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# The New Yorker Magazine

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# Goings On

- **Othership, the SoulCycle of Spas**

By Vince Aletti, Helen Shaw, Brian Seibert, Sheldon Pearce, Jackson Arn, Richard Brody, Rachel Syme, and Jane Bua | Plus: Photographs of labor and solidarity at I.C.P., the Roots bring jazz rap to the Blue Note, the unstoppable Twyla Tharp, and more.

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## [Goings On](#)

# **Othership, the SoulCycle of Spas**

*Plus: Photographs of labor and solidarity at I.C.P., the Roots bring jazz rap to the Blue Note, the unstoppable Twyla Tharp, and more.*

*By [Vince Aletti](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Jackson Arn](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Rachel Syme](#), and [Jane Bua](#)*

*March 7, 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 in-box.](#)*

The International Center of Photography, founded, in 1974, by the photographer Robert Capa's brother Cornell, was dedicated to what Cornell called "concerned photography"—the sort of engaged photojournalism practiced by Robert and his close associates Werner Bischof, Andre Kertesz, and Leonard Freed. The museum has broadened its focus considerably since then, but photojournalism, largely ignored elsewhere, continues to be its strong point. [Weegee](#) is the brash, entertaining headliner at I.C.P. right now, but it's a quieter companion show, "**American Job 1940-2011**" (through May 5), that feels especially urgent. With photographs, nearly all from I.C.P.'s collection, by several generations of concerned photographers, including Danny Lyon, Gordon Parks, Robert Frank, W. Eugene Smith, and Susan Meiselas, "American Job" is a show about people at and out of work. The curator, Makeda Best, grounds it in images of the crushing routine and casual camaraderie of the office and the factory floor. But pictures of picket lines and protest marches are regular reminders that jobs can be terminated, denied, or made unbearable. Best wants us to remember that one of the show's most famous photographs, Ernest Withers's 1968 shot of massed Memphis sanitation workers holding signs that read "*I AM A MAN*," is, first and foremost, a document of a labor-solidarity march.



*“Stationary Engineer checking air conditioning gauges, 1975.”*

*Photograph by Freda Leinwand / Courtesy Freda Leinwand Papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute / ICP*

“American Job,” for all its instructive underpinning, is never dry or didactic. Best keeps it sharp by skewing her image selection to lesser-known and anonymous work, including a number of news-service images. A grid of pictures by the Fort Worth studio photographer Bill Wood gives the show a detour into deadpan realism: a bank under construction, a woman with her office equipment, a set of filing cabinets. Louis Stettner, like most of the photographers here, keeps it personal; his portraits of factory workers are artfully atmospheric. Accra Shepp closes the show with a series of empathetic, full-length portraits of Occupy Wall Street protesters in 2011 and 2012, most holding homemade signs. Following a section titled “When Work Disappears,” Shepp’s pictures offer an appropriately open ending, anticipating this very moment and the protests to come.—[Vince Aletti](#)



## About Town

Off Broadway

In Lisa Sanaye Dring's soapy "**Sumo**," a drama about a cutthroat Japanese training facility, a newbie wrestler, Akio (Scott Keiji Takeda); the bullying top dog, Mitsuo (David Shih); and a vulnerable tough guy, Ren (Ahmad Kamal), all vie for physical and moral primacy. Flimsy dialogue dominates every contest, however: "Tell me the story again," one man says to his lover, in a way no real person ever does. Ralph B. Peña directs a cast that excels mostly at the margins—Earl T. Kim is sweetly diffident as a confident loser—and in well-staged matches, meticulously designed by James Yaegashi and Chelsea Pace. But, though the playwright introduces intriguing provocations about sumo's ancient etiquette, she mainly demonstrates that cliché is a killer in the ring.—[Helen Shaw](#) (*Public; through March 30.*)

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## Dance

At eighty-three, **Twyla Tharp** shows no signs of stopping. The touring program marking her sixtieth year choreographing includes a new work: "Slacktide," set to Philip Glass's gently evocative "Aguas de Amazonia," which Third Coast Percussion plays live, on custom instruments. The main event, though, is a revival of a little-seen dance from 1998, "Diabelli." Tharp, setting herself the challenge of Beethoven's mammoth and adventurous Diabelli Variations, responds with her own ideas about theme and variation, employing her formidable powers of invention and wit. It's a major display of virtuosity, but riding on the humor of the score it stays light.—[Brian Seibert](#) (*City Center; March 12-16.*)

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## Hip-hop



*Questlove and Black Thought, of the Roots.*

*Photograph by Joshua Kissi*

The Philadelphia crew **the Roots** have been a late-night staple for so long that it's easy to forget its standing as one of the most distinguished progressive-rap groups ever. Founded, in 1987, by the rapper Black Thought and the drummer Questlove, the Roots integrated live production into traditional hip-hop programming, giving even its hardest songs a lush feel and helping to define jazz rap across three classic albums, "Do You Want More?!!!??!" (1995), "Illadelph Halflife" (1996), and "Things Fall Apart" (1999). Though the Roots haven't released a new album since 2014, and its members remain busy with side projects, the group loves to pop out and reaffirm its bona fides, as, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of "Do You Want More?!!!??!", with this show, in an intimate, jazzy setting befitting the album's reputation.—[\*Sheldon Pearce\*](#) (*Blue Note; March 13-15.*)

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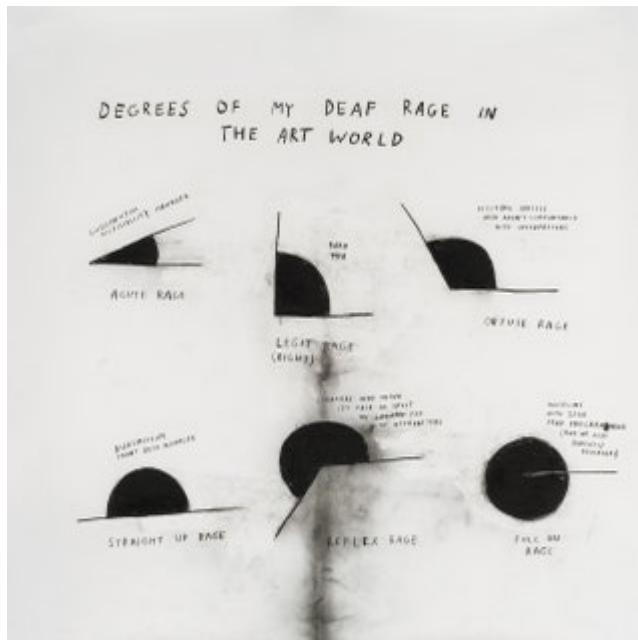
## Classical

If you've ever watched a loved one lifted into the air at a wedding while joyous attendees form concentric circles of dance, the soundtrack was likely a celebratory style of music called klezmer. This March, the violinist and First Concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic, Noah Bendix-Balgley, performs his own composition, "Fidl-Fantazye: A Klezmer Concerto," drawing on traditional folk melodies, accompanied by the conductorless **Orpheus Chamber Orchestra**. The piece is paired with Bartok's raucous

and spectral “Romanian Folk Dances” and selections from Brahms’s vivid, pendulous “Hungarian Dances.” Caroline Shaw’s “Entr’acte” opens the concert, serving as a bridge from melodies of tradition to the present moment.—[Jane Bua](#) (92Y; March 18.)

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## Art



“Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World.”

Art work by Christine Sun Kim / Courtesy François Ghebaly Gallery / WHITE SPACE

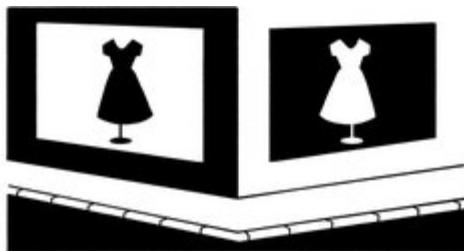
There are two main flavors in the Whitney survey **“Christine Sun Kim: All Day All Night”**: sour and sweet, each with a strangely quick fade. The charcoal drawings that put Kim on the map, in the late twenty-tens, document hearing people’s endless condescension and have titles like “Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World.” They’re pure vinegar, though other drawings and videos take a more sugary approach to the same subject. Most powerful are the sculpture “ATTENTION,” in which two enormous red hands attack a rock with gestures, and the video piece “Close Readings,” about the hidden-in-plain-view weirdness of movie captioning. Kim made her name explaining deafness to the hearing while also scolding them. In her stronger work, everyone’s jolted by the same inexplicable things—words, images, thoughts.—[Jackson Arn](#) (Whitney Museum; through July 6.)

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## Movies

“**The Empire**” is the giddiest installment in an increasingly loopy series of comedic dramas that Bruno Dumont has been making, during the past dozen years, on France’s hardscrabble northern coast. The movie is something of a “Star Wars” parody: two flirtatious groups of young adults in a village of farmers and fishermen find themselves on opposite sides of an intergalactic battle between Good (guided, from a subaquatic cathedral, by the town’s mayor) and Evil (commanded by Beelzebub, in a space palace). Lightsabres figure gruesomely. Dumont nonetheless lovingly magnifies the townspeople’s local troubles to mythic dimensions; above all, he derides the poisonous politics of the times by way of diabolical references to a quest for racial purity.—[\*Richard Brody\*](#) (*In limited release.*)

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## On and Off the Avenue

[\*Rachel Syme\*](#) suits up for regimented relaxation in N.Y.C.’s hottest (and coldest) club.

We live in stressful, isolating times. And so it makes sense that a new crop of “wellness clubs” promising serenity, and instant community, would rise in N.Y.C. There’s **Bathhouse**, in Flatiron and Williamsburg, which specializes in Aufguss classes, or guided sauna sessions. (A day pass begins at \$40.) There’s **Akari**, a members-only Japanese-inspired “neighborhood sauna” in Williamsburg, where it costs nearly \$200 a month to mingle in dry-heat rooms. (It’s sold out; in late spring, a second location will open in Greenpoint.) **Moss**, a five-story private club that will open this year near Bryant Park, bills itself as a place to “gather in the shared pursuit of

intelligent leisure,” where one can spend \$600 a month (plus a \$2,000 initiation fee) unwinding in thermal pools and hammams.



*Illustration by Roche Cruchon*

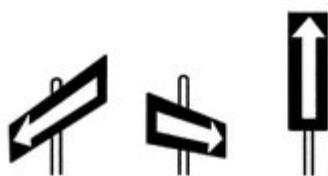
Perhaps the buzziest offering is **Othership**, a “social sauna” startup from Canada which opened in Flatiron, last July. The company began when the cryptocurrency entrepreneur Robbie Bent converted his Toronto back yard into an unlicensed communal spa. In 2022, Bent and four co-founders opened the first formal Othership club, in downtown Toronto, eventually raising eight million dollars in funding. Bent has described Othership as “a Cirque du Soleil performance that you are a part of, meets group therapy.” Intrigued, I took them up on an offer to try a drop-in class (\$64).

Othership is, I found, not intended to be a leisurely experience. Think of it more as a fitness studio, but for hydrotherapy—the SoulCycle of spas, where relaxation is regimented down to the minute. To begin each seventy-five-minute session, participants (the studio calls them “journeyers”) gather in swimsuits in the tea lounge. The lounge has a decidedly cultish feel: the day I visited, it was packed with dewy twentysomethings air-kissing in clusters—a vibe that was not entirely dispelled when our “guide,” a cheery woman named Sharisse Francisco, told us to enter a 185-degree “performance sauna” for a twenty-minute “guide down” ritual, where we would chant and rub our faces with wooden *gua-sha* tools.

In the sauna, under neon lights, Francisco put on a thumping playlist and led the group through deep-breathing exercises. Every few minutes, she would hurl essential-oil-infused snowballs onto the sauna rocks with a

theatrical flourish. After a rinse in a communal shower, we were led to the cold room, containing shallow plunge tubs of varying icy temperatures. I was directed to the coldest—thirty-two degrees—and Francisco commanded us to dunk in unison. We were encouraged to endure the brutal, teeth-chattering sensation for up to three minutes; I lasted forty-five seconds. Francisco banged a gong. I looked around at a sea of blissed-out faces and wondered, Are we all so fried these days that we yearn for tranquillity on demand? It feels contradictory, and yet it has never been more popular: Othership’s second location opens in Williamsburg this fall.

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## Pick Three

*Jackson Arn on some of his favorite reds.*

1. I’m aware that I have nobody but myself to blame for this, but writing a longish [article](#) about uses of the color red in visual art felt like one prolonged pang of “But what about . . . ?” I wish that I’d found a way to work in, for example, **“No Fear, No Die,”** Claire Denis’s film, from 1990, about underground cockfighting, a sort of encyclopedia of red’s different emotional meanings: bloody, gaudy, ecstatic, childish, sexual. The underground club where much of the film takes place, all whirring Vegas-y electronica, could be the single coolest set in cinema.

2. In Chapter 3 of **“Ulysses,”** Stephen sees a dog running along the beach, “a rag of wolf’s tongue redpanting from his jaws.” That might be my favorite snippet from the entire novel—so precise and surprising that it can change the way you see, just a little. Someone has surely written a dissertation about the postcolonial symbolism of an animal with another animal’s tongue. But the next time you pass a dog, pay close attention and then tell me it doesn’t look like it’s panting *redly*.



*Photograph from BFA / 20th Century Fox / Alamy*

**3.** A few months after I'd moved to New York, a friend brought me to a midnight screening of "**The Rocky Horror Picture Show**," which turns fifty this year. The movie began with the disembodied mouth of the actress Patricia Quinn (she plays Magenta) floating like a U.F.O. in the night sky. It might have been the first time that I felt completely welcome in my new city, and I wonder if the shameless, gooey redness of her lips was what did the trick. The color doesn't belong, but nothing really does, so everything—and everyone—is welcome.

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#### P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [The pleasures of a bed island](#)
- [Why you need a nemesis](#)
- ["Dorchester," by Steven Duong](#)

*Vince Aletti* is a photography critic and the author of "[Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines](#)."



[Helen Shaw](#), *The New Yorker's* theatre critic, joined the magazine in 2022.

[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.



[Sheldon Pearce](#) is a music writer for *The New Yorker's* *Goings On* newsletter.



Jackson Arn was *The New Yorker's* art critic.



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.”](#)



*Rachel Syme* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. She has covered Hollywood, style, and other cultural subjects since 2012. She is the author of “[\*Syme’s Letter Writer\*](#),” about the joys of handwritten correspondence.

*Jane Bua* is a member of *The New Yorker*’s editorial staff.

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[\*\*Brave New World\*\*](#)

# Can Artificial Intelligence Stir-Fry?

Ed Zitron, an A.I. skeptic worried about “rot-com” in the tech industry, gives robot-fried chicken a try.

By [Oren Peleg](#)

March 10, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In January, 2000, early internet startups (Pets.com, Epidemic.com) made up about twenty per cent of Super Bowl ads. That year’s game was known as the Dot-Com Bowl. Then the dot-com bubble burst, sending the Nasdaq tumbling more than seventy per cent by October, 2002. Twenty years later, Super Bowl LVI was called the Crypto Bowl, and featured ads from Coinbase, Crypto.com, and FTX. Soon, FTX was bankrupt, and Bitcoin

was sputtering. This year, the Super Bowl was all about artificial intelligence, as Google, Meta, OpenAI, and Salesforce ran ads showing off their A.I. tools.

Is history repeating itself? “It is such a bad sign,” Ed Zitron, an A.I. skeptic and the host of the tech podcast “Better Offline,” said the other day. Zitron, who has blue eyes and a British accent, wore a black leather coat as he stood outside a Chinese restaurant in the Sawtelle neighborhood of Los Angeles, ready to test (or, rather, taste) the fruits of A.I.’s labor. The restaurant, called Tigawok, uses A.I.-powered robot chefs that cook on woks. He was curious to see how it was working out. “I always ask why,” he said of tech innovations. “If you’re going to throw robots in everything, at least make there be a meaningful reason. At least *improve* it for someone.”

Tigawok’s doors opened, and Zitron entered to order an early lunch. “Is the kung-pao chicken spicy?” he asked a human at the register.

“It’s mild,” she responded. Doubtful, he settled on plum fried chicken, for \$4.99. Visible in the kitchen, behind the counter, were three robot chefs that looked like front-loading washing machines. As they whirred loudly, Zitron muttered, “Welcome to the future,” then found a table.

Zitron is thirty-eight and lives in Las Vegas, where he runs a tech P.R. firm as his day job. In 2020, he began writing a newsletter about the industry, and three years later Cool Zone Media approached him about making a podcast. “‘A.I.’ and ‘robots’ are just words,” he said. “One of the more cynical things that you see people like Sam Altman, of OpenAI, do is try and use the umbrella term of ‘A.I.’ to connect” generative A.I. and large language models, “where not much is happening,” to robotics, “where stuff is actually happening.”

Around him, tables were filling up. “I can see why they’re doing it,” he said of the robot chefs. “They’ve got a more compact space—they’re able to cook more food.” Still, he added, “it seems like a gimmick.”

Last year, when Zitron started his podcast, he focussed his attention on Silicon Valley and the A.I. boom. He remembered thinking, *There must be*

*something I'm missing.* Before long, he was hearing from programmers who were skeptical of generative A.I. and warning that it was “actively dangerous” for their work. “There’s a ton of founders in the Valley who do not like A.I. They’re mad that it’s taking up all the oxygen,” he said. “People are angry at tech, but I don’t think they’re angry at *all* tech.” He mentioned staples like smartphones, social media, instant access to nearly all the world’s recorded music. His main critique of Silicon Valley today is its addiction to endless expansion and profits, which has led to what he calls the “rot-com” bubble. “All these companies are obsessed with growth,” he said. “But we’re approaching the end of hyper-growth in tech, and it’s making them do crazy things.” A.I., he said, is just a “big, shiny bauble to say, ‘We have ideas.’ ” Investors have eaten it up.

In late January, a crack appeared in the façade. The Chinese A.I. company DeepSeek released R1 (a rival to OpenAI’s reasoning model), and the company’s app quickly became the most downloaded free program in the iOS App Store. “They proved that you can make a reasoning model for cheap, and you can run it for cheaper” than Silicon Valley companies, Zitron said. It would no longer be necessary for companies like Nvidia to release an expensive new chip every year. In a panic, the tech-heavy Nasdaq 100 index dropped about a trillion dollars in value in one day, with Nvidia alone losing nearly six hundred billion in market capitalization.

Remembering the insanity of that day, Zitron smiled. He described talking with hedge-fund managers and startup founders afterward: “Everyone was sitting around going, ‘Wait, why are we spending three hundred billion dollars on cap-ex?’ ” DeepSeek’s success showed that the narrative around A.I. was wrong. “It removed the sheen from OpenAI,” Zitron said. The market and the tech companies have not fully recovered, and Zitron said that people in the tech world are “unsettled—everyone knows that something’s shifted.”

Zitron doesn’t consider himself a tech fatalist. He can still find what he calls “genuine magic” in tech, such as the use of gallium nitride in batteries and chargers. “But then there’s all of these assholes who are making all of this money getting in the way of the cool shit that tech does,” he said.

He took a bite of his plum fried chicken. Then another. “Hmm,” he said.  
“This isn’t terrible.” ♦

*Oren Peleg is a journalist and a screenwriter based in Los Angeles.*

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**Shoe-In**

# Whoopi Goldberg's Shoe-and-Tell

The “View” host gives a private tour of her two hundred and eighty-eight pairs, from glittery Dr. Martens to banana-peel heels.

By [André Wheeler](#)

March 10, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

People have been talking about Whoopi Goldberg’s shoe collection. Goldberg owns two hundred and eighty-eight pairs—including, but not limited to, heels, sneakers, pointy-toed flats, Birkenstocks, Converse, wedges, boots, platforms, Crocs, flip-flops, and loafers. Several sources say that, if you win Goldberg’s favor, she may give you a pair right off her feet. Past beneficiaries include a former “X-Factor” contestant, the comedian

Whitney Cummings, and even a few audience members of “The View.” A visit seemed in order.

“What do you want to know?” Goldberg said one recent afternoon, in her gravelly voice. She was in the lower-Manhattan headquarters of her company, Whoop, Inc., after a live taping of “The View,” where she has been a co-host since 2007. She had on a billowy leopard-print top worn open over denim overalls and a white shirt. Shoe of the day: black Cloud sneakers (\$150). After receiving a reminder of the research mission, Goldberg nodded and dove right into the task.

Her size, she said, ranged from ten to eleven and a half, depending on the brand and model. She walked into her dressing room and turned to face a combination desk-shelving system with twenty-four white-painted wooden shelves. The shelves held neat rows of footwear, arranged according to designer. Notable pairs: glittery Dr. Martens, banana-peel heels, pumps whose transparent heels contain decapitated dolls’ heads, Gucci Peggy sneakers.

She explained the origin of the hoard. “Well, when I first got on ‘The View,’ all of the women were very well dressed,” she said. “You know, they are given clothes every day, and jewelry.” She went on, a bit huffily, “And I knew I wasn’t going to be taking my clothes on and off *there!*” She figured that sticking to her personal uniform—“I like black and white, and oversized, and tents”—and experimenting with shoes was a good compromise. “Some of the first ones—I’m trying to remember,” she said, gazing at the racks. “Oh! These folks.” She held up a pair of Star Wars pumps with lightsabre heels from a British brand called Irregular Choice. Next she reached for a variety of trompe-l’oeil heels, designed to look like puppy paws, pelicans, and Olive Oyl. One pair had a heel that resembled a wad of gum. “Now come on, what’s better than that?” she said, holding the shoe aloft like an Oscar. (She has one of those, too.) “It looks like you stepped in gum!”

She continued the survey—gothic golden heels from Alexander McQueen’s final runway collection, never-worn Jeremy Scott x Adidas sneakers. She snatched a black Louboutin spike heel and held it to her cheek, cooing, “That red bottom, that red bottom.”

Three years ago, Goldberg was diagnosed as having sciatica, which forced her to quit the heels. “Because once your back goes you’re, like, ‘O.K., I’m not fooling with this,’ ” she said. “But every now and then, you know, I think, ‘I would like to put on something fun.’ ” At the Oscars recently, she busted out black velvet Caroline Groves heels, decorated with embroidered flowers and silk bows.

Her joie-de-vivre approach to style has not always been appreciated. She recalled the scathing reviews she got for her 1993 Oscars red-carpet look, which she called an homage to Lucille Ball. It featured a lime-green-and-purple brocade jumpsuit, with skinny legs and a skirted bolero jacket. “Baby, you’d’ve thought I’d pooped all over somebody’s house,” she said. Her shoes that night were satin spike heels, designed in the same fabric as her outfit.

Nowadays, Goldberg wears what she wants for “The View.” She does not have a stylist. “I wake up, and whatever I’m in, that’s what I show up in,” she said. She raised a finger in clarification. “But I am clean!” she added. “I am clean.” When a designer dresses her for a red carpet or such, she gives the person carte blanche, and doesn’t even look at preliminary sketches. Otherwise, she said, “I realize that I’m going to say no to everything, because my comfort zone is only this big.” She pantomimed a tiny opening.

Mulling a second Trump Administration, she said that her staple shoe going forward would be a sneaker. “I think the next couple of years are all about folks making themselves comfortable,” she said. “You say, ‘These are my favorite pants—I’m wearing them. I don’t care how often you’ve seen them, *these* are the pants I’m wearing.’ ” Same goes for the shoes. ♦

*André Wheeler*, a young-adult novelist and formerly a writer at *Vogue*, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2021.

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**The Real Thing**

# “Night Court” Goes to Night Court

With the reboot of the beloved sitcom in its third season, John Larroquette, its star, finds that the show’s Burbank set is as dingy as the real thing in downtown Manhattan.

By [Sarah Lustbader](#)

March 10, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In all the time that the sitcom “Night Court” has been on the air—for nine seasons beginning in 1984, and now again, in an NBC reboot that’s in its third season—the show’s star John Larroquette never visited an actual night court. That changed on a recent Wednesday, when Larroquette was in town. He arrived on a street corner near City Hall just before 5 P.M. and eyed 60

Centre Street, the classical Roman-style courthouse with Corinthian columns and a sweeping staircase. “It isn’t that one,” Greg Gomez, a public defender who had agreed to show him around, said. “That’s the nice courthouse you have in your opening credits.” Gomez gestured across the street toward 100 Centre Street—the criminal courthouse, a cheerless Art Deco building the color of cinder blocks.

Larroquette has played a lot of lawyers: Joey Heric on “The Practice,” Carl Sack on “Boston Legal,” and, on “Night Court,” the dour womanizer Dan Fielding. In the original show, Fielding was a prosecutor; in the reboot, he is a public defender. Larroquette initially turned down the reprised role, he said, but then he thought, *I used to be funny—maybe I can be funny again.*

Larroquette, filming “Night Court” from a soundstage in Burbank, never saw a need to do intense character research. “Hopefully, it’s twenty-two minutes of decent jokes—that’s how I always thought of it,” he said. “I just memorized my lines and tried not to walk into the furniture.” He is a youthful seventy-seven, with a grin that forces his eyes into horizontal crescents; he wore black jeans and a navy sweater. “When my character was an A.D.A., I could be as misanthropic as I wanted,” he said. “Now that I’m playing a defense lawyer, I have to, like, try to help people.” He continued, “As a prosecutor, I never lost a case. Now Fielding loses. Is that realistic?”

Gomez laughed. “Yeah, man,” he said. “That’s all realistic.”

Passing through security, Larroquette removed his watch and wallet, paused before a metal detector, and gallantly asked, “May I?” The guard waved him through. Approaching the courtroom, Larroquette looked around. “It’s dingy and drab and run-down—just like our set! Do you have a gross cafeteria, too?”

Elizabeth Bender, a public defender who was helping with the tour, said, “I’d kill for the cafeteria on that show.” They entered the courtroom, and Bender pointed to a crumbly part of the ceiling.

“Just a little asbestos,” Larroquette said.

Suddenly a court officer announced, “Everyone quiet down! AR3 is now in session, the Honorable Rachel Pauley presiding!” Larroquette folded his six-foot-four frame onto a seat. The first case was a man facing a misdemeanor charge for allegedly violating an order of protection. He had made a statement to the police: “Just take me to jail—it’s too cold out here.” The judge released him without bail.

A second man, accused of possessing three vials of crack, pleaded guilty to a noncriminal infraction, and the judge ordered him to report to a Brooklyn court the next morning. “He just spent his fiftieth birthday in custody, Judge,” his lawyer, Matt Daloisio, said. “Can we give him the weekend?” The judge assented, but warned of the consequences if he failed to appear on Monday.



*“Geez—I can’t believe someone’s getting rid of these perfectly good rocks.”*  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

On “Night Court,” Larroquette said, Judge Harry Stone would have ruled the same way. “Though,” he added, “Stone may have made the whole courtroom sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to the guy.” Between cases, Larroquette sat with Gomez and Bender, whispering questions: Were there really jail cells under their feet? (Yes.) Did all defendants have to be handcuffed? (Yes.) Is cash bail still a thing? (Oh, yes.)

During a lull, Larroquette approached the bench. “Welcome to night court!” Judge Pauley said to him. “I’m old enough to remember the first series.”

Larroquette thanked her and said, “I hope I’m not disrupting things here.” On the original “Night Court,” Judge Stone was a bighearted prankster who

performed magic tricks from the bench. “Do you do any magic at all?” Larroquette asked.

Pauley smiled and leaned forward. “I have absolutely no talent!” she said.

Afterward, Larroquette wandered into the clerks’ office, where he met Aston Ellis, who said that, whenever anyone asks him what he does, he says, “Just think of Mac on ‘Night Court.’ ”

Larroquette demurred: “But it’s a vaudeville act. We had horses in court! Do you have that?”

“Sometimes it smells like it,” another clerk said.

Recently, Daloisio said, a judge berated a lawyer for being distracted by a pigeon that had flown into the courtroom.

Larroquette brightened. “In the new series, we had a whole invasion of pigeons! Some were well trained enough to fly to their perch. Others were improvising, and not very well.” ♦

*Sarah Lustbader* is a criminal-defense attorney whose writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *The New York Review of Books*.

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[In or Out Dept.](#)

# New York's Pickiest Doorman Gets a Piece of the Action

Frankie Carattini has worked the door for Baz Luhrmann, Stella McCartney, and Anne Hathaway (and he once turned away Cuba Gooding, Jr.). Now he brings his “encyclopedia of faces” to bear at People’s, a new club downtown.

By [Laura Lane](#)

March 10, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Frankie Carattini, who mans the velvet rope at the new Greenwich Village club People's, has been a night-club doorman since 2018. He left his previous gig, at the piano bar the Nines, because he thought he had more to offer than saying yes or no. His duties at People's are fancier. "I guess I am creative director, director of guest services, chief vibe officer," he said.

Before the new place opened, he took its owners, Emmet McDermott and Margot Hauer-King, on a research tour of the city's hot spots, scoping out the door action. Their first rendezvous was Zero Bond. McDermott, a film producer, said that he and Hauer-King (the daughter of the restaurateur who created London's Wolseley group) had recruited Carattini because he had "this kind of X factor." He added, "I mean, why is Jimi Hendrix so good?"

Hauer-King had a deeper historical take on what makes a club's mix right. "The philosophical Enlightenment happened in places like Vienna," she said, where disparate sorts of people were mingling at venues "and having conversations that weren't expected. And that's what we are aiming for." She wore black-and-white leather pants and an oversized white top.

In 2023, the partners brought their idea for an evening club to Carattini. (McDermott's mantra: "Hospitality is the purest form of storytelling.") They offered him equity, something that no other club had ever done. When his relationship with the Nines fizzled—"I got a bonus, but it was a joke," Carattini said—he eagerly signed on.

At Zero Bond, Carattini, who is thirty-five, was wearing a black beret, a Saint Laurent lace-up leather top, Celine trousers, and leather boots. After becoming a club kid at fifteen, he held various jobs in fashion until he took a gig working the coat check at Acme, and later the Nines, when it opened. "I saw it as a way to go out while making money," he said. Eventually, he moved from coats to the door. In 2023, he served as gatekeeper for two Met Gala after-parties, racing around the corner from a bash that Stella McCartney and Baz Luhrmann threw at Zero Bond to one that Jeremy Strong and Anne Hathaway hosted at the Nines.

"He is an encyclopedia of faces," McDermott, who had on a gray shirt jacket, said.

Whom has Carattini turned away at a door? Cuba Gooding, Jr. Whom did he almost turn away by accident? Kate Moss's daughter. ("She waited very patiently.") Whom did he let in purely on the basis of "energy"? A minor Kennedy. Whom did he sneak out the back to avoid paparazzi? Margot Robbie. Who would have got in on physical stature alone? Alexander Skarsgård. ("He's so freakishly tall and handsome.") What will not help at the door? TikTok stardom. ("If people are, like, 'Do you know who I am?,' my response, typically, is 'I don't.'")

If a person passes Carattini's vibe check, they're in. "It's in the eye of the beholder," McDermott said. "It's like that Supreme Court definition of porn. You know it when you see it." Since People's opened, Carattini has let in Robert Pattinson, Suki Waterhouse, and Jon Hamm.

Carattini has a formula. "I like being in spaces where a mechanic can dance with a movie star and a princess can get a drink with a plumber," he said. "Everyone has a role to fill. We need the finance guys to buy drinks and to keep the lights on. We need the cool kids to add decoration. We need the celebrities to continue to draw people. And then we need the gays because they're fun and fabulous."

If Carattini doesn't see a role for someone in line, he will mouth the words "Not tonight."

"You know how in Japanese one word said in seven different intonations has seven different meanings?" Hauer-King said. "'Not tonight' is a whole language." They had moved on to Raf's, a bustling restaurant on Elizabeth Street, and she scanned the room, taking notes: the lighting ("actual ambient"), the uniforms ("they're like Prada but make it practical"). A camera flashed and she frowned. "*That* will not be happening at People's," she said. (The club has a no-phone policy.)

The group's next stop was to be Socialista, an Old Havana-themed bar above Cipriani Downtown. "One of the tightest doors in New York," McDermott said. But—a snag—the place wouldn't open until ten. To kill time, they hit the Crosby Bar, where Hauer-King and McDermott had held investor meetings. They walked into a crowded, colorful room decked out

in kitsch: rotary phones nailed to the wallpaper, a giant dragonfly, orange walls.

Carattini looked around, unimpressed. “I’d almost prefer just the décor and an empty room,” he said glumly. “I would describe the crowd as from a flyover state.” He was about to head for the door, but a woman stopped to admire his zebra coat. Stella McCartney’s office had loaned it to him, he said. “I was, like, ‘I want to keep it.’ And she was, like, ‘Well, if you don’t fuck up my Met Gala party, you can keep it.’ ” The coat was his. ♦

*Laura Lane* is a co-author of the humor books “[This Is Why You’re Single](#)” and “[Cinderella and the Glass Ceiling: And Other Feminist Fairy Tales](#).” She has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2016.

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# Trump's Agenda Is Undermining American Science

Research funded by the federal government has found useful expression in many of the defining technologies of our time. This Administration threatens that progress.

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)

March 9, 2025



*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty*

The United States, for much of its history, was less an engine of scientific progress than a beneficiary of it. Pasteur, Koch, Lister, Mendel, Curie, Fleming—the giants who midwifed modern medicine were not Americans

but Europeans. During the Second World War, the balance shifted. President [Franklin Roosevelt](#) created the Office of Scientific Research and Development and tapped Vannevar Bush, a former dean of M.I.T., to lead it. In the span of a few years, the agency spurred development of an antimalarial drug, a flu vaccine, techniques to produce penicillin at scale, and, less salubriously, the atomic bomb. Bush became a champion of state-sponsored research, helping to establish the [National Science Foundation](#) and to modernize the National Institutes of Health. As he wrote, “Without scientific progress, no amount of achievement in other directions can insure our health, prosperity, and security as a nation.”

Bush’s vision may be as responsible as any other for nearly a century of American scientific dominance. Research funded by the federal government has found useful expression in many of the defining technologies of our time: the internet, [A.I.](#), [crispr](#), [Ozempic](#), and the [mRNA vaccines](#) that saved untold lives during the [covid](#) pandemic. Between 2010 and 2019, more than three hundred and fifty drugs were approved in the U.S., and virtually all of them could trace their roots to the N.I.H. The agency has grown into the world’s largest funder of biomedical research, with a forty-eight-billion-dollar budget, supporting the work of tens of thousands of scientists. By some estimates, each dollar that the U.S. invests generates five dollars in social gains like economic growth and higher standards of living.

[Donald Trump](#), since his return to the White House, has upended the long-standing bipartisan consensus that the government should fund scientific research and then mostly stay out of the way. His Administration has paused communications from health agencies, wiped data from their websites, fired hundreds of government scientists, and proposed slashing the budget of the National Science Foundation by two-thirds. It has announced that the N.I.H. will no longer honor negotiated rates for “indirect costs” on the grants that it administers—money that institutions use for such things as laboratory space, research equipment, removal of hazardous waste, and personnel to help patients enroll in clinical trials. “This will likely mean that fewer experimental treatments will get to children,” Charles Roberts, the head of the cancer center at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, said. “More children will die.”

A federal judge has temporarily blocked that change to indirect costs, but many scientists have been contending with an even bigger problem: the N.I.H. has functionally stopped awarding new grants. In the weeks since Trump took office, it has released about a billion dollars less than it did during the same period last year. In defiance of court orders, the Administration has largely maintained a freeze on funding, using procedural tactics to impede meetings where grants are discussed or awarded, thereby stalling research into [Alzheimer's](#), addiction, heart disease, and other conditions. (Some scientific-review meetings have been allowed to resume, but a moratorium remains on high-level gatherings at which funding decisions are finalized.)

The disruptions are already cascading through academia. Medical schools have paused hiring; labs are considering when they'll have to let employees go; universities are curtailing Ph.D. programs, in some cases rescinding offers to accepted students. Meanwhile, biotech investors are warning of a contraction in medical innovation. "Drug development requires government support of basic science," a partner at an investment firm said last month. "Nobody else can step in to fill that void." There is nothing wrong with reform—it is, in fact, the hallmark of a healthy system. The N.I.H. could stand to restructure its institutes to minimize duplicative work, to fund projects with greater transformative potential, to demand more transparency in how institutions calculate their administrative overhead. But what Trump is doing is not reform, it is subversion. And it could not come at a worse time.

America has long been the global leader in scientific output, but by various measures [China](#) is now surging ahead. In recent years, it surpassed the U.S. as the top producer of highly cited papers and international patent applications. It now awards more science and engineering Ph.D.s than the U.S., and, even before the current funding turmoil, it was projected to match spending on research and development by the end of the decade. Trump may speak of America First, but his Administration's playbook will insure that the U.S. comes in, at best, second.

If today we have effective treatments for lethal conditions such as [H.I.V.](#), heart disease, and [leukemia](#), it is because of historic investments in

foundational research. Without such investments, people would still be dying from those illnesses at unconscionable rates. A retrenchment of American science could mean that people will continue to suffer from the many illnesses for which we currently have little to offer: [Parkinson's](#), pancreatic cancer, dementia, and others. The economist Alex Tabarrok has described patients who die before a medical innovation can be developed and approved as being buried in an “invisible graveyard.” It’s easy to see when a drug you take has a noxious side effect; it’s harder to envision how the absence of a treatment harms people.

The Administration’s actions could also mean that people who were getting lifesaving treatments will no longer be able to—that they will start to populate not invisible graveyards in the future but visible graveyards today. The Administration has dismantled the President’s Emergency Plan for *aids* Relief, or *pepfar*, which is credited with saving some twenty-six million lives globally. Amid the worst flu season in years, the F.D.A. cancelled the meeting at which experts discuss how best to update the vaccine for the fall. As the threat of bird flu mounts—the virus is tearing through farms and mutating in ways that increasingly threaten human health—the country’s response has been woefully inadequate.

In the meantime, childhood vaccination rates continue to fall, and a measles outbreak has spread to nine states. Two people have died—a child in Texas and a man in New Mexico—marking the country’s first [measles-related](#) deaths in a decade and prompting [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#), who serves as both the nation’s top health official and its foremost vaccine skeptic, to belatedly advise parents to consider immunizing their children. He also spoke favorably about cod-liver oil.

“Science, by itself, provides no panacea,” Vannevar Bush concluded. “It can be effective in the national welfare only as a member of a team.” But our government doesn’t seem to want to play ball. ♦



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- **What Do We Buy Into When We Buy a Home?**

By Jennifer Wilson | Homeownership, long a cherished American ideal, has become the subject of black comedies, midlife-crisis novels, and unintentionally dystopic reality TV.

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By Jonathan Blitzer | The Texas governor gained national attention by busing migrants to Democratic cities. Jonathan Blitzer reports on how he's paving the way for President Trump's mass-deportation campaign.

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**Our Local Correspondents**

# The Case of the Missing Elvis

When a kitschy bust of the King was swiped from the East Village restaurant where it had lived for thirty-seven years, the theft ignited a fight over the soul of downtown.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

March 10, 2025



*The caper came to symbolize the fight for the soul of the old East Village. Illustration by Antonio Giovanni Pinna*

When someone stole the Great Jones Street Elvis, a few years ago, a lot of people viewed it as a sign that the old East Village was officially dead. The Elvis was a chalk-plaster bust that had stood in the window of 54 Great Jones for thirty-seven years. It started out in the Great Jones Café, a

gathering spot for the downtown arts scene in the eighties, and after the café closed, in 2018, it continued on in a new restaurant there called Jolene.

The theft was unusually brazen. “It was a busy night,” Vishwas Wesley, Jolene’s general manager, told me. “I see these two people kind of push past my maître d’.” There was a woman wearing a *Covid* mask and a black coat, and a man in a jacket and a fedora with a little feather. “They didn’t look like subway creatures who had just stormed in,” Wesley said. They looked as if they might be senior citizens. The woman made straight for Elvis and took off. Wesley set down a tray of glasses he was carrying and gave chase. “I’m not very proud to say, with the age difference in mind, that she outran me,” he said. Curiously, the man in the fedora and a younger female accomplice who’d waited on the sidewalk didn’t seem to be in a hurry. After the older woman made a run for it, they stood outside the restaurant, giggling.

“When I approached them, they thought it was the funniest thing ever,” Wesley said. The older woman had disappeared with the statue. To de-escalate, Wesley offered to buy the man and the younger woman a beer and talk things over. They declined. The man gave Wesley a parting message: “Tell your owner the statue is mine.”

Gabriel Stulman, the restaurant’s owner, soon got a call from Wesley. “My reaction was: what the fuck do you mean somebody stole Elvis?” Stulman recalled. He decided to rally the community to find the bust. He posted to Instagram that it had been “passed down through three successive owners, and blessed thousands of nights of service.” He knew the bandits’ identities; in his posts, he included a snapshot of the pair, their faces concealed by colorful circles, along with a threat. “If these crooks don’t return the sculpture of Elvis that they have stolen in the next 24 hours, we’ll let you know exactly who they are and where to find them,” he wrote. “You have disrespected our restaurant, our team and the history of this space.”

It’s not that people hadn’t stolen from restaurants before. A month before Elvis went missing, *Nightmoves*, in Williamsburg, reported the theft of a cherished ceramic figure with a lumpy and prodigious phallus. (*Grub Street*: “On the evening of October 1, Penis Man went missing.”) A large porcine sculpture outside the Spotted Pig, in the West Village, was swiped twice.

(*The Post*: “Swine steals the pig.”) But the Elvis, whether because of its doe eyes or the way it had become part of East Village lore, felt more personal —less like a theft and more like a kidnapping.

Phil Hartman and Rich Kresberg opened the Great Jones Café in 1983, a more violent time for the block. “When my mother walked in, she wept and said, ‘Please don’t do this,’ ” Hartman, who lived on East Tenth for four hundred and nine dollars a month, told me. In a sense, the café was for, and belonged to, the community. It was the size of a living room. Before it opened, Hartman and Kresberg slapped up paint—the Mets’ orange and blue—and sanded the bar with the help of friends. Sharon, the manager, hung Christmas lights. Karen, a rock guitarist and chef, learned Cajun cooking: blackened redfish, gumbo, peanut soup. The Martinis were made using bottles of house gin or vodka stuffed with jalapeño peppers and served in a shot glass for a dollar. The beers were long-neck Rolling Rocks. Staff and patrons played together on a softball team called the Cajuns. One day, a server known as the Rudest Waitress in New York City showed up with the Elvis. It was approximately life-size, with chipped and crudely applied paint delineating a pinkish face and black hair. It’s Vegas Elvis, looking over his left shoulder, with a kind of blue-steel gaze. Occasionally, someone dressed it up or made out with it, and people liked to hang Mardi Gras beads around its neck, but nobody made it into a big deal. “Nothing about the Jones was trying too hard,” Hartman said.

This was the decade of the yuppie. (A few blocks west, the Gotham Bar and Grill was serving up vertical towers of roasted celeriac with black truffles.) The Jones was for the artists, the punks, the weirdos. Line cooks smoked pot in the walk-in refrigerator. There was sex in the bathrooms and dancing on the tables. Cocaine was abundant. One regular, Milt, lived in the Whitehouse Hotel, a flophouse around the corner. The Jones could abide eccentrics and cranks. After closing, a cocktail napkin might be left on the bar with a note like “Rich—last night, your friend George ‘got carried away’ and massaged his member (to no climax) before being asked to leave.” Once, a regular who claimed he was a Middle Eastern prince took out a gun and waved it around. At Christmas, the owners hung up a hundred and fifty stockings for the regulars and filled each one with a bottle of the patron’s favorite booze. When the *Village Voice* reviewed the place, the

writer found it to be insidery and exclusive, and irresistible, and refused to print its full name or address, to avoid ruining the spell.

Word eventually got out. Dan Aykroyd and Bill Murray showed up in a white limousine; Aykroyd hung out in the kitchen. There was Bruce Springsteen, Christopher Reeve, Matt Dillon. The photographer Nan Goldin and Mark Ibold, of Pavement, were bartenders. Keith Hernandez wore a Great Jones Café T-shirt at spring training. Penélope Cruz and Monica Lewinsky were part of a later era. But the most famous regular was Jean-Michel Basquiat.

In 1980, shortly before Basquiat sold his first painting—to Debbie Harry, for two hundred dollars—he was living in an upstairs apartment at 54 Great Jones. When the restaurant opened, three years later, he had moved across the street, into a loft owned by Andy Warhol. Sometimes he would send his assistant over with a cart to load up with food from the Jones. By then, Basquiat was collaborating with Warhol and, in his paintings, honing a critique of ownership and the commodification of everyday life. He liked to use the copyright symbol in his work as a joke. A painting from 1984 shows a Native woman giving birth under the words “*ABORIGINAL GENERATIVE ©*.” In other works, he copyrighted “milk,” “spine,” and “elbow.”

Basquiat might visit the Jones and pay with a hundred-dollar bill, then bum change to use the café’s pay phone. Often, he’d walk in before the place opened and sit at the bar in silence. He knew the bartender, a guitarist named Randy Gun, from the music scene. Basquiat would order a margarita with house tequila and fresh lime juice. Gun, a recovering addict, would talk to him gently about sobriety. Basquiat bestowed little gifts upon the place. Hartman ended up with a poster of the painter and Warhol, in the style of an old boxing promotion. Basquiat gave Gun a book about bartending, inscribed “*TO RANDY FOR THE BEST BARTENDER IN N.Y.*,” along with some doodles that later featured in his paintings. Forty years later, Gun sold the book for nearly two hundred thousand dollars.

To a resident of the more anonymous and corporate post-pandemic New York, the East Village of the eighties could seem as small and intertwined as a walled city. You saw the same people every day. Hartman, in the

seventies, had worked at a bookstore, with Richard Hell and Tom Verlaine, where Patti Smith liked to hang out. Basquiat had been the teen-age friend of a Great Jones Café dishwasher named Julie Wilson. It wasn't unusual to bump into Madonna. For three hundred dollars a month, Gun shared a three-story loft on Bowery after one of its floors had been vacated by Chris Stein and Debbie Harry. Half the neighborhood was between the ages of twenty and thirty-four. Everyone knew everyone, or knew someone who did. So it came as a shock when the Elvis bandits turned out to be two of their own.

The novelist Jonathan Safran Foer saw Stulman's ultimatum shortly after it was posted on Instagram. He sent a screenshot to his friends Sam Messer, an artist and a retired associate dean at the Yale School of Art, and Eleanor Gaver, Messer's wife, an underground filmmaker. "I said something like 'Isn't it funny how much these people look like you?'" Safran Foer told me. "I was sort of joking, but half serious. More than anything, it was so *exactly* something that they would do."



*"I don't want my house to smell like dog, so I spray it with this, and then it smells like dog and this."*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

In 1983, Gaver was living in a studio with a back yard, on Seventh Street between A and B, for three hundred dollars a month, and working at the Jones. Messer was making art and pitching for the Cajuns. The first time he visited the café, Gaver was his bartender; Messer asked her to marry him. She threw him out. "I was known as the Rudest Waitress in New York City," Gaver told me.

Recently, I visited Gaver and Messer at their house, in Bedford-Stuyvesant. We sat in their back yard with their dog, Easy, a docile Great Pyrenees mix. Messer and Gaver are in their sixties. Gaver, who has shoulder-length silvery-blond hair, wore a black button-down, Jimmy Choo sunglasses, and Crocs. “I bought that Elvis,” she said. In 1984, she and a co-worker had found it at a Spanish plaster-statuary shop on Ludlow Street. “We paid nothing for it, and I just stuck it in a window at the bar,” she said. Gaver told Hartman that she was O.K. with him keeping her Elvis at the Jones. In 1989, Hartman sold the café (he now owns Two Boots Pizza) to a regular, Jim Moffett, who preserved the place as if it were a museum. Gaver extended the loan of Elvis. In 2018, Moffett died, and the place shut down. Gaver and Messer decided not to push to reclaim the Elvis in the immediate aftermath—they felt it would have been inappropriate.

The pair and their daughter, Jo Messer, who is also an artist, considered the Elvis a family heirloom. “We always said to Jo, ‘This is your inheritance,’ ” Gaver told me. After Moffett’s death, Stulman took over the space. He’d made a splashy entrance into the downtown restaurant scene around 2006, with Little Owl and, later, Joseph Leonard. In the Great Jones Café space, he opened a new restaurant called, simply, the Jones. Messer told me that he stopped by before it opened: “I said, ‘That’s our Elvis.’ They said, ‘Get the fuck out.’ ” (Stulman said he had no knowledge of this.) The Jones—the new one—soon changed its name to Jolene. Stulman also covered the garish old orange-and-blue façade with pristine white paint.

One night in 2021, the Messer-Gaver family, on their way to a gallery, found themselves walking past the restaurant. “I said, ‘I’m gonna go in and get it,’ ” Gaver recounted. She did. Messer, finding the caper hilarious, and also sympathizing with the restaurant’s employees, felt compelled to stay behind and explain after his wife made her getaway. So Stulman didn’t need to do any detective work to find the culprits. Messer had explained the history of the bust to Wesley, the manager, and left his name and number. Jo stayed with her father. “I was, like, ‘Why would you give them our information?’ ” she told me. She handed Wesley a hundred dollars.

Minutes later, Messer got a text from Stulman demanding the statue back. “I was just, like, Fuck you,” Messer said. Stulman called and texted many

more times and threatened to go to the police. Messer ignored him. He and Gaver brought Elvis home. They took photos with it around the house. Gaver slept with it in bed, topless.

Shortly afterward, Jo exchanged messages with Jolene's Instagram account. "It was crazy rude," she said. "He was, like, 'You're harboring them.' " She went on, "He was, like, 'How dare they take a piece of East Village history? They stole our history.' But it's not *your* history—it's our history. He clearly wanted it because it gives him some sort of old-school New York cachet, which I found ironic, because if you want to be old and cool you don't arrest the old and cool New Yorkers, because then you're sort of a narc."

The public reaction on social media was getting aggressive. People who didn't know the backstory were calling her parents cowards and demanding their imprisonment. One said, of Gaver, "Her hands need to be stealing anti aging cream!" At Jo's urging, Messer eventually gave in, and began negotiating with Stulman over text. Stulman had a habit of referring to the Elvis as "art" in his messages, which bothered Messer. He and Gaver were also offended by the picture of them that he had posted on Instagram. Stulman hadn't used surveillance footage but, rather, a photo he'd found on social media. In it, the pair appear jaunty and arrogant. Messer is mid-dance move. Above all, Messer objected to the colored circles that Stulman had added to conceal their faces, which he saw as a ripoff of the artist John Baldessari. "He doesn't even know who Baldessari is!" Messer said. Gaver added, "They tried to make us seem like a couple of old white people."

"It was the time of the Karens," Messer said.

Gaver said, "We moved here"—Bedford-Stuyvesant—"in 2013 and are, you know, we're the first white people that moved here, and we are very tight with our neighborhood." The Facebook photograph of them that Stulman had posted was taken at a block party. "We were virtually the only white people at the party," she said.

If anyone was a thief, Messer and Gaver believed, it was Stulman, who was stealing and selling the Jones's East Village legacy. "There's a romance about that time," Gaver said. "For some reason, that lives on in the body of Elvis."

The history of New York, like that of any city, can be told in cycles of decay, rebirth, and stultification. We are all gentrifying, or being gentrified. Every Great Jones Café will beget its Lucien. Even the Jones and its early crowd would be classified by urbanists as “pioneer gentrifiers.” But what irked Messer and Gaver was not that the neighborhood had changed but that the newcomers seemed to be commodifying, and perverting, the memory of the old. It wasn’t just the Jones. Out went the CBGB of David Byrne and Joey Ramone (replaced by a John Varvatos store), and in came the Zero Bond of Elon Musk and Eric Adams. Basquiat’s loft was recently listed for sixty thousand dollars a month. It was rented by Angelina Jolie. The scene’s artists have had their estates acquired by marketing firms. The work of Robert Mapplethorpe can be licensed from a company called Artestar for use in “elite brand extensions.” The Nets paid to create special Basquiat “City Edition” uniforms. There are Basquiat ski helmets, Basquiat wristwatches, and a Basquiat candle, which smells of ylang-ylang and smoked tea.

Eventually, Messer and Gaver agreed to meet Stulman at a coffee shop in Fort Greene. The couple brought Easy the dog. Safran Foer had recounted the dispute to the broadcaster Ira Glass, who dispatched a “This American Life” reporter to the meeting. At the coffee shop, Messer told Stulman that he’d bought an identical Elvis bust on eBay, for a hundred and fifty dollars, and offered an exchange. Stulman declined. “It got somewhat contentious,” Messer said. “He was saying how it was ‘art.’ I kept saying, ‘You don’t know about Baldessari. You’re stealing copyrights from artists.’ ”

Stulman’s willingness to have the police settle the dispute gave him the upper hand. Ultimately, Messer went to his car and relinquished Elvis. “We figured it was over,” he said. On Great Jones Street, Stulman put the bust back on display.

A few days later, Messer and Gaver were visited at home by three N.Y.P.D. officers. The lead detective, Mark Tufano, wore a bulletproof vest and a Yankees hat, and spoke in the Queens English of a WFAN caller. “Listen, I feel stupid coming to your door about this, but we don’t get to pick and choose the cases,” he said.

“You’re hunting for Elvis?” Gaver asked. She explained that they’d given it back already.

“Here’s the deal,” Tufano said. “A complaint was made about the Elvis bust, O.K.? We’re not, like, boomeranging your door and dragging you outta here in handcuffs. But you can’t put the toothpaste back in the tube.” Tufano told them that there was a warrant for their arrest, and he asked them to surrender the following day at the Ninth Precinct, in the East Village.

Messer informed Tufano of their own East Village roots. Tufano replied, “You a McSorley’s guy?” The conversation was amicable. Messer told the three cops, “I’m gonna now call Ira Glass and see if they want to finish the story.” The officers looked as if they had no idea whom he was talking about.

Messer left a message for a lawyer, and the next day he and Gaver walked into the precinct. “The lawyer called back as I’m walking in, and she said, ‘Do not go into the precinct! Do not talk to anyone!’ ” Too late. A detective grabbed Messer’s arm. Gaver recalled, “I said, ‘Don’t touch him! He had nothing to do with it. I did!’ ” The detective advised her that she’d just admitted to a crime; Messer was an accessory. They were handcuffed, mug-shotted, fingerprinted, and separated for questioning. Gaver was handcuffed to a pipe in an interrogation room. Messer was taken to a cell. They were charged with grand larceny.

“I absolutely had notified the police,” Stulman told me recently. I met him at Fairfax, his cozy restaurant on West Fourth Street, along with his business partner, Matt Kebbekus. Stulman wore a blue cardigan and a scarf, and had his hair in a bun. He is earnest and direct, and a restaurant romantic in the Bourdain mold; he’s been in the business since he tended bar at the University of Wisconsin, where he met Kebbekus. (His college roommate was Virgil Abloh.) In 2003, he moved to New York, where he lived in a studio on the Lower East Side for thirteen hundred dollars a month, and opened his first restaurant. When I told him of the opinion shared by Messer and Gaver—essentially, that Jolene was borrowing the Jones’s credibility, because it wasn’t cool enough to have its own—he looked wounded.

Taking over the Jones's space, he explained, was not part of any plan. His son went to school, at P.S. 3, with the grandson of the Jones's landlord. After the Jones closed, in 2018, the landlord struggled to find a tenant. Would Stulman be interested? "When we went in, it looked like one day somebody just turned off the lights," he recalled. "The Mardi Gras beads were still hanging. The Elvis bust was still in the window. The last specials were still written on the chalkboard. It was, like, this perfectly preserved, old, worn-in restaurant. And it spoke to us. There was energy in the walls. There was a vibe." He and Kebbekus talked to former regulars about the place's history. "Also, like, I've lived in New York for twenty-one years," Stulman said. "I went there." The landlord, himself a longtime neighborhood resident, stipulated in Stulman's lease that certain parts of the building, such as a neon sign on the façade, and the bar itself, could not be altered or removed. "There was something else in the lease, though," Stulman said. "The Elvis head."

If their original decision to name the place the Jones was a brand extension, it backfired. Too many patrons thought the new Jones was the same thing as the old Jones, and associated it, Stulman said, with "average gumbo and average wings and a Red Stripe." For a new name, they landed on Jolene, in honor of Dolly Parton. (Kebbekus's young daughter was obsessed with the song.) "It felt like a female version of the Jones," Kebbekus said. "*Jo-lene*." Jolene strove for some funkiness and some comfort. "Our M.O. is to build restaurants for neighborhoods, and for people to make part of their lives," Kebbekus said. But things had changed since the eighties: Yelp, regulation, labor markets. Low margins, high rent. Soon came the pandemic, which, strangely, re-created something of the old feeling.

"It was amazing, in a way," Stulman said. "It was just New Yorkers. I felt like I was part of a resilient bunch. There was an energy." But it was also financially stressful. At times, Stulman found himself clutching his chest, thinking he might be having a heart attack.

The theft happened at a time, with the pandemic winding down, when restaurants, as a social idea, felt precious, and possibly endangered. Losing Elvis created a new problem. "I'm literally in default of my lease if I don't have this," Stulman said, of the plaster head. He viewed his Instagram post

as an attempt to resolve the issue extrajudicially. (Penis Man had been recovered in this manner.) Stulman had kept trying to negotiate with the thieves, and he went to the police only after he suspected that Messer had blocked his number. A detective asked him how much the Elvis was worth. Stulman told me, “As far as I’m concerned, it’s worth thousands and thousands of dollars—to someone.” Messer believes that it should be valued at the (negligible) price of its eBay clones, though this arguably overlooks how meaningless objects are sometimes transmuted into something more precious by the force of their history. A bartending manual may go for two dollars; Basquiat’s goes for two hundred thousand. In any case, the police used Stulman’s valuation in its report. This was enough to transform a petty caper into a class-E felony, punishable by up to four years in prison.

Stulman remembers the Elvis-handover meeting as bizarre. The first odd thing he noticed was the reporter from “This American Life” hanging around. He wondered if he was involved in some kind of publicity stunt: “I’m now, like, is this all a ruse?” (No story materialized.) He also felt menaced. “They had at least one, maybe two, very big dogs,” he said. He struggled to comprehend Messer’s complaint about the Instagram post. “They accused us of trying to steal some artist’s style of art work,” Stulman said. Then, he went on, “they start asking me, ‘Why is this so important to you?’ I said, No. 1, it was in my restaurant, and you took it. And, whether this was originally yours or not, that’s not a way to go about telling me. But then—and I think this was when they had the, like, ‘Aha!’ moment—I said, ‘Really, I’m obligated by my lease to return this. So this isn’t *my* Elvis bust. It belongs to 54 Great Jones Street.’ ”



*Cartoon by Liana Finck*

After he got Elvis back, Stulman informed the police that the bust had been returned, and that he no longer wished to press charges. The police told him that wasn't his call.

Jolene, meanwhile, never cohered into a local joint. "That neighborhood changed quite a bit," Kebbekus said. "It's people that have money. And if you could afford to live there you could also afford not to live there during the pandemic." Last year, he and Stulman decided to close. On the final night, one of the regulars hired a Scotsman in a kilt to play a bagpipe dirge. Soon, a new restaurant took over the lease. It opened last September. The new owners called the place Elvis.

Elvis is a French wine bar, with orange walls, a cozy nook in the back, and tiny tables. When I visited, in January, there was a couple, dining in a corner, who'd met at the Jones, got married, and subsequently divorced. A co-owner of the restaurant said that his girlfriend's parents had their first date at the Jones. It was loud and bustling, and people seemed happy. Not the Jones, exactly, but, still, nice. The Elvis, which I'd been hoping to find, wasn't there.

"It can't live here," one of the owners, Darin Rubell, told me, adding that he wished it could. "It's a shame."

Rubell said that, shortly after the name was announced, the ownership team received a cease-and-desist letter from a company managing the estate of Elvis Presley, alleging trademark theft. “It’s stern. It’s clear. It’s well put together. It’s threatening,” Rubell said.

In 2013, much of Presley’s estate was acquired for a hundred and forty-five million dollars by a company called Authentic Brands Group. Authentic Brands is an intellectual-property business whose portfolio consists primarily of distressed companies—Brooks Brothers, Barneys New York, Juicy Couture, Nautica, Sports Illustrated. Authentic buys them cheap, then typically ceases operations and licenses out the trademarks. This keeps beloved, bankrupt businesses alive, in a sense; there are still Nautica polos and Juicy sweatpants, albeit manufactured by third parties. In another sense, it creates zombie brands, whose new lives have nothing to do with their original ones. You can buy Sports Illustrated protein powder, for instance, or visit the Sports Illustrated Resort, in the Dominican Republic (“Where Champions Come to Stay!”).

Jamie Salter, Authentic Brands’ founder and C.E.O., previously worked at a private-equity fund, where he bought up the rights to Bob Marley’s estate. Salter went after bootleg Marley T-shirts, beanies, and bongs. There was money to be made in the dead and famous. At Authentic, he bought the rights to the estates of Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali; Salter, who owns twelve houses, recently told *Bloomberg Businessweek* that they made ideal partners: “They don’t fly private, they don’t talk back.” Authentic began marketing Presley to a younger generation, licensing an Elvis Snapchat filter, CBD-infused Hound Dog dog treats, and an animated Netflix show, “Agent Elvis,” in which Matthew McConaughey voices a secret-agent Elvis who jet-packs around the world.

Messer once remarked to me on the irony of a bunch of well-off white people fighting for control of a plaster head of Elvis, who built his own career upon the sound of Black blues artists, many of whose copyrights were stolen by their record labels. The Authentic purchase was just a step in the copyright food chain—an I.P. tuna swallowed by an I.P. shark.

Rubell, the new owner, viewed his Elvis trouble as a misunderstanding. “It’s not named after Elvis Presley,” he said, of the restaurant. “Sometimes

things just sound right. My partner, John, was, like, ‘Isn’t Elvis a great name for a bar, just on its own? Just a great name: Elvis.’ And that was really it.” He repeated a version of this to me many times. Once, he mused, “It’s almost like ‘El-vees! ’ Not ‘Elvis.’ It’s clearly French.” To avoid further misconceptions, the ownership group decided to remove any references to Elvis the man—including the plaster bust. It currently resides in the office of the landlord, who runs an auto-repair shop next door.

Messer and Gaver would still like to get the bust back. After their arrest, they pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor; as part of the deal, by avoiding criminal charges for the following six months, they had their convictions erased. But news of the new restaurant’s name reopened the old wound. Gaver began plotting, and recruiting accomplices for, another heist. “We were gonna go back en masse and take back the Elvis on opening night,” she said. Eventually, they contacted Rubell. “Sam Messer called me and started yelling,” Rubell said. “He was really angry, man. He was demanding I switch the Elvises.” But they talked it out, and Rubell explained that the Elvis was also protected by his lease. “We’re cool now,” Rubell said. (Messer confirmed this.)

Rubell doesn’t think that Messer and Gaver have much of an argument in terms of owning the bust. “I feel like if you take something back that’s been there for thirty-eight years, I don’t know that it’s yours anymore,” he said. But he’s rooting for them. “There’s a beautiful end to the story if they could swap it out and have it. If it were to come back to them, isn’t that fucking amazing?”

I met Elvis for the first time a few weeks later. He’d been living for months atop a butcher’s block in an office behind the mechanic’s garage next to 54 Great Jones. I don’t know what I expected; it looked like a nice arts-and-crafts project. (Many of today’s plastercraft and chalkware Elvises came from shops with paint-your-own ceramics, which rode a boomlet of Elvis sales after his death, in 1977. A woman named Audrey Tasiemski, who owned a shop in Long Beach, California, painted a lot of them. “It’s not a Rembrandt,” her son, Larry, told me.) Elvis had pockmarks, and a chunk of his hair had fallen out, which made him seem old. There was a vulnerability

to him. If plaster Elvis was born, in a sense, at the Jones, that would make him about the same age that human Elvis was when he died.

“He’s my buddy,” the landlord, Anthony Marano, told me. “I say good morning to him every day.” Marano, who is seventy-nine, was sitting at his desk, which faces Elvis. The office is windowless, a little dusty, and filled with knickknacks and junk stacked above head height: an old barber’s chair, paintings, posters, neighborhood detritus. “People come in and give me stuff,” Marano said.

Marano is a downtown lifer. He was born on Cherry Street, by the Manhattan Bridge, and opened an auto-repair shop on Delancey in 1963. He has seen the neighborhood rise and fall and rise again. His current mechanic shop is basically a retirement hobby, something to pass the time. He’s done well for himself real-estate-wise, but he is perhaps not the world’s most exacting businessman. He’s a sentimental guy. “I like old,” Marano said. “People can’t believe I have a little garage over here in the middle of multimillion-dollar fucking apartments. But I enjoy my life. I enjoy being who I am. I enjoy being here. I fixed the building up. My tenants have all been nice people. And it gives me something to do. That’s what life is all about.”

In the matter of Elvis, he was on the side of Stulman, of course, though temperamentally he has the gleeful combativeness of a Gaver/Messer type. Withholding the bust from his antagonists seemed to give him joy. “Maybe if they came to see me, it would’ve been a different story,” he said. “I talk tough, but I’m not a hard guy. Instead they fuckin’ tried to steal it. There’s no fuckin’ way they’re getting it now.”

Marano told me that he’d let Moffett, the last owner of the Jones, slide on rent, in order to help keep the place open. He was owed a six-figure sum by the end. After Moffett’s death, Marano got the restaurant’s furnishings—Elvis among them—which, monetarily, didn’t amount to much. “I call Elvis my hundred-thousand-dollar bust,” Marano said. We sat for a moment. In the office, Marano still has the Jones’s old jukebox, and some fake fish that used to hang on the café’s wall. Elvis seemed to be staring at us over his shoulder. I asked if there was anything Gaver and Messer could do to entice him to give it over. “Nah,” he said. “Outside a hundred thousand dollars.

But I don't think they're ready to spend a hundred thousand dollars for a piece of fucking chalk." ♦

*Zach Helfand* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

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[\*\*Annals of Real Estate\*\*](#)

# What Do We Buy Into When We Buy a Home?

Homeownership, long a cherished American ideal, has become the subject of black comedies, midlife-crisis novels, and unintentionally dystopic reality TV.

By [Jennifer Wilson](#)

March 10, 2025



*Both options, renting and buying in New York City, felt unsustainable to me. Why couldn't there be some secret third thing? Illustration by Janne Iivonen*

In the late nineties, a movie came out about a slick-talking, hot-shot developer who is about to destroy a small but cherished neighborhood institution when he reads the letters of a woman who's trying to save it and falls in love with her. I'm not talking about "You've Got Mail," Nora Ephron's classic ode to indie bookstores and Upper West Side quaintness. I'm referring to the box-office bomb "'Til There Was You," an agitprop rom-com about zoning laws written by Winnie Holzman, the creator of "My

So-Called Life.” In the film, Jeanne Tripplehorn plays Gwen, a struggling ghostwriter looking to rent a place in Los Angeles. She finds an apartment in La Fortuna, a historic building—based on the real-life El Cabrillo condominium in Hollywood—where a bohemian, multigenerational coterie of residents gathers in a shared courtyard to smoke, play music, and reminisce about old flames. Gwen keeps to herself, though; this is just a “temporary shelter” until she moves to New York City to be a *real* writer. Then one day news arrives that La Fortuna is being demolished to make room for a high-rise condominium designed by a trendy architect named Nick (Dylan McDermott), and Gwen starts writing anonymous letters to a newspaper in protest. Nick reads them, at first incensed but eventually charmed. He and his landlord girlfriend (Sarah Jessica Parker) break up, he implores his firm to keep La Fortuna intact, and he races to the courtyard to find the woman behind these passionate appeals for tenants’ rights.

Though Roger Ebert gave the film one and a half stars, “ ’Til There Was You” imprinted on me in a way that “You’ve Got Mail” never did. I wish I could say that it was because it had the more repentant developer, extolled communal living, or presented the written word as a political tool. Mostly, I coveted Gwen’s apartment. Her bare écrù walls and improvised furnishings made being peripatetic and underemployed look chic—an ideal that would sustain me through many years of being a freelance journalist. And there was something so beguiling about that buzzing, open courtyard. “If real estate is a self-portrait and a class portrait, it is also a body arranging its limbs to seduce,” Deborah Levy writes in her memoir “Real Estate.” I was so seduced that for years I would type “courtyard” into the keyword search on apartment sites. I had to stop after I moved back to New York City. When I started looking for a place in Brooklyn on my own a couple of years ago, my friends warned me to manage my expectations—as in, have none. “Dishwashers are for the aristocracy,” one cautioned.

After weeks of searching, I noticed an apartment within my budget on StreetEasy, but when I went to see it I realized that the living room looked out over a massive Con Ed substation, beyond which lay a cemetery. I decided that I could do either power lines or a cemetery, but not both. I felt like the protagonist of Danzy Senna’s “Symptomatic,” a journalist who moves to New York and, amid a protracted hunt, considers an apartment

share where her prospective roommate likes to keep the canned foods alphabetized. She finally finds a place through a fact checker’s hairdresser’s cousin. I, too, relied on thin connections. I used a dot-edu e-mail address that I had from an adjunct teaching gig at a journalism school to find a sublet on a site called *SabbaticalHomes*, a “temporary shelter” in Flatbush where I could live until I got my bearings. By the time that happened, a year later, rents across the city had grown more than seven times faster than wages, according to a report released in May, 2024, that compared StreetEasy and Zillow listings with data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. I started fantasizing about moving to Finland, finding a quiet job teaching English, and joining a socialist housing complex on the outskirts of Helsinki. The only thing stopping me was that it sounded like the beginning of a true-crime series.

I was complaining about my rent at a friend’s birthday party when one of the guests suggested that I look into buying a place. A mortgage would lock me into a monthly rate, protecting me from the fluctuations of the rental market. There were just about seven hundred and seventy thousand problems with that plan, the main one being that that number is the average sale price of a one-bedroom co-op in the city. The guest told me she understood; she was an artist. But had I heard of something called a Housing Development Fund Corporation co-op? These were below-market-rate apartments for low- and middle-income New Yorkers. (I saw a two-bedroom H.D.F.C. co-op on StreetEasy for three hundred and forty-nine thousand dollars.) If I took a ten-hour class with a local organization, she explained, the city could provide me with a hundred thousand dollars toward a down payment. (Yes, this is how people talk at parties in New York.) To qualify at the time, I needed to make less than eighty per cent of the area median income. I had never been so grateful for my terrible life choice to major in Russian literature.

This chance meeting felt like a scene out of a novel I had recently read, “Terrace Story,” by Hilary Leichter, in which a character living in a cramped urban apartment meets a mysterious woman with the magical ability to expand space, who “gifts” her a terrace. I tried to forget that the novel was also a cautionary tale about what, in the quest for more, we let into our lives.

And so, on a rainy night this past December, I made my way to Medgar Evers College, in Crown Heights, to attend an information session for first-time home buyers co-sponsored by Neighborhood Housing Services and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. I walked inside the glass doors of the sleek DuBois Bunche Center, named for the civil-rights leaders W. E. B. Du Bois and Ralph Bunche, and into a small, crowded auditorium, filled with about sixty New Yorkers, most Black like me. I had gone that night expecting to hear how I could save money, but instead it felt like *I* was there to be saved. A series of speakers appeared onstage, preaching about the virtuousness of homeowners. They were “more likely to vote,” one presenter suggested, because they were “more invested in their communities.” We would be building “generational wealth,” another speaker said, for those who came after us. What was next—mortgage as a form of “forced savings”? I had heard that line from real-estate agents trying to help me get over sticker shock.

I was prepared to be indignant if anyone suggested that my savings or lack thereof were correlated to anything other than the exorbitant cost of living in New York, but it is true that we were near a “provisions” shop where I purchased a bar of peppermint bark for twelve dollars. Still, I wasn’t sure that buying an apartment was the solution. Some of the monthly maintenance fees for co-ops neared a thousand dollars. (These fees could include property taxes, building upkeep, and amenities like a windowless room with a few treadmills labelled “Gym.”) I thought of a friend who had just bought a place in Crown Heights. “I can’t really save now. Or spend,” she had told me. I suddenly pictured myself in my future apartment, my freedoms and pleasures restricted, all so that I could one day pass on real estate to a hypothetical child. Was this an info session or the set of “Rosemary’s Baby”?

I wasn’t alone in feeling that some wall had been knocked down between the American Dream and the stuff of nightmares. Across popular culture, homeownership has become the subject of black comedies, midlife-crisis novels, and unintentionally dystopic reality TV.

“No Good Deed,” on Netflix, stars Lisa Kudrow and Ray Romano as a couple of empty nesters looking to sell their charming nineteen-twenties

Spanish-style home in Los Feliz. But are they hiding a dark secret that could bring down the asking price? Also on Netflix is “The Watcher,” starring Naomi Watts and Bobby Cannavale as a New York City couple who deplete their savings to purchase a dream house in suburbia. “This is America, right? Everybody buys a house they can’t afford,” Cannavale’s character quips. After they move in, the pair start receiving menacing letters from someone who is “watching” the house. In the course of seven episodes, the couple unravels over what would hurt more: getting murdered in their sleep or selling at a loss. Showtime’s “The Curse” is one part HGTV, one part “Twin Peaks,” all millennial mishegoss. Emma Stone and Nathan Fielder portray a married couple who build a Potemkin village of eco-friendly homes and pour-over coffee shops in a struggling New Mexico town. They’re desperate to lure the kind of wealthy buyers who hope to launder their class guilt in energy-efficient washers. Houses have always been haunted, but, whereas poltergeists of yore troubled the suburban idyll of white America, in these shows the scariest spectre is a disappearing profit margin.

During the pandemic, homeowners became the market equivalents of people who bought Zoom stock in 2019. Low interest rates, coupled with the feeling that having your own space was a matter of life or death, sent housing prices soaring by about forty per cent; in especially hot markets, owners saw their home values practically double overnight. Popular culture both facilitated and reflected that shift. House-flipping shows like “Flip or Flop,” “Fixer Upper,” and “Windy City Rehab” primed us to see homes not as places to live in but as assets to buy and sell. “Selling Sunset,” a reality show about bleached-blond real-estate agents as identical-looking as the Hollywood mansions they were shilling, had premiered in 2019, but after 2020 everywhere in America was for sale: “Selling the OC,” “Selling Tampa,” “Selling the City” (as in New York). Before long came “Buying London,” “The Parisian Agency,” and something called “Making It in Marbella,” about Swedish real-estate agents who sell properties in Spain. I had assumed that all these shows were about the glories of owning a statement home, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” for the streaming age. But these are shows about hustling. We salivate over commissions, not coved ceilings. In one episode of “Selling Sunset,” a potential buyer bemoans the lack of a gas range in a twelve-million-dollar hideaway in

Beverly Hills. “Bitch, you don’t even cook!” the real-estate agent later shouts to the camera. It’s the brokers who are the heroes of these stories, the new wolves of Main Street.

Maybe what I had been seeing in all that morbid mortgage content were the beginnings of buyer’s remorse? Since the pandemic, costs associated with owning a home in the U.S. have gone up twenty-four per cent, according to the personal-finance website Bankrate. The Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University reported in 2024 that nearly a quarter of American homeowners are “cost-burdened” (meaning that more than thirty per cent of their income goes to housing). Rising insurance premiums, increased property taxes, and inflation have hit low-income homeowners especially hard, particularly those over sixty-five years old who are on fixed incomes. Is it any wonder that audiences flocked to “Wicked,” a redemption story for a woman whose sister was killed by a house?

In fiction, 2024 was the year of ditching the domestic. (And, if you happened upon a memoir, there was a good chance it was about someone getting divorced.) Look at the feverish reception of Miranda July’s road-trip novel “All Fours.” The main character, a married artist in her mid-forties, sets out from her Los Angeles home, stumbles into a psychosexual dynamic with a young rental-car attendee, and decides to remodel a motel room into a love nest. Rental cars, booking a room—it’s a veritable homage to the erotics of transience. You can imagine the narrator of Ayşegül Savaş’s “The Anthropologists” reading “All Fours” for a book club and having an existential crisis. Savaş’s novel is about a documentary filmmaker who, out of a sense of social obligation, decides that she and her husband should buy a place: “We’d been living in the city for several years by then, and from time to time worried that we weren’t living by the correct set of rules, that we should be making our lives sturdy.” We register her ambivalence toward homeownership when she and her husband respond with barely disguised jealousy after learning that their best friend might be leaving the city to take a new job and pursue an exciting love affair. He’s a renter—he can be that torridly free.

I could relate. I wasn’t sure that I was ready to stop living out what the scholar Pamela Robertson Wojcik calls “the apartment plot.” In her book of

the same title, which looks at mid-century representations of “urban living” in film and pop culture, Wojcik cites Doris Day in “Pillow Talk,” Lauren Bacall in “Designing Woman,” Natalie Wood in “Sex and the Single Girl,” and Audrey Hepburn in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” as emblematic denizens of the genre. These films offered “a vision of home—centered on values of community, visibility, contact, density, friendship, mobility, impermanence, and porousness.” I would add “glamour.” Without the imperative to invest in home furnishings, Holly Golightly can blow her powder-room money on Givenchy.

These characters’ real-life inspirations, a postwar generation of career women living alone in New York City, occupied an anxious space in American culture: they were often portrayed as sexy but sad. The missives directed their way now sound aspirational. In 1952, an article in *Mademoiselle* stated, “The average career girl with an apartment of her own is notorious for the abandoned way she runs her domestic life. Home is not really home—it is a base of operations.” Though onscreen the plot necessitated that these women wind up married (and presumably with a mortgage), the fantasy of the single girl in her apartment has proved unmovable. Carrie Bradshaw goes on to live in a penthouse, but it is her single-girl one-bedroom walkup that still attracts throngs of tourists who pose for pictures on her fictional stoop. (Not for long—the real-life owner of the building just received permission from the city to build a gate in front of it.) Even the apartment plot has gone co-op.

Both options, renting and buying in New York City, felt unsustainable to me. Why couldn’t there be some secret third thing? It turned out that, for decades, there had been. The Mitchell-Lama program, a nineteen-fifties urban-housing initiative, allowed New Yorkers to purchase “limited equity” co-ops, low-cost apartments that they technically owned but couldn’t resell or pass down. If you moved or “went to a better place,” your apartment would go to the next person on the waiting list. You were merely a steward. Mitchell-Lama got some surprise P.R. recently thanks to the actor Timothée Chalamet, who, during his press tour for “A Complete Unknown,” talked about growing up in Manhattan Plaza, a Mitchell-Lama in Hell’s Kitchen that was intended for artists. (Larry David and Alicia Keys also lived there.) The city stopped building new Mitchell-Lamas in the late seventies, but you

can still apply for a spot in existing ones. Last year, Clayton Apartments, in Harlem, listed available studios for sale for just over twelve thousand dollars. You can see why, when New Yorkers say they won the lottery, they mean the housing lottery.



*"This friend and I slowly drifted apart over many years because she was a total flake."*  
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

A new book, “Homes for Living: The Fight for Social Housing and a New American Commons,” by the urban historian Jonathan Tarleton, recounts the history of the Mitchell-Lama program and examines the threats to its survival. Those threats, he found, came from the very middle-income New Yorkers for whom these homes were built. Tarleton focusses on two buildings whose residents were given the opportunity to “go private”—that is, to leave the Mitchell-Lama system and sell their homes at market rate, pulling the affordable-housing ladder up along with them.

In 2014, Tarleton was the editor-in-chief of *Urban Omnibus*, the online publication of the Architectural League of New York. One day that fall, he received an e-mail from a man who lived in a Mitchell-Lama in lower Manhattan called Southbridge Towers. The residents there were about to vote on whether to “privatize,” and the tide was turning toward a yes. The pro-privatization camp was so confident that it threw a party at T. J. Byrnes, an Irish pub on the ground floor of the complex. On the invitation, Tarleton notes, was “a smiling, sunglasses-wearing sun” and the words “Living the Dream.” Tarleton’s book follows the lead-up to the vote at Southbridge and to a similar vote at St. James, another Mitchell-Lama, in Brooklyn’s Clinton

Hill neighborhood. What ensues is a distinctly New York City opera: a bunch of loudmouths obsessed with whose apartment is worth what. A St. James resident who supported affordable housing told Tarleton that a pro-privatization co-op board member approached her and asked, “Did you call me a bitch?” The resident continued, “And I did. I’m not going to turn around and say, ‘I didn’t say it.’ That’s not who I am.” At Southbridge, a resident against privatization identified as James Szal was given a security escort home after the vote. His opponents weren’t all unsympathetic to his cause, but they couldn’t ignore the potential upside. As one put it, “Listen . . . if there’s a million dollars on the ground and I have to stoop down to pick it up, I’ll do that.”

The decision to privatize wasn’t as clear-cut as it might seem to a casual observer with a calculator. For one thing, the residents of Southbridge and St. James would now have the pleasure of seeing how far their money didn’t go on the New York City housing market. Yet Tarleton found that the residents were under the spell of something other than money. To them, ownership came with a vision of boundless possibility: they would get to renovate their counters without asking permission from the board (a moment of dramatic irony for anyone familiar with condo bylaws), other parents would respect them more at school drop-off, and they would get to say “we bought” without an asterisk. An eighty-two-year-old African American resident of St. James whom Tarleton refers to as Lester Goodyear wrote, in one of many manifestos he drafted, “Home ownership is also the first step in acquiring status as a First Class Citizen in America (Owning a piece of the Rock).” Where had he heard this, other than in a Prudential insurance commercial?

Tarleton sees in arguments like Goodyear’s the effects of what he calls “over a century of public policy and real estate propaganda.” American mythology about land ownership long existed as a rationale for Native dispossession, but the *house* in the little house on the prairie took center stage in 1917, the year of the Bolshevik Revolution. It was then that the U.S. Department of Labor took over a program called Own Your Own Home, which had been run by the National Association of Real Estate Boards. If “housing and cooperative arrangements evoked the supposed contagion of socialism and communism,” Tarleton writes, “the single-

family home was the antidote.” The U.S. government distributed two million posters touting the virtues of homeownership to offices, factories, and churches. One stated, “A Man Who Owns His Own Home is a better worker, husband, father, citizen and a *real* American.” At the bottom, it read, “Talk to your wife about it.” Ideally, she had seen the poster that read, “How glad I am that I agreed with John when he proposed that.”

Herbert Hoover, aside from his stint in the White House, lived in a hotel for most of his political career, yet he was the architect of the idea that America was a nation of homeowners. In 1931, as President, he addressed the Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, proclaiming that homeownership was “a sentiment deep within the heart of our race and of American life.” Look no further than the American songbook, he told the crowd. “Those immortal ballads, ‘Home, Sweet Home,’ ‘My Old Kentucky Home,’ and the ‘Little Gray Home in the West,’ were not written about tenements or apartments,” he said, adding, “They never sing songs about a pile of rent receipts.”

In 1934, a two-story Colonial surrounded by a white picket fence and dogwood trees appeared just south of Grand Central Terminal, in Manhattan. That year, two hundred thousand visitors toured “America’s Little House,” as the model home was called. Construction was paid for by a federal program called Better Homes in America, and the only occupant was a CBS-affiliate radio station, which promoted homeownership over the airwaves. One of the first radio guests was the country’s new First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, whose husband would institute Federal Housing Administration loans, establish Fannie Mae, and pass the G.I. Bill after the Second World War, all of which made buying a home more financially feasible. In 1959, Vice-President Richard Nixon travelled to Moscow, where he and the Soviet Union premier, Nikita Khrushchev, conducted what became known as the “kitchen debate,” an impromptu televised back-and-forth about the merits of capitalism versus communism, while they toured an American model home outfitted with gadgets from General Electric. “Any steelworker could buy this house,” the Vice-President bragged. I learned about this exchange in a Soviet history class in college, a year before I graduated, in 2008, amid the subprime mortgage crisis.

There were problems with Nixon's argument even at the time, though. Black Americans, from steelworkers to white-collar professionals, were routinely denied F.H.A. loans and often suffered under redlining policies that made homeownership prohibitively expensive for them. Tarleton believes that Black Americans' experiences with the real-estate industry explain why the privatization vote unfolded differently at St. James and at Southbridge, with race functioning as a kind of political education. At the predominately Black St. James, residents had less faith in the market. "They would still be Black in a real estate system that had racism baked into its core," Tarleton writes. He cites the work of my colleague Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, who observes, in her book "Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership," that banks, after decades of refusing to lend or lending on discriminatory terms to Black families, pivoted from exclusion to something she calls "predatory inclusion," targeting that same demographic with subprime mortgages.

The Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 encouraged banks to make loans available to Black Americans and established *HUD*, which began holding information sessions similar to the one I attended last year. In other words, "more invested in your community" has historically served as a euphemism for "less likely to riot." "For some," Taylor writes, "the promotion of homeownership and access to credit in neighborhoods and communities that previously had been ignored was appealing as a new means of social control." This had been true from the start, for white consumers as well. Adrienne Brown, in her book "The Residential Is Racial," argues that campaigns like Own Your Own Home wanted white buyers to see themselves as belonging not to a multiracial working class but to a white home-owning class, who, with mortgages breathing down their necks, would be less likely to agitate for better employment terms. "Realtors framed homeownership as a fix-all for radicalism of all stripes," Brown asserts.

Southbridge voted to privatize, and in time the co-op's Listserv included such complaints as "Households without kids shouldn't have to pay for playground maintenance." Property taxes were starting to increase faster than earnings from the flip tax (the thirty per cent that sellers had to pay back to the co-op on their profits) could offset them. Szal, the Southbridge

resident who opposed privatization, told Tarleton that he felt like Charlton Heston at the end of “Planet of the Apes,” screaming, “You maniacs! You blew it up! Damn you! God damn you all to hell!” Time will tell if the yes vote proves apocalyptic. The Southbridge vote had an antecedent across the pond. In 1981, Margaret Thatcher ushered in the Right to Buy campaign, making it possible for British citizens to buy their council homes. Forty per cent of these homes, as today’s housing activists in England are apt to repeat, ended up in the hands of private landlords.

Tarleton takes sides but doesn’t lay blame. “These pro-privatization perpetrators are also victims,” he writes. “The narrative of the American Dream, driven by capitalism and homeownership, had taught them that they were not true homeowners, and thus were lesser than their neighbors.”

Not long after I moved to New York, I started looking into doing a story on Cinemóvil, a left-wing film collective known for its “guerrilla screenings” across the city. I had heard that it projected “Wild in the Streets,” Barry Shear’s 1968 cult classic about generational warfare, on a screen at the corner of Ninth Street and Avenue B, where Anarchy Row—a settlement of unhoused people who were vocally resisting Mayor Eric Adams’s orders to dismantle all homeless encampments in New York City—was situated. (An Anarchy Row resident had requested the film.) On Cinemóvil’s Instagram feed, I saw a post advertising an upcoming “Anti-Landlord Halloween” double feature at Mayday, a co-working space for organizers, in Bushwick. On the docket were two Japanese horror flicks: Kimiyoshi Yasuda’s “Yokai Monsters: 100 Monsters” (1968) and Katsuhiro Otomo’s “World Apartment Horror” (1991). I was still reeling from my apartment search, and from the ghoulish tales I heard along the way—rats crawling out of bathroom drains, brokers charging fifteen per cent of the annual rent, et cetera—and so I merrily settled in for an evening of watching monsters from Japanese folklore evict developers out of existence.

Before the movies even started, though, there was—to my surprise—a full two-hour meeting of the Brooklyn Eviction Defense, a tenants’ union. A member of the union spoke to the room, explaining the history of the organization. It had formed in 2020, and mobilized as fears spread that the Tenant Safe Harbor Act—an early pandemic policy that suspended

evictions for tenants facing financial hardships related to COVID-19—would expire. Around the city, the union has fought evictions and organized rent strikes. We were all asked to come to the front of the room, pick up a marker, and write down on a whiteboard what we thought a “world without rent” would look like.

How had I let my vision for what kind of world was possible become as small as a New York kitchen? This whole time, I’d been contemplating the question of whether to rent or buy, and here were people who were saying: *neither*.

I imagined living in a society where people don’t need to own a home only to have something they can take out a mortgage on should calamity or college tuition strike. There, the flimsy divide between low- and middle-income workers wouldn’t be concretized through housing policy. In Vienna, for example, where income limits for government benefits are less stringent, eighty per cent of the population qualifies for social housing. (The Austrian city is famous for its *Pawlatschen*, “access balconies,” which open up onto a shared courtyard.) I decided that I *did* want to be invested in my community, but as a tenant. Something tells me that this will make me just as likely to vote—though maybe not for lower property taxes.

I opened two new windows on my laptop. One was for the Brooklyn Eviction Defense’s website, where I began to fill out my tenant-union card. The second was for StreetEasy, where I began looking for a rent-stabilized apartment. I typed in a keyword search for “courtyard.” A girl can dream. ♦



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**The Political Scene**

# The Unchecked Authority of Greg Abbott

The Texas governor gained national attention by busing migrants to Democratic cities. Now he's paving the way for President Trump's mass-deportation campaign.

By [Jonathan Blitzer](#)

March 10, 2025



*“As governor, he has begun exercising power in a way that’s not previously been seen,” a Republican lobbyist said. Illustration by Diego Mallo; Source photograph from Bloomberg / Getty*

The Wall Ranch, in Eagle Pass, Texas, occupies a thousand acres of scrubland along the Mexican border. Several times a day, freight trains

coming from Mexico stop on the southern edge of the property, where a large X-ray machine scans the cars to check if people are hiding inside. One morning in early January, the ranch's owner, Martín Wall, a forty-five-year-old cattleman and a seventh-generation Texan, showed me around. Between 2022 and 2023, he said, more than two hundred migrants crossed through his land each day to board the trains and travel farther north. Discarded clothes and trash piled up in the brush. A tractor was vandalized. Wire fences that Wall had erected to keep his cattle from wandering into the road were repeatedly cut. Once, Wall came inside for lunch and found two men in his kitchen. "Hell, you can grab their phones and they have pins," he told me. "They have my house marked."

We were sitting in Wall's pickup truck. The muzzle of a hunting rifle poked out from the back seat, and a water bottle on the front console was filled with the brown swill of chewing tobacco. Wall, who is tall and burly, with long hair and a salt-and-pepper beard, told me that he'd spent more than three hundred thousand dollars making repairs on the ranch. "I've been totally crippled by this," he said. The problem began "as soon as Biden went in. We got forgotten about down here."

By the end of last year, the number of migrants arriving at the border was at its lowest ebb since 2020, owing in large part to a dramatic increase in apprehensions in Mexico, and a series of stricter policies adopted in the final months of the Biden Administration. In February, after Donald Trump's first month back in office, the U.S. Border Patrol recorded fewer encounters with migrants than at any other time in at least a quarter century. But Wall, who flies a large Trump flag at the entrance to his ranch, attributed the change to a single person: Greg Abbott, the Republican governor of Texas.

In the spring of 2021, Abbott announced that Texas would "not be an accomplice to the open border policies" of the Biden Administration. He issued a disaster declaration and launched an eleven-billion-dollar enforcement crackdown called Operation Lone Star. Thousands of state troopers from the Department of Public Safety were dispatched to arrest migrants in the borderlands. The Texas National Guard placed floating buoys in the Rio Grande to make it harder to swim across, and strung up

more than a hundred miles of razor wire to ensnare anyone who did. Both moves prompted federal lawsuits. “The only thing that we are not doing is we’re not shooting people who come across the border,” Abbott said in a radio interview. “Because, of course, the Biden Administration would charge us with murder.”

The following spring, Abbott began busing migrants to New York, Chicago, Denver, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. More than a hundred thousand people arrived in those cities as a result—an influx that overwhelmed government resources, stoked local resentments, and deepened divisions among Democrats. Abbott’s strategy was to inflict the pain felt by constituents like Wall on liberal voters who lived far from the border. In response, congressional Democrats backed legislation to increase border security and restrict asylum. When the Biden White House asked other cities to help take in migrants, local officials privately told the President’s aides they were worried that Abbott would target them next. A senior Biden Administration official told me, “Greg Abbott single-handedly changed the national politics around immigration.”

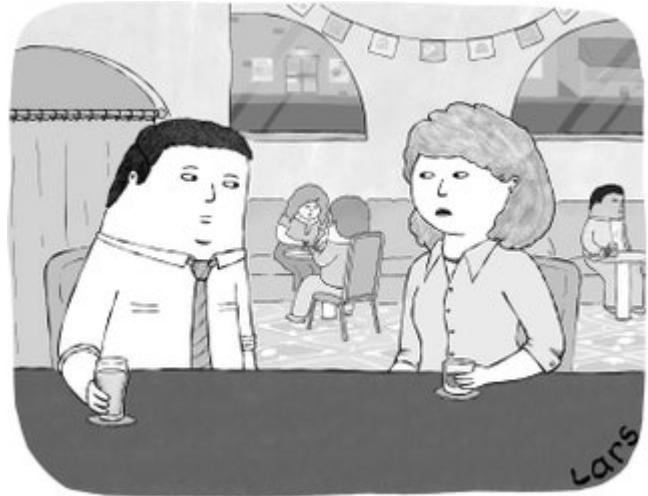
The federal government has the sole authority to enforce the country’s immigration laws. But Biden, Abbott said, had “broken the compact between the United States and the States” by failing to enforce immigration laws passed by Congress. When Biden stopped construction on Trump’s border wall, Abbott directed his state to keep building. Invoking Article I of the Constitution, he declared that the state had been “invaded” and therefore had the “authority to defend and protect itself.”

Last January, on orders from Abbott, the state seized control of Shelby Park, a public plot in Eagle Pass on the Rio Grande. Border Patrol agents, who had long operated inside the park, were barred. The following month, with the Presidential campaign under way, Trump gave a speech alongside Abbott in front of the park’s razor-wire fences. Abbott was a “spectacular man,” Trump said afterward. More than a dozen Republican governors, in a show of support for Abbott, had sent their own guardsmen to the border. When I visited Shelby Park recently, with a chaperon from the Texas National Guard, an airboat from Florida still floated in the water.

Martín Wall's ranch had become ground zero for Operation Lone Star. He and his wife were among the first landowners to agree to let state troopers onto their property. The Department of Public Safety was “our Border Patrol,” Wall told me. National Republicans treated Eagle Pass like it was the site of a partisan pilgrimage. Senators visited, as did the Speaker of the House and Elon Musk, who’d recently moved to Texas himself. Wall and I got out of his truck and walked through a grove of mesquite trees. Dense coils of concertina wire snaked through the brush. Without Abbott, Wall said, “my family wouldn’t still be here.”

On January 20th, the day of Trump’s second Inauguration, the President was telling an overflow crowd at the Capitol how he’d won—immigration was his “No. 1 issue,” he said—when he caught sight of Abbott. The Governor, a paraplegic who has used a wheelchair since an accident in his twenties, was sitting toward the back of the audience, in a dark suit. At sixty-seven, he has a full head of wispy gray hair, a muted speaking style, and an air of conventionality which belies his far-right politics. “We couldn’t get you up in the front row?” Trump asked, with a grin.

Abbott, who is in his third term as governor and is poised to run for a fourth, is an unlikely *MAGA* hero. He has spent three decades in government, first as a justice on the state Supreme Court and then as the longest-serving attorney general in Texas history. In style, he is the antithesis of the President—highly scripted and canny. “He’s not flashy or well spoken,” Beto O’Rourke, a Democrat who ran against Abbott for governor in 2022, told me. “He’s rarely memorable.” State politicians tend to describe Abbott as a run-of-the-mill Republican who once had more in common with the Chamber of Commerce than with the Party’s raucous, populist base. As one Democratic operative in Texas put it, “He could always associate himself with the bomb throwers and not ever look like one.”



*“I’d love to be a morning person, but I like spending my nights awake and racked by crushing anxiety too much.”*

*Cartoon by Lars Kenseth*

Texas is home to about thirty-one million people, but statewide elections are effectively decided by just one and a half million of them—the average turnout in the Republican primary. In the past decade, as that constituency moved right, Abbott refashioned himself as a conservative crusader and a culture warrior. He has signed some of the country’s harshest anti-abortion bills, restricted the rights of transgender people, and fought diversity initiatives at state universities. Since the *COVID* pandemic, Abbott has made liberal use of the governor’s power to declare statewide emergencies, which has allowed him to circumvent judicial and legislative checks. His longevity in office has conferred additional powers: thousands of state officials owe their jobs to Abbott appointments, and his campaign war chest, which dwarfs those of his closest rivals, has brought him to the edge of political invincibility. “He’s a tough motherfucker, and don’t believe otherwise,” Bill Miller, a Republican lobbyist, told me. “As governor, he has begun exercising power in a way that’s not previously been seen.”

Last year, in a move that was unprecedented in the history of Texas politics, Abbott attacked reliable members of his own party. Twenty-one Republicans in the state House had broken with him on a policy that he’d elevated as a priority in the 2023 legislative session: vouchers for religious schools, an issue known among supporters as “school choice.” Conservatives aren’t usually strong opponents of vouchers, but in Texas’s rural communities public schools are often both the only option for students

and a major source of local employment. The state, where some six million students attend public schools, ranks near the bottom in education funding nationally. Each time a bill to establish a statewide voucher system has come up in the House, it has failed; the 2023 legislative session was no different.

For most of Abbott's career, he had barely mentioned the issue, but a few things had changed. Frustration with public schools during the pandemic, one of the Governor's advisers told me, had begun to "turn the tide" in favor of "parents' rights." The state's top political fund-raisers—a pair of Christian nationalists—were bankrolling the effort. So were out-of-state donors like the TikTok investor Jeff Yass, from Pennsylvania, who contributed more than six million dollars, and a group affiliated with Betsy DeVos, Trump's former Education Secretary, which added another four million dollars.

After the bill was defeated, Abbott called a special session, forcing lawmakers to return to the capitol to weigh his proposal for a second time. The Governor, according to one of his top staffers, "was out there saying, 'We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Pass this thing or I'm going to go after you.' " Hugh Shine, a Republican in the House who voted against the voucher measure, told me, "My colleagues and I were with the governor 99.9 per cent of the time. When I came up, in the Reagan years, I was told, If someone's with you eighty per cent of the time, they're your friend." When the legislation again failed in the special session, Abbott targeted the bill's Republican opponents with primary challengers, not only campaigning with them but flooding the districts with ads. The attacks themselves, though, had little to do with vouchers. "He accused us of being weak on the border, that we were weak on property taxes, that we wanted to raise taxes," Steve Allison, a Republican from San Antonio, said. "That was absolutely false."

When eleven of the incumbents targeted by Abbott—including Shine and Allison—lost or dropped their candidacies the following year, Abbott said, "The overall message from this year's primaries is clear: Texans want school choice." The vast sums of money that Abbott unleashed, along with his zero-sum assessment of political loyalty, has proved persuasive. The

measure is almost certain to pass this year. “He had to flex his muscles,” Miller said. “Make people respect you, which is really what it’s all about. The rule is: nothing succeeds like success.”

Trump’s plans to carry out mass deportations face a number of logistical obstacles. The Department of Homeland Security lacks the resources to detain and deport undocumented immigrants at a scale that meets the President’s ambitions. Any path to achieving his aims runs through Texas. At the U.S. Capitol in January, Trump went off on a tangent about the border wall but kept returning to Abbott, praising him for his actions on immigration. “You didn’t do that for politics—you did it because you wanted to do the right thing,” Trump said. “But it sure as hell worked for politics.” Abbott beamed. By way of reply, he mouthed, “Self-preservation.”

July 14, 1984, was a muggy, overcast day in Houston. Abbott, then twenty-six and studying for the Texas bar exam, decided to go for a run. He and his wife, Cecilia, who’d been married for three years, were living a couple of miles from downtown, where Abbott was due to start a job as an associate at one of the city’s most prestigious law firms. “Running was a refreshing break from sitting at a desk,” Abbott later wrote in a memoir. He had been a competitive runner in high school; in college, at the University of Texas, and then in law school, at Vanderbilt, he jogged obsessively. On this particular afternoon, his study partner joined him, and they ran side by side on the streets of a leafy, affluent neighborhood.

After about a mile, the sidewalk narrowed. Abbott went ahead. A loud crack rang out, and Abbott was knocked to the ground. A giant oak tree in the front yard of a divorce attorney had collapsed on him. “The good news was that I was still conscious,” he later wrote. “The bad news was that I had not lost consciousness.” While his friend sprinted off to call an ambulance, Abbott, lying on his back, remembered a movie that he and Cecilia had recently watched about a man who’d been paralyzed in a tragic accident. “If that ever happened to me,” Abbott had told her, “just put me to death.”

Abbott had grown up in a family of modest means in East Texas, before moving, as a young teen-ager, with his churchgoing parents and his brother to Duncanville, a small suburb of Dallas. His father died of a heart attack

when Abbott was sixteen, and his mother went to work as a real-estate agent to support the family. Abbott mowed lawns and stocked shelves at a general store after school. A scholarship from the Duncanville Police Department helped him get through college. The night before his accident, Abbott and his wife had attended a lavish gala hosted by his law firm. As he later put it, “This was the beginning of the life we’d been striving for.”

Abbott spent ten days in intensive care, and another month in the hospital. Surgeons had to remove bone fragments from his back, fuse together his damaged vertebrae, and insert two steel rods along his spine. Eventually, he regained use of his arms and his hands, but he would spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. “Think about how young they were,” a close family friend told me. “Cecilia was twenty-four when he had his accident. That’s young to be figuring out all the things—the hospitals and all that.”

Colleagues at Abbott’s law firm introduced him to a well-regarded personal-injury attorney named Don Riddle, who agreed to represent him when other lawyers had refused. “Look at the bare facts,” Riddle told me. “A tree falls on a young man and paralyzes him. That doesn’t look like much of a case. Who are you going to collect against?”

It turned out that the homeowner had hired a deep-pocketed company to inspect the tree, which was rotted at its core. “Things got better once we did discovery,” Riddle said. He remembered Abbott as upbeat, pleasant, and not the least bit self-pitying: “One of the things he said early on was ‘I will walk again.’ He was very confident.” When Riddle eventually secured a lucrative settlement in the case, Abbott wanted it all in cash. “He never had any money, so the few million that they were willing to put up looked like a lot,” Riddle told me. He persuaded Abbott to opt for a structured settlement, worth the equivalent of eight million dollars, with tax-free payments accruing for the rest of his life.

Abbott’s work ethic has always been a personal point of pride. In his memoir, he recalls taking the bar exam in a wheelchair, in July, 1985, only a year after his accident, and going to work at his law firm each day in a body brace, arriving before his colleagues and leaving after them. In the courtroom, he fashioned himself as a tenacious litigator. At one point, he represented a hospital sued by a man who alleged an injury in a “slip and

fall incident.” During a tense cross-examination, the man rushed from the witness box and beat Abbott’s wheelchair with his cane. “I was on my way,” Abbott wrote. A few years later, when Abbott was thirty-four, he was elected as a district judge in Harris County, where he earned a reputation as a fair-minded jurist with a doctrinaire conservative bent. The Texas Association of Civil Trial and Appellate Specialists voted him Trial Judge of the Year.

The nineties were a period of political realignment in Texas. Since Reconstruction, the state had been run by Democrats, though intraparty fissures grew throughout the sixties and seventies. “Republicans were in the Democratic Party, because there was only one party,” Ann Richards, the last Democrat to serve as the state’s governor, once said. “We wanted them out of the Democratic Party, and they got out in spades.” In 1994, George W. Bush upset Richards in the governor’s race. Eight years later, Republicans won the state House for the first time since 1872. The new Republican speaker, Tom Craddick, partnered with Tom DeLay, a former exterminator from Sugar Land who’d become the Majority Whip in the U.S. House, to force through a redistricting plan that put Republicans on a path to long-term dominance in the state. “Texas became a model for how to get control,” Craddick later said, as my colleague Lawrence Wright wrote in his book “*God Save Texas*.”

The architect of the Republican takeover was Karl Rove, who served as a top adviser to Governor Bush. In 1995, when a vacancy opened on the state Supreme Court, Rove suggested that Bush invite Abbott to the governor’s mansion for a meeting. “He’s young, he’s Republican, and he’s in a wheelchair,” Rove told him. According to *Texas Monthly*, Bush was impressed by Abbott’s positive outlook on life after the accident. Rove said, “I knew when he finished, he was the guy Bush was looking for.”

In Texas, Supreme Court justices are elected, and Abbott demonstrated an immediate facility for the more overtly political elements of the job. He published a newsletter called *The Abbott Advisor*, which provided updates on the court’s activities, and he routinely gave speeches to Republican groups across the state. Colleagues and political insiders consider him to be the best fund-raiser in Texas history. Abbott raised close to three hundred

million dollars in his first decade as governor, according to ProPublica. This may be a function of his trademark persistence rather than of tact. When one donor cut him a six-figure check, Abbott replied, “Now you’re in my top one hundred closest friends.” Someone recalled a meeting in which another donor handed Abbott an envelope containing his contribution. “He couldn’t wait to tear that envelope open,” the person told me. “I’ve delivered a million checks to a million people. The one thing that’s gauche is to open the check. He does that.”

Abbott’s judicial philosophy tracked with the prevailing views of mainstream Republicans. But one issue was awkward for him personally. Like Bush, he was a proponent of tort reform, a Republican-led effort to fight “frivolous lawsuits” by capping the dollar amounts of personal damages won in civil court. When asked about his own sizable payout, Abbott maintained that he wasn’t trying to block legitimate injury claims. Riddle considered the argument disingenuous. Tort-reform advocates were backed by powerful interest groups, such as the Texas Association of Business and Texans for Lawsuit Reform, which was made up of large insurers, doctors, construction companies, and retailers. “Frivolous cases were not their enemy,” Riddle said. “Good, honest cases were the ones that the insurance companies had a problem with.”

Riddle and Abbott had become friends in the years after Riddle handled his case. To their mutual amusement, Riddle once argued a case before Abbott in court. But their friendship soured “around the time that the tort-reform thing came along,” Riddle told me. “If Abbott’s case had come along after the reform of the tort system, we could not have achieved a settlement like the one we got.” He and Abbott never spoke again.

In 1997, most states required sitting judges to resign before running for nonjudicial office. That year, every member of the Texas Supreme Court voted to adopt such a policy—except Abbott. When he left the court, in 2001, to run for attorney general, roughly a quarter of the money that he raised for his campaign came from groups such as Texans for Lawsuit Reform, *Texas Monthly* reported. He outspent his opponent, won handily, and held on to the office for the next thirteen years.

As attorney general, Abbott took a number of positions that would surprise his present-day supporters. He opposed a legislative proposal to tax remittances sent home by immigrants living in Texas and a push to end birthright citizenship. According to Texas Public Radio, his office brought more than seventy cases against fraudsters who preyed on undocumented immigrants. In 2007, when Texas legislators tried to pass a series of bills toughening the state's treatment of undocumented immigrants, Abbott blocked the effort, saying that such enforcement was "not Texas's job" but, rather, that of the federal government.



*"Love is patient, love is kind, love is several text messages in a row about what you ate for lunch, that weird bug you found in the bedroom, a home-renovation idea that neither of you possesses the skills to achieve . . ."*

Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

In other areas, Abbott confirmed his partisan bona fides. In 2003, he named Ted Cruz, then a former Justice Department lawyer, as the state's solicitor general. Three years later, he created an investigative unit to uncover instances of voter fraud. Despite a \$1.5-million investment, his office struggled to find any serious perpetrators; instead, it pursued people such as Gloria Meeks, a sixty-nine-year-old Black woman from Fort Worth who had helped a neighbor vote by mail. Meeks had failed to include her name and her signature on the back of her neighbor's ballot, prompting two

agents from Abbott's office to visit her at home. In a sworn statement, Meeks said that the agents "peeped into my bathroom window not once but twice while I was in my bathroom drying off from my bath."

Texas politicians have a rich tradition of resisting the federal government, but Abbott may have done more than anyone else to professionalize the practice. This was partly a result of a new dynamic in Washington, where Congress was growing increasingly polarized. After Republicans retook the House in 2010, the view among conservatives was that President Barack Obama was overstepping his powers out of frustration with congressional inaction. "Now we have the President acting like a king," Abbott said at the time. One study found that Republican attorneys general took part in legal challenges against the federal government just five times during Bill Clinton's Presidency; in the first seven years of the Obama Administration, they intervened ninety-seven times. Texas was at the center of at least thirty of these cases while Abbott was attorney general. "I go into the office in the morning, I sue Barack Obama, and then I go home," he liked to say.

By 2016, the attorney general's office had spent more than six million dollars suing the White House. When critics in Texas objected to the cost, Abbott told his staff, "Don't read the paper, don't become victim to someone else's narrative," John Scott, a deputy attorney general at the time, told me. Abbott's office sued the White House over the Affordable Care Act, environmental regulations, transgender rights, education policy, and immigration enforcement. In 2014, during Abbott's final month as attorney general, he challenged a federal program called Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents, or *DAPA*, which would have shielded some five million people from deportation. A judge in the Southern District of Texas ultimately ruled in favor of the state.

Abbott often based his legal arguments on an obscure statute called the Administrative Procedure Act, which allowed federal judges to block policies for being "arbitrary" and "capricious." During Trump's first term, invoking the Administrative Procedure Act became the primary means by which Democratic attorneys general, as well as groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, halted the President's policies. Republicans took the same approach once Biden entered the White House. But before Abbott,

Scott told me, “nobody had ever really done that.” To justify Texas’s standing in such cases, Abbott’s attorneys solicited comments from state officials affected by the President’s policies. “We went to state agencies and said, ‘This is how it’s going to affect you,’ ” Daniel Hodge, then a top deputy in the office, said. “We inserted ourselves as a check and balance.”

The headquarters of Abbott’s political operation is on the third floor of a nondescript building a few blocks from the capitol, in Austin. When I visited, earlier this year, campaign paraphernalia decorated the walls, and Abbott-family Christmas cards were piled on a table in the lobby, underneath a large photo of Trump after last year’s assassination attempt, his face spattered with blood. I was there to meet the most influential political operative in Texas, who, luckily for me, was in town. Dave Carney, Abbott’s top adviser, lives in New Hampshire. Since 1997, he has commuted to Austin every other week. “I never thought of moving,” he said. “Texas is hot as hell, and they have snakes.”

Carney, who’s sixty-five, is more than six feet tall, heavyset, and profane, with a gray goatee and a rumpled appearance. He served as the White House political director under President George H. W. Bush and is credited with helping Republicans win back the Senate in 1994. A Bush Cabinet member once described him as “temperamental and a bit nuts, but he defines action—he gets stuff done.” In 1998, Carney ran Rick Perry’s successful bid for lieutenant governor. Perry, a former agriculture commissioner and state legislator, went on to serve three terms as governor. Now, with Abbott on the eve of a fourth term, Carney has been the main adviser to the two longest-serving governors in the state’s history.

Perry and Abbott are a study in contrasts. Perry was, as Carney put it, “a chitchatter,” magnetic and outgoing, with a talent for remembering names and relating to people. “When he would meet with someone, there would be a ten-minute conversation, trying to find one thing that you and he had in common,” Carney said. Abbott’s chief characteristic, on the other hand, is lawyerly discipline. “He reads every bill before he signs it, which is unusual,” Carney said. Because of a quirk in the state’s legislative schedule, that amounts to some eleven hundred bills in roughly twenty days. “He does find stuff, and he’ll put a note on it,” Carney said. “That’s one of the things

about Abbott. He thinks everything is going to go to court, and so, the things that he cares about, he's literally hyper-focussed on making sure that it will pass constitutional scrutiny.”

In 2014, most of liberal America was familiar with Abbott’s opponent in the governor’s race: Wendy Davis, a Democratic state senator from Fort Worth who had filibustered an anti-abortion bill on the floor of the legislature for thirteen hours. Democrats from across the country poured money into her campaign, and a team of Obama-aligned operatives set up a group called Battleground Texas to help run it. “The national media wanted the story that Texas was turning purple, that the great red bastion was being broken,” Wayne Hamilton, who managed Abbott’s campaign, told me. Davis was intent on debating Abbott, but he would do so only with strict conditions; their first debate was on a Friday night, in an auditorium without an audience. “They definitely didn’t want any attention on the real issues,” Davis told me. Abbott linked Davis to Obama, and went on to defeat her by twenty points. Matt Angle, the director of the Lone Star Project, a Democratic PAC, told me, “Once you get tagged as a national Democrat or a national liberal, you can’t get from here to there.”

In Abbott’s first six months as governor, he vetoed more than two hundred million dollars’ worth of legislative directives, but his own policy aims were largely undefined. As one former state official told me, “He’s always been an enigma. He often lacks strong opinions, unless forced to develop them by others.” His predecessors, the person said, “had a definitive idea of what they wanted to achieve. Abbott’s often not steering. He looks at currents in the water to see which way his boat is going.”

Lawmakers in Austin had considered Perry “House trained,” Sarah Davis, a former Republican representative from Houston, told me. “His office would call and say he’s not going to sign this bill. With Abbott, you’d get a call after it was vetoed.” Staffers in the governor’s office sometimes referred to Abbott’s review of legislation as his “ruling period.” “What I found interesting is the similarity between being a judge and being a governor,” Abbott later told the *Austin American-Statesman*. “You have lawyers on each side representing different interests and 99 percent of the time those

interests work themselves out and the judge never really has to get involved.”

In Texas, the governor’s powers are somewhat constrained, in part because the lieutenant governor, who is elected independently, presides over the state Senate. When Abbott took office, one of his political rivals, Dan Patrick, became lieutenant governor. Patrick, a Republican ideologue with ties to Rush Limbaugh, was a former radio host who once broadcast his own vasectomy live on air. If Abbott represented Texas’s Republican mainstream, Patrick was an embodiment of the Tea Party wing. Many political insiders regarded Patrick, not Abbott, as the ascendant figure in Austin.

The 2017 legislative session, which began the same month that Trump entered the White House, was dominated by causes championed by Patrick, most notably a fractious bill requiring trans students to use bathrooms that corresponded to the gender they’d been assigned at birth. A year earlier, a similar bill in North Carolina had provoked national boycotts that cost the state hundreds of millions of dollars. Abbott kept his distance from the debate in Texas, leaving the speaker of the state House, a moderate Republican named Joe Straus, to fight off the effort. “He will stay out of the conflicts where he doesn’t see a clear gain for himself,” James Henson, the director of the Texas Politics Project, at the University of Texas, told me. “On the trans-bathroom bill, Abbott let Straus take all the heat.”

Abbott, however, was playing both sides. The chairman of the committee responsible for the bathroom bill got word from the governor’s office that Abbott “didn’t want to see that bill on my desk,” Sarah Davis told me. But when the regular session ended without the bill’s passage, Abbott blamed Straus, called a special session, and added the bill back on to the agenda. Many Republican lawmakers were resigned to Abbott’s public posturing. But forcing them to reconsider legislation that he didn’t want passed felt like a betrayal. “That frayed a lot of feelings,” an Abbott staffer told me.

In the spring of 2017, Abbott signed into law a measure that allowed local law-enforcement officers to check the immigration status of anyone they arrested. Arizona had passed a similar law, but Texas’s version included a component that punished sheriffs and police chiefs who didn’t inquire about

immigration status, by fining them or removing them from office. Several months earlier, the Travis County sheriff, Sally Hernandez, had defended Austin's sanctuary policy, which limited the city's coöperation with federal immigration enforcement. Abbott called her "Sanctuary Sally" and cut off more than a million dollars in grant money to the county. The new legislation, he said on Fox News, "will put the hammer down on Travis County as well as any sanctuary-city policy in the state of Texas."

A federal appeals court ultimately froze the provision mandating penalties for local law enforcement. But Abbott had succeeded in putting his stamp on one of the signal fights of the early Trump era. The Governor has long recognized the political utility of the immigration issue. Randall Erben, Abbott's first legislative director, said, "He would tell us, 'This is a big deal. I want eight hundred million dollars for border security.' We'd say, 'That's a lot of money,' and he'd say, 'Yes, it is, and that's what we need.' " When I asked O'Rourke what it was like to debate Abbott, he told me, "If I raise the issue of poor performance in public schools or the exodus of teachers or the fact that our education lags in the state, he'll say there are Mexicans coming to kill you. If you point to the failure of the power grid, he'll point to the border."

As Abbott prepared for his 2018 reelection campaign, he and Carney decided to target a region that most other Texas Republicans considered a lost cause: the borderlands, which are heavily Hispanic and historically Democratic. Carney had commissioned a focus group of Latino voters in McAllen, in South Texas, and made two unexpected findings—the voters wanted less gun control and more border security. Many of them were especially hostile to new immigrants. "They're resentful about them taking up classroom space. They're resentful about people thinking *they're* illegal," Carney said. "The Democrats ignore the Hispanics. They believe that demography is destiny or whatever." The key for Abbott and the Republicans was to increase G.O.P. turnout in South Texas, Carney said, and "it's hard to get turnout when you don't have local candidates."

Abbott's super PAC hired Eric Hollander, a young consultant from South Carolina, to recruit candidates for offices such as justice of the peace and county judge in places along the border where Democrats hadn't faced

Republican challengers in years. “Because Abbott would dominate in 2018, I could tell people that they could win on his coattails,” Hollander said. With money from the *PAC*, Hollander paid the candidates’ filing fees. His reports went to Carney, who updated the Governor each week. Ultimately, seventeen candidates backed by Abbott’s *PAC* won their races that year. The effort benefitted Republicans in other ways, too. Early in his travels, Hollander heard from local Party members that Ted Cruz, who was running for reelection to the U.S. Senate, was falling behind his opponent, Beto O’Rourke. “Abbott saved Ted Cruz,” Angle, the Democratic operative, told me. “Cruz would have lost if it weren’t for the Abbott field operation.”

The recruitment effort, known as Project Red TX, is still operating today. In 2024, it focussed on persuading Democrats who had grown disgruntled during the Biden years. After the election, in which Trump carried almost every South Texas county and local Republicans made inroads throughout the region, I spoke with Wayne Hamilton, who runs Project Red TX. Democrats act like immigration is a “racial thing,” he told me. But “it’s about people who are not supposed to be here taking up resources from Texans. And Texans are the ones who have to pay for it.” As the veteran political reporter Scott Braddock put it, “If anyone should get credit for flipping South Texas, it’s Abbott, not Trump.”

Early one morning in July, 2023, a Venezuelan family of five hid in the brush along the banks of the Rio Grande, in the Mexican city of Piedras Negras. Cartel members patrolled the area in search of migrants to extort. On the opposite side of the river, in Eagle Pass, a phalanx of Texas guardsmen stood watch with rifles. Crossing was “a marathon,” a thirty-two-year-old Venezuelan man, whom I’ll call Antonio, told me. He was a student organizer who’d been forced to flee the country with his wife, his sister, a one-year-old nephew, and a seven-year-old stepson. “I came prepared on the issue of political asylum,” he told me. He knew, in other words, that anyone who arrived in the U.S. had a legal right to seek it.

When the family reached the shore, the guardsmen told Antonio that only women and children could enter the country. “I don’t have anywhere to go back to,” he said. His wife began to cry. The soldiers put thick plastic cuffs

on his wrists and ankles and led him away. “You’re committing the crime of trespassing,” one of them told him.



*Cartoon by Ellie Black*

Operation Lone Star was devised to counter the legal premise that only the federal government is allowed to make immigration arrests. The governor’s office, prompted by complaints from ranchers like Martín Wall, found a work-around by charging undocumented migrants with the misdemeanor of trespassing. Abbott asked landowners to sign agreements giving agents from the state’s Department of Public Safety permission to make arrests on their properties. Some declined, but most didn’t. Since 2021, according to the D.P.S., the state has arrested more than fifty thousand people as part of the effort.

Antonio was loaded onto a van with six other men and driven to a temporary processing center. “We didn’t think this was going to be that serious,” he said. After a day or two of sleeping on the floor of a large cell, he and the others boarded another bus and were driven two hours southeast to the Briscoe Unit, one of three retrofitted prisons that the state was using to detain people charged under Operation Lone Star. There have been widespread complaints of abysmal conditions at these facilities: rampant mold, rodent and insect infestations, spoiled food. Antonio was most bothered by being treated as a criminal. He told me that he’d never been to jail before, and that it was several days before he was allowed to speak with his wife. After a week, he posted bond and was handed to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. At that point, he was given a preliminary asylum

screening, which he passed. He was released with a future court date. When we spoke, in early February, he was working as a foreman on a roofing job in Utah.

“Much of Operation Lone Star feels like a very expensive form of political theatre,” Amrutha Jindal, the executive director of Lone Star Defenders, told me. Based in Houston, she leads a group of public defenders who coördinate representation for people who are charged under Operation Lone Star and can’t afford lawyers. The organization has helped some seventeen thousand defendants to date. Roughly seventy-five per cent of the cases involve trespassing.

When Abbott first announced the initiative, he said that Texas was being forced to do the job that the federal government had shirked. But, although the state could arrest and charge migrants for trespassing, it eventually had to return them to federal immigration authorities. In effect, Jindal said, Texas was creating an elaborate “detour.” It was paying for thousands of agents to make arrests, for jails and processing centers and the personnel to staff them, and for dozens of judges to hear the trespassing cases. The migrants often ended up where they had started. Many, like Antonio, had credible asylum claims; others were simply released because *ICE* resources were limited.

At the same time, the state still had to deal with people who were eventually deported. To get out of criminal detention, roughly forty per cent of migrants charged with trespassing under Operation Lone Star pleaded out. About half of them posted bond, which on average was twenty-seven hundred dollars, an unusually steep sum. Even after being deported, defendants were required to attend virtual hearings with a Texas judge; those who failed to appear forfeited their bond. “There are thousands of cases in Kinney and Maverick Counties where the clients are no longer in the country,” Jindal told me. “On Zoom, you see the background behind a defendant, and it’s a ranch in Honduras or Guatemala.”

David Martínez, a warm and voluble lawyer in his sixties, is the attorney for Val Verde County, about an hour north of Eagle Pass. His brother, Joe Frank Martínez, is the sheriff. Both are lifelong Democrats, with moderate politics that have allowed them to survive the steady rightward shift in Del Rio, a

border city of about thirty-five thousand people, where the brothers grew up and now live. Shortly after Operation Lone Star was announced, the D.P.S. section chief from Laredo came to town to explain the new policy. David told him, “I don’t ever have a problem prosecuting a case when I’ve got a good case to prosecute.”

Problems emerged a few months later, when he started receiving case files. Footage from the body and dashboard cameras of D.P.S. troopers showed them leading migrants from public to private land, where they could be arrested for trespassing. “A D.P.S. trooper would direct a group of people to walk through that gate right there, or to sit under that tree and to wait until someone comes,” David told me. “I probably ended up dismissing or rejecting close to sixty per cent of the cases.” He dropped other cases because people were languishing in pretrial detention. By law, the county attorney had a month to press charges against someone before it had to release them. David said, “There were way too many occasions where, when I got the file, I would learn that that person had already been sitting in jail for sixty days, ninety days, or one hundred and twenty days.”

At meetings of the Texas District and County Attorneys Association, David raised his concerns. “Voices like mine were being drowned out by the louder voices of ‘We’ve got to get behind the Governor, we’ve got to put a stop to this illegal-immigration problem,’ ” he said. A friend with connections to Abbott’s office called David one day to tell him that he was “on the Governor’s radar.” David replied, “He can call me and I’m happy to discuss why I’m making the decisions that I’m making.” The call never came.

Joe Frank, his brother, was on better terms with Abbott. When he expressed misgivings about the county’s limited detention space, Abbott called him personally, on a Saturday, and offered to erect a large processing center in the parking lot of the county jail. People are now detained there before the state buses them to the Briscoe Unit, at virtually no cost to the county. “I appreciate what the Governor did,” Joe Frank told me. Three years later, on the eve of his reëlection bid for sheriff, he received a call from Project Red TX, inviting him to switch parties. When he declined, the group tried to unseat him. He won, but the race was unexpectedly tight. During the

campaign, Project Red TX highlighted a photo of him helping to pull a young mother and her child from the Rio Grande. The image neglected to show the full context: he was standing in front of a large group of D.P.S. and Border Patrol agents, who were waiting to take her into custody.

Abbott's supporters and detractors can all agree on one point central to his political rise: the Biden Administration, by mishandling the situation at the border, created a vacuum for the Governor to exploit. In the summer of 2021, shortly after Abbott launched Operation Lone Star, he held a summit in Del Rio. Owing to smuggling routes and migration patterns, the city historically has been spared the humanitarian emergencies that have flared up elsewhere along the border. But that was changing. In September, 2021, fifteen thousand migrants, most of them from Haiti, got trapped under a bridge between Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña, Mexico. The next year, the Border Patrol released forty-nine thousand people to a city shelter; in 2023, it was fifty-seven thousand.

Close to a thousand people showed up to the summit, including officials, ranchers, and residents from outside the county. Local Democrats and Republicans approached Abbott with different versions of the same plea: to transfer the newly arrived migrants to bigger cities with more resources. When several people suggested sending buses to places like Dallas, Abbott dismissed the idea. "That doesn't help," Gardner Pate, then a senior aide to Abbott, told me. "You take them from Del Rio and you send them to Corpus Christi, or you send them to Houston. It's the same from a Texas point of view."

Back in Austin, Abbott began holding meetings with top staffers from the Texas Division of Emergency Management. They concluded that it would be better to send migrants not only out of the state but to sanctuary cities. The question was how. "We could not get big enough planes to land on runways in Eagle Pass and Del Rio," Luis Saenz, Abbott's chief of staff at the time, told me. Someone suggested chartering smaller planes, but that was too expensive. "Why don't we send buses?" Abbott said.

The busing strategy, he told his staff, couldn't be just a "one-time thing." It needed to withstand federal scrutiny. "Before we put one person on a bus, Abbott and the legal team were looking at us and saying, 'We can't be

accused of kidnapping,’ ” Saenz told me. “We knew the Biden Administration would prosecute anyone if they could. So that’s when we came up with notices in English, Spanish, and other languages and had people sign them saying that they knew where they were going.”

The federal government can’t hold all the migrants it takes into custody. It usually releases a large share of them to local shelters, many of which are bootstrap operations that rely on donations to provide clothes, food, and other assistance. The lone shelter in Del Rio, the Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition, can’t even house migrants overnight. On a cold morning in January, Tiffany Burrow, the head of the shelter, met with me in an unheated room with racks of clothes and shoes. Three years earlier, W. Nim Kidd, the head of the state’s Division of Emergency Management, had visited Val Verde with a proposition for Burrow. The state wanted to bus migrants to Washington. Would she help them do it?

Burrow was skeptical of Kidd’s pitch, but the situation was dire enough that she made a counterproposal. “We can’t have buses running 24/7,” she said. “There has to be a curfew. There has to be coordination and contingency plans for drivers, in case of a flat tire or if a woman goes into labor. And I needed to have someone I could speak with in the receiving city.” It was unsettling that Texas didn’t seem to be making arrangements with state or local authorities farther north, Burrow said, but that was beyond her control. Without some form of intervention, she told me, “this area would have been overrun.”

Kidd offered to let Burrow travel on one of the first buses to Washington. “That trip set the baseline,” Burrow said. “We weren’t aligned on the why. But there was a sense of decency, and it matched the motive of humanitarian aid that we had here.”

Abbott staffers insist that the busing program was as much a policy necessity as it was a political maneuver. But the Governor’s advisers admitted that they’d expected a more dramatic response when the earliest buses arrived in Washington. “No one in D.C. seemed to care,” Carney said. “So we sent them to the Naval Observatory”—where Vice-President Kamala Harris lived—“and it got a little attention.”

According to an analysis by the *Times*, Texas sent some six thousand migrants to Washington before it bused a single person to New York. But that didn't mean New York wasn't feeling a new sort of strain. As the overall number of arrivals at the border increased, the federal government was forced to release more people in nearby towns and cities. "The nonprofits couldn't keep up," Saenz told me. These groups, together with local officials, started sending their own buses to cities outside the state. That, rather than Abbott's busing program, is what appears to have first led New York's mayor, Eric Adams, to call out Abbott publicly, in July, 2022.

"Adams says, you know, Governor Abbott is a mean bastard or whatever, sending these people up here, using people as political pawns," Carney recalled. "But we hadn't fucking sent anybody to New York." (Kayla Mamelak Altus, a spokesperson for Adams, told me, "We asked people who sent you here, and they told us the Texas government.")

Adams's statements helped generate headlines and "nationalize" the scheme, a former Abbott aide said. Carney told me that, when Abbott saw the news, "he said, 'If I'm going to get blamed, then I'm going to get the fucking credit.' So we asked people, 'Who wants to go to New York?' Everyone wanted to go. So we just started up the buses." Eventually, Abbott would send forty-five thousand people to New York, most of them Venezuelans, along with another thirty-seven thousand people to Chicago, nineteen thousand to Denver, and twelve thousand to Washington.

By the middle of September, Abbott hadn't just confounded Democrats; he'd inspired Republican copycats. Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, who was preparing to run for President the following year, spent \$1.5 million flying forty-nine migrants to Martha's Vineyard. DeSantis's office had paid an operative who recruited migrants in San Antonio, often by misleading them about where they were going. After a county sheriff in Texas filed kidnapping charges, DeSantis's chief of staff called Abbott's office to admit that they'd made a mistake. He then asked if Abbott might say that both governors had been working together all along. Abbott declined, but he and his staff kept quiet about the request.



*“He’s not your typical doomsayer.”*

*Cartoon by Frank Cotham*

The busing continued for more than two years, but Burrow participated for only eighteen months. She pulled out, she told me, when it became clear that the priorities in Austin had changed. “They got big in the head,” she said. “They said, We’re going to make a command center. We’re going to send buses to every state in the country. We’re going to run them 24/7, and we don’t want to say where the buses were going.” City officials in Del Rio continued the busing, but, by the start of 2024, arrivals started to decrease. The governor’s office “wanted the headlines to explode,” Burrow said. “But, at that moment, the actual number was about to take a dive.”

In December and January, when I travelled along the border, the general atmosphere was sleepy, but evidence of Operation Lone Star was everywhere. The Governor had set up two “forward operating bases” for the Texas National Guard, in Eagle Pass and Del Rio. D.P.S. pickup trucks filled parking lots and roadways. I asked the manager at a La Quinta Inn where I was staying why everything in the hotel seemed so new. The hotel had been built just two years earlier, he told me, to accommodate all the state agents staying in town because of Operation Lone Star.

The flood of agents brought their own problems. In El Paso, a heavily Democratic city in West Texas, local officials have been documenting a rise in high-speed car chases initiated by the D.P.S. in pursuit of alleged human smugglers. There was a six-hundred-and-twenty-five-per-cent increase in such chases between 2022 and 2023, according to the El Paso County attorney’s office. Most of them began in the western end of town, along the border with New Mexico, where D.P.S. troopers were getting tipped off by

sympathetic Border Patrol agents. Eighty-five per cent of the incidents started with a routine traffic violation, but about half involved pursuits that reached more than a hundred miles per hour. Residents have complained about chases in their neighborhoods and around schools, hospitals, and places of worship. “It all coincided with Operation Lone Star,” Christina Sanchez, the county attorney, told me.

Just before Christmas, I visited Sanchez at her office downtown, next to the county jail. She and her staff were seeing markedly more accidents as a result of the chases, some of them fatal. One of them, in July, 2023, resulted in a collision with two other cars on the road, sending nine people to the hospital. Another, in October, 2024, led to a crash that killed a forty-four-year-old mother on her way to work. A Human Rights Watch investigation found that, in communities where Operation Lone Star was in effect, vehicle pursuits have caused a hundred and six deaths and more than three hundred injuries. “There are no D.P.S. policy guidelines for how they conduct these chases,” Sanchez told me. “We have the buoys, the concertina wire, we have the troopers. But that increased activity doesn’t necessarily equate to a safer environment for the community.”

The city and county governments in El Paso have clashed with Abbott before. During the pandemic, a local judge challenged an order from the Governor that banned mask mandates and required businesses to reopen. County officials have joined lawsuits against some of the state’s immigration policies. Abbott’s repeated claims that the state was being “invaded” by migrants were especially jarring to city residents. In 2019, a twenty-one-year-old from a small town outside Dallas had travelled to a Walmart in El Paso and opened fire with a semi-automatic assault rifle, killing twenty-three shoppers. In an online post before the attack, the shooter had written about the “Hispanic invasion of Texas” and claimed to be “simply defending my country.”

To qualify for state grants under Operation Lone Star, the city and the county had to issue disaster declarations. Sanchez told me that officials initially “held off at the local level because there really was this concern about what we’re saying to our community with language like ‘invasion.’ ” Their hesitation was costly. El Paso gets money from the U.S. government

for holding federal inmates in county jails—typically, about thirty-three thousand dollars a day. By law, however, El Paso had to give priority to state detainees, including those arrested under Operation Lone Star. The city declared an emergency in December, 2022, and the county finally followed suit in July, 2024. But the sums that they eventually received from state grants didn't cover the budget shortfalls.

Late last year, Sergio Coronado, an El Paso County commissioner, met with D.P.S. representatives to communicate his concerns. His constituents, in addition to complaining about the high-speed chases, had reported being racially profiled. One evening in October, 2023, a family of four was driving on the west side of the city when a blue Silverado abruptly stopped in front of their car. According to a statement taken by the county commissioner's office, a white vehicle then boxed them in from behind. Agents got out and surrounded the car with their guns drawn. They were looking for smugglers and had stopped the wrong vehicle. In 2023, a forty-eight-year-old El Paso resident was taking medicine to her grandmother when she was arrested by state troopers on a stakeout, who had mistaken her for a smuggler. "They heard us out," Coronado told me of the D.P.S. agents. "But I didn't get the feeling that they were going to be responsive."

At one point, Coronado asked the agents why, with the state spending more than eleven billion dollars on Operation Lone Star, the D.P.S. didn't use helicopters to conduct the chases in a more responsible manner. "Our helicopter is in Lubbock," he was told. "It needs repairs."

In the same special session in which Abbott's voucher proposal was defeated, the legislature passed a sweeping and audacious immigration-enforcement bill. "These measures were deliberately paired," a senior House aide told me. "The immigration bill kept things more or less in line."

The measure, known as Senate Bill 4, allows state officials to arrest anyone they suspect of crossing the border illegally and, if they're undocumented, to deport them. The bill appeared to contradict a 2012 Supreme Court ruling that struck down sections of a similar law in Arizona, on the ground that it preëmpted federal authority over immigration. (Antonin Scalia, in a forceful dissent, wrote, "As a sovereign, Arizona has the inherent power to exclude persons from its territory.") The Biden Justice Department sued Texas,

arguing that the state was usurping the powers of the federal government, and the case went to a federal appeals court. Last March, on the same day that Texas's solicitor general defended S.B. 4 before the appellate judges, Abbott spoke at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a right-wing think tank in Austin. "We found ways to try to craft that law to be consistent with the dissent that was wrote in the Arizona case by Justice Scalia," he said.

With Trump in the White House, the Justice Department is no longer expected to contest S.B. 4 in court. Lucas Guttentag, a former senior adviser at the Justice Department and a professor at Stanford Law School, told me that the Trump Administration "will abandon the principle that the U.S. fought for and won before the Supreme Court in the Arizona case—namely, that the federal government must have sole authority over the enforcement of immigration laws."

There are strategic reasons for this reversal. The new Administration's first set of executive orders made the same argument that Abbott did when he declared a state emergency: the country is in the midst of an "invasion." But ICE has already struggled to deliver on the deportation numbers that Trump campaigned on. Three top officials at the agency have been demoted as a result. Thomas Homan, the President's so-called border czar, has said that he is "not happy." The most obvious way for the federal government to boost arrests is to enlist states in its wider enforcement effort.

Texas will almost certainly be a key partner. The state's land commissioner, Dawn Buckingham, has offered the Administration a fourteen-hundred-acre ranch in Starr County to build a detention facility. "We have thirteen million acres around the state," she said. "We want them to be able to utilize that." In January, Homan spent a night at the governor's mansion before he and Abbott visited members of the Texas National Guard in Eagle Pass. "The cavalry is here," Abbott told them.

The D.P.S. agents who'd been policing private land were now, on Abbott's orders, working with the Department of Homeland Security to "track down the thousands of illegal immigrants with active warrants across Texas and deport them from our country." The Texas National Guard, for its part, has radically broadened its remit. On January 31st, the Trump Administration signed an agreement with Abbott that relied on a previously unused section

of the Immigration and Nationality Act called the “mass-influx provision,” which gives state law-enforcement officers the powers of federal immigration agents. According to the agreement, the Texas National Guard can now deport migrants. This will not only “massively increase the government’s resources beyond what’s currently appropriated” by Congress, Guttentag told me. “It unleashes this separate immigrant-detention-and-deportation force at the state level.” Operation Lone Star, he added, “is a preview of the illegality, inhumanity, and sheer cruelty that results.”

In 2021, Abbott’s disaster declaration automatically suspended laws governing how the state spent money on Operation Lone Star. Four years later, those temporary measures have essentially become permanent. *The Texas Observer* recently reported that at least \$3.5 billion in Operation Lone Star funding has gone to no-bid contracts and emergency procurement orders. Executives at some of the companies benefitting from the state’s largesse have made generous donations to Abbott’s campaign fund. Operation Lone Star, in the meantime, has become a significant part of the Texas economy. Already, the state legislature is proposing another \$6.5 billion for border security. A few weeks ago, with migrant-arrival numbers at historic lows, Starr County declared a border disaster. It hadn’t done so at any point in the past four years, but, according to the *Texas Tribune*, the county wanted money for more prosecutors because a state program had been cut. Its best chance of accessing the funds was applying through Operation Lone Star.

In mid-February, while the Trump Administration was slashing the federal budget and firing thousands of government employees, Abbott travelled to Washington to make a request. In meetings with Trump, and then with House Speaker Mike Johnson, he explained that he wanted Congress to reimburse Texas for the cost of Operation Lone Star, which he called “services rendered.” “This is a payment for real-estate assets and improvements provided by the state,” he said. Carney, Abbott’s political adviser, put it more simply. “It wasn’t a Texas thing as much as an American thing,” he told me. “I think everybody recognizes that Texas went above and beyond.” ♦



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[Letter from Sweden](#)

# Zyn and the New Nicotine Gold Rush

White snus pouches were designed to help Swedish women quit cigarettes. They've become a staple for American dudes.

By [Carrie Battan](#)

March 10, 2025



*“If you see another guy popping a Zyn, there’s an almost immediate camaraderie,” a thirty-five-year-old who works in mergers and acquisitions told me. Illustration by Christoph Niemann*

To visitors, Sweden is as remarkable for what is absent as for what is present. Walking around Stockholm, you hear little noise from traffic, because Swedes have so aggressively adopted electric vehicles. (They also seem constitutionally averse to honking.) Streets and sidewalks are exceptionally free from debris, in part because of the country’s robust anti-littering programs. And the air bears virtually no trace of cigarette smoke. During five days I spent in Sweden this January, I could count the number of smokers I encountered on one hand, and I saw no one pulling on a vape. In November, 2024, Sweden was declared “smoke-free” because its adult smoking rate had dipped below five per cent. As smoking has declined, so have related illnesses, such as emphysema; Sweden has one of the lowest rates of lung cancer in the E.U. This shift is broadly described in academic papers as “the Swedish Experience.”

And yet the Swedes have an immense appetite for nicotine, the addictive chemical found in tobacco. About a third of Swedish people consume nicotine, and they mostly get their fix from snus—small, gossamer pouches that look like dollhouse pillows, which users nestle in their gums. Snus pouches deliver nicotine to the bloodstream through sensitive oral membranes; Swedes refer to the resulting buzz as the *nicokick*.

“Snus is the first thing I take every morning when I wake up,” Niklas Runsten, an energetic thirty-three-year-old podcast producer, told me. “It’s the last thing I take out before I brush my teeth.” We were sitting in his office, in Stockholm, and he was fondling a brown, hockey-puck-shaped tin. “I’m awake approximately seventeen hours a day, and I probably have a snus in my mouth for sixteen hours and thirty-two minutes,” he said.

Scandinavians have a proud history of snus usage. During the mid-seventeenth century, ground-up sniffing tobacco became popular in the French royal court and made its way to Sweden. Later, working-class Swedes started adding liquid to the powder and placing it against their gums, as a claylike paste. The preportioned pouches that are common today were introduced in the nineteen-seventies, as more people turned to snus in order to stop smoking. In the early nineteen-nineties, when Sweden held a referendum on whether to join the E.U., which had a bloc-wide snus ban, voters adorned their cars with bumper stickers that read, “E.U.? Not without my snus.” Ultimately, Sweden was granted an exemption from the ban in exchange for stricter warning labels.

The most committed Swedish snus enthusiasts sometimes talk like sommeliers, capable of detecting subtle differences in tobacco quality and flavor. Before he shut down Fäviken, his two-Michelin-star restaurant, the renowned Swedish chef Magnus Nilsson was known to offer patrons a portion of snus at the end of their meal. In Skansen, a part of Stockholm that’s home to a children’s petting zoo and farmstead tours, there is a Snus and Match Museum, funded in part by the tobacco company Swedish Match. Snus has also served as an economic engine: in 1915, Sweden nationalized its tobacco production to generate revenue for the military and a universal pension system for its citizens.

Runsten started snusing at eighteen, as soon as he was legally allowed. He remembers what drew him to it. “A friend told me that the best thing about snus is that you get a present every day,” he said. “When you finish your meal, you take a little present. It’s like a gift you give yourself, and without the consequences of smoking. It was the romantic part of snus.”

Until recently, the word “snus” referred solely to a pungent product made of tobacco leaves. But, over the past decade, the earthy brown substance has been joined by white snus, a new product with a characteristically Swedish design elegance. White snus, which consists of pure nicotine mixed with filling agents, has little natural odor and does not stain the teeth the way that the traditional kind can. It was developed by Swedish scientists to appeal to women, a constituency that hadn’t historically taken to brown snus. The creators also had ambitions to eventually reach Americans.

“From a branding perspective, the white snus is, like, a genius thing,” Runsten continued. He pulled out one of his own pouches, which was brown. *“This couldn’t reach Los Angeles, because it’s something that tastes like shit!”* He surveyed two of his colleagues, Jonatan Peterson and Hugo Lavett. “Your dad snused?” he asked Lavett. Yes. “Your dad?” he asked Peterson. “No, but all of my friends’ dads,” Peterson replied. “But no mothers whatsoever. Our mothers’ generation never would have.”

White snus pouches have become popular in the U.S., though American mothers don’t seem to have adopted them, either. Zyn, the nicotine pouch launched by Swedish Match, was introduced to the U.S. market in 2014 and, thanks to champions such as Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson, became a fixture of the so-called manosphere. The tobacco company Philip Morris International, which acquired Swedish Match in 2022, said that it shipped 131.6 million cannisters of Zyn to the U.S. in the first quarter of 2024—an eighty-per-cent increase from the same period the previous year.

Swedish Match estimates that about seventy per cent of cannisters in the U.S. are purchased by men. “I’m sure we have women who buy Zyn. I’m sure we do,” Tom Allen, the western-region director at Smoker Friendly, the large chain of tobacco stores where the product was first tested in the U.S., said. “I just don’t remember if I’ve ever seen a woman buy them in any of our stores.”

In certain settings, Zyn is ubiquitous: the imprint of a cannister in a pair of khakis is a signature of the finance sector; golf courses have posted signs imploring patrons not to dispose of their pouches in urinals. Carlson has used the product to incite a masculinity arms race: after Philip Morris disputed a joke he made about Zyn being a “male enhancer,” he decried it as “not a brand for men” and launched a competitor pouch, called *ALP*—the brand that Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., was said to be using during his confirmation hearing. The actor Josh Brolin told the podcaster Marc Maron that he keeps a Zyn in his lip twenty-four hours a day. “I’m not fucking lying,” he said. He popped open a cannister. “My wife would hear this in the middle of the night. I don’t even know I’m doing it. I’m asleep.”



“Tony and I are both into true crime, just in completely different ways.”  
Cartoon by Tyson Cole

In Sweden, the white pouches are not exactly an emblem of virility. “When I was working in Stockholm, the group of girls on my team, we all snused through every meeting,” Verona Farrell, a columnist for *Vogue Scandinavia*, told me. You can buy pouches in highly curated nicotine depots, and the white snus flavors—apple mint, jasmine tea, pomegranate melon—appeal to refined, diet-conscious tastes. “In Sweden, the Tucker Carlson thing was a laughingstock,” Runsten said. “Everything they talk about is related to masculinity,” Peterson, his colleague, added. “And they’re doing the most girl thing I know.”

In 2008, three Swedish scientists gathered in a laboratory in Helsingborg to test white snus. Two of them, Thomas Ericsson and Per-Gunnar Nilsson,

had backgrounds in pharmaceuticals—they had worked on antibiotics and aspirin, among other drugs. (The third scientist was Thomas's son, a chemical engineer named Robert.) Their new venture was “a dynamic institute of fun,” Ericsson, who is now seventy-four, told me recently. When testing various nicotine concentrations, the trio used one another as lab rats, referring to a rather vague measuring stick: “Tell me when you get dizzy.” Ericsson was already a regular snus user, while his son and Nilsson were not. They tended to get dizzy much faster than Ericsson did.

In the eighties and nineties, Ericsson had worked at *LEO*, a Swedish pharmaceutical company whose flagship product is Nicorette, the nicotine-replacement gum. He had also developed and patented tobacco-processing protocols that helped lower carcinogenic chemicals in traditional snus. (By the twenty-tens, the level of harmful chemicals in snus had been significantly reduced.) At one point, Ericsson was tasked with raising the nicotine levels in Nicorette, but the higher concentrations led to side effects like hiccupping and stomach pain. As an alternative, his team conceived of the white nicotine pouch, a cleaner riff on the traditional product. Because it would be lodged in the gums, it would produce less saliva than chewing gum, and the digestive side effects could be avoided. Ericsson began to experiment in his garage, and by 1990 he and some colleagues were working on a patented white snus product.

“You always have a philosophy,” he told me. “We said, ‘It must satisfy an important medical need.’ ” We were sitting in a loud, dark restaurant in Helsingborg, which is home to so many nicotine-related companies that Ericsson calls it Nicotine Valley. Ericsson is a meticulous speaker, and throughout the conversation he produced diagrams in a notebook. “How many people in the United States die yearly due to smoking?” he asked. I said half a million. In Sweden, it was just a few thousand, Ericsson told me, scribbling in his notepad. “Who was smoking?” he asked. He had a hypothesis based on industry data: “Swedish females between the ages of eighteen and thirty-six,” he answered, drawing the female-gender symbol. Among Swedish men, brown snus had already provided a compelling alternative to cigarettes. Ericsson hoped the white pouches would appeal to women, and to a U.S. market that had largely rejected traditional snus.

“If I go back then, we think, *Snus: brown, smelly, bitter, not sexy,*” Ericsson continued. “So how do you make this attractive for females between the ages of eighteen and thirty-six?” In business presentations, he has often used a metaphor: If cigarettes are standard gasoline-powered cars, brown snus is diesel—an effective alternative, but not different enough to shift the paradigm. White snus, on the other hand, is an electric vehicle. “The big car manufacturers, they will only change if they have an alternative,” he said. “The cigarette companies will not change if they don’t have competition.”

Many iterations of Ericsson’s project were thwarted. At one point, a group of investors who had financial interests in traditional tobacco products decided not to compete with the industry, and halted development. He and his colleagues also had to choose whether to sell their product as a pharmaceutical, like Nicorette, or as a life-style product, like traditional snus. Ericsson did not want to pursue the pharmaceutical path. After working on Nicorette, he had become skeptical of medicalized smoking cessation efforts. “I didn’t like for pharmaceutical products to create dependencies. It’s more ethical that a person decides by themselves,” he said. “We knew that consumers would like to be free and not go to a pharmacy. They are not sick.”

In 2009, President Obama signed the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, bringing regulation of tobacco products under the purview of the federal government for the first time, with stricter rules around marketing. The law was a headache for many in the tobacco industry, but it wasn’t clear to Ericsson how it would affect white snus pouches: the nicotine is often derived from tobacco, but the product contains no biological parts of the plant. He decided that having his invention regulated as a recreational tobacco product was still preferable to having it regulated as medicine. With Nilsson, his colleague, he argued for the F.D.A. to count white snus as a tobacco product. In 2012, they were granted a U.S. patent for the “free nicotine salt” that fills the pouches.

In the past, cigarette alternatives had represented a threat to tobacco companies. But, after the passage of the tobacco bill, the industry began to embrace them. Americans were well aware of the hazards of smoking, and adult smoking rates had been in steady decline, from forty-two per cent in

1965 to about fifteen per cent in 2015. These new offerings could save their business—and help Big Tobacco remedy decades of reputational woes. Companies such as Philip Morris International began to evoke visions of a “smoke-free future.”

In 2009, Philip Morris launched a joint venture with Swedish Match to promote snus products in the U.S. Swedish Match approached Ericsson about finally bringing his white nicotine pouches to market. The plan was contentious: some within Swedish Match wanted to keep pushing brown snus on the global market to preserve tradition. Ultimately, white snus won out. Ericsson purchased an industrial mixing machine from a bankrupt bakery in the north of Sweden for production.

It took a while for American consumers to feel the *nicokick*. Originally, white snus was tested in the U.S. market under names such as Stockholm Ice and Chill of Sweden. It arrived in Colorado’s Smoker Friendly stores in 2014 as the much pithier Zyn. Sales were slow at first: customers didn’t understand what the product was, and many Americans still associated oral nicotine products with oral cancer. Zyn eventually gained fans, because it seemed more like candy than like cigarettes: it had appealing flavors; a circular, palm-size package; and a loyalty program through which users could accrue points to exchange for items such as grills and AirPods.

In 2019, after five years of selling in select shops, mostly in the Southwest and Pacific Northwest, Swedish Match took Zyn national. Three years later, sales of nicotine pouches had increased by six hundred and forty-one per cent, and Philip Morris acquired the company for sixteen billion dollars. By this point, Zyn was a mainstay for a growing variety of users: purple-state early adopters, hockey and baseball players, Wall Street guys, medical students, truck drivers, and anyone who could use a quick jolt.

Zyn’s populist appeal made it the perfect target for ineffectual liberal outrage and gleeful right-wing trolling. In early 2024, Senator Chuck Schumer, recalling the scores of American teens who had taken up vaping just a few years prior, called Zyn “a pouch packed with problems,” and urged the F.T.C. and the F.D.A. to crack down. G.O.P. lawmakers seized on this effort as an irritating nanny-state gambit. The Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, who has never spoken publicly about using

nicotine herself, declared that a “Zynsurrection” was in order. “Democrats are idiots,” she said. Schumer has said little about the subject since.

Zyn users often feel like they’re in on a shared secret. Unlike cigarettes or vapes, the pouches can go undetected in meetings, on flights, or at the gym. (And, unlike American chewing tobacco, no spitting is required.) “If you see another guy popping a Zyn, there’s an almost immediate camaraderie,” Logan Jeffs, a thirty-five-year-old who works in mergers and acquisitions, told me. The nicotine entrepreneur Bengt Wiberg went as far as to say that pouch usage gave Ukrainian fighters an advantage in the war with Russia, where snus is banned—according to one of his friends, a volunteer in the Ukrainian army, Russian soldiers are more easily detected by the glow of lit cigarettes.

Yet Americans have found ways to make their allegiance known: fans identify with their preferences for “upper deckys” or “lower deckys” (referring to pouch placement in the gums), and ornately punny nicknames for the pouches—Declaration of Zyndependence, Zyndaya, Osama Zyn Laden—have become a tic of frat-boy patois. By last summer, Zyn had gained such traction in the U.S. that shortages broke out across the country. (The crisis was dubbed the “Zynpocalypse.”) As wildfires raged in Los Angeles this January, Zyn was one of the most sought-after “essentials” collected for firefighters.

In “The Easy Way to Stop Smoking,” a cult-favorite book among those trying to ditch cigarettes, the British accountant turned self-help author Allen Carr describes the bizarre logic that often turns people into smokers. “The thing that springs the trap is not that cigarettes taste so good; it’s that they taste so awful,” he writes. “Because that first cigarette tastes awful, our young minds are reassured that we will never become hooked, and we think that because we are not enjoying them we can stop whenever we want to.” This was certainly my experience when, in high school in 2005, some friends and I sneakily purchased a pack of cigarettes from a vending machine in a twenty-four-hour diner. That first cigarette—smelly, awkward, improperly inhaled—was so unpleasant that I declared, with a little disappointment, that I could never become a smoker.

In college, I took puffs of other people's cigarettes at parties, smug in the knowledge that I did not enjoy them. Gradually, though, I started smoking more during late-night study breaks with friends. I began to see cigarettes as an essential stress reliever during breakups or exam periods. By the time I graduated, I was smoking a pack of Camel Lights per day. I never thought of myself as a nicotine addict. I was a smoker, and I loved cigarettes.

I continued smoking heavily for a few more years, until an elective tonsillectomy forced me to quit. (I had suffered frequent bouts of strep throat since I was a small child.) After my surgery, I enjoyed the occasional cigarette, but never fully returned to the habit. Then, during a weekend beach trip with a group of friends in 2018, I fell prey to the vape. My early puffs of a friend's Juul seemed like such a perverse and pathetic imitation of cigarettes that I figured, once again, there was no chance it could become a habit.

Within a few months, the Juul had a hold on my waking hours in a way cigarettes never did. My vape began to feel like an eleventh finger; I started referring to it, half jokingly, as my adult binky. Most reputable sources agreed that vaping was much safer than cigarettes, but the potential long-term health effects were unclear. And the desperation I felt when I didn't have my Juul was demoralizing. I quit many times over the years—during vacations abroad, while on a temporary health kick, while pregnant and postpartum—and always found my way back. Still, I didn't think of myself as a nicotine addict: I simply loved vaping.

Last December, I noticed that my vape of choice—an elegant, mint-flavored device called Mega—had disappeared from my local bodega. Rather than switch to a new type, I decided to stop altogether, and placed a bulk order of Nicorette. The gum was rubbery and almost flavorless, and the first few times I chewed it the nicotine produced a peppery sensation that made me cough. I longed for the familiar lung hit of the vape, and for the low-grade rebellious thrill I felt blowing clouds into my sweater in the back of a cab.

In "The Easy Way to Stop Smoking," Carr makes the persuasive argument that all the benefits smokers claim to derive from smoking—stress management, relaxation, focus, social bonding—are illusions. The only benefit smoking provides is relief from the discomfort of a nicotine craving.

When I read the book, during one of my attempts to quit vaping, I thought, *Well, yes—that’s the entire point.* Nicotine addiction is a nuisance, but it also gives you a pleasurable sense of direction: amid the vast, hazy cloud of competing desires and woes that fill up any given day, you have at least one problem—a nicotine craving—that can be solved easily.

Some medical and public-health institutions have settled into an uneasy détente with smoking alternatives. Scott Gottlieb, a physician who served as the F.D.A. commissioner from 2017 to 2019—the golden age of Juul—once emphasized the need for safer options, including vapes, in order to get Americans to quit cigarettes. As it turned out, Americans were too enthusiastic: Gottlieb would soon lament an “epidemic” of youth vaping. In 2020, the F.D.A. banned many of the candy- and fruit-flavored vapes that may have drawn in adolescents. Two years later, the F.D.A. ordered Juul to stop marketing its devices. (The ban was reversed only this past June.)

Nicotine can have cardiovascular effects, including heightened blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol. Some pouch users complain of mouth lesions from long-term use. Yet more figures in addiction research are acknowledging the importance of smokeless tobacco products in the fight against cigarettes. In a recent interview, Ann McNeill, a pioneering scholar of tobacco addiction, said she’d started to see the benefit of adopting a harm-reduction approach—getting people to trade one dangerous habit for another, significantly less dangerous one. “I thought it was prudent to study the evidence,” she said. “And that’s what drew me to also studying what was going on in Sweden.”

More bullish noises are coming from the corner of the internet that’s concerned with amateur biohacking and self-optimization. In 2022, the wellness podcaster Andrew Huberman said that the effects of nicotine create almost “the optimal state for getting mental work done.” Medical researchers are beginning to explore the potential cognitive benefits: an ongoing study at Vanderbilt’s medical center investigates whether nicotine patches could alleviate memory loss in people with mild cognitive impairment.

When I was in Sweden, my supply of Nicorette ran low. To get my fix, I bought a mountain of white snus tins in various flavors—tangerine spritz,

cappuccino, chili lime—with strengths ranging from light to “Xtra” strong. Since I was already accustomed to nicotine, I didn’t experience the dizziness, nausea, or euphoria that some people report when they try snus, but the pouches made my gums sting. And I felt that something was missing: I needed my Nicorette. As with cigarettes and vaping, my brain had mistaken my nicotine addiction for an attachment to the vessel that the nicotine came in. I suddenly wished that someone would find a way to deliver nicotine via leafy green vegetables.

If the term “Big Tobacco” evokes an image of shadowy executives shredding secret documents, “New Nicotine” calls to mind the well-lit entrepreneurialism of Silicon Valley. Lately, upstart companies have been trying to distinguish themselves on the white-pouch market. Wiberg, the Swedish entrepreneur, patented a nicotine pouch with a membrane on one side that prevents the gum irritation that can come with prolonged use. *ON!*, a brand sold by the American tobacco company Altria, boasts stretchier “flex tech” encasements on one of its products, allowing for a softer mouthfeel. (I found that this makes the pouches unpleasantly leaky.) Ericsson still lends his expertise to new companies around the world. In 2020, he created a formulation for a California-based brand called Lucy, whose name is a play on the term for a single cigarette, a “loosie.” Lucy’s signature pouches are called Breakers; each one contains a “tiny jewel-like capsule” that can be broken open in the mouth to release “a flood of extra flavor and hydration”—a nicotine Gusher.



OUR AUDACIOUS LITTLE PLAN HAD  
BEEN ONLY PARTIALLY SUCCESSFUL

*Cartoon by Glen Baxter*

Lucy was formed in 2016 by David Renteln and John Coogan, whose previous business venture, a nutrition shake called Soylent, was designed with workaholic tech employees in mind. Coogan, a lively thirty-five-year-old from California who has smoked “fewer than ten” cigarettes in his life, has become an eager spokesman for the possibilities of oral nicotine. In addition to Breakers, the company sells an eponymous line of nicotine gum, and Excel, a line of pouches that winkingly appeals to the Wall Street set. (“At Excel, we believe that by maximizing productivity, we not only enhance individual performance but also contribute to the overall success and growth of your clients and stakeholders,” the website reads.) Coogan is creating an umbrella corporation to house all of Lucy’s products; he plans to call it the Anti-Smoking Company.

Like Ericsson before him, Coogan hopes to attract a new group of customers. “The cohort is already the max masculine,” Coogan said. “That might be a good business strategy, but that is not broadening the appeal.” Nonetheless, the company owes most of its growth to the Zyn-centric milieu it’s trying to transcend. In Lucy’s early days, Coogan and Renteln bought ad reads for Barstool Sports podcasts, such as “Pardon My Take”

and “Bussin’ with the Boys.” Eventually, Barstool’s founder, Dave Portnoy, took an interest in Lucy, and offered to make the company Barstool’s exclusive nicotine-advertising partner in exchange for equity. Lucy’s sales grew tenfold last year, thanks to the Barstool deal—and the Zyn shortage.

Today’s nicotine entrepreneurs cite Juul as both an inspiration and a cautionary tale; the product’s appeal was so broad that teen-agers flocked to it. When the 2024 National Youth Tobacco Survey was published, Coogan and others in the industry were relieved: the rate of underage pouch usage had remained relatively low, at 1.8 per cent. Because of the Juul debacle, Zyn flavors in the U.S. are restricted to mint, coffee, cinnamon, and citrus varieties. (Swedish teen-agers seem to have embraced the smorgasbord of white snus flavors available to them.) Coogan hoped that the Excel line would help his company dodge any suggestion of marketing to adolescents. “Children do not like spreadsheets and Bloomberg Terminals,” Coogan said. “It’s not something that’s cool with them.”

And yet it seemed preposterous to me that any kind of marketing, in 2025, could avoid the eyes of teen-agers. Equally so was the idea that adults exist in a consumer category that is distinct from that of children. Grown men make millions of dollars by live-streaming themselves playing video games. Coffee consumption has been disrupted by wacky energy drinks and elaborately sweet, calorie-rich Starbucks concoctions. Meanwhile, today’s teen-agers have a penchant for trying on grownup identities and “aesthetics” online—it is not difficult to imagine a group of high-school students getting *very* into the idea of spreadsheets and Bloomberg Terminals. It’s as unnerving as the thought of the millions of grownups who need to feel like they’re popping candy all day.

In Stockholm, at one of Swedish Match’s proprietary snus cafés, I met Fredrik Peyron and Brian Erkkila, two of the company’s liaisons to the F.D.A. Earlier this year, the F.D.A. announced that Zyn would receive a new federal green light. Its premarket tobacco application—the first for a nicotine pouch—had successfully made it through several years of F.D.A. review. “It means that we can continue doing what we’ve been doing,” Peyron said.

“We had to do our best to say, ‘O.K., these products, in the flavors we market them in, are helping cigarette smokers and other users switch over,’ ” Erkkila said.

“In the end, you have to show that the product is safer than cigarettes,” Peyron said. “Slam dunk.”

Erkkila, who previously worked as a toxicologist at the F.D.A., glanced at Peyron as if he’d made a major gaffe. Here was the semantic dance of the modern tobacco business: these companies can’t claim the product is safe, even if it could help people improve their health. Doctors and public-health agencies in Sweden still generally advise people not to use snus, but they are more receptive to the idea of harm reduction. (Last year, the Swedish parliament voted to lower taxes on snus by twenty per cent, while raising taxes on combustible tobacco products.) When I spoke to American experts on the topic, the phrase “harm reduction” seemed to carry an immense weight. The word “safe” was almost third-rail. “Fredrik is using language that I would never allow in the United States,” Erkkila said, laughing. “But we’re in Sweden.”

Last year, one intrepid YouTube blogger published a video hypothesizing that podcasters and video creators were being paid to advertise Zyn without disclosing it. Among those featured were the Nelk Boys, a group of right-leaning, prankster YouTubers who once used a helicopter to deliver a sedan-size tin of Zyn to Tucker Carlson. It was the sort of promotion that marketing executives can only fantasize about.

But, when I mentioned the stunt to Peyron and Erkkila in Stockholm, they winced. “We’ve done so much to rein in those influencers,” Peyron said. “We don’t use any influencers, we don’t pay anyone, we don’t have any spokespeople,” Erkkila added. “We get asked and we say no.” A product like Zyn could likely survive with few official advertising efforts: when you combine a substance as addictive as nicotine with the alchemical influence of content creators, the pouches practically sell themselves.

In his youth, Ericsson was never much of a smoker. It was not until he began developing Nicorette that he had prolonged, habit-forming exposure to nicotine. “Then I was hooked,” he told me. While working in Amman,

Jordan, in the early two-thousands, Ericsson would stow used pieces of Nicorette in the blister packs; they would melt in the heat and ruin his clothes. It prompted him to switch to snus. Today, he uses one of his own proprietary white-pouch brands, called *ART*. When he pops one into his mouth—which he does frequently—he does it so fluidly you hardly notice. Around his office, he keeps several miniature trash cans to stash his used pouches. And yet in conversation Ericsson never struck me as a salesman for his invention. I mentioned that anti-tobacco organizations have struggled to find a stance on white snus pouches, because they’re sold by tobacco companies. “I understand that,” he said. “I mean, they have been the evil ones.”

I asked Ericsson whether he had any concerns about the possible harms of nicotine itself. “Of course you should have concerns,” he told me. “Or you should do risk analysis.” He walked out of the room and returned with a large ball of string. The string was exactly ninety-five metres long, each millimetre representing one of Sweden’s approximate ninety-five thousand annual deaths. Ericsson slowly unravelled the string until he reached a piece of tape representing the people who die early from smoking each year. He moved his fingers down to another marker, a few meters shorter, which represented the people who die from drinking. He continued shortening the string, indicating the number of deaths by suicide (fifteen hundred), drowning (a hundred and fifty), car accidents (two hundred), and workplace accidents (between fifty and seventy).

“You can ask yourself, ‘What are Swedish people most afraid of?’ They’re afraid to fly. They’re afraid of wolves. They’re afraid of deer and other things,” he said, holding a short length of string. “But what you should be afraid of is the wasp. It kills five to ten people every year.” Finally, Ericsson reached the very tip of the string. While working on Nicorette, he and his colleagues did a risk-analysis calculation that estimated that fewer than two people per year would die of heart illnesses exacerbated by nicotine use. Compared with other hazards, he said, “this is not a big risk.”

Ericsson did not strike me as someone who takes his own health lightly. He told me that he is so concerned about lung health that he won’t burn candles in his home. During our conversations, he periodically dropped a fizzy

aspirin tablet into a glass of water, because he had worked on clinical trials in the nineties that found that it could reduce the risk of heart attacks—and he did suffer a heart attack, in 2022. Did he think that long-term nicotine use was a factor? Ericsson paused for a long time, then threw up his hands. “You take risks every day—by driving, what you eat, and so on,” he said. “I am a proud nicotinist.” ♦



*[Carrie Battan](#)* began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 2015 and became a staff writer in 2018.

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# Takes

- **[Louisa Thomas on John Updike's “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu”](#)**

By Louisa Thomas | The article, about Ted Williams's final game, was described as the best piece about baseball The New Yorker ever printed—which, Updike later allowed, was small praise.

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[Takes](#)

# Louisa Thomas on John Updike's “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu”

*The article, about Ted Williams’s final game, was described as the best piece about baseball The New Yorker ever printed—which, Updike later allowed, was small praise.*



By [Louisa Thomas](#)

March 9, 2025



October 22, 1960

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

The original idea was an assignation. On a dreary Wednesday in September, 1960, John Updike, “falling in love, away from marriage,” took a taxi to see his paramour. But, he later wrote, she didn’t answer his knock, and so he went to a ballgame at Fenway Park for his last chance to see the Red Sox outfielder Ted Williams, who was about to retire. For a few dollars, he got a seat behind third base.

He spent the following five days writing about what happened next: Williams, after enduring a sorry little ceremony to say goodbye, came to bat for the last time, in the bottom of the eighth inning, and hit a home run—low, linear, perfect. “It was in the books while it was still in the sky,” Updike wrote, and it is still in the sky, sixty-five years later, because of the arresting vividness of his depiction. Updike captured not only the ball’s trajectory and its monumental effect but also the moment’s mix of jubilation and relief.

No one should have anticipated what Williams had done. He was forty-two; the Red Sox were bad; the air was heavy with impending rain; and the sky was so dark that the stadium lights had to be turned on—“always a wan sight in the daytime, like the burning headlights of a funeral procession.” But it was Updike’s insight to see that everyone *had* expected it, and in fact it was that shared expectation that held them in their seats. “There will always lurk,” he wrote, “around a corner in a pocket of our knowledge of the odds, an indefensible hope, and this was one of the times, which you now and then find in sports, when a density of expectation hangs in the air and plucks an event out of the future.”

The essay, “[Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu](#),” ran in *The New Yorker* a few weeks later—white-hot speed by the publication’s stately standards. Its editor, William Shawn, wrote to Updike that it was the best piece about baseball the magazine had ever printed, which, Updike later allowed, was small praise, for among the “many prejudices” of the previous editor, Harold Ross, “was one against baseball,” and there had been few mentions of the sport in *The New Yorker*. Shawn’s judgment has not quite stood up over

time. Two years after “Hub Fans” appeared, Roger Angell began covering baseball for the magazine, which he did so often and so well that he [ended up in Cooperstown](#). Still, the original appraisal is pretty close to true.

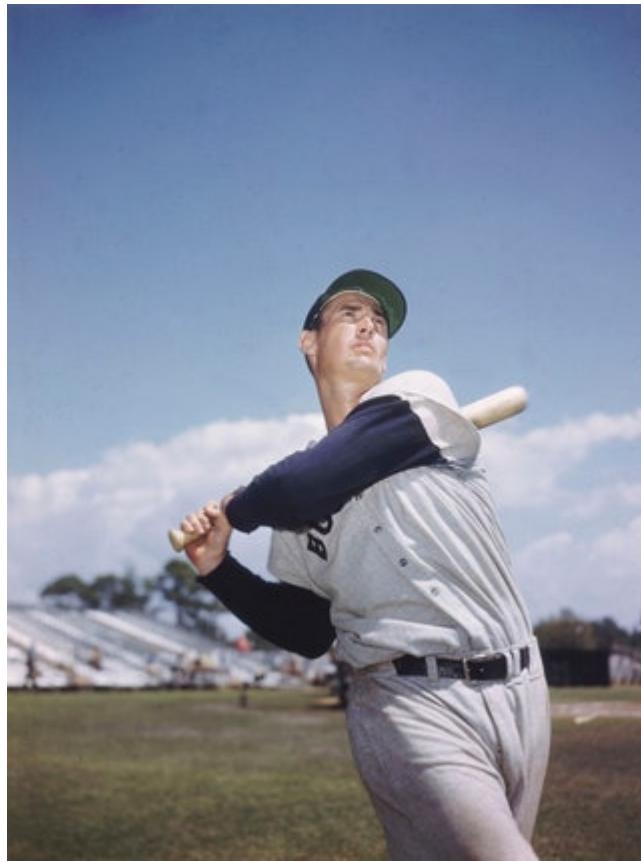
Angell, for his part, was always clear about his debt to Updike, and he was not alone. So much of the best sportswriting since then bears the hallmarks of Updike’s example: an elegant, natural tone; precise, surprising descriptions; pacing that neither impedes the drama nor does too much to drive it. His style and references can seem a little pretentious now. (A groundskeeper picks baseballs off the top of a wall “like a mushroom gatherer seen in Wordsworthian perspective.”) But Updike demonstrated that you could write about sports without a suspicious or cloying bent, or the access of a beat writer. He wrote, as he later put it, with the heart of a fan.

Updike never scratched an itch without putting it into a book, so it’s not a surprise that that trip to Fenway turned into an essay. Updike and Williams shared more than a little—an outsider’s perspective on Boston; a tall, lean physique; eyes that could drill a hole through the soul—but Williams, unlike so many of Updike’s fictional projections, also shared his genius. Williams’s talent was hitting a ball with a stick, whereas Updike’s was turning the world into crystalline prose. Yet they both carried something essential, “the hard blue glow of high purpose.”

Williams was the best pure hitter of his generation, maybe ever, but what fascinated Updike was his dedication to his craft. “For me, Williams is the classic ballplayer of the game on a hot August weekday, before a small crowd, when the only thing at stake is the tissue-thin difference between a thing done well and a thing done ill,” Updike wrote. He saw Williams as a “loner,” and that batting, like writing, was a lonely, unforgiving art. What separated the good from the great, more than talent, was the quality and intensity of their care. Williams’s seemed to carry the ball out of the park, Updike observed. He knew what he was talking about. ♦

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[\*\*Read the original story.\*\*](#)



## [Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu](#)

Ted Williams's last game at Fenway Park.



*Louisa Thomas*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, contributes the weekly column *[The Sporting Scene](#)*. Her books include “*[Louisa: The Extraordinary Life of Mrs. Adams](#)*.”

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# Shouts & Murmurs

- **Prayers for Everyday Life**

By Ian Frazier | Good God Almighty, Holy, and Merciful, how do you get these tear-off produce bags to open?

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

# Prayers for Everyday Life

By [Ian Frazier](#)

March 10, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

## Throughout the day

Oh, dear God,  
May I not have thrown away the  
Top to the sour cream.

Dear Lord,  
Look at all those ants.

Oh, Jesus,  
Where did all that water in the  
Basement come from?

Blessed Mary, mother of God,  
What happened to my hat?  
It was my favorite hat.  
Mary who is without sin,  
Grant by your mercy that someday

I will be able to just call it up  
Like I do my phone.

### **At the workplace**

Dear God Almighty,  
Why hasn't that idiot Liam been fired?

Oh, Christ,  
I was just about to sign out  
For the day,  
And now somebody sends me this.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,  
Is this guy boring.

Almighty God,  
Who sees and knows all things,  
And for whom all things are possible,  
May this guy keel over of a heart attack  
Or something.

Sweet Jesus,  
Did that meeting have a point?

### **At the pharmacy**

Oh, for God's sake,  
You are not next in line.

Jesus Christ,  
Why did the pharmacist have to yell,  
“Bowel-prep kit for [your name]”?  
Now everybody in the place knows  
That I am getting a bowel-prep kit,  
And that [your name] is me.  
In this, as in all things, Lord,  
Your will be done, not mine.

Oh, my God,  
That is Aïda,  
The young woman from the taco place.  
Please may she not have heard that.

**At the corn maze**

Blessed St. Anthony,  
Finder of lost items,  
Where am I?

Dear God, I do truly thank you  
That you have brought me out of there  
And into the parking lot.

Jude, Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes,  
Where's my car?

**At the supermarket**

Good God Almighty,  
Holy, and Merciful,  
How do you get these tear-off  
Produce bags to open?  
I have been pinching what I think is  
The top, i.e., the “open” end,  
Between my thumb and forefinger  
For at least three minutes,  
And still I can’t get the thing to open.  
Help me, dear God, please.

Almighty God,  
Who created Good,  
You also created self-checkout.  
And now you see  
That the “Assistance Needed” light  
On the self-checkout machine  
That I am using is blinking.  
Why did you make the slot for  
Cash payment

And the slot for coupons so alike?  
Oh, dear Lord,  
Now they have to take the whole  
Machine apart  
To get back the twenty-dollar bill  
That I put into the slot for coupons  
By mistake.  
My enemies, including Dalen,  
The self-checkout-monitor guy,  
Laugh me to shame.  
Lord, be with me in the time of trial.

### **On the occasion of an audit**

Oh, Heavenly Father,  
Why did I write down  
My daily expenses for entertainment,  
Travel, books, magazines, newspapers,  
Movies, and postage  
On this "Nudism in America, 1949"  
Calendar  
That a friend gave me as a joke  
On my birthday a few years ago?  
Please may the auditors forgive me  
As I would forgive them if I were  
Their auditor  
And this calendar were theirs.

### **At bedtime**

Dear Lord,  
Losing my phone just now  
When I'm about to go to bed,  
And it has not been charged all day  
And so is out of power  
And won't ring when I call it,  
Is one of the worst things  
That happens to me.  
My tears are bitter;

My bones are poured out like water.  
Have mercy on me—  
Oh, there it is.  
Dear Lord in Heaven,  
Thank you. ♦

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

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# Fiction

- **“Techniques and Idiosyncrasies”**

By Yiyun Li | It's astonishing, Lilian often thought, that people feel this urge to talk about themselves with a stranger, however much or little they have lived.

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[Fiction](#)

# Techniques and Idiosyncrasies

By [Yiyun Li](#)

March 9, 2025



*Illustration by Na Kim*

Lilian was the only patient that morning. This was a change from the crowded waiting room she was used to in the days before Dr. Fenton began to charge an annual fee. “Concierge medicine” sounded like “bespoke chocolates” and would not have been Lilian’s natural inclination, and yet she stayed with the clinic. Looking for a new physician would require making calls, meeting strangers, and filling out medical-history forms, and that, even for a healthy fifty-one-year-old, could be complicated. Lilian might be able to omit the two miscarriages—not all experiences, thank goodness, left a trace—but could she also omit the two childbirths, the second by C-section? Small talk happened in doctors’ offices, sometimes about children.

A fee was a manageable price for not having to lie or explain. Lilian did not mind telling the truth, but truths could be startling and leave people uneasy—*spooked*, Lilian called that state.

The nurse, who introduced herself as Tina, was new. So, Eileen must have retired. For a few years, Eileen had been talking about travelling to County Clare, where her grandparents had lived before emigrating. That retirement plan had been a recurring subject, and Lilian welcomed the images of the coastal cliffs, the castle ruins, and the country lanes, a whiff of wild and poetic bleakness in the fluorescent-lit examination room. She wondered if Eileen talked about visiting her grandparents’ village with every patient. Lilian had been to Ireland many times but not to County Clare. Eileen had never been to Ireland.

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

Tina, between fifty and sixty, was not the chatty type. She seemed to have an unusual way of looking at Lilian, which reminded her of the way Elizabeth Bowen had described a secret agent in one of her novels—“using both eyes at the same time.” The association was perhaps unfair. Why shouldn’t Tina look with both eyes fixed harshly on Lilian’s face—the nurse was not a Cyclops or afflicted with exotropia.

Lilian’s right arm failed to provide any blood. Tina sighed. “Nope,” she said. “Nothing.”

“Huh, I drank plenty of water this morning,” Lilian said, a pointless statement because the outcome was the only thing that mattered in this circumstance.

“Not enough,” Tina said, and switched to Lilian’s left arm, which proved a success.

The veins in both her arms used to be coöperative for Eileen. Lilian was about to say something—like how odd that an arm could wake up one morning and decide to misbehave—but Tina held up a finger. “Listen. You can hear it if you stay quiet.”

*It?*

“The blood flow,” Tina said, nodding at the tube in her hand.

Lilian held her breath, and, in the stillness, made a mental list detailing the nurse’s appearance and movements. Her fingernails were painted lavender; her hair, shoulder length, thick, was dyed ink-dark; her green eyeshadow and pink blush seemed only to accentuate her angular face and hard stare. She favored her left hand, capping and uncapping tubes with it. There was a mole on the back of her right hand. Lilian had not taken such an inventory with Eileen, whose face had begun to fade from her memory, but Eileen had never asked her to listen to her own blood filling the test tubes. No nurse had done that.

### **Podcast: The Writer’s Voice**

[Listen to Yiyun Li read “Techniques and Idiosyncrasies.”](#)

Perhaps Tina had a propensity to seek unusual and aesthetic satisfaction from her work, Lilian thought, experimenting with generosity, but it was a cold generosity, assured by her sense that she herself possessed the ease of a chameleon: she could meet Eileen’s small talk with warmth and effusiveness, and she could also match Tina’s unsmiling stillness with her own stark impassiveness. She wondered if Tina asked all her patients to listen to their blood. It seemed unlikely. Someone would have complained, concierge medicine or not.

They sat through six large tubes' and three small tubes' worth of silence. Only once did Lilian catch what she thought might be the sound of her blood flowing. If asked to describe it, she would not have had any way to do it. Lilian was a writer, but words were limited. Once, at a zoo, she and her children had been invited to stroke a boa constrictor. Lilian, with a phobia of reptiles, nevertheless gathered the courage for her children's sake, running a finger along the back of the boa constrictor. The sensation, unlike touching any other living creature or inanimate object, could not be described. Some experiences are exclusive, known only to those who seek or are afflicted by them.

Tina untied the tourniquet on Lilian's arm and left with the tray of tubes. At that moment, two thoughts occurred to Lilian: she would be able to give a good witness's description of Tina if they were characters in a detective story; and Tina, memorable in her appearance and her demeanor, would never be the murderer in a novel, only a decoy.

In real life, the probability of a nurse being a murderer in disguise, though not zero, was low, and Lilian did not believe that such a sensational turn was likely to occur to her. She had simply been reading too many mysteries recently, and those books tended to instill extra meaning in the commonplace. It was like the sky in a painting, which was often the first thing Lilian noticed and studied when she was in a museum. That must be what the painters wanted, their individual skies rendered unique by their perceptions and techniques. Lilian did not pay equal attention to the actual sky, which served as a background for other things she scrutinized: witch hazel in February, weeping cherry in May, autumn foliage, and icicles in the coldest days of the year. She was wary of giving the sky, which was vast and lofty for everyone, any metaphorical or transcendental weight, as Tolstoy was wont to do.

Lilian had begun to see Dr. Fenton seven years ago, three months after the death of her older son, Oscar. Dr. Fenton had dealt with that information professionally at their first meeting. She had asked about Lilian's mood, and Lilian had replied with a joke about the ratio of her being vertical versus horizontal. Joking was her version of uncontrollable tears, but Dr. Fenton neither laughed nor pressed to see what was behind Lilian's inane laughter. Instead, she wrote down the contact information for Lilian's psychiatrist and

therapist and turned her attention to Lilian's body, which offered, Lilian supposed, the solace of the concrete: minor problems could be managed; anything major would be referred to specialists.

But, when a second death beset Lilian's life, Dr. Fenton's reaction took her by surprise. It was four weeks after Jude's death, and Lilian had gone to the clinic because of a small gardening mishap. A rose thorn had pricked the back of her ring finger and caused an exceedingly painful but local infection.

Dr. Fenton explained that where the prick was, between two joints, was an enclosed space, like a small petri dish. Like an Eppendorf tube, Lilian said. It's an occupational hazard for writers to always want to revise and edit; she could not help but offer an alternative simile. Dr. Fenton glanced at Lilian and said yes, exactly, and within that space the bacteria's proliferation could cause acute pain, but it was a problem that was easy to solve with antibiotics. As Dr. Fenton washed her hands at the sink, ready to finish the visit, she asked about Lilian's general health. Lilian hesitated and said there was something else that Dr. Fenton might want to know, which had nothing to do with the infection and was not the reason for the appointment.

This time, Lilian did not attempt any joke. She related the news in the simplest manner: like his brother, Jude had died by suicide. Dr. Fenton looked so stricken that Lilian, for fear that Dr. Fenton might faint, held her elbow and guided her to a chair. It was the first and the only time that Lilian had witnessed another person's reaction to Jude's death. Apart from two close friends, people had received the news by e-mail or by text or by phone call—not from Lilian and never in person. Dr. Fenton's tears made Lilian feel that she had performed an unfair trick. She should have e-mailed the news before she arrived at the clinic with a pricked finger like a princess in a fairy tale.

Lilian had chosen Dr. Fenton because she had an unfussy, pragmatic way of looking at life. "My job"—she had often said at Lilian's checkups—"is to keep you healthy for as long as possible. And then, when the time comes, hopefully, you'll go out fast, no prolonged illness, minimal suffering." The first time Dr. Fenton had said that, she had drawn a steady line in the air with her pen and then dropped it suddenly. Lilian laughed, but Dr. Fenton remained stern, only nodding at Lilian's understanding.

When Dr. Fenton recovered from her tears, she asked Lilian how she was doing. Lilian, aware of both her hands now being held by Dr. Fenton, who was neither stern nor matter-of-fact in that moment, replied with what she had carefully formulated as an answer to people's queries, making a distinction that only some would notice: "My life is never going to be all right again, but I'm doing all right."

"But why . . . did he . . . do you know?"

Most people did not have the opportunity to blurt out that "why" question to Lilian, even though it must have been among the first questions that occurred to anyone. "I don't think 'why' is the question for me to ask," she said. "I accept Jude's decision."

"You must be a saint!"

It was an inexplicable exclamation, one that Lilian would later wonder about. What kind of saint, in what religion or tradition? Lilian was not a saint—just considering the idea made her feel ten times bleaker about her life than she did already. Nor was she a cold-blooded monster, though she knew that some people considered her precisely that. Why else would two children from the same family choose suicide? The unfathomable is unsettling, and that makes the most banal thought a shelter. Those who don't think of themselves as monsters feel less uneasy if catastrophes can be explained as consequences. "I suppose it's only natural for people to come to that conclusion," Lilian had mused a couple of times with her therapist, and once, at a literary banquet in London, with an acquaintance.

The previous time Lilian had seen Imelda, who was sitting next to her in London, was ten years earlier, when her children were alive, but with some people mindless small talk would be an insult. Imelda pondered. "If you look around, it may be safe to say that most of the people here have not experienced the same level of difficulty as you have," she said, gesturing to the well-dressed guests relishing the dinner and their conversations. "So, I'm afraid an average person might think, My gosh, those parents must be monsters."

Lilian found that reply comforting. The world could not be made darker or rosier for her by the tinted glasses others chose for themselves. She would rather talk with a person who was capable of seeing the world as it was, hence capable of seeing her as who she was. “Sometimes I think about Ivy Compton-Burnett,” Lilian said, knowing that Imelda would understand the reference. Ivy’s two youngest sisters died in a suicide pact on Christmas Day of 1917, and they were not even the only children in that family to meet the fate of untimely death.

“A hundred years ago, the death of young people was a more common experience,” Imelda said. “But that thought doesn’t help you.”

“No,” Lilian agreed.

“I hope you don’t feel you need to beat yourself up for what happened.”

“Oh, I don’t beat myself up,” Lilian said. “Life has done that already.”

Tina came back to administer more tests. Though not a talkative woman, she had a range of ways of conveying her judgments: a heavy sigh, a quick gasp, or an emphatic shaking of her head. Thus Lilian learned that she did not ace the depth-perception test for both eyes, and her hand grip was suboptimal, which—as Tina refreshed Lilian’s memory, though she needed no such reminder—was an important measurement because of its correlation with the onset of dementia.



*"Let's leave before the lights come on."*  
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

Just as Lilian settled into a chair for her auditory test, Tina paused and pointed to Lilian's puffer jacket on a hanger. "Look," Tina said. There was a tear on the back, about half an inch. Some downy fluff was about to leak out.

"Oh," Lilian said, keeping her face and voice flat. She felt a convulsion, not because of this jacket but because of the one she had worn at twelve. That year, she had begun to commute to middle school, navigating the crowded buses in Beijing, an hour in the early morning and an hour in the evening. Public transportation in a metropolis was a reliable way to hasten the end of childhood. On those buses, a girl learned to watch out for the trespassing body parts of men, a hand probing purposefully, a leg pressing ignobly, but it was on a winter evening that the malice of the world was crystallized for Lilian. A stranger razored the back of her puffer jacket, crisscrossing lines that she did not feel. After she got off the bus, feathers started to escape behind her, swept up by the wind and turned golden orange by a nearby street lamp. A passerby exclaimed, and a circle of people formed around Lilian: worse than being beset by a disaster was to have it assessed by strangers. More than one person expressed disapproval of Lilian's carelessness; someone wondered aloud about the financial burden she would cause her parents—a puffer jacket, in 1985, was a considerable expense. An acquaintance, who happened to have been passing, questioned the cost of unnecessary ambition. Lilian, the woman said, could have done just fine

going to the middle school nearby instead of commuting a long distance to an élite school. Seen from decades later, that moment took on the fantastical air of a fairy tale, but it was one about Bluebeard rather than the Goose Girl, served up as a cautionary tale, not a happily-ever-after. What was the moral of the story? Years later, Lilian understood people's fear of the incomprehensible: when something terrible happens to someone, surely that person must have erred in the first place. How else can people find security and reassurance in this senseless world?

Tina, as though offended by Lilian's nonchalance, clicked her tongue and retrieved a Band-Aid from a drawer. "If you'll allow me," she said, and, before Lilian agreed, she placed the Band-Aid over the tear.

Lilian watched the lavender fingernails as Tina smoothed the Band-Aid, and remembered a quintessential Patricia Highsmith scene—or perhaps Lilian had only imagined it, for later she could not recall from which of the Tom Ripley books she had retained this memory: Tom, moving the body of a man he has just murdered into some woods, accidentally breaks off a branch of a young tree; while the body burns, Tom caresses the wounded tree, full of tender apology.

A puffer jacket does not sense its mutilation. A tree does not mourn a severed branch. Blood flowing into test tubes does not hanker for an audience. A rose thorn does not harbor any ill will, only blind stubbornness. If one were to tally the things and the people in life, Lilian thought, one would be bound to conclude that much of the world is unfeeling: incapable of feeling or unwilling to feel, though what difference does it make? And, in so many ways, an unfeeling world may be less horrendous than a world in which feelings, too narrow or too strong or too timid or too distorted, dictate life.

A pair of twins from the past often returned to Lilian's memory. In first grade, Lilian had befriended the girls. Their family, unlike the families of most of Lilian's schoolmates, lived not in an apartment building with central heating and running water but in a one-room cottage, which was no more than a shack. The windows were open squares pasted over with layers of newspaper, and the room was occupied mainly by a brick bed large enough for the parents and the four children to share. The twins, inexplicably to

Lilian even then, kept a hedgehog as a pet, and once—only once—Lilian was invited to visit the hedgehog after school. The girls' older brothers were out, and their parents were at work. The room, with neither enough natural light from the newsprint-covered windows nor a lamp lit, reminded Lilian of the word “medieval,” which she'd just learned, though she knew not to share this with her friends. The twins, in fact, were considered backward at school. They could not read and often failed the hygiene check on Mondays: their fingernails were dark, the skin on the backs of their necks and behind their ears looked sooty, and they could never produce a clean handkerchief from their pockets.

The hedgehog was retrieved from a cardboard box where it lived. (Why did it never think of climbing out of the box and running away when no one was home? Lilian would wonder after the visit.) The creature, with its small eyes, a pink, sniffling nose, and gray spikes that did not hurt but only tickled, did not have a name. Unlike a cat, it could not chase a piece of yarn, but it could do the neatest trick, which the twins were eager to show Lilian. One of them placed a pinch of salt in her palm. The hedgehog licked it up and then started to cough, an eerily human sound, as if an old man were coughing. Lilian, startled, looked around at the door, and that made the sisters laugh: Lilian, too, was tricked, just like the hedgehog.

Lilian felt obliged to laugh with the girls. Was that a form of small talk for children, when feelings that were too intense could be covered up more easily than articulated? Was that the beginning of Lilian's habit of telling jokes instead of shedding tears?

A few weeks after that, the girls and their mother died of carbon-monoxide poisoning on a cold night. The father and the two boys survived. Nobody said anything about the hedgehog, and, long after Lilian had forgotten the girls' faces and their names, she thought about the hedgehog. Lilian could be considered a sensitive child because the memory of the coughing hedgehog agonized her, and yet she was unfeeling, too, for she had not mourned her friends. Perhaps it is futility—more than pain, more than humiliation, more than death—that haunts one. Short of stealing the hedgehog from the girls, Lilian could do nothing to stop them from obtaining heartless pleasure from its helplessness, just as the world did nothing to save the girls or many other children. Perhaps Lilian should have told Imelda that it was not that

children's deaths were becoming less commonplace. Rather, the world was becoming more resourceful with its distractions: futility is easier to banish than death.

Once the auditory test got under way, Tina, for the first time, was approving. "My God, your hearing *is* good," she said, looking straight into Lilian's eyes as though challenging her to disagree. But she might be imagining these things by paying too close attention, Lilian thought, in the same way that Tolstoy gave meaning to the lofty sky of Austerlitz, or the painters of the past immortalized the sky as they had seen it.

Lilian made a noncommittal sound. She had not minded Eileen's small talk, because it had required neither feeling nor attention from her. Tina demanded extra exertion from Lilian—it took an effort to look intentionally obtuse. Pretending can be a different form of understanding, or of withholding understanding.

About fifteen years ago, Lilian had travelled to upstate New York. Nabokov country, as she used to think of it, though on a recent trip she realized that it would be more fit to be called *MAGA* country. The literary organization that had invited her for the earlier trip had arranged a car service between the airport and the town, a two-hour ride. The man who came to pick Lilian up introduced himself as Noah.

It was neither the first time nor the last that Lilian had been a captive audience. People who knew her little tended to see in her a sympathetic listener, taking her quietness as attentiveness, viewing her questions—asked only to deflect people's questions about her—as an invitation. Once, at a fund-raising party in San Francisco, a woman approached Lilian with a wistful look. "If my mother had had your career, she would not have killed herself" was the opening line, and Lilian felt obliged to stay for a long narrative and offer the appropriate response. Another time, someone else's graduate advisee kept Lilian in her office for three-quarters of an hour with a monologue, during which Lilian did not say a single word. Afterward, the young man exclaimed, "You're wonderful. Perhaps I should add a wise Japanese woman as a character to my novel!" For about two years, a hairdresser—an immigrant in New York who also had a master's degree in

theology from his homeland—talked at length about religion, philosophy, and his struggles with faith as he cut Lilian’s hair.

It’s astonishing, Lilian often thought, that people feel this urge to talk about themselves with a stranger, however much or little they have lived. But few people would look at their own lives and think they have had only a meagre portion of experience; they must feel that they have experienced more life than they know what to do with—why else would they insist on telling Lilian their stories? Only someone like Ivy Compton-Burnett would say, after the deaths of those young siblings, whom she had raised, “I have had such an uneventful life that there is little information to give.”

People are sometimes presumptuous, at other times predictable, but often they are both. Yet, even as Lilian bemoaned this to a friend, she knew she was partially responsible for repeatedly putting herself into these situations. Was she too passive, too polite, too sympathetic, too kind—was that what made people feel the ease of telling her about themselves? Was she too curious to resist a story—any story, good or bad or mediocre? Or was she, ultimately, too indifferent to her own dilemma of being held hostage by other people’s wishes and miscomprehensions?

The journey in Nabokov country could have been one of those familiar incidents. In her travels, Lilian had unintentionally collected many drivers’ stories: of a man from an Irish family in Boston who had escaped what he called his “Catholic guilt” by running west, all the way to the Pacific; of a Puerto Rican whose aspiration to become a champion jockey had been dashed by his weight gain during puberty; of a Pennsylvania grandfather whose tales about the talents and quirks of every single grandchild—seven of them—had made Lilian drowsy; of the hard luck and good dreams of many strangers. Lilian wondered if those men repeated their stories to all their passengers.

Noah, encouraged by the occasional and polite response from Lilian, talked, unsurprisingly, non-stop: about his previous position, as a school district’s superintendent; about his inheriting a fleet of vehicles two years earlier, when his father retired from his limousine firm; about the village in Central Europe from which his great-great-grandfather had emigrated, and the family get-together every other year, alternating between the village in the

Old World and the town in upstate New York, where the latest reunion included two hundred and fifty family members, from both countries; about his three children, the youngest in high school, the two older ones in college; about his favorite grocery store, Wegmans, and his favorite purchase from the store, organic roast chicken. This tireless need for people to narrate their lives, Lilian thought, half listening, half sunk in amused despair.

Then Noah changed his subject. He asked Lilian if she had heard of the famous case of a local teen-age girl being abducted and chained in the basement of a farmhouse for seven years by a man. “The reason I want to tell you the story is that we’ll pass that part soon,” Noah said. “I can take a detour to show you the house.”

Lilian said there was no need, and Noah insisted that it was not inconvenient. Only two minutes off the road, and he would make sure to step on the gas so that Lilian would get to her hotel without any delay. Already, the air in the car seemed to take on a different quality. Lilian, keeping her face vacant, pretended that she did not see Noah’s eyes studying her in the rearview mirror as he went on to recount, with lurid relish, the girl’s abduction, her years in the dungeon, and, eventually, her escape.

Noah was not the man who had committed the atrocity, but how much better was he than the criminal, whose feat he must have admired, somehow, when he swerved off the local highway to a country road and then onto an unpaved dirt road? The farmhouse, unoccupied for some years according to Noah, stood in early-spring drabness, its white paint peeling, its dark windows staring blankly. Noah left the car idling and pointed out a path behind the house which led to a neighboring farm. When the girl had found the opportunity to escape, she had run on that path barefoot and naked, Noah said, describing the scene as though on that day he had been sitting in an idling car in the same spot, watching.

Perhaps Noah was no different than Patricia Highsmith, who had not murdered and yet must have found a thrill in watching her characters murder others. Was it a crime that Noah turned himself into a compulsive narrator, fondling details of gruesomeness because he was safe, free, and invincible, and because there was nothing Lilian could do but sit with him, listening?

Lilian, then and later, wondered if she had done the right thing by maintaining an inscrutable look when the car stopped at the farmhouse. After they got back onto the highway, she closed her eyes, pretending to have dozed off. Noah's motive—timid in one sense and outrageous in another—was transparent, but there was no point in letting him know that she had seen through him. Her understanding was precisely what he hankered after: he wanted her imagination to be framed by his imagination; he wanted her undivided attention and intense feelings.

When they reached the hotel, Noah helped to unload Lilian's suitcase and wished her a good visit. Until then, Lilian had not known how the drive would end. In fiction, there would have been many alternatives between the farmhouse and the hotel. Patricia Highsmith would have taken the story in one direction; Elizabeth Bowen, another; Ivy Compton-Burnett, yet another. But Lilian knew that there was nothing she could do but wait and see. In fiction, one can maneuver the time line to accentuate a drama or to defuse a crisis, but, in life, Lilian knew, then and later, the falsity of such maneuvers: there was nothing a mother could do when a child died or when a second child died; she could only wait for each day to arrive and then discover the meaning of that day.

Some writers rely on their techniques; some, their idiosyncrasies. All the same, there is consistency in each writer's touch, Highsmith being Highsmith, Bowen being Bowen. Life, inconsistent, with little technique but with unpredictable idiosyncrasy, is always a superior storyteller.

When Tina came back into the room, Lilian was lying on the examination table, naked but for her underpants and a robe held closed by her hands, since she had been warned by Tina not to tie the belt. Tina wired the EKG machine and put cuffs around Lilian's ankles for an ABI test, asking not once but twice whether Lilian had put any lotion on her body that morning.

Lilian shut her eyes. In a murder mystery, Tina could have injected something into Lilian, or she could simply have knocked Lilian out with blunt force, but life was not fiction. Whatever was going on behind Tina's discontent that morning, or whatever had happened in Noah's imagination, was only a small fragment in a vast reality. They were unlikely to rewrite an ordinary life. Few people could. Few people would.

When the tests were over, Tina disconnected the electrodes from Lilian's body, taking care not to rip off the tape too abruptly. Lilian, her eyes still closed, nodded when Tina said that her heart looked fine. Then the room became quiet, as though Tina had left without Lilian's noticing. She opened her eyes. Tina was standing right next to the table, looking down with both her eyes fixed on Lilian's face. "Do you have children?" Tina asked.

Later, Lilian would call a friend whose father was a doctor to confirm that the question was unusual or at least unprofessional. Later, Lilian would wonder if in her file Dr. Fenton had notes about the deaths of Oscar and Jude, which Tina had seen, and if Tina felt compelled to ask the question because how Lilian chose to answer it would mean something. This, of course, was a conjecture; for once, Lilian was not interested in knowing the truth.

But at that moment, looking up from the examination table at Tina, her dark hair framing her unsmiling face, Lilian neither hesitated nor flinched. "No," she said.

Tina nodded. "Neither do I."

The unmistakable sadness in that statement took Lilian by surprise. Did Tina mean that it was too bad that Lilian, like Tina, had missed something essential in a woman's life? Or perhaps Tina had expected Lilian to say, "I had two sons, and they died"—to which Tina could have responded with a revelation of her own: "The same happened to me. I've lost my children, too."

Lilian would never know what was behind Tina's sadness. After she left and Dr. Fenton came into the examination room, Lilian did not mention anything unusual to the doctor, just as, years before, she had not complained to the literary organization about Noah. Noah and Tina would stay in her memory, just as the twin sisters had, but they would do little to haunt Lilian, unlike the hedgehog's coughing, unlike the feathers flying from her back, and unlike the lives and the deaths of her children. Had Oscar and Jude been alive, Lilian might have felt differently toward Tina. She might have asked questions, which might have led to stories. She might have even made up a story with a deeper complexity, featuring a villain named Noah. But her

attention was limited, and her feelings were more exclusive these days. She did not seek to understand Tina or Noah, for understanding was not their due. ♦

*Yiyun Li* has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2003. Her books include the story collection “*Wednesday’s Child*,” which was a finalist for the 2024 Pulitzer Prize, and the memoir “*Things in Nature Merely Grow*.”

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# How the Red Scare Reshaped American Politics

*At its height, the political crackdown felt terrifying and all-encompassing. What can we learn from how the movement unfolded—and from how it came to an end?*

By [Beverly Gage](#)

March 10, 2025



*After Joseph McCarthy was censured by the Senate, in 1954, his admirers vowed to keep the flame alive against a corrupt, treacherous, and deluded liberal establishment. Photographs by Bettman / Getty*

When, exactly, was America great? For as long as [Donald Trump](#) has touted the MAGA slogan, he has been cagey about the answer. But recent weeks have suggested a few possibilities. One is the [Gilded Age](#) of the late nineteenth century, when tariffs, crony capitalism, and hard-and-fast racial hierarchies were the stuff of American politics. Another is the postwar Red Scare, when the federal government was weaponized against the American left.

Trump has long vowed to root out “radical left lunatics” and “Marxist equity” from the bowels of the state. Most members of his Administration now seem to share that commitment. The *DOGE* overlord [Elon Musk](#) proclaimed that U.S.A.I.D. is—or was?—“a viper’s nest of radical-left marxists” and deserved to be destroyed. Defense Secretary [Pete Hegseth](#) has similarly promised to rid the U.S. military of its “cultural Marxism.” An update on the old Judeo-Bolshevik myth, “cultural Marxism” is now the term favored by the right to get around the obvious fact that there are vanishingly few doctrinaire Marxists, much less a vigorous Communist Party, in the United States today. Unlike actual Marxism, “cultural Marxism” includes almost any form of progressive multiculturalism or egalitarianism. Thus the [war against diversity-equity-and-inclusion initiatives](#), campus protesters, and the Green New Deal is, in fact, the good old war against Communism.

For much of the country, the Cold War ended quite some time ago. But the far right has always nurtured a counternarrative in which hard-core Marxists are forever pushing the nation down the road to serfdom. After Joseph McCarthy’s Senate censure, in 1954, right-wing organizations and self-proclaimed McCarthyites vowed to keep the flame alive against a corrupt, treacherous, and deluded liberal establishment. And it doesn’t require a conspiracy theory to get from then to now. McCarthy’s chief counsel, Roy Cohn, famously served as [one of Trump’s early mentors](#), a tutor in the ideological and practical workings of American politics.

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So it might be a good time for the rest of us to brush up on our Red Scare history. The latest book from the New York *Times* journalist Clay Risen, “[Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism, and the Making of Modern America](#)” (Scribner), describes the biggest showdowns and the many oddities of the postwar Red hunt. It also documents the fear and suffering of those who bore the brunt of it.

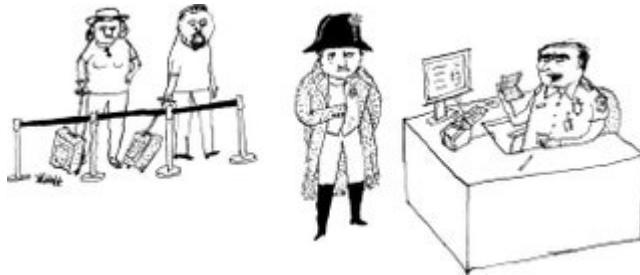
As a scholarly subject, the Red Scare has never quite experienced its moment of glory. During the second half of the twentieth century, the topic was too combustible to make for great history: you were either for or against Joe McCarthy, for or against Alger Hiss, for or against the Rosenbergs. The end of the Cold War produced a rush of work seeking to assess new political, archival, and conceptual openings. For the first time, it became possible for non-Marxist historians to write admiringly about the Communist Party’s civil-rights and antifascist activism without needing to denounce Stalin on every page. Historians examined classified materials opened by U.S. intelligence agencies and even, briefly, by the post-Soviet government, seeking to get to the bottom of decades-old mysteries.

Then the outpouring of interest and energy largely stopped. The political and academic Zeitgeist moved on to questions deemed more pressing and relevant for the twenty-first century. Even academics who described themselves as Marxists expressed little interest in, say, the operations of America’s Communist underground during the height of the McCarthy era. Partly as a result, younger generations often find it hard to grasp what everyone was so worked up about.

Risen wants to remedy that. But, he notes, the Red Scare can be hard to understand—and hard to narrate—because it was so many things at once. The nineteen-forties and fifties were supposedly an era of liberal consensus, when both parties agreed on the virtues of the welfare state and a U.S.-led international order. At the same time, those decades saw ferocious political battles, with Republicans and Democrats flinging accusations—“You’re a comsymp!” “No, you are!”—across the aisle.

As Risen suggests, the Red Scare was also a “cultural war,” in which many Americans fought “atheistic communism” by squaring off against anyone who thought or acted out of step with the status quo. The anti-Communist

surge reshaped every institution in American life: Hollywood, labor unions, churches, universities, elementary schools—and, above all, the national-security state. McCarthy became the movement's title character, but he was just one marcher in the parade of Red-baiters that included his fellow-Republican [Richard Nixon](#), the wunderkind of the House Un-American Activities Committee; the Democratic senator Pat McCarran, who ran a rival Communist-hunting committee; and the F.B.I. director, [J. Edgar Hoover](#), an unelected bureaucrat, and the most powerful of them all. From on high, they told ordinary Americans how to live, whom to love, and what to say.



*“How long will you be staying in exile?”*  
Cartoon by Roland High

Until they didn't. Risen's book usefully lays out the many mechanisms of repression that made the Red Scare possible, from executive orders and congressional-committee hearings to conservative control of vital media outlets. It also describes how something that once seemed so terrifying and interminable did, in fact, come to an end.

Other than the Communist Party itself, no group suffered as much scrutiny or punishment during the Red Scare as the amorphous agglomeration known as the federal workforce. Today, the U.S. government's employment of millions of people is a familiar part of American life, if not, as we've recently discovered, an entirely settled matter. In the forties, when the Red Scare began in earnest, a robust federal workforce was still a new proposition, and not one that everyone in Washington was willing to concede. Republicans worried that federal employment was doing the Democrats' work for them; with every government paycheck, a new Democrat was made. They also didn't like what many of those workers were doing: creating regulations, dispensing Social Security, enforcing labor rights. They saw a cabal of eggheaded do-gooders intoxicated by

bureaucratic power. Worst of all, Republicans alleged, the sprawling federal workforce was where Communists went to hide and wait for instructions from their Soviet masters.

Franklin Roosevelt dismissed this last charge as vicious partisan politics, which it was. But there was enough truth in it to kindle the Red Scare's earliest flames. Beginning amid the New Deal and continuing into the Second World War, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union were ostensible allies, Russian intelligence recruited dozens of people inside or close to federal agencies to steal information and spy on policymakers. Toward the end of the war, the F.B.I. began to warn the Truman Administration about spies inside departments such as Agriculture, State, and Treasury, and even in top-secret programs such as the Manhattan Project. Many spies were recruited through the Communist Party, which maintained close ties with the Soviet government despite claiming that "Communism is 20th century Americanism." When Republicans caught wind of the operation, they saw an ideal issue around which to build the 1946 midterm campaign.

"Communism vs. Republicanism" became their slogan, casting all New Dealers, liberals, and progressives as either Communist sympathizers or pathetic dupes. When the votes were counted, it was plain that the American people had chosen Republicanism, giving the G.O.P. control of the House and the Senate for the first time since the early nineteen-thirties. At that point, Truman figured he had to get out ahead of the Communist issue. In March, 1947, he signed Executive Order 9835, establishing a "loyalty program" to investigate the political sympathies, affiliations, and memberships of all federal employees. "Although the loyalty of by far the overwhelming majority of all Government employees is beyond question," the order read, "the presence within the Government service of any disloyal or subversive person constitutes a threat to our democratic process." The Red Scare was under way.

During the next five and a half years, Risen estimates, authorities conducted almost five million background checks on federal employees, seeking evidence of views or associations that seemed too far left. The F.B.I. followed up with in-depth investigations into more than twenty-six thousand federal workers; five hundred and sixty were fired, and another

sixty-eight hundred resigned or withdrew their applications. About .01 per cent of all federal workers were fired for ideological reasons. That might not sound like much, but that's all it took to set off a wave of anticipatory obedience. As the historian Landon Storrs has shown, the Red Scare pressured an entire generation of federal workers into putting their heads down, keeping their mouths shut, and renouncing interest in progressive ideas.

Much of the country did the same. In 1945, Truman proposed a national health-insurance program; by the late forties his proposal for "socialized medicine," as its critics labelled it, was dead. In the meantime, liberals and leftists tried desperately to separate themselves from their former far-left allies. In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee held spectacular hearings to expose the alleged Communist infiltration of Hollywood. In response, some motion-picture industry leaders volunteered to keep a blacklist and to fire any suspected Communists. The following year, the Truman Administration arrested twelve leaders of the Communist Party on charges that they were in breach of the 1940 Smith Act, which made it a crime to advocate for the violent overthrow of the government. Aside from some courtroom discussions of Marx and Lenin, there was not much evidence for the charges. Convictions ensued nonetheless. Waves of Communist Party leaders went to jail for speech, not deeds, that suggested a sympathy for revolutionary violence.

The Smith Act trials sounded the death knell for the nineteen-thirties Popular Front, when Communists, Socialists, progressives, and liberals had worked together—or at least tried to—on issues such as antifascism, racial justice, and labor rights. Many liberals and progressives were happy enough to get rid of the Communists, who had always been secretive, dogmatic, and, in general, hard to deal with. For others, the breaking apart of the Popular Front was intensely painful and personal, with friends turning on friends and allies on allies. If these early Red Scare battles hold any lesson for our time, it's how quickly people tend to capitulate at moments of intense political pressure, when careers and reputations and institutions seem to be at stake.

Of all the high drama during the early days of the Red Scare, no episode was more personal than the split between the former Soviet spy Whittaker Chambers and his alleged contact in the New Deal government, the Harvard-trained lawyer and State Department official Alger Hiss. Risen delivers a marvellous account of the Hiss case, with its many plot twists, involving accusations about a fake typewriter, microfilm hidden in a pumpkin, and the intricacies of ornithology. Today, few Americans—even few historians—could describe the ins and outs of the case, but in the forties almost any literate American could have told the tale. Hiss became a generational touchstone: what you thought about him revealed what you thought about pretty much everything else. On one side was the liberal establishment, which swore that Hiss would never betray his country. On the other were supporters of Chambers, the schlumpy senior editor at *Time*, who insisted that anyone, even Hiss, could be lured in by the siren song of Marxism.

In the end, Chambers was more right than not. Hiss served time in prison for perjury, and documents released in the nineties helped the historical case against him. But even Chambers lamented what the harsh political times had wrought. “I do not hate Mr. Hiss,” he insisted. “We were close friends. But we are caught in a tragedy of history.”

Much of that tragedy—the loyalty program, the Smith Act trials, the Hiss showdown—took place before most Americans had ever heard the name Joe McCarthy. Prior to 1950, McCarthy was an obscure first-term senator from Wisconsin. After 1950, the country couldn’t shut up about him. In retrospect, what makes McCarthy a significant political figure is not that he started the Red Scare; he didn’t. But when he came along, several years into it all, boasting that he had in his hand a list of two hundred and five Communists in the State Department, he introduced a whole new political style. As a noun, McCarthyism was a mode of politics rather than an ideology. It meant hitting hard, moving fast, telling lies, and grabbing headlines along the way.

McCarthy came to Congress as a fighter in both the figurative and the most literal sense. Born in 1908 to an Irish Catholic family, he practiced as an attorney and coached boxing before leaving for the war and then returning

to run for the Senate. Like Trump, he sold himself as a straight talker and a tough guy. He explained his style of mudslinging as “Americanism with its sleeves rolled.” During his Senate run, he fulminated against federal workers. “Tired of Being Pushed Around?” read one campaign ad. “Do you like to have some government bureaucrat tell you how to manage your life?” Like everyone else in Washington, he was an anti-Communist, though initially of a rather anodyne sort. In early 1950, most people would have said that Nixon, not McCarthy, was the Republicans’ young Red-baiting star, owing to the work he had done on the Hiss case.

But it was McCarthy whose name came to dominate the era, in part because he knew how to dominate the media. From his first big Communists-in-government speech, in February, 1950, he showed an uncanny ability to stay a step ahead of the news cycle, insuring that he was generating the headlines rather than responding to them. Almost immediately, his critics—including many fellow-Republicans—began to call him on his lies and cruelties, and to fact-check his evidence. By then, though, he was on to a new target, and the whole cycle started again.

The newspapers loved McCarthy’s outrage machine, even when they did not love the man himself. In 1952, at the height of McCarthy’s influence, Republicans reclaimed not only the White House but both houses of Congress—a three-pronged triumph not repeated until the Presidency of [George W. Bush](#). Many Republicans attributed their victory not just to President-elect Eisenhower’s popularity but to McCarthy’s ability to manage the media and roil the masses.

McCarthy was notably popular with the Catholic working class, a constituency that was not then known to be overly fond of Republicans. Even Eisenhower, who was no fan of McCarthy’s slash-and-burn methods, hesitated to speak out against him, for fear of splintering a fragile Republican coalition. After the Republican sweep in 1952, McCarthy set out to test the limits of his newfound power. He was just a senator, not the President, so his sphere of action was far more limited than Trump’s, or even Eisenhower’s. But he managed to take what had been a senatorial backwater—the Committee on Government Operations—and turn it into a one-man anti-Communist juggernaut.

Like Truman's loyalty program, McCarthy's hearings operated on the assumption that fear would produce compliance and compliance would produce new allegations, as witness after witness coughed up information on friends and allies. In some instances, there was truth to his charges of Communist affiliation or sympathies. In others, his allegations were mostly fiction. The distinction hardly mattered. What gave McCarthy his fame and his influence was the spectacle of arbitrary power. Alone among rivals, he demonstrated that a single loose-cannon senator could do and say whatever he wanted—nobody could stop him. To speak out against McCarthy was to invite his scrutiny and intimidation. But remaining silent was no guarantee of safety, either. He created a no-win situation that left enemies and critics, year after year, at a loss.



*McCarthy's chief counsel, Roy Cohn, famously served as one of Donald Trump's early mentors, a tutor in the ideological and practical workings of American politics.*

Eisenhower contributed to the culture of fear with his own investigative program aimed at federal workers. Under the updated policies, government employees could be dismissed not just for Communist sympathies but for a host of other traits, including homosexuality and alcoholism. Proponents of the policy suggested that harboring such shameful secrets made federal workers vulnerable to blackmail by Soviet operatives (though nobody ever quite explained how a gay postal worker posed a threat to the nation). And so the whisper chain went on: who slept with whom, who joined which organization, who said something critical about McCarthy or Eisenhower or the loyalty program itself.

And then, one day, the chain broke. Risen describes how things fell apart for McCarthy without quite explaining why, in part because there was no single factor. Just as the Red Scare played out on multiple fronts for years, the opposition to its accusatory politics grew slowly, over time, until it achieved mass velocity. Civil-liberties lawyers played a key early role by bringing test cases and mounting defenses, though the Supreme Court sided against them time and again. Concerned journalists also contributed, including CBS's Edward R. Murrow, who, in 1954, finally spoke out against McCarthy. From their minority-party position, Democrats railed against the Senator's antics as an un-American abomination; though they achieved little success initially, they eventually helped to establish an alternative narrative. And dozens of people—including some bona-fide Communist Party members—accepted jail time and professional ostracism rather than name names.

Ultimately, though, it took the Republican Party to destroy its own monster. In 1954, McCarthy overreached by accusing the U.S. Army—Eisenhower's beloved longtime employer—of secretly harboring yet more Communists. In response, his own committee held televised hearings on accusations that Roy Cohn was using the committee's power to strong-arm the Army into granting special privileges to his close friend (and possible lover). Seizing the opportunity, the Army's special counsel, Joseph Welch, strategized in advance to prepare a great made-for-TV zinger. When McCarthy began to attack a young lawyer in Welch's firm as a would-be Communist, Welch shot back with a question that had long been in the hearts and minds of many Americans: "Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"

It would be comforting to say that this cri de coeur melted the icy souls of McCarthy's fellow Red-baiters. But something else had to happen before his Republican allies turned on him for good. In November, 1954, the Party lost the midterm elections, breaking the spell of McCarthy's political magic. The following month, before the official handover, the Republican-controlled Senate voted to censure McCarthy. Even then, though, it did not directly object to what he had done to alleged Communists or to the left more broadly. It censured him for conduct unbefitting a senator in other matters.

What can we learn about our current moment from all of this? Risen hopes that readers will decide for themselves. “This is a work of history, and as such it is not concerned with drawing parallels between the past and the present,” he writes. “I leave it up to the reader to find those as they will.” So, as a reader, let me offer a few thoughts.

The unfortunate truth is that most mechanisms of the Red Scare, including congressional hearings and loyalty investigations, would not be especially hard to revive. Indeed, recent developments have indicated that they might be deployed with genuine glee. Already, the Trump Administration has started asking for lists—of federal workers who attended D.E.I. training, of F.B.I. agents who investigated January 6th cases, of scientists engaged in now suspect areas of work. Trump himself has openly announced his intention to deploy the Justice Department and the F.B.I. against his personal, political, and ideological enemies.

The history of the Red Scare suggests that it won’t take many firings, federal inquiries, or acts of public humiliation to frighten a whole lot of people. But it also offers some reason to think that such intimidation methods may not be quite as effective this time around. For starters, there is much less agreement about the Trump Administration’s agenda than there was about Communism in its heyday. The Red Scare gained momentum because nearly everyone in American political life shared the same basic assumption: Communism is bad and poses an existential threat to the American way of life. It’s hard to come up with any contemporary issue that would generate the same powerful consensus.

Generally speaking, we also have better protections for political speech and assembly than Americans had in the fifties. Indeed, some of those protections are legacies of the Red Scare. In 1957, as the anti-Communist furor was winding down, the Supreme Court issued a series of decisions limiting some of the most sweeping methods deployed against political dissenters, including parts of the Smith Act.

But to say that Trump won’t necessarily succeed in setting off a new Red Scare is not to say that he won’t try. And, in this sort of politics, the trying is part of the game. As long as the nation’s “cultural Marxists” feel vulnerable to random accusations or secret investigations, they’ll likely be more

careful about what they do and say. As Roy Cohn once instructed a young Donald Trump, much can be accomplished by attacking first and dealing with the consequences later. ♦

*Beverly Gage*, a professor of history at Yale, received a 2023 Pulitzer Prize for her book “[G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century.](#)”

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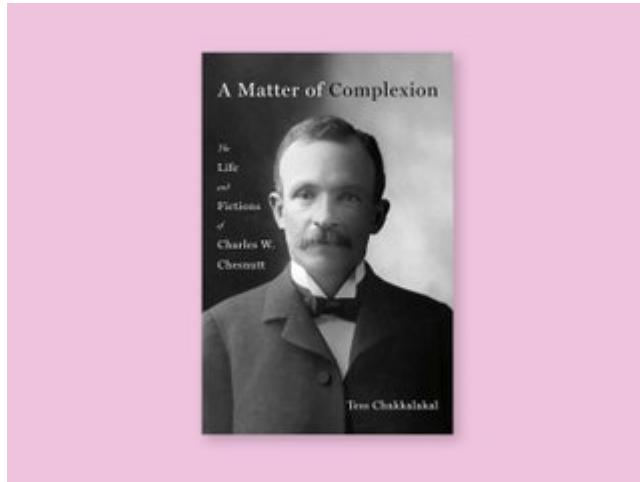
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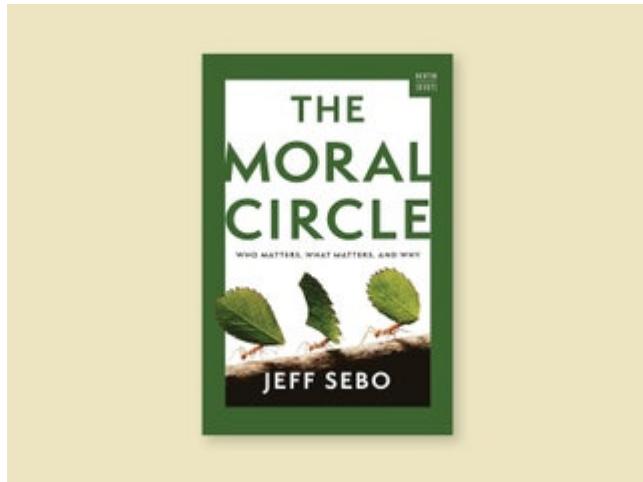
# Briefly Noted

“*A Matter of Complexion*,” “*The Moral Circle*,” “*The Boyhood of Cain*,” and “*Theory & Practice*.”

March 10, 2025



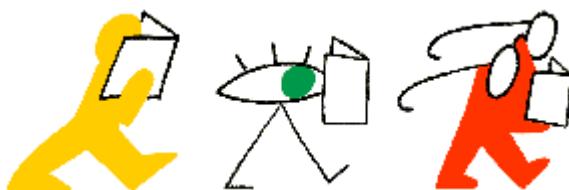
[\*\*A Matter of Complexion\*\*](#), by Tess Chakkalakal (St. Martin’s). Charles W. Chesnutt, the subject of this well-considered biography, was born to free people of color in 1858. He could have passed as white, but he identified as Black; he was, he explained, “quite willing for the colored people to have any credit they could derive from anything I might accomplish.” Though he often wrote about “the race question,” he wanted his work to appeal to readers with wide interests, believing that, as Chakkalakal writes, “only by putting the individual over race will the race be served.” This conviction was not generally embraced by the generation of Harlem Renaissance writers that followed, but Chesnutt’s work was nevertheless a catalyst for the movement.



**The Moral Circle**, by *Jeff Sebo* (Norton). What kind of ethical consideration do we owe insects, plants, or A.I. systems? This book argues that if entities have the capacity for welfare—the ability to be helped or harmed—they should be included in our moral circle, which Sebo defines as “the set of beings who matter for their own sakes.” Using a series of thought experiments, he suggests that our moral intuition may not be the most useful tool for evaluating the ethics of our conduct, especially when it affects beings that are far removed from our everyday experience, either geographically or evolutionarily. “Taking this virtuous path,” Sebo concludes, “requires telling ourselves new stories about the meaning, purpose, and value of human existence.”

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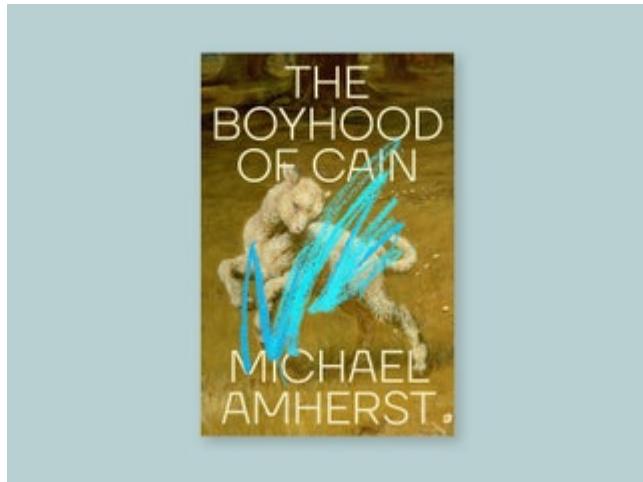
## **What We're Reading**



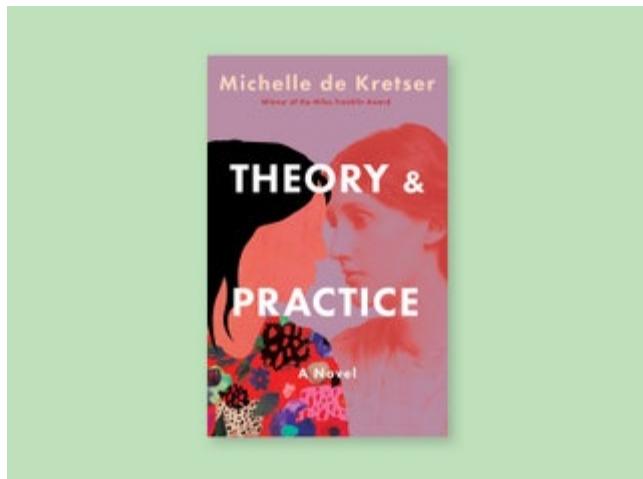
*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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**[The Boyhood of Cain](#)**, by Michael Amherst (*Riverhead*). In this tender début novel, Daniel, the precocious pre-teen protagonist, comes of age in rural England. After an illness and financial mismanagement force his father to accept early retirement, the family relocates from a suburban town to the countryside. The narrative follows Daniel as he adjusts to his new surroundings and contends with a series of disappointments and troubling discoveries. He learns of his mother's jettisoned dream of becoming an actress; he grows close to a teacher whose attention proves capricious; and he becomes infatuated with a new classmate, who has a “glorious body.” No longer just an observer of the adult world, Daniel learns difficult lessons about life and sexuality.



**[Theory & Practice](#)**, by Michelle de Kretser (*Catapult*). De Kretser's seventh novel begins on a historical note—in 1957, an Australian geologist contemplates a past romance—before swerving abruptly. “At that point, the

novel I was writing stalled,” the unnamed narrator interjects. Afterward, the story edges closer to autofiction, following the experience of the narrator, a young Sri Lankan Australian woman, as she attends graduate school in Melbourne. While working on a thesis about Virginia Woolf, she considers what it means to be a “modern woman” in an intellectual milieu saturated with French theory. Drawn into an affair with another student, she grapples with her feminism and discovers unexpected points of contact between ideas and physical passion.

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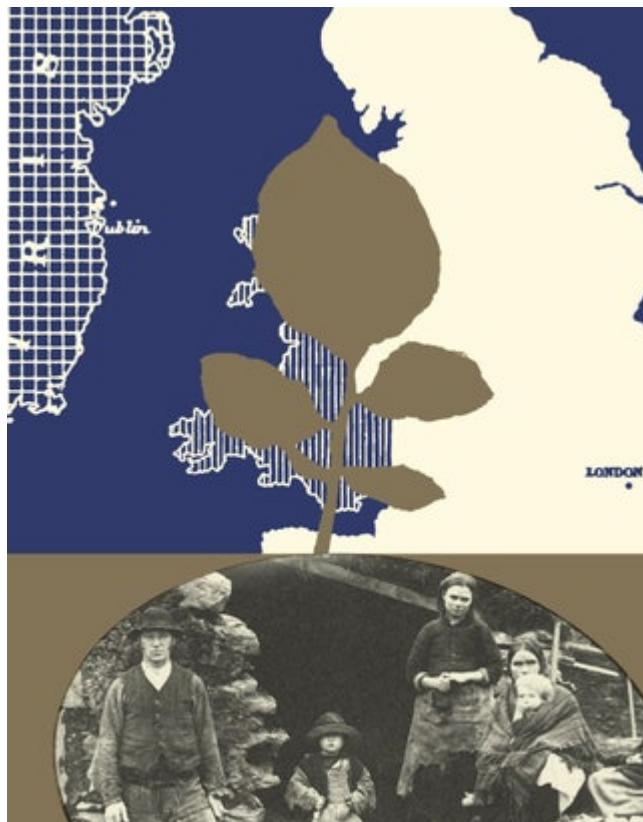
[\*\*Books\*\*](#)

# What Made the Irish Famine So Deadly

The Great Hunger was a modern event, shaped by the belief that the poor are the authors of their own misery and that the market must be obeyed at all costs.

By [Fintan O'Toole](#)

March 10, 2025



*Roughly two of every three people born in Ireland in the early eighteen-thirties were killed by the famine or joined the exodus to North America, Britain, and Australia. Photo illustration by Lucy Jones; Source photographs by Andrew Harnik / Getty; Brendan Smialowski / Getty; Bloomberg / Getty*

In the first act of the wittiest Irish play of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde's "[Importance of Being Earnest](#)," there is much ado about a shortage

of food. The fearsome Aunt Augusta is coming to tea, but we have watched the feckless Algernon eat all the cucumber sandwiches prepared for her by his manservant, Lane. The servant saves the day when the aunt arrives, expecting her sandwiches, by lying: “There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.” Algy responds with high emotion: “I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money.”

The play, first performed in 1895, is subtitled “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People,” and this scene is an exquisite exercise in trivialization. Wilde is imagining what a food crisis might look like if it were happening among the English upper classes rather than in his home country. The panic and dread of searching for nourishment and finding none is transformed into an airy nothing: a fake story about the nonexistent dearth of a plant that has relatively little nutritional value, and a charade of great distress. The comedy is so wonderfully weightless as to seem entirely free from the gravitational pull of the history that had preoccupied Wilde’s family, and of a place called Ireland, where the unfortunately unavailable food was not the cucumber but the potato.

In 1854, when Oscar was born, his father was also engaged in the sublimation of horror. William Wilde, a pioneering surgeon and medical statistician, was the assistant commissioner for the census of Ireland that was conducted in 1851—the one that recorded the disappearance from what was then the richest, most powerful, and most technologically advanced country in the world, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, of some one and a half million people. They had died in, or fled from, what the Irish poor called in their native language An Gorta Mór, the Great Hunger, a catastrophe that was then continuing into its sixth year.

## **What We’re Reading**

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The year Oscar turned two, William published the results of his immersion in the minutiae of the famine as an official report of the British Parliament. The two-volume work is called the “Tables of Deaths.” Because the census relied on the information given by survivors, and thus did not count many victims whose entire families had been wiped out or had left Ireland as desperate refugees, it actually underestimated the number of lives lost in the Great Hunger.

William and his assistants were nonetheless able to build solid pillars of data, mass death broken down into discrete numerals to represent sexes, ages, locations, seasons, years, and causes of mortality, which included starvation, scurvy, dysentery, cholera, typhus, and relapsing fever. The tables of deaths occupy hundreds of double-page spreads, laid out with exemplary clarity and precision. They speak of order, regularity, the capacity of Victorian governance for infinite comprehension. The staggering rise in mortality may have demanded extraordinary efforts from the statisticians, but they were equal to their task. They tabulated calamity, confined it safely within vertical and horizontal lines on the pages of sturdily bound official tomes. There are no names of human beings.

This dutiful, sober, and rigorously unemotional work might also have been titled “The Importance of Being Earnest,” albeit without a hint of Oscar’s playful irony. William’s safely anonymized figures are, in their way, just as weightless as Oscar’s sharply amusing figments. In the introduction to his volume, he uses the remote and clinical language of officialdom: “The labours of the Commissioners in this particular portion of their work greatly exceed those connected with the Tables of Deaths published in the Census of 1841, chiefly owing to the extraordinary increase in the numbers of

deaths.” It almost seems as though the reader’s sympathy is being evoked not for the people behind the statistics but for the commissioners who had to work so hard to categorize the circumstances in which those people expired.

There was also a third kind of language used to cloak the horrors of the famine: an accusatory rage against the British authorities who had failed to prevent it. As it happens, it was another Wilde, Oscar’s mother and William’s wife, Jane, writing as a passionate and incendiary Irish nationalist under the pen name Speranza, who helped to invent that language. In 1847, she published a poem about the famine whose voice is that of the “wretches, famished, scorned,” who warn their oppressors that their deaths will be avenged: “But our whitening bones against ye will rise as witnesses, / From the cabins and the ditches, in their charred, uncoffin’d masses, // A ghastly, spectral army, before the great God we’ll stand, / And arraign ye as our murderers, the spoilers of our land.”

Jane’s fiercely unforgiving tone was adopted by militant Irish nationalists for whom the famine stood as the ultimate proof of English perfidy. But in her poem, too, the victims appear as an undifferentiated mass. Her avenging army of the undead is in its own way just as distanced as the numbers in her husband’s tables.

One difficulty in writing about the Great Hunger is scale. There have been, in absolute terms, many deadlier famines, but as Amartya Sen, the eminent Indian scholar of the subject, concluded, in “no other famine in the world [was] the proportion of people killed . . . as large as in the Irish famines in the 1840s.” The pathogen that caused it was a fungus-like water mold called *Phytophthora infestans*. Its effect on the potato gives “[Rot](#),” a vigorous and engaging new study of the Irish famine by the historian Padraic X. Scanlan, its title. The blight began to infect the crop across much of western and northern Europe in the summer of 1845. In the Netherlands, about sixty thousand people died in the consequent famine—a terrible loss, but a fraction of the mortality rate in Ireland. It is, oddly, easier to form a mental picture of what it might have been like to witness the Dutch tragedy than to truly convey the magnitude of the suffering in Ireland.

Another difficulty is that the Great Hunger was not just an Irish event. It bled far beyond its own borders, seeping into the national narratives of the rest of the Anglophone world. Only about one in three people born in Ireland in the early eighteen-thirties would die at home of old age. The other two either were consumed by the famine or joined the exodus in which, between 1845 and 1855, almost 1.5 million sailed to North America and hundreds of thousands to Britain and Australia, making the Irish famine a central episode in the history of those countries, too.

There has long been something inarticulable about this vast human disaster. In a preface to the monumental “[Atlas of the Great Irish Famine](#),” published in 2012, the former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, observed that “for many years the event was cloaked in silence, its memory for the most part buried or neglected.” The editors of the “Atlas” noted that, until recently, “there was a strange reluctance on the part of historians, historical geographers and others to address” the vast archival records. Right up to the nineteen-nineties, the annual rate of publication of scholarly papers on the subject of the famine never rose above a half-dozen.

The novelist [Colm Tóibín](#) suggested, in 1998, that the problem “may lie in the relationship between catastrophe and analytic narrative. How do you write about the Famine? What tone do you use?” He speculated, moreover, that the Great Hunger had created a great divide even in Irish consciousness. If, he said, he were to write a novel about his home town, Enniscorthy, that took place after the famine years, “I would not have to do much research”—because the place would resemble the one he grew up in. But he would find the years before and during the event itself “difficult to imagine.”

It is easy to sympathize with this difficulty. The famine set in motion a process of depopulation—even now, after many decades of growth, the island has a million fewer inhabitants than it had in 1841. It disproportionately affected those who spoke the Irish language, creating an Anglophone Ireland. It led ultimately to a radical reform of land ownership, which passed to a new class of Catholic farmers. The profoundly uncomfortable truth is that Ireland started to become modern when its

poorest people were wiped out or sent into exile—a reality that is too painful to be faced without deep unease.

Even before the potato blight, there was a degree of hunger among the Irish rural underclass that seemed like an ugly remnant of a receding past. In 1837, two years after Alexis de Tocqueville published the first volume of “[Democracy in America](#),” his lifelong collaborator, Gustave de Beaumont, went to Ireland, a country the two men had previously visited together. The book de Beaumont produced in 1839, “[L'Irlande: Sociale, Politique et Religieuse](#),” was a grim companion piece to his friend’s largely optimistic vision of the future that was taking shape on the far side of the Atlantic. De Beaumont, a grandson by marriage of the Marquis de Lafayette, understood that, while the United States his ancestor had helped to create was a vigorous outgrowth of the British political traditions he and de Tocqueville so admired, Ireland was their poisoned fruit. America, he wrote, was “the land where destitution is the exception,” Ireland “the country where misery is the common rule.”

The problem was not that the land was barren: Scanlan records that, “in 1846, 3.3 million acres were planted with grain, and Irish farms raised more than 2.5 million cattle, 2.2 million sheep and 600,000 pigs.” But almost none of this food was available for consumption by the people who produced it. It was intended primarily for export to the burgeoning industrial cities of England. Thus, even Irish farmers who held ten or more acres and who would therefore have been regarded as well off, ate meat only at Christmas. “If an Irish family slaughtered their own pig, they would sell even the intestines and other offal,” Scanlan writes. He quotes the testimony of a farmer to a parliamentary commission, in 1836, that “he knew other leaseholders who had not eaten even an egg in six months. ‘We sell them now,’ he explained.”

In the mid-nineteenth century, Scanlan notes, fewer than four thousand people owned nearly eighty per cent of Irish land. Most of them were Protestant descendants of the English and Scottish settlers who benefitted from the wholesale expropriation of land from Catholic owners in the seventeenth century. Many lived part or all of the year in England. They rented their lands to farmers, a large majority of whom were Catholics.

Scanlan points out that, whereas in England a tenant farmer might pay between a sixth and a quarter of the value of his crops in rent, in Ireland “rent often equalled the entire value of a farm’s saleable produce.”

Landlords could extract these high rents because their tenants, in turn, made money by subletting little parcels of land, often as small as a quarter of an acre, to laborers who had none of their own. The whole system was possible only because of the potato. Most years, those micro farms could produce enough of this wonder crop to keep a family alive. It provided enough calories to sustain hardworking people and also delivered the necessary minerals and vitamins. By the eighteen-forties, as many as 2.7 million people (more than a quarter of the entire population) were surviving on potatoes they grew in tiny fields that encroached on ever more marginal land, clinging to bogs and the sides of stony mountains.

De Beaumont, noting that these laboring families had to endure a “life of fasting” when their store of potatoes ran out in the summer or when the crop was scanty, grasped the precarity of this situation. One of his most striking insights was that the exceptionally cruel nature of Irish poverty made it seem incredible to outsiders: “The word *famine*, employed to describe the misery of Ireland, appeared to them a metaphorical expression for great distress, and not the exact term to express the state of human beings *really* famishing and perishing from sheer want of food.” It was, he suggested, particularly in England that “persons were pleased to keep themselves in this state of doubt.”

Yet de Beaumont himself felt he could not describe what he saw on his travels. Words were not adequate to the task. Adopting a disembodied third-person voice, he asked, “Shall he relate what he saw?—No. There are misfortunes so far beyond the pale of humanity, that human language has no words to represent them.” If he were to “recall the sinister impressions produced” by the contrasts between the wealth of the Irish landowning aristocracy and the destitution of the rural poor, “he feels that the pen would fall from his hands, and that he would not have the courage to complete the task which he has undertaken to accomplish.”

This feeling that Irish reality was at once incredible and indescribable became almost a standard response to the Great Hunger. In one of the first

widely circulated eyewitness accounts, an open letter written to the Duke of Wellington by Nicholas Cummins, a magistrate in Cork, Cummins struggled to articulate what he saw when he entered a settlement outside Skibbereen, in December, 1846. “I was surprised to find the wretched hamlet apparently deserted,” he wrote. “I entered some of the hovels to ascertain the cause, and the scenes which presented themselves were such as no pen or tongue can convey the slightest idea of. . . . It is impossible to go through the details.”

Asenath Nicholson, a woman from Vermont who began a one-person relief operation in Ireland, in 1847, recorded a moment when a man invited her to inspect a cabin where a mother, a father, and their two children lay dead: “The man called, begging me to look in. I did not, and could not endure, as the famine progressed, such sights . . . they were too real, and these realities became a dread.”

The Great Hunger was excessively real to many European and North American observers because it was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was happening not in India or China but in what was supposed to be the Empire’s heartland. Its victims were white, Christian, and (notionally, at least) subjects of the United Kingdom with the same rights as the inhabitants of Hampstead Heath or Tunbridge Wells.

It was also an affront to the liberal Victorian certainty that progress was linear and inevitable. The British Prime Minister Lord John Russell told the House of Commons, in January, 1847, that “the famine is such as has not been known in modern times; indeed, I should say it is like a famine of the thirteenth century acting upon the population of the nineteenth.” What the British ruling class could not grasp was that the Irish famine was a phenomenon of “modern times,” the product, as Scanlan convincingly argues, of a particularly virulent form of exploitative capitalism that left millions of people utterly exposed to the instability of short-term rental of land, to fluctuating food markets, and to wages driven downward by the pressure of too many laborers looking for too little work.

Militant Irish nationalism would follow Jane Wilde in seeing the famine as mass murder and thus as what would later be categorized as a genocide. Under pressure from Irish Americans, this even became an official doctrine

in New York, where a state law signed in 1996 by then governor George Pataki required schools to portray the famine “as a human rights violation akin to genocide, slavery and the Holocaust.”

Pataki announced that “history teaches us the Great Irish Hunger was not the result of a massive failure of the Irish potato crop but rather was the result of a deliberate campaign by the British to deny the Irish people the food they needed to survive.” But this is not what history teaches us. A much more accurate conclusion is the one drawn by the Irish historian Peter Gray, who wrote that there was “not a policy of deliberate genocide” on the part of the British. Instead, Gray argued, the great failure of the British government was ideological—“a dogmatic refusal to recognise that measures intended to ‘encourage industry, [and] to do battle with sloth’ . . . were based on false premises.” The British did not cause the potatoes to rot in the ground. They did launch, by the standards of the mid-nineteenth century, very large-scale efforts to keep people alive, importing grain from America, setting up soup kitchens, and establishing programs of public works to employ those who were starving. But they were blinded by prejudice, ignorance, and a fanatical devotion to two orthodoxies that are very much alive in our own time: their belief that poverty arises from the moral failings of the poor and their faith in the so-called free market. The famine was so devastating because, while the mold was rotting the potatoes, mainstream British opinion was infected with a cognitive blight.

It was obvious to outsiders that the root of Ireland’s misery was what de Beaumont characterized as a “bad aristocracy”—the monopolization of land by a small élite that had no cultural or religious affinity with its tenantry and little sense of obligation to develop sustainable agriculture. But an English ruling class in which many leading politicians were themselves owners of vast estates in Ireland was unable to acknowledge this inconvenient truth. Who, if not the landlord system, could be to blame? It must be the Irish poor themselves. As Scanlan puts it, “Intensive monoculture made Irish potatoes vulnerable to blight. The solutions proposed to mitigate famine were themselves the product of a kind of intellectual and political monoculture. Solutions were unimaginable outside the market that fuelled the crisis to begin with.”

In a neatly circular argument, the conditions that had been forced on the laboring class became proof of its moral backwardness. It was relatively easy to plant and harvest potatoes—therefore, those who did so had clearly chosen the easy life. “Ireland, through this lens,” Scanlan writes, “was a kind of living fossil within the United Kingdom, a country where the majority of the poor were inert and indolent, unwilling and unable to exert themselves for wages and content to rely on potatoes for subsistence.” Or, as William Carleton, the first major writer in the English language to have sprung from the Irish Catholic peasantry, put it with withering sarcasm, the Irish poor had not learned “to starve in an enlightened manner”: “Political economy had not then taught the people how to be poor upon the most scientific principles.”

Civilized people ate meat—England’s unofficial national anthem was “The Roast Beef of Old England.” The desire to consume animal flesh stimulated effort and enterprise. Thus, the destruction of the potato crop, however terrible and regrettable its short-term effects, would teach the Irish to crave meat instead and become proper capitalist wage earners so that they could afford to buy it. “When the Celts once cease to be potatophagi,” wrote the editors of the *London Times*, “they must become carnivorous.” Let them, as Marie Antoinette did not say, eat steak.

This arrant nonsense obscured the reality that the Irish had no particular love of potatoes. Their historically varied diet, based on oats, milk, and butter, had been reduced by economic oppression to one tuber. Nor were they reluctant to work for wages. Many travelled long distances to earn money as seasonal migrant laborers on farms in England and Scotland, and Irish immigrants were integrating themselves into the capitalist money economy in the mills of Massachusetts and the factories of New York.

Yet, as stupid as this bigotry undoubtedly was, it was also deadly. The idea of Irish indolence fused with a quasi-religious faith in the laws of the market to shape the British response to the famine. In its first full year, 1846, Robert Peel’s Conservative government imported huge quantities of corn, known in Europe as maize, from America to feed the starving. The government insisted that the corn be sold rather than given away (free food would merely reinforce Irish indolence), and those who received it had little

idea at first how to cook it. Nonetheless, the plan was reasonably effective in keeping people alive.

The general assumption, however, was that the blight of 1845 was a one-off event. At the end of July, 1846, it became crushingly obvious that the blight had spread even wider, wiping out more than ninety per cent of the new crop. By then, most of the poor tenants had sold whatever goods they had, leaving nothing with which to stave off starvation. Fishermen on the coasts had pawned their nets for money to buy maize. The terrible year that followed is still remembered in Ireland as Black '47, though the famine would, in fact, last until 1852.

In London, the realization that this was not a temporary crisis coincided with the coming to power of a party with a deep ideological commitment to free trade. The Liberals, under Lord John Russell, were determined that what they saw as an illegitimate intervention in the free market should not be repeated. They moved away from importing corn and created instead an immense program of public works to employ starving people—for them, as for the Conservatives, it was axiomatic that the moral fibre of the Irish could not be improved by giving them something for nothing. Wages were designed to be lower than the already meagre earnings of manual workers so that the labor market would not be upset.

The result was the grotesque spectacle of people increasingly debilitated by starvation and disease doing hard physical labor for wages that were not sufficient to keep their families alive. Meanwhile, many of the same people were evicted from their houses as landowners used the crisis to clear off these human encumbrances and free their fields for more profitable pasturage. Exposure joined hunger and sickness to complete the task of mass killing.

“Rot” provides a convincing answer to Tóibín’s question of what tone you should use in writing about the famine. Scanlan’s voice is cool but never cold. The book is richly underpinned by research in contemporary sources and firmly rooted in historical scholarship, and it does not fall into the trap of oversimplifying the famine as deliberate genocide. But a proper sense of outrage runs between the lines and carries a consistently high voltage.

Above all, “Rot” reminds us that the Great Hunger was a very modern event, and one shaped by a mind-set that is now again in the ascendant. The poor are the authors of their own misery. The warning signs of impending environmental disaster can be ignored. Gross inequalities are natural, and God-given. The market must be obeyed at all costs. There is only one thing about the Irish famine that now seems truly anachronistic—millions of refugees were saved because other countries took them in. That, at least, would not happen now. ♦

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[The Art World](#)

# Should We View Tatlin as a Russian Constructivist or a Ukrainian?

In “Tatlin: Kyiv,” at the Ukrainian Museum, the revolutionary artist—a star of the avant-garde while the Soviet Union still permitted one—is Volodymyr, not Vladimir.

By [Jackson Arn](#)

March 10, 2025



*Tatlin's "Podium," from 1927, which marked the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. Art works by Vladimir Tatlin / Courtesy Ukrainian Museum; Photographs by Kateryna Ostapenko*

It may be a lazy critic cliché to write that an artist’s life was itself a work of art, but we are dealing with a man who let a *wounded stork* convalesce in his bed while he slept on the floor. As a teen-ager, he became a sailor and voyaged from the south of Russia to India and Egypt. Later, he made extra rubles boxing at the circus. He talked his way into Picasso’s studio by pretending to be a blind musician. Picasso kicked him out, but the same trick fooled Kaiser Wilhelm II into giving him a gold watch, which he

promptly sold. His motto was “Life into art,” but only a fraction of each—just enough to fill a K.G.B. file—forms our view of Tatlin.

We can imagine how that file read, how the life was snipped, pressed, and dried: Vladimir Yevgrafovich Tatlin. Born 1885, a subject of the old Russian Empire. Grew up in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Self-described artist-engineer. Enrolled in the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, 1902. Proud supporter of the Revolution. Enemy of dainty bourgeois painting. Archrival of the abstract painter Kazimir Malevich. Father of Constructivism, a term that Malevich sneeringly invented and Tatlin cheekily accepted. Proponent of “real material in real space.” Sculptor of whizzing shards of metal, wire, wood, and glass. Saw no inherent contradiction between beauty and use. Spent the early years of the Soviet Union in Moscow and Petrograd, where he favored his comrades with utilitarian designs for clothes, textiles, and a super-efficient stove. Famous for his “Monument to the Third International,” an enormous skeletal wedding cake that was never built but survives thanks to models and photographs. Star of the avant-garde while the U.S.S.R. still permitted one. Later shunned for the crime of not being a painter of socialist realism. Died 1953, Moscow.

The word “decolonization” comes up more than once at “Tatlin: Kyiv,” the Ukrainian Museum’s delightfully weird survey of the artist’s work from the nineteen-twenties. The theme, here in the heart of Manhattan’s Little Ukraine, may be Ukrainian-ness itself: our hero is *Volodymyr*, not Vladimir, and, if he sometimes comes off as a cheerleader for the Soviet Union, he is also a proud son of Kharkiv, raised on folk art and bandura music. Revolution took him east, but, some years later, the new rector of the Kyiv Art Institute extended an invitation, and from 1925 to 1927 Tatlin taught there, along with other Ukrainians whose good fortune briefly convinced them that Communism had brought about the best of all possible creative worlds. In the following decade, the institute resumed teaching academic painting, and the luckiest of the old bunch switched to churning out propaganda. The rest were shot, imprisoned, or otherwise dissolved in the gut of Stalin’s new empire. This is all horribly timely, though the present-day parallels never feel forced: Tatlin is Russian, Russian, Russian in most Western accounts, but between Tatlin and Malevich, El Lissitzky and

Anatol Petrytsky, and the Alexanders Archipenko and Dovzhenko, there was barely a Russian avant-garde without artists of Ukrainian heritage. This show, which is being billed as the first Tatlin survey in the United States, confirms that some things are so overdue they become punctual again.

There are an impressive number of original Tatlins on display here: seven. That's more than there were in MoMA's big Russian avant-garde show in 2016, a lack on the level of a book about the Civil War that barely mentions Lincoln. It's understandable, though: the Ukrainian Museum's director, Peter Doroshenko, told me that something like ninety-five per cent of Tatlin's work was either lost or destroyed by a totalitarian state that saw no need for it. Most of what has lasted won't be leaving Russia's museums anytime soon, but Ukraine sent what it could, apparently with the support of the First Lady, Olena Zelenska. At the outset, you find two of Tatlin's small Cubist drawings, both female nudes. Minor works, maybe, but notice how, when Tatlin "does" Picasso, he has none of his early idol's punitiveness. The hard wedges of the women's bodies do no harm and pose no threat—they jolt us awake, and that's all.

Tatlin scholarship is whispery on his time in Kyiv, for the excellent reason that Stalin's minions torched most evidence of it. Even with all the research the Ukrainian Museum's team has done, we don't know the names of more than a third of Tatlin's students, probably because most died in the purges. (The rector survived the Gulags, and went on to write about Ukrainian art, but censors forbade him to include anything about Tatlin.) The information about the institute which has avoided the memory hole just sits there, though this makes some of it glow brighter. The first showstopper is a vitrine's worth of graphic designs that Tatlin created in Kyiv, which are making their museum début. Like his sculptures, his posters are all limb, no body. One, which he created for the silent film "Boryslav Laughs," based on a Ukrainian novel about labor strikes, takes an oil-extraction plant and shuffles its parts like playing cards, until there's no center or dominant direction: pipes snake around and between and under more pipes, while the letters of the title stomp on everything. Amid the mayhem, Tatlin's precision impresses; you may not be sure where the various bits go or what they do, but you can always tell whether they're rope or wood or metal or brick. Or flesh—notice the tiny worker huffing up the steps in the top right.

Either he is praying for a worker's uprising or this is what life looks like in the new socialist utopia.



*A wingless reconstruction of Tatlin's flying machine, the Letatlin.*

It is easy to interpret art like this in the scornful clarity of hindsight. Everything starts to feel like an omen of totalitarianism: the lopsided, unrealized model of “Monument to the Third International,” absent from the Ukrainian Museum but present in countless books, is almost too obviously a modern-day Tower of Babel. To appreciate Tatlin on his own terms, here is a good rule of thumb: lopsidedness is next to godliness. Right angles are for wimps. Material flourishes when it seems on the verge of collapsing. Tatlin was far from the only Soviet avant-gardist to make vigorous compositions with the diagonal (see almost any Malevich), but, judging from his students’ work, of which there is a good sampling in this exhibition, he may have gone farthest in making an outright aesthetic principle of it. A 1931 film poster designed by Semen Mendel is a riot of loops and arrows—the only level object is a grayish industrial worker, and he looks unstable, balanced on nothing at all. Everything tilts because everything moves because everything shakes with energy. The film is called “Rolling of Iron,” which could almost be the name of Tatlin’s tower.

A marine carpenter once saw a photograph of the original “Monument” model and declared that it must have been created by someone in the same line of work, with a knack for staircases. Bull’s-eye: Tatlin was a carpenter during his sailor days, and it’s likely that he carried on thinking of himself as a maker of objects that were ingenious and elegant but above all *useful*. The anecdote convinces me that the key Tatlin work in this show is a

podium, built in 1927, for the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, and reconstructed from old photographs. In a way, it is a staircase, too, with three little steps in the back, followed by three big ones that would curl around a speaker like a pile of books about to topple. Unusual—but what is a usual podium? A big, immobile slab that makes the occupant look impressive while ordering the rest of us to pay attention? Tatlin's version isn't more honest, exactly, but it offers a sweeter dream of authority: this podium's speaker addresses us from the stairs, a little like that huffing worker, and enlists us in the climb.

If his life was a work of art, which genre? Tragedy is the obvious answer, but a strong case can be made for black comedy. Such horrific ironies! The man who thought realism dead was buried by it, the artist-engineer who celebrated tangible material is mainly remembered in photographs. Above all: the ship's carpenter who aspired to help his fellow *Homo sapiens* devoted himself to folly after folly. (It's unlikely that the Soviet Union could have built his tower even if it had wanted to.) He spent years at work on a flying machine called the Letatlin. And then, to top a nasty joke with a nastier one, he was deemed useless for the final twenty years of his life. Museums blackballed him for refusing to make Soviet kitsch, and by the end he was sketching portraits for money in the streets of Moscow. Eight people at most attended his funeral. What kind of art he was making for himself we don't really know, because after he died a cleaner threw away most of what remained in his home, having deemed *it* useless.

She may have been right, too, but there is a difference between useless and worthless. A drawing in the exhibition, by Tatlin's student Mykola Triaskin, shows some young men slouching by the water. Most of them are fishing, but one lies back, smoking. I suppose this would qualify as useless behavior in Soviet terms, but there's no hint of parasitism; we may be looking at a kind of miniature utopian society. (Is it purely a coincidence that the tilted net in the drawing's center looks like Tatlin's "Monument"?) There is enough for everybody here. Work is a form of play, and leisure is the natural state of things: life for life's sake.

And art for art's sake? Someone else whose very existence was a masterpiece declared all art quite useless. Tatlin would have hated the idea,

of course, but learning how the Soviet Union swallowed him whole makes me want to say that we could all do with some extra uselessness, in our aesthetics as well as in our lives. Speaking of which, the final showstopper in “Tatlin: Kyiv” is a wingless reconstruction of the Letatlin. It’s bulky but delicate, like a bug’s exoskeleton, with enough room for an adult to fit inside, and endless graceful lines that swoop off into other graceful lines. For most of the time I spent looking, I forgot that it was ever supposed to fly. ♦



[Jackson Arn](#) was *The New Yorker's* art critic.

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[Dancing](#)

# Akram Khan’s “Gigenis” Mines the Drama of Indian Classical Dance

In a piece loosely inspired by the Mahabharata, performers from various traditions enact a dance that feels like a collective ritual of mourning.

By [Jennifer Homans](#)

March 10, 2025



*In the Mahabharata, Queen Gandhari lost a hundred sons in battle. The queen in Khan's dance sees one son destroy another in a battle for succession. Illustration by Simone Noronha*

Recently, at the Joyce Theatre, I attended a war. The war was a dance, “Gigenis: The Generation of the Earth,” directed by the British dancer and choreographer Akram Khan, loosely inspired by the story of Queen Gandhari, from the ancient Hindu epic the Mahabharata, who miraculously produced a hundred sons only for them all to be killed in battle. “Gigenis” was danced by seven exponents of Indian classical traditions (including

Khan), accompanied by seven musicians. Khan, whose family is from Bangladesh, was trained both in the Indian classical dance form Kathak and in contemporary Western techniques. As a child, he performed in [Peter Brook](#)'s legendary 1985 theatrical adaptation of the Mahabharata, and he has since made several dances on themes or stories from the epic. Working with his London-based company and elsewhere (notably, the English National Ballet), he has often melded Kathak and Western dance.

But in “Gigenis” he has shifted course. Feeling that something was missing from contemporary dance, he turned back to Indian classical dance, in search of a way, as he recently told an interviewer, “not to act, but to *be*.” In the past few years, he and Mavin Khoo (a performer of Bharatanatyam, another Indian dance form) convened a series of residencies in India, Sri Lanka, and Britain for soloists in classical Indian dance, drama, and music. “Gigenis” (which returns to the U.S. next month) grew out of this process, and Khan is careful to note that, although he directed the work, the choreography was made collectively.

What emerged is a seventy-minute dance about the life of a woman who is also a queen: girlhood and love, marriage and motherhood, the death of a husband in war, and the loss of one son at the hands of another. And although the title suggests earthly renewal, the dance documents a timeless cycle of violence, rivalry, and vengeance.

The performance begins on a darkened stage, with the sound of drums and an impending storm. As the lights come up, we dimly see a woman crowning a man, with a crown made purely by her fingers, splayed high into a curved lattice shape. A riot of bells and singing marks the moment, and we then see an elevated row of musicians seated on each side of the stage—vocalists and players of Indian drums and Western instruments. A line of dancers, each one under a cone of light, faces us, and a woman in simple Indian dress steps out of the line and walks toward us.

She is the queen, played by Kapila Venu, a leading exponent of Kutiyattam, an intensely dramatic style of theatre from Kerala. She plants herself in a wide squat before us and seems to enter a trance of memory and prophecy: her body shakes; she hunches in fear; her hands make the shape of a gun and she shoots, pulls back, shoots again. Then, mouth wide open and eyes

bulging fiercely, she appears literally to grow and expand, taking on a monstrous form as her presence consumes the stage, until finally she lifts an imaginary dead body and, with gouging and devouring movements, reaches the depth of her possessed terror.

The spell breaks and she falls to the floor and urgently scribbles, obsessively recording the events that have overtaken her soul. The other dancers advance like a chorus and perform angular, martial movements in unison. Then everything stops, and a gentle voice intones, “In another time, I was a daughter, and then a wife, and then a mother, and then I have been alone”—a mantra that is repeated again and again, as her life unfolds before us. And, as each of these former selves is invoked, the women she once was step forward. For the rest of the performance, the queen is split into four: daughter, wife, mother, and her present elder self. At this moment, the emotional structure of the piece shifts: we are now inside the queen’s mind, and her memories are also ours. The fourth wall disappears, and we feel we are part of the dance, which is itself becoming a ritual of collective grief. We are in the past and the present at the same time, watching the woman watch her younger selves—with the terrifying knowledge of what is to come.

The dances that follow are less narrative than mythic. There is a plot, but you don’t need to know it. The heart of the matter is told through gesture, imagery, and repetition—a circular looping of time. The choreography draws on several [Indian classical dance](#) languages, performed by a cast also versed in yoga, martial arts, ballet, various modern-dance techniques, and more. This hybridity is not blended into a single tongue. Rather, each classical form is put to dramatic use: we see clearly the theatricality of Kutiyattam in Venu, and the contrasting delicacy of Odissi in Sirikalyani Adkoli’s performance as the daughter. Bharatanatyam yields both the expressive partnering of Vijna Vasudevan and Renjith Babu (as the wife and her husband) and Mythili Prakash’s power and precision as the mother. The rhythmic and narrative thrust of Khan’s Kathak suffuses everything. One thing that these traditions share, though, is an immediacy that answers Khan’s desire “not to act, but to *be*.” We experience the events onstage less as a representation of a story than as something that is happening right now

before us, even though they are also part of a seemingly eternal human tragedy.

And so the queen watches, touches, and feels a thousand things, as she weaves in and out of her memories. She sees her daughter-self playing. Then the wife and husband, to whom she is invisible, stretch across her and join their bird-winged hands with hers, before opening out into their own private dance of fluttering, flowering movement. The queen is not just watching a memory; she is guiding its outcome. She is a woman, but she is also a figure of fate.

When her husband departs for war, the stage goes black and she is left alone in a thin stream of light. She begins again to quake, morphing into her horrific state, as the gentle voice tells us, “Do not think this is war, it is not war, it is the end of the world.” This may mean the apocalypse, but what we feel is the destruction of the small, intimate world of her love.

Now the mother stands over two man-boys (Khan and Khoo), and we realize that it was Khan who imagined himself crowned at the start. He playfully grabs the finger-crown from her and spins in a giddy circle, before she takes it back and their crown-shaped fingers mingle overhead in a shaft of golden light. The boys drop away and her fingers, illuminated, grow into a mesmerizing fire, flickering at fantastical speed, licking the light, flaming higher and higher.

This astonishing image is still with us when we see the queen and the mother sitting together on a bench, with husband and wife standing behind them, a hand on each, like an echo from the past. When the husband sinks lifelessly into the queen’s arms, her mother-self, sitting beside her, stares straight ahead and opens her mouth wide in a silent scream. Darkness falls again, and time seems to unspool and circle as the voice returns: “In another time . . .” And this woman, like women before and since, covers her husband’s body, while her mother, wife, and daughter selves dance sorrowfully together.

The queen lifts the crown—those filigree fingers!—from the dead body, and the two sons begin a ritual fight for succession. When she passes over Khan and crowns his brother, he rages and tries to crown himself, clasping her

fingers to his head, and flame seems to race over his undulating chest and arms. Soon, the brothers confront each other in a tense, martial dance that brings them face to face over their dead father's body. A hand is extended and refused; the scene disperses.

By the end of the piece, the old queen is squatting once more, deep like a tree trunk, her limbs shaking. This time, her memory is upon her, and the events she once recalled and presaged will now be enacted before her by her warring sons while she grimly presides. And when she gives the nod to one son to kill his brother and the blow is cast, the scene freezes one last time. Like his father, the dead son slumps over the bench. The pulsating warlike dances return, and the queen scribbles madly on the ground before collapsing before us. Her only living son gathers her up and the voice again returns: "In another time" (he backs away) "I was a daughter" (she is left alone) "and then a wife" (she looks at each of her hands) "and then" (lights out, all black, breath) "a mother." ♦

*Jennifer Homans*, the magazine's dance critic, is the author of books including "[Mr. B: George Balanchine's 20th Century](#)."

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**Musical Events**

# Two Young Pianists Test Their Limits

Yunchan Lim tackles Bach's Goldberg Variations, and Seong-Jin Cho presents a Ravel marathon.

By [Alex Ross](#)

March 10, 2025



*Yunchan Lim, top, and Seong-Jin Cho, bottom. Lim is a volcanic talent who renders scores by Liszt and Rachmaninoff as if he'd composed them himself; Cho produces a preternaturally beautiful sound. Illustration by Patricia Bolaños*

When, last month, the preposterously gifted twenty-year-old pianist Yunchan Lim played Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts, in Costa Mesa, California, the crowd

responded with one of the loudest noises I've lately heard in a classical venue. The previous week, Lim's thirty-year-old colleague Seong-Jin Cho gave an all-Ravel recital at Disney Hall, and concertgoers emitted a similarly full-throated roar. In both cases, the average age of the audience was markedly lower than the concert-hall norm. The two events gave me a tremor of hope about classical music's eternally precarious future.

Lim and Cho both come from South Korea, and people of Korean heritage make up a good part of their considerable fan base. Both grew up in nonmusical families and became spontaneously obsessed with the piano. Neither gravitates toward the flashier aspects of the virtuoso life style. Beyond that, their personalities diverge. Cho is an elegant performer who produces a preternaturally beautiful sound, although he sometimes goes against type by staging unexpected expressive interventions. Lim is a volcanic talent who renders scores by Liszt and Rachmaninoff as though he had composed them himself. He, too, resists being pigeonholed: his major offering this season is Bach's Goldberg Variations, the antipode of Romanticism. I saw him play the work at the Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center, in La Jolla; in April, he will bring it to Carnegie Hall. Truth be told, neither Cho's Ravel nor Lim's Bach proved entirely persuasive. It's healthy, however, for younger artists to test their limits.

Cho attracted international notice when he won the Chopin Piano Competition in 2015. Three years later, he presented an essentially flawless program of Chopin and Debussy at Disney, exhibiting pianissimo chords like emeralds on velvet. When he returned in 2023, he came across as a spikier, more unpredictable artist. Handel's Suite No. 5 unfurled with bewitching grace and suppleness, but Brahms's Handel Variations suffered from abrupt accents and overstudied phrasing. Schumann's "Symphonic Études" were a feast of sumptuous sonority, yet cohesion was lacking. Cho seemed so enamored of each moment that he periodically let go of the guiding thread. Still, his spirit of risk resulted in one of the year's more memorable recitals.

With his crystalline touch, Cho is a natural fit for Ravel, whose hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary arrives this year. The pianist has been touring with a program of Ravel's complete solo keyboard works; he has also recorded

them for Deutsche Grammophon. I don't think that the album will displace classic Ravel surveys by Samson François, Abbey Simon, and Steven Osborne—Cho's versions are polished and controlled to a fault. At Disney, though, things heated up. The weightless opening of "Ondine," the first movement of "Gaspard de la Nuit," which sounds somewhat clinical on the recording, glowed and glimmered. "Le Gibet" and "Scarbo," the second and third movements, exuded menace and power. In "Miroirs," the birds of "Oiseaux Tristes" sang anxiously amid ominous silence, while "Une Barque sur l'Océan" gave the heady feeling of being heaved over the crest of a wave.

Cho made a weaker impression in the smaller genre studies that fill out Ravel's piano output. The mercurial variations on waltz rhythm in "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales" needed more ironic fin-de-siècle charm than Cho supplied. By the time he reached the final work, "Le Tombeau de Couperin," his concentration had dipped, and Ravel's neo-Baroque rhythms were short on snap and lilt. Cho has noted his admiration for the great early-twentieth-century French pianist Marcelle Meyer, whose Ravel recordings are unsurpassed. He could still learn from Meyer's way of handling each phrase as if it were a step in an invisible dance.

After his solo marathon, Cho joined Paavo Järvi and the L.A. Philharmonic to perform Ravel's Concerto in G. This heralded a companion D.G. recording, of Ravel's two piano concertos, with Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony. Again, the live version bested the studio one. On disk, the Bostonians play with maximum effervescence, but in the Adagio of the Concerto in G Cho's attempt at otherworldly lyricism turns listless. In L.A., Järvi discouraged such longueurs by nudging tempos along, and the Satie-like main theme of the Adagio became a gently swaying trance. As an encore, Cho whipped up a vibrant account of the Rigaudon from "Tombeau"—more characterful than the one at the recital. What amounted to a weeklong Ravel residency ended with a stylish bang.

Lim shot to fame when he won the Van Cliburn Competition in 2022. Stephen Hough, a member of the Cliburn jury, said of Lim's rendition of Liszt's Transcendental Études, "He understood the rhetoric, the scope, the personality of Liszt. It isn't speed but a kind of inner charisma." How this

shy, shaggy-haired youth acquired such depth of understanding isn't immediately clear. He seems to have burrowed inside the music from an early age and simply knows how it should go.

The famous opening of the Rachmaninoff Second Concerto—an expanding-and-contracting sequence of minatory F-minor-ish chords, with F's tolling deep below—established Lim's sorcery at once. The composer asks for a gradual crescendo, which most pianists interpret as a stepwise intensification of the big chords, with the low notes following suit. Lim, whose left hand is a force of nature, applied ever-increasing pressure to those F's, so that they pulled us down into the Romantic abyss. Although Lim had impassioned accompaniment from Antonio Pappano and the London Symphony, he was in command from the start. Which is not to say that he made a spectacle of his virtuosity; the piece was as symphonically integrated as I've ever heard it. The audience explosion at the end was richly earned.

To jump from Rachmaninoff to Bach requires an adjustment. The Conrad, as the La Jolla venue is known, possesses an exceptionally sensitive acoustic, and at times Lim's booming tone swamped Bach's geometric designs—like a Wagnerian soprano singing Gregorian chant. Certainly, this was not a performance for purists. Lim followed András Schiff in transposing the repeat sections of several variations (Nos. 7 and 19 up an octave, No. 18 down). Here and there, he added octaves in the left hand. But nothing he did lacked taste. In any case, playing Bach on a concert grand is an inherently impure act; Bach knew of no such instrument.

Lim has obviously pondered this cosmic music at length. Idiomatic ornaments enlivened the repeat sections; these had a particularly exhilarating impact in Variation 5, amid sixteenth notes of already breathtaking effortlessness. In the minor-key variations, Lim devised some striking effects. In Variation 15, he brought out a tortured, almost modernistic atmosphere by stressing dissonant notes and lamenting lines; in the monumentally melancholy Variation 25, he gave wrenching emphasis to a line descending from high D and then made the same passage affectingly subdued on the repeat. Yet these movements were not drawn out to the point of stasis, as in mannered recent performances by Vikingur Ólafsson.

Inevitably, Lim's Goldbergs are a work in progress. In La Jolla, they amounted to a collage of riveting episodes, rather than the kind of fully articulated narrative fashioned by such experienced exponents as Schiff, Murray Perahia, and Igor Levit. All the same, it was thrilling to watch Lim navigate the Bachian labyrinth, which yields all its secrets to no one.

Before launching into the Goldbergs, Lim offered a short piece by Hanurij Lee, titled "... round and velvety-smooth blend ..." Lee is a nineteen-year-old Korean composing prodigy who writes scores with titles like "Supermarktmusik" and "Wrong Tempered Clavier" and seems drawn to Schoenberg, Messiaen, and Stockhausen. Lim's expert, sympathetic performance made one imagine vast new swaths of repertory for him to explore. The encore was Liszt's "Petrarch Sonnet No. 104," which crashed against the ears like the Pacific surf. ♦



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

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[The Current Cinema](#)

# “Eephus” Is as Surprising as the Baseball Pitch It’s Named For

*In Carson Lund’s stylistically innovative directorial début, two amateur teams say farewell to a beloved field—but will their game yield a result?*

By [Richard Brody](#)

March 7, 2025



*In most baseball movies, sport is merely a vehicle for human dramas; in “Eephus,” all the drama originates in a single baseball game.* Illustration by Zach Hackman

The old film studios had house styles: M-G-M’s was plush and sentimental, Warner Bros.’ stark and intense. A fledgling independent-film collective, Omnes Films, goes a step further, having not only a house style, of loosely structured and finely observed microdramas, but also a house theme: finality and the making of memories. These traits marked the first feature by the Omnes co-founder Tyler Taormina, “Ham on Rye,” about high-school classmates’ dispersal after graduation, and his third, “[Christmas Eve in Miller’s Point](#),” about an extended family’s last holiday in its matriarch’s house. The new Omnes feature, “Eephus,” is the first to be directed by Carson Lund, who was Taormina’s cinematographer on those films and now brings his own perspective to the Omnes style and theme. Lund’s subject is [baseball](#), his premise is historical, and his dramatic mode, though no less

sharp-eyed and fragmented than Taormina's, is rooted in documentary filmmaking.

"Eephus" is set on a Sunday in October, sometime in the nineteen-nineties, at a baseball diamond in the small New England town of Douglas. A school is going to be built on the site of the field, and two teams, Adler's Paint and the Riverdogs, are about to play the last game that will ever be held there. The players, all men, range from college age to graybeard, from lithe to lumbering, and they approach this farewell game with all the sentiment and ceremony it demands. In most baseball movies, the sport is just a part of some bigger drama off the field, but for Lund the game's the thing: the movie begins as the players arrive and ends soon after the game does. Baseball is the star, the game is the story, and the only conflicts that matter are the ones that the athletes resolve in play.

Nonetheless, in Lund's keenly discerning view, the game—its swings and misses, hits and runs, acrobatic catches and awkward miscues—is inseparable from the human element that goes into each of these crucial yet infinitesimal incidents. That element is not limited to matters of strategy and execution; it also includes distractions, emotionally charged foibles, random chitchat, and targeted ballbusting—and involves the match's handful of spectators and people only peripherally connected to the game. You'd need a radar gun to keep track of the movie's zinging, often ribald dialogue, which leaps along with mercurial glee. At one point, the Riverdogs heckle their opponents by yelling out the names of Italian dishes to distract a batter as a pitch comes in. There's more Italian food where that came from: the fact that an easily hittable pitch is called a "meatball" leads players in the dugout to come up with ever more fanciful culinary epithets, and a pizza truck arrives, run by one Mr. Mallinari (played by the former Boston Red Sox announcer Joe Castiglione), whose amiable salesmanship gives rise to a confessional monologue about his hatred for his job and his dreams of the open road.

Those interactions spring from the rich loam of history and lore that gives the sport its halcyon glow, and from which even a humble amateur game absorbs vicarious grandeur. No one is more rooted in that lore than the scorekeeper, Franny (Cliff Blake), who takes on his mission with a rigid but

joyful sense of devotion that's manifested in the virtual prayer (borrowed from [Lou Gehrig](#)'s farewell address at Yankee Stadium, in 1939) that he intones, with self-deprecating humor, before and after the game. (The sacramental aspect is reinforced by the frequent pealing of church bells.)

Lund, who co-wrote the film's script with Michael Basta and Nate Fisher, builds the game into an overarching, existential drama. To start with, it's uncertain whether it can even be played. One of the Riverdogs is running late, and the home-plate umpire is intransigent about the rule that each team must field nine players; he also has a hard out at a certain hour, leaving the teams in a state of potential anarchy. (The players are dubious about reaching a consensus: "Making baseball a democracy?" "We're all gonna kill each other.") Then, once things get going, the teams start running out of baseballs, having underestimated how many would be hit into the surrounding wilds. Finally, human drama yields to the natural order: the sun goes down. The field is increasingly engulfed in darkness, and—with the score tied—the players must choose between the reckless absurdity of playing a night game without lights and the eternal purgatory of leaving the final contest unresolved.

The two teams encompass a wide range of personalities: there's the sad sack Bobby (Brendan "Crash" Burt) and the volatile military veteran Rich (Ray Hryb), who tangles with the Riverdogs' smooth-surfaced founder, Graham (Stephen Radochia). Several players are in college, and one is said to have pro-ball potential that his girlfriend is imperilling by not letting him move to Florida. Tightly compressed scenes crystallize microdramas of melancholy comedy: a middle-aged Riverdog named Bill Belinda (Russ Gannon), the only one whose family comes to the games, worries that his children won't get to see him play again; the Adler's Paint pitcher Ed (Keith William Richards), intent on pitching a complete game, is visited by his brother Al (Wayne Diamond), a loudmouth in a loud suit, who has other ideas. The skill of pitching plays a special role in the plot, as when the Riverdogs' pitcher, who's been drinking beer, doubts whether he can continue. As the team has no extra players, the future of the game is again in question. The solution, too good to spoil here, involves a sacrilegious yet principled breach of a basic rule—and a tweak to a pitcher's very identity.

The movie's exotic title is the name of a peculiar and venerable pitch, a high-arcing floater that seems easy to hit but instead may tantalize batters. It's funny-looking and rare, cultivated by the few pitchers who throw it as a nonconformist idiosyncrasy—as much an assertion of style as a competitive edge. An Adler's Paint relief pitcher (played by Nate Fisher, the co-writer) explains the pitch's deceptive virtues in aesthetic, almost metaphysical terms: because it “stays in the air forever,” it can make a hitter “lose track of time.” Not long thereafter, a white-haired, sharp-tongued visitor comes to the Riverdogs’ dugout—a former pitcher named Lee, thirty years retired, who says he played on the very same field back then. (“It’s a shame those pricks are building a school here,” he adds.) He’s played by the real-life former major-league pitcher Bill (Spaceman) Lee, an eephus exponent with a reputation as a baseball eccentric. He declares himself ready to pitch a good inning for them, and does so with flamboyant use of his eephus, which Lund delights in showing alongside the bright-light personality of its hurler.

Where Lund depicts baseball, he seemingly X-rays it to reveal a plethora of fine points and arcana that, once grasped, yield up the hidden meanings of infinitesimal gestures. “Why do they care so much?” a player’s daughter asks. “Don’t they have more important things going on?” Doubtless they do, the movie suggests, but nothing quite as meaningful or beautiful. In presenting the game, Lund develops a passionately analytical aesthetic of baseball that offers a corrective to the way it’s usually depicted. His documentary-based method, in rejecting the patterned routines of television coverage, intensifies the drama of the sport itself. The camera gets close to the players and intersects freely with the action in ways that would be impossible for a broadcast or a spectator. An inspired variety of angles emphasizes the disparate and complex nature of ordinary plays, as when a ball fielded far away by an outfielder is thrown toward the camera to a second player, who then pegs it to a nearby infielder, who in turn tags the runner from the opposing team—all in one tight, tense, continuous, deep-focus shot. When a player hits a game-tying home run, the moment is purged of commonplace exultation: the view stays fixed on the field, far from the action, as the dejected opponents huff and grumble; the hitter, rounding the bases in the distant background, looks like an extra. Lund contextualizes the game with the primal joy of a day outside—a view of a puffy cloud, the charm of autumn foliage, a glimpse of the moon while the

sun is still shining—and he catches the players distractedly delighting in the natural spectacle, too, as if enshrining it in their future nostalgia for this final match.

The Omnes spirit, its sense of an ending, gets an extra kick from the way that “Eephus” circles back to its beginning. No one talks politics during the game, but politics undergird the action from the start: the movie opens with a radio host announcing a municipal board’s decision to replace the field with the school. The actor voicing the host is the great documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, a former law professor whose movies (including one called “State Legislature”) probe the workings of a wide range of civic and public institutions. Just as, in major-league baseball, a team’s presence in a given town or city often depends on government subsidies for the construction of a stadium—and on the politicking that such plans entail—so the Douglas amateurs, blissfully detached from their lives while out standing in their field, remain, more than ever, part of their world. ♦



*[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](#).”*

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# Poems

- **“One Vessel”**

By Henri Cole | “I’ve had the time of my life, friends, / living quietly like a snail in a pocket.”

- **“Saint Hyacinth Basilica”**

By Patrycja Humienik | “When devotion is self-betrayal, / the body knows.”

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[Poems](#)

# One Vessel

By [Henri Cole](#)

March 10, 2025

I've had the time of my life, friends,  
living quietly like a snail in a pocket.  
It's a rather simple tale, really,  
as elegant and amoral as a Latin poet's.  
I loved the sailboat and airplane rides.  
I loved the fossil of a mouse.  
The sweetness of growing  
into a man whose dreams—  
like leaves or a bird's nest—  
came to life.  
But times have changed,  
and the snail now lives  
in a single-dwelling unit  
with pillows and lamps.  
The woe is gone,  
and the demons of the woe.  
On the front lawn, a queen lays  
eggs to build up the bee colony.  
A crow pecks at an orange.  
My breast is strong from morning swims.  
I take unto me new things  
to keep in the vessel,  
and let go of others.

[Henri Cole](#) is the author of numerous poetry collections, including “[The Other Love](#).”

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[Poems](#)

# Saint Hyacinth Basilica

By [Patrycja Humienik](#)

March 10, 2025

House of yelling, scent of hyacinth.  
Back then, my head was full of fragments.  
*Of a question I buried & unburied*  
in the dirt. Flower brain unblinking.

Drenched in gossamer. Webs glint then  
disappear. Subject fatigued by a silken un-  
ribboning. Undoing takes more effort than  
you'd think. Here, the subject was supposed to  
be a child. Able to take a joke.

What makes a child serious could be called  
devotion. It is beyond obedience.  
Kneeling in recognition of one's smallness  
in the vast. I learned about love that way. But  
when devotion is self-betrayal, what then?

•

When devotion is self-betrayal,  
the body knows. The first time I fainted,  
I was a choirgirl. Someone caught me just  
before I hit my head. Damn pillar. The saints &

clergy in the dome's three-thousand-square-foot  
mural looking down on me. Our Lady  
of Częstochowa crowned in ten pounds of gold.

Jackowo, center of Polonia. Three  
steeples visible from the Kennedy

expressway. Glazed terra-cotta, brick & stone.  
Three pairs of heavy bronze doors I never  
touched. Girl or woman, holy only  
what's done to me. I don't agree. Still, that  
story leaves a mark. I rarely touch myself.

•

I rarely touch myself—the story leaves a mark.  
The sword struck twice Our Lady's face at Jasna  
Góra, where the horses refused to go on.  
Like millions, I kneeled at her shrine. One of

my uncles took me there en route to Warszawa,  
fasting like his grandmother. Twice a week. If there  
were photographs of her, they burned. My great-  
grandmother hated artificial light. This  
stubbornness enough to imagine we were

alike. Did she steal pleasure in the pasture  
like her daughter's daughter? My mother, swinging  
onto cows' backs with her brothers. Two decades  
later, reunited, cheeks streaked with charcoal.  
For a moment, terribly close to childhood.

•

Each moment risks proximity to childhood.  
Splayed out on the rocks, near the sprawl of lake,  
that inland sea. It was spring, I think. We were  
supposed to be in school. Driving for the sake  
of going somewhere. Later, standing  
at my friend's kitchen sink, I don't know  
how long I stayed there, observing a tiny

jade on the windowsill, ache of the weight of living in each oval leaf,

luminous though it was, easily engulfed, I sensed, intensely, an older version of my self. These selves. Embracing now. & Time, beating heart, draping its diaphanous wings over all of us, saying *here we are here we are*.

•

Here we are, here we are, all of us singing. Such was my dream of faith. Silver hymn to slip on. No thirst. A river alongside the whole way. I went to the desert instead,

praying for the pearl beyond the din of text like a square jaw, clenched fist, asking to be spared from analysis. To be abandoned by dreaming. A woman acted upon. But I move otherwise. That a daughter

carries the desire of many mothers before is a hunch I visit in my sleep. Faces forming a mass of land. Longitude. I long to plant flowers there. Dry them upside down. Quiet the house of yelling, stench of hyacinth.

*This is drawn from “[We Contain Landscapes](#). ”*

*[Patrycja Humienik](#) is the author of the poetry collection “[We Contain Landscapes](#). ”*

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# Cartoons

- **[Cartoon Caption Contest](#)**

Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.

- **[Cartoons from the Issue](#)**

Drawings from the March 17, 2025, magazine.

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# Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Tuesday, March 4, 2025](#)**

By Will Nediger | A moderately challenging puzzle.

[Crossword](#)

# The Crossword: Tuesday, March 4, 2025

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*



By [Will Nediger](#)

March 4, 2025



[Will Nediger](#) is a crossword constructor from London, Ontario, who publishes puzzles independently under the name Bewilderingly.

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