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By [Richard Brody](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Marina Harss](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Dan Stahl](#), [Jane Bua](#), and [Rachel Syme](#)

March 28, 2025

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

Beguiling blends of fiction and nonfiction are the highlights of this year's edition of the **New Directors/New Films** series, at Film at Lincoln Center and MOMA, April 2-13. "**Fiume o Morte!**" (April 4-5), by the Croatian filmmaker Igor Bezinović, is a novel approach to historical drama, realized with daring, skill, and sardonic wit. After the First World War, the Croatian town of Rijeka was invaded by Italian nationalists led by the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who, between 1919 and 1921, turned the city, under its Italian name of Fiume, into a proto-Fascist dictatorship much admired by Benito Mussolini. To recount the regime's rise and fall, Bezinović gathers archival footage and still photos—and, largely via person-in-the-street interviews, assembles a cast of nonprofessionals to reënact events at the very sites where they occurred. The film's self-deprecatingly comedic artifice nonetheless captures chilling details of an adventure that starts with a demagogue's cult-like following and ends with bloody corpses. The movie powerfully conveys the eerie sense of experiencing history in the present tense.



The Croatian filmmaker Igor Bezinović's "Fiume o Morte!" Photograph courtesy Lightdox

A literary detective story that's rich in the fine grain of daily life, "**Lost Chapters**" (April 3 and April 5), by the Venezuelan filmmaker Lorena Alvarado, stars her real-life family: her sister, Ena; her father, Ignacio; and her grandmother, Adela Rodríguez. Ena, who's twenty-five, is staying with Ignacio, a book collector specializing in the national literature. In one of his volumes, Ena finds a handwritten note about an early-twentieth-century Venezuelan author she's never heard of, and, undertaking her own investigation, begins to doubt whether he really existed. Meanwhile, Adela, a former poet now showing signs of dementia, creates spontaneous poetry of poignant incongruities. Alvarado and José Ostos did the cinematography, and their keen sense of light, color, and tempo invests Adela's tender observations and enigmatic digressions with drama and passion.

The documentary filmmaker Courtney Stephens directs her first quasi-fiction, "**Invention**" (April 5-6), in collaboration with the actress Callie Hernandez, who stars as Carrie, a young woman who visits a small New England town, where she claims the ashes of her late father, a doctor and a spiritual healer whose ambitious schemes came to naught. There, Carrie inherits the patent for his electromagnetic device and, to better understand it and him, connects with his collaborators, and enters the vortex of their conspiracies. The local, face-to-face action is amplified by clips of her father's infomercials (taken from actual footage of Hernandez's father) and by wry metafictional touches. With startling views of unspoiled nature, Stephens evokes vestiges of the philosophies of Emerson and Thoreau surviving the din of modern media.—Richard Brody



About Town

Off Broadway

Classic Stage Company's revival of Alice Childress's "**Wine in the Wilderness,**" from 1969, directed by LaChanze, is a character study about a character study: during the 1964 Harlem riots, Bill (Grantham Coleman), a hipster painter, works on a triptych about Black femininity; for his portrait of a "messed up chick," he chooses the brash, needy, unsophisticated Tommy (Olivia Washington) as his model. She thinks she's being wooed, only to discover that she's an object of derision for Bill's urbane friends. "Forget yourself sometime, sugar," Bill says, but instead Tommy demands dignity and even love. Bill's pivot to recognizing her value is wish-fulfillment stuff, but Childress's own brush moves quickly over him, more interested in the details of a forgotten kind of woman and her beauty.—*Helen Shaw (Through April 13.)*

Dance

With their mix of authority and recklessness, Sara Mearns's performances have been drawing audiences to New York City Ballet for almost two decades. She is a restless artist, unafraid to reveal her challenges: depression, hearing loss, burnout. All of this is poured into "**Artists at the Center: Sara Mearns.**" Part one is "Don't Go Home," a dance play, inspired by Mearns, written by Jonathon Young, and choreographed by the Canadian dancer Guillaume Côté. "I needed the piece to be personal. I needed it to be related to what I was going through in my life," Mearns says of the work. Part two is a première by the former Alvin Ailey dancer Jamar Roberts, who performs alongside Mearns and the incisive Jeroboam Bozeman (also formerly of Ailey), among others.—*Marina Harss (City Center; April 3-5.)*

Jazz



Photograph by Ayana Wildgoose

A few days after his one-hundredth birthday, the saxophonist **Marshall Allen** began recording his début solo album. Starting in the nineteen-fifties, Allen worked alongside the cosmic jazz explorer Sun Ra, as a member of the Arkestra, and he's led the ensemble in the creator's stead since 1995. That is a larger-than-life legacy all its own, but "New Dawn," released on Valentine's Day, reveals that the titan isn't yet done checking items off his bucket list. The music is clearly informed by his service in the Arkestra, but it is also resoundingly personal, culling from and synthesizing more than a half century of experience. As Allen steps out from under a large shadow, his grand solo turn is prime evidence that it's never too late to set out on a new adventure.—*Sheldon Pearce (Roulette; April 5.)*

Broadway

First it was a club in pre-Castro Havana. Then, in 1996, a group of virtuosos from its heyday adopted the name for themselves and for their Grammy-winning album. Now “**Buena Vista Social Club**” is a Broadway musical (transferred from Atlantic Theatre Company). The book, by Marco Ramirez, rigs a narrative between the album’s recording and the club’s last hurrah, and at the show’s heart are songs from the album, many of them pulsating Cuban standards rich in subtext. Their melodies give way to bravura solos, including some flurry-fingered tres playing. Equally formidable, if less spry, is Natalie Venetia Belcon’s imperious, late-career Omara Portuondo, reluctant to sing again. But despite Saheem Ali’s sure-handed direction the storytelling sometimes stalls—a common fate for a jukebox musical, however lively its songs.—*Dan Stahl (Schoenfeld; open run.)*

Read Vinson Cunningham on the show’s [Off Broadway première](#), in 2023.

Off Broadway



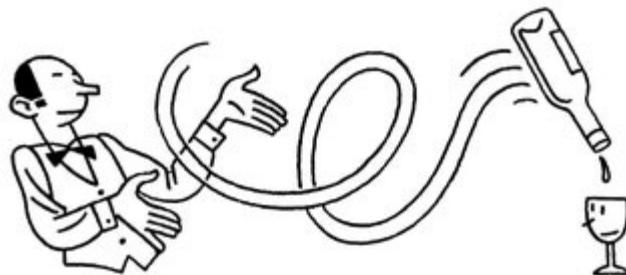
Photograph by Moritz Haase

It’s hard enough to navigate your personal life under regular circumstances. But when you’re also a slasher in Victorian London, weaving through the streets with your new wife’s disapproving father on your tail and a gaggle of local sex workers vying—successfully—for your attention, things can get *really* messy. BAM and St. Ann’s Warehouse present this havoc in “**The Threepenny Opera**,” which first premiered in 1928, in Weimar-era Berlin. Written by Bertolt Brecht and composed, with jazz and German-dance inflection, by Kurt Weill, the so-called “play with music” mixes the flamboyance of murder and lust with astute social commentary, in a

Berliner Ensemble production, helmed by the seasoned Australian director Barrie Kosky.—*Jane Bua* (BAM; April 3-6.)

Movies

The Portuguese director **Manoel de Oliveira**, who was born in 1908 and died in 2015, started his career slowly but made up for lost time, completing twenty-two features between the ages of eighty-one and a hundred and three. BAM is showing ten of them, in new restorations, including two exquisite ones from 2001. “I’m Going Home” stars Michel Piccoli in a tragicomic tale of an elderly actor who, after a grievous loss, throws himself into his work but finds his ability declining even as his sensibility remains strong. In the memory-film “Porto of My Childhood,” Oliveira blends archival footage, new documentary images, and deft dramatizations with his voice-over reminiscences of a bohemian youth amid the city’s cultural and natural splendors.—*Richard Brody* (BAM; March 28-April 3.)



Bar Tab

Rachel Syme checks out Baz Luhrmann’s theatrical new cocktail den.



Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

The Australian auteur Baz Luhrmann has his fans and his detractors; some are in thrall to his maximalist, hyper-saturated, bespangled visual style, and others find his frenzied work to be gimmicky and full of empty calories. Still, no one can deny that Luhrmann knows how to stage a party. He is at his best when engineering sybaritic revels: a night of rowdy cancan kicking at the Moulin Rouge, a champagne-drenched fête on Gatsby's lawn, a phantasmagoric costume ball at the Capulet mansion. One could be forgiven, then, for assuming that Luhrmann's first cocktail bar, **Monsieur**, would be a boisterous *scene*. But on a recent rainy Wednesday night, the mood inside Monsieur was surprisingly subdued. This may be a matter of scale. Monsieur, which occupies the former home of the gay dive bar Boiler Room, has an intimate feel, with room for just about two dozen teeny tables. Or it may be a by-product of aggressive art direction; Luhrmann and Catherine Martin, his wife and creative partner, fell in love with a stained-glass window in the space, and they designed the bar around a dimly-lit medieval theme, complete with Gothic candelabrum, Jacobean revival wooden furniture, and tawny tapestries. Scattered macabre ephemera include antique books, bronze statuettes, marble-like busts, and a suit of armor made of cardboard. The menu—full of twists on classic cocktails, such as an espresso Martini with a creamy glug of banana liqueur, or a Vesper enlivened with a bitter spritz of grapefruit oil—doubles as a set piece, with a full page devoted to the story of “Monsieur,” the bar’s

fictional proprietor, a mythical “fabulist” and “trickster” who makes mischief with his sidekick, a chimpanzee named Tybalt. It’s quite the cinematic setup, but real life rarely feels as intoxicating as the movies.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [How to do pleasuremaxxing](#)
- [A delicious recipe for your spring leeks](#)
- [Breaking the grass ceiling](#)



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*[Marina Harss](#) has been contributing dance coverage to *The New Yorker* since 2004. She is the author of “[The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky’s Life in Ballet](#).”*



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*[Jane Bua](#) is a member of *The New Yorker’s* editorial staff.*



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Photo Booth

For Elias Williams, the Hip-Hop Beat Machine Carries the Soul of Community

In “Straight Loops, Light & Soul,” a project evoking Roy DeCarava’s Harlem jazz pictures and the music of J Dilla, Williams captures the underground beat-maker scene of New York City.

By [Sheldon Pearce](#)

March 22, 2025



The Brooklyn-based m.c. and producer Zarz the Origin—a.k.a. the Loop Menace, under the Manhattan Bridge. Photographs by Elias Williams

Hip-hop beat-makers are usually unseen. Not all sample-based producers are as reclusive as the torch-bearing loop artist [Madlib](#), but even the most prominent among them are part of the backdrop. After all, a central function of their work is to produce scenery, as set designers for rap’s theatre of flamboyance. In this way, they are diametrically opposed to rappers, who plow into the foreground and draw the eye.



The m.c. and producer Large Professor, most notable for being a member of Main Source and for his collaborations with Nas, d.j.'ing a set dedicated to J Dilla at Nublu.

Beat-makers are often d.j.s, but even d.j.s, for all their in-the-room command, are, historically, vibe setters who must be both present and invisible. Though artists such as [Kanye West](#), a beat-maker turned celebrity instigator, and Metro Boomin, a top-billed super-producer who is often credited as a featured performer, have challenged the binary, the dynamic has largely held. Nevertheless, the producer is fundamental to what hip-hop is. In essence, the earliest rap was turntablism; the merry-go-round—a technique, created by DJ Kool Herc, of clipping the rhythm breaks in soul records—led to sampling, the art of repurposing a portion of a recording to create a new one. Sampling is foundational to rap music as both an aural and a textual medium. As rap grew into a commercial juggernaut, the rapper's standing rose as the beat-maker's declined. It often feels as if the beat-maker's recognition rarely aligns with his outsized impact.

In “[Straight Loops, Light & Soul](#),” a black-and-white series by the Queens-raised photographer Elias Williams, the focus is on beat-making as a

practice—its execution and exhibition. But in these photos the producers aren't stars; they are operators and artisans. They are primarily machine-wielders, using samplers and M.P.C.s (which add sequencing capabilities) as tools, in solidarity with one another and in communion with their acolytes. The sampler is a machine of endless possibility, capable of taking any sound and conceiving it anew. Thus, beat-makers are on one side of an open line to the infinite; the machines are sacred, and gathering around one can turn a small room into a shrine to the past. The producer is reaffirmed as a cultural shaman. It is in this context that, Williams believes, one truly sees what the producer and the machine are capable of, how much artistry can be wrung out of a device on a table.



Large Professor poses for a portrait after a Smoke N Beatz event on the Lower East Side.

The writer Dan Charnas, in his 2022 book, “[Dilla Time](#),” a cultural biography of the late crate-digging icon J Dilla, refers to the idea of the rap beat-maker as a conduit through which all musical memory flows, as the soul in the machine. “What hip-hop created, in the late 1980s and early

'90s, was a machine-assisted collage of human music," he writes. "It turned the beatmaker into an alchemist of musical culture." "Straight Loops, Light & Soul" was inspired, in equal parts, by Dilla and by "[The Sound I Saw](#)," a book by the fine-art photographer Roy DeCarava, which compiled images from the Harlem jazz scene in the nineteen-sixties, mixing in tableaux from the city around it. Williams compares his project to sampling, riffing on DeCarava's work as an act of transmutation. But, for Williams, the scenes captured within a back-room producer community are synonymous with those of everyday life.

In 2023, Williams, who had picked up beat-making as a hobby during the pandemic, sought to deepen his understanding of the form and his long-standing attachment to innovators such as Dilla. He found a group of producers hosting events on the Lower East Side, and told them of his aspirations—to shoot within their makeshift network, and to learn more about making beats. They welcomed him in, and the resulting series is imbued with the comfort and maneuverability of an insider.



Nothing_neue performing at a birthday bash for the producer Saywordstaz?!, at the Bronx Brewery, in 2023.

Most of Williams's photography is portrait-based, and there is a bit of portraiture mixed into "Straight Loops, Light & Soul," but the majority of these pictures are concerned with atmosphere. They bob through live events where beats are being played for an audience—a Dilla fund-raiser, producer showcases and meetups, the Lo-Fi Festival in Brooklyn. "You have fifteen minutes to find some expression in someone's performance," Williams told me. "Once I noticed that, it became just as much about the people who were around the room, engaging with the music." Pictures of producers setting up in bars, dispensaries, art galleries, and co-working spaces also capture the soul emanating from samplers and the effect this has on repurposed dens. There are closeups of stank-faces, daps, acrylic nails turning knobs. Hands, lots of hands—outstretched, passing cords, clutching mikes, slipping vinyl out of sleeves, scratching records, tapping pads, scrawling signatures onto posters. Some images evoke the space through which sound travels. Others catch performers and spectators in moments of rapturous enlightenment, in the thrall of a locked-in groove.

Williams occasionally uses composition to convey a sonic signature or identity for an artist. In some portraits, the producer DFNS poses with his SP-404 MKII (the latest in a series of samplers designed by the Roland Corporation), seemingly in reference to photos of the N.B.A. greats Michael Jordan, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Allen Iverson. DFNS's beats often mine hoops for inspiration, so, fittingly, he holds his MKII as if crossing over, and wears a jersey bearing the name of his rap collective, the Boppers. Another producer, Zarz the Origin, who samples field recordings of city sounds, appears completely in shadow, skating under the Manhattan Bridge, his sampler illuminated in his hand like an enchanted object.

These images render the beat-makers as avatars for their sounds and for the machines that give shape to their various aural personalities, but the bulk of Williams's collection revolves around performance, the use of the machines, the reactions they provoke, and the community built from a shared love of sampling as archival work. Most people don't think of samplers and MPCs as instruments—in many ways, the music workstations are more akin to computers. They differ greatly from the horns and woodwinds and upright basses DeCarava sought to characterize, especially

in action. Even Williams, a devotee of sample-based production, wasn't initially sold on its live presentation. "I had my own preconceived notions of how people engaged with beat devices," he told me. "I thought it was strictly hitting pads for fifteen minutes." But samplers contain their own musicality, and the photos demonstrate how "playing" one can be a physical, expressive act. "It became a way, through everyone's variations, to show their uniqueness. While everybody has the same device, they create a different thing. So their bodies become an instrument." You can see those bodies as vessels in dialogue with both the music and the crowd, channelling time as each artist imagines it, in pursuit of a sweeping, inescapable connection.



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

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By David Remnick | The spectacle of incompetence and the attempts to smear a reporter are a misery; even worse is the encroaching threat of autocracy that cannot be concealed or encrypted.

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By H. C. Wilentz | With egg prices soaring, New York bodegas are asking if liquid eggs can save the bacon, egg, and cheese.

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By Michael Schulman | Stateside again, the “White Lotus” star discusses life with her partner, Sam Rockwell, and whether Patrick Schwarzenegger really eats two breakfasts.

- **The Instagrammer Who Floats Like James Harden and Shoots Like Shaq**

By Charles Bethea | Maxim Peranidze, a twenty-six-year-old Angeleno from Moldova, has a knack for impersonating basketball stars, aided by fake beards, embellished jerseys, and his twin, Gene.

- **Kevin McDonald, Superstar!**

By Sarah Larson | In his new rock opera, the Canadian comedian and *Kids in the Hall* veteran conjures a boozy night from the nineties, with an assist from Dave Hill on electric guitar.

[Comment](#)

The Greater Scandal of Signalgate

The spectacle of incompetence and the attempts to smear a reporter are a misery; even worse is the encroaching threat of autocracy that cannot be concealed or encrypted.

By [David Remnick](#)

March 26, 2025



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs (left to right) by Mohammed Hamoud / Getty; Mark Wilson / Getty; Kevin Carter / Getty; John M. Chase / Getty

Every era produces its own emblematic array of knuckleheads and butterfingers: Mack Sennett's Keystone Cops. The Three Stooges. The 1962 Mets. Beavis and Butt-head. Wayne and Garth. In Stanley Kubrick's Cold War classic, "Dr. Strangelove," the fools wield apocalyptic weapons rather

than custard pies. Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper, played by Sterling Hayden, grows so feverish and paranoid about a Communist plot “to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids” that he goes “a little funny” and orders a thermonuclear strike on the Soviet Union. But such fantastical heedlessness is the province only of comic fantasy, no?

In the initial months of [Donald Trump](#)’s second Administration, the qualities of malevolence, retribution, and bewildering velocity have obscured somewhat the ineptitude of its principals. This came into sharper view with recent reports in *The Atlantic*, in which the magazine’s editor, Jeffrey Goldberg, tells [how he was somehow added](#) to a communal chat on the commercially available messaging system Signal, labelled “Houthi PC small group.” Sitting in his car, in a Safeway parking lot, Goldberg watched incredulously on his phone as the leaders of the national-security establishment discussed the details of bombing Houthi strongholds in Yemen.

The comedy of Goldberg’s reports resides, at least in part, in the discovery that the Vice-President and the heads of the leading defense and intelligence bureaucracies deploy emojis with the same frequency as middle schoolers. More seriously, but not astonishingly, when prominent members of the Administration were confronted with their potentially lethal carelessness, they did as their President would have them do: they attacked the character and the integrity of the reporter (who proved far more concerned about national security than the national-security adviser), and then refused to give straight answers to Congress about their cock-up and the sensitivity of the communications. Everyone from Cabinet members to the President’s press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, followed principles inherited by the President from the late [Roy Cohn](#): Never apologize. And be certain to slander the messenger.

This spectacle of breezy contempt regarding questions of process and policy was humiliating, for sure, but hardly an amazement. In the chat, Vice-President [J. D. Vance](#) and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth seem to compete in their denigrations of the Europeans. (“I fully share your loathing of European freeloading,” Hegseth tells Vance. “It’s PATHETIC.”) And yet much of what is so depressing about the chat is how familiar we are with

the details and its spirit. Vance has, publicly and repeatedly, unburdened himself of his and the President's [disdain for Europe](#)—most flagrantly in a speech in Munich, in February, when he lectured European leaders on their supposed failures in the realms of immigration and free speech.

This is an Administration that does not have to slip on a Signal banana peel to reveal its deepest-held prejudices and its painful incapacities. You get the sense that we would learn little if we were privy to a twenty-four-hour-a-day live stream of its every private utterance. Part of what was so appalling about Trump and Vance's recent meeting with [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) was not just their penchant for channelling the world view and negotiating points of [Vladimir Putin](#) but their comfort in expressing them, [barking them](#), at the Ukrainian President in front of reporters in the Oval Office.

Similarly, it does not require months of painstaking investigative reporting or a middle-aged tech fail to discover that another member of the group chat, Steven Witkoff, the President's leading shuttle negotiator, is no more steeped in the granular details of diplomatic history and strategy than any other New York real-estate developer from the eighties in Trump's circle. In a long interview with [Tucker Carlson](#), following recent conversations in Moscow with Putin, Witkoff consistently parroted Russian talking points and relayed that the Russian dictator ("I don't regard Putin as a bad guy") had been "gracious" and gave him a "beautiful portrait" of Trump as a gift for the President. (Trump, in turn, "was clearly touched" by the painting, Witkoff reported.) Throughout, Witkoff's grasp of the conflict was so wobbly, so Moscow-inflected, that one could almost hear the guffawing from the Kremlin. In a moment of contemplation, Witkoff admitted, "I underestimated the complications in the job, that's for sure. I think I was a little bit quixotic in the way that I thought about it. Like, I'm going to roll in there on a white horse. And, no, it was anything but that, you know."

Pete Hegseth is less prone to misty self-reflection. But his incompetence might have been predictable. Last December, after Trump nominated Hegseth, a weekend host on Fox News, to lead the Pentagon, Jane Mayer wrote [a meticulously reported piece](#) in this magazine on his florid background: his bouts of excessive drinking and profoundly sexist behavior on and off the job; his failures at managing enterprises somewhat larger

than a dry cleaner but infinitely smaller than the Pentagon. No matter. Congressional Republicans were not inclined to deny Hegseth his appointment or to [risk the President's wrath](#). And they were similarly accommodating for another participant in the hapless Signal chat, Tulsi Gabbard, the director of National Intelligence.

And so the week's scandal is rather like the ending of an O. Henry story, surprising yet inevitable. If a journalist is mistakenly dropped into a group text among the leaders of the American health bureaucracy, will we faint when [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#), refuses to recommend proven vaccines?

It would be unwise to dismiss the importance of secrets in this or any other Administration, but the point is that Trump and his ideological and political planners have made no secret of their intentions. While Richard Nixon tended to save his darkest confidences and prejudices for private meetings with such aides as [Henry Kissinger](#) and H. R. Haldeman, Trump gives voice to his id almost daily at the microphone or on social media: the autocratic actions intended to undermine the law, academia, and the media; the disregard for democratic partners and the affection for all manner of authoritarians; the hostile designs on Greenland, Canada, Panama, Mexico, and Europe; the ongoing attempt to purge the Republican Party of any remaining dissenters; and the constant effort to intimidate his critics and perceived enemies.

The threat of autocracy advances each day under Donald Trump, and it is a process that hides in plain sight. Some will choose to deny it, to domesticate it, to treat the abnormal as mere politics, to wish it all away in the spirit of "this too shall pass." But the threat is real and for all to see. No encryption can conceal it. ♦



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

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Breakfast Dept.

Two Over Easy, with a Side of Xanthan Gum

With egg prices soaring, New York bodegas are asking if liquid eggs can save the bacon, egg, and cheese.

By [H. C. Wilentz](#)

March 31, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

Fernando Mateo, a co-founder of United Bodegas of America, has been worried about the future of the venerable staple known as the bacon, egg, and cheese. It used to go for two or three dollars, but costs have spiked.

“We kept thinking, *What can we do to bring down the prices?*” he said on a recent Wednesday, as he set out to take a casual egg census in the Bronx. Amid avian-flu outbreaks and soaring egg prices, he wanted to spread the

word about a U.B.A. policy shift: swapping out fresh eggs for liquid ones, the kind that come in a carton. “When you go on a cruise ship, that’s what they give you,” he said, trying out his spiel at his first stop, La Bonita Grocery, at 183rd and Ryer. He pointed to a plastic tub of eggs, packaged three to a baggie, on the counter—another U.B.A. initiative. “Bodegas have figured it out,” he said. “The same way we’re breaking up a carton of eggs and selling them as loosies—that’s the way we look at this. We don’t need rocket scientists.” Ana Villalona, the store’s owner, nodded in agreement.

In recent months, B.E.C. discourse had been feverish. Bodegas were charging as much as six or eight dollars a sandwich. The usual two eggs had become one, and citizens reported that the bacon was shrinking, too. The B.E.C. was becoming a bread-forward affair, with the feel of rations. Vegans were circling, hawking mung-bean alternatives. Traffickers at the border were hiding eggs under blankets. On Fox News, the Secretary of Agriculture talked up back-yard hen-keeping. Charges of price gouging—originally levelled at industrial farmers—were creeping into the sandwich space.

Mateo, who is sixty-seven and wore a puffer vest over a black shirt and jeans, is a systems thinker. “You have to become a real businessman,” he said. “You have to have vision.” A product of Catholic boarding schools, he “grew up with priests and nuns—very strict, very, very rigid.” At fourteen, he dropped out of school to work at an East Village baby-furniture store called Schneider’s. He built a flooring business, then a money-wiring empire; since 2007, he’s been a partner at a securities firm. He lives between Miami, Westchester, and the Upper West Side. In 2021, he made a late bid for mayor, as a Republican. “I lost in the primaries against Curtis Sliwa, who’s a jerk idiot,” he said. “If I had won, I would have beat Adams.”

U.B.A., Mateo explained, is an opt-in organization; its other recent initiatives have included firearms training and the procurement of behind-the-counter panic buttons. Although competition among storekeepers can be fierce, Mateo sees U.B.A. as a marketplace of ideas.

He got in his black Silverado and drove across town, to Pamela’s Green Deli, where he greeted Radhamés Rodríguez, the bodega’s owner and the

president of U.B.A. Catching sight of individually bagged slices of avocado, priced at a dollar, Mateo praised his friend's innovation.

Rodríguez nodded. "They ask, 'Can you sell me a little portion of lettuce and tomato?'" he said. "Three dollars, and that's it. They make their own salad."

The phone rang: a hundred and fifteen B.E.C.s ordered by a nearby school. A lanky line cook smiled. Pamela's was already using liquid eggs, and the cook started pouring puddles of the stuff onto the hot griddle. Offered a sample, Mateo shook his head. "I try not to eat carbs," he said. Rodríguez gave him a few Lotto tickets on the way out.

Locals aren't completely sold on the switch to liquid eggs. "That's like cheating the community," a man named Quaison Richardson told a TV news reporter. "If I'm going to pay for an egg sandwich, I want an egg. I want you to crack the egg." U.B.A. is insisting that the taste is the same, but the liquid eggs that La Bonita and Pamela's are using are composed mostly of whites, with seasoning and xanthan gum to imitate yolk warmth. The resulting B.E.C.s have a pale, spongy heft.

The next stop was the Yankee One Deli, whose owner wanted to talk security. There had been egg lootings at other stores, he said, but not at his place, though a guy had recently tried to make off with two hams. (He'd dropped one at the door.)

Near Crotona Park, Mateo pulled up to a bodega called J.J.N. Corp. One of the store's workers, David Evangelista, had an egg-scarcity story. Two customers, a man and a woman, were standing in line. There were only two eggs left, visible in the deli case. The woman ordered two eggs on a roll, and the man got upset: couldn't they go one and one? The woman started yelling. She got both of the eggs, and the man, grumbling, ordered a ham and cheese, but stormed out before it was ready. "He said, 'I don't want no sandwiches from you!'" Evangelista said, shaking his head. "And now Easter is coming." ♦

H. C. Wilentz is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

gum

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[**Arts and Crafts**](#)

Leslie Bibb Goes Indigo

Stateside again, the “White Lotus” star discusses life with her partner, Sam Rockwell, and whether Patrick Schwarzenegger really eats two breakfasts.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

March 31, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

The actress Leslie Bibb cuts a figure like the aerodynamic swoosh of a Brancusi, or a gazelle. She is five feet nine, with a blinding smile and blond hair styled in a knifelike bob—glamazon features that pair oddly with her singsongy voice. You might cast her as a cheerleader (which she played on the WB show “Popular”), or a flight attendant (the horror flick “Flight 7500”), or a country-club belle (“Palm Royale”). But Bibb, who is fifty,

doesn't like to be pigeonholed. "Somebody looks at you, puts you in a category," she said recently. That, she thinks, is a big theme this season on "The White Lotus," in which Bibb, Carrie Coon, and Michelle Monaghan play three gal pals vacationing in Thailand whose friendship fractures as each twosome gossips about the third. In one scene, the other two realize with horror that Bibb's character, a Texas socialite, has become a churchgoing conservative—she may even have voted for *Trump*.

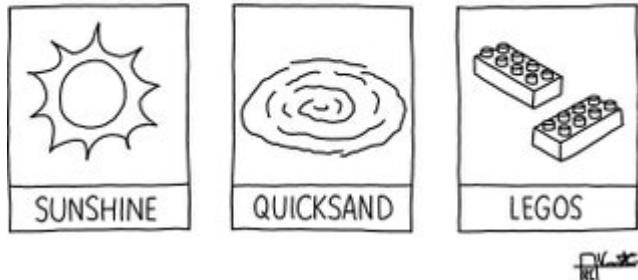
"It's putting somebody in a category," Bibb said, "instead of stopping to be, like, 'You knew me when I was going to be the best version of myself, and now I'm this version of myself. Will you still love me?'" She was at a coffeehouse in the East Village; Bibb keeps an apartment downtown, with her longtime partner, Sam Rockwell, who also appears on "The White Lotus," as a lowlife adrift in Bangkok. (The season finale airs this weekend.) The couple met in 2007, in L.A.; Bibb was having dinner at the Chateau Marmont, where Rockwell was staying while he filmed "Frost/Nixon." "I always say we fell in love in Room 68," she said.

Bibb grew up in Virginia, and, at sixteen, she won a modelling contest on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." "My mom sent in a couple of pictures," she recalled. "I joke that they were the only two with my head attached, because she was a terrible photographer." Bibb got a contract with Elite Model Management and spent a week in New York, where her world opened up. Two years later, she dropped out of college and moved to East Sixteenth Street. She posed for catalogues and for *Seventeen*, but she treated modelling as a springboard for acting. As she left the coffeehouse and walked down Second Avenue, people gasped at the sight of her. "This 'White Lotus' thing is *wild*," she said.

At Dashwood Projects, a gallery on East Fourth, she greeted Philip Huang, a designer who splits his time between Bangkok and Bushwick. Huang, himself a runway model, took an indigo-dyeing workshop in 2014, then spent two years, with his wife, learning Indigenous methods from the grandmothers of northeastern Thailand. He opened his [eponymous label](#) in 2016; his tie-dyed indigo socks sold like hotcakes during the pandemic. Huang has a friend in common with Mike White, and in Thailand he offered

dyeing lessons to the cast. Bibb took one there, along with her co-star Aimee Lou Wood, and had cajoled him into another.

THINGS JESUS CAN'T WALK ON



Cartoon by Amanda Chung and Vincent Coca

As Huang explained, *Indigofera tinctoria* has been cultivated for millennia; it was once used as currency, or “blue gold.” “We take all the branches and the leaves and put it in one big barrel,” he said. “Then we add a burnt seashell to it, which makes it alkaline, like a pickling lime.” Indigo paste was fermenting in a plastic vat, to which he’d added apple cider and a shot of vodka. (“It pretty much lives off sugar and alcohol, like us.”) It had a nice, musky smell. Huang gave Bibb a white T-shirt and some twine and showed her how to tie the fabric into a sausage shape. Then he instructed her to plunge the shirt in a bucket of cold water, “to open up the fibres.”

“So crazy that we did this in Bangkok, and now we’re doing it in the East Village!” Bibb said. She dipped the shirt in the indigo until it turned chartreuse, then placed it on a silver tray in the sun, where it oxidized into a deep blue. In Thailand, Huang had given a lesson to Patrick Schwarzenegger, Sam Nivola, and Sarah Catherine Hook, who play siblings on the show. “Does Patrick talk about food all the time?” he asked. “He was looking at a pile of rubber bands and said, ‘That looks like pasta. I’m so hungry right now.’ ”

“That kid eats, like, two breakfasts,” Bibb said. “All he thinks about is food.” After a second indigo dip, she rinsed her shirt three times in clean water and once with vinegar, to neutralize the pH level. Finally, she snipped off the twine and unfurled her shirt, which had a trippy striped pattern.

“I love the sausage! ” Bibb squealed. She had blue splotches on her forearms and jeans, but she was giddy. “Sam and I just bought a house upstate, and I want to wear my new shirt in my back yard with my dog, with Sam, in late afternoon,” she said, in a reverie. ♦



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

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[Doppelgänger Dept.](#)

The Instagrammer Who Floats Like James Harden and Shoots Like Shaq

Maxim Peranidze, a twenty-six-year-old Angeleno from Moldova, has a knack for impersonating basketball stars, aided by fake beards, embellished jerseys, and his twin, Gene.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

March 31, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

James Harden, the Los Angeles Clippers prolific shooting guard, recently scored fifty points in a game for the twenty-fourth time. The next day, Maxim Peranidze, a twenty-six-year-old Angeleno born in Moldova, headed to an indoor basketball court in the San Fernando Valley which he'd rented with his twin brother, Gene. "I was, like, 'Bet—I got him,'" Peranidze said, of Harden. He set to work. The Clippers star has been something of a white whale for Peranidze, who may be the world's greatest online impersonator of professional basketball players. For one thing, Harden is left-handed and Peranidze is better with his right. For another, it's difficult to grow a beard like Harden's, which overtakes the face. Peranidze had ordered a fake one from Amazon. "Like, nine dollars," he said. Soon, he'd put up a [new post](#) on his Instagram account, @MaxIsNicee (a million followers), captioned "Harden Floaters Be Like." Peranidze nailed Harden's loping and off-kilter lethality, which he described as "He nice."

A couple of days later, Peranidze, who is six feet one, was back at the gym with his brother, working on another Clipper. "Zubac easy," Peranidze said, referring to Ivica Zubac, the seven-foot Croatian center. "I'm good with slow white guys." He noted his mastery of the reigning M.V.P., Nikola Jokić, and of the likely future M.V.P. Luka Dončić. Peranidze pulled on his Zubac jersey and a white sleeve. He took a minute to plan some moves with Gene, who is three inches shorter, twenty minutes older, and quieter. In Max's videos, Gene tends to play a generic point guard or a hapless defender. (If a taller sidekick is needed, Max calls his friend Ron Artest III, the son of the former N.B.A. star once known as Metta World Peace.)

"I'm gonna set you a screen," Max said. Gene nodded. Then Max did a few floppy-armed rehearsal spins toward the basket after setting the screen on an imagined defender. He looked at Gene. "Bet," he said.

"Bet," Gene replied.

"G. and me work good together," Peranidze said. "We don't gotta talk."

With a grunt, he rolled off his screen, caught a pass, and just barely flushed it, Zubac style, through the hoop, which Gene had lowered to eight feet. He headed back up the court, arms flailing.

“I told you, he got no control,” Peranidze said afterward. “He goofy.”

Some players chafe at Peranidze’s mimicry. “I did Angel,” he said, referring to [a video](#) he made pretending to be the Chicago Sky’s Angel Reese, in heels, a skirt, and a wig. “I think she mad.” He shrugged. But most players seem to enjoy it. When he did the New York Liberty’s [Breanna Stewart](#), she responded with laughing emojis.

He shot some jumpers in the manner of Larry Bird. A request was made from the sidelines for Trae Young. “I saw his dad at All-Star weekend,” Peranidze said. “He was, like, ‘We need a new Trae video.’ I was, like, ‘I got you, Pops.’” Peranidze has D.M.’d with Dennis Rodman (“Make. Me. Next,” Rodman wrote) and Mark Cuban (“Love the impressions”), and has FaceTimed with Jordan Poole. “He was, like, ‘Bro, that video of Luka and the G.M. was hilarious,’” Peranidze said, referring to his take on the Dallas Mavericks general manager beholding his former star.

“I got jerseys for almost every guy in the league,” Peranidze went on. They’re mostly knockoffs, which he alters with scissors and safety pins if needed. “When guys are traded, I arts-and-crafts their names onto the new team’s jersey,” he said. He swished a three and did Young’s trademark shiver.

A request was made for a free throw à la Shaquille O’Neal. Peranidze pulled a Lakers jersey from his gym bag, where he also keeps a can of sore-muscle spray and his beards and wigs. “I had class with his son in high school,” Peranidze said, referring to O’Neal. “I think we both failed. I know I did.” He turned to his brother: “G., lemme see your phone.” Peranidze briefly consulted YouTube. “O.K.,” he said. “I got it.” He stepped up to the line with his arms awkwardly outstretched and the ball in his fingertips. Clang. He lumbered away.

“Wanna see LeBron?” he asked. “That’s who people think of when they think of me. I walk out in public sometimes and people be, like, ‘Do Bron!’” He put on a gray beard—LeBron James turned forty last year—then shuffled backward downcourt, like James, blowing on each hand. “Low key, it helps to wear the jersey,” he said.

His phone rang: his mom. He spoke Russian for a few minutes. “Health insurance,” he said, after hanging up. “I’m bad with that type of shit.” ♦



[Charles Bethea](#), a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2008. He covers crime, politics, food, local media, and the American South.

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The Boards

Kevin McDonald, Superstar!

In his new rock opera, the Canadian comedian and *Kids in the Hall* veteran conjures a boozy night from the nineties, with an assist from Dave Hill on electric guitar.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

March 31, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

The other day, Kevin McDonald, the curly-haired actor-comedian best known as one of the *Kids in the Hall*, the beloved Canadian comedy troupe, invited a few people to a rehearsal in a tiny hotel room in lower Manhattan. One guest's knock had a rhythm similar to "shave and a haircut."

McDonald knocked back “two bits,” then opened the door. “I had to do the callback,” he said, looking pleased. “And I *did* shave today.” McDonald, who lives in Winnipeg, was in town to perform his rock opera in progress, “Kevin McDonald Superstar,” at the SoHo Playhouse, with friends like his fellow-comedians Dave Hill and Janeane Garofalo. McDonald’s curls are now gray, and he was wiry and energetic in an oversized hoodie. The hotel room was angular and spare—one bed, one chair, two bananas—and it overlooked an H.V.A.C. system. “I opened the curtains so we could see the view,” McDonald said. “I’ll close them when I’m alone later, crying.” Two young collaborators, John Wlaysewski and Aaron Tarnow, sat on the bed, with librettos. Wlaysewski, the show’s music director, held an acoustic guitar. “I’ll be Joan Rivers,” he said.

“Kevin McDonald Superstar,” with music and lyrics by McDonald, centers on a few days of youthful idiocy in 1991—when the “Kids in the Hall” series was on HBO—during which he and his fellow-Kid Dave Foley travelled from Toronto to New York to appear on Joan Rivers’s talk show. The night before the taping, in an effort to whoop it up in New York, the pair attended a gala charity event—an AIDS benefit, featuring the band Deee-Lite. Drunken mayhem and bad decisions, some atop a buffet table, ensued. “Kevin McDonald Superstar,” like one of its inspirations, “Jesus Christ Superstar,” has themes of fame, doubt, betrayal, and alcohol. Wlaysewski began strumming a plaintive ballad with an air of foreboding. “Kevin, do you want to start out being Lorne Michaels?” Tarnow asked. (Michaels produced “The Kids in the Hall.”)

“You know, the thing about this is, I’ll kill them,” McDonald said, in a Lorne voice. As himself, he sang, “Joan Rivers says . . .”

“Can we talk? Can we talk?” Wlaysewski said.

“Dave and Kevin say,” McDonald sang.

“No—’cuz we’re drunk,” McDonald and Tarnow sang. They sang of on-camera mumbling, dehydration, and wooziness; the last line was “Get them off my set!” Other numbers were more rollicking; McDonald danced in a style that suggested a frenetic hybrid of the frug and the mashed potato. “I cheated on you / with a Howard Stern fan / at an AIDS benefit,” he sang. On

“I will never cheat, never cheat again / Except on taxes / But only if it’s done quasi-legally,” he hit an operatic series of notes, almost like yodelling. Tarnow looked up, wide-eyed. “Wow,” he said.

“I’m trying to make it like Frank Sinatra, phrasing when I want,” McDonald said.

“That’s the first thing I thought of—Ol’ Blue Eyes,” Wlaysewski said. Then another knock at the door: the comedian Frank Conniff, who’d be playing Dave Foley. “I can’t sing, but I sang a lot on ‘Mystery Science Theater,’ ” he said. Wlaysewski reassured him: “I play defensive guitar.” They began. “Why are those silly heteros / Fucking up this AIDS benefit?” everyone sang.

After rehearsal, the gang went to Harney & Sons for a vocals-friendly round of tea. McDonald jostled, and apologized to, a “*HAVE A TEA-RIFFIC DAY!*” sign, then sat at a table and recalled his musical journey. “I’ve always had a knack for melody,” he said. As a kid, in Toronto, “I’d hum songs and write lyrics I thought were witty. I’d sing them to my mother as she was washing the dishes.” Artistic revelations came early. First, the Beatles; second, “King Kong” (“I thought, Wow! Movies could *be* that good?”); and third, in Catholic school, “Jesus Christ Superstar,” which blew his mind. “The relationship between Jesus and Judas—ambiguous!” he recalled. “That was the key thing in the seventies. I went to Sam the Record Man and bought the movie soundtrack. I tried to write it all down, like I’d done with ‘Young Frankenstein.’ It made me love rock opera.” Kids in the Hall, which he formed with Foley, Bruce McCulloch, Scott Thompson, and Mark McKinney, in 1984, had a punk comedy sensibility—and punk is part of what later bonded him with Dave Hill, who would open that week’s shows and play multiple roles. They met at Sketchfest in San Francisco, in 2023, duetting on “Institutionalized,” the Suicidal Tendencies song from “Repo Man.” “I had a comedy crush on him,” McDonald said. It intensified a year later, when Hill caused a punkish ruckus at a hockey game in Anaheim. “I was watching, because the Leafs were playing,” McDonald said. In an electric-guitar performance that circulated online, Hill played both the U.S. and Canadian national anthems Hendrix style, with shredding.

McDonald laughed. “You see the players on the ice—they’re like this.” He made an “agog” face. “They were like the guys at the *AIDS* benefit.” ♦



[Sarah Larson](#), a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2007.

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Does the Knot Have a “Fake Brides” Problem?

The popular wedding website helps d.j.s, caterers, and florists find spouses-to-be. Some vendors say they’re finding something else.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

March 31, 2025



“It’s very fishy,” one venue owner said, to get so many leads and so few replies. Illustration by Josie Norton

On a recent afternoon, a dressmaker named Sergio Guadarrama rummaged through a pile of fabric. He and his partner had converted the living room of their home, in Hudson, New York, into a bridal atelier. Rolls of satin were stacked under a worktable; a mannequin in a strapless gown made of

Chantilly lace stood near an armoire. Scattered around were five sewing machines and hundreds of yards of organic linen, greige hemp canvas, ombré silk brocade, and all manner of other textiles. Guadarrama had the look of a man at ease—leather slippers, a loose denim shirt, and a big, bright smile—though his eyes betrayed a hint of exhaustion. After a few minutes, he found what he was searching for and held it up: a swatch of vintage flower-printed silk voile from Christian Dior. “This one is to *die* for!” he said.

The Dior fabric would be sewn into a custom wedding dress for a twenty-five-year-old bride-to-be, Keelie Verbeek, who had just driven down from New Hampshire. Verbeek arrived at Guadarrama’s house with her sister, her mother, two pairs of high heels, and her mother’s wedding gown (bespoke, purchased at a bridal shop in Cicero, New York, in the eighties), which she wanted to incorporate into her own dress, somehow. Guadarrama suggested that he could remove tiny pearls from the old gown’s surface and sew them onto the new one. “I can kind of sprinkle them in,” he said. Verbeek nervously glanced at her mother, who shrugged. Then she disappeared into Guadarrama’s bathroom for her first fitting, with a prototype made from cotton muslin. Kade Johnson, Guadarrama’s business partner and fiancé, cautioned, “We had to leave the toilet seat up, because the cat pees in the toilet here.”

A few minutes later, the bride emerged. Guadarrama eyed her up and down, took some measurements, made a few quick alterations, and then began to pepper her with questions about her bra. The dress, which cost nearly thirteen thousand dollars—typical for a couture bridal gown—would require six fittings in all.

As Verbeek changed back into her street clothes, the conversation turned to other elements of the wedding, which was going to be held, in eleven months, at the former estate of the sculptor Daniel Chester French, in the Berkshires. The reception would feature biodegradable confetti, small-batch Albanian olive oil, and, as Verbeek put it, “emotional-support chocolate.” Although she had already picked most of her wedding vendors, including a celebrity makeup artist—recommended by Guadarrama—and a hairdresser from Maryland, she still needed a florist and a photographer, she said, and

had been browsing the Knot, a popular wedding-planning platform. In addition to hosting gift registries and wedding websites, and offering reception ideas and relationship advice (“What to Know About Walmart Wedding Cakes,” “How to Prepare for Sex on Your Wedding Night,” “Dislike Your Spouse’s Last Name? Here’s What to Do”), the Knot is used by millions of couples to find their wedding vendors, who pay to advertise on it. When Verbeek mentioned the Knot, Guadarrama shook his head and frowned.

“Should I not do that?” Verbeek asked.

“They’re doing some *baaaad*, shady stuff behind the scenes,” Guadarrama said. He started to explain, but the bride told him that she was running late for her next appointment, at the venue. She needed to decide whether to order custom floating lily pads for the fish pond, and to review where the turreted sailcloth tent and dance floor would be constructed.

After the bridal party left, Guadarrama and Johnson sat down at their dining table and told me that before coming to Hudson they had run an atelier in Manhattan. “We were having success after success after success,” Guadarrama said. They had dressed Kesha, JoJo, Tiffany Haddish. For the 2019 Tony Awards, they made Billy Porter a velvet Elizabethan gown from actual Broadway stage curtains. After a financial setback, the couple decided to move upstate and begin again—right as the pandemic all but shut down the bridal industry. Business tanked. On a chilly winter day in 2022, a saleswoman from the Knot called Guadarrama, in response to a form he’d filled out online. If he signed up for a premium advertising package, the saleswoman said, he could expect between eighty and two hundred and forty brides to contact him each month. Johnson thought this sounded implausible, but, despite his misgivings, the couple signed a yearlong advertising contract with the Knot, for five thousand eight hundred dollars. “We were looking at the Knot as a beacon of hope,” Johnson told me. “And it was the complete opposite.”

Guadarrama said, “The Knot was, like, the final nail in the coffin.”

Couples who are getting married tend to hear the same advice over and over: “Get good at forgiveness.” “Learn the wisdom of compromise.”

“Don’t forget to chill the champagne.” When it comes to the wedding itself, the National Association of Wedding Professionals insists that every reception is better with balloons. The Association of Bridal Consultants recommends stocking extra toilet paper, just in case. If you want a quick cure for a rehearsal-dinner hangover, you can hire registered nurses to arrive with the hair and makeup professionals, carrying I.V. bags infused with vitamins or anti-nausea medicine. Cold feet? A man from Spain might be available to crash your wedding. (Going rate: five hundred euros.) “I’ll show up at the ceremony, claim to be the love of your life, and we’ll leave hand in hand,” he told a Spanish TV station. Marcy Blum, a wedding planner who has orchestrated celebrations for LeBron James, members of the Rockefeller family, Bill Gates’s oldest daughter, and, once, a woman who demanded that no other brides be present in the same Italian town on the day of her ceremony, told me, “I will spend whatever it takes of my client’s money to make sure there’s enough bartenders before I’ll put a flower on the table.”

Each year, Americans drop roughly seventy billion dollars hosting weddings. Most people think that this is too much—that couples are overspending, that venders are overcharging, and that the wedding-industrial complex verges on unethical. After all, many weddings *are* excessive and wasteful. (In New York City, the average cost is eighty-eight thousand dollars.) The wedding planner Colin Cowie, whose clients range from Tiësto (“Happily married,” Cowie boasted) to Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck (“I get them down the aisle fabulously, but they’re on their own thereafter”), told me that he hires hundreds of venders for every event: invitation managers, shoe-check attendants, babysitters, ice carvers, drone operators, and caviar servers. “Once, we built a church,” he said.

Even more modest affairs can involve a phalanx of venders; the average number brought on per wedding is fourteen. These small-business owners often begin as amateurs pursuing a side gig: students moonlighting as wedding photographers, cashiers doing calligraphy after work. Typically, surges of new venders follow layoffs in corporate America. “People cash in their 401(k)s, and they start a business,” Marc McIntosh, a wedding guru who regularly speaks at conferences like WeddingMBA, told me. “A lot of people go into this industry because they’re good at something—they bake

good cakes, and their family says, ‘You should go into the wedding-cake business!’ ” But being good at something doesn’t mean you’re good at running a business. And running a wedding business is especially tough: there are hundreds of thousands of competitors; costs are rising, owing in part to inflation; and, for many vendors, bookings and budgets have decreased by about twenty-five per cent. According to a recent industry survey, a third of all wedding vendors said that they are doing poorer financially than they were a year ago. “Florists are the worst,” McIntosh said. “There are so many broke florists.”

A reliable way for a florist to avoid going broke used to be by advertising in glossy magazines like *Brides* or *Martha Stewart Weddings*. By the early two-thousands, wedding marketing, like everything else, was increasingly shifting online. When Blum started her planning business, in Manhattan, in 1987, she took out a small ad in *New York*. Ten years later, she had become the city’s unofficial wedding czar, and four friends who’d met at N.Y.U.’s film school approached her for advice. “They were, like, ‘We’re going to start this website about weddings,’ ” Blum recalled. “And I said, ‘That’s the cutest thing that I’ve ever heard. Let me introduce you to everybody.’ ” The website was the Knot, and the four friends created it with about one and a half million dollars in seed funding from AOL. “In those days, it was a joke,” Blum said.



“Now batting, two friends engaged in a platonic baseball lesson, about to discover an unspoken attraction.”

Cartoon by Jon Adams

Within a few years, the Knot was a juggernaut—the Yellow Pages of the wedding industry. By 1999, when it went public, two of the company’s co-founders, Carley Roney and David Liu, who are married, had become veritable wedding moguls. The couple started a reality show about wedding planning, launched a magazine, and purchased weddingchannel.com, an online bridal registry. Roney appeared regularly on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and “The View.” In an episode during Season 2 of “The Apprentice,” contestants raced to open a bridal shop and sell wedding dresses. One team spent its entire marketing budget with the Knot—and won. “Our phone went off the hook after that,” Liu told me. “I’m almost ashamed, but, like, some of our success has to be attributed to idiot Trump and that show.”

In 2018, XO Group, the Knot’s corporate parent, was acquired by its biggest competitor, a company called WeddingWire, in a private-equity-backed deal worth almost a billion dollars. By then, Roney and Liu were out. The Knot Worldwide became a privately held company.

Last year, the Knot facilitated four billion dollars in consumer spending via advertising on its platforms. Most of the company’s revenue comes not from brides and grooms but from wedding vendors. Nine hundred thousand vendors in more than ten countries use the Knot, and many pay to be advertised to couples—“leads,” in industry parlance—seeking their services. Ronnie Rothstein, who, at eighty-two years old, is the C.E.O. of Kleinfeld Bridal, one of the largest wedding-dress retailers in America and a mainstay on the reality show “Say Yes to the Dress,” told me, “Every wedding vendor needs a qualified lead.” He went on, “Most of these businesses are family businesses, and they need help to get as many people into the door as possible.”

After Guadarrama signed his advertising contract with the Knot, he started receiving a flood of inquiries from couples. Many of the messages seemed bland or formulaic. “Hello—we are getting married,” one groom wrote. A bride asked, “Could you send over some more info about the products and services you offer?” Guadarrama always responded immediately, and repeatedly followed up. At first, he was optimistic. But, week after week, he never heard anything in return.

Curious to learn more about the vendor experience, and being a weekend cake baker myself, I decided to fill out a vendor contact form on the Knot's website to get some basic information about the contract terms. A Knot representative soon called me. She was encouraging about the brides and grooms who would be spending money on my fictitious wedding operation. "People do go over budget sixty-two per cent in your particular area," she said. After a long discussion about pricing and placement, she said that, if I wanted to take my business to the next level, a twelve-hundred-dollar-per-month advertising package might be appropriate. (Later, the Knot characterized this call as an attempt to "entrap and bait our salesperson" and accused me of being "ethically challenged.") I also spoke at length with dozens of wedding vendors across the United States. David Sachs, a wedding photographer in Northern California, started advertising with the Knot in 2016, after giving up on becoming an actor. "The Knot was the biggest directory at the time, so I figured I would just do what everyone else was doing," Sachs told me. Initially, he got some clients from the site. "Sales were higher than expenses, and that was good enough for me," he said. But after a few years brides stopped reaching out, and he called his sales rep to complain. A new, pushier rep talked him out of closing his account and persuaded him to upgrade to the most expensive advertising tier. "I started spending a thousand dollars a month," he told me. Then a torrent of leads arrived, via the Knot's online vendor portal. Often, he'd talk to the potential customers by phone. "It felt like all the brides were reading from a script," he said. "I could hear other calls in the background, and they all had the same lilting tone. That's when I realized, they have a literal phone bank of people who are faking leads."

When I asked the Knot about this, a spokeswoman said, "We do not tolerate fraudulent practices." She went on, "The Knot Worldwide does not employ any individuals or teams who act as fake couples to send fake leads to vendors. We have no financial incentive to engage in such conduct, and it is antithetical to our business." But more than twenty wedding vendors who advertise with the Knot told me that they've received inquiries from what they believe are fake brides. Matt Pierce, a wedding photographer in Texas, said that he'd exchanged e-mails with someone who was getting married in a few days. Pierce called the wedding venue, he told me, and the woman who ran it said, "You, too, huh? You're about the twelfth photographer

that's called here today about a wedding this weekend." There was no wedding.

Documents I obtained from the Federal Trade Commission reflect that, since 2018, more than two hundred formal complaints have been made about allegedly fraudulent activity on the Knot and WeddingWire. One vendor wrote, "I paid around \$12,000 and got absolutely nothing to show for it." Another said, "My business is on the verge of going bankrupt. I would happily pay for the service [if] it was providing me what was promised, but it has not."

Vendors have also shared their grievances on several private Facebook groups, one of which features a stock photo of an enraged bride wielding a pistol. (Sample posts: "Hi! New victim here!"; "I'm in a war with the Knot"; "Can we get together for a class-action lawsuit?"; and "You know what would be more powerful than a lawsuit? A Netflix documentary . . .") Vendors in the group suspected infiltration by Knot employees. A post read, "We found two spies here who worked for The Knot. They know about us. And, they should be scared." A couple of years ago, an online petition was launched in an effort to spur regulatory action. "This petition is going to congressional leaders," the organizer wrote. Comments from signatories include:

I've been robbed

this company is a scam

They have sent me nothing but fakes brides for years

Mike Cassara, a wedding photographer, influencer, and podcast host, told me that he and his co-host, Lauren O'Brien, regularly receive D.M.s on Instagram from wedding vendors who complain about "fake brides" and "bad leads" from the Knot. He told me, "Their stories are endless! If this was five people, I'd question it. If it was ten people, twenty people, even a hundred people, I'd question it. But we've had thousands of people saying the same thing: 'They're ripping me off.' "

As I was reporting this story, the Knot had multiple outside communication firms correspond with me. One of them got in touch through a representative who had a résumé that included “successful presidential pardons” and “hostage and kidnapping recovery.” In the past six months, I contacted more than seventy current and former employees of the Knot, because I wanted to better understand the wedding venders’ claims. Almost all who agreed to speak with me requested anonymity, citing N.D.A.s or fear of retaliation. One former saleswoman said that, after her vendors had complained to her about lead troubles, she recognized that many of the leads seemed like they might be fake. But she was working on commission, and it wasn’t in her interest to let clients out of their annual contracts; if she lost too many, she might lose her own job. Bretta Thompson, an Indianapolis-based wedding planner and officiant who advertised on the site, told me, “It was like pulling teeth to get anyone at the Knot to contact me. It would take weeks to get a response back, via e-mail, and then it was always *my* fault.” Another former saleswoman put it more plainly: “We fucked over vendors.” (“We strongly dispute these claims,” the spokeswoman for the Knot said.)

Many vendors I spoke with told me variations of the “fake brides” story, and took it upon themselves to conduct investigations, which produced results that were sometimes difficult to verify. Nicole Hobbs, who worked as a wedding photographer in Nashville, said that she had been contacted by people who, upon further inquiry, had already exchanged vows. “I was even able to confirm that one of the ‘grooms’ was actually a married minister in a different state,” she claimed. Darryl Cameron II, a part-time d.j. in Cleveland, Ohio, said that he’d received dozens of fake leads from the Knot. “These folks are real,” he told me. “But I’ve looked several up in the county database, and they’re married already!” Jeffrey Caddell, who owns a wedding venue in Alabama, told me, “All I can say is, it’s very fishy when you have hundreds and hundreds of leads and only a handful of responses.”

In David Mamet’s play “Glengarry Glen Ross,” a beleaguered real-estate salesman explains that he isn’t closing deals because his boss has been giving him bad leads. “I’m getting garbage,” he says. “You’re giving it to me, and what I’m saying is, it’s *fucked*.” Most leads for most vendors in most industries don’t ever amount to anything—it’s hard work chasing

down a lead, as any salesperson will attest—and the wedding industry is particularly challenging. Brides are regarded by wedding professionals as fickle and elusive. Marc McIntosh, the wedding guru, told me, “A couple planning a wedding has a to-do list, and everything on that list is something they’ve never bought before, from a company they’ve never heard of before. And they don’t have a lot of time.” Ronnie Rothstein, of Kleinfeld Bridal, said, “When a girl gets engaged, she’s gonna talk to *everyone*.”

Not every wedding vender hates the Knot. Allison Shapiro Winterton, a wedding-cake baker, considers it a “very honest business.” Steven Burchard, a d.j. and magician who runs a nationwide entertainment company, said that during engagement season—between Thanksgiving and Valentine’s Day—he usually receives about a dozen leads a week from the Knot. He follows up with each of them numerous times, and many do end up booking him. “You’ve gotta remember, there *are* tire kickers,” he told me. “Is that a fake lead? Or is it just someone who isn’t interested?”

Jeff MacGurn, who owns a wedding venue in the San Jacinto Mountains, told me, “The Knot’s great! And I’m uniquely positioned to comment on that.” In addition to operating the venue, MacGurn works for a digital-marketing firm. “When I’m judging the Knot, it’s not me saying, ‘I *think* it’s working.’ I *know* it’s working,” he said. “There’s a return on investment, for sure.” By his estimate, each lead from the Knot costs between twenty-two and thirty dollars. Most couples reach out once, then never again; booking a single wedding might require as much as nine hundred dollars in ad spend. “I can sit here and blame the Knot for bad leads,” MacGurn said. “But oftentimes I would look at my process, and I’d be, like, this is why we’re not closing”—not following up enough, not following up quickly enough, asking a prospective bride too many questions. Other venders, he noted, could stand to improve their tactics.

But, for many venders, so few leads have worked out that their tactics seem beside the point. They believe that the Knot inflates its lead numbers by allowing couples to simultaneously send form-letter inquiries to multiple vendors. “People are getting leads that aren’t really for them,” McIntosh told me. “But, when it comes time to renew, the Knot can say, ‘We sent you five hundred leads this year,’ even though only five were really for you.”

The company's spokeswoman explained, "We have a tool that makes it easier for couples to reach out and start a conversation with vendors using templated language." For instance, if a couple browsing the site decides to ask for a quote from their dream d.j., they will afterward be presented with a pop-up that invites them to send auto-populated messages to several other vendors. The spokeswoman cautioned that vendors "may misinterpret" such messages as spam, but that "spam is not a widespread problem" and "less than one per cent of leads delivered to vendors in the U.S. were reported by vendors as spam."

Rothstein, who has advertised with the Knot for more than two decades, told me he was confident that the company wasn't intentionally sending bad leads. "We don't find them to be dishonest whatsoever," he said. Rather, in recent years, the Knot simply stopped working well for them as a lead-generation platform. "They've become less effective," he said. Jennifer Shipe, Rothstein's chief marketing officer, said that she could spend Kleinfeld's advertising dollars better elsewhere. Recently, she had her team manually compare every e-mail that originated from the Knot with the e-mail addresses of brides who booked appointments at their stores. "I don't think we got anything out of it," she told me.

Several days after I spoke with Shipe, Rothstein called me back—"I spoke to the Knot today!" he said—and clarified that a few of the leads might have led to appointments, about one tenth of one per cent of them, not zero. "We have a fucking phenomenal relationship with the Knot," he said. "Neither one of us wants to fuck up that relationship." He went on, "The leads don't work, but I get great editorial from them. There aren't that many magazines anymore. They're it—numero uno! There's no place else to go." Many unhappy vendors were reluctant to have me publish their names—or even their stories—in this article, for fear of retaliation by the Knot. Laura Cannon, who runs the International Association of Professional Wedding Officiants, told me, "They dominate the market." Dozens of Cannon's members have received suspicious leads from the Knot, but were too scared to say anything publicly. She continued, "You feel like you're in an abusive relationship. I've thought about leaving the wedding industry, because what else can I do? It's *their* industry now."

Recently, I asked Tamas Kadar, the C.E.O. of a fraud-prevention firm, to review a few hundred e-mail addresses associated with suspicious leads from the Knot. He told me, “It seems like ten per cent of them are not real. We look at their digital footprint—their social-media profiles, how old is the e-mail account, does it appear elsewhere on the internet. And for ten per cent of them it’s, like, someone just opened an e-mail account.” Kadar also identified what he described as a significant vulnerability: unlike many other online services, the Knot doesn’t require users to verify their e-mail addresses when they sign up. “You don’t even have to have *access* to the e-mail account,” he said. “This could be why vendors are facing so many nonexistent leads. The Knot doesn’t conduct the right kind of verification to make sure they don’t give fake leads to their customers. This is a basic step.” He went on, “I could just ask ChatGPT Operator to go to this website, type in a fully random e-mail address, and open an account and send a hundred inquiries to random wedding venues.”

Rich Kahn, another ad-fraud expert, told me, “It’s possible they know they have a problem and they’re doing nothing about it. And it’s also possible they don’t know.” Kahn explained that more than twenty per cent of the six hundred and forty billion dollars spent globally on digital marketing each year was effectively stolen via bots and “human fraud farms”—people at computer terminals, often overseas, who generate web traffic and inflate marketing metrics by making fake Facebook profiles, clicking on Google ads, or even sending fake leads. “In digital marketing, a portion of what you’re buying is not a real audience,” he said. “But that’s not a defense. It’s on you to do something about it. If you’re a big brand, you’re supposed to be protecting your clients.”

One night last fall, after a rooftop business mixer at a hotel in Manhattan, a woman in a long, flowery dress looked down at her heels and grimaced. “These puppies are barking!” she said. A few colleagues laughed knowingly. The women, who all worked at a Mississippi dress boutique, had been on their feet for days, at previews and runway shows connected with Bridal Fashion Week. Outside the hotel, as the group waited for their Ubers, one of them turned to a woman standing nearby and, making small talk, asked, “What store do you own?” The woman, Jennifer Davidson, was dressed in a chic black dress and gold-studded heels and carrying a Chanel

purse that she had borrowed from a friend for the evening. She replied that she had spent about two decades working at the Knot. The woman from Mississippi laughed, then said that she had closed her Knot account after receiving dozens of dubious leads. “We were, like, ‘There’s no way these are legitimate,’ ” she told Davidson. The woman’s daughter, who co-owns the shop, chimed in: “We *still* get fake leads! It’d be, like, ‘Can you tell me more about your services?’ And I’d be, like, ‘Well, we’re a bridal store—what do you think we do?’ ”

Davidson, who was for many years one of the Knot’s top salespeople, was not about to defend the company. In 2015, she came to believe that it had been defrauding its biggest advertisers. By her account, the digital ads that she and her colleagues were selling were not reliably showing up on the Knot’s website. Macy’s, David’s Bridal, Kleinfeld Bridal, Justin Alexander, and even the N.F.L., she felt, had together been duped out of millions of dollars. When she alerted a vice-president at the company, John Reggio, who now works at TikTok, he told her that the Knot’s technology was flawed. “The website is duct-taped together,” Davidson recalled him saying. (I repeatedly reached out to Reggio for an interview; he declined, then said, “Please stop emailing me.”)

Davidson’s colleague Rachel LaFera reported the same issue to an executive, who exploded, LaFera recalled. “She grabbed me by both of my arms, and she started shaking the shit out of me, red-faced, spitting, saying, ‘You have to stop, just stop! You’ve got to stop bringing all this up. Stop it!’ ” LaFera said. “I was so in shock.” (When I reached out to the executive for comment, she replied, “😩,” and then said that she had mistook me for someone else. Later, she said that LaFera’s recollection was “untrue.”)

In 2017, Proskauer Rose, a prominent white-shoe law firm, was brought on to investigate the alleged advertising fraud. Executives and employees, including Davidson and LaFera, were interviewed, and the firm found no evidence of “widespread misconduct.” The Knot told me that, in the course of investigating Davidson’s allegations, a “material weakness” was identified in the “internal controls for the national advertising business” which affected approximately a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in ad purchases, and that advertisers were made whole. The Securities and

Exchange Commission also conducted an investigation, according to the Knot, “and did not pursue any action.” But Davidson believes that employees lied to government officials and mucked up the S.E.C. investigation. (The Knot said, “There is no evidence to support an assertion that any employees were untruthful.”)



“These recipe videos are giving me a lot of great ideas for what I want to order for dinner.”
Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

Davidson, LaFera, and Cindy Elley, who is Davidson’s sister and also worked at the Knot—the trio call themselves “the Knot Whistleblowers”—have an end-to-end encrypted e-mail account to field tips. In the past eight years, they say that they have contacted more than a hundred and fifteen current and former employees and secretly recorded many of the conversations with the aim of persuading the S.E.C., and possibly other government agencies, to mount a new inquiry into the company. (If the S.E.C. collects damages from the Knot, the trio stands to make up to thirty per cent of any potential recovery, thanks to a program that rewards whistleblowers for coming forward.)

I went to visit Davidson at her home, near Charleston, South Carolina. She and I sat on her patio, and she played me several of the recordings, all of which she insists were obtained legally. (“We put our Nancy Drew hats on,” she said.) In one tape, LaFera can be heard chatting with a former Knot executive at a restaurant in New York. The two had met up to share war stories from their time with the company, and LaFera had worn hidden mikes that were taped to her shoulders. “Getting out was the best thing,” the

former executive said. Another recording featured a former employee, Dave Harkensee, who oversaw a team of sales reps at the Knot. Harkensee said to Davidson, “We actually send out messages on behalf of these couples that don’t even realize we’re doing it.” He went on, “It’s almost, honestly, gaslighting these vendors, saying, ‘Hey, we’re sending you leads. You’re just not able to convert them.’ But it’s actually, like, these are not viable leads. These aren’t legit at all.” (Harkensee denied that this conversation took place. The spokeswoman for the Knot said, “We do not send leads on behalf of couples without their consent.”)

In 2023, the *New York Post* published an article about Davidson’s initial allegations. “The Knot has been accused of systematically swindling clients for years,” the piece read. Weeks later, *Forbes* followed up: “How Wedding Giant the Knot Pulled the Veil Over Advertisers’ Eyes.” That year, the trio reached out to the office of Charles Grassley, a U.S. senator from Iowa who is an advocate for whistle-blowers. (Grassley is also known around Capitol Hill as something of a matchmaker. Per the *Washington Post*: “Forget dating apps. Sen. Grassley’s office has produced 20 marriages.”) Last week, Grassley, who chairs the Senate Judiciary Committee, sent a letter to the acting chairman of the S.E.C. and the chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, asking them about wrongdoing at the Knot. “I have recently been alerted of alleged deceptive business practices by the Knot from several Iowa small businesses that suspect they have been defrauded,” he wrote. “What steps have you taken to investigate the allegations? I would like to know, and I’m sure all these small businesses would as well.”

In the living-room bridal atelier in Hudson, Sergio Guadarrama elaborated on the setback that had led him to the Knot. In 2019, he was cast on the reality show “Project Runway.” The appearance backfired; he came across as a villain, and the dress orders for his business, Celestino Couture, plummeted. “People came up to me randomly in the street and said, ‘Oh, you’re *that* fucking guy,’ ” Guadarrama recalled. Moving upstate had seemed like the best way to get a fresh start. Then came the pandemic, and then came the Knot.

After signing up, Guadarrama and Johnson sent their first payment to the Knot—about five hundred dollars, money that should have gone toward

their rent. “That was a lot of fucking money at the time, especially when we had no money coming in,” Johnson said. They got fifteen leads, but a month went by with no responses. One spring afternoon, Guadarrama called the phone number listed on a lead. He said that the woman who picked up told him, “I never signed up for the Knot! I’m not even getting married. Who are you?”

I contacted all the suspicious leads that Guadarrama had received from the Knot, and only a few people replied. Of those who did, one woman told me that she would not have sent a message to him because she had already bought her dress—and her ex-fiancé lived in Hudson. “It makes zero sense that I would want to go to Hudson,” she said. Then she logged into her account and found that a message *had* been sent to Guadarrama, likely via the pop-up template outreach feature, which she had forgotten all about. Another woman told me, “I never heard of Celestino Couture.” She wouldn’t have contacted the business, she said, because when Guadarrama received her supposed inquiry she had already made plans to buy a wedding dress in Europe.

Guadarrama tried to cancel his contract with the Knot, but the company refused to let him out of his yearlong commitment. So, like many vendors I spoke with, he closed his bank account to prevent the Knot from continuing to withdraw payments. When I asked the Knot about this, the spokeswoman said that “contract terms are clearly disclosed by our sales representatives,” who are “trained to specifically mention that no number of leads are guaranteed.” Other vendors told me that they’d cancelled their credit cards; some uploaded banners to their Knot profiles that read “*DON’T USE THE KNOT*” and filed complaints with the Better Business Bureau.

Carley Roney and David Liu, the company’s co-founders, trace the increasing number of lead complaints to the private-equity acquisition. Liu stepped down from the Knot’s board a few months before the deal. (Roney left the company in 2014.) “We felt like twenty years of our lives had been flushed down the drain,” Liu said.

“It’s a tragedy to us what’s become of our life’s work,” Roney added.

Before the acquisition, the Knot was generating about twenty million dollars in cash flow each year; as part of the deal's financing, the Knot Worldwide took on hundreds of millions in debt. "To pay the interest on that much debt would essentially cripple a business," Liu said. Any company in that position would need to cut costs and generate a *lot* of revenue. Liu wouldn't comment directly on the allegations of fake leads or fraud, but that kind of financial obligation, he said, would mean that "the experience of the consumers is gonna suffer." He added, "Who ultimately loses? The brides—and the local venders."

In March, a Knot employee named Thomas Chelednik addressed a ballroom full of wedding vendors at a Hyatt Regency in Huntington Beach, California. He said that the company was not sending fake leads to people, and that he would quit his job if it were. The next day, Raina Moskowitz, the Knot's new C.E.O., held a virtual town hall. "We're in a moment where I think celebration and communication and community matter more than ever," Moskowitz said. She then answered pre-submitted questions, which were read aloud by a colleague: "A planner named Dolly asked, 'What are you doing to stop the fake leads created by the company and giving false hope to vendors?'" Moskowitz suggested that the vendors were mistaken. "You get a lead, but you don't hear back—and that can be incredibly frustrating," she said. "It might be perceived as fake, but I just want to name it as 'ghosting.'" She went on, "It doesn't feel great," and announced that the company is testing a new tool that she hopes will address the problem. (The Knot's spokeswoman said, "We are continually improving our spam-filter capabilities.")

Before Guadarrama and Johnson extricated themselves from their contract with the Knot, they were selling their possessions to get by—"our clothes, our shoes, anything that we could," Johnson told me. But their circumstances have since changed. In 2023, the couple, along with a business partner, opened two slow-fashion boutiques, which have been successful. Their wedding-dress business is, for now, a side hustle. They still chase every lead.

Keelie Verbeek, the twenty-five-year-old bride-to-be, had been window-shopping for chocolates and antique glassware in Hudson when she

wandered into one of Guadarrama and Johnson's boutiques. She tried on a vintage Ulla Johnson dress, as Henry, her fiancé, lingered nearby. The dress wasn't for her, but before she left Johnson commented on her engagement ring. "Did you know we also make wedding dresses?" he asked.

Verbeek laughed. She had spent six months trawling Instagram, TikTok, Facebook Marketplace, and even the Knot, searching for the perfect dress. As Henry drove them home, Verbeek scrolled through Guadarrama and Johnson's Instagram page. That afternoon, Guadarrama and Johnson received an e-mail from Verbeek: "I was hoping to be able to book a bridal consultation." Excited, they followed up immediately, and, to their surprise, someone actually replied. ♦

An earlier version of this article incorrectly described Carley Roney and David Liu's role in a reality show about wedding planning.

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

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[The Ancient World](#)

Why Catullus Continues to Seduce Us

Imbuing his work with a volatile mix of tenderness, aggression, sophistication, and obscenity, the Roman poet left a record of a divided and fascinating self.

By [Daniel Mendelsohn](#)

March 31, 2025



Catullus was so renowned that his early death occasioned public mourning, but his work was nearly lost, with just a single manuscript surviving until the Renaissance. Illustration by Irene Rinaldi

Was it something to do with *blow jobs*? Incredulous, I looked again at page 82 of my Latin textbook, then over to the entry in the dictionary; then once more at 82. From the bottom of the page, the word I'd been puzzling over all day seemed to be leering back at me. Until that moment, "[Two Centuries of Roman Poetry](#)" had struck me as harmless enough: a collection of excerpts from the major Latin poets, pitched to the reading level of an intermediate college Latin student—which is what I happened to be that

evening in the early autumn of 1979, when I learned what the word really meant and it dawned on me that there might be more to Roman verse than philosophical musing, pastoral idylls, and heroic derring-do.

In class that morning, I'd been called on to sight-translate a handful of lines by Gaius Valerius Catullus, the first-century-B.C.E. poet who, the professor had warned us, was among the most erudite and sophisticated, the most *doctus*, of all Roman writers. In the poem at hand, Catullus ruefully recalls having served on the staff of a provincial governor, bitterly referring to him —because he didn't let his subordinates enrich themselves at the expense of the locals—as an *irrumator*. When I stumbled across the unfamiliar noun, I hazarded a guess: “Cheapskate?” Professor Stocker, who'd got his Ph.D. before the Second World War and liked to wear bow ties, pursed his lips, made a face, and declared, a little too loudly, “You may render *that* word as ‘bastard.’ ”

So I did. But something about his discomfiture had made me curious. That evening, in the library, I took down a Latin dictionary from the shelf and flipped to the “I”s. Within moments, I saw why he'd hurried me past the word. According to “[An Elementary Latin Dictionary](#),” the verb *inrumō*—the root of *irrumator*—means “to give suck, abuse obscenely.” I grinned, thinking I had a pretty good idea of what Catullus was calling the governor. What doubts remained were swept away a couple of years later, when, now in my senior year, I happened upon an entire article devoted to *irrumator*, whose root verb the author crisply defined as “to force to fellate.”

Just how you can call your boss a skullfucker and still maintain a reputation for refined erudition and literary sophistication was a question that stumped me. As it turned out, I wasn't the only one. “In Catullus we have, in a sense, not one poet but two,” the editors of “Two Centuries” acknowledged. Most scholars would agree. On the one hand, there is the impetuous, often swaggering young writer whose sometimes brash, sometimes tender personality vividly emerges from the hundred-odd poems that have come down to us. This Catullus will dash off a dinner invitation in verse to his more financially responsible friends (“You'll dine well . . . as long as you bring a nice big meal”), or obscenely lampoon the high-and-mighty figures of the day, such as Julius Caesar—a family friend—or lay bare his bleeding

heart for all to see. That organ is certainly on abundant display in the poems on which Catullus' reputation rests today, a cycle that traces the course of a tormented affair with a woman he refers to only by a pseudonym, Lesbia. By turns giddy, anxious, and despairing, these poems have endeared him to generations of ordinary readers who find in the tempestuous and ultimately brokenhearted poet a strikingly modern and profoundly accessible figure.

On the other hand, there is the *doctus poeta*, the refined littérateur celebrated for his delicacy and wit, who peppered even his occasional verse with elaborate word games and abstruse allusions. (Just what was *in* the “asafoetida-bearing sands of Cyrene”?) This Catullus produced a handful of longer works that include a baroquely structured mini-epic about the marriage of Achilles’ parents and a gender-bending showstopper that the University of Virginia classicist Jenny Strauss Clay has called “the strangest poem in Latin”: a breathless narrative, cast in an extremely rare and agonizingly complex meter, about an Athenian youth named Attis, who, in a frenzy of devotion to the cult of the Eastern goddess Cybele, castrates himself. Much of the poem takes the form of an anguished monologue the young man delivers after he wakes up the next day, short on body parts and long on regrets.

Catullus himself seemed to be aware of his split nature. One of the most famous of the Lesbia poems is a terse couplet that not only sums up an emotional conundrum that is familiar to anyone who’s been in the throes of obsessive love but also encapsulates an essential quality in the poet himself: “I hate and I love. Just why is something you might well ask. / I don’t know. But I feel it happening, and I’m in torment.”

Because of his extraordinary range, the naked intensity of his emotions, and his dazzling variety of tones—all of which constituted what a prominent mid-century classicist referred to as a “Catullan revolution” in Roman literature—Catullus has always been a poet admired and imitated by other poets. [Virgil](#), half a generation younger, quoted him in the Aeneid; the love elegist Propertius remarked, a little wide-eyed, that Catullus had made Lesbia more famous than [Helen of Troy](#). Renaissance Italians mimicked his Lesbia verses, and Byron adapted one of his odes to a beautiful youth named Juventius. (Like many Romans, Catullus was blithely indifferent to

the gender of his inamorati.) Swinburne folded elements of the crazed castrato poem into his sadomasochism-themed “Dolores,” from 1866. Tennyson, that great mourner, self-consciously echoed the Roman’s celebrated elegy on the death of his beloved brother—the poem that gave us the phrase *ave atque vale*, “hail and farewell,” and furnished the inspiration for Anne Carson’s “[Nox](#),” from 2010, a meditation on her own brother’s death. [Robert Frost](#) kept an edition of Catullus by his bedside.

Even more, the many registers of Catullus’ verse, from recherché artiness to gutterspeak, have proved an irresistible challenge for translators ever since the first fairly complete English version was produced, in the late eighteenth century, by a physician and scholar named John Nott (who warned “the chaste reader” that he was giving “the whole of Catullus without reserve”). To judge from a spate of recent Catullus-inspired work, including an English rendering of [selected poems](#), by Stephen Mitchell, and “[Switch: The Complete Catullus](#),” a dizzyingly idiosyncratic translation-cum-adaptation by the British poet and illustrator Isobel Williams, the fascination hasn’t waned, nor has the challenge grown less daunting.

Catullus would be little more than a name and a reputation today had a single manuscript containing his poems not survived the Middle Ages. Such a narrow escape from oblivion would have shocked his fellow-Romans. Born most probably in 84 B.C.E., into a wealthy and influential family based in Verona—the historian Suetonius reports that Caesar was a frequent guest when he went north to fight his Gallic campaigns—Catullus was, according to ancient sources, dead by the age of thirty. The late Peter Green, who published a Catullus translation in 2005, tried to argue, from a handful of references in the poems to a lingering cough and chronic malaise, that the poet died of tuberculosis—then, as later, a killer of bright young things.

Despite the brevity of Catullus’ life, he had evidently made his mark. His death, according to one early biography, was greeted by “public mourning,” and in the decades afterward he was never far from the minds of Roman writers, starting with the Golden Age poets who immediately followed him: Virgil, Horace, Propertius, [Ovid](#). A century later, the satirist Martial, renowned for his tart epigrams, declared that his greatest ambition was simply to be counted second to Catullus in that genre. Around 150 C.E., the

author Apuleius, who had access to sources long since lost to us, was convinced that he knew the identity of Lesbia. Learned Latin writers were still talking about Catullus as late as the early seventh century.

Then the trail goes cold. Unlike his admirer Virgil, Catullus seems to have been almost entirely unknown throughout the Middle Ages. One poem appears in a ninth-century anthology, and a tenth-century Bishop of Verona mentioned him in a sermon; otherwise, nothing. Then, around 1305, that single manuscript turned up in Verona—a discovery that occasioned a celebratory poem, in Latin couplets, by a local man of letters who noted rather mysteriously that the text had come “from a far frontier.” The poems soon found their way into the hands of the poet and humanist Petrarch. Thus began a process that eventually earned the long-forgotten poet an electrifying new renown. For the collection—the *Catulli Veronensis Liber*, the Book of Catullus of Verona, as it came to be called—was unlike anything else in the Latin canon known at that point.

The poems fall into three successive groups, possibly representing three papyrus scrolls that may have originally constituted the *Liber*. The first group alone, known as the “polymetrics”—sixty shortish poems cast in a variety of meters borrowed from the Greeks—ranges over an astonishingly broad array of emotions and subjects, the poems often occasioned by the most casual events. There’s that invitation to the B.Y.O. dinner; a thank-you note to Cicero so obsequious that you have to think it’s tongue in cheek; an ode on the retirement of a favorite yacht. One charming piece celebrates the return of a cherished friend from a journey abroad—“Can’t wait to lay eyes on you and hear you / tell of Spain and its people, places, products”—and, meanwhile, in the poem I had to sight-read that day forty-five years ago, the poet is seething because he’s been caught in a pretentious lie about his year in Asia Minor serving on the staff of the *irrumator* governor. (The governor, Gaius Memmius, can’t have been all bad: it was to him that Lucretius dedicated his magnum opus, the philosophical epic “[On the Nature of Things](#).”) Sometimes Catullus will be singing delicate praises of the virgin goddess Diana; sometimes he’s off and running about a disgusting acquaintance who uses urine as a tooth whitener. He’s like the love child of [T. S. Eliot](#) and [Frank O’Hara](#).

Whatever their subject or inspiration, many of these poems display the wit, pith, and cleverness that were hallmarks of the avant-garde school to which Catullus belonged, the so-called New Poets—or *neoteroi*, as Cicero, who preferred the old ones, sniffily referred to them. The orator’s use of the Greek word for “new” was pointed: Catullus and his friends were in thrall to the theories of the Hellenistic Greek scholar and poet Callimachus, who flourished in the first half of the third century B.C.E. and worked at the [Library of Alexandria](#), the great literary and cultural center of the Mediterranean world. It was Callimachus who famously proclaimed *mega biblion, mega kakon*, “a long book is a great evil”; for his Roman acolytes, concision, originality, and vividness, rather than what they saw as the bombast and portentousness of an earlier generation, were the qualities to embrace. Catullus makes no bones about his literary allegiances. One poem, addressed to the grandiloquent work of a dreary historian, begins, “Hey, Volusius’ *Annals* (yes, I’m talking / to your hundreds of pages smeared with bullshit.)”

A startling freshness and informality are certainly the rule in these shorter poems, most of which are cast in a jauntily syncopated meter known as the “hendecasyllable”: BUM-BUM-BUM-buh-buh-BUM-buh-BUM-buh-BUM-BUM. And yet even the breeziest of Catullus’ occasional poems can suddenly betray flashes of ferocious emotion. Poem 50 begins as a giddy recollection of an afternoon spent dashing off verses to his friend Calvus, another of the *neoteroi*. The opening lines paint an endearing picture of the two writers “playing now with this meter, now with that one, / improvising on themes set by the other, / laughing hard.” But—typically, as it turns out—the experience becomes overwhelmingly intense for Catullus, who goes on to record how, on returning home,

I was burning with your brilliance;
Food could give me no ease, nor could I rest my
Eyes in sleep, but unsettled, flushed, I tossed and
Turned all night, as I longed for daylight, so that
Once again we could spend some time together.

The nakedness of the feelings exposed—to say nothing of the willingness to expose them—was wholly new in Latin poetry.

The way in which a poem by Catullus can veer from the innocuous to the intense is often mirrored by dramatic swerves in the tone and the register of his language. In certain poems, you can practically hear the gears shift. The first half of Poem 11, for instance, makes you think you're reading an ode to the constancy of the poet's friends Furius and Aurelius, who he says he knows will follow him to the ends of the earth, from Persia to the Nile to the Alps and as far as the "horrible Britons." But the real point becomes clear only at the beginning of the second half, when Catullus, having listed the proofs of his friends' loyalty, feels emboldened to ask them to do him a favor relating to Lesbia:

take a message now to my former girlfriend, brief and unpleasant:
tell her that I wish her a happy life with
all three hundred studs whom she fucks at one go.

Then he puts in the clutch yet again, ending with lines of astonishing delicacy, which compare his rejected love to "a flower / fallen at the edge of a field, the plowshare's / blade slicing through it."



"He goes 'Beep, beep, beep' when we're backing up."
Cartoon by Sam Gross

The volatile emotions to which Catullus gives vent are not always so touching. Poem 16 begins with a jokey threat that he's going to assault two male friends because they've teased him: "I'll fuck you up the ass and"—*inrumō* again!—"fuck your face." The offense for which they're being menaced is that, having read some of the tender poems addressed to Lesbia, they've accused him of being *male marem*—"insufficiently manly." Although the tone is playful, it's hard not to feel that the friends had hit a nerve. Not for the first time, the violence of a bullying threat is directly proportional to the vulnerability that's been exposed in the bully.

Sometimes it's as if this poet can't hold the warring parts of his own personality together.

In jarring contrast to the polymetrics, with their accessible freshness and ingratiating openness, stand the four long poems that constitute the second section of the Liber: two wedding hymns, the mini-epic about the nuptials of Achilles' parents, and the castrato tour de force. Contemporary readers tend to have a harder time with these; Stephen Mitchell, whom I've been quoting thus far, shares the general prejudice and omits them from his translation, explaining that, "despite their sporadic beauties, [they] leave me cold." At first glance, it's easy to see why: their tone and manner, compared with those of the other poems, are so much more self-consciously "literary" that you sometimes wonder how the same poet could have written them all. The two wedding hymns, Poems 61 and 62, bristle with learned mythological allusions ("For Junia, as beautiful / As Idalium's mistress / Venus coming to the Phrygian / Judge, is wedding Manlius . . ."), and the hyperventilating poem about the self-mutilating Attis is steeped in the arcana of Eastern cultic practice.

As for Poem 64, the mini-epic about Achilles' parents, for all its size—at more than four hundred lines, it's Catullus' longest work and accounts for almost half of the second section—it is a Fabergé egg of a poem, structured with great ingenuity and aglitter with favorite devices of the high Greek style. One of these is known as ekphrasis: an extended depiction, within a literary work, of a work of art. In Catullus' poem, the account of the meeting and subsequent wedding of the couple, Peleus and Thetis, soon segues to a detailed description of a coverlet spread over their marriage bed, woven with images depicting the myth of the Cretan princess Ariadne, who was abandoned by her faithless lover, Theseus. (With this allusion, the poet artfully foreshadows the fact that the union being celebrated will eventually sour—after producing a child who brings grief and destruction to many.) Catullus pushes ekphrasis to unprecedented limits, allowing the description of the coverlet to metastasize to the point where the Theseus-Ariadne story grows larger than the story of Peleus and Thetis, the ostensible subject of the poem—a bravado move on the poet's part in a work that he clearly intended to be a masterpiece.

Still, you could argue that, beneath their arch sophistication, these longer works turn out to be animated by the same hot-blooded themes and obsessions that you find in the other poems. Take the startling tenderness of the marriage hymns, with their intense empathy for the emotions of young brides leaving home for the first time (whose lot is compared, rather shockingly, to the fate of women after “a city’s brutal capture”), or Attis’ surrender to a frenzy he cannot control, followed by the morning-after self-recriminations (“Now, ah now, what I’ve done appalls me”): we recognize these feelings. Also familiar is the note of righteous outrage in the poet’s diatribe, at the end of Poem 64, against the corrupted morals of his day. Even when Catullus is being arty, the passions, the tenderness and the indignation, the wounded sense of wrongs unpunished, come through.

But nowhere in the *Catulli Veronensis Liber* is emotion at a higher pitch than in the *Lesbia* poems, which are threaded through both the polymetricals and the third section, which is devoted to poems written in the “elegiac” meter: lines of six beats alternating with lines of five beats. (A lot of the really filthy epigrams, which prompted Byron to declare that “Catullus scarcely has a decent poem,” belong to this group.) Most scholars believe that *Lesbia* was in fact a certain Clodia, a member of one of Rome’s greatest families. Her father was a consul; her brother, Clodius Pulcher, was a powerful demagogue and the archenemy of Cicero. Unfortunately, nearly everything we know about her, apart from what Catullus says, comes from a savage speech of Cicero’s that was intended to discredit Clodia as a witness in a politically explosive trial, and hence can hardly be taken at face value. (At one point, the great orator hints that brother and sister were lovers.) By contrast, what we glean about her from Catullus’ *Liber* is oddly generic. The focus, as with so much of his work, is on *his* feelings, *his* reactions.

It’s likely that Catullus met Clodia around 62 B.C.E., when he was just past twenty and she was around thirty; it was then that her husband, Metellus Celer, became the governor of the northern-Italian province where the poet’s family lived. Given the family’s prominence, it’s not unreasonable to assume that the new governor and his wife could, like Caesar, have been their guests at one point or another.

Whatever the case may be, the Lesbia poems often betray the giddiness of a callow young lover who's already hopelessly in over his head with an older and far more sophisticated woman—one who, you sense, may well just be toying with him. It's worth remembering that, for all his suavity, Catullus was, at heart, a boy from the hinterland: the outrage he often expresses at faithlessness, betrayals, and broken promises, whether by lovers or friends, belongs to the ethos of the straightlaced provinces, not the decadent capital. The pseudonym Lesbia, which alludes to the lyric poet Sappho (and, perhaps, to the alleged erotomania of the women who lived on her island), was presumably intended to protect Clodia's identity—she was, after all, a married woman—although it's hard to believe that, in gossipy Rome, the affair could have remained a total secret.

Not counting a verse dedication to the biographer Cornelius Nepos, a fellow northern Italian who “used to think that / these light things that I scribbled had some value,” the first poem of the Liber is about Lesbia, and after that she’s rarely out of sight for long. Strikingly, the glimpses we get of this notorious femme fatale are often oblique. Poem 2, for instance, is addressed to her pet sparrow, with which the poet wishes he could play “and bring ease to my heart’s ongoing torment!” Poem 3 is playful: a mock-heroic eulogy for the sparrow, now dead, whom the poet blames for making his sweetheart’s eyes swollen and red—one of a very few references to Lesbia’s physical appearance. In Poems 5 and 7, he’s counting out, apparently on an abacus, how many kisses will satisfy him: a thousand, then a hundred, then another thousand. Isobel Williams, in the introduction to her renderings of the poems, rightly observes that Catullus, who was likely the scion of successful businesspeople, has a “book-keeper’s eye.”

As giddy as Catullus seems to be in these early poems, he never forgets his clever Alexandrian technique. “Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love,” goes the opening of the first kiss-counting poem: a winning enough incipit. But the classicist Michael Fontaine has pointed out that the poet—who, like all educated Romans, knew Greek as well as Latin—is actually indulging in an elaborate and risqué bilingual pun here. If you translate “let us live, Lesbia” into Greek, you get *Lesbia, zōmen*, a phrase that’s virtually identical to the Greek *lesbiazōmen*, which you could translate as “Let’s do fellatio!”

Beneath the fun and games, however, there's a shadow over the proceedings almost from the start. Here's Mitchell's translation of Poem 5 in its entirety:

My dear Lesbia, let's just love each other
and not bother our heads about the gossip
spread about by old farts and busybodies.
Suns can die and then rise new the next morning
but for us, when our little light has vanished,
one vast night must be slept and slept forever.
So come, sweetheart, and give me first a thousand
kisses, then you might add a hundred others,
then a thousand, and then another hundred.
And then, once we have added tens of thousands,
let's go bankrupt and cancel the whole number,
so that no one can cast a spell upon us
when they learn we've enjoyed so many kisses.

Why are the old men gossiping? Who is so jealous that they'd cast a spell?
Even in these early, seemingly lighthearted verses, you sense that this
unlikely couple won't be able to keep the real world at bay for long.

And, sure enough, in Poem 8 you get the first crisis:

Wretched Catullus, stop this crazy longing.
Let go of her. She's gone. She won't come back.
You had it good: your days were filled with sunshine. . . .
But now she doesn't want you, and there's no
changing that, poor madman. So forget her;
don't make yourself so wretched at her absence;
stand firm and stay the course. What's done is done.
Goodbye, dear girl; Catullus will stand firm;
He won't run after you, won't beg or plead,
And you'll be sorry soon, when no one wants you.

As the cycle proceeds toward the inevitable breakup—triggered, perhaps, by Lesbia's dalliances during the year that Catullus was away working for Memmius—the poems of recrimination and spite, often eye-poppingly obscene, predominate. But here, in Poem 8, the poet hasn't yet hardened

himself. That pivot from abjection to the overconfident “Goodbye, dear girl,” and then to the pathetic “you’ll be sorry soon,” suggests why the *Lesbia* poems have so long appealed to readers. The precision with which Catullus evokes the feverish rhetoric of desire and disappointment, the strident self-admonitions, the denunciations, the pronouncements advocating courses of action that, we know, will never be followed are as familiar today as they were during the waning years of the Roman Republic.

“Even Landor turned back from an attempt to translate Catullus,” [Ezra Pound](#) wrote, referring to the distinguished British poet and friend of Dickens. “I have failed forty times, so I do know the matter.” It’s not hard to see why Pound was so pessimistic. Precisely what makes much of Catullus’ work so appealing and “relatable” to modern audiences—the offhand charm, the impish vulgarity, the jazzy colloquialisms—makes him that much more difficult to bring into modern English. Ordinary language, after all, has a far shorter shelf life than does the elevated language of high literature; translations of Catullus that are barely twenty years old already feel dated. Peter Green’s “Wretched Catullus, stop this stupid tomfool stuff” sounds positively Victorian next to Mitchell’s “Wretched Catullus, stop this crazy longing.”

Mitchell often succeeds at conveying Catullus’ diction and tone in a way that feels natural. In the accounting poem, “old farts” is perfect for the Latin *senum severiorum*, literally “rather stern old men.” Elsewhere, though, he inexplicably fumbles the ball. (Well, maybe explicably: his version aims to reproduce Catullus’ jumpy meters, which force him into some tight corners and limit his choices.) At the beginning of that same poem, Catullus suggests to *Lesbia* that the gossip of the old farts is worth no more than *unius assis*, “a penny”—an exhortation wholly in keeping with this bookkeeper poet’s use of pecuniary diction. Mitchell’s “let’s . . . / Not bother our heads about the gossip” abandons the metaphor that crucially structures the entire poem. Such lapses add up. Mitchell is a veteran translator—he’s done everything from Gilgamesh and Homer to Rilke—but you sometimes find yourself wondering whether the scope of his ambition hasn’t come at the price of a certain depth of engagement with the original. The scant notes provided at the back of his volume, a number of which

simply paraphrase other scholars' insights, feel similarly sketchy. You don't ever feel that he owns this material.

Isobel Williams's "Switch" puts the fizz back into the proceedings, hewing closely to the thought world of the original, albeit by—to say the least—unexpected means. Among other things, she gets at the Roman poet's penchant for polarities via a prefatory explanation of the Japanese erotic practice of rope bondage, or *shibari*. For Williams, Catullus' divided nature suggests something kinky: "Catullus splits into an anxious bitchy dominant with the boys," she writes, "a howling submissive with his nemesis, the older woman he calls Lesbia."

However oddly this may strike you at first, that fresh breeze from the East has the effect of blowing away the cobwebs, giving her renderings the immediacy and wit of the original. "Open out to life and love with me, / Clodia, and we'll set the regulators' / Hisses at the lowest rate of interest," goes the opening of her translation of Poem 5; she proceeds to render all those hundreds and thousands of kisses as Roman numerals interspersed with little "x"s. And here's how she deals with Poem 8, when the poet thinks it's all over—the one that, in Mitchell's version, begins, "Wretched Catullus, stop this crazy longing":

In tears again, Catullus. Just get out of bed.
Accept the past and have the loss adjusters in.
Oh, once upon a time you were the golden boy. . . .
So now she's dumped you and you can't get tied at will.
Don't chase vanilla boys or put your life on hold—
Try Buddhist meditation to endure the drought.

Mistress, get lost. Catullus-san's remade in stone.
He won't beg favours or come sniffing after you.
You'll pine for him now he's not snivelling in your wake.

It's clear that Williams isn't interested in giving you everything Catullus actually says; I wouldn't use "Switch" as a primary text in a survey of Roman literature. But I'd certainly recommend it to anyone who wants to know what reading Catullus must have *felt* like. Every page of "Switch" is electric with that unmistakable personality: the strutting young genius who

knows exactly how talented he is and wants you to know it, too, the brash newcomer from the boondocks determined to conquer the big city, the lover who proudly wears his hemorrhaging heart on his sleeve, the twentysomething with, maybe, a shadow on his lung, writing as fast as he can and bringing everyone he's ever met, everything he's studied, and everything he feels to the party, from Callimachus to *inrūmō*. Some old farts may complain about the accuracy of Williams's new version, but who'd give a penny for *their* thoughts? As far as I'm concerned, she's right on the money. ♦

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The Political Scene

The Senate's Age of Irrelevance

Elon Musk's DOGE and Trump's executive orders are pushing Congress's upper chamber from ineffectiveness to obsolescence. Will John Thune, the new Majority Leader, let them?

By [David D. Kirkpatrick](#)

March 31, 2025



Thune says that he has made it clear to the White House that DOGE cannot cut government without Senate approval, as Elon Musk appears to have done repeatedly. But will Trump listen? Photograph by Kent Nishimura for The New Yorker

On January 8th, in an ornate hall of the United States Capitol, five Republican senators stood behind President-elect Donald Trump as he talked to the Capitol Hill press. Four listened impassively, but John Thune could hardly stand still. As Trump began describing a “lovefest” in Greenland over his plans to annex it, Thune turned away, as though distracted by oncoming footsteps. He crossed his arms, stared at his feet, rocked from side to side, moved his hands in and out of his pockets, and fidgeted with his suit jacket as Trump spewed falsehoods: that the diversion of water for “a tiny little fish” had kept Los Angeles from putting out fires;

that illegal immigrants were mainly murderers or mental patients; that China was “running the Panama Canal.”

After Trump left, Thune, who was about to take over as the leader of the Senate’s new majority, gamely echoed the President’s insistence that Republicans stood “united on his agenda.” Yet Thune, as he often does, subjected that agenda to notable edits, making Trump’s platform sound like that of a Reagan-era Republican: bolstering the military, bringing down taxes, “securing the border,” producing more energy. He said nothing about Trump’s signature policies—across-the-board tariffs, mass deportations, a purge of the “deep state,” pressing Ukraine to end its fight against Russia, pulling away from *NATO*. Asked about Trump’s wildly impractical campaign promise to stop taxing tips, Thune said only that the idea was “on the table.” Would Trump’s priorities be packaged in one big bill or two staggered ones? And which chamber would take the lead? All this was “an ongoing conversation—I’ll put it that way,” Thune said, as an aide hurried him off.

Thune, a fourth-term senator from South Dakota, is an awkward leader for Trump’s ruthless Republican Party, in part because even Democrats invariably describe him as amiable and honest. A senior Democratic aide told me that Thune is “incapable of lying.” Kevin Woster, a former reporter for the Sioux Falls *Argus Leader* who covered Thune for decades, told me that the senator used to hold weekly conference calls with South Dakota journalists. When Thune tried to sell Republican talking points about the perfidy of whatever Democrats were doing, Woster recalled, “I’d ask him, ‘But, John, Republicans really did the same thing, didn’t they?,’ and he’d say, ‘Yeah, we’re really at fault, too. That’s true.’ Who *does* that?” Before Thune became the Party leader, journalists would crowd the hallway outside his Capitol office. Unlike [Mitch McConnell](#), the taciturn and cunning leader at the time, Thune genuinely tried to answer questions. He was seldom cutting or caustic, and rarely tossed off a memorable line that might begin or end a newspaper article. As a veteran congressional reporter told me, Thune could be counted on for a reliable “middle quote.” A Republican aide who knows Thune described him to me as hypercompetitive but also “Midwestern nice.” (“Southern nice”—like [Mike Johnson](#), the Louisiana Republican who is the Speaker of the House—can be double-edged, as in

“Bless your heart!”) Lamar Alexander, a former Republican senator from Tennessee and a friend of Thune’s, noted a contrast between him and the two most recent Majority Leaders, McConnell and the Democratic senator Chuck Schumer: those men are renowned for their guile, and “you don’t think of guile when you think of John Thune.”

We sat down in mid-March for an interview in Thune’s grand new office, and I asked him how he communicated with Trump, given their differences in style and substance. “Very carefully,” he said, with a chuckle. Did he find it difficult to work with a President so little concerned with accuracy?

“Well, I mean, we’re very different personalities,” Thune said—“a very big personality” and “a boring Midwesterner.” He argued that Trump had “qualities very useful for his job,” such as “enormous stamina.” Although Trump is beginning his second term as President, Thune expressed sympathy for him as “somebody who hasn’t been around a legislative body for any length of time” and for whom “in some ways it is all a little bit of a foreign language.” Thune said that he ran for leader “to be a bridge to the White House.” He added, “I’ve always felt like I can sort of get along with anybody,” noting that his relationship with Trump “on a personal level has gotten more comfortable over time.” He concluded, “I’m straight with him, and he’s straight with me.”

Thune’s candor often stood out in the course of Trump’s rise to power. During the 2016 race, Thune condemned Trump’s expressions of bigotry as “inappropriate.” After the leak of the “Access Hollywood” video, on which Trump boasted about grabbing women by the genitals, Thune was one of the first Republican senators to demand that Trump quit the race “immediately,” though the election was only a month away. And, even after Trump’s victory, Thune never masked his opposition to the President’s most cherished plans. In a 2017 television interview, he objected to the mass deportation of illegal immigrants, adding that “a lot of my colleagues” shared his view. He has called across-the-board tariffs “a recipe for increased inflation” that would punish South Dakota farmers and ranchers by setting off trade wars. He has consistently stood with what he calls “our trusted intel community” on the conclusion that Russia indeed meddled to help Trump in the 2016 election; he has called Vladimir Putin “a murderous thug” whose invasion of Ukraine proved “the value of NATO.” Thune also

often praises wind energy—a booming industry in his home state—even though Trump considers turbines loathsome eyesores.

Trump’s demand that Congress refuse to certify Joe Biden’s 2020 election win elicited one of Thune’s few memorable turns of phrase: he told journalists that the request would “go down like a shot dog” in the Senate. After January 6th, Thune called Trump’s role in the riot “inexcusable.” Linda Duba, a friend from South Dakota and a retired Democratic state legislator whose children used to run in track meets alongside Thune’s, told me that she once asked him what working with Trump was like. “Not fun,” Thune had said. Another old friend was blunt: “I think he thinks Trump’s an ass.”

Trump, for his part, used to mock Thune as a McConnell lackey—“Mitch’s boy.” After the “shot dog” comment, Trump accused Thune of “weakness” and sought to back a primary challenge against him. Trump mouthpieces tried to block Thune’s ascent to Party leader; Tucker Carlson, for example, declared that Thune hated “Trump and what he ran on.”

The senators, though, keep their ballots secret. Without fear of Trump’s retribution, they chose Thune, by a vote of 29–24. The selection of a non-MAGA Party leader suggested that Senate Republicans may not be as reflexively devoted to Trump as many liberals assume. It was also a measure of the senators’ cynicism: Thune represents what they might stand for if Trump weren’t looking. Yet the gap between the senators’ private votes and their public fealty to Trump also poses a risk to Thune’s status as leader. With each biennial congressional election, more MAGA diehards have joined the Senate while Reagan-Bush holdovers have left (or reinvented themselves as America First converts). Given Trump’s towering popularity among G.O.P. primary voters, only a handful of the fifty-three Republican senators have been willing to risk even a slight public break with him. And, were the President to turn against Thune again, some MAGA true believer would surely be eager to replace him. John Barrasso, a Wyoming senator who was considered a leading contender to succeed McConnell, now serves as the second-ranking Republican in the chamber. After the November election, he staked out his position as a MAGA champion by declaring, while standing next to Thune at a press conference,

that Trump's return marked "the remaking of the Republican Party *for the better.*"



"We decided to have a baby because we didn't value our free time and thought we had a lot of money."

Cartoon by Amy Hwang

When Thune gave his first floor speech as Senate leader, he pledged, in effect, to stand up to the President. He vowed to preserve the filibuster—a Senate rule that checks the power of a majority by requiring sixty votes to cut off debate and get almost anything done. It would take only a simple majority to change the rule if the Majority Leader scheduled a vote on it, and Trump, during his first term, unsuccessfully demanded some thirty times that McConnell and the Republicans do so. It is axiomatic on Capitol Hill that Trump will resume that push the next time the Democrats use the filibuster to thwart him.

To everyone's surprise, however, the new Trump Administration has made the filibuster almost beside the point. Instead of trying to bulldoze the Senate, Trump has simply driven around it. He has sought to govern by fiat, through executive orders, brazenly ignoring federal spending statutes and daring courts to try to stop him. Several Republican senators told me they worried that Congress—paralyzed by decades of partisan gridlock—had already ceded too much of its power to the executive branch. As Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency swings its chainsaw through congressionally mandated federal spending, Trump is now threatening to push the legislature from ineffectiveness to obsolescence.

In the mid-March interview, Thune acknowledged that, “right now, there’s a tension” between the Senate and the executive branch. He said several times that the Trump Administration was “testing limits”—including through “stuff that *DOGE* is doing.” Yet Thune insisted that “the Senate has a unique role in our democracy, and our job is to defend that role, and at times, if necessary, to push back.” *DOGE*’s handiwork “will get litigated,” he predicted, and, “at the end of the day, the structure works, and, I think, the institutions stay standing.” Thune, in other words, was counting on the judicial branch to protect the legislative branch.

Saxby Chambliss, a former Republican senator from Georgia and a friend of Thune’s who talks to him often, told me that Thune is ready for “adversarial conversations” with Trump, and that he will “be as tough as he needs to be.” Joe Manchin, the Democratic-turned-Independent former senator from West Virginia and another close friend of Thune’s, agreed. He said that, with *MAGA* loyalists now dominating the House of Representatives, and the Democrats flailing at one another over their own impotence, Thune was “the keeper of the seal.” It would be up to Thune alone to “convince the White House that we have three equal and independent branches of government.”

In a city aptly described as Hollywood for ugly people, Thune could pass for an actual movie star, with pale-blue eyes, a square jaw, and Mt. Rushmore cheekbones. Now sixty-four, he has salt-and-pepper hair that is still thick enough to part neatly on the side, and the broad shoulders, thick arms, and narrow waist of a basketball player. His morning workouts at the Senate gym are legendary. Until a recent knee injury, Thune held the informal title of the fastest man in Congress. (He has likened that honor to “the best surfer in Kansas.”) The phrases “looks the part” and “central casting” come up in nearly every conversation about him. [John McCain](#), a two-time Presidential contender, used to joke that he would have won the White House had he looked like Thune. The South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham, who liked to respond that McCain’s wife, Cindy, “would be happier, too,” told me that Thune “is a guy you really *want* to hate—so tall, good-looking, beautiful wife—but you can’t, because he is so genuinely nice.” Some journalists who cover the Capitol have given Thune the nickname Hot Grandpa.

Thune's physicality played a role in the chance encounter that started his political career. He grew up in the tiny town of Murdo, South Dakota, the fourth of five children. His father, a decorated Navy vet who'd been a star basketball player for the University of Minnesota, taught and coached at the town high school, where Thune's mother was a librarian. High-school sports were virtually the only entertainment in town. Bruce Venard, a friend of Thune's whose family owns an auto-repair shop there, told me, "In those days, if you wanted to be somebody, you showed it on the basketball court, on the football field, on the track." Thune was a standout in all three sports. In one high-school basketball game, he sank five of six free throws. Later, at a store, he ran into Jim Abdnor, a Republican congressman from a nearby town who often turned up to cheer for high-school sports teams. "I noticed you missed one," Abdnor teased him. Thune's parents were Democrats. But Thune became Abdnor's protégé.

In 1980, the year Ronald Reagan first won the Presidency, Abdnor took George McGovern's Senate seat. Thune, who'd graduated from high school the previous year and followed his older brothers to Biola University, an evangelical school near L.A., volunteered for the campaign. After earning a business degree at the University of South Dakota, in 1984, he joined Abdnor's Senate office as a legislative aide focussed on tax policy. (Abdnor, who never married, hired a series of young men from South Dakota, forming a kind of surrogate family. Some lived with him in his apartment near Washington, working as a combination of driver and aide. They called themselves the Li'l Abdnors.)

Abdnor lost his seat to Tom Daschle in 1986, and Thune followed his mentor to the Small Business Administration. Abdnor's connections then set Thune up for a series of political jobs back home, including state railroad director and executive director of the South Dakota Republican Party. He was elected to the House at the age of thirty-five and ran for the Senate six years later, in 2002, against the Democratic incumbent, Tim Johnson.

In retrospect, the parallels to the 2020 Presidential campaign are uncanny. Thune led by more than three thousand votes on Election Night, but by morning the tables had turned. Late returns showed an unusually high turnout on a large Oglala Sioux reservation. Thune lost the race by just five

hundred and twenty-four votes. South Dakota is sometimes called the Mississippi of the North because of pervasive racism toward its Native American minority. Operatives and donors urged Thune to demand a recount, reasoning that, even if the effort failed, allegations of reservation ballot stuffing would galvanize the Party's base—much as President Trump's allegations of voter fraud in predominantly Black cities energized his core supporters in 2020. But Abdnor, who was serving as an adviser to the Senate campaign, had always preached a more high-minded politics, and Thune decided to concede. Lee Schoenbeck, a former Li'l Abdnor who volunteered on the Senate campaign, told me that supporters “went out and made affidavits and did all the things that happened in 2020, and John just said, ‘No, I am not doing it.’ ”

Several Li'l Abdnores, who keep in touch with one another, told me that most of them disdained Trump's incivility and lawlessness. Schoenbeck said, “The attack on America's Capitol is something I don't think Jim Abdnor could ever have gotten over, and that is all I am going to say about it.”

Two years after losing the 2002 Senate race, Thune challenged and beat Daschle, then the Democratic leader. In his victory speech, Thune addressed Abdnor: “Jim . . . we got your seat back!”

Thune arrived in Congress at a time that now looks like a high point of its power and effectiveness. In the nineties, lawmakers debated issues, committees drafted bills, and the parties compromised to tackle urgent problems. Congress sent Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton major legislation on trade, crime, environmental protection, financial regulation, civil rights, and other issues. Negotiations between the parties even closed the deficit, briefly. Philip Wallach, a fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and the author of a timely book, “Why Congress,” told me that, looking back, “it's really amazing—nothing like that has happened in the last fifteen years.”

Wallach argues that the Founders intended Congress to defuse the kind of polarization currently vexing our politics. In the Federalist Papers, James Madison worried about what he called “the violence of faction”—he feared that rival parties would put their own interests ahead of the common good,

that a party in the majority would tyrannize the minority, and that an all-or-nothing battle for the upper hand would tear apart the Republic. Presidential elections could provide no remedy, because they are winner-take-all contests; the same is generally true of court verdicts. Congress is the sole branch of the U.S. government in which opposing factions can broker mutually acceptable solutions. In the Senate, especially, a tradition of unlimited debate—the origins of the filibuster rule—all but forced compromise by blocking a simple majority from taking action on its own. The necessity of power sharing also meant that Congress could provide a check against despotism even if the same party held the Presidency and a majority in both houses.

One turning point, Wallach told me, was Newt Gingrich’s Republican takeover of the House of Representatives, in 1994. Gingrich relished partisan warfare, demanded loyalty from his rank and file, and turned district elections into contests between the national parties. Political scientists have identified long-standing trends that have contributed to the deepening polarization of Congress, including the growing ideological homogeneity of each party and the breakdown of the media into echo chambers. But Wallach is surely correct that Congress, the branch of government designed to mediate factional conflicts, has succumbed to them—and even made them worse.

To more effectively wage partisan battles, Democratic and Republican leaders in both chambers consolidated their own power. Instead of relying on committees to draft bills, party leaders increasingly negotiated significant measures behind closed doors, then brought them to the floor for up-or-down votes—often in the form of giant “must-pass” bills against a tight deadline, such as measures to keep funding the government. In the Senate, the concentration of power has been especially stark. Senators used to take pride in proposing amendments during floor debates, facilitating bipartisan dealmaking even against party leaders’ wishes. Yet those leaders now often block individual senators from such freelancing by allowing consideration of only a limited number of amendments and then filling those slots with innocuous proposals of their own choosing—a tactic called “filling the tree.” The former Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid

pioneered this strategy in the two-thousands, and his successors from both parties have kept it up ever since.

In the Congress of 1991-92, Wallach noted, the Senate adopted more than sixteen hundred amendments. In 2023-24, that number fell to two hundred. And the last Congress passed just two hundred and seventy-four bills—down from about seven hundred a year during the late eighties and fewer than any Congress since before the Civil War. Of those two hundred and seventy-four bills, the ten longest were assembled by the party leaders, and they accounted for four-fifths of all the pages of legislation passed in that Congress.

Lawmakers sometimes grouse about their loss of power. Ten years ago, Mark Begich, then a Democratic senator from Alaska, tried, unsuccessfully, to instigate a revolt against Reid's tree-filling. Lamar Alexander, another critic of the practice, told me that being elected to the chamber now resembled “joining the Grand Ole Opry and not being allowed to sing—it’s very disappointing.” Senator [Ted Cruz](#), of Texas, complained to me that “what used to be an integral part of legislating—offering amendments, changing bills on the floor—has largely disappeared. Bills are drafted privately by the leaders of both parties, and ninety-eight other senators acquiesce to allowing two leaders to arrogate that power to themselves!” He continued, “Mitch McConnell ruled the conference as a monarch. He made the decisions, and he shared his thinking with no one.”



“Do you mind?”
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

Thune is in some ways a throwback. At a time when cable-news coverage and online donations reward the noisiest partisans, he has built a reputation for quietly working in good faith with Democrats on the committees he has sat on, among them Agriculture and Commerce. Chris Lewis, the chief executive of Public Knowledge, a left-leaning advocacy group, told me that Thune opposed its positions on most issues, but called him “a straight shooter” who looked for “common ground” on such issues as rural broadband access. Several senators told me that, at the end of last year, Thune negotiated an agreement with Democratic leaders that allowed Biden to equal the number of judicial confirmations made during the first Trump Administration. In exchange, the Democrats agreed to drop a handful of liberal appellate nominees whom Republicans found especially objectionable, leaving those seats open. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, a New York Democrat who participates in a weekly Bible study with Thune, told me that “he was fundamental to all the bipartisan work we did in the last cycle.” For example, Thune helped initiate talks on an immigration bill, even letting legislators use his office. In the end, the bill became a classic example of partisan paralysis: when Trump indicated that he preferred to leave the border problems unaddressed, so that he could keep campaigning on the issue, the Republicans killed the legislation.

In today’s Senate, bipartisan committee work produces little major legislation signed into law. An unusual spate of bipartisan bills that were produced early in the Biden Administration—on infrastructure, semiconductor manufacturing, and gun control—emerged from White House negotiations with “gangs” of senators informally deputized by their party leaders, not from traditional committees. As a result, Thune has few major laws to his name. In 2017, he was one of four Republicans McConnell charged with hammering out an internal Party consensus about a tax package. But this was an all-G.O.P. effort passed through a fifty-year-old process known as reconciliation, which allows a simple majority of senators to approve certain budget-related measures.

Candidates for congressional leadership now routinely pledge to bring back “regular order”—committees drafting bills, amendments debated on the floor. Thune promised this, too—“sort of,” Senator Josh Hawley, a Missouri Republican, told me. He said that he’d seen “no effort to reverse that trend

and actually reëmpower senators.” Few lawmakers believe that such a restoration is imminent.

Similarly, the tradition of the filibuster—which increases the leverage of individual senators and circumscribes the majority—has grown tenuous. Each party, when in the minority, has used the filibuster to obstruct almost any action; then, when back on top, it has chipped away at the rule. When Democrats controlled the Senate during the Biden Administration, only the opposition of a pair of moderates—Manchin and the then senator Kyrsten Sinema—saved the filibuster from extinction. Now the Democrats can thank those two holdouts for preserving their best chance at constraining Trump.

Congress, stymied by gridlock, has increasingly failed to exercise even its most vital prerogative: the authority to control taxation and spending, which is the legislature’s main leverage over the executive. The first article of the Constitution, enumerating the powers of Congress, stipulates that “no Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law.” But Congress, unable to pass annual appropriations bills, now often relies on so-called continuing resolutions that essentially extend current spending levels in order to prevent the government from running out of money. A recent study concluded that since 2012 Congress has used such resolutions nearly half the time. Wallach said, “This sense of fiscal autopilot is really profound.”

In his book, Wallach projected that, if Congress continued its course of the past decade, it would eventually become either a useless circus or a mere rubber stamp, in either case ceding its authority to an increasingly dominant White House. Two months into the second Trump Administration, Wallach told me that Congress appeared to be devolving into that also-ran status much faster than he’d ever imagined. Moreover, after years of shrinking congressional power, the public seemed undisturbed. “Imagine being a young person who has only lived in the twenty-first century,” Wallach said. “How seriously could you really take the idea that all policy is supposed to come from Congress? The executive branch seems like the originator of all the most important policies going back your whole political consciousness.” Trump’s attempts to ignore or bully Congress look like a natural

progression, not an aberration. “If Trump says, ‘I am going to embrace the idea that the White House is in charge and get a lot done,’ I don’t know how shocking that is to people,” he went on. The Republicans in control of Congress, he noted, had so far barely mustered any opposition to Trump’s strong-arming: “If we follow this trajectory, Congress will certainly be more marginal than ever before in American history.”

When factional loyalty supersedes all, a President whose party controls Congress hardly needs to worry about the courts, which have little enforcement muscle of their own. A President determined to go it alone could arbitrarily hand out or withhold federal grants, contracts, and jobs; impose or remove selective tariffs according to whim; exploit his public office for personal profit; promote friends’ interests; direct or squash criminal prosecutions; reshape regulations to benefit favored businessmen. In fact, Trump has already attempted all these things. A President unencumbered by congressional oversight might wield such powers over media companies, universities, labor unions, trade associations, and the donors to advocacy groups or political campaigns. By rewarding obeisance and muffling dissent, he could make voting out the ruling party more and more difficult. That is how authoritarians operate around the world.

Lamar Alexander reminded me of a maxim from the late Supreme Court Justice [Antonin Scalia](#), the conservative icon. Scalia said that “every tin horn dictator” and “President for life” has a Bill of Rights; it’s the separation of powers that has kept Americans free.

When Trump first took office, in 2017, Thune joined other Republican congressional leaders in what amounted to an opportunistic bargain. They basically ignored the new President’s falsehoods, insults, conspiracy theories, protectionism, xenophobia, and the rest of it. In exchange, they tried to capitalize on his supporters’ passion in order to score G.O.P. victories on issues such as tax cuts and judicial confirmations. With characteristic forthrightness, Thune, who was then the third-ranking Senate Republican, told the *Times* that Republicans had accepted Trump’s tendency to “say things on a daily basis that we’re not going to like.” But, he added, if senators “stay focused” and “get that stuff enacted—those would be big wins.”

McConnell took this bargain to a duplicitous extreme. He was publicly enthusiastic about the agenda of the new Administration, but behind the scenes he conspired daily with Paul Ryan, then the Speaker of the House, to curb Trump's impulses. Both lawmakers describe their efforts in a new biography of McConnell, "The Price of Power," written, with his coöperation, by the journalist Michael Tackett. Ryan explains that he and McConnell saw Trump as "an amoral narcissist" with "zero regard" for the Constitution who would "shoot the messengers" whenever they explained the limits of a President's power.

McConnell gave Tackett access to private oral-history recordings he made during the first Trump Administration, and they are scathing. In the recordings, and in later interviews, McConnell describes Trump as unfit for office; "uncontrollable"; "not very smart, irascible, nasty"; "beyond erratic"; "stupid" and "ill-tempered"; a "sleazeball"; and "despicable." After the 2020 election, McConnell said that Senate Republicans were "counting the days" until Trump left office. McConnell called Trump's role in the January 6th assault on the Capitol "an impeachable offense," and Tackett describes the Majority Leader's decision to vote against impeachment anyway—on the basis that Trump had left office, and voters and judges would keep him out of politics—as "likely the worst political miscalculation of McConnell's career."

By opening up to Tackett, McConnell essentially dropped his mask. Lindsey Graham, a former Trump critic who has reinvented himself as the President's golfing buddy, told me that McConnell had been *too* honest. "Mitch has burned every bridge" and squandered his influence, Graham told me. Thune "would never do that," because of that Midwestern niceness. Yet Thune, a McConnell lieutenant and confidant throughout Trump's first term, has hardly distanced himself from the former Majority Leader. In interviews, Thune has said that he still asks McConnell for advice, crediting him with "an outsized influence" on issues such as national security.

In fact, the Trump takeover of the G.O.P. so dispirited Thune that in 2022 he contemplated retiring. He lamented to journalists that too many "quality people"—Reagan-Bush Republicans—were leaving the Senate. If

Democrats ended the filibuster, Thune added, the Senate “won’t be a fun place to be.”

A friend of Thune’s told me that the senator had gone through a period of soul-searching that bordered on depression: “He was asking, Where did his life go? And what had happened to his party?” But the friend said that Thune’s thoughts of retirement had collided with his feelings about January 6th: “Who is going to be there to certify that the votes are counted in the next election? Who is going to be there to stand against the crazies?” At the end of 2021, Senator Susan Collins, a Maine Republican and another friend, told the *Times* that she would “truly be beside myself” if Thune left the Senate. As if to persuade him to stay, she added, “We’ve just got to plow through this to the post-Donald Trump era, which I believe is coming.” Sinema, a former Arizona senator who left the Democratic Party and became an Independent, is a good friend of Thune’s. She told me that he had stayed “to protect the institution—and by ‘the institution’ I mean the American system of governance. He believes in the fundamental principles our Founding Fathers laid out. You know, the separation of powers.” (A person close to Thune told me that the senator and his wife “ultimately concluded that he had more to give and wanted to leave it all on the field.”)

In 2024, when Thune announced a bid to succeed McConnell as leader, Trump’s hostility posed the biggest obstacle. The favored MAGA candidate was Rick Scott, of Florida, who had previously tried to oust McConnell. Such contests have always been settled privately among senators, out of shared pride in the institution’s independence, but Scott seemed to enlist MAGA celebrities to undermine Thune. He went on the podcast of the far-right provocateur Laura Loomer, and afterward she slammed Thune on social media as “a snake” who wanted to “KNEECAP Trump’s second term.” Musk called Thune the Democrats’ favored candidate; Tucker Carlson accused him of plotting “a coup” against Trump’s agenda.

Thune’s secret weapon was a floating dinner party. For years, almost every week that the Senate was in session, he gathered a rotating group of six to twelve fellow-senators for a jovial dinner at a restaurant near the Capitol (Bistro Cacao, La Loma). Thune mostly hung back and listened as his colleagues drank wine and traded gossip, jokes, and updates about their

families. The dinners stood out as a rare recurring opportunity for building camaraderie among lawmakers who sometimes had little in common. Senator Markwayne Mullin, of Oklahoma, a former mixed-martial-arts fighter who dropped out of college to take over his father's plumbing business, told me that at these dinners he'd made a surprising discovery about Cruz, an Ivy League-educated lawyer known for ideological grandstanding. "Ted Cruz is the funniest guy in Congress," Mullin said. "If he fails at the Senate, he's got a life as a comedian." Sinema and Collins were frequent guests, as was Steve Daines, a Montana senator who was often mentioned as a potential dark-horse challenger to Thune in the race for Party leader. Manchin told me that Thune always graciously charged the tab to his political-action committee—"I jumped him one time and got to pay before he could grab it"—and that "those dinners became his political base." Manchin admired Thune so much that he offered to caucus with the G.O.P. if Thune needed an extra vote to become the Republican leader.

Several of these dinner companions—notably Mullin, Graham, Daines, and Senator Kevin Cramer, of North Dakota—were also close to Trump. All four told me that they had undertaken a quiet campaign to help Thune win Trump over. Graham said that their message about Thune was "He wants you to be successful, and everybody likes him."



"There's more interesting evidence at the crime scene next door."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

In the run-up to the 2024 Presidential primaries, Thune voiced his hope for “other options” besides Trump; he eventually endorsed his fellow-senator Tim Scott, of South Carolina. But behind the scenes Thune was selling himself to the former President, too. Mullin told me that he helped “coördinate the very first phone call,” and that Thune “took it from there.” After that, Mullin said, “one of them would call me and say, ‘Hey, I just got off the phone with your buddy,’ and you saw a relationship develop.” He argued that it testified to the character of both men “that they could bury it that quick.” Thune endorsed Trump in February, 2024, visited him at Mar-a-Lago the next month, and returned again in September.

Trump himself never publicly backed any candidate. But by November Mullin was discreetly suggesting that Trump was for Thune. Mullin told me, “If John Thune had asked Trump to endorse him, I am confident he would have.”

In the end, Graham said, it was Thune’s appearance that brought Trump around. Graham insisted to me several times that “Trump likes the look—the look matters *a lot* to Trump. Just look at the Cabinet.”

Trump’s second Inauguration carried echoes of January 6th. *maga* pilgrims again converged on Washington. Trump moved his swearing-in ceremony indoors, owing to inclement weather, and the next day Republican lawmakers gave constituents tours of the Capitol. Roving bands of Trump superfans filled the halls. In their “Stop the Steal” regalia, many could have passed for January 6th rioters; I saw T-shirts emblazoned with mottoes such as “When tyranny becomes law, rebellion becomes duty—1776.” Stewart Rhodes, the founder of the Oath Keepers, showed up again, too. He was sprung from prison on Inauguration Day, when Trump pardoned everyone convicted of crimes connected to the attack. The following day, at a Dunkin’ beneath the Capitol complex, Rhodes held forth to astonished journalists about the righteousness of the assault.

I joined the Capitol press corps chasing Republican senators in pursuit of their honest reactions to the pardons. The mob, after all, had targeted them. Collins, pausing before she disappeared into an elevator, called it “a terrible week for our justice system.” And Senator Thom Tillis, of North Carolina,

said that granting impunity for the violence had made the Capitol “less safe.” Nearly all the others dodged the question.

Evoking the January 6th riot was in some ways a fitting start to Trump’s second term. He had already begun a sustained assault on the power of the legislative branch. On December 17th, Elon Musk had débuted the Department of Government Efficiency, which at the time consisted only of a month-old social-media account. Thune, Johnson, and their Democratic counterparts had just worked out yet another continuing resolution to keep the government’s lights on, and they’d inserted thirty billion dollars in funding for disaster recovery. Republican aides in both chambers told me that the Trump transition team had signed off on it all. But Musk used his new account to spread misinformation about the deal, including false claims that it would give lawmakers a big pay raise and fund a bioweapons lab. By the afternoon, he’d threatened to back primary challengers against any Republican who voted for the resolution. “The waste and corruption will never stop,” he declared, unless “@DOGE ends the careers of deceitful, pork-barrel politicians.”

Trump jumped on Musk’s bandwagon. Then, without consulting either Thune or Johnson, he declared that any continuing resolution must also raise the limit on federal borrowing—to save him the unpleasantness of handling that chore himself when the debt reached its cap. This was an impossible demand. Many House Republicans refuse on principle to vote for a debt-limit adjustment; securing one requires weeks of negotiations and Democratic coöperation in both chambers. Still, with Musk and Trump attacking the agreed-upon deal, House Republicans voted it down.

Neither Thune nor Johnson dared complain. Johnson, who is widely perceived to owe his Speakership to Trump’s endorsement—the Speaker ballots are public—even pledged to follow Trump’s swerve. Trump humiliated him nonetheless, declining for weeks to assert confidence that Johnson would remain Speaker. “We’ll see,” Trump told journalists.

Thune is less dependent on his favor, and Trump has opted to flatter him. At a January meeting with Senate Republicans, Trump praised Thune as “very elegant,” senators present told me. Trump invited Thune to sit with him and Johnson at the Army–Navy football game, and named Thune’s son-in-law,

Luke Lindberg, to a top Agriculture Department post. By March, Trump was calling the Majority Leader by a fond nickname: Big John.

Yet Trump has tested Thune, too. In the final stage of the Senate's Republican-leadership race, Trump insisted that the contenders agree to support recess appointments; by installing nominees with Congress out of session, he could bypass the Senate's constitutional authority to "advise and consent." Then Trump forced Senate Republicans into confirmation votes so politically painful that they couldn't hide their discomfort. Questioning Tulsi Gabbard about her appointment as the director of National Intelligence, Republican senators begged her to agree with them that Edward Snowden was a traitor for leaking sensitive documents and then fleeing to Moscow. During hearings on Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.,'s nomination to be the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Senator Bill Cassidy, a Louisiana physician, prodded him to repudiate his baseless fear-mongering about vaccines: "Will you reassure mothers, unequivocally and without qualification, that the measles and hepatitis-B vaccines do not cause autism?" Both nominees refused to comply. Except for McConnell, every Republican senator acceded to Trump's wishes anyway.

Trump's nominee for the Office of Management and Budget, Russell Vought, challenged the Senate even more fundamentally: Vought insisted that Congress did not have exclusive control over federal spending. In 1974, after President Richard Nixon refused to spend money as directed by appropriations laws, Congress passed the Impoundment Control Act to clarify that no President can unilaterally withhold such funds. The Supreme Court confirmed the next year that the Constitution forbids it, too. Yet Vought testified that Trump had actually campaigned on the idea that the Impoundment Control Act *itself* was unconstitutional. Trump and Vought were asking senators to surrender some of their most crucial power.

By the time Vought's nomination came up for a vote, on February 6th, Trump had openly defied spending statutes by issuing an executive order that froze trillions of dollars in federal grants and loans. He'd summarily fired seventeen internal agency watchdogs, ignoring legislation that barred such terminations without cause and without notifying Congress thirty days in advance. And *doge* had grown into a shadowy team furiously slashing

congressionally authorized programs and civil-service jobs, starting with Musk’s announcement, on social media, that he’d put the United States Agency for International Development through “the wood chipper.” Despite all this, every Republican voted for Vought’s confirmation.

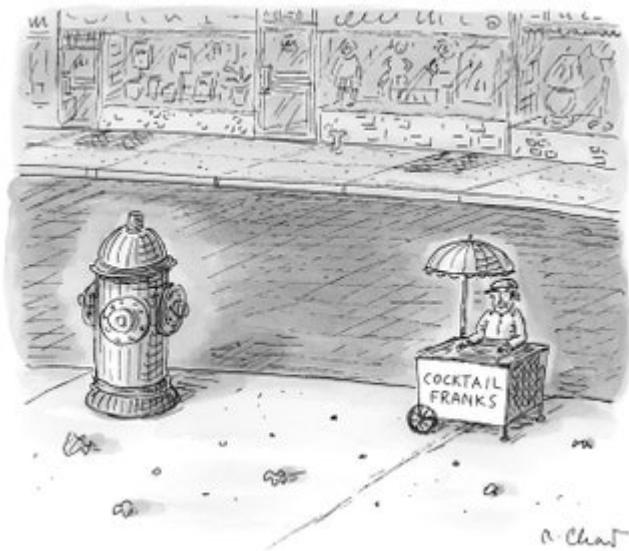
Trump, bucking his party’s traditional commitment to free trade, has used emergency declarations to impose sweeping tariffs on Mexico, Canada, and China. He has repeatedly threatened levies and then deferred them, seemingly on impulse, sometimes after an ingratiating phone call from a C.E.O. or a foreign leader. Even more dramatic, on February 28th, Trump abruptly upended congressionally mandated support for Ukraine. In a televised meeting, he upbraided President Volodymyr Zelensky for insisting that only U.S. security guarantees would stop future Russian aggression. That morning, three Republicans had met with Zelensky, in a show of solidarity. After Trump’s outburst, the Republican senator Roger Wicker, of Mississippi, who chairs the Armed Services Committee, deleted a social-media post celebrating his meeting with Zelensky.

Thune, faced with this blitz, has so far ducked open conflict with Trump. According to Mullin and others, Thune privately explained to the President that recess appointments were too impractical to pursue except as a last resort: the move requires majorities in both chambers to vote to adjourn simultaneously, and forces the appointees to work without pay and benefits, for up to two years. Mullin said, “I am sure the President did not understand that, because I did not understand it, either.” But “one person in particular had a very strong conversation with the President about it, and that was Leader Thune—and when was the last time you’ve heard the President talk about it?” In public, however, Thune pledged allegiance to the idea that “all options” were “on the table” to get Trump’s picks confirmed, “including recess appointments.”

When Trump and Musk blew up the December spending deal, Thune feigned normalcy. At midnight on a Friday, minutes after the government had technically run out of money, the Senate passed what amounted to the original deal, but broken into pieces to hide the resemblance. “It is what it is,” Thune said to reporters, shrugging off the needless chaos.

After Trump's pardons for the January 6th attackers, Thune, speaking to reporters, grappled audibly with his instinct for honesty. "I think that he needs to—I mean, as I've said, obviously—look at these things on a case-by-case basis," he stammered, repudiating the indiscriminate nature of the pardons. But in his next sentence he said that he was focussed on "the future, not the past."

Thune has protected vulnerable Republican senators from having to cast potentially embarrassing confirmation votes, but only to the extent that he could avoid crossing Trump. Mullin told me that Thune instructed Republicans to allow Collins the flexibility to vote no on some nominees, including Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth—[a former Fox News host dogged by allegations of heavy drinking, sexual assault, and financial mismanagement](#). (He denies the drinking and the assault.) According to Mullin, Thune reminded his Republican colleagues that Collins, who's up for reelection next year in Maine, "is probably the only Republican who can get elected to a statewide Senate seat there."



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Yet Thune showed less consideration for Tillis, who is seeking reelection in North Carolina, where he faces a credible Democratic opponent and may also confront a primary challenge—perhaps from Lara Trump, the President's daughter-in-law. The night before the vote, Tillis informed Thune of his plan to oppose Hegseth. He would have been the fourth Republican to vote against the nomination, thus dooming it. Thune refused

to shield Tillis from Trump, forcing him to tell the President personally. That enabled Trump to pressure Tillis into a yes vote, partly by threatening to back a primary opponent. Hegseth squeaked through. (Both the *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* reported Thune's role; with the senator under pressure from the right to rush confirmations, his staff had incentive to confirm the stories.)

When Trump is outlandish, Thune often recasts the President's words and deeds in benign terms. At a luncheon after Trump's Inaugural Address about "America's decline" and "horrible betrayal," Thune toasted him for recapturing the "optimism" of President Reagan. Thune has also tried to describe Trump's arm-twisting of Zelensky in nobler language. After the President called Zelensky "a dictator without elections" and bizarrely faulted Ukraine for Russia's invasion, Thune told reporters that Trump merely wanted "a peaceful conclusion to the war," and so did Ukraine. But the Oval Office spat with Zelensky was harder to euphemize. "Last week was a missed opportunity," he told reporters, disappearing into his office without saying who had missed it, Trump or Zelensky.

When we met in mid-March, Thune told me that he had not talked much to Trump about Ukraine, though the President had conveyed in general terms "what he is trying to achieve there." Thune said, "I think he's now, at least, he's starting to . . ." He paused. "There's more pressure being applied with the Russians." Thune noted that, in public statements, he's always been clear about "who is at fault" in the region, and that the U.S. commitment to NATO must remain "iron-clad."

Thune has acknowledged, diplomatically, that he sees tariffs "through a slightly different lens" than the President does. But he prefers not to talk about Trump's forecasts that across-the-board tariffs will be a major long-term source of revenue, potentially to be collected by a new External Revenue Service. Thune has focussed on White House statements suggesting that the levies on Canada and Mexico are intended only to push those countries to crack down on the flow of fentanyl. In television interviews, Thune confidently portrayed the new levies as "targeted," "a means to an end," and for "a specific purpose" only.

When I pressed Thune about Trump's tariffs one day as he was walking through the Capitol, he was less sanguine. "I think they're—hopefully—temporary," he said. He crossed the anteroom of his office suite while I followed up with a question about whether he or the Senate could have any say in the matter. Thune stopped to think before turning back to respond that there was "a lot of executive-branch authority when it comes to tariffs." He sounded almost mournful.

Despite Trump's systematic disregard for Congress's authority, many Republican senators, at least publicly, have brushed off worries about the separation of powers. "Who is saying that?" Mullin asked, asserting that only Democrats had expressed concerns. In another conversation, he insisted that *DOGE* was eliminating only "fraud and abuse." When I asked if he thought that the entirety of U.S.A.I.D. was fraudulent, he shot back, "Have you seen it?"

Thune, in contrast, has tried to sound as though he is backing the President while still affirming fidelity to the Constitution. In a floor speech on February 6th, he took up the theme of "double standards." He accused the Democrats, accurately, of ignoring Biden's deviations from congressional spending statutes, such as in his failed attempt to forgive student loans, or his impractical requirement that programs for expanding rural broadband infrastructure prioritize union labor. Yet Thune was also clear that he agreed with Democrats on the fundamental issue. Congress had already "bequeathed and given up way too much power to the executive branch," he declared, and he was "not deaf" to complaints about the Trump Administration.

Thune's threading of the needle has been most effortful when it comes to the furious cuts to congressionally mandated programs. He has charitably called Musk's *DOGE* work a "careful scrub" of federal spending and "not unusual" for a new Administration. On February 11th, as Musk ratcheted up his rampage, Thune told reporters that *DOGE* cuts were just part of "the natural give-and-take" between the executive and legislative branches. The courts "have a way of mediating or refereeing" such disputes, he said.

By early March, that give-and-take seemed to enter a critical stage. On the fifth, the Supreme Court preliminarily upheld a lower court's ruling

blocking Trump's freeze on two billion dollars in congressionally appropriated foreign aid. The next day, a federal judge in Rhode Island found that the White House had "put itself above Congress" in ignoring a court order compelling the release of billions of dollars in other appropriations. On the day of the Supreme Court's decision, I ran into Collins, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee, as she was leaving an Ash Wednesday observance in the Senate chapel. She'd been texting with Musk, and she told me that "his brilliance does not extend to understanding how government works, what our laws are, what the separation of powers means." Congress, she said, would reclaim its authority in the spending bills for the next fiscal year, which begins in October, "with much more precise and careful legislating." She expressed confidence that Thune would protect the Senate's authority, though she acknowledged that he faced "an extraordinarily difficult balancing act."

Senator Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska, chairs the Appropriations Subcommittee for the Interior. She told me that she'd recently sent a letter to the heads of the agencies she oversees reminding them that they cannot make major changes to staffing or facilities without notifying congressional appropriators well in advance. She said that Congress should "look inward" at its failure in recent decades to make a more vigorous defense of its powers: "It's not all about taking potshots at Trump or *DOGE* or [Elon Musk](#). It's about the Senate saying, 'No, actually, we have a role here when it comes to determining the direction of spending.'" But, she continued, the Trump White House "wants to do everybody's job, and if they are rolling over or ignoring the legislative branch we should not allow that to stand." Murkowski said that Thune deserved "some latitude" as he quietly sought ways to protect the separation of powers. With a smile, she said she was sure that he'd get the job done, "with a little help from his team."

Musk himself showed up at the Capitol that afternoon for a lunch with Senate Republicans. Wearing his customary "Tech Support" T-shirt under a sport coat, he smirked and raised his eyebrows at a waiting crowd of journalists. Every Republican had stood to applaud him the previous night, during Trump's address to a joint session of Congress. But several senators told me and other journalists that, in private, Musk had faced polite but firm complaints about his failure to notify lawmakers before making vast cuts in

congressionally authorized spending, often alarming their constituents. Graham said that it had been “political malpractice not to consult Congress.” According to the senators, Musk had sought to assuage them by announcing his cellphone number, to facilitate better communication. Some noted, with satisfaction, that he appeared to have read the Supreme Court opinion issued that morning. And Graham told me and other reporters that Musk had pumped his fist in a dance of joy when senators described a rarely used legislative procedure that might retroactively legalize some *DOGE* cuts. The procedure, known as rescission, allows an Administration to make cuts *if* it submits a list to Congress in advance and majorities in both chambers approve them.

All the Republican senators have been eager to express their support for the *idea* of *DOGE*. But several left the Musk meeting gushing to reporters about the rescission proposal, clearly relieved that there might be a fix for the glaring problem that *DOGE* posed to the separation of powers. A rescission process would also surely force the Trump Administration to restore cuts so drastic or arbitrary that they couldn’t pass Congress. Mike Rounds, an old friend of Thune’s and South Dakota’s junior senator, told me, “They are going to break some things, and when that happens we want to repair them as quickly as possible.” Still, several senators weren’t sure that Musk now understood that only Congress could control federal spending. Rounds all but winked at me when he said that that part of the discussion was “still ongoing.”

Thune, pressed about the rescission approach as he headed toward the Senate floor, sounded far from convinced. “We’ll see—obviously, a rescission package needs to be submitted by the White House,” he said with a frown, tacitly questioning whether Trump and Musk would agree to such oversight.

When he was on his way back to his office, I pursued him again. Wasn’t it backward to slash spending and *then* ask Congress to legalize it? Thune started to explain the standard rescission process—the way it might have been done in, say, the Reagan or the Bush years. “It’s a tool that is available to the Administration,” he said. “If they identify savings within different agencies and departments that are real and they want us to act on them . . .”

But Musk and Trump were not just proposing future savings, I pointed out. They were eliminating programs and firing thousands of federal employees before asking for the consent of Congress. “Well, that’s”—a long pause—“a *different issue*.” He grinned, pointed a finger at me, and disappeared into a doorway, as though poking fun at his own evasiveness.

Rounds told me that Thune’s strategy was to hold the Republicans together in order to preserve “the relevance of the United States Senate.” Unity would give the senators a better chance “to have a say when it comes to modifications” of the President’s actions—presumably through budget and spending bills later this year. Although Republicans wanted to “reduce the size of the executive branch,” Rounds added, the senators “have to do our due diligence.” Like Thune, Rounds said that he looked forward to courts ruling on Trump’s expansive assertions of executive power. He told me that “none of us” could support unchecked executive authority, and that Trump was now “creating an atmosphere” that would force the courts to clarify the separation of powers, possibly bolstering the authority of Congress over rule-making agencies. “This will bring it to a head,” he predicted.

Yet the White House had already started raising questions about how binding it considered court rulings. In a post on social media in February, Trump declared, “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law.” [Vice-President J. D. Vance](#), a lawyer who has mused in the past about defying the Supreme Court, wrote in a post of his own that “judges aren’t allowed to control the executive’s legitimate power.”



"You've entered the final stage of grief—milking it."

Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

At a press conference, Thune went out of his way to rebut Vance directly. “Do I believe that the courts have a very, very valid role and need to be listened to and heard in that process?,” he said. “The answer is yes.” But it is unlikely to be so simple. So far, the Administration appears intent on insisting that it *does* follow court rulings while nonetheless contesting decisions in higher courts, shifting to new legal rationales, finding work-arounds, dragging its feet, and, arguably, inventing pretexts for noncompliance. (The deportation flights were over international waters by the time the judge ordered the Administration to turn them around!) In the meantime, though, some of DOGE’s demolition may come to seem irreversible. Foreign-aid workers are returning home. Fired federal employees are taking other jobs. New tenants may soon occupy federal office space. Ron Bonjean, a strategist who has worked as a senior adviser to Republican leaders in the House and the Senate, told me that the Trump Administration would surely rejoice if just a small part of its extra-legislative cuts survived judicial scrutiny. Shrinking the government by even a quarter of what Trump has already done in a few weeks would be “insanely victorious” for any other Republican Administration. Trump might even relish the chance to spar with the courts when he loses. Bonjean told me that Trump wants “headlines about ‘Look how much money I am trying to save.’”

That leaves Republican senators caught between their desire to preserve their own authority and the political imperative to stay on Trump's good side. Bonjean told me, "None of the senators like seeing their power usurped by the executive branch, but they know they are in a tough spot politically."

In truth, much of Trump and Musk's hatchet work—[wiping out U.S.A.I.D.](#); laying off tens of thousands of employees across Veterans Affairs, the National Institutes of Health, the Federal Aviation Administration, Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education; slashing medical and scientific research—is highly unlikely to win a majority vote as a rescission package, even in a Senate with fifty-three Republicans. Carefully targeted bills to claw back less than three billion dollars each failed to pass the Senate under George W. Bush and the first Trump Administration, despite Republican majorities. The federal bureaucracy may be inefficient, but each program tends to have vocal supporters—whether they're meat-packers, drug manufacturers, or pediatricians.

Whispers of discontent from Republican senators are not hard to detect. Some murmur that "soft power," such as foreign aid, is a much cheaper way to buy influence than military operations, or that cutting fifteen per cent of the Department of Veterans Affairs in a single blow must surely jeopardize crucial services. A few conservatives have carefully raised their voices. Senator Jerry Moran, the Kansas Republican who chairs the Veterans' Affairs Committee, has introduced a bill to roll back cuts to that department; he wants the government to keep paying U.S. farmers to send food abroad, too. Senator Katie Britt, of Alabama, has called for the restoration of research funding in Birmingham. The chairs of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees have warned the Administration that it cannot change the U.S. role in *NATO* without congressional approval.

On March 27th, Collins joined the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations panel in a public letter chastising the White House over news reports that it planned to ignore parts of the recent continuing resolution. "It is incumbent on all of us to follow the law as it is written—not as we would like it to be," they wrote, adding that the President "does not have the ability to pick and choose" from congressionally mandated

spending. Longtime Senate staffers told me that more pushback is likely to happen out of the view of the President or the public, in phone calls to Cabinet secretaries from congressional leaders and committee chairs.

Thune, who was surely informed in advance of the appropriators' letter, has studiously avoided opining on specific *DOGE* cuts. He may well share some of his colleagues' concerns. It's hard to imagine the senior senator from South Dakota being enthusiastic about reducing agricultural purchases, National Parks personnel, or veterans' services. But a Thune staffer told me that the senator would likely be happy to discuss one set of cuts: those made to the Department of Education. Like Reagan, Thune has long advocated for more local control.

By early March, in the weeks before the latest continuing resolution, the White House quietly asked Republican congressional leaders to insert provisions that would retroactively legitimate *DOGE* cuts, such as the erasure of U.S.A.I.D. Johnson, the House Speaker, initially sounded supportive, telling reporters that "it would not make sense" to fund "an agency that doesn't exist." But, even if every Republican in both chambers had consented, this backdoor approach would have given Senate Democrats clear justification for using the filibuster to block the resolution and shut down the government. Johnson and Thune privately rebuffed the White House. And when Schumer, the Democratic leader, voted to keep the government running, Thune revelled in the backlash from the left. At a press conference, he called it "something of a civil war among the Democrats."

For now, any public attempt by Thune to check Trump would likely arouse even greater anger from the Republican base. Breaking with the President could cost Thune his leadership job. But this could change in a matter of months, if Trump's popularity falters. Bonjean, the strategist, said that, if Republican senators hear "droves of *MAGA* voters calling to say, 'I voted for Donald Trump, but we are feeling too much pain from these tariffs and cutbacks,' " that's when Thune's colleagues may tell him, "We need some air cover."

Many Democrats outside the Senate are convinced that Thune and the Republicans will never say no to Trump. Jim Manley, a former senior

adviser to the Senate's Democratic leader Harry Reid, told me, "They've made their bed." Senator Raphael Warnock, the Georgia Democrat, recently told me and other reporters that the Republicans "are being rolled" and "making themselves increasingly irrelevant." Others argue that Thune's strategy resembles McConnell's miscalculated acquittal vote at Trump's impeachment: a gamble that the courts and the electorate will hold Trump to account.

Still, several Democratic senators told me that they were reluctant to express impatience with Thune, because they still hope that he will defend the separation of powers. A Democratic senator close to Thune cited his retort to Vance's post about judges as an encouraging sign that he will "stand up for the rule of law." Senator Chris Coons, a Delaware Democrat and another friend of Thune's, told me, "I'm pretty sure he understands just how dangerously close we are coming to giving away the Senate." He added, "On that, history will judge all of us."

When we met in Thune's office, I asked if he'd ever spoken to Trump about the separation of powers. He replied that he'd "drawn lines in the sand about places we're not going to go, one of which is the filibuster." Thune gave *DOGE* another dignified gloss, calling it an "analysis of government spending" and a drive "to modernize a lot of our ways of doing things." But he also told me that he'd made it clear to the White House that *DOGE* cannot cut government on its own (as Musk appears to have done repeatedly). "Hiring and firing decisions," Thune emphasized, should be made only by Senate-confirmed department heads "who understand the mission of that department or agency, and which employees and which programs and functions are critical." He added, "Some cuts they are going to need from Congress—I mean, they can't abolish the Department of Education. It would take Congress to do that." (A week later, Trump issued an executive order to gut the department while he seeks congressional approval to do away with it officially.)

I asked again if Thune had told the White House about such limits. "Well . . ." he said, with a deep sigh. "I had a fairly lengthy conversation a few weeks ago," as Congress was deciding on the continuing resolution. "I've had those conversations with the President. He understands that there

are things that we have to do.” Thune said that he’d talked to some of the newly confirmed Cabinet secretaries, and was reassured to see that they were “pulling back” on “some of those things that *DOGE* got out there and did early.” All the secretaries, at least, understood that “Congress has to vote” on proposed major cuts or shutdowns.

In another rosy depiction of Trump’s moves, Thune downplayed many of the cuts as “a lot of Biden stuff they are trying to clear out.” In truth, much of the federal spending that Musk and Trump have attacked was in place long before Biden. But, echoing Collins, Thune said that he expected the White House to adhere fully to the spending legislation that Congress would pass for the *next* fiscal year, in part because the Trump Administration would have a chance to provide “input.” He argued that the new Administration would follow protocol “as their agenda and priorities start being reflected in some of these appropriations bills.” Such legislation, of course, will take even more than unanimous Republican support. It will require the sixty votes needed to overcome a filibuster—Thune’s line in the sand—severely limiting how many *DOGE* cutbacks survive in law.

By late March, about two weeks after we talked in Thune’s office, Trump was escalating his efforts to circumvent Congress altogether. More than fifty district-court rulings had halted Trump initiatives, finding them probably illegal. After drawing rebukes from multiple judges for failing to comply with their orders, Trump retaliated by calling for their impeachment, arguing that a mere district court should not constrain a President. One day, I stopped Thune in the hall and asked if he believed that the White House had “listened to” the courts, as he had said that it must.

Dodging conflict again, Thune said that the answer was yes; the Administration was “using the appeals process,” which was “typically how something like this would get handled.” When I noted that, until Trump, Presidents have typically complied with injunctions while pursuing appeals, Thune sought to defer judgment until the Supreme Court itself had weighed in more fully. Whether a President must follow a district-court order, Thune said, “that’s going to be the question.” He continued, “I assume these appeals are going to have to happen very quickly,” and that the Supreme Court rulings “will be final.”

Manchin, now watching from the sidelines, urged patience with such seeming evasions. “John plays a long poker hand,” he told me. “It might seem out of character right now—going along with some things that maybe he normally wouldn’t—but when push comes to shove, and the survival of the separation of powers and basic independence of the legislature is on the line, when someone’s got to pull the trigger, John has the ability, the character, and the strength to do it.”

After the courts declare it illegal for Trump to rule by fiat, and after the Democrats thwart him in Congress, would come Thune’s moment of truth, Manchin predicted. Would the Majority Leader keep his promise to preserve the filibuster? Or would he capitulate to Trump? “If John caves to that,” Manchin said, “then I will be extremely disappointed in my buddy.” ♦



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[**Life and Letters**](#)

What We Knew Without Knowing

Notes to John Gregory Dunne.

By [**Joan Didion**](#)

March 31, 2025



“I said I wasn’t sure where we left off,” Didion wrote to her husband, about a session with her psychiatrist. “Dr. MacKinnon said why not begin where you are now.” Photograph by Brigitte Lacombe

Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne met in the late fifties, when she was working at Vogue and he at Time. They married in 1964, and in 1966 they adopted a baby girl, giving her a name from the Yucatán: Quintana Roo. Together, Didion and Dunne lived out one of the most collaborative literary marriages in American history. Last week, after two years of preparation, the New York Public Library opened the Didion-Dunne archive to the public. Among its three hundred and thirty-six boxes of material is a thick file of typewritten notes by Didion describing her sessions with the psychiatrist Roger MacKinnon, beginning in 1999. Addressed to Dunne, the entries are full of direct quotations and written with the immediacy of fresh

recollection. Didion was concerned about Quintana and her struggles with depression and alcoholism, but she was preoccupied, too, with aging, with creative fulfillment, with the complex dynamics of their family. She recorded her thoughts with the cool, forensic clarity she was known for. These entries will be published in book form as “Notes to John.” Readers of her memoirs “The Year of Magical Thinking,” written in the wake of Dunne’s sudden death, in 2003, at the age of seventy-one, and “Blue Nights,” about Quintana’s death less than two years later, at thirty-nine, will recognize how these notes inform those final books—the striving to understand and the sense of futility that comes with it. “Life changes fast,” Didion famously wrote. “Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.” She died in 2021, at eighty-seven.

—David Remnick

29 December 1999

Re not taking Zoloft, I said it made me feel for about an hour after taking it that I'd lost my organizing principle, rather like having a planters' punch before lunch in the tropics. I said I'd tried to think this through, because I knew rationally it couldn't be true, since the PDR said even twice that dose doesn't reach any effect for several hours and peak effect for 3-5 days of steady dosage. I realized that I had a very closely calibrated idea of my physical well-being, very fearful of losing control, that my personality was organized around a certain level of mobilization or anxiety.

I then said that I had tried to think through the anxiety I had expressed at our last meeting. I said that although it had been expressed in terms of work (the meeting in Los Angeles etc.), I realized when I discussed it with you that it was focused on Quintana.

“Of course it was,” he said. We then talked about what my anxieties were re Quintana. Basically, they were that she would become depressed to a point of danger. The shoe dropping, the call in the middle of the night, the attempt to take her emotional temperature on every phone call. I said that in some ways this seemed justified and in other ways unfair to her, because she must be feeling our anxiety as we were feeling hers.

"I suspect she feels your anxiety very particularly," he said. I said apparently she did. She had not only told us she did but had also mentioned this to Dr. Kass. It was me and not you she wanted to see a psychiatrist. He said he would assume that she read anxiety in both of us, but that something in her and my relationship made her feel mine more acutely, made her lock into mine. "People with certain neurotic patterns lock into each other in a way that people with healthy patterns don't. There's clearly a very powerful dependency that goes both ways between you and her."

He wanted to know how old Quintana was when we got her, the details of the adoption. We talked at some length about that, and I said I had always been afraid we would lose her. Whalewatching. The hypothetical rattlesnake in the ivy on Franklin Avenue. He said that just as all adoptive children have a deep fear that they will be given away again, all adoptive parents have a deep fear that the child will be taken from them. If you don't deal with these fears at the time you have them, you displace them, obsessively on dangers you can control—the snake in the garden—as opposed to the danger you can't control. "Obviously, you didn't deal with this fear at the time. You set it aside. That's your pattern. You move on, you muddle through, you control the situation through your work and your competency. But the fear is still there, and when you discovered this summer that your daughter was in danger you couldn't manage or control, the fear broke through your defenses."

I said I may have been overprotective, but I never thought she saw me that way. In fact, she once described me, as a mother, as "a little remote."

Dr. MacKinnon: "You don't think she saw your remoteness as a defense? When she uses remoteness herself as a defense? Didn't you just tell me? She never looks back?"

2 February 2000

...

I said that repeatedly over the past few years—when Quintana expressed unhappiness or hopelessness about her situation—I had tried to explain that she had to make a decision to be happy. That there was an actual benefit to

“putting on a happy face.” I said I was encouraged to hear that some of what was said at Hazelden seemed to echo this—the “look good to feel good,” the “as if” theory—the point being to act “as if” you believed the slogans, and suddenly you found you did believe. I said that I had told her, as an example of this, that I had thought myself in a dead-end situation in my twenties and had finally come to a conscious decision to change it—in this case to break off a relationship with someone destructive and get on with my life.

Dr. MacKinnon wanted to know what was destructive about the relationship. I explained that the person in question was very smart, and had believed that I was very smart, which at an insecure time in my life had been valuable, but that this person was also very destructive to himself, drank too much, was too depressed to work or even take care of himself, etc.

Dr. MacKinnon asked if he was much older than I was. I said he was older than I was, but not greatly so—I guess eight or nine years. Dr. MacKinnon asked if he were an alcoholic. I said it wasn’t a word I used at the time but I supposed he so defined himself, since he later went into rehab and as I understood it hadn’t drunk since. I said I didn’t actually know because we no longer spoke—we had remained friendly after you and I were married but then he tried to sue me over a character in a novel.

“Was the character based on him,” Dr. MacKinnon asked. I said more or less, yes, but basing a character on him wasn’t really the problem—the problem was that the “character” did something in the novel that this person had done in real life and didn’t want people to know about. Dr. MacKinnon asked what it was. I said that the character had beaten up a woman in circumstances pretty much the same as this person had beaten up a woman I knew. Or so I had believed.

“Did he ever hit you?” Dr. MacKinnon asked.

I said yes.

“Did your parents hit you?”

I said no, they never even spanked me. Once my mother slapped me but it was totally understandable.

“Then wasn’t it a pretty world-shaking thing to get hit by this man?”

I said yes, it was, but I had at the time been able to rationalize it, or distance it, as “literary,” “real life,” an example of romantic degradation.

“Did you blame yourself?”

Definitely not, I said. I blamed him. I blamed him or alcohol or something else, not myself. I said I had naturally asked myself this, since everything you read about domestic abuse is based on the notion that the victim blames herself. I didn’t.

“Yet you remained friendly even after you were married?”

I explained that we were all friends, that you and I had in fact met through this person.

“Your husband didn’t resent this friendship?”

Why should he have, I said.

“Most people are possessive about the people they’re married to. Wouldn’t you resent having an old girlfriend of his around?”

No, I said. In fact, an old girlfriend of yours had been over the years—although we rarely saw her, because she lived in England—one of our best friends. I had even once called her (she worked for BA) to get Quintana onto a flight from Nice to Heathrow.

“You really don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?”

No, I said. What are you talking about?



“What percentage of my donation will go toward public recognition that I made a donation?”
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

“It’s as if you operate on a different level. Maybe it’s the entertainment industry.”

“If you mean many people I know get married a lot of times and stay on good terms with their ex-wives and husbands, that’s true.”

“Only a very small percentage of people do that. In the rest of the world, people regard their wives or husbands possessively.”

“I think they’re unhealthy.”

I said, in a conciliatory way, that in fact your parents had been married only once, my parents had been married only once, my brother has been married for 40 years, and you and I were married 36 last Sunday. So we were not entirely operating on entertainment-industry rules.

“You mentioned a few weeks ago that your father had been depressed.”

I said yes, he was. I said I had looked a few weeks ago at the letters he had left in his safe deposit box for me and my mother. My mother had given them to me just after he died, saying that she could not bear to read hers, “so you take it.” There had also been one for my brother but I never saw it. At the time I was given the letters, right after he died, I read them once and then put them in a box—I didn’t want to dwell on them. A few weeks ago,

when I took them out of the box and read them again, I noticed something—I hadn't noticed it before—that shocked me. The letter to Mother was dated 1953, and the letter to me 1955. The letter to me began by saying that certain things were happening that suggested he wouldn't be around much longer, and the letter to Mother didn't say but implied the same thing.

"Do you think he had just gotten bad news about his health?"

I said if he had just gotten bad news about his health, it was seriously off the mark, since he lived forty more years.

"Then what shocked you?"

I said they read almost like suicide notes.

"Goodbye notes. Yes. That's certainly what they sound like. Obviously you must have had some idea of his state of mind at the time."

I said I had known of course that he was depressed. He was in and out of Letterman. He could only eat raw oysters. Mother would drive down from Sacramento on Sundays and pick me up in Berkeley and we would go over to San Francisco to see him. We would pick him up at the hospital and drive somewhere—anywhere—then go somewhere to eat oysters. Then he would want to be left off as far from the hospital as possible. The hospital was in the Presidio. Do you know San Francisco, I asked.

"I was stationed at the Naval Hospital in Oakland during the same years you're talking about," he said. "So yes. I know the hospital you're talking about."

All right, I said. Where he wanted to be let off was always on the beach to the south of Golden Gate Park.

"People die there," Dr. MacKinnon said. "Heavy surf, heavy rip tide. That must have gone through your mind when you dropped him there, knowing how depressed he was."

I said I didn't remember thinking this. I just thought how sad he looked waving goodbye.

"People who are depressed to the point of suicide say little things to people who are close to them—little insignificant things—that may not register in the conscious mind but certainly register somewhere. They end a discussion by saying 'Of course that won't matter to me,' things of that nature."

"Are you saying I knew at some level that he was suicidal?"

"I don't see how you could have escaped it. And I don't see how that old unarticulated knowledge could escape coming back into play now—when you're experiencing fears about your daughter."

16 February 2000

I said I wasn't sure where we left off. Dr. MacKinnon said why not begin where you are now. I said I wasn't sure where I was now, life seemed rather scattered, we had not seen Quintana but had talked to her, she had seemed on the occasions we spoke in generally good spirits, fairly upbeat. Still, I found myself worrying, waiting for the bad news to kick in. I had thought about what he had said last week—that I had to have faith, believe that everything was going to turn out—but that I had difficulty doing this, and I wondered if my anticipating the worst was in some way transmitting itself to her, worrying her to the point where it became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"I think you have to examine how far back in your life you've been anticipating the worst. Because the farther back this pattern goes, the more likely it is that she's been picking up on it for a very long time."

I said I knew that it went very far back, to early childhood. For example, I keep hearing that small girls imagine themselves as brides, princesses in wedding dresses. I never had: my earliest picture of myself being "married" was myself getting a divorce, leaving a courthouse in a South American city wearing dark glasses and getting my picture taken.

“You don’t think that’s unusual? I’ve never encountered a childhood divorce fantasy.”

I said yes, I did think it was unusual, that was why I had mentioned it. On the other hand, it reflected nothing in my actual experience—nobody we even knew at that stage was divorced—it reflected my reading a lot of trash fiction as a very young child.

“Why were you reading trash fiction? You would have been a bright child, didn’t you go to the library?” I said I was too little to go to the library by myself. There was a children’s library near our house and my mother would take me there. But I didn’t like children’s books, they bored me. “And your mother didn’t realize how precocious you were, that you weren’t being challenged?” I said I was pretty sure she had realized it, but she might not have wanted to encourage it. “She didn’t want to expose you to things you might not have been able to handle?” I said maybe something like that, I didn’t know. In any case, the war came and we left and there was no question of libraries until after we came home.

I said that my reaction to the war was another case of having been in retrospect overly apprehensive. “Can you expand on that reaction?” I said in some ways it (the war) began for me when my brother was born, in December 1939. My mother was in the hospital for two weeks. The hospital did not allow visits from children. I felt quite alone, left out. “Abandoned,” he said. In a way, I said. Then she came home, and everything was a little different, and I didn’t react well. My father and I had been very close—I spent a lot of those first five years just driving around with him, visiting relatives or dropping by ranches or whatever—and after my brother was born this dynamic changed. Plus, the war was always on the horizon. I would hear Daddy talking about enlisting. Which he did, before war was declared. When he went away I was sad for a long time, I stopped growing, the pediatrician called it “failure to thrive” and recommended to Mother that we join him if possible. It was possible, he was only at Fort Lewis then, so we did. Then we went to Durham, then to Colorado Springs.

These were for a child disordered times. There was always difficulty getting trains. I remember there were no seats on the train between New Orleans and Durham, we stood up in the vestibule where the cars coupled. There

was always difficulty finding somewhere to live. The first and one of the few times I ever saw my mother cry was coming out of a military housing office in either Tacoma or Durham. In Durham my father was billeted at Duke, and Mother and my brother and I lived in one room in a Baptist preacher's house, with kitchen privileges. This family was strange to me, exotic. The children sat under the back stoop eating dirt, I later learned it was common in poor areas of the south, the result of a nutritional deficiency.

"But your father was getting a salary, why did you live that way?" I pointed out that this was 1942. Every place the military was stationed was overcrowded. It wasn't a question of money. It was a question of no place to live.

"You must have been afraid your father would be sent overseas, maybe die." I said I was. He talked about going overseas all the time. He seemed ashamed that he kept getting orders for one after another office job in safe places. This feeling on his part seemed especially acute in Colorado Springs, because this was a base on which other people were actually in harm's way—fliers from Petersen were always crashing, but he wasn't a flier.

When he left Petersen for Cleveland and Detroit we went home. Except we didn't have a house anymore, they had sold it. So my mother and brother and I lived with my grandmother until the war ended and Daddy came home, at which point they built a house, but finding the property and getting the house built took probably another year of living with my grandmother. That was a difficult time for Daddy. During the time he was away, Mother had seemed to work out a very contented life with her mother.

"Was your grandfather dead?"

No, I said, but he was away from Sunday afternoon until Friday night. She lived in Sacramento, he worked in Marysville. That was their M.O. So it was really a house of women, until Daddy came home.

"There must have been tension. You must have felt it." I said there had been tension, that in fact I had later learned from Mother that it was a period

when they considered divorce.

“There has to have been a level at which you knew that. Witness your divorce fantasy.”

I said there might or might not have been a level at which I knew it, but in point of fact the divorce fantasy was much earlier, before the war.

“I’m suggesting that the tension may not have arrived out of nowhere in 1945. That you felt it much earlier, even before the war. Sensitive children are extraordinarily attuned to domestic tension, things they hear at the dinner table.”

I said I supposed that all children were so attuned. And they had no way of interpreting what they picked up. They had no way of understanding the normal give and take of adult relationships, normal differences of opinion.

“Children have different ways of handling this. Some children close it off, refuse to hear it, don’t remember it later.” I said that my brother remembered nothing about our childhood. I could not engage him in a conversation about his life before college if our lives depended on it. Of course he was only four, but his entire memory of Colorado Springs is a dead certainty that we left because he saw a spider in a packing box.

“That’s something like believing the tension in your household began when the war ended.”

I said nothing.

“I think you grew up believing that you were on the brink of disaster. That you were about to lose your father. I think you were anticipating the loss of your father your entire life. Until he died. Which is why I think you took his death harder than you thought you did.”

Let’s for the sake of argument, I said, assume that this is true. It’s certainly true that I have always been extremely apprehensive. The reasons for my being apprehensive may not be as important as the simple fact that I have been. Here’s what I don’t understand: what has this got to do with

Quintana? What is she getting from me that troubles her? I accept that she's getting something, that's what she tells Dr. Kass, that's why I'm talking to you.

"A very simple message. She gets that you're worried, apprehensive, maybe afraid. Children who sense that a parent is always worried feel insecure, from a very young age. They have no idea what the parent is worried about, so they anticipate the worst outcome they can imagine. They're afraid the parent may lose control of the situation, may not be able to take care of them. They carry that fear into adult life. That's what she's working on with Dr. Kass. But she needs to feel that you'll be all right."

21 June 2000

...

I said that he had mentioned, last week, a certain surprise at my actual strength. I said I had been thinking about this, and had wondered if a lot of what looked like strength wasn't just a highly developed capacity to compartmentalize.

"You do compartmentalize, yes, but I see an actual strength."

I said I had then started thinking about where the capacity to compartmentalize came from. I said I thought it came from the basic way-west story that had been drummed into me as a child. You drop baggage, you jettison the piano and the books and your grandmother's rosewood chest, or you don't get to Independence Rock in time to make the Sierra before snowfall. I said I had come to see a lot of contradictions in this story, the principal one being, where were you when you got there? What did you actually have left?

"You know what this entire session has been about, don't you?"

No, I said.

"It's about being forced to sum up. Looking at your life. Asking yourself if you've truly lived it. Asking yourself what you've really got to leave

behind. This is something everybody has to face. It's hard to face. But if you face it now, and make whatever changes you need to make, you're going to have a shot at dying peaceful."

I said I thought we were both feeling the pressure of time. Of not having time to do what was important to us. Of writing movies when we should be doing things we wanted to do. And that every time we thought maybe we had a shot at getting out from under our obligations—Quintana would kick in. And that sometimes I couldn't help feeling a certain resentment.

"Of course you do. You can't help but feel it. You feel imprisoned by responsibility for her. You're allowing her to hold you prisoner, which in turn imprisons her. She does feel imprisoned. She says so. She feels just as responsible for you and John as you feel for her. I think this realization of your resentment could have valuable consequences for her."

How, I asked.

"There's not a short answer. We have to think about it. We have to discuss it at length. But I think we're getting close to where we can discuss it."

28 June 2000

I said that it had occurred to me after we talked last week that the question we had gotten into—that of summing up your life, what it's been worth, what legacy are you leaving—had probably been on my mind all year. That the situation with Quintana had thrown into relief—and compounded—a more general concern about work, meaning, etc. That in fact this very question had precipitated what probably amounted to a late-life crisis.

"Very definitely," he said.

I said I recognized all that, but I still didn't know where to go with it, how to resolve it. I said the situation with Quintana was at the moment looking good. That she had responded very positively to the addiction specialist, that she identified with the group he had put her in and found it very useful. I said we could see the difference. She was looking better, of course,

because she wasn't drinking, but she was also thinking better. She had even allowed herself to become extremely happy—and this was a worry in the back of my mind—about a dinner date she had had with someone. I said this was the first time we'd seen her this way in a long time—the worry of course was that it, or she, would crash.

"You could look at it that way, but there's another way to look at it. Obviously, she's making progress, she's allowing herself to hope, to make contact with someone outside herself. The very fact that she's exposing herself to possible disappointment shows great progress. There was a time—quite recent, too—when she wouldn't have risked that."

But what if it fails, I said.

MOG AND THOG SIMULTANEOUSLY DISCOVER EYE CONTACT



Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

"It might well fail," he said. "That's life. She's learning to live it. You could help her by enjoying it with her while it lasts—being optimistic. She can take something from your optimism. She can use it. It can make her more optimistic, give her ways of coping with her own depressive periods. You don't always have to look ahead for the bump in the road. Your anticipating the bump won't make the bump disappear. It'll still be there. You're afraid you won't be prepared to deal with it if you don't anticipate it, but you will. Your adrenalin kicks in. You deal with it. And meanwhile, you've been happy. Which gives you more strength to deal with it—and it also gives her more strength."

I said that after a lifetime of looking ahead to the bump in the road—or as I always thought of it, keeping the snake on cleared ground—I didn’t see how I could stop now.

“People can change. I grew up in a family like yours, I was depressive like you, I was always looking for the bump or the snake. A lot of psychiatrists are attracted to the specialty because they themselves are depressed. That’s why psychiatrists have a suicide rate four times the rate for other professionals. So I do know—from personal experience—that change is possible. Depression is a habit of mind. You can change the habit.”

I said, vis-à-vis the effect of this habit of mind on Quintana, that we had mentioned to her this week that we were both depressed. This had seemed a source of considerable concern to her until we made clear that it had to do with a specific work problem. Which it didn’t entirely, but we didn’t tell her that.

“So long as you didn’t let her think it had something to do with her. What was it about?”

I said it was about work, but more than any specific work. It had to do with where we were in our lives, wanting to do more work that was worthwhile and less that wasn’t. I said that for many years we had been able to do pictures—a fair number of which got made—and still keep time to do what we wanted to do. This was increasingly hard to do. Some of it had to do with the economics of the picture business—more expensive movies, more development, more rewrites etc. A single picture could dominate years of our life and still never get made.

“At this stage in your life you clearly shouldn’t be doing things you don’t want to do. No one should. I for example had to make a decision not to treat patients I didn’t want to treat. It meant making some sacrifices. I have no idea of your financial situation. Can you afford not to work?”

I said it wasn’t a question of wanting not to work, it was a question of wanting to work on things that we did well, got some psychic reward for doing.

“So you’d still have income, but not as much income. Is that the situation?”

I said yes.

“Can you live on it.”

I said I had no idea.

“This is really very easy to figure out. I could tell you how to figure it out, I’m good at it, all my friends come to me when they have questions about money. But I’m sure you and John could figure it out by yourselves. You know what you have, you know what your income is likely to be for the year, you know what you’ll spend.”

I said there were two unknowable elements in that formula, what our income would be and what we would spend.

“You’ve never lived on a budget?”

I said no. I said we both assumed that we would probably have to cut back our spending. But by how much—or whether it was even a real factor—remained a mystery to me. We had made a stab at addressing the question last fall, I said. Maybe the most telling fault in our approach was that we had decided to address it in Paris, and taken the Concorde.

He laughed. “If the two of you are going to regain control of your lives, this would be the best possible way to start. I think you should sit down with your accountant, get a grasp on this.”

I said obviously it was tied into our immediate legal dilemma. “I think you better address that too,” he said. “Because it’s not going to get miraculously better. Obviously, you should be doing what you want to do. But you can’t really do it until you get these questions about financial security resolved. That could well be one of the things that’s worrisome or troubling to Quintana, too. Plus, it would be extremely useful to her to see you getting joy from your work.”

I said she had seen it, but not recently. I said there were many things we should have done this year, and I wasn't even talking about books. I said you should have done the LAPD scandal, I should have done Miami.

"Yes. Definitely you should be doing these things. So figure this out, and do them."

I said there was another factor that could be standing in the way of that kind of reporting. I said that each of us had become exceedingly reluctant to go anywhere or do anything without the other.

"You're in each other's skin, yes. You get security from that, but it's also very limiting. This seems to be what makes Quintana sometimes feel herself to be an outsider in a family of two.

"Sometimes the two are keeping her out, in her view, and other times they're enveloping her, pressuring her. But it's two, and she's one."

I said I thought this two-ness had perhaps been reinforced—been increased exponentially—during and after the period when I was being treated for cancer and we didn't tell anyone.

"Yes, I think you're still showing scars from that. Scars you've never looked at. The physical scars healed but the emotional ones didn't."

I said I thought any scarring was not from the fact of having had cancer, but from the isolation.

"Have you told anyone since?"

I said we had told Calvin and Alice at the five year point, and explained why we had felt particularly guilty about not telling them at the time.

"At the time you were being treated, didn't your doctors suggest you go to a support group?"

I said I never would have done that. In any case, I was telling no one. I even did the radiation at 168th Street so I wouldn't run into people I knew.

“I think we should get into this another time. Cancer still carries a heavy freight for many people.”

I repeated: the freight for me wasn’t the cancer, but it may have been the isolation.

“Whatever it was, I think we should get into it.”

11 October 2000

I sat down and immediately began to cry. “What’s on your mind,” Dr. MacKinnon asked.

I said I didn’t know. I rarely cried. In fact I never cried in crises. I just found it very difficult to sit down facing somebody and talk.

“Of course you don’t cry in the course of your day, whoever was around would feel you were accusing them of hurting you in some way. They would feel guilty. This isn’t the course of your day. I don’t feel guilty. You find it difficult to talk today in particular?”

I said no, every day.

“But you mention it today.”

I said that I mentioned it today because it seemed to me particularly striking that I sat down and immediately reacted (to nothing but his silence) by crying. In light of the fact that I actually felt quite good—felt maybe as if I might be capable of seeing daylight for the first time in a long while—I could only conclude that I was finding it almost impossible to be forced to express myself.

“Who’s forcing you,” he said.

That’s why I’m here, I said. I can’t just sit here in silence. “You could if you wanted to,” he said. “But I think you’d be better off thinking about what these tears are expressing. Tears express a lot of things, particularly in people whose wiring is as close to the surface as yours is. They can express

relief, joy, all kinds of complicated emotions in between. You said you were feeling that you might be capable of seeing daylight.”

I said I had experienced—just yesterday—a kind of breakthrough about what I could do next. I had finished the long political piece I’d been doing. It was over, I’d seen it in print over the weekend.

Then the question of what to do next—a decision I’d been putting off, not addressing—had become urgent. At some point yesterday it had occurred to me that I could take a couple of long pieces I’d done about California and use them—one of them in particular—as notes for an extended essay or book about California. These pieces dealt with things that had been very much on my mind all this year—really for years before that, but this year in particular because the attitudes implicit in them had been things we talked about all year. For example the basic story of the crossing—the redemption through survival, the redemption for what purpose, the nihilism. The fables and the confusion they engendered.

“I can see that as thrilling,” he said. “Liberating. I could make a case that you walked in here and sat down and for the first time felt liberated enough to cry, tears of joy. You’d found something you thought could truly engage you, enable you to set your concerns to one side. Which is what you’ve needed to do all year. It was the clearest thing about you. You needed to work, and work in a meaningful way. It’s not selfish. It’s crucial to your own survival.”

I said we had for all intents and purposes shelved the movie business. We had been tending in that direction all year, but finally the impulse had gone critical.

“One of the first things I remember your telling me was about a meeting in California that had upset you, depressed you. Obviously, for whatever reason—some of which surely had to do with the youth orientation of the industry—this wasn’t improving your situation.”

Only monetarily, I said. And that would be something we’d have to figure out, deal with.

“You’re very strong. You’ll be amazed what you can deal with if you’re doing something you want to be doing.”

13 December 2000

Discussion of how I felt, re my hip. I told him I was much stronger—really almost physically normal—but mentally shaky, fragile, too easily exhausted. I was exhausted for example by the party Thursday night, although I’d done nothing. I told him what had happened Friday night—the reading, the Hedermans, suddenly knowing I had to go home. I said I had been wondering if this kind of injury did something to your brain—although I hadn’t hit my head at all.

“Of course it does,” he said. “Any injury like that makes you feel fragile, incapable. It affects your self-image in a negative way.

“You have it fixed in your mind that you can’t fall. It’s the most important thing on your mind: not falling. You move differently, you perceive your surroundings differently. I was on crutches for three months after I fell last winter. I’d never before been nervous walking around this neighborhood after dark. But on crutches I was. I felt like prey. Then—even after I was off crutches—I had to cancel a trip to see my daughter in Seattle. Which made me feel new limits. I managed to go to a big school reunion, but I was miserable, I was only thinking about not getting hurt. Then I realized there was no point going to Europe, which we usually do every September. It makes you feel old. Useless. Never mind you didn’t hit your head. It still affects your head.”

I said I supposed that the strain of last week had intensified this feeling of fragility. Last night I had even found myself wondering if—if I were to go see my mother in January—I would be able to drive.

“You’ll remember how to drive, but I understand why you feel that. I understand that Quintana seems better.”

I said yes, she did. When we talked to her on Sunday we had both been somewhat encouraged—she spoke of “having nine days” without either

false euphoria or the kind of defensiveness we'd come to see as a danger signal.

We talked about the Supreme Court decision. I said I had found it depressing, troubling in some way that didn't have anything to do with who got to be president.

"What they did or what they didn't do?"

What they didn't do, I supposed. I said I always thought I could read Tony Kennedy, I didn't always agree with his decisions but I knew where they were coming from, they were coming from Sacramento. This was different. I couldn't read it. There was a very clear thing the court could have done, when it came to them the last time, and they didn't do it.

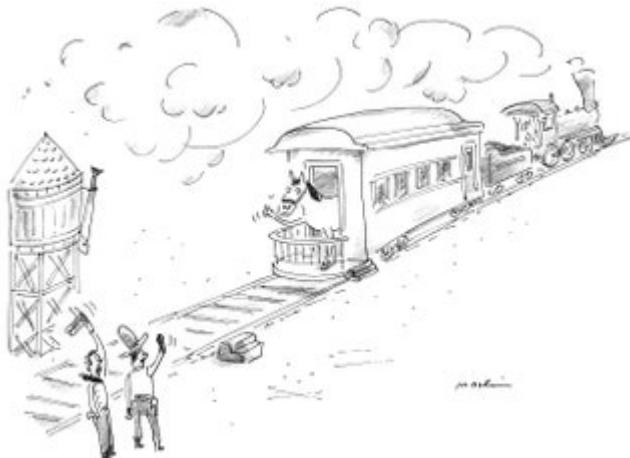
"They were playing out a political game. And the Florida Supreme Court didn't help them, they were playing out their own political game.

Obviously, if you wanted to do something that would be the best thing for the country, and wouldn't guarantee one or another political outcome, you would have said at the outset let's recount the entire state and here are the standards we're going to use. Either court could have done that, in plenty of time to get it done. Neither one did."

I said I guess that's what troubled me about it. What troubled me about Tony's role in it. He was smart, he could have seen that. So why didn't he say it?

"He lives in society. A very small, basic society. Those nine people are his society. He has to get along with them in order to function at all."

I said I guessed I still thought of Tony as a child at the dinner table, very smart, very idealistic in some ways—it wasn't a particularly idealistic household, how could it be, his father was Artie Samish's lawyer, his mother was political to the bone, but they were always straight, and Tony was still straight. So it troubled me to see him making this kind of accommodation.



"Now we're not even a one-horse town."

Cartoon by Michael Maslin

“Most people do make accommodations. You look at this from a very special point of view. You have an unusual purity of intention. You’re extremely intelligent, absolutely logical. You demand that everyone else live up to this standard.”

I said I didn’t live up to it myself.

“Always being right doesn’t necessarily make you feel good about yourself.”

I said I supposed he was saying that I wasn’t always right. “I’m saying you can’t let yourself not be. You can’t let yourself make mistakes, be human. Having to be right is like the Midas touch. You think it would be wonderful if everything you touched turned to gold, then you find you’ve turned to gold yourself, stopped being human.”

I said this discussion was kind of striking, because every fight you and I ever had came down to your thinking I was holding myself up as always right. I said I always had trouble understanding this, because I didn’t feel right.

“Of course you don’t feel right. You could never be right enough to make you feel good about yourself. There’s a certain kind of family that encourages the kind of personality you are. Children in that kind of family think if they’re right they’ll be loved. Then they get to be adults, and they

don't understand why being right doesn't make other people love them. And it doesn't. It isolates them. They can't accept other people's mistakes, because they can't accept their own. What's interesting here is that we're talking about the same thing now that we were talking about when you came in. About feeling fragile, threatened by other people, threatened by a world you can't control. What happened to you when you fell is that you lost control. That's the one thing you're most afraid of losing. You don't understand living without control. Which is another way of saying you don't understand not having to be right."

4 April 2001

I said I had just come from a lunch, and had found myself unable to remember anything the speaker said long enough to write it down.

"Did this upset you," he asked.

I said yes. I said that I was more and more aware of this, that you were too, that we had talked about it, that both of us had trouble thinking of words or maintaining a thought long enough to follow it through, that I had said to you that it was emotional overload, stress, and to some extent I supposed it was but it was worrisome. For example I couldn't remember a phone number long enough to dial it.

"So you write it down, and you still have to glance at it to finish dialing?"

Yes, I said.

"Welcome to the club," he said. "But let's get back to this lunch. Was what the speaker was saying important to you?"

In fact no, I said. I had already written whatever I was going to write about the subject, there was no reason for me to even be there except to please Bob Silvers. Still, taking notes was what I did, and on this occasion I couldn't seem to do it.

“I would suspect there was a dissonance between what was being said and what was actually on your mind.”

In this case possibly, I said. But it also seemed to be a breakdown of short-term memory.

“There are tricks for getting around that. They’re the same tricks you use when you’re learning to study, to read for an exam. You hear it or read it, then you repeat it to yourself—2 or 3 times if it’s really important—then you write it down. The reason for this is that hearing or reading gets laid down in one part of your brain, speaking it in another, and writing it down in still a third. So if you’ve got cell loss in one part, you’ve still got it laid down in the other two. Telling someone else also works. Not because you expect them to remember it and remind you. Just because you’ve reinforced it in your own mind. My schedule is so limited and so much the same every week that I often don’t even look at my calendar. So if there’s something out of the ordinary coming up—say a changed appointment—I’ll often ask the patient to call and remind me. Whether the patient calls or not, I will then remember. Because I’ve reinforced it to myself by talking about it.”

He picked up a stack of notes by his telephone. “See these? They’re things I might need to remember. They’re here so I know where they are. It’s not just age. I see my son write everything down on his Palm Pilot, and he’s only in his 40s. As far as things like telephone numbers go, you can’t remember them because they aren’t important to you. If I gave you a seven digit number right now and told you it was crucial that you remember it, you would remember it, you’d devise a trick for remembering it. The telephone number isn’t up front in your mind. Your mind at that moment is on the call, what you’re going to say when the other person answers. Anybody’s mind.”

I said I often thought it would help just to have a week free. To not be under any pressure, to get the house put in order, all the pieces of paper put in place.

“That would be very valuable. In fact it’s another trick. Straightening out your office or your house actually reorders your mind. It has a measurable physiological effect, it’s been documented. I myself have been cleaning out

my files, because I ran out of filing space, I could no longer afford to keep 50 years of tax records. It's time-consuming, but it's been extremely useful."

I told him about the dumpster when we left California. That it felt liberating, but also traumatic. That I thought even now about things I had thrown out. That there was no reason in the world I needed to know for example how much it cost to take Quintana to the Royal Hawaiian in 1969 but I acutely missed not being able to look it up.

"There's no reason I need to have checks my mother wrote when I was a child," he said. "But until now I kept them. I couldn't throw them out. They were somehow pieces of a life."

On the subject of mothers, I said that mine seemed better most of the time but then would let slip something deluded. For instance she remained unconvinced that she had not had a lung removed in the hospital. When I tried to correct this, she said "I know what they did, I saw the bill." I said I supposed I should call her doctor about this.

"Just so he knows what's going on, yes."

I said I had been thinking about something he said last week. He had said that trying to intervene on behalf of my mother might well be in vain, but that it was still important that I do it, because to not do it would be inconsistent with my image of myself as a caring person.

"Exactly."

Well, I said, I'm not at all sure that "a caring person" is in fact my image of myself.

"Is that what was on your mind at lunch? How you were going to have to walk in here and tell me this truth I had somehow failed to recognize? Come clean about having put one over on me?

"Masquerading as a caring person when you're not? Why exactly do you think you're not a caring person?"

I said it had just never been my image of myself. It was tied up with my working, leaving home, the selfishness it took to . . .

“Do productive work?” he interrupted.

I said it did take a certain selfishness. A certain self-focus. Which lately I had been hard put to summon up.

“In our culture this is something not many girls escape. Some deep idea that they should be the caring ones, the ones to stay home, the ones to take care of ill family members. You rejected that, but you didn’t escape feeling guilty about it. This affects more women than men, but men don’t get off as free as some women think they do.”

I asked if he knew, when he said what he said last week about my image of myself as a caring person, that this wasn’t my image of myself.

“I can’t say I’m entirely surprised. I did think you might have developed more self-awareness. But you really don’t see yourself as other people see you, do you? Other people—myself included—see you as extremely caring. On the other hand, if you saw yourself that way, you wouldn’t be here. Which is where we’re trying to get.” ♦

This is drawn from “[Notes to John](#)”.

Joan Didion, who died in 2021, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1988. Her books include “[Slouching Towards Bethlehem](#)” (1968), “[The Year of Magical Thinking](#)” (2005), and “[Notes to John](#)” (2025), a collection of journal entries addressed to her late husband.

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Takes

- **[Elizabeth Kolbert on John McPhee’s “Encounters with the Archdruid”](#)**

By Elizabeth Kolbert | The nominal subject was the Sierra Club leader David Brower, but McPhee allowed a mining expert named Charles Park to share the stage.

[Takes](#)

Elizabeth Kolbert on John McPhee’s “Encounters with the Archdruid”

The nominal subject was the Sierra Club leader David Brower, but McPhee allowed a mining expert named Charles Park to share the stage.



By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

March 30, 2025



March 20, 1971

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.

When President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, on September 3, 1964, he called it one of the “most far-reaching conservation measures” ever approved. The bill established fifty-four wilderness areas, most in the American West, which, together, encompassed more than nine million acres. As the act famously put it, in these areas “the earth and its community of life” were to remain “untrammeled by man.” Homes, roads, cars, and even bicycles would therefore be prohibited.

There was, however, a gap in the law, one big enough to drive an earthmover through—or, really, several hundred. To win passage of the measure, which had gone through more than sixty drafts in the course of eight years, its sponsors agreed to a compromise. For the next twenty years, mining claims would still be honored. Anyone who held such a claim could blast a hole through a spot that otherwise was protected.

A few summers after Johnson signed the act, John McPhee hiked out to Miners Ridge, in Washington State’s Glacier Peak Wilderness, where an enormous copper mine was planned. With him were two men who did not like each other. One was David Brower, the Sierra Club’s longtime head. A tall man with delicate features, Brower had once been an accomplished mountaineer, but by the time of the hike he had spent more years trying to defend remote places than he had exploring them, and he was out of shape. There was, McPhee noted, “a fold across his middle.”

The other man was Charles Park, a geologist on the faculty at Stanford. Like Brower, he had spent much of his life in the mountains, but his interest in the landscape was less disinterested. Park had hunted for silver in Nevada, gold in Alaska, and iron in the Chilean Andes. So often had he laid hold of what he was seeking that some of his friends—perhaps jokingly, perhaps not—attributed to him occult powers.

The trail to Miners Ridge wound through some of America’s most spectacular scenery—snow-covered peaks, riffled streams, meadows

spangled with wildflowers. Trudging along, Brower and Park admired the view and exchanged shots.

“Geologists go into the field because of love of the earth and of the out-of-doors,” Park says at one point.

“The irony is that they go into wilderness and change it,” Brower retorts. He declares the proposed mine an abomination: “If we’re down to where we have to take copper from places this beautiful, we’re down pretty far.”

“Minerals are where you find them,” Park counters. “It’s criminal to waste minerals when the standard of living of your people depends upon them.”

Who wins this back-and-forth? It’s hard to say. Though the piece is nominally about Brower—the Archdruid of the title, who returns in subsequent installments in the three-part series—Park is an equally compelling character and, quite possibly, a better debater. Brower is a crusader, Park a pragmatist.

“People seldom stop to think that all these things—planes in the air, cars on the road, Sierra Club cups—once, somewhere, were rock,” Park tells McPhee, out of Brower’s earshot.

McPhee’s evenhandedness harks back to an era when reasonable people could disagree. (When the Wilderness Act finally got to the floor of Congress, it passed with bipartisan support.) But it would be a mistake to see in his restraint something as straightforward as an effort at objectivity.

McPhee has been writing for *The New Yorker* for nearly sixty years, on subjects as varied as oranges, basketball, plate tectonics, barges, roadkill, and, most recently, [writing itself](#). In a 2015 essay titled “[Omission](#),” he spoke up on behalf of reticence: “When you are deciding what to leave out, begin with the author. If you see yourself prancing around between the subject and reader, get lost.”

Much of the art of “Encounters with the Archdruid” lies in the way that McPhee manages to be both there and not there. He bathes his aching feet in the water. He recalls other trips he has taken with Brower and, separately,

with Park. He searches for copper-bearing rocks, and, when he finds them, gets excited. But he never reveals whose side he is on. When it comes to the great question of the piece—to mine or not to mine—he gets out of the way. ♦

[Read the original story.](#)



[Encounters with the Archdruid—I: A Mountain](#)

Should we mine the riches of the wilderness?



Elizabeth Kolbert, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1999, won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction for “[*The Sixth Extinction*](#).” She is also the author of “[*H Is for Hope*](#).”

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **Mixed Signals**

By Anthony Lane | Who says there are no historical precedents for accidentally including a journalist on top-secret war plans?

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

Mixed Signals



By [Anthony Lane](#)

March 31, 2025



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

The accidental inclusion of Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic*, in a secret group chat of senior U.S. officials has been described as a breach of national security without historical precedent. This is not the case.

1252 B.C., eastern Mediterranean, Saturday night

Odysseus: O.K., we're in.

Diomedes: In where?

Odysseus: Troy. We're inside the walls. They bought it.

Menelaus: By the golden toenails of Athena, we're in *Troy*? In a freaking horse?

Odysseus: Sh-h-h. Keep it down, dummy. If they hear us inside this thing, we're screwed.

Menelaus: Says Mr. Cunning, who always has to have the bright ideas.

Neoptolemus: Says the dope who couldn't hang on to his wife in the first place. Hey, she'll always have Paris, right?

Menelaus: To Hades with *you*, Neo. No wonder you got stuck in the horse's ass.

Odysseus: O.K., enough. Remember, we got to wait a few hours before we get out of here and start pillaging. Till then, the Trojans have to think it's just another horse. A gift horse.

Philoctetes: Wise guy, huh?

Odysseus: Zip it, Stinky. Everybody quiet.

Silence.. Hegsethus: Mmprrrh. Mmprrrh.

Diomedes: What's that?

Hegsethus: I was neighing. That's my neigh. I was trying to be horsy.

Odysseus: Oh, for gods' sake. It's made of wood.

August 23, 410 A.D., Rome

Alaric: O.K., we're here. We are, literally, barbarians at the gates. How brat is that?

Cleverdic: Dope.

Kissmequic: So dope.

Alaric: Like I always say, a Visigoth is a—

All: Busy Goth!

Picnic: O mighty and most feared king, how do we actually, you know, get in?

Pogostic: Ladders. Or catapults that ping us over the walls. Catapults are sick.

Alaric: Nah. I have a spy on the inside. He'll open up.

Kissmequic: Name?

Alaric: Hegsegorth.

Silence.

Pogostic: Um, Al, I don't mean to be difficult, but is he really our guy? I mean, has he ever done any actual sacking?

Alaric: Well, no, but have you seen his hair? And he wears a little Alaric handkerchief in his top pocket. Smooth.

Hegsegoth: Hey, guys! Up here! Look, it's me, up on the walls! Back me or sack me, know what I mean?

Cleverdic: Typical European freeloader. *Pathetic.*

Pathetic: Hello?

December 7, 1941, north of Oahu, Hawaii

Vice-Admiral Chūichi Nagumo, Imperial Japanese Navy, to captains of the aircraft carriers Akagi, Kaga, Sōryū, Hiryū, Shōkaku, and Zuikaku: Gentlemen, all is prepared. Dawn has broken. The first wave of airborne attacks will be launched forthwith. May glory attend our efforts.

Captain Jisaku Okada, Kaga: Pls confirm midget submarines in position for dispatch 10 nautical miles Pearl H.

Nagumo: Confirm dispatched at 0100, now approaching targets.

Captain Ryusaku Yanagimoto, Sōryū: Pls reconfirm Level 1A secret channel telegraphic comms only repeat only hereafter.

Nagumo: Confirmed.

Captain Tomeo Kaku, Hiryū: Well, sort of.

Silence.

Nagumo: Come again?

Kaku: Msgs also currently dispatched ship to ship.

Nagumo: Identify comms urgent repeat urgent.

Kaku: Um, some complete idiot doing it with flags. FFS. Broad daylight.

Nagumo: Identify idiot.

Kaku: Hang on. Rising Sun handkerchief top pocket. Shades. Oh shd have known. Petty Officer Second Class Hegsethawa.

Yanagimoto: Any chance emergency deployment kamikaze training program query.

Nagumo: May glory attend his efforts.

Kaku, Yanagimoto, Okada: LOLS. Over and out. ♦



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

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Fiction

- **Marseille**

By Aysegül Savaş | Alba stretched her arms dramatically. “I mean, I guess it would be fun to have an amoureux in Marseille. Handy for holidays.”

[Fiction](#)

Marseille

By [Aysegül Savaş](#)

March 30, 2025



Illustration by Virginie Morgand

For her birthday, Amina asked to go on a trip. Her husband had travelled for work the previous month, and, although that wasn't exactly for pleasure, it was now understood that anything which freed them from child care could be considered some type of holiday. Besides, they were trying to allow each other leisurely activities— evenings out, morning runs, a movie from time to time. And, recently, nights away. They wanted to find ways of easing back into their life, which had been on hold since the baby was born.

It was so simple to slip into that old self, free of obligations; the exchange happened so naturally. Amina was already bored in the half hour she had to wait at the train station in Lyon, even though such time was hard to come by. She bought a coffee and a pack of biscuits, then sat on a bench, scrolling restlessly on her phone. Though this was her first trip away from the baby, who had recently turned one, it didn't really feel momentous. It felt, rather, as if she were putting on a coat she hadn't worn in a long time, whose shape and texture she remembered immediately.

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

She was going to Marseille to meet her university friends Alba and Lisa, with whom she had studied in England. They were travelling from Madrid and Zurich and would arrive at the rental apartment at around the same time as Amina. It was Lisa who'd arranged everything—set the dates, booked an apartment, compiled a list of restaurants and neighborhoods they should go to. Amina and Alba had reverted to their old joke that Lisa was their travel agent; she'd account for their hours of sleep, for every minute in the bathroom.

Amina sent her friends a photo of herself making an excited face on the platform.

Eeeee, Alba responded. Lisa sent instructions for retrieving the keys, in case the others arrived before she did.

On the train, Amina sat next to a woman travelling alone with her baby, who was refusing to nap despite the mother's frenzied attempts. Amina looked up from her reading now and then to offer the woman understanding smiles, meant to signal that she felt for her, that she didn't mind the baby's crying,

but from the woman's perspective she must have appeared smug, with her book and coffee.

Amina hadn't seen her friends since her pregnancy. They used to visit regularly after Amina and her husband moved to Lyon seven years ago, to the neighborhood where Amina's husband had grown up. Amina always looked forward to these reunions; she was allowed to be a tourist with her friends, speaking too-loud English, getting a little hysterical. But Lisa and Alba were exceptionally busy in the months after the birth. This was what they'd said, when they apologized for not yet having met the baby. Their weekends were booked for months ahead. Amina had barely left the confines of her neighborhood that year, and she had thought with some bitterness that Alba and Lisa didn't know what real busyness meant. But she hadn't insisted they come. For one, she was exhausted. And their friendship had always operated in leisure: long meals, afternoon drinks, dressing up to go dancing. Amina wanted to see them on these same terms, rather than be disappointed by interrupted conversations and her friends' possible lack of interest in her daughter. She herself had never paid attention to friends' babies before; she only surveyed the mothers. She noted the physical changes, their waning interests, trying to project what might become of her in the future were she to have a child.

Next to her on the train, the baby had finally fallen asleep. The mother looked at once defeated and serene, her face sagging with fatigue. Amina considered telling the woman that this was her first trip away from her daughter, but she decided against it. She retrieved Lisa's list of restaurants and checked them one by one, already feeling that there wouldn't be enough time.

The apartment was a half-hour walk from the station. Amina had planned on taking a taxi, but it was so sunny when she stepped out of the train and onto the wide marble terrace that she could not bear to waste the bright day. The city lay beneath her, past a long descent of stairs. She took another selfie at the bottom, for no one in particular, because she was feeling giddy. Then she walked, dragging her suitcase, stopping from time to time to take pictures of shop fronts, the boulevard lined with palm trees.

When she entered the building, she heard Alba and Lisa exclaiming from an upper floor. She called their names, and they ran out to peer at her over the bannister, all three of them shrieking.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Aysegül Savaş read "Marseille."](#)

“Let the festivities begin,” Alba announced, taking Amina’s bag at the door to the apartment. Lisa and Alba had already opened theirs on the living-room floor. The couch was strewn with clothes—too many for the two nights they would be spending together.

“We should get going soon,” Lisa said, showing Amina the route she’d mapped for the evening—drinks, dinner, a walk along the sea.

“Amazing,” Amina said. “I can leave right away.” She was wearing jeans and a button-down shirt, slightly stained from the baby’s bottle that morning.

“Leave like this?” Alba had taken off her trousers. She was picking up clothes and putting them down without trying anything on. “It’s our first evening out. I might meet someone fabulous.”

Alba had separated from her boyfriend some months ago. She’d informed Amina and Lisa briefly of the fact, brushing away the details, as she did with every breakup. She’d known from the start it was just a fling, she’d texted their group chat, though Amina seemed to remember that there’d once been talk of having a child. She could no longer recall whether this had been a serious plan or simply a consequence of Alba’s age, at which the question could no longer be ignored. If, that is, Alba even wanted to have a child—she’d always been at once transparent and mysterious about her desires. Blunt and elusive.

Lisa had taken off her shirt. She was not wearing a bra, and Amina thought that her body had not changed very much since their student years. Then, too, the three of them would gather in one another’s rooms and invent reasons to take off their clothes. Had it been a requisite for intimacy? Or a silent competition? Full-moon gatherings and menstrual rituals—they loved that sort of thing, the way it made them beautiful, brought them together.

Amina had other close friends—studious types, with whom the body became invisible, or irrelevant. It was with them that she discussed serious matters: choices, strategies, philosophies. It was with them that she could be sad. Whereas her friendship with Alba and Lisa demanded cheer; it was carried forth by a constant desire to enjoy life.

Alba and Lisa were still without clothes, showing each other tasteful, expensive options for outfits, so different from the flowery, tattered garments they'd worn as young women, when they borrowed dresses and shoes from one another for parties. Just like their clothes, her friends' bodies had more purpose now, Amina thought; they were muscled and smooth, made to look that way through discipline and deliberation. She turned away, as if she could no longer examine them on equal footing. It seemed that she'd stepped off the imaginary stage where the three of them had once stood together.

Finally, they left the apartment. Alba had settled on a short, neon dress, as cheeky as it was seductive. Lisa was wearing a striped shirt and canvas trousers, identical to the neat outfit she'd just changed out of. Amina put on earrings and lipstick, surprised how these small adjustments brought her into her body. Lisa led the way, phone in hand, through several small streets and out onto a wide boulevard, crowded even as shops were closing.

It was so nice, Lisa said, to be in a city that was alive.

“Zurich makes me feel old,” she said, when they’d arrived at a rooftop bar overlooking the harbor, bustling with tattooed and pierced people. Her boyfriend didn’t mind the monotony of the city, whereas she tried to leave as frequently as possible; she could not bear the thought of so much life passing her by.

The bar continued to fill up. Newcomers joined their friends in an expanding group along the terrace ledge. It was as if all the young people in Marseille knew one another. Or perhaps it was the familiarity of youth, the way you could become acquainted over a single drink and spend an entire evening chatting.

“Let’s skip the restaurant,” Alba suggested. “It’s fun here.”

She'd already pointed out two men with rugged beards; Amina and Lisa joked that they could pick out the most rumpled shirt in any crowd and its owner would be Alba's type.

There wasn't much food on the menu, so they ordered everything—little dishes of olives and spreads, a platter of cured meats. Amina was starving. She'd woken up before dawn with the baby, had barely eaten anything other than the pack of biscuits at the train station. Still, she could see the charm of spending an evening at the bar. Not that she had any interest in the linen-clad men with whom Alba was now exchanging glances. Alba had always been like this: she found someone to flirt with wherever she went. Very quickly, the attention was reciprocated, and then it was up to her to decide how much she wanted from the encounter. Alba's appeal had less to do with her beauty than with her confidence and nonchalance. Lisa and Amina had spent years trying to decipher it, to understand exactly how it worked. There was admiration in their investigation, and of course some envy. Perhaps the envy was related to the fact that Alba's exuberant flirtation had been an aspect of their own youth, before they'd settled into relationships. Amina could not recall whether she'd always thought this; maybe it was only after the birth that age had come into such focus for her.

She remembered a woman telling her, in the last month of her pregnancy, that she should beware of her diminished desire. This was at a party, and the woman had approached Amina out of the blue to say that after she gave birth to her first child she had not wanted to have sex with her husband for quite a long time. People had a way of opening up to pregnant women, as if they would forgive, or forget, whatever they were told.

"How long?" Amina asked.

"Oh, I can't remember," the woman said. "It was years ago. The point is, no one told me this would happen. That's why I'm telling you now. But don't worry. It will come back. It's your life force."

Amina had taken the woman's words at face value: a simple warning. But afterward, months after the baby was born, she wondered whether the anecdote was intended to have the opposite effect, to draw attention to the woman's restored passion, and mark her sexuality. She hadn't been very

young—certainly past her reproductive years, a time when it might seem surprising to talk about desire. Yet she'd seemed fierce, and radiant. She'd seemed, Amina thought in retrospect, to be showing off.

They were too tired to walk along the port as they'd planned and took a taxi back to the flat. They bought a bottle of wine and a pack of cigarettes from a kiosk downstairs, though none of them really smoked anymore.

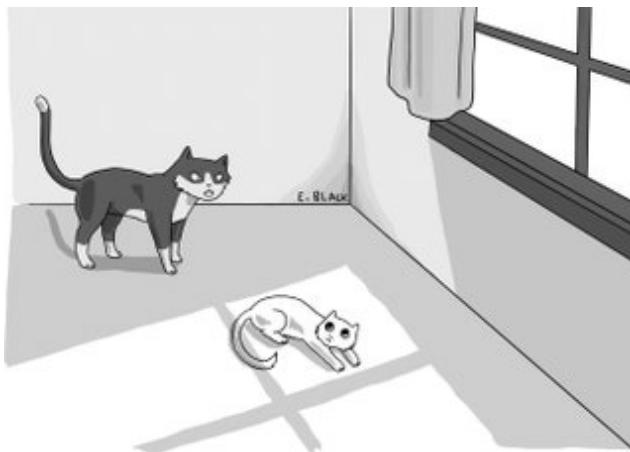
"Just one glass," Lisa cautioned. "We shouldn't waste all day hungover tomorrow." But they were too sleepy by the time they'd changed out of their clothes. They wandered off to their beds, murmuring good night.

Breakfast was coffee and tartines with jam on a chic plaza. A block away, the streets were lined with fabric shops, elderly men crammed onto benches.

Alba said that she couldn't get a sense of the city, of its age and mood. One minute it seemed ancient, then suddenly youthful.

"It's a harbor," Lisa said. "Port towns are always eclectic." Amina liked the sound of that—the idea of Old World trade, of people stepping ashore, embarking on adventure.

They took a group photo. Alba offered around the pack of cigarettes. They asked the waiter for second cups of coffee.



"Son, it's time I told you about the birds and the bees I killed, batted around a bit, and discarded on the patio."

Cartoon by Ellie Black

“This is so great,” Amina said. “This may be the best morning I’ve had in a year.”

The waiter turned around and tapped her on the shoulder.

“You can do better,” he said in English. “You haven’t even tried the pastries.”

He took out a lighter from his back pocket and extended the flame to Alba. When he left, Lisa remarked that he sported both a rumpled shirt and a rugged beard.

“Well, then,” Alba said, “I guess I have a type.”

When he returned with their coffees, he asked if they were sisters. The three of them were wearing flowing black outfits, and they all had brownish hair, though they weren’t otherwise very similar.

“Sisters from different mothers,” Alba told him. It was unclear whether he understood what this meant.

“Are the sisters on holiday?” He looked boyish despite his dark beard.

“Yes,” Alba said. “Do you have any suggestions for us?”

“Have you already taken the ferry?” He named a place Amina couldn’t make out. “You must go there. You drink pastis at the docks, and you eat—” He said something else she couldn’t catch.

“Great suggestions,” Lisa said. “We’ll totally do that.” It was clear she had no idea what he’d said, either.

A few minutes later, he came back to smoke a cigarette at the empty table next to theirs. It didn’t look as if his shift was over, only that he was taking things easy.

“Are you from Marseille?” Alba asked.

He was born in Bordeaux, had moved here a year ago. He felt this was where he really belonged. The city was full of energy, he said. His two good friends from home, with whom he had a band, were also in Marseille.

“You’re in a band?” Alba asked.

“We’re not Pink Floyd. We just have fun.”

“Would love to hear you play,” Alba said.

“Would love to play for you,” the waiter said.

When he was called back to work, he told them that they were a happy sight: three women having a great morning.

“You’re all like sunshine,” he said. The awkwardness of the phrase did not diminish its charm.

Afterward, they egged Alba on to ask for his number.

“Can I be bothered?” Alba stretched her arms dramatically. “I mean, I guess it would be fun to have an *amoureux* in Marseille. Handy for holidays.”

Amina remembered Alba’s way of talking about men—her tone of idleness. It hadn’t occurred to her before that *this* might be her allure: the suggestion that she was bored with them even as she was intrigued.

When they got up to leave, Alba told her friends to wait for her. She went inside, where the waiter was standing at the bar. He jotted down something on a piece of paper and handed it to Alba, who walked out smiling.

“I asked him for the name of that place,” she explained. “And the thing we’re supposed to eat. It’s called a *panisse*,” she read out from the piece of paper. “And then I invited him for a drink with us.”

“How did he react?” Lisa asked.

“Oh,” Alba said, “he put on some airs, like he was expecting it. I mean, he isn’t as boyish as he looks.”

He was seeing a friend that evening, but he could meet up later. Amina and Lisa agreed this was the best arrangement—they'd have a long dinner, then join him for a nightcap.

“Nightcap for me and Lisa,” Amina said with a giggle.

“His name is Vincent,” Alba added. “Or, should I say, *Van-sun*.”

“*Vincent, mon amour*,” Lisa cooed.

There were two museums that Amina had suggested visiting when they were making plans in the group chat, though they now decided it would be more fun to be outside. They were feeling so jolly, walking the streets. The encounter with Vincent had cheered them up, given them purpose. It was as if they were all going to meet him for a date that evening. And in a way they were: they'd made their impression as a group, and would do so again, until it was time for Alba to take off with him. This was not so different from their student years, when Amina and Lisa would help Alba in her quests—they must have decided that this was a smoother path than trying to compete with her. Any flirtations of their own happened in private, away from Alba. And perhaps Alba was now a bit old for one-night stands with waiters—after all, she'd readily stated that she wanted a relationship. But this was part of the thrill; a reminder that they were on holiday.

Amina was a little sad to skip the museums—she hadn't been to one in months. Her days were so efficient, and practical. She was feeling the same restlessness she'd experienced on the journey—that there would not be enough time, that she was wasting her trip. It was already past noon; her train back home was the following day.

She didn't tell her friends she'd still like to go to a museum. They would joke that she was an old lady, as they used to when Amina sat alone on a couch at parties, watching people. Was that what it meant to be old—a spectator to interesting things?

Lisa was telling them that they were entering the city's longest-inhabited neighborhood, atop a hill. Winding, narrow streets were lined with pots of flowers. There were many shops, meant to lure tourists with overpriced hats

and silk dresses. So many useless, beautiful things: they examined them seriously, one by one. They each bought a hat, scarves, beaded jewelry. When they reached the bottom of the hill, the sea appeared before them, like a celebration. Alba said that they might as well take the ferry, as Vincent had suggested.

“I thought that was just an excuse to get his number,” Lisa said. “We have reservations for lunch.”

“It’ll give us something to talk about when we meet him,” Alba said. “And it’s a tip from a local.”

“I agree,” Amina said. “We might not get to see anything like this.”

They had some trouble finding the correct ferry. Most people were boarding another one, to go swimming at the calanques. Theirs turned out to be a small motorboat that would take them across the bay. The young boy checking tickets advised them to sit in the front, so they wouldn’t get wet.

Soon enough, they were in open sea, pushing forth against crashing waves. Even where the boy had suggested, they were sprayed by water. Lisa and Alba cheered with every thrust and descent of the boat. Amina tried to appear calm, though she was at that moment imagining a disaster, and its aftermath. She pictured her husband telling the baby that Mama wasn’t coming back, and the miscomprehension on the baby’s face. She had tears in her eyes from the scenario; she was annoyed with Vincent for suggesting such a trip.

The village, when they finally arrived, was utterly unspectacular. There was a single café, where they stepped off the boat. Farther down the boardwalk, food trucks were indeed selling *panisse*, which looked something like fried dough.

They walked a little way inland, though there was no center to speak of. A bunch of teen-agers were smoking on a bench, loud, unpleasant music thumping from somewhere in their midst.

“Let’s just go back to the café,” Lisa suggested. “We can have lunch there and take the next boat to the city.”

There were only chips, which they bought with their pastis. They asked the waiter how much water they should add to dilute the fragrant, milky liquid he'd poured. He was a young boy; at first glance, he looked just like the one who'd taken their tickets on the boat. Perhaps the two of them were brothers.

"Depends how drunk you want to get," the boy replied. He offered them second rounds on the house as their boat was approaching.

"We have to leave soon," Amina said. "But thanks."

"Let's dunk them," Alba said.

"She knows what she's talking about," the boy said.

Maybe he wasn't a mere boy. Maybe they were a little tipsy. In any case, the ride back to the city did not feel so bumpy.

On board, a young woman asked Amina to take her photo. She posed seductively, pouting her lips without any hint of self-consciousness. Then she took the phone back and examined the pictures.

"Thank you *sooo* much," she said. "I'm travelling alone, so I always have to ask."

"How do you like Marseille?" Amina asked.

"Oh, it's so fun. And this little village was amazing."

"What did you like about it?" Alba asked, only slightly condescending.

"Cézanne's house, of course," the woman said. "I imagined him painting there, seeing the view from up top."

The friends exchanged glances. Was that why Vincent had told them to go to the village? How had they failed to realize its significance?

"Where else have you been?" Lisa asked.

That morning, the young woman had visited the two museums they'd skipped. She had tickets to see a dance show later. She was taking a train early the next day to Spain, where she would meet up with her boyfriend to walk the path of St. James. She was not religious, she clarified, but she would consider herself *spiritual*. She had recently graduated from university and was taking a year off to travel.

Amina was startled by just how much they had learned about the young woman within minutes. She was still young enough that she could sum up her life in a continuous narrative; she hadn't asked them any questions, perhaps believing that her year of travels was something extraordinary. Amina didn't tell her that she and her friends had all done something similar after graduation. It didn't seem very interesting now. In fact, Amina felt a little tired on the young woman's behalf—all those trains she had to take, the cheap hostels, the plazas of every city which blurred into one another. Lisa and Alba had stopped listening and were deep in a conversation of their own.

"Wow," Alba said when they stepped off the boat. "You had a lot of patience for her."

"She was just young," Amina said, feeling generous now that the conversation was over.

They discussed what to do before dinner. They could go back to the flat to change, though it was in the opposite direction from the restaurant. They were all dishevelled from the wind, sprayed with seawater.

"It's Alba's call," Lisa said. "She's the one meeting her *amoureux*."

"Oh, I'll just put on some lipstick," Alba said. "I don't want to drag everyone back for my sake. Vincent can take it or leave it."

In the end, they sat on a bench by the harbor, idly watching the crowds. Amina called her husband to check if everything was all right.

"We've had a great day," her husband said. "Someone was on her best behavior. Don't worry about us."

She was grateful to him for saying that, and a bit envious that she'd missed out. And now it was nearly the baby's bedtime. Afterward, her husband would pour himself a glass of wine and watch something before going to read in bed. Whereas she still had so many hours ahead of her.

There was a mixup with their reservation: they were given seats at the bar until one of the tables cleared. Lisa kept repeating that she wasn't pleased about this, but the waiter did not take her very seriously.

They were tired, and hungry. The barstools weren't comfortable. Half-heartedly, they discussed plans for the next day: perhaps they could make it to one of the museums before Amina's train.



"We're looking for someone who likes folding laundry."

Cartoon by Mick Stevens

"That all depends on Alba's night out," Lisa said, trying to lift their group spirit. "You should text him now."

"I'll wait a bit," Alba said. "He's probably out with his friend." Amina couldn't tell whether it was for their sake that Alba was demonstrating nonchalance. Still, Alba wrote a message a few minutes later, telling Vincent to meet them at the restaurant.

The job was done. And their food had arrived. They were all in a better mood. They discussed ideas for another, longer trip, a few months later.

"How about that music festival in Barcelona?" Alba suggested. "Get Amina back on track."

“I just need to figure out logistics,” Amina said, “but it should be doable.”

“It’s good to see you liven up,” Alba went on. “When you arrived yesterday, I thought . . . she’s had a tough year.”

“Really?” Amina said. “I was feeling totally fine.”

“It’s more the over-all change.”

“And?” Amina said. “What’d you notice?”

“Darling, you’re always fabulous. You just need some sleep. And maybe a haircut.”

Amina felt a shudder of annoyance at the bluntness of the comment, and also at its blindness—that signs of her transformation should be guessed at from her appearance. She held back from saying something bitter. She shouldn’t make a big deal of it, she thought. This was the way they’d always been with one another. But it was true that she felt, at that moment, defeated.

There was no response from Vincent when they finished eating, so they each ordered another glass of wine and asked the waiter for the dessert menu. In the end, they’d never been given a table, and now the waiter was telling them that the seats at the bar were also reserved.

“You still have some time,” he offered. “Just wanted to let you know.”

“It’s O.K.,” Lisa said curtly. “We’ll have dessert somewhere else.”

After they paid, they walked toward the harbor, which was now utterly different than when they had stepped off the boat. The boardwalk was teeming with people trying to get into bars. Girls in high heels, shaky on their legs; boys dressed comically like businessmen, in blazers and dress shoes.

“Where did all these people come from?” Alba asked.

The air smelled of perfume and hair gel.

“Let’s get out of here,” Lisa said, leading them toward a side street, and up to the shopping avenue they’d walked the previous evening. The stores were closed, the pavements empty. The booming sound of music from the harbor reached them as if through a membrane. They took another turn, into a lifeless, dirty neighborhood, though none of them wanted to suggest they should just go home. Alba’s phone buzzed.

“Finally,” Lisa said. “Someone’s playing hard to get.”

Alba was silent for a moment. Her face fell, just a little. Then she read out the message.

It would have been lovely to join them, Vincent wrote, but he was already back home. He hadn’t met up with his friend, after all. If they were around the following afternoon, he’d be playing music at a café, some distance from the center. He could send them details.

“Well,” Alba said. “I guess I wrote too late.”

“Do you want to go tomorrow?” Amina asked. “We could make it if it’s early enough.”

“Can’t be bothered,” Alba said. “And I can’t believe he’s arrogant enough to suggest we come to watch him tuning his guitar on our holiday.”

“It’s your call,” Amina said, though the whole thing now sounded a bit pathetic.

They turned around and headed in the direction of the flat.

“You know,” Alba said, “the city’s grown on me. I didn’t know what to make of it at first. It’s so vibrant. And I find it amazing that most people we met today were our age, at most.”

“Sorry to break it to you,” Amina said. “But they were all younger by, like, a decade.”

And perhaps this had dawned on all of them, like an answer, though they hadn’t realized until then that there’d been a question. It had never been a

question, not yet. It was still their turn.

“Oh, my God,” Lisa said. “What if . . . what if he thought we were just a bunch of aunties?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Alba said. “I already thought about it—he’s at most five, maybe six years younger. Besides, we don’t show our age.”

“I was kidding,” Lisa said. “Obviously we’re not *aunties*.”

Still, they were startled by Alba’s response. That she’d even considered the question, and addressed it, rather than laugh it off as she always did. That she’d made a decision for all of them.

Amina tried to recall their exchange at the café, the way Vincent had flattered them. It hadn’t occurred to her that he might be doing so out of vanity, to make anyone who crossed his path adore him.

They’d reached their building.

“We’re definitely having a nightcap,” Lisa said. Alba offered to go to the kiosk to get a bottle of wine. Really, they were all tired, though they wouldn’t let on, for the sake of their last evening.

Then they remembered that the bottle they’d bought the previous night was unopened, and climbed slowly up the stairs. ♦

This is drawn from “[Long Distance: Stories](#).

Aysegül Savaş is the author of the story collection “[Long Distance](#),” in addition to novels and a memoir.

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[A Critic at Large](#)

It's Always the Other Side That's Been Brainwashed

What talk of brainwashing helps us not to talk about.

By [Nikhil Krishnan](#)

March 31, 2025



We're fascinated by how Patty Hearst, after weeks of terror, came to join the Symbionese Liberation Army. The more important question is how her captors came to their beliefs. Illustration by Ben Wiseman

It wasn't so long ago that respectable psychologists didn't really talk about "brainwashing." The term had the slightly kitschy flavor of other Cold War embarrassments—[C.I.A.](#) spy cats and [Reds-under-the-bed](#) paranoia. But

Google's indispensable Ngram Viewer, which analyzes how frequently phrases appear in printed texts, confirms that the past two decades have seen an uptick in the word's usage. What's bringing brainwashing back?

One potential answer is the rise of technologies suspected of having mind-controlling powers, chief among them [social media](#). Another is the entrenched political polarization of our time. When the cousin you kicked a soccer ball around with as a [child](#) starts spouting unhinged certainties about viruses, vaccines, and climate change—beliefs he treats as beyond debate—you might wonder: *What happened to him?* This isn't just an ordinary disagreement. Could he have been . . . brainwashed?

Don't get smug; he's wondering the same thing about you. A few years ago, *Psychology Today* posted a checklist under the headline “Your Friend Might Be Politically Brainwashed If . . .” The last item on the list: “They assume that everyone who disagrees with them must be brainwashed.” So wait—does entertaining the possibility of having been brainwashed mean that you haven't been? Or is that too easy?

Several recent books have taken up the subject of brainwashing—among them Daniel Pick's “[Brainwashed: A New History of Thought Control](#)” (Profile), Joel E. Dimsdale's “[Dark Persuasion: A History of Brainwashing from Pavlov to Social Media](#)” (Yale), and Andreas Killen's “[Nervous Systems: Brain Science in the Early Cold War](#)” (HarperCollins). They share a scholarly squeamishness about the word they are forced to use for their subject matter. “Yes, the term *brainwashing* is silly and unscientific,” Dimsdale writes. “No one ever meant it literally, but the metaphor is a powerful one.”

In the new book “[The Instability of Truth: Brainwashing, Mind Control, and Hyper-Persuasion](#)” (Norton), Rebecca Lemov, a historian of science at Harvard, takes a different approach. She is often asked, she says, whether brainwashing really exists. “The answer is yes,” she writes, without any it-depends-what-you-mean-by hedging. In fact, she continues, “what we call brainwashing is not rare but common.”

Of course, words like “brainwashing” have no fixed meaning independent of their usage, which can be imprecise and expansive. When [Frantz Fanon](#)

wrote of colonial efforts at *lavage de cerveau* in Algeria, or when a commentator in the seventies accused President Richard Nixon of having “brainwashed” white workers into fearing Communist infiltration, the word was gesturing at *something*, however loosely defined.

Yet the term’s recent resurgence raises suspicions. Accusations of brainwashing aren’t neutral claims; they offer a particular explanation for why someone holds beliefs we find preposterous. That explanation attributes those beliefs to deliberate manipulation instead of rational argument or personal conviction. In doing so, it may recast those with “deplorable” beliefs as victims rather than agents, deserving of not just condemnation but sympathy—and, perhaps, treatment. In the seventies heyday of the cults, that treatment was called “deprogramming.” Is this what our addled cousins need? A systematic re indoctrination into conventionality?

The earliest appearances of the concept “brainwashing,” Lemov writes, occurred in the mid-twentieth century, in the files of the Office of Strategic Services, a precursor of the C.I.A. The term came to prominence owing in large part to the writings of an American journalist named Edward Hunter. He claimed that it was a rendering of a Chinese phrase, but it may have been, as he elsewhere claimed, a coinage of his own to describe Chinese persuasion techniques.

These techniques were most famously applied during the Korean War. As a prisoner of war, Morris R. Wills faced a gamut of privations—he was left malnourished and consigned to filthy conditions amid the ever-present threat of execution. Horror alternated with boredom. Conditions improved when Wills was transferred to what was called Camp One. The food got better, letters could be sent home, and there were even volleyball games.

That was, it seems, an early stage of a procedure known as reeducation. Wills was identified as a member of the exploited classes, a promising target for the method. Reflecting on his experiences many years later, he said, “Brainwashing is not done with electrodes stuck to your head.” It was, rather, “a long, horrible process by which a man slowly—step by step, idea by idea—becomes totally convinced, as I was, that the [Chinese Communists](#) have unlocked the secret to man’s happiness and that the

United States is run by rich bankers, McCarthy types, and ‘imperialist aggressors.’ ”

The theory behind this method, as articulated by Chairman Mao, didn’t sound so bad. People could not be forced to become Marxists, Mao wrote. He recommended, instead, “democratic” methods of “discussion, criticism, persuasion, and education.” An important stage of the process was called “speaking bitterness.” American G.I.s, like the Chinese peasants on whom the method had first been tried, had a great deal of bitterness to speak: of racism and poverty back home, and of discrimination within the armed forces. Wills was made to introspect, to write an autobiography. He and other P.O.W.s were subjected to hours of lectures on Marxist theory.

Faced with the demand to justify “the American system,” Wills—unable to articulate what that even was—found himself moving in what his captors called a Progressive (as opposed to Reactionary) direction. American society was rotting, he came to believe; the Chinese way was the future. He chose not to be repatriated. But, where other prisoners who made the same decision were sent to work on farms and in paper mills, he was sent to the People’s University in Beijing.

The brainwashing process was never complete. Ostentatious acts of “repentance” were repeatedly demanded—Wills had already had to participate in “self-criticism” seminars. He was now taught more about Marxism and the history of China. He even witnessed a public execution. But he ended up staying in China for twelve years.

Wills’s retrospective accounts of his experience, once he was back in the United States and in a position to reflect on what had been done to him, are illuminating. It is plain that his Chinese captors had succeeded, at least for a time, in producing a genuine change of mind. He was, as he himself put it, “totally convinced.”

If we take Wills at his word, we might wonder about Mao’s claim that nobody can be coerced into sincere belief. In professing this, Mao echoes an old idea within modern European thought, one given its most influential expression in John Locke’s 1689 tract, “[A Letter Concerning Toleration](#).” Locke condemned the use of coercion in matters of faith—the sort of thing

we now associate with the Spanish Inquisitors—and among his arguments was that it simply *couldn't* work. Real belief is a product of the “inward persuasion of the mind,” he wrote. An effective torturer can make his victims move their limbs as he tells them to, or even say the words—professions of faith, confessions of guilt—that he whispers into their ears. But “such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force.”

Locke’s point is connected to a more general philosophical claim about belief: that no one can just *decide* to believe something. Try believing, for instance, that the magazine (or computer or tablet or phone) in front of you is a venomous snake, or that your coffee mug is made of molten lava. You can cry out, if you like, but your steady heart rate will give you away.

For all that, you can surely be forced into situations where the desired conviction comes unbidden. Even in the seventeenth century, people saw the limitations of Locke’s view. An Oxford churchman named Jonas Proast agreed that belief could not be coerced directly, but, in his chilling words, the magistrate might lay “such Penalties upon those who refuse to embrace their Doctrine . . . as may make them *bethink* themselves.”

To force someone to believe something requires the concealment of the role that force has played in the process. The brainwashed can’t conceive of themselves as brainwashed; to do so would indicate that the brain remains unwashed. They can only coherently describe their experience as one of seeing the light, having their consciousness raised, being red-pilled. As Lemov quotes someone telling her about brainwashing: if the method works, it “erases itself.”

So, if your environment was tailored to exclude alternative views, should we say that you were being forced to believe something? Whether we call this coerced belief is a matter of terminological preference. Ways of making people believe things don’t divide neatly into the persuasive and the coercive—the brainwashing model gives the lie to that distinction. As Lemov writes, echoing the psychologist Edgar Schein, it is “neither pure persuasion nor sheer coercion but both: coercive persuasion.”

The phrase “coercive persuasion” effectively conveys the core objection to what it describes. It suppresses the fundamental exercise of human autonomy—it prevents you from making up your own mind. If that’s the case, would the criminal courts find you responsible for what you do when you’ve been brainwashed?

This question was decisively answered during the trial of Patricia (Patty) Hearst, in 1976. Two years earlier, Hearst, a granddaughter of the press magnate William Randolph Hearst, was an undergraduate at Berkeley. Her life changed forever when she caught the eyes of members of the Symbionese Liberation Army, an anti-capitalist guerrilla group. They abducted her and held her in a closet, blindfolded, for nearly two months. She was raped multiple times by the group’s leaders while in captivity, having been told that it would be “uncomradely” to refuse consent.

Shortly afterward, she was offered a nominal choice. Would she join them? Or did she wish to be freed? It was clear to her that the appearance of choice was illusory, that she was choosing between joining the group and being killed. She chose life. Or, as she later put it, “I accommodated my thoughts to coincide with theirs.” As with the Korean War P.O.W.s before her, mere pretense was not, under the circumstances, a real option. “By the time they had finished with me,” she later reflected, “I was, in fact, a soldier in the Symbionese Liberation Army.”



“Just remember, Mr. Big Fancy Libertarian, no one is a self-made man to their mother.”
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

A little more than two months after her abduction, surveillance cameras captured Hearst robbing a bank in San Francisco, gun in hand. When she was eventually arrested, she weighed eighty-seven pounds and was—in the assessment of the psychologist Margaret Singer—“a low-I.Q., low-affect zombie.” The Yale psychiatrist [Robert Jay Lifton](#) interviewed Hearst for about fifteen hours and then declared her a “classic case” of brainwashing. During her time in custody, she repudiated her allegiance to the S.L.A. When she stood trial for her role in the bank robbery, her attorneys argued that she was a victim of coercion and duress.

It was a risky strategy. “I was brainwashed” was not a legally recognized defense. As Lemov, recounting the episode, points out, one of the psychiatrists who testified as an expert witness for the defense did Hearst no favors by admitting blithely that “brainwashing” was not a term of “any medical significance.” It had become, he said, “a sort of a grab bag to describe any kind of influence exerted by a captor over a captive, but that isn’t very accurate from the scientific or the medical point of view.”

The defense failed. Patty Hearst was convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison. After she had completed nearly two, President Jimmy Carter commuted the sentence to “time served.” It was only on [Bill Clinton](#)’s last day in office, in 2001, that she received a full pardon.

Why, Lemov asks, have lawyers found brainwashing “impossible to deploy as a legal exculpatory framework”? The concept evidently places defense lawyers in a double bind. If brainwashing doesn’t work, defendants can hardly claim it as a defense. But, if it does work, the defendants are acting on their own beliefs and no longer being coerced. An NPR interviewer forty years after the Hearst trial put the question in a revealing way: “Was she coerced, or did she become a believer?” Lemov rightly asks why it couldn’t be both. Why not say that “Hearst was coerced into becoming a true believer”?

The problem, as Lemov sees it, is that our intuitive model for thinking about brainwashing diagnoses it as a “rational, cognitive malfunction.” Hence the mockery to which the brainwashed are frequently subjected. The brainwashed soldiers of the Korean War were thought of as hapless dupes who “fell for” Communism, Lemov says. She invites us to consider a

twenty-first-century parallel: the scorn directed at people who lose their savings to a [cryptocurrency](#) cult.

Lemov thinks that this perception shifts once we acknowledge the role of trauma in brainwashing. Maybe so. But how does this claim square with her broader hypothesis that “what we call brainwashing is not rare but common”? If trauma is a necessary condition for brainwashing, as she suggests, it follows that trauma is more widespread than we might assume. Yet she insists that she is not among the credulous sentimentalists who “see trauma everywhere.” How common, then, is brainwashing?

For recent historians of brainwashing, the issue carries high contemporary stakes. Joel Dimsdale, in “Dark Persuasion,” relates the disturbing case of Alexander Urtula, who took his life after receiving a staggering forty-seven thousand text messages from his girlfriend, who kept urging him to do so. Dimsdale asks, “If you can use social media to persuade an individual you know well to do something awful, can you persuade a wider circle of friends and acquaintances?” Given the resources—for instance, “troll farms” of the kind that state actors can muster—it appears that you sometimes can.

The power of such trolls lies in their ability to manipulate the epistemic environment. What was once a lone voice ranting at a street corner becomes a mutually reinforcing chorus. “When observers receive the same message from multiple sources,” Dimsdale writes, “they find the messages more believable, even if they are preposterous.” When President Trump tells us that “a lot of people are saying . . . ,” this claim, at least, is true.

There was outrage when it was revealed that [Facebook](#) researchers were tinkering with users’ emotions—making tiny tweaks to their feeds in what Lemov calls “massive-scale emotional engineering.” But she notes that the backlash didn’t stop the researchers from running these experiments; it just made them more reticent about their results. One researcher on the project said that the response amounted to people thinking, “You can’t mess with my emotions. It’s like messing with me. It’s mind control.”

And, in a sense, it *is* mind control. But that phrase, much like “brainwashing,” runs into a tricky question: Isn’t everything that shapes our

thoughts, desires, or feelings a form of mind control? Lurking behind our unease is a fantasy of total, unshackled cognitive freedom. Any deviation from that ideal gets labelled as manipulation. If we cling to that standard, then, sure, we're all brainwashed. But the standard is an absurdity. It's obvious that our minds are shaped by the world we live in, including what others say. This isn't what we have in mind when we talk about mind control.

Our idea, instead, is that to be free is not to be subject to the will of another. Lemov quotes an impassioned remark made by the Princeton sociologist [Zeynep Tufekci](#) about how online corporate power enlists “new tools and stealth methods to quietly model our personality, our vulnerabilities, identify our networks, and effectively nudge and shape our ideas, desires and dreams.” That’s the real worry these days—not just influence but control that’s hidden and personal.

Lemov’s emphasis on trauma suggests that the concept of brainwashing may not be all that helpful in understanding whatever it is that social media does to its users. Morris Wills was starved and terrified as a P.O.W. Patty Hearst was locked in a closet and sexually assaulted. Contemporary sociology invites us, perhaps rightly, to extend the traditional concept to include the working-class experience of deindustrialization and the precarity of the white-collar knowledge worker denied a secure job. The question still arises: What has your average [TikTok](#) user been subjected to that is remotely comparable to what Wills and Hearst endured?

There’s another irony here. Much of what Wills came to believe when he lived in China—that socialism is superior to capitalism, that the United States is an imperialist power run by a class of kleptocratic oligarchs—is shared by many young people today who were subjected to nothing more traumatic than a typical liberal-arts education. Their professors would, of course, balk at the implication that they’ve brainwashed their students, but that’s exactly what their critics in the conservative media have long been accusing them of.

It’s a familiar pattern in our polarized age. The right accuses the left of using the institutions it dominates—the federal bureaucracy, nonprofits, universities, Hollywood, and “legacy” media—to brainwash the public. The

left, in turn, levels the same charge against the right, pointing to talk radio, partisan television networks, and manosphere podcasts. (Each side condemns the other's social-media activity.) Naturally, no one admits to doing what they denounce in their opponents. But that's to be expected: persuasion is what we do; brainwashing is what they do.

Does the case of the radical professor fit into this model of malign manipulation? Come to think of it, what exactly should we make of the Communists who brainwashed the American soldiers? Or the members of the Symbionese Liberation Army—mainly white, middle-class, and well educated—who appeared quite sincerely to believe their rhetoric calling for “death to the fascist insect that preys upon the life of the people”? Were *they* brainwashed into their beliefs, too? Or did they form them in the way that we all do—as the result of some half-conscious process only half mindful of evidence and truth?

We can grant that the term “brainwashing” has some utility as an explanation for what happened to certain individuals who were subjected to extraordinary stress and strenuous efforts at reeducation. But we needn’t reach for it when we seek to describe, and understand, the masses of people who fail to see what we find clear-cut. There are simply too many other ways of making sense of their beliefs.

Heterodox views—particularly antinomian ones—are attractive in part because they are at odds with the obvious. If our beliefs were obvious, how could we use them to distinguish our group from others? How could our beliefs be used to demarcate a social identity? Even in more mainstream precincts, plenty of our avowed beliefs—“our diversity is our strength”—may not be real beliefs at all, if belief is something that holds itself accountable to fact. In ways the philosopher Daniel Williams has explored, they are better understood as shibboleths, tribal anthems, expressions of commitment so deep that we cannot conceive of doubting them. Insofar as these clichés don’t express factual propositions, we shouldn’t apply to them the explanatory frameworks designed to tell us how people come to credit outlandish things.

We may be better served by looking to more conventional human motivations: our desire for approval from those around us, and the way

social incentives can reward the outrageous and punish the reasonable. Social media strengthens these tendencies by indulging them and allowing them to operate on an unprecedented scope. Ordinary forces working on a vast scale often produce the effect of an extraordinary force.

Although beliefs can be badges—tribal markers chosen less for their empirical accuracy than for what they signal about us—plenty of people do buy into outlandish factual views. It's not a cope, or a flex; it's what they take to be reality. How about them?

There's a well-meaning, if patronizing, ethical impulse behind our propensity to blame brainwashing for others' convictions, whether they're expressions of allegiance, hard factual commitments, or something in between. Labelling people as brainwashed casts them as one of the damned—lost souls whom we, as saviors, must redeem. Yet it might be our own savior complexes that we need to shed.

The philosopher [Karl Popper](#), writing in 1960, suggested that the temptation to attribute misguided beliefs to sinister manipulation came from a mistaken assumption: that “truth is manifest.” If the truth were manifest, it would follow that the failure to grasp it must reflect “the work of powers conspiring to keep us in ignorance, to poison our minds by filling them with falsehood.”

But, even when confronted with a world of people holding views we find baffling, why assume that they're victims of a grand conspiracy—or victims at all? Perhaps truth isn't so obvious. Uncovering it demands effort and a bit of luck. Other people will take different things to be true because their paths—owing to differences in diligence or chance—diverged from ours. That conspiracy-minded cousin isn't necessarily a casualty of mind control; he may simply have wandered down intellectual rabbit holes where evidence matters less than belonging. To depict him as a victim of manipulation grants him an unearned absolution. The most disturbing possibility isn't that millions have been brainwashed. It's that they haven't. ♦

[Nikhil Krishnan](#) is the author of “[A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy and War at Oxford, 1900-1960](#).”

[brainwashed](#)

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Books

Why the Court Hit the Brakes on School Desegregation

Two decades after Brown v. Board, the Supreme Court struck down a desegregation order—and paved the way for today's retrenchment efforts.

By [Louis Menand](#)

March 31, 2025



After 1972, it was plain that busing mandates had made court-ordered school desegregation explosively unpopular among white voters. Photograph from Interim Archives / Getty

On February 14th, a letter went out from the Department of Education to educational institutions that receive money from the federal government, which most do. The letter gave schools fourteen days to eliminate “the overt and covert racial discrimination that has become widespread in this Nation’s educational institutions.” Such discrimination, it warned, violates the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The letter (addressed “Dear Colleague,” often a sign that what follows won’t be especially collegial) came from the desk of the acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, a man named Craig Trainor. It stressed that the new anti-discrimination policy encompasses much more than the race-conscious admissions programs recently declared unconstitutional by [the](#)

[Supreme Court](#) (forty-five years after the Court declared them constitutional).

“Educational institutions may neither separate or segregate students based on race,” the letter said. For example, programs that suggest “certain racial groups bear unique moral burdens that others do not” violated the equal-protection clause, since they “stigmatize students who belong to particular racial groups based on crude racial stereotypes. Consequently, they deny students the ability to participate fully in the life of a school.” (Whether a majority group can discriminate against itself—who is stereotyping whom?—is an interesting question not explored in the letter.)

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Although some school policies “may appear neutral on their face,” the letter cautioned, “a closer look reveals that they are, in fact, motivated by racial considerations.” Eliminating standardized testing, for instance, could be a covert means of achieving racial balance or “diversity,” and thus a denial of equal protection. The letter cites the 1977 Supreme Court case of *Village of Arlington Heights v. Metropolitan Housing Development Corporation* as a supporting authority for this interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment.

If the Administration were not using this kind of fake (to borrow a term) legalism as an excuse to take a hammer to higher education, the letter might be funny. Student ethnic-affinity groups, a standard feature of campus life for decades, could now be seen as racially discriminatory. And is the

Fourteenth Amendment to be used to restrict speech? If Donald Trump can say that an airplane crash was caused by diversity hiring, I can say that certain groups bear unique moral burdens. We might both be wrong, but our speech is protected by the First Amendment. (A related executive order posted by the White House did note free-speech exceptions.) Most risible is the citation of *Arlington Heights*. That case does not stand for the principle that ostensibly race-neutral policies may violate equal protection. It stands for the opposite principle.

The case involved the denial of a rezoning request to build multifamily dwellings in the upscale Chicago suburb of *Arlington Heights*. Sixty-four thousand people lived in the suburb; twenty-seven (not twenty-seven thousand, just twenty-seven) of them were Black. A development company that wanted to build housing for low- and moderate-income families sued, claiming that the denial perpetuated racial segregation and was therefore in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection.

The Supreme Court, in an opinion by Lewis Powell, held that even if it could be shown that the failure to rezone made it harder for nonwhites to move to *Arlington Heights*—that is, even if it had a racially disparate impact—the plaintiffs would have to prove that it was adopted with discriminatory intent, which they had failed to do. No intention to discriminate, no discrimination.

The citation of *Arlington Heights* in the Department of Education letter inadvertently makes clear the astonishing transformation in constitutional jurisprudence that is now under way in this country. Ever since the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified, in 1868, courts have made it challenging for Black people—the people everyone agrees the amendment was specifically designed to protect—to prevail in equal-protection cases. Even when laws were plainly discriminatory, as with Jim Crow, courts mostly declined to strike them down, reasoning that “separate” was not inconsistent with “equal.” The intent standard in *Arlington Heights* was another way of making it harder to prove a claim of racial discrimination. That a government policy made nonwhites worse off relative to whites was not enough to show a denial of equal protection.

The letter from the Department of Education also warned against the use of proxies for race and other “less direct, but equally insidious, ways” of practicing discrimination. But states and municipalities have often used proxies for race, such as income or party affiliation, to engineer discriminatory outcomes—for example, when drawing congressional redistricting maps. And government actions that can be made to seem only remotely related to discriminatory behavior—for example, awarding a liquor license to a private club that does not serve Black people—are not outlawed as a “covert” means of discrimination.

In short, after more than a century during which the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was construed narrowly when nonwhites claimed to be victims of discrimination, the Administration proposes to expand the amendment’s scope when white people believe themselves to be the victims. Still, in the law, one size fits all. What lowers the bar for whites should lower the bar for every other group. I’m not sure the acting Secretary has thought that part through.

The letter repeats the familiar charge that “educational institutions have toxically indoctrinated students with the false premise that the United States is built upon ‘systemic and structural racism.’ ” Putting aside the toxicity part, I think that this idea is the heart of the issue.

You can look at it this way. People living in Arlington Heights wanted to maintain property values. Maintaining property values meant zoning for single-family residences. Single-family residences were more likely to be affordable to white home buyers than to nonwhite home buyers (in part because the latter were more likely to have trouble getting a mortgage). So having single-family zoning kept Arlington Heights predominantly white. And, since homeownership is generational wealth—houses can be inherited—racial disparities get locked in.

Today, a little under seventy-five thousand people live in Arlington Heights; only three per cent of them are Black. (The city of Chicago, less than twenty-five miles away, is twenty-eight per cent Black.) In this line of reasoning, no white homeowner had to think, *I don’t want to live around Black people*. The thought could be more like *I want to protect the value of my home equity so that I can pass it along to my heirs*.

But disparity in homeownership is a big reason that, according to the Census Bureau, the average white household possesses ten times as much wealth as the average Black household. And homeownership is one piece in the standard American Dream pile of assets. As Lyndon Johnson put it in a message to Congress in 1966, “Employment is often dependent on education, education on neighborhood schools and housing, housing on income, and income on employment.”

This is structural racism: the system is not self-correcting. Government has to intervene to break the cycle, and that is something that government has found it hard to do, even when the political winds were blowing in a direction favorable to civil rights.

Systemic racism is the subject of Michelle Adams’s “[The Containment: Detroit, the Supreme Court, and the Battle for Racial Justice in the North](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The book, some five hundred pages long, is the story of a single Supreme Court case, *Milliken v. Bradley*, decided in 1974. That case concerned efforts to desegregate public schools in Detroit. It attracted a lot of attention at the time, and it remains a landmark case in civil-rights law. There are at least two previous books specifically about *Milliken*.

Adams, a Detroit native who teaches law at the University of Michigan, does not propose a new understanding of the facts or the law, but her book is passionate and well researched. It can also get a little in the weeds. The trial alone lasted forty-one days, and there is a sizable cast of characters. We get a full appreciation for the complexities of the campaign for racial justice from the book.

The Bradley in *Milliken v. Bradley* was a six-year-old named Ronald. Ronald was a student at Clinton Elementary School, in northwest Detroit. His mother, Verda, served as a lunchroom aide there, and she could see that the school was suffering from underfunding and neglect. Classes, which might have as many as fifty students, sometimes had to be held in trailers, owing to a shortage of space. When it snowed, the city didn’t bother to plow the schoolyard. It just threw some cinders on it.

Verda Bradley didn't think that the reason for the neglect was mysterious. Ninety-seven per cent of the students at Clinton were Black. She believed that, if it were fully integrated, services would improve, and so would the quality of Ronald's education. She was from Tennessee, a Jim Crow state. She had come to Detroit in 1942, as part of the Second Great Migration. When she arrived, the city was about nine per cent Black. By 1970, the year of the lawsuit, it was 43.7 per cent Black. Whites were moving to the suburbs, a trend that started after the war but was accelerated by urban unrest in the summer of 1967, during which at least forty-three people died and more than seven thousand were arrested.

Like many Black parents in the post-Brown v. Board of Education era, Verda was not interested in integration for its own sake. She simply believed that a school with a lot of white kids was going to get more resources than a school in which almost all the kids were Black. So she approached the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., which, in 1970, filed a class-action lawsuit in federal court. The defendant, William Milliken, was the Republican governor of Michigan.

The history of school desegregation—the history of Brown after Brown—is well known. After the decision came down, in 1954, Thurgood Marshall, who had argued the case before the Court, predicted that public schools would be integrated in five years and all of American society would be integrated in nine.

Things didn't quite work out that way. In 1955, in a case known as Brown II, the Court ordered school systems to desegregate “with all deliberate speed,” a phrase that Marshall said would be interpreted as “S-L-O-W.” Slow turned out to be an understatement. Southern states resisted desegregating their public schools for years. In 1963, the year John F. Kennedy proposed a civil-rights bill, only two per cent of Southern Black children were attending schools with whites.

That started to change when the Justice Department and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare began putting pressure on school districts to desegregate. Finally, in 1968, the Supreme Court put its foot down. In *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, it charged school boards that once operated a dual system with “the affirmative duty to take

whatever steps might be necessary to convert to a unitary system in which racial discrimination would be eliminated root and branch.” A year later, in *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*, the Court said that school desegregation must happen “at once.” The era of all deliberate speed was over.

“Root and branch” is a reference to systemic racism. The Court was saying that it was not enough to have mixed-race classrooms. Sending small numbers of Black children into schools with overwhelmingly white student bodies and virtually no Black adults in the building had been a disaster. The lesson was that, for integration to work in the way the Court had imagined with Brown, the whole system needed to be desegregated. The Court’s order in Green therefore extended to “every facet of school operations—faculty, staff, transportation, extracurricular activities and facilities.”

In 1968, then, the federal government finally seemed ready to make good on the vision of Brown: integrated schools as a step toward a post-racial society. The plaintiffs in the Milliken case had reason to believe that they might prevail.

They had two problems, neither insurmountable. The first one was shared by all Northern school-desegregation cases. Brown had established that it was unconstitutional for a state to have a law mandating segregated schools, and Michigan had no such law. Since 1869, segregation in Detroit public schools had been outlawed by the state’s Supreme Court. There was nothing to strike down. But, in a 1961 case, a federal court in New York had ruled that gerrymandering school-district lines could count as state-ordered segregation, so there was a legal lifeline.

The other problem was that, because of the racial imbalance in the city, no integration plan could be effective unless it included the suburbs, where the residents and the schools were virtually all white. What was needed, therefore, was an interdistrict, or “metropolitan,” remedy. In order to get a court to endorse this solution, the plaintiffs had to show that what looked like de-facto segregation, just the pattern resulting from personal housing choices, was a result of state action.

The N.A.A.C.P. amassed an impressive amount of evidence, which it used to convince the district-court judge Stephen Roth, who initially seemed unsympathetic, that school segregation was the result of government and not just real-estate-industry policies. The evidence showed that the Detroit school board had made decisions about districting, sites of new school construction, feeder schools, and school transportation with a view to maintaining a racially segregated system.

Housing patterns, too, were the result of discriminatory actions whose effects had compounded over decades. Government decisions about the location of public-housing and urban-renewal projects had been guided by racial considerations. Redlining practices used by the Federal Housing Administration and the federally funded Home Owners' Loan Corporation had made it almost impossible for Black people to get mortgages. By mid-century, more than eighty per cent of the properties outside central Detroit had racial covenants—which were generally clauses in deeds signed by white homeowners pledging not to sell or rent to Black people.

In addition, the National Association of Real Estate Boards' "Code of Ethics," adopted in 1924, specified that "a Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race, or nationality or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood." (The explicit reference to race was eliminated from the code in the fifties.) Black real-estate agents in Detroit did not have access to white agents' listings of homes. Presiding over all this was the state government, whose constitutional duty it was to provide for the equal protection of its citizens.

There was a ton of evidence, but it was agreed that the most powerful witness for the plaintiffs was a ten-by-twenty-foot map of the city that showed the evolution of residential segregation. The map was placed, for the duration of the trial, in the judge's line of vision, a constant reminder of racial separation. At one point, Roth allowed a question about whether a map wouldn't show similar concentrations of Poles, an ethnic group with a reputation for insularity. He was informed that Poles in Detroit were less than half as segregated as Blacks. This seemed to surprise him.

In June, 1972, Roth issued the metropolitan remedy that the N.A.A.C.P. wanted. He brought fifty-three school districts in surrounding suburbs and small cities into the plan and required the authorities to distribute students among districts to achieve integration throughout the system. The ruling affected nearly eight hundred thousand students, and distributing them meant busing, or, as opponents called it, “forced busing.”

The “forced” part was the problem, because in 1971 forty-two per cent of American children took a bus to school as a matter of course. In most cases, no one had to force them. Parents liked busing. It saved them time and transportation costs. The yellow school bus was an iconic piece of Americana. Less commonly acknowledged was the fact that, under Jim Crow, Black schoolchildren were bused all the time.

The defendants appealed, but the Sixth Circuit largely upheld the verdict. That court was likely emboldened by a Supreme Court case decided while the Milliken trial was in progress: *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*.

Mecklenburg is the county surrounding Charlotte, and the region had more than a hundred schools and eighty-four thousand pupils, one of the largest school districts in North Carolina. In 1968, when the lawsuit was under way, more than half of the Black children in the district were attending all-Black or nearly all-Black schools.

The district court ruled that the school board had to adopt an integration plan that included busing in order to achieve racial balance. Some ten thousand students would be bused. Somewhat surprisingly, the Supreme Court, in an opinion by Chief Justice Warren Burger, a Nixon appointee, unanimously upheld the order almost in its entirety. Busing to achieve racial integration was constitutionally permitted, it said.

There had been noisy local resistance surrounding the case, but the protests expired from exhaustion soon after the Court’s decision came down, and integration, at least in the early grades, seemed to be a success. In 1968, the average white student in the district had attended a school that was ninety per cent white. After the court order went into effect, the average white student attended a school that was sixty-nine per cent white.

If Swann looked like the future in 1971, it proved to be a mirage. Three years later, the Court took up the state of Michigan's appeal in *Milliken v. Bradley*. It held, in a 5–4 vote, that, since there was no proof of discriminatory acts by the suburban school districts, the metropolitan remedy was "wholly impermissible." The suburbs were being made to pay for the city's bad behavior. The opinion noted that "no single tradition in public education is more deeply rooted than local control over the operation of schools."

Then why was the outcome in Swann not also an "impermissible" assault on local control? The answer is that although Charlotte-Mecklenburg covered an area of five hundred and fifty square miles, it contained a single school district. The desegregation remedy was therefore intradistrict. The proposed remedy in Milliken was interdistrict, and the Court was not inclined to cross district lines. It entrenched the concept of the neighborhood school.

As Adams puts it, the Supreme Court treated school districts as though they were mini-states. But there is nothing more sovereign or God-given about school districts than there is about congressional districts. The boundaries are entirely a function of who is drawing the map.

Still, in a case decided two years after Swann, the Court doubled down. That case, *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, was not about desegregation. Much of American public-school funding comes from local property taxes, which is why the schools in suburban Detroit were so much better than the schools in the city. Rodriguez challenged this practice on the ground that it produced unequal results, with poor districts having much less to spend on education than affluent districts.

The least affluent school district in San Antonio, Edgewood, was about ninety per cent Mexican American and six per cent Black. The most affluent, Alamo Heights, was eighteen per cent Mexican American and less than one per cent Black. Per-pupil expenditure in Edgewood was \$356; in Alamo Heights, it was \$594.

The district court ruled that, because of this disparity, the plaintiffs had been denied equal protection. But the Supreme Court reversed the decision. The

Court asked and answered two questions. The first was whether differences in wealth triggered “strict scrutiny” under the equal-protection clause. The Court said no. Poverty, unlike race, is not a “suspect class.” The poor have no special rights just because they’re poor.

The second question was whether education is what courts call a fundamental right. Fundamental rights are rights the state is not supposed to deprive you of except under circumstances where the public good overwhelmingly outweighs the private harm. Some fundamental rights are enumerated in the Constitution: freedom of speech, the right to a jury trial, and so on. But some are not: the right to marry, to have custody over one’s children, to travel between states.

When a fundamental right is at stake, courts are supposed to set a high bar for any encroachment on the right in question. In Rodriguez, however, the Court’s opinion, by Lewis Powell, held that education “is not among the rights afforded explicit protection under our Federal Constitution. Nor do we find any basis for saying it is implicitly so protected.”

But hadn’t Brown been all about the right to education? “Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments,” Earl Warren had written for a unanimous Court. “It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” That sounds pretty fundamental.

Warren stopped short of explicitly saying so, however. There was a reason he didn’t, and Powell must have known what it was. Earlier in the century, the Supreme Court had declared “liberty of contract” to be a fundamental right and had used it to proclaim much New Deal legislation unconstitutional. Critics of the Court blamed it for inventing a right in order to pursue an economic agenda, and the Justices reversed their position after a few decades. Fundamental-rights talk was still highly unpopular in 1954. Warren did not want to go there. It would have looked as though the Court had an agenda.

By the time of Rodriguez, though, fundamental rights were back. The right to privacy was a Warren Court creation. Powell was not being completely forthright when he acted as though Brown had not set a precedent to defend education as a fundamental right.

Adams says that Milliken v. Bradley “was where the promise of Brown ended.” Milliken was the first major loss for Black people in a school case in the twenty years since Brown. But another promise of Brown was that education would be understood as a right afforded equally to all, and that promise died in Rodriguez. It’s significant that the author of the Court’s opinion in Rodriguez was the Justice who would also write the opinion in *Arlington Heights*: Lewis Powell.

Richard Nixon won the 1968 Presidential election by pursuing a “Southern strategy”—a campaign that appealed to Southern whites aggrieved by the passage of the Civil Rights Act—and he wanted to appoint a Southerner to the Court. “I don’t care if he’s a Democrat or a Republican,” Nixon told his Attorney General, John Mitchell, in an Oval Office conversation in 1971. “He must be against busing, and against forced housing integration. Beyond that, he can do what he pleases.”

Powell was a Virginian. He thought that Brown had been wrongly decided, but his decision not to openly defy it put him on the safe side for confirmation. The Senate had recently rejected two Nixon Supreme Court nominations in part because of their records on race.

As it happened, Powell, too, had a record on race. He had been the chair of the Richmond school board from 1952 to 1961. In the year he stepped down, there were about twenty-three thousand Black schoolchildren in Richmond, and only thirty-seven were attending previously all-white schools. He went on to serve on the state board of education, until 1969. In that capacity, as his biographer, John C. Jeffries, Jr., puts it, he “never did any more than was necessary to facilitate desegregation.” Though this history was raised during Powell’s confirmation hearings, the Senate approved his appointment by a vote of eighty-nine to one. Richmond was still in litigation over school desegregation in 1974, twenty years after Brown.

Was this all the fault of the Court? After 1972, it was plain that busing mandates had made court-ordered school desegregation explosively unpopular among white voters. The winner of the 1972 Democratic Presidential primary in Michigan was George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, who was known for his segregationist views. He won seventy-nine of the state's eighty-three counties. [Court-ordered busing in Boston](#), in 1974, sparked protests that convulsed the city.

Nixon had campaigned on an anti-busing platform in 1972, and he won sixty per cent of the popular vote, carrying forty-nine states. There was talk of a constitutional amendment prohibiting busing as a tool of desegregation. In 1975, a liberal from a Northern state, [Joe Biden](#), began supporting anti-busing legislation in the Senate (as Kamala Harris would one day remind him). The Departments of Justice and of Health, Education, and Welfare began to ease off enforcement of Brown. The courts could not expect much executive or legislative support for desegregation orders.

But there was also a liberal reappraisal. The assumption of the Brown Court was that integration would improve the quality of education for Black children. That was Verda Bradley's assumption as well. In 1966, a sociologist named James Coleman produced a report, commissioned by H.E.W., on race and inequality of opportunity in education.

Coleman expected that the results of his study would confirm the benefits of school desegregation. Instead, what they showed was that the quality of the school on its own had little to do with student achievement. Much more determinative, he found, was the "home, neighborhood, and peer environment." Being around more academically motivated students helped, but the main forces of inequality were outside school.

Adams discusses the Coleman report. She does not discuss two papers that may have had a bigger impact on learned opinion. Both were by Daniel Patrick Moynihan: "The Negro Family," written in 1965 for the Department of Labor, where Moynihan was an Assistant Secretary, and "The Schism in Black America," published in *The Public Interest* in 1972. Moynihan's conclusions paralleled Coleman's: the principal cause of Black underachievement was not white racism. It was the structure of the Black family, over which public policy had limited control. In 1970, Moynihan

suggested to Nixon that it might be best to treat civil-rights issues with “benign neglect.”

By the time Moynihan’s second paper came out, many white liberals, distracted by the war in Vietnam and disenchanted by Black militancy, had given up on the crusade for civil rights. It was possible to think that ending segregation did not require compulsory integration. Coleman and Moynihan became respectable excuses for getting off the train.

Yet the idea that someone could measure the effects of the civil-rights revolution when it had barely begun was preposterous. In 1966, when Coleman released his report, hardly any school desegregation had occurred anywhere in the United States. The Civil Rights Act was two years old.

And how could Moynihan have expected to see racial transformation just eight years after Black people had been granted legal protection from discrimination in education and employment, and just four years after the passage of the Fair Housing Act? Insofar as Moynihan and Coleman showed that desegregation was only one step on the road to full equality, they were obviously not wrong. Still, it was a little soon to draw conclusions.

Today, only ten per cent of Black students attend an all-Black or almost all-Black school, and only fourteen per cent of white students are in schools that are more than ninety per cent white. But progress is uneven. District courts began terminating desegregation orders in the early nineteen-nineties, and when the orders stopped so did the desegregation. In Charlotte, the busing order was lifted in 1999 by Judge Robert Potter, a former campaign worker for [Senator Jesse Helms](#) who had been nominated by Ronald Reagan on Helms’s recommendation. In 2018, less than two decades after Potter lifted the order, Charlotte-Mecklenburg was the most segregated school district in North Carolina.

In Detroit, some suburban schools closest to the city flipped from being virtually all white to being virtually all Black as whites moved farther out. Harper Woods, an inner-ring suburb, had zero Black students in 1975; in 2024, it was eighty-seven per cent Black. The number of students in Detroit public schools is now less than fifty thousand, and just two per cent of the

students are white. Clinton Elementary School, where Ronald Bradley went, closed in 2009. According to the Michigan Department of Education, the student body at the time was 99.52 per cent Black. The February letter from the Department of Education is a pretty clear signal that even modest efforts to address racial inequality (forget about the history of discrimination, forget about even mentioning the subject of race) are no longer on the table where the wealthy and the powerful now dine. ♦



[Louis Menand](#) is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His books include “[The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War](#),” released in 2021, and “[The Metaphysical Club](#),” which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for history.

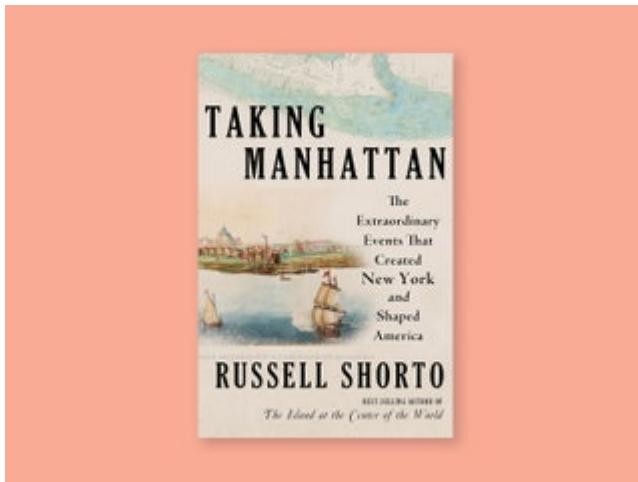
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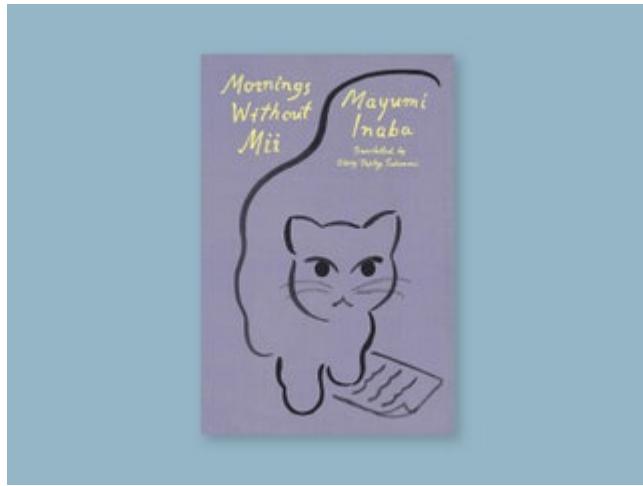
Briefly Noted

“*Taking Manhattan*,” “*Mornings Without Mii*,” “*Goddess Complex*,” and “*Death Takes Me*.”

March 31, 2025



Taking Manhattan, by Russell Shorto (Norton). This vivid history chronicles England’s “taking” of New Amsterdam from the Dutch, in 1664. Shorto, however, argues that it was the Dutch, not the English, who sowed the seeds of the multiethnic, religiously tolerant, and unabashedly capitalistic metropolis that would emerge as New York. He recounts the lives and doings of Peter Stuyvesant, the last leader of the Dutch colony, and his adversary Richard Nicolls, the commander of the English invasion. The taking, accomplished without bloodshed, was less a usurpation than it was a merger of two ways of being. Though Shorto describes the joint enterprise with admiration, he also confronts the dispossession of Native inhabitants which preceded it, and the city’s imminent future as a slave-trade hub.



Mornings Without Mii, by *Mayumi Inaba*, translated from the Japanese by *Ginny Tapley Takemori* (FSG Originals). On a summer day in Tokyo, the author of this moving memoir finds a kitten, “a little ball of fluff,” stuck on a fence. After rescuing the stray and naming her Mii, Inaba gradually learns the ins and outs of cat ownership: feeding, play, and the dangers of wandering outside. The book, which spans the twenty-odd years of Mii’s life, describes the daily joys and intimacies of having a pet, the difficulties that come with an aging cat, and the sorrows of outliving one’s animal companion. Inaba’s portrait of the human-feline relationship is reverential, an expression of devotion in its attention to detail.

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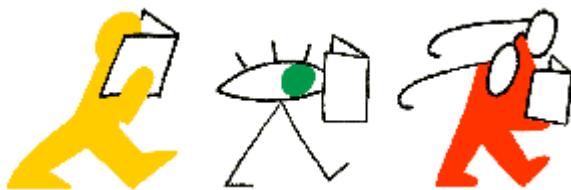
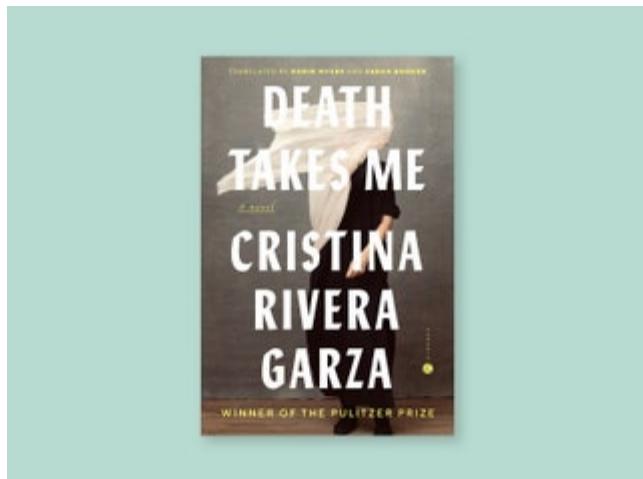


Illustration by Ben Hickey

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Goddess Complex, by *Sanjena Sathian* (*Penguin Press*). Sanjana, the protagonist of this biting novel, has recently left her husband in Bombay after a dispute over whether to have children. Couch-surfing in the U.S., she contends with her own perceived shortcomings as “a thirty-two-year-old soon-to-be divorcée” who has “twice overdrawn her bank account.” After Sanjana discovers that her ex is in a new relationship, with someone who has an almost identical name and likeness, and that this person is pregnant, she returns to India to finalize her divorce. There, she’s forced to confront her doppelgänger at the wellness retreat that the woman runs for wannabe parents. What follows is a twisted examination of motherhood and the arbitrary expectations of adulthood.



Death Takes Me, by *Cristina Rivera Garza*, translated from the Spanish by *Robin Myers and Sarah Booker* (*Hogarth*). In this novel, a detective, a tabloid journalist, and a professor become obsessed with a string of strange

and gruesome killings. The victims are all male, the corpses all castrated, and each crime scene is signed with lines of poetry by the Argentinean writer Alejandra Pizarnik. The story that unfolds is hardly a conventional murder mystery; rather, it's a genre- and gender-bending exploration of violence and desire, form and fragmentation. Veering between surreal interior monologue, scholarly criticism, and elliptical verse, Garza's chimerical and metatextual whodunnit unsettlingly posits that no one—not the writer, and perhaps not even, or especially not, the reader—is truly innocent.

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[The Theatre](#)

An Overpriced “Othello” Goes Splat on Broadway

Denzel Washington and Jake Gyllenhaal lack direction, and “The Trojans,” a spirited football-themed Iliad, heads for the end zone.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

March 28, 2025



Jealousy consumes Iago and Othello in Shakespeare’s oddly comic tragedy. Illustration by Dale Edwin Murray

There’s a sense of occasion to the new “Othello” now at the Barrymore, on Broadway—Denzel Washington, one of our last true movie legends, is playing the titular role, and Jake Gyllenhaal, no slouch in the stardom department himself, appears as his evil saboteur, Iago. Producers are charging north of nine hundred dollars for orchestra seats, the kind of ludicrous, norm-busting event pricing that somehow drives demand; the sidewalk outside buzzes with excitement. Inside the theatre, though, it’s another story.

In Shakespeare's oddly comic tragedy, jealousy is the prime mover. As the Venetians and the Ottoman Turks squabble over Cyprus in the background, the men before us quarrel over everything—a woman, a job, a handkerchief. Iago, a veteran soldier, hates Othello, his general, a Moor who fights for Venice: Iago's missed out on a promotion, and he also half believes a rumor that Othello has seduced his wife, Emilia (Kimber Elayne Sprawl). His hatred devours all but his capacity to lie and plot; "I am not what I am," he says. Iago turns his sights to ruining Othello's new wife, Desdemona (Molly Osborne), with false clues and poisonous innuendo. Envious of what Othello has, he takes it.

You need energy and clarity to make "Othello" work—to make the language sing and to propel the deceptions forward—especially because the vicious Iago hasn't got an actual goal, just an appetite for chaos and a ready little knife. The director, Kenny Leon, is uninterested in clarity, though, and the vibe is mild depression: a pre-show projection reading "The Near Future" doesn't turn out to be particularly useful, and the dreary, gray-columned set, designed by Derek McLane, looks like a parking garage. (Dede Ayite dresses the soldiers in de-rigueur fatigues, the Venetian senators in suits.) Famously, Iago hurls racist abuse behind Othello's back, calling him, for example, an "old black ram," and that poison, too, worms its way into Othello's mind. "I am black and have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have," he says to himself, alone. In this production, Emilia is Black, as are some soldiers in Iago's platoon. The casting choices might raise a whole host of interesting questions about how this Venice reflects our own time, but Leon doesn't foreground, or even really acknowledge, them.

Leon and Washington have had triumphs together, namely the Broadway productions of August Wilson's "Fences," in 2010, and Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," in 2014. In those shows, Leon turned his eye for behavior to prop-heavy naturalism, where he seems most graceful and at ease. Here, there's very little reality in his direction—Emilia switches randomly among the jobs of lady's maid, glamorous chief of staff, and camo-wearing lieutenant, for instance—and too few people look at one another when they talk. At least Gyllenhaal, crazy as a scorpion, makes a point of facing the people he's bamboozling, jabbing his hand at them as if

he could drive his lies in by force. He and Andrew Burnap, playing Cassio, one of Iago's many persuadable fools, find nice moments together, largely because they seem like they're in conversation. The rest of the time, if there are more than a handful of actors onstage they drift into a half circle, the hallmark of amateur staging.

When Washington enters, we sense, for one bright moment, the Othello that might have been: he charges in, tucking his white shirt into his blue trousers, and here is his Don Pedro from "Much Ado About Nothing" (the Kenneth Branagh film from 1993), still forceful and on the go. As long as he's joshing with other soldiers, or glad-handing senators, he moves comfortably. And, early in the first act, Washington's touch with the verse is casual, knowing, deft. The trouble hits when he greets his "soul's joy," Desdemona—who is dressed in a series of Political Wife pants suits—and exhibits only a faint, avuncular enthusiasm. As Leon's production toils blandly along, Washington employs a light, high delivery, lapsing into vagueness and singsong. Nothing commands his full attention. Othello is supposed to be "declined into the vale of years," but Washington moves past what might be a portrait of an overtaxed old general into apathy.

Sinking onto Desdemona's bed, reciting his lines without notable crescendo or feeling, Washington puts Osborne into a weary headlock, and then kind of leans on her to death. As Act V plays out, Othello is often found sitting on this bed, staring out into space. Watching Washington's gotta-take-a-load-off finish reminded me of his most recent Broadway performance, in 2018—as Hickey in Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh," another presumed cuckold who, it turns out, has murdered his wife. In that production, the director George C. Wolfe had Washington conclude the play sitting in a chair at center stage. As in "Othello," he stopped engaging with the cast around him, delivering his monologue like an aria, straight out to the audience.

Maybe Washington just doesn't like blocking? My suspicion is that a director in a rehearsal room, looking at the megastar as he runs his lines, thinks, *If only people could experience what we see here*, without necessarily calculating the difference between that small room and a Broadway house. But these ill-spent moments do, I think, matter. Ticket

prices aside, the theatre really cannot afford to waste a chance with Washington like this. He values the stage, and returns to it often, but, at seventy years old, he's started hinting in interviews about retirement. It's heartening, therefore, that he has been talking about a film of "Othello." I can see it in my mind's eye already—his magnificently tired face filling a screen, where we can finally see the flickers of waning nobility and waxing madness. Also, it'll cost maybe twenty-five bucks.

There are still bargains to be had this week in live theatre, however. On Twenty-third Street, at a long, narrow, no-frills space called Nancy Manocherian's the cell theatre, you can pay fifty dollars and get a "Friday Night Lights"-inflected synthwave-musical retelling of Homer's Iliad, performed by a joyfully committed ensemble. "The Trojans," written and composed by the hugely gifted Leegrid Stevens and directed by Eric Paul Vitale, is that rara avis: a gorgeously produced downtown epic, somehow both trash-based (the costume designer, Ashley Soliman, has made football armor out of knee-pad inserts, for example) and luxurious, rich in the way that theatre is meant to be rich—with imagination, intelligence, and potential.

On entry, the room looks like an Amazon warehouse, with boxes piled to the ceiling. If you take a minute to read the labels, though, something seems odd: the addresses all list places like Parthenon, Arkansas, and Athens, Georgia. The glum workers pushing their hydraulic carts and listening to a tinny boom box perk up the moment someone mentions the "old days," when their town resounded with the rivalry between two high-school football teams, the Trojans and the Highland Kings. Soon, the workers are reënacting the run-up to a long-ago homecoming game—way back in the nineteen-eighties, I'm guessing, based on the occasional Walkman. Back then, the prom queen, Heather (Deshja Driggs), left her boyfriend, Johnny (Roger Casey), for the allure of Highland's arts program, and everyone freaked out.

Is Heather Helen of Troy? She certainly causes mayhem, as the teen-agers drive their cars—those same hydraulic carts, weaving only inches from the audience—toward disaster. Paris is the coy Daris (Arya Grace Gaston), and the doomed hero Achilles has become the grim-faced Trojan running back

Keeley (Erin Treadway, in boxer braids and golden work boots), who refuses to take the field after Johnny utters a fatal insult. Stevens has slyly flipped the sides in Homer's poem, but we're not here for a one-to-one narrative mapping of a Bronze Age tragedy. Instead, we've come for the same reason that scouts go to high-school football finals: to see stunning talents like Casey and Treadway before everyone else hears about them, and to get back in touch with our love of the game. ♦



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

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[On Television](#)

The Second Season of “Wolf Hall” Surpasses Its Acclaimed Predecessor

In the culmination of the Hilary Mantel adaptation, Mark Rylance’s Thomas Cromwell becomes a more poignant figure, weighed down by regrets.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)

March 30, 2025



The series, like Mantel’s novels, humanizes the oft-villainized Cromwell, but its most refreshing creation is perhaps its version of Henry VIII. Illustration by Bianca Bagnarelli

In the first season of the Tudor-era drama “Wolf Hall,” Anne Boleyn’s brief queendom was undone by rumors. Just three years after she became the

second of Henry VIII's six wives, in 1533, Anne (played by Claire Foy) landed in the Tower of London following accusations of adulterous dalliances, including with her own brother. Her beheading was a ghastly sight, shocking even to the man who had done much to bring it about—the King's adviser Thomas Cromwell ([Mark Rylance](#)), who used threats of ruin and torture to drum up witnesses against Anne. Now, in the show's second season, Cromwell becomes the subject of outlandish gossip himself. There's practically nothing that his Catholic foes, still smarting at the Church of England's rejection of papal authority, won't believe about the man who helped engineer the schism so that Henry ([Damian Lewis](#)) could divorce his first wife as part of his ongoing quest to beget a male heir. Some say Cromwell has ensorcelled the sovereign. Maybe the King is dead, and has been for some time: one commoner claims that the adviser has secretly taken the throne and intends to "melt all the crucifixes for cannons to fire on the poor folk." In the North, where a rebel army prepares to march on London, the statesman has become a monster with which to scare children. Mind yourself, the little ones learn, or "he'll jump down your throat and bite your liver."

Season 1 ended with Anne's decapitation; Season 2, which débuted on March 23rd, ends with Cromwell's. The six hours of television between those two deaths are riveting—partly because the more fearsome Cromwell's reputation becomes, the more assiduously he strives in private for moral redemption. Immediately after Anne's execution, Henry had warmly embraced Cromwell; while the monarch beamed, thinking perhaps of his impending nuptials to Jane Seymour (Kate Phillips), the adviser could barely conceal his dismay at what they'd accomplished. Early in the première of the new season, the series' director, Peter Kosminsky, deploys one of his most effective flourishes, cutting between Anne's final moments and Henry's wedding to Jane. As the newly emboldened King tests the limits of his power, Cromwell struggles to remain a loyal servant amid his growing unease about Henry's ideas and tactics. He believes that the King, in his role as reformer of the Church, doesn't go far enough, and that, as the father of an obstinately Catholic daughter—Mary (Lilit Lesser), his firstborn—the monarch is startlingly reckless.

“[Wolf Hall](#)” is a PBS/BBC adaptation of the novelist [Hilary Mantel](#)’s trilogy of the same name. The second season arrives a decade after its predecessor, but the two halves display remarkable consistency, having been not only directed entirely by Kosminsky but also written entirely by Peter Straughan, who won a screenplay Oscar earlier this month, for the film “[Conclave](#).” The original season covered the [first two novels](#) in Mantel’s trilogy; this one dramatizes the events of the [third novel](#), from which it takes its subtitle, “[The Mirror and the Light](#).” Season 2 is arguably greater than its acclaimed predecessor. Cromwell’s middle-aged regrets build poignantly, while brisker pacing and some levity—Cromwell is widowed, and various courtiers take it upon themselves to play matchmaker—lend the proceedings a teeming liveliness.

In the first season, Cromwell, then in his forties, still saw himself as a vengeful son. Having escaped his humble origins through a legal education, he was ferociously loyal to the surrogate father he found in Cardinal Wolsey (Jonathan Pryce), a once beloved confidant of the King who, in the end, scarcely fared better than Henry’s discarded wives. After Anne’s death, a more paternal side of Cromwell appears—augmented, perhaps, by the loss of his own young daughters to sudden illness, a few years earlier. He pleads for mercy for those he believes to have been carried away by youthful folly, such as Mary, whom Henry “bastardized” when he annulled his marriage to his first wife. Demoted from princess to plain Lady Mary, she flirts with fatal defiance when she refuses to publicly recognize her father’s negation of his twenty-four-year union with her mother. In so doing, she becomes a dangerously attractive marriage prospect for Vatican allies with eyes on the English throne.

Unlike many period dramas, “Wolf Hall” doesn’t bother to twist history to suit modern preoccupations. Straughan trusts that the machinations of this notorious royal adviser and his king’s marital fecklessness, the consequences of which are still with us five centuries later, are fascinating enough on their own. This makes for an unapologetically cerebral series, demanding close attention to keep track of its sprawling cast, not to mention a host of characters we never see. (Many of them are foreigners who regard Henry’s dominion as a pregnable backwater: “some poor little island full of heretics and sheep.”) But the focus required is amply repaid by a richly

detailed snapshot of an England that is not yet a colonial superpower. While Henry worries about the risks of invasion by Spain or of a religious civil war, Cromwell, whom nobles nickname Crumb for his low birth, envisions a world that's less beholden to ancient hierarchies. Cromwell's sense of superiority stems from his intelligence, his cosmopolitanism (he has spent time in Europe), and the knowledge that he has made his own fortune.

When an ally cautions that, by going after the "oldest, richest families in the land," Cromwell is making too many enemies, the statesman flashes a grin —a rare break from Rylance's bewitching understatedness—and compares their imminent destruction to "jugs in an earthquake." But the self-made upstart underestimates the extent to which his alienation of the aristocracy leaves him perilously dependent on a fickle ruler.

When Henry isn't admiring his own portrait, like a ginger Narcissus, he spends much of "Wolf Hall" fretting that he'll be remembered for his inability to beget a son to succeed him. (Eventually, he gets his wish: Jane Seymour gives birth to the future Edward VI, but dies days afterward.) In fact, he is now chiefly remembered for going through queens as if they were disposable broodmares. (The pop-feminist takeaway of the Broadway musical "Six," about Henry's wives, is that he, and we, treated his brides interchangeably.) The series, like Mantel's novels, humanizes the oft-villainized Cromwell, but its most refreshing creation is perhaps its version of Henry. Seldom seen in closeup, the King is framed as Cromwell regards him—a distant figure to be simultaneously feared and managed, like a captive lion. In contrast to the ever-prune-faced Cromwell, Henry undergoes significant bodily deterioration during the decade in which the two seasons take place, and Lewis delivers a magnificently physical performance of a man who feels his virility slipping away. Henry's self-awareness—and his self-pity—allows him to recognize his emasculation; he grumbles to Cromwell that he has to "breed for the nation." No wonder, then, that this aging jock in velvet and furs is at his giddiest when making plans to dress up as a Turk or a shepherd, resorting to boyish pranks in such garb when manhood becomes a duty.

Cromwell loses the King's favor after his suggestion for wife No. 4 goes awry: Henry, betrothed to Anne of Cleves (Dana Herfurth) sight unseen, is crushed to discover that she doesn't live up to her portrait and recoils at the

sight of him. It's a credit to the series that, though history determines the plot's immovable destination, exactly where we are headed moment to moment rarely feels predictable. Not all the detours are worthwhile; there are too many flashbacks and conversations with Wolsey's ghost, as well as an unconvincing story line in which Cromwell is tempted to withdraw from court—a tired iteration of the trope of the grizzled veteran who dies just before a long-awaited retirement. But for the most part the scripts stay commendably true to Cromwell's grounded point of view, refusing to manufacture the kind of climactic confrontations on which TV dramas thrive. When Henry decides that Cromwell will follow Anne Boleyn to the Tower, the two men don't face off or exchange their grievances or relive their past together. The result is all the more unsettling for it. Cromwell is instead forced to plead his case to his jumped-up, cocky juniors—the final indignity for a man who knows that he could bring forth "brave new days," if only he had more time. ♦



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

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Poems

- **“Day One”**

By Bon Iver, Dijon, and Flock of Dimes | “Been a long while now coming up / Thought we were past it, thought we’d patched it up.”

- **“Refusal”**

By Cynthia Ozick | “Acclaim / Nature’s hues / in fall and spring.”

[Poems](#)

Day One

By [Bon Iver, Dijon, and Flock of Dimes](#)

March 31, 2025

Been a long while now coming up
Thought we were past it, thought we'd patched it up
Thought the title had passed hands
Thought we'd had enough

But the Sun's gonna go ahead and tag right up
and we dont understand what we're standing on
and we sure come in blind
With our timing

So I've culled what I can't tame
I have taken all that I can take
It got bad enough
I thought that I would leave . . .

I wish you could take that right off!
All that shit that rips you right up
Then you'd know that we been taught all this from Day One . . .
from Day One

Same old town and yer
parsing through
Signs of live and die for you
There's a million ways
You're falling thru
The cost of your mind

And some may say that
you lack the stuff
and you burn it down and
clack your cuffs
But you may have to toughen up
While unlearning that lie

I'll go find the tap wire
I'll go put the pathfinder on waltz

.....

Well, can I get a rewind?
Just this once, if you don't mind
I don't know who I am without ya
'cause I feel a wild one now comin' on
I told you to be patient
I swore that I was wrong
So why can't we both just
now get to understand
from Day One . . .

All this was dry land
Yes you have just always
had your Band
But you get sad enough
because it's all you seek . . .

Hop on it'll all be gone!

You don't have to take so very long . . .

and u can't have it for a song

And that's why I have rattled on

from Day One . . .

from Day One

This is drawn from “SABLE, fABLE.”

Bon Iver is an art project of the singer, songwriter, and producer Justin Vernon, whose albums include “SABLE, fABLE” (2025).

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Refusal

By [Cynthia Ozick](#)

March 31, 2025

*In memoriam
Lore Segal (1928-2024)*

Acclaim
Nature's hues
in fall and spring
gold and rust
lilac and rose
azaleas aflame
petal and leaf
conspiring
in disbelief
that by and by
they and I
must come in grief
to dust.
Refuse
to seed
in shame
what Nature sows
and choose
what leaf and petal and wayward weed
all know:
grow.

[Cynthia Ozick](#), an essayist and a fiction writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1977. Her books include “[In a Yellow Wood: Selected Stories and Essays](#).”

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By Erik Agard | A challenging puzzle.

[**Crossword**](#)

The Crossword: Monday, March 31, 2025

A challenging puzzle.



By [Erik Agard](#)

March 31, 2025



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

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