PRICE $9.99

THE NEW YORKER

AUG. 18, 2025

The New Yorker Magazine

[Aug 11]

Goings On

- **Richard Brody’s Summertime Movie Picks**
  By Richard Brody, Brian Seibert, Sheldon Pearce, Jane Bua, Dan Stahl, and Rachel Syme | Plus: Lady Gaga and the Black Keys, Indian dance by the New York Harbor, the Time:Spans festival, and more.
- **Getting in Marc Maron’s Head**
  The podcast host recommends three recent favorites—about the gentrification of punk, what makes a great actor, and the corrosive influence of social-media platforms.
- **Three Plays on the Pancake**
  By Helen Rosner | A masa-based version at Hellbender, a riff on soufflé at Pitt’s, and a modern-classic stack at S&P Lunch.

Goings On

Richard Brody’s Summertime Movie Picks

Plus: Lady Gaga and the Black Keys, Indian dance by the New York Harbor, the Time:Spans festival, and more.

By Richard Brody, Brian Seibert, Sheldon Pearce, Jane Bua, Dan Stahl, and Rachel Syme

August 8, 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.***

The recent heat wave may be only a memory—but enshrining memories is what movies do, and many of them rely on harsh summer climates as crucial elements of drama. In the mid-twentieth century, when few residences were cooled during the summer, most movie theatres were air-conditioned: even as characters sweated, viewers chilled. Here are a few of my favorite sunbaked delights, to stream at home at your preferred temperature.—*Richard Brody*

Clarke Peters in “Red Hook Summer.”Photograph from David Lee / Variance Films / Everett Collection

“The Lost Patrol” (1934, John Ford)

This First World War drama, about British troops fighting in the Mesopotamian desert, is one of the most harrowing war movies. Its action is centered on the mind-bending power of the blazing sun and the bewildering emptiness of the sandy landscape; its grim premise is the blankness of death itself.

“Rear Window” (1954, Alfred Hitchcock)

Although Hitchcock’s voyeuristic cross-section of life in and around the rear courtyard of several Manhattan apartment buildings is one of his key murder mysteries, the story’s main puzzle involves love, sex, and the connection between them. James Stewart and Grace Kelly are its central romantic couple; the heat of the summer night is a crucial symbol for their erotic bond.

“Sun Don’t Shine” (2012, Amy Seimetz)

Seimetz’s first feature, set in her native Florida, is a sun-scorched neo-noir with a contemporary sensibility. It’s also a road movie, about a young tussling couple (Kate Lyn Sheil and Kentucker Audley) whose lurching journey is fuelled by a murder and a coverup.

“Tabu” (2012, Miguel Gomes)

The Portuguese director delves into his country’s colonial history to create a new form of anti-colonial drama that’s both analytical and ironic. The film is set partly in modern-day Lisbon, where a political activist meets an elderly man who’d formerly lived in colonial-era Mozambique. Gomes then shifts the action to a retrospective vision of the man’s life there, a lusty adventure in a tropical climate that gives rise to personal and political violence.

“Red Hook Summer” (2012, Spike Lee)

This self-financed film, shot quickly and passionately on location in Brooklyn, is both a coming-of-age story and a reckoning with secrets and lies. It’s the tale of an Atlanta teen-ager called Flik, who’s spending the

summer with his grandfather, a pastor, in Red Hook, as the community risks being torn apart by long-silenced abuses.

Spotlight

Taiwan's Bulareyaung Dance Company performs "Colors."Photograph by Chang Chia-hao

The **Battery Dance Festival,** the city's longest-running free summer dance series (in Rockefeller Park, Aug. 12-16), is also its most consistently wide-ranging showcase of international dance artists. The global variety represented in shows set against the Statue of Liberty and New York Harbor can come at the cost of coherence, except on the annual India Day. This year, on Aug. 15, New York's own Malini Srinivasan displays the beauty in Bharatanatyam, while choreography by the great Bijayini Satpathy—based in Bangalore—exhibits the curving charms of Odissi. Kalpavruksha Dance

Ensemble, out of Hyderabad and New Jersey, samples Kuchipudi and Kathakali, and Subhajit Khush Das, from Kolkata, revives the fusion style of the twentieth-century popularizer Uday Shankar.—*Brian Seibert*

About Town

Alternative Rock

In the two-thousands, the singer and guitarist Dan Auerbach and the drummer Patrick Carney rose to indie-rock prominence as **the Black Keys,** a band anchored by a brawny garage sound and colored by the blues. The duo released five albums in a seven-year span, steadily building a fan base and culminating in the breakout success of the 2010 album " Brothers," which spawned the Danger Mouse-produced single "Tighten Up" and won the band three Grammys. Since the pandemic, the duo has produced Mississippi Hill Country blues covers for the album "Delta Kream" (2021) and the spirited arena jams of "Ohio Players" (2024). Back with yet another rousing LP this month, "No Rain, No Flowers," the band is joined in support by Gary Clark, Jr.—*Sheldon Pearce (Forest Hills Stadium; Aug. 13.)*

Classical

Earle Brown's composition "Time Spans," commissioned for the 1972 Olympics, is dense and incongruent, filled with declarative and dissonant piano chords. It continues for nearly twelve minutes, constantly reshaping its original harmonies to mean something new. It makes sense that the **Time:Spans Festival** took its name—the piece represents an ethos of invention and musical liberty. This year's festival retains that legacy, with the Bozzini Quartet, débuting the Canadian composer Zosha Di Castri's "Delve"; the U.S. première of "The Divine Thawing of the Core," by Chaya Czernowin, performed by the Talea Ensemble and the flutist Claire Chase;

and the New York première of Jordan Nobles's "Still Life," originally composed for a choir, here played by the percussion sextet Sixtrum.—*Jane Bua (DiMenna Center; Aug. 9-23.)*

Off Broadway

Danny McCarthy and Quincy Tyler Bernstine in "Well, I'll Let You Go."Photograph by Emilio Madrid

Bubba Weiler's play **"Well, I'll Let You Go"** probes interiority, exposing the flux of feelings and ideas beneath our fixed exteriors. Its inspection tool is a narrator (Michael Chernus) who provides in-the-moment thoughts underpinning the words of Maggie (Quincy Tyler Bernstine), a middle-aged Midwesterner trying to make sense of her husband's sudden death. The audience tries, too; details emerge in dialogues between Maggie and family and community members connected to him. Frank J. Oliva's set mirrors this progression, its beige blankness accumulating flowers, memorabilia, and, finally, vibrancy. If the ending seems pat, that's partly because what preceded it—especially the procession of textured, troubled characters, incarnated in sensitive performances—was so resolutely complex.—*Dan Stahl (The Space at Irondale; through Aug. 29.)*

Dance

For dance in New York, August is the quietest month. But for the past ten years, the calendar has included at least one reliable highlight: a trip to the beach. The latest edition of Beach Sessions, Beach 112th Street in the Rockaways, features a free site-specific work by **Kim Brandt.** A choreographer with a strong sense of space who tends to focus on small,

incremental motions, Brandt sets her eye on the line of the horizon, trying to blur boundaries such as where the ocean meets the shore. Some Beach Sessions experiments succeed more than others; the sand and sea themselves are always reason enough to go.—*Brian Seibert (Rockaway Beach; Aug. 23.)*

Pop

Lady Gaga on tour in Inglewood, California, in July.Photograph by Kevin Mazur / Getty

Throughout a flamboyant career, **Lady Gaga** has embraced many roles—standing cheek to cheek with the late Tony Bennett performing standards, donning a cowgirl hat for a survey of dive-bar Americana, and portraying the muse in Bradley Cooper's 2018 film "A Star Is Born"—but she is most comfortable as pop's resident exhibitionist. Her 2008 début, "The Fame" (and its 2009 reissue, "The Fame Monster"), launched an ostentatious and even campy electro-pop identity that established her as a risktaker and a dynamo, peaking with the wide-ranging techno maximalism of "Born This Way" (2011). "Artpop," from 2013, set off a nomadic creative period that ended this year, with the artistic homecoming "Mayhem," and its five-act stage show transforms her discography into an extravagant musical.—*S.P. (Madison Square Garden; Aug. 22-23 and 26-27 and Sept. 6-7.)*

Movies

Art and love mesh tensely yet fruitfully in **"By the Stream,"** an intricate and expansive melodrama by the Korean director Hong Sangsoo. A textile artist who teaches at a university in Seoul invites her uncle, a retired actor

and director, to write and direct a skit for her female students—to replace one they'd been working on with a male student who was dismissed amid scandal. The results prove turbulent: the uncle's skit sparks political controversy, and his niece is taken aback by his romance with her mentor. The story's psychological twists emerge in remarkable extended dialogue scenes in which characters confess their failings and their dreams, expanding their sympathies and refining their sensibilities as they test new self-images.—*Richard Brody (Film at Lincoln Center.)*

Listening Booth

Rachel Syme's songs for going over a bridge at night.

Whenever I am feeling grumbly about the hard parts of living in New York City—and it happens quite often, despite the fact that I've been here for twenty years and plan, barring some unforeseen circumstance, to remain here all my days—I have a few surefire methods for reënchanting myself to this place. There's what I call the Film Forum Method, whereby I'll take myself to see a late-night black-and-white movie and walk out with that giddy, "Only in New York, kids!" feeling. There's the Big Long Walk Method, whereby I'll amble aimlessly across the island for hours—feeling

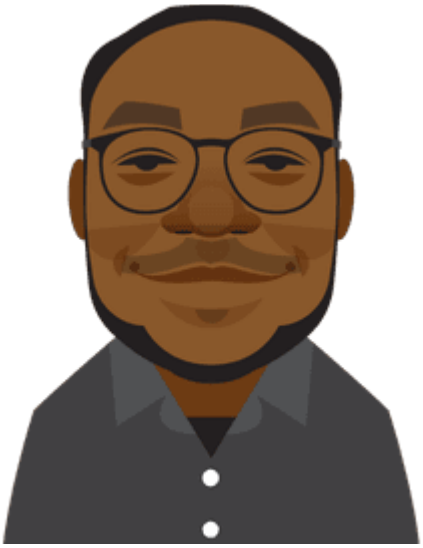
lighter and less cynical every twenty blocks—until I've shuffled off my malaise. But perhaps my most tried-and-true way to reconnect with the city, honed over much trial and error, is the Bridge at Night Method, which involves quite literally taking a taxi over a bridge, preferably quite late, preferably by myself, preferably after a long night out. I don't do this too often—I'm a staunch subway rider—but, when I do splurge for a ride home, I tend to crave a particular kind of song in my headphones as the car zooms over the East River. Something cinematic, nostalgic, and (admittedly) sentimental, something that seems to match the lights twinkling on the water, the skyline disappearing in the rearview. My go-to, for years, has been Joni Mitchell's "Cactus Tree," in which she sings about having a heart that is "full and hollow." That's how you feel, sometimes, living in the city—grand and depleted, all at once. So, I offer you my current playlist of songs that sound best at the end of a full night, when you are between where you were and where you're going.

- "Brooklyn Bridge," by Anaïs Mitchell
- "Cactus Tree," by Joni Mitchell
- "Save It for Later," covered by Eddie Vedder
- "I Feel It All," by Feist
- "Anyone Who Knows What Love Is (Will Understand)," by Irma Thomas
- "Coming Around Again," by Carly Simon
- "Some Dream," by Perfume Genius
- "iT," by Christine and the Queens
- "Kathleen," by Josh Ritter
- "It Ain't Fair," by Aretha Franklin
- "The Morning Fog," by Kate Bush
- "Sky Full of Song," by Florence and the Machine
- "Workin' in Corners," by Nanci Griffith
- "I Was Meant for the Stage," by The Decemberists
- "I Know," by Fiona Apple
- "I Have Loved You Wrong," by The Swell Season
- "Manhattan," by Blossom Dearie
- "All My Friends," by LCD Soundsystem

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- *No nukes in this outer space*
- *The infinite intelligence of birds*
- *A map of movies*

Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of "Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard."
Brian Seibert has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2002. He is the author of "What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing," which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the New York Times and the New York Review of Books. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.



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

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

Book Currents

Getting in Marc Maron's Head

The podcast host recommends three recent favorites—about the gentrification of punk, what makes a great actor, and the corrosive influence of social-media platforms.

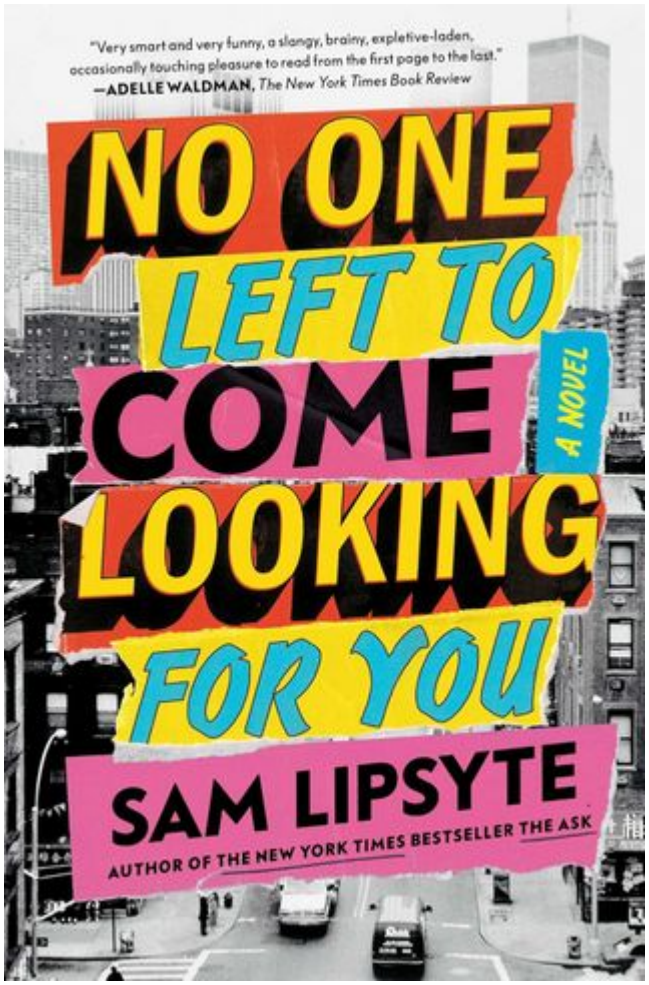
July 30, 2025

You're reading Book Currents, a weekly column in which notable figures share what they're reading. ***Sign up for the Goings On newsletter*** *to receive their selections, and other cultural recommendations, in your inbox.*

In its nearly sixteen years on the air, "WTF with Marc Maron" has recorded more than fifteen hundred episodes, with guests ranging from RuPaul to Robin Williams to Barack Obama. In 2015, Maron interviewed the Saturday Night Live creator Lorne Michaels, who had long ago turned Maron down for a job. As Sarah Larson noted, what might have seemed a loss was really a gain, allowing Maron to arrive at "the right thing at the right time"—that is, becoming "an unhinged garage-podcast messiah." This fall, "WTF" will end its run, after which Maron plans to spend more time acting and doing standup. (His new special, "Panicked," arrives on HBO this week.) Not long ago, he joined us to recommend a few books about particular interests of his that he has recently enjoyed. "I wouldn't say I'm an avid reader, and when I read, I mean business," he said. "If I'm going to read a book, it better do its job." His remarks have been edited and condensed.

No One Left to Come Looking for You

by Sam Lipsyte



Amazon | **Bookshop**

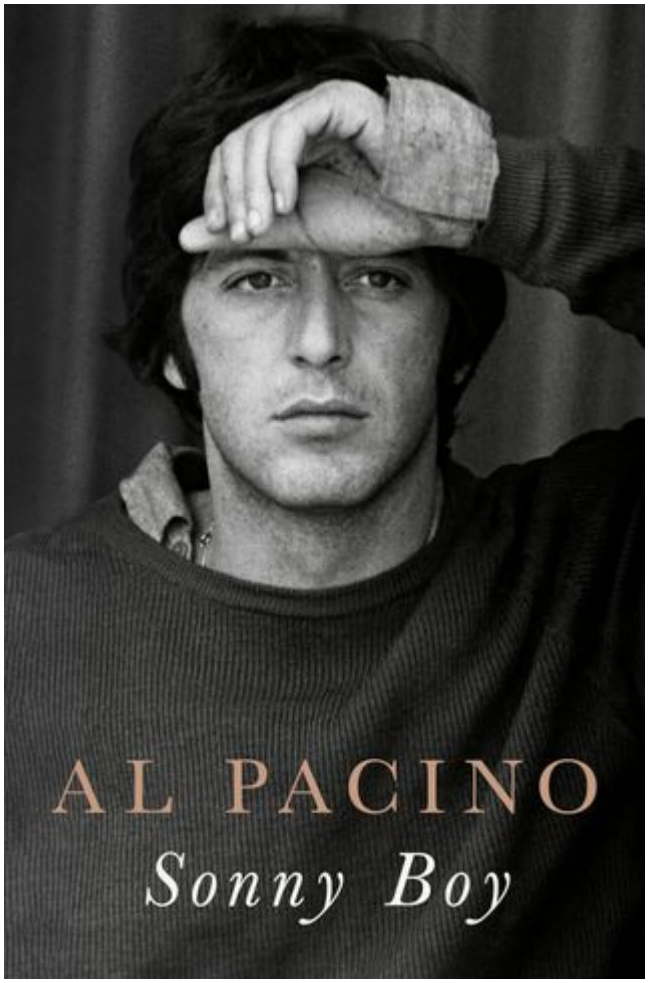
This novel is about young people who are living through a moment of transition, when both the Lower East Side and the music associated with it are becoming gentrified. These are people who think “sellout” means something, and that some stuff is really garbage because of its mass appeal.

The plot is a pulpy detective story that revolves around this kid named Jack Shit, who’s in a noise-rock punk outfit, and who has lost his bass and his drug-addicted lead singer. He needs to find them because they have a gig in a few days. He’s singularly focussed on that, but in the course of his search Jack learns that there are bigger forces at hand—that it’s not all about him, and that not only is music slipping away from what he believes it should be, but that New York City is also about to be turned inside out by real-estate developers.

I have to be transparent—Sam is one of my best friends. But I have read him forever, and I think he's one of the great humorists of our time. The book has a beautiful ending that takes place in an ice rink, where Jack has to go up against a hired goon who is also a great skater. I think the requirement of a story of any kind is that your lead character should probably change. At the end of this, everything around Jack has changed, but he remains, and it's kind of touching.

Sonny Boy

by Al Pacino



Amazon | **Bookshop**

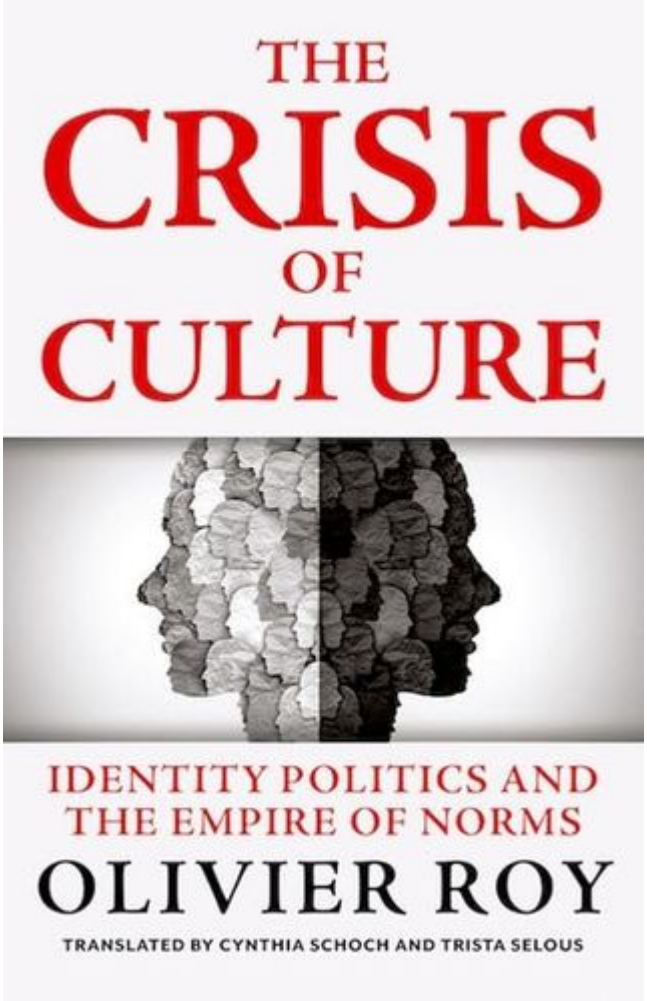
Reading Pacino's whole story was fascinating. It shows you how much he was really invested in acting from the start because of the art. You read

about his influences, his beginnings as part of this kind of fringe, radical theater company—where he and Martin Sheen would be in the back sweeping up—and about the fact that what compelled him was the pursuit of truth. I know people talk about “truth” in acting all the time, but acting can be a lot of things. You can just get away with it. A lot of actors are just hustlers, they’re conmen riding on natural gifts. But he was in it, all in.

Another thing I came away with is that, with a public person like this, you judge them by their performances. Al Pacino’s always got these roles where he has a lot of swagger, but it turns out that he’s pretty shy. I didn’t know that he is this vulnerable, sensitive, neurotic artist. And he’s very honest about having to do roles for money, because he was such a nutty guy that he just couldn’t manage money at all. It was just kind of amazing to me to know that guy, the real Al Pacino, and to learn a bit about his process.

The Crisis of Culture

by Olivier Roy



Amazon | **Bookshop**

Yeah, this one, geez. It's not an easy read. I've always been a guy who wants to take on these books—whatever trend cultural criticism is leaning toward, I try to crack it. I'm not that intellectual, I do not have the foundations to really wrap my brain around some of the language of this stuff, but I like to look toward books like these to feed my own perception of what I see going on.

The biggest thing I took is Roy's idea that society is breaking apart and that we are losing a shared cultural understanding—that, especially as we moved into a world ruled more by social media, we lost the ability to have a civic body. He has some really interesting stuff to say about how neoliberalism flows into the structure of digital platforms, and how that has all kinds of questionable effects, like making what people stand for meaningless in a certain way.

The book really made me think about the effects of creativity being made available, for many people, only through social-media platforms, which are corporate entities designed and built to capture eyeballs and make money and advertise—to dump things into people's brains. It's especially interesting to me in terms of the comedy industry. You know, I have this idea that as a comic you have freedom of speech, freedom of voice. But if your career is tethered to a one-minute clip, and to algorithms dictating what should and shouldn't be put in front of people—an algorithm that is also chipping away at people's attention spans—what happens then? If you're operating in that world, which is not the real world, then maybe you don't have any real freedom.

The Food Scene

Three Plays on the Pancake

A masa-based version at Hellbender, a riff on soufflé at Pitt's, and a modern-classic stack at S&P Lunch.

By Helen Rosner

August 3, 2025

At Hellbender, in Queens, heirloom-masa pancakes are made in individual cast-iron pans, which create a crispy exterior and a soft, almost meltingly creamy interior.Photographs by Janice Chung for The New Yorker

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

Helen, Help Me!

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

God help anyone trying to wax poetic about a pancake. A golden circle? A saintly halo? A shining sun? No metaphor is needed to capture its simplicity: flour, egg, a bit of sugar, the gentle tangy exhale of leavening. A pancake is the anti-Cronut, the opposite of a stunty gimmick: a flat meditation on the beauty of the simple and the unremarkable, stacked to modest height. And, like so many simple foods, despite its fundamental humility, the pancake has long been a kingmaker: a killer stack can put a restaurant on the map, secure its legacy, grant it longevity. Today, lines snake around the block for Golden Diner's fluffy stack; before that, the cult-object pancake was a thin, almost crêpe-like version at Chez Ma Tante,

in Greenpoint, its frizzled edges crisped in oceans of clarified butter. There's a pancake for every culinary era of the city: Clinton St. Baking Company owned the genre in the early two-thousands, with its Lower East Side earnestness; Bubby's, a retro-throwback diner in Tribeca, ruled the pancake scene at the turn of the millennium. Three relatively new takes on the pancake have captured my attention recently, as modern classics of the brunch canon very much worth seeking out.

Heirloom-Masa Pancakes at Hellbender

There are exquisite golden pancakes, and then there are the pancakes that the chef Yara Herrera serves at her spectacularly appealing restaurant on a sunny corner of Ridgewood: thick, puffy, light as a whisper—and yellow as a marigold, thanks to a base of fresh *masa*, a dough made from ground nixtamalized corn, which brings a nutty, sunshiny dimension to the traditional pancake flavor profile. The result is distantly reminiscent of an arepa, in its texture, and of cornbread, in its sweetness. Like the version made famous at Golden Diner (which Herrera has credited as an inspiration), these are true, literal *pan*cakes: made not on a griddle but in individual cast-iron pans, which define the pancake's shape, constraining its boundaries and creating a distinct crispiness to the outsides that plays in beautiful counterpoint to the soft, almost meltingly creamy insides. A serving of two pancakes arrives under a brutalist slab of butter so substantial that I thought, at first, it was a thick slice of cheese.

Pancakes at S&P Lunch

The brief at S&P Lunch, a dinette-style restaurant in the Flatiron district that's been open for three years but feels like it's been open about a hundred, is luncheonette nostalgia, burnished to an exquisite shine. An egg-salad sandwich, a plate of pickles, a bowl of matzo-ball soup, black coffee in a smallish mug: the restaurant trades not in innovation or excitement but in a throwback New York familiarity, the dining-room equivalent of a subway token. (It occupies the former home of the venerable Eisenberg's Sandwich Shop, and the grumpy-old-man spirit of the place remains virtually unchanged.) The pancakes are one of the menu's sleeper hits: tender, tangy, with lacy faces and pale, bubbly edges, a circle of salty butter punctuating the top of the stack of three like a bull's-eye. I suspect a fair

degree of their magic comes from being cooked on the same short-order flattop as nearly everything else on the extensive menu, including uncountable burgers and cheesy omelettes. This gives the pancakes a subtle depth, something like a griddle version of *wok hei*. There's so much flavor in the pancake itself that you hardly even need syrup.

Pancake Soufflé at Pitt's

It's arguable that this dish, the flagship dessert at chef Jeremy Salamon's proudly kitschy Red Hook restaurant, isn't actually a pancake: no pan, no cake. But it evokes pancakehood in an extraordinary way, by exploiting a soufflé's essential egginess. Generally, in a soufflé, the notes are masked by punchier components, such as boozy chocolate or sharp cheese. Here, as in a proper pancake, the round, custardy flavor of egg is a keypiece of the over-all story, along with white-sugar sweetness and an edge of buttery-toasty flour. Upon arrival at the table, a server dramatically slashes into the top of the quivering soufflé and pours maple syrup into the crevasse, letting it seep into all the airy puffs and bubbles of the tender interior. It's the best kind of clever hybrid—one that doesn't get bogged down in its own cleverness, and which playfully illuminates the fundamental joys of both pancakes and soufflés. Pitt's is open for dinner only, so this is, by necessity, more of an evening pancake; pair it with the restaurant's take on an espresso Martini, punched up with notes of coconut and blood orange, for a complete brunch-after-dark moment. ♦

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

The Talk of the Town

- **Can Democrats Fight Back Against Trump's Redistricting Scheme?**
  By Jonathan Blitzer | Fleeing lawmakers in Texas are unlikely to stop Republicans from redrawing the state's congressional maps, but their effort has offered a rallying cry—and a reminder of the Democratic Party's weaknesses.
- **King Charles's Crony Catches the Salmon of the Year**
  By Zach Helfand | A Park Avenue finance guy goes fishing with a royal nanny and hooks a fifty-two-pounder.
- **A Visit from the V.R. Squad**
  By Nick Paumgarten | Jon Griffith, a filmmaker on his third commission from Meta, has been strapping strangers into V.R. headsets in their living rooms and taking them up, up, and away.
- **Ben Folds's Latest Thing**
  By Emily Nussbaum | After quitting his gig with the Kennedy Center in protest, the Gen X indie rocker is turning his talents toward MAGA trolls and Charlie Brown.
- **Ripping Cards with Emma Roberts**
  By Parker Henry | The scream queen is a card-collecting obsessive, and her new favorite haunt is Tom Brady's CardVault, in East Hampton.

Comment

Can Democrats Fight Back Against Trump’s Redistricting Scheme?

Fleeing lawmakers in Texas are unlikely to stop Republicans from redrawing the state’s congressional maps, but their effort has offered a rallying cry—and a reminder of the Democratic Party’s weaknesses.

By Jonathan Blitzer

August 10, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

The Texas legislature meets every two years for a hundred and forty days, but there’s an old joke that the state’s governors, who never object to less legislative deliberation, would prefer that it meet for two days every hundred and forty years. Early last month, Greg Abbott, arguably the most powerful governor in Texas history, called a special session of the legislature and added an agenda item at the behest of the only Republican who’s more dominant in the state than he is. Donald Trump wanted his party to gain five seats in the U.S. House of Representatives in next year’s

midterm elections, and he had a plan: Texas legislators should redraw the state's congressional maps. "We have a really good governor, and I won Texas," Trump said. "We are entitled."

Trump and congressional Democrats are alike in one conspicuous respect: the public roundly disapproves of them both. But the party of a sitting President usually suffers losses in the midterms, and Democrats need to flip just three seats to retake a majority in the House. Divided government, painful to any President, would be especially treacherous for Trump, who, in his second term, has routinely flouted judges' orders and the Constitution's checks on using the office of the President for personal enrichment. "Democrats would vote to impeach him on their first day," Mike Johnson, the House Speaker, recently predicted.

Redistricting generally happens once a decade. Only four years have passed since Texas Republicans last completed the process, and it's difficult to imagine how they could possibly do more to stack elections in their favor. Twenty-five Republicans from the state currently serve in the U.S. House, compared with twelve Democrats. Their overwhelming advantage—itself the result of years of gerrymandering—led many Republicans to privately question the President's demands. At an emergency meeting in the U.S. Capitol, in June, members of Texas's Republican delegation in Congress expressed concern that their own districts might become less safe as a result of another gerrymander. According to the *Texas Tribune*, Abbott had told them that he was reluctant to add redistricting to the legislative agenda in Austin. Then Trump picked up the phone.

On July 7th, the Department of Justice sent a letter to Texas legislators informing them that four of the districts that were redrawn in 2021, all of which were now represented by Democrats, needed to be overhauled for legal reasons. Experts called the claim baseless, but it gave Abbott a pretext for adding the issue to the special session, which he did two days later. A Republican from Corpus Christi was ready with a new congressional map. Three districts in Houston, Dallas, and Austin would lose Democratic strongholds, diluting the Party's base, and two districts in South Texas would become more conservative. Every Republican incumbent in the state,

meanwhile, would be in a district that Trump carried by at least sixty per cent of the vote in 2024.

Democrats have been in the minority in Texas for two decades; their tools of resistance are limited. On August 3rd, some fifty of them met in secret and left the state on a chartered plane. A hundred legislators are necessary for a quorum. If Democrats couldn't change the outcome of a vote, they could at least prevent it from taking place. They've made such moves before—in response to a redistricting fight, in 2003, and a voting-rights bill, in 2021—but this time the national stakes of the Republican power grab were particularly stark. Earlier this summer, when White House officials began speaking with Abbott about padding Republican margins in the House, the idea was that Texas would be the first state in which to pursue the strategy, but not the last. One aide told the *Times* that the goal was "maximum warfare, everywhere, all the time."

Historically, when Democrats have absconded, Republicans have issued state arrest warrants—a symbolic gesture, since the lawmakers had already left Texas—and imposed fines to compel them to return. Abbott has threatened to remove the Democrats from office and to investigate them for fraud. Ken Paxton, the state's attorney general, has already launched an investigation of the former House member Beto O'Rourke, whose grassroots political operation is reportedly helping to pay the Democrats' expenses. Paxton is currently running in a tight Republican primary for a U.S. Senate seat against John Cornyn, the state's senior senator. Last Tuesday, Cornyn escalated his party's response by announcing that he'd asked the F.B.I. to "locate and investigate" the Democrats who'd fled the state. The F.B.I. agreed, though no one could say which legal authority the Bureau might legitimately invoke to justify its involvement. As Justin Levitt, a redistricting expert at Loyola Law School, put it, " 'Because the President said so' is not a statute."

The spectre of a redistricting war is now spreading across the country, with Democratic governors in California and New York vowing to retaliate by redrawing their own states' maps. So far during Trump's second term, the Democratic Party's governing logic, largely set by its congressional leadership in Washington, has appeared to be that a House majority in 2027

is its to lose. Thanks to Trump and Abbott, that complacency might finally be laid to rest. Eric Holder, the former U.S. Attorney General, who's spent years opposing partisan gerrymandering, made a telling statement to the *Times*. "It's like the Germans have invaded France," he said. "When confronted with this authoritarian, anti-democracy effort, we have to take up arms."

Holder was referring to Democratic states that might be willing to offset lost seats in Texas with gains elsewhere, something Republicans, in turn, are threatening to do in Ohio, Missouri, South Carolina, and Florida. In a battle like this, it's far from clear what kind of firepower the Democratic Party has. In California, voters would have to support a ballot measure to change state redistricting rules. In New York and New Jersey, the state constitution would need to be changed. Maryland has only a single seat to flip, and Illinois, where congressional maps already heavily favor Democrats, is unlikely to yield many more. The Democratic holdouts in Texas may be staging a doomed effort, but it has served as a rallying cry for a party that, too often, seems overly risk-averse. The current special session in Texas ends on August 19th. "Democrats act like they're not going to come back," Abbott said. "I'm going to call special session after special session." ♦

Jonathan Blitzer is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His first book, "Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here," was published in January, 2024.

Leisure Dept.

King Charles’s Crony Catches the Salmon of the Year

A Park Avenue finance guy goes fishing with a royal nanny and hooks a fifty-two-pounder.

By Zach Helfand

August 11, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

Unless you’ve been living under a rock submerged in Norway’s Alta River and have gills, you probably missed the news announced in a press-release-style note last month. “Largest Atlantic Salmon Landed in 2025,” the

headline read. Underneath, the note elaborated that “250 miles inside of the Arctic Circle at around two o’clock in the morning with a still tall midnight sun overhead, Edward L. Shugrue III feels a slight touch at the end of his fly-line.” The toucher: a fifty-two-pound Atlantic salmon, one of the largest ever caught. The touchee: Shugrue, a fifty-nine-year-old mutual-fund guy.

The correspondent? “I wrote it,” Shugrue said recently, in the living room of his apartment on Park Avenue. “It took, like, a week to process, but I was flying home and I thought, Holy Christ, this is a real fucking fish.” You catch the big fish so you can talk about catching the big fish. Shugrue, who had mostly white hair and a salmon-colored shirt (unintentional), was telling the tale before a plate of smoked striper from his fishmonger in Amagansett. “I thought about serving salmon because we’re talking about salmon, but I really can’t do it,” he said.

To fish the Alta, which has some of the biggest salmon in the world, you need a “rod.” Shugrue’s rod grants him angling rights for a section of river for six days every year. Fewer than a hundred rods exist. “They’re handed down, father to son,” Shugrue said. “I’ve heard stories—wealthy, keen anglers—letting it be known, ‘Hey, I’d pay a million bucks for a rod.’ Actual numbers today, it’s like buying into a golf club.” Shugrue bought his, in 2019, from an heirless angler friend. (There’s also a public lottery.)

The Alta was hot this year. The week before Shugrue arrived, a forty-pounder was caught by a Russian oligarch. “He’s what I would call a good oligarch,” Shugrue said. “Big salmon conservationist.” Shugrue had invited his friend Tiggy Pettifer. She was the assistant to Prince Charles and a companion to William and Harry. Shugrue felt the slight touch on the first day. He got a piece of string to demonstrate. “You’re the angler, and I’m the fish,” he said. He touched the string slightly. Afterward, the fish took off. Two boatmen, rowing a wooden canoe, chased it a mile downstream. Thirty minutes later, Shugrue had his fish.

Pettifer took photos of Shugrue and the two boatmen. “I love Tiggy to death, but most people make a small fish look big,” Shugrue said. “She made a big fish look small. But, if you look at my hand, you see the girth is absurd. It’s a twenty-nine-inch girth. What’s Kate Moss? Twenty?” They let the fish go.

Shugrue and Pettifer met several years ago, at a dinner for the Atlantic Salmon Trust, a conservation group. “Tiggy was my tablemate,” Shugrue said. “I had a very good seat. It was me, Tiggy, Prince Charles, George Percy, who will be the next Duke of Northumberland, and to his left was King Harald of Norway.” He learned that he and Harald used the same boatmen. “There was no question at the time, King Harald was the king at the table. Very regal bearing. Now, mind you, I think he has an easier job. If you had to be king, I’d take King of Norway. Charles—this is the thing I couldn’t get out of my head—he’s really got sportsmen’s hands. He is not a dandy. Calloused, rough hands. He has a real love of salmon.”

Shugrue wrote about his encounters with royalty and other big fish in a memoir. It’s twelve chapters, structured by month: St. Barts in January, European sailing regattas in September, bird shooting in November. July is for salmon, his favorite. There are some sociological observations. “The vast amount of douchebags that you see along the journey,” Shugrue said. “You know, guys who speak with lockjaw and make you feel like an asshole.” He provides advice on avoiding douchbaggery. “A little PJ (Private Jet) etiquette,” he writes. “Bring a few great snacks (caviar, Champagne, pre-poured bloodies, etc.) and a nice gift like an Hermès cashmere blanket for when it gets chilly on board.” The book was a *COVID* project, unpublished. “My wife said, ‘Darling, I love you, and I think you are a decent writer, but I really don’t want to read seventeen pages about salmon.’ ”

The salmon is a pretty great fish. It lives in saltwater and in fresh. It jumps twelve-foot dams. It travels thousands of miles across the ocean to find its ancestral river and spawns within feet of where it hatched. “Sadly, everybody wants to kill the salmon,” Shugrue said. “It has too many enemies.” Poachers, farmed-fish effluent (“You’re, like, ‘How do fish shit this much?’ ”), global warming, the demand of the seafood-eating public. “And then, of course, sharks and other things want to eat them, too,” Shugrue said. Who will be the salmon’s friend? “For right or wrong, wild-salmon fishing is seen as a pretty one-per-cent, élitist kind of thing,” Shugrue said. “It’s, like, ‘I’m saving all these wild salmon so rich guys can catch them?’ ” ♦

Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

Sneak Preview

A Visit from the V.R. Squad

Jon Griffith, a filmmaker on his third commission from Meta, has been strapping strangers into V.R. headsets in their living rooms and taking them up, up, and away.

By Nick Paumgarten

August 11, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

A knock on the door: two men from afar, bearing marvels. The visitors, both fit, neither tall, were Jon Griffith, a climber, photographer, and filmmaker who lives in Chamonix, in the French Alps, and his foster son, Danylo Terekhovskyi, a refugee from the Donbas, in Ukraine. They kicked

off their shoes, declined an offer of refreshments, and instead asked that the man who had answered the door find a swivel chair and position it with the clearance to spin fully around. (Griffith, forty-two, did the talking.) The apartment dweller complied and sat. Griffith produced a Meta Quest 3 virtual-reality headset and a pair of earphones, and, after a moment, the dweller was no longer in his dwelling but soaring over the Swiss Alps, near the Monte Rosa massif, in the company of a couple of paragliders with Austrian-ish accents. He spun around slowly and saw mountains in all directions, in three dimensions: Matterhorn, Zinalrothorn, Weisshorn, Bishorn, Alphubel, Rimpfischhorn, Dufourspitze, Lyskamm, Breithorn.

This was “Touching the Sky,” Griffith’s latest film project, and his third V.R. feature for Meta. His previous two, on older tech, showcased Mt. Everest and the free soloist Alex Honnold. This film follows (literally) two wingsuit daredevils and a pair of paraglider pilots as they perform extremely picturesque and perilous flights in the Alps, the Dolomites, and the Pakistani Himalayas. The sensation of immersion is overpowering, but not in any way nauseating. Here is the world as it is—and what a world it be, amid these inhospitable peaks otherwise attainable only with enormous effort and know-how, at great risk and cost. The experience made the Sphere, in Las Vegas, feel like Shankweiler’s Drive-In.

The dweller, now in Italy, standing with the wingsuiters on the edge of a precipice, leaped with them into a void and felt a rush of air. Virtual wind? He removed the earphones. “Did you just point a fan at me?” he asked.

“No,” Griffith said from the couch. “Put the earphones back on.” The dweller felt vulnerable, with his eyes and ears elsewhere and strangers close at hand. In the headset, he plunged down the mountainside, into a turreted canyon, but imagined the house guests rifling through his things, pocketing valuables, or standing over him with an axe. A good scheme it would be, to visit people’s homes, blindfold them with virtual-reality excursions, and clean them out.

“You keep saying I’m bossy, but I don’t see you doing anything I tell you.”
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

The adventure continued, in the rare, thin air of the Karakoram, in Pakistan. Two paragliders bobbed from updraft to updraft in an effort to fly up the Baltoro Glacier to K2. Ominous clouds prompted a diversion to the Trango Towers, a rampart of granite spires esteemed by big-wall climbers. The paragliders sailed right up to the stone. The dweller, like the pilots in the film, made dopey exclamations of awe.

When it was over, he removed the headset. Griffith and his son were side by side on the couch, grinning. “It’s the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done,” Griffith said. The bar was high; as a climber, he’d made numerous first ascents in these mountains. Griffith, who’d moved to Chamonix from England when he was twenty-two, reckoned that fatherhood (he and his wife have two young children of their own) had curbed his appetite for risk, and yet the new film disproved this. The credit sequence features a blooper reel of near-calamities. Along with his team, Griffith had designed and built the cameras and gimbals, including the stalk he dangled as he flew in tandem with another paraglider, which struggled, under the weight of two men and all the gear, to get aloft. The year he’d shot in Pakistan, he recalled, four paragliders, out of a total of a mere two dozen, had fallen out of the sky. “I don’t like flying,” Griffith said.

He does seem to like a challenge. After Russia invaded Ukraine, a few years ago, Griffith arranged for eighty-five refugees to come from the Polish border to Chamonix. He and his wife helped put them up and find them work. “We spent a lot of money,” he said. “I wouldn’t do it again.”

Terekhovskyi and his mother were among them. After less than a year, the mother decided to return to the Donbas. The boy, then seventeen, didn't want to go back. His life there had been violent and hard, even before the Russians rolled in. So Griffith took him in.

This was Terekhovskyi's first trip to the East Coast. What did he think of New York? "*Bordel*," he said, in French. Chaos. He wanted to go shopping and get a forearm tattoo in Chinatown. They packed up the V.R. kit, put on their shoes, and left the apartment. That night, Griffith took Terekhovskyi to see "The Lion King." Terekhovskyi's verdict: "*Magnifique!*" Immersion, of another kind. ♦

Nick Paumgarten, a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2000.

The Musical Life

Ben Folds’s Latest Thing

After quitting his gig with the Kennedy Center in protest, the Gen X indie rocker is turning his talents toward *MAGA* trolls and Charlie Brown.

By Emily Nussbaum

August 11, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

At the Bergen Performing Arts Center, in Englewood, New Jersey, the singer-songwriter Ben Folds sat at a piano and picked out the opening bars of “Kristine from the 7th Grade,” a delicate, mordantly funny ballad about a former classmate turned *MAGA* troll. (“The misspellings, they must be on purpose / We went to a good school, Kristine.”) Then he swiftly ran his

fingers down every key, pointer over thumb, hard, testing for trouble. “Two keys are sticking,” he announced.

Offstage, a sound engineer yelled to him, wondering if the piano sounded “bright”—too brassy for the sound system.

“Icepick!” Folds, a slight figure in bookworm glasses and with haystack hair, called back.

It was musician code: he suspected that a technician had applied lacquer to the instrument’s felt hammers, producing a shrill sonic overkill. Folds, a virtuosic keyboardist who broke out as an indie-rock singer in the nineteen-nineties, first in the band Ben Folds Five, then as a solo artist—and who, during a mischievous Andy Kaufman-influenced rise to fame, had a phase of tossing stools at pianos—was unconcerned. The sound was “pretty awful, but I pretend it’s a clavinet”—a sturdy nineteen-seventies funk keyboard that could take some abuse—“and get on with it,” he said later.

Just before Folds stepped onstage for his show, his tour manager held up his phone to show him the news: the U.S. had bombed Iran. The set that followed was cathartic and percussive, full of ballads that split like piñatas into cascading arpeggios, often concluding with a crashed elbow or hammered fist. The Gen X audience knew every word; whenever Folds side-eyed his congregants, they chimed in with the next line.

Afterward, in the dressing room, Folds sipped a ginger ale. He wore a beige T-shirt that read “24th Annual Derby Cholla Bay Sportsmen’s Club 1979,” with a cartoon of a pelican in a sombrero. Nearby, on a folding chair, sat Lindsey Kraft, a TV actress who was Folds’s opening act and is also his girlfriend; he’d been helping her create a one-woman confessional musical called “We’ve Been Here Before.”

“We’ve known each other for six years and gradually realized we were a couple,” Folds explained, dryly, with a trace of his native North Carolina in his voice. “Which made our significant others mad as hell.”

The revelation wasn’t a surprise; Folds, who has been divorced five times, has long specialized in bleak, candid autopsies of failed love. (Before

performing his song “Fragile,” he told the crowd, “There will be quite a few people here tonight who are in an abusive relationship—and you’ve come together to the show. In which case, this song is for both of you.”) In middle age, he’s diversified, writing a memoir, mentoring a-cappella groups on NBC’s “The Sing-Off,” and scoring Peanuts specials on Apple TV+. Collaboration wasn’t always easy, though; Folds had struggled to write an upbeat final anthem about Charlie Brown saving his summer camp. “I tried a disco version. They turned that down,” he said, with a shrug.

He was most proud of his eight years, starting in 2017, as the Kennedy Center’s first artistic adviser to the National Symphony Orchestra, bringing in pop artists and introducing new audiences to classical music. When Donald Trump took over, he quit. “Not for me,” Folds wrote on Instagram, later decrying the President’s “authoritarian instinct.” Since then, he’d beefed up security.

He marvelled at how dark the landscape had turned under a reality-TV-judge President. Folds’s own time in the reality mines was a mixed bag, although he was glad he’d been able to sneak music theory on to “The Sing-Off.” “Everyone was, like, ‘Bring it!’ or ‘You’re pitchy,’ ” he said. When the network pressured him to eliminate certain contestants, the producer Mark Burnett became his unlikely hero: “He came to my trailer and said, ‘You won’t have to hear a single word from NBC ever again.’ And then he started talking about the Bible.”

Kraft loves reality shows, but they aren’t Folds’s jam. “ ‘Wings of Voice’ was a good one,” he joked, about Nathan Fielder’s fake competition on his series “The Rehearsal.”

Folds was looking forward to doing an upcoming live stream from Washington, D.C., critiquing Trump’s crackdown and releasing a new orchestral concert album recorded at the Kennedy Center. Heading to his tour bus, he expressed frustration with pop stars who are too detached to take a stand. “They’re just, like—babies,” he said. “Dead behind the eyes, you know?” Lately, he’d been dwelling on an old favorite, Joni Mitchell’s “Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter,” the jazz experiment that pushed her beyond industry acceptability. “It’s been in my head all month now,” he

said. “Not just one song—the whole album. It’s so unusual, her piano playing, all those *nines*.” ♦

Emily Nussbaum, a staff writer, won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2016. She is the author of “I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way Through The TV Revolution” and “Cue The Sun!: The Invention of Reality TV.”

Rarities

Ripping Cards with Emma Roberts

The scream queen is a card-collecting obsessive, and her new favorite haunt is Tom Brady’s CardVault, in East Hampton.

By Parker Henry

August 11, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

Emma Roberts loves the chase. “I’m a treasure hunter at heart,” Roberts said the other day, eying a box of rare baseball cards inside a glass case. “I collect dolls and vintage books. I’m always on the hunt for first editions.” The actress’s latest fixation is sports cards. Until recently, she hadn’t been able to indulge her obsession while at her house in Sag Harbor. “The closest

card store used to be in, like, New York City," she said. "Which sucked, because, when my fiancé and I come out to the Hamptons, we're always wanting to rip cards, and there's been nowhere to do it."

In May, a store called CardVault by Tom Brady opened next to the Brunello Cucinelli boutique in East Hampton. (The local paper described Brady's appearance at the grand opening as "like the Second Coming.") Roberts is a regular.

"Oh, hey, Emma," Blaise Malabre, a twenty-three-year-old CardVault employee with a "*MOM*" tattoo, said. "What are you looking for today?"

Roberts, who had on a black minidress and gold Celine flats, rattled off a list: "Topps Marvel Chrome and a Garbage Pail Kids Blaster. You can pick which one. And—" she pointed to a case of cards with old-timey graphics —"a Topps Allen & Ginter Hobby Box, please."

Another clerk disappeared into the back and emerged with a case of Roberts's requested box, from 2017:"Take your pick."

"Picking" the box is an essential part of a card nut's ritual. Collectors can either buy individual cards—and know just what they're getting—or gamble on sealed packs and boxes. ("Way more fun," Roberts said.) Some are duds, and some contain rare inserts, autographs, or "chase" cards.

Roberts ran her hand over the sealed boxes. Her fiancé, Cody John, an actor, hovered. "I've been letting her pick," he said. "Emma's got a hot hand right now."

"Cody's ice," Roberts said, laughing.

"This is the one," she said, touching a box. "I can feel it." Malabre rang her up: five hundred and seventy dollars.

Next, the couple brought their new purchases to a back room with gray leather sofas, lined with autographed Tom Brady photos, a private setting for shoppers to "rip" their cards. They tore into their Allen & Ginter.

“What we’re looking for is a hot box,” Roberts explained. That means one in which all the cards are “foils,” premium cards with colorful reflective surfaces—the baseball equivalent of Willy Wonka’s golden ticket. Roberts had a special card she was hoping to find: Aaron Judge as a rookie.

She ripped opened the first box. Gold foil. Score. “It’s a hot box, people!” she hollered, skipping around the room. “My hands are sweating. I’m gonna cry. What are the chances?” About eight per cent. They went on ripping. “You guys! This can’t be real. It’s Aaron Judge!”

John Googled how much the card is worth: five hundred dollars.“We’ll just about break even!” he said.

They kept going. Some cards feature nonathletes (William Shatner or Sarah Michelle Gellar) and have no market value, but Roberts doesn’t mind. (“They’re silly, fun, and make great bookmarks.”)

John pulled a Nick Jonas card:“That’s some Big Nick Energy right there.”

Roberts pulled a Jon Lester, then of the Chicago Cubs, which had a sliver of a sports jersey embedded in it. “It’s more valuable if it’s been worn,” she said. “Cody, check.” It hadn’t.

“One time, we got part of Ronald Acuña, Jr.,’s cleat,” she said, wistfully.“It still had mud in it from a game.” She was holding out for a holy grail. “We’re chasing Tom,” she said. She meant a specific Tom Brady fantasy baseball card, released in 2023, showing Brady having been drafted by the Montreal Expos in 1995. It’s inscribed with a note from him: “If baseball doesn’t work out, there’s always football.” A collector has placed a half-million-dollar bounty on the card, but it has yet to surface. So far, Roberts and John have spent ten thousand dollars looking for it. (Each box that may contain one goes for upward of a thousand dollars.)

At their Sag Harbor house, the couple put choice cards on rotation, on a stand. “We have our coffee in the mornings and look at them,” Roberts said. The rest are stored in a vintage Louis Vuitton trunk in the attic.

Some people think ripping cards is just gambling, but Roberts disagrees. “How many times a day are we genuinely surprised anymore?” she asked. “The phone rings, and we know exactly who’s calling. We’re all algorithmed within an inch of our lives. But chasing cards feels genuinely random. And that just feels so rare.”

What happens when the Tom card is finally found? Will the chase end?

“No way,” Roberts said. “We’ll just find the next hunt.” ♦

Parker Henry, a former member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff, is a graduate student in the philosophy department at Stanford.

Reporting & Essays

- **How an Ultra-Rare Disease Accelerates Aging**
  By Dhruv Khullar | Teen-agers with progeria have effectively aged eight or nine decades. A cure could help change millions of lives—and shed light on why we grow old.
- **Is Mac DeMarco the Last Indie Rock Star?**
  By Amanda Petrusich | The musician’s overwhelming popularity can overshadow his ethos of self-reliance. On his new album, “Guitar,” he played every instrument and is releasing it on his own label.
- **How Much Is Trump Profiting Off the Presidency?**
  By David D. Kirkpatrick | An honest accounting of our Executive-in-Chief’s runaway self-enrichment.

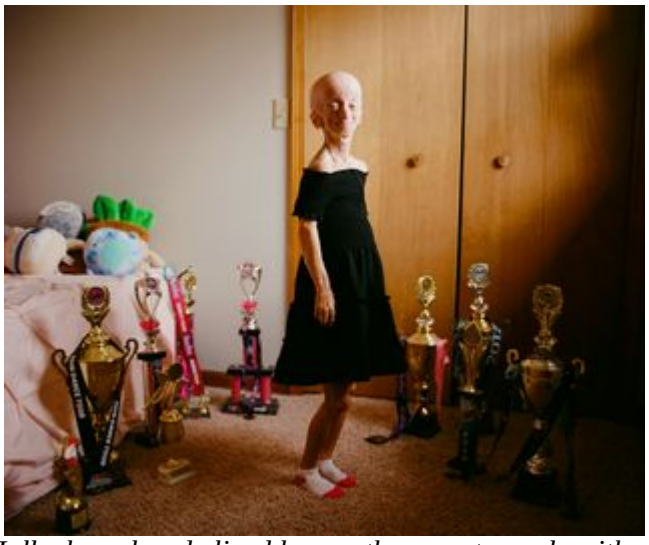
Annals of Medicine

How an Ultra-Rare Disease Accelerates Aging

Teen-agers with progeria have effectively aged eight or nine decades. A cure could help change millions of lives—and shed light on why we grow old.

By Dhruv Khullar

August 11, 2025



At twenty-two, Kaylee Halko has already lived longer than most people with progeria.Photographs by Logan White for The New Yorker

In 1996, Leslie Gordon, a biologist and a pediatrics resident at a hospital in Rhode Island, gave birth to a son, Sam. For a few months, Sam seemed healthy. But Gordon and her husband, a pediatric emergency physician named Scott Berns, soon started to feel that something was wrong. Sam's skin looked tight, shiny, and veiny. He lost hair and was hardly putting on any weight. Doctors couldn't explain why. "It was driving me crazy," Gordon said. "They'd say, 'Oh, he's small, but you guys are small, too.' " One evening, a colleague of Berns's, Monica Kleinman, came over for dinner and looked across the table at Sam. "Something just clicked in my

mind," Kleinman told me. She'd seen features like Sam's in a textbook. A few days later, she told Berns that Sam might have a rare, fatal condition called progeria. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do," Kleinman said. A specialist in New York confirmed the diagnosis. "Within a week, it was clear that there was nothing out there," Gordon told me. "No research. No treatments. No hope."

Progeria, which derives from the Greek for "early old age," was first described in the late nineteenth century. It is a disease of rapid, brutal aging that is thought to afflict fewer than one in every four million babies. By the time children with progeria enter their teen-age years, their bodies have effectively aged eight or nine decades. They have a distinctive appearance: small, wizened, and bald, with wrinkled skin, rigid arteries, stiff joints, and weak bones. Many die of heart attacks before their fifteenth birthday. There are estimated to be about twenty people living with the condition in the U.S. and several hundred in the world.

After Sam's diagnosis, Gordon withdrew from her residency and began to study progeria full time. She and Berns started a nonprofit, the Progeria Research Foundation, and recruited her sister, Audrey, to serve as its executive director. Gordon organized a meeting of several dozen scientists from various fields: genetics, orthopedics, immunology. "I scoured the earth for anyone who knew anything that might theoretically be useful for progeria," she said. She also assembled an international registry of dozens of progeria patients; Sam became friends with many of them. Berns, for his part, spent a year in the federal government, working as a senior adviser to the Secretary of Transportation as part of a White House Fellowship. At a work event one evening, he met Francis Collins, then the director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, which was sequencing a complete human genome for the first time. Berns told Collins about the diagnosis, not knowing whether he would recognize the condition. In fact, Collins had once cared for a patient diagnosed as having progeria.

Collins invited the family to his home. When they visited, he tossed a Frisbee with Sam, who was now four, in the back yard. He told them that he'd try to identify the genetic culprit. "That really epitomizes who Francis is," Gordon told me. "Here he is, in charge of the entire Human Genome

Project, and at the same time he's looking for a gene for one kid." Collins soon tasked Maria Eriksson, a postdoc from Sweden who had recently joined his institute, to search for genes that might cause progeria. "Don't spend more than a year on this," he told her. "If it doesn't work out, we'll find something else for you to work on."

"Definitely not going to the bathroom!"
Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

Eriksson studied the DNA of progeria patients along with that of their parents, thinking that the condition must be a recessive trait—one that shows up in a child only when both parents have a particular genetic variation. Then, on a Saturday in 2002, about a year into her work, she called Collins. "I think I'm seeing something interesting," she told him. Children with progeria had a mutation that their parents didn't, she said. The condition didn't seem to be hereditary at all but, rather, to arise from a spontaneous mutation present at birth, a C replaced by a T on chromosome 1. The human genome contains billions of letters, enough to fill hundreds of books; the disease was apparently caused by the equivalent of a single typo.

Gordon and Collins held a press conference. "This discovery is likely to shed light on the normal process of aging," Collins announced. "It reverberates well beyond its application to progeria." In healthy cells, a protein called lamin A helps to shape and stabilize the nucleus. But the

mutation produced an abnormal, toxic version of the protein called progerin, which warped the nucleus. At first, when cells affected by progeria divide, “they don’t look so bad,” Collins told me. “But, after seven or eight passes, they look really, really bad. The nuclei are totally messed up.”

Meanwhile, Sam grew older. He developed heart disease at a young age, saw numerous doctors, and took a slew of medications. When he was a teen-ager, members of the Dave Matthews Band, which he loved, heard about his condition and invited him backstage. In high school, he played the snare drum in marching band; with its harness, the instrument weighed forty pounds, nearly as much as he did. (An engineer helped design a special apparatus so he could wear it.) He went to Disney World and, because his bones were so weak, cracked two ribs just sitting on a ride. He excelled in school and said that he wanted to be an inventor, “like Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs, combined.”

Sam became the subject of an HBO documentary called “Life According to Sam,” which was released in 2013. “I kind of deal with death a lot different than other people,” he says in the movie. “I asked my mom about one of my friends, Ory, and my mom said, ‘Oh, he passed away.’ I’m, like, ‘Oh, what about Stuart?’ She’s, like, ‘Well, he passed away.’ ‘What about Ronnie?’ ‘He died, and Mierko died.’ ” A few months before his own death, at seventeen, he gave a *TEDX* talk that has been viewed more than a hundred million times. His life was a happy one, he told the audience, with the authority of someone preparing to depart it. Focus on what you can control, he said. Surround yourself with good people. Keep moving forward. And never miss a party if you can help it.

Kaylee Halko was born in 2003, in a small town in Ohio. She, too, had progeria. But her experience was different from Sam’s in a crucial way: she was seven years younger. When Kaylee was four, the Progeria Research Foundation helped launch the first-ever clinical trial of a potential progeria drug, and she enrolled. Young patients took lonafarnib, which had originally been investigated as a cancer treatment. They gained weight, their hearing improved, and their arteries became more pliable. Lonafarnib interfered with a sort of chemical anchor that helps the lamin A protein target the

nucleus. The drug didn’t eliminate the abnormal protein, but it seemed to reduce the damage: children taking it ultimately lived two and a half years longer.

Kaylee’s parents, Tim and Marla, also had three healthy boys. They tried to insure that Kaylee had as normal an upbringing as possible, despite the obvious challenges that she would face. As a child, she experienced instances of vicious bullying about her appearance. To this day, strangers sometimes stare and point. Others direct conversation solely toward her parents. “They talk to them like I’m not even there,” Kaylee said. “They’ll look down and say, ‘Oh, how old is she?’ ”

A decade ago, Kaylee started posting short videos on Musical.ly, a social-media platform that eventually merged with TikTok. Her parents found out only after she became internet famous; she currently has half a million followers on TikTok and more than a hundred and fifty thousand on Instagram. I was surprised that, after receiving so much undesired attention, Kaylee would want to be so public online. In the comments, a small number of people sound much like those who bullied her when she was a child. But many are supportive to the point that they go after the haters on her behalf. “Kaylee’s condition has allowed me to see, to feel, the good nature of people,” Marla told me. “I don’t think I would have seen that side of humanity as clearly if it wasn’t for Kaylee.”

Some of Kaylee’s posts simply capture moments in her life: dancing in her living room, going to a concert, watching a sunset at the beach. Others try to give people a sense of what it’s like to live with progeria. In one video, viewed more than thirty million times, she snips a single hair from her otherwise bald head. In another, a sombre ballad plays while she has a subtitled conversation with her younger self.

Young Kaylee asks about her life expectancy: “So did we beat the odds?”

Older Kaylee smiles gently. “Yeah, we’re 21.”

Then young Kaylee poses a question. Older Kaylee rolls her eyes. “No,” she answers. “Our boobs did not grow.”

Recently, Kaylee filmed a video response to an insensitive comment that someone left on one of her TikToks: “for a second I thought that was my grandma’s hands.” A screen grab of the remark appears onscreen. For a moment, it looks as though Kaylee, who is wearing a baggy yellow sweatshirt, is preparing to scold or make fun of the commenter. Then it becomes clear that someone else’s hands are protruding from the sleeves, gesticulating madly. One of her college-age friends, hidden by the sweatshirt, is pretending that her hands are Kaylee’s.

Kaylee tries to do a bit, feigning shock that anyone would think she has “old-lady hands.” But her friend’s hands move so wildly that she keeps breaking character and giggling. By the end of the video, she is laughing so hard that her eyes are full of tears.

In “Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity,” the writer Andrew Solomon defines “vertical identities” as traits or norms that are passed from parents to children, and that therefore tend to be shared and celebrated: ethnicity, religion, language, customs. Horizontal identities, in contrast, are not shared. They may flow from spontaneous genetic mutations, personal experience, environmental factors, or sheer chance; they can include disease, disability, neurodivergence, and sexual orientation. “For people who must accept a fixed external reality, the only way forward is to adjust internal reality,” Solomon writes. It takes effort to transform such traits from sources of stigma and misunderstanding to objects of tolerance or pride. Often, it takes community—something that, in the case of progeria, had to be laboriously created. The Progeria Research Foundation is aware of only about a hundred and fifty people worldwide with the condition, and the population that has had it in all of human history probably numbers in the thousands. (Progeria is formally known as Hutchinson-Gilford progeria syndrome; there are other conditions that cause premature aging, but they present differently and arise from different genetic mutations.)

When Gordon created the foundation, she worked to build connections between progeria patients and their families. She now hosts Zoom calls that are attended by a quarter of known progeria patients, who in turn sometimes organize meetups around the world. Through the foundation, Kaylee

befriended three others; they called themselves the “P dawgs.” In a remarkable coincidence, one lived just a few miles away, so the group often convened in Ohio. “It was special because we could really relate,” Kaylee said. “The progressiveness of the disease. The relentlessness of it.” Over time, all of the other P dawgs died. Kaylee, who went to church intermittently as a girl, has become increasingly religious, and she told me that she expects to see her friends again. “Death is not something I want to happen,” she said. “But it doesn’t scare me, either.”

Donations to the Progeria Research Foundation—from individuals, grants, fund-raising events, and campaigns by volunteers—eventually surpassed two million dollars a year. About a decade ago, Gordon directed some of the organization’s funds to a South Korean researcher named Bum-Joon Park, who was studying how the abnormal lamin A protein attaches to the nucleus of a cell. He thought he’d identified a molecule, progerinin, that could block its effect through a different mechanism than lonafarnib. In 2021, his team published a paper showing that progerinin could reduce concentrations of the toxic protein in cells and extend the life spans of mice with progeria. In Phase I safety trials conducted with healthy adults, the drug was well tolerated, and the F.D.A. green-lighted a Phase II trial, which will measure how well it works in progeria patients. Gordon is one of its primary investigators. Monica Kleinman, who first diagnosed Gordon’s son as having progeria, is another.

In January, Kaylee travelled to Boston for the start of the trial. On a frigid evening, I met her and her mom at a sports bar near Fenway Park. Kaylee’s legs dangled from her chair; a compact wheelchair and a white Labrador were nearby. After I greeted them, the dog nuzzled my leg and sat on my foot.

“Sorry,” Kaylee said. “That’s Iris. We’re still training her.” Her voice was quiet and high-pitched, and I had to lean in to hear her over the din of the bar. She ordered chicken tenders from the kids’ menu.

A few years ago, Kaylee enrolled in a program to train as an ultrasound technician, but she was eventually told that her small size—she was three feet eight and weighed thirty-some pounds—would make the job too difficult. “Gee,” she told me. “Think you could have told me that before I

spent a year of my life on this?” She took law classes at a community college but soon had a realization: “I’m actually the type of person who scrolls to the bottom of the terms and conditions and just hits Accept.” Now she was studying psychology, in the hope of working as a high-school guidance counsellor. “That’ll probably take another two years,” she said, dipping a fry in some ketchup. Kaylee, like many college students, was taking time to decide what she wanted to do with her life. But she has already exceeded the average life span of a person with progeria.

Every day, Kaylee takes half a dozen medications, many of which I prescribe to elderly patients: drugs for diabetes, high blood pressure, digestive issues, thyroid problems. A doctor had recently told Kaylee that she had worsening diabetes, so she’d sworn off sugar for the month. “He also said that my triglycerides were the highest he’s ever seen and that my ‘good cholesterol’ was the lowest,” she added. “I’m setting records.”

Kaylee has had serious joint problems since she was in high school. They started in the middle of a dance class, when she leaped into the air and landed awkwardly, dislocating her hip. In addition to several hip surgeries, she has had a major cardiac operation. She has also undergone lithotripsy, which uses shock waves to break up kidney stones. (“I don’t really count those as surgeries, since they just go in and blast them,” she told me, miming the shooting of a gun.) Once, after an operation, Kaylee’s tongue swelled so much that she struggled to breathe, possibly owing to anesthetic medications and an experimental drug she was taking. She was taken to a local hospital, where doctors said that it might be difficult to intubate her, given her size. She was airlifted to a larger hospital at the University of Michigan.

“I’m not in denial, but, if I lived my life according to the stats, I couldn’t do anything,” Kaylee told me. “For me, the best way to live is just to put it out of my mind.” She made me think of a passage from “When Breath Becomes Air,” a 2016 memoir by Paul Kalanithi, a neurosurgeon who was given a diagnosis of lung cancer. He expected to die of it, but he didn’t know when. “Tell me three months, I’d spend time with family,” he wrote. “Tell me one year, I’d write a book. Give me ten years, I’d get back to

treating diseases. The truth that you live one day at a time didn't help: What was I supposed to do with that day?"

The morning after our meal, I waited for Kaylee at the Experimental Therapeutics Unit, on the sixth floor of Boston Children's Hospital. She arrived in jeans, an oversized pink sweater, and gold cross earrings. An energetic research assistant—a premed student who was the same age as Kaylee—led us to an exam room. I thought about the difference that one letter in their genomes had made.

A physical therapist asked Kaylee to lie face up, arms crossed over her chest, on a bed that was twice her size, and took some measurements. "Your left leg is a little shorter than your right," the therapist announced.

"Least of my problems," Kaylee joked.

She prepared for a six-minute walk test, a standardized assessment of a person's aerobic fitness. "Normally, they have her use a walker when she's having hip issues," Marla told the therapist.

"I'll be fine without it," Kaylee said, and shot her a look.

"Oh, the joys of an adult child," Marla replied.

While Kaylee finished her tests, I met Gordon in the brightly lit hospital cafeteria. She had warm hazel eyes and shoulder-length brown hair. Around us, parents tended to their children. Gordon told me about a day, many years ago, when she drew blood from a teen-age boy for a progeria biobank she'd started. He had lived with the disease long enough that his symptoms were already advanced, like Kaylee's. As she wrapped a tourniquet around his arm, he told her, "I know this isn't going to help me. But I want to help other kids."

Some years ago, I cared for a teen-ager with cystic fibrosis, which is usually caused by a mutation to a gene known as CFTR. (Collins, who oversaw the discovery of the progeria gene, also helped identify CFTR in the eighties.) In healthy people, the gene codes for a protein involved in clearing respiratory secretions from the lungs, but the mutation produces a defective

version. As a result, thick mucus builds up in the lungs and traps bacteria, causing infections and inflammation. My patient was in the hospital with severe pneumonia.

I prescribed a series of powerful antibiotics. A respiratory therapist fitted him with a vibrating vest to shake loose the mucus plugging his airways. Even so, he was taking rapid, shallow breaths through an oxygen mask, and we knew that the strain would ultimately exhaust him. When I explained that the next step was to place him on a ventilator, he stared at me with recognition and resignation—the look of someone who had heard such explanations many times in his short life. While he was being intubated and wheeled to the I.C.U. on a stretcher, I had a wrenching feeling that I had nothing to offer him. (He went home a week later but was back in the hospital with pneumonia the next month.)

“It’s too damn slow,” Gordon told me, of the pace of research into rare diseases. “Kids are dying. Every day, I think, *Why didn’t I go faster? Why can’t I go faster?*” Yet, in 2019, the F.D.A. approved a treatment for some patients with cystic fibrosis, Trikafta, which helps fix the defective protein and directs it to the right place in a patient’s cells. The therapy is projected to extend the lives of patients by decades. As the journalist Sarah Zhang wrote in *The Atlantic*, “Where they once prepared for death, they now have to prepare for life.” A woman with cystic fibrosis told her, “It’s like the opposite of a terminal diagnosis.” Many patients are now experiencing normal days for the first time, making plans for a future they didn’t think they’d have.

Last fall, I spoke with Sammy Basso, who at twenty-eight was the oldest man known to have progeria. He lived with his parents in Tezze sul Brenta, a small town about an hour’s drive from Venice. He couldn’t remember learning about progeria. It just was, he said, “like an ancestral memory.” As a child, Basso loved science. Like Gordon, he founded an organization to raise money for progeria research; like Kaylee, he spoke eloquently about his condition, in his case on television and with government officials. Basso readily made friends who did not have progeria; a group of them, who called themselves Sammy’s Runners, pushed him in a specialized wheelchair while running marathons. He was also a devout Catholic—Pope

Francis gave him a call when he was in high school—and he sometimes wondered, *Why is God doing this to me?*

During our conversation, Basso was by turns philosophical and self-deprecating. He had a photograph of Sam Berns. “He was a great friend of mine,” Basso said. “I should say, he is a great friend of mine. I believe him to be alive in another dimension.” He told me that he yearned to start a family, even though he knew that his time was limited. He has joked that, because of his slight stature, his doctors put him on a “see food” diet: “When I see food, I eat.” Once, on Halloween, he leaned in to his slight resemblance to E.T. and handed out candy; on another occasion, he donned bright-green sunglasses and greeted visitors outside a U.F.O. museum in Roswell, New Mexico.

In the years since Sam, Kaylee, and Basso were born, scientists have gained the astonishing ability to make changes to a person’s DNA. The best-known method for doing so, *CRISPR*-Cas9, works like a pair of genetic scissors: a special RNA sequence delivers the Cas9 enzyme, which cuts DNA strands, to a precise location on a gene. When Basso went to college, at the University of Padua, he made *CRISPR* a focus of his studies, pursuing a degree in molecular biology. In 2019, he co-authored a paper in *Nature Medicine* that described how the technique could theoretically fix the progeria mutation. He remembered hearing the motto “Together, we will find a cure” and feeling skeptical. But eventually he found himself thinking, *Maybe in the very far future we can have a cure*.

By the time we spoke, Basso had begun working with David R. Liu, a professor at Harvard and the Broad Institute who has built on *CRISPR* to develop novel gene-editing techniques. “I’m not doing it for myself,” Basso told me. “It’s for the others.” He had undergone major surgery to repair a failing heart valve. “Progeria has had a lot of time to mess up my body,” he said.

A few days after our conversation, Basso died. He’d collapsed after a night of dancing at a friend’s wedding celebration. Hearing the news, I felt both shock and resignation. I thought of Sam Berns’s advice: never miss a party if you can help it. A letter that Basso had written was read at his funeral. “Death is the most natural thing in life,” the letter said. “If it were not there

we would probably not accomplish anything in our lives, because anyway, there is always tomorrow. Death, on the other hand, lets us know that there is not always a tomorrow, that if we want to do something, the right time is now!”

Later, I reached out to Liu, who described Basso as a scientific collaborator and a friend. Their research together was “one of the lasting gifts Sammy gave the world,” Liu said. He spoke about the progress that gene-editing technology has made lately. Another condition caused by an abnormal protein, sickle-cell disease, can now be treated with a recently approved drug. But it does not target the problematic protein or the gene responsible for it—instead, it bolsters a healthy version by disrupting a different gene. A fundamental problem, for Liu, was that many genetic diseases can’t be treated in this way; genetic scissors are simply the wrong tool. “How do you *fix* a gene with a pair of scissors?” Liu said. “That turned out to be quite a profound question.”

In a landmark 2016 paper, Liu and his colleagues showed that a gene editor his lab had developed could home in on a specific genetic sequence, unravel the DNA, and change one base to another—a C to a T, say, or a G to an A. It was less like a pair of scissors than like a pencil and an eraser. He was invited to give a prestigious lecture at the National Institutes of Health, and before his talk he met with Francis Collins, who had become its director. He knew about Collins’s progeria research, so he mentioned that his method could correct the progeria mutation, at least in human cells in a petri dish. “You have to present that!” Collins told him. Liu looked frantically for a quiet place to revise his lecture. He ended up in the bathroom, laptop open, updating his slides.

Liu began collaborating with Collins and Gordon. (Basso, before he died, often attended their meetings virtually from Italy.) Starting in 2019, the researchers incorporated Liu’s DNA editor into nonpathogenic viruses, injected them into two-week-old mice that had progeria, and found that about thirty per cent of cells in certain organs were successfully edited. The scientists observed a staggering ninety-per-cent reduction in the toxic progerin protein in some tissues, possibly because edited cells replaced unedited cells over time. The hearts, livers, and blood vessels of treated

mice appeared strikingly healthy. The data were so promising that they looked unreal, Liu told me.

The mice that didn’t get the gene therapy died after about two hundred days. Those that did lived more than five hundred—the rough equivalent of a human living to retirement age. Liu showed me some videos from the experiment over Zoom. At seven and a half months, the untreated mice looked small and shrivelled, with thin gray coats and curved spines. Next, he pulled up a video of treated mice at eleven months, longer than any of the untreated mice had lived. They were larger, their coats were shinier, and they scurried energetically. “You wouldn’t see them in a pet store and say, ‘Oh, those mice are sick,’ ” Liu said. “It worked better than we could have dreamed.”

“Are you willing to bark nights and weekends, even when there’s nothing to bark at?”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

Later this year, Liu plans to seek permission from the F.D.A. to move his therapy into clinical trials. Editing the genes of a living person can pose profound risks, however, especially when viruses serve as the delivery vehicle. In 2022, a man with muscular dystrophy received a gene-therapy infusion and died after developing a severe immune reaction. This year, two other recipients of gene therapies, both teen-agers, died of liver failure. “Nobody is under the illusion that you will have anticipated everything,” Liu told me. “You just hope you’ve anticipated most of the important

things.” His original progeria base editor was too big to fit inside a single virus, so he had to cut it in half and have it reassembled by what he called “molecular Velcro.” His team has now modified the editor to fit inside one virus, which will hopefully reduce the risks. Gordon named the editor SamPro-1, after her son.

For the first time, it now seems plausible that progeria could be cured. Collins has come to see this possibility as something more. “My commitment, my obsession, with finding a way to cure progeria is of course to help the children who are affected—but also because this could be a new treatment paradigm,” he said. “If we’re successful, it would be the first time we have an in-vivo gene-editing cure of a multisystem disease.” Essentially no treatments have stopped such a complex condition by modifying the DNA inside a living person. “I want progeria to be part of the leading edge of showing what’s possible,” Collins said. He still believes that research into progeria might teach us about aging in general. Even healthy people have been shown to produce the toxic progerin protein in very small quantities; the amount in our bodies increases as we age. Collins told me about an ongoing experiment that modifies the DNA of healthy mice so that they can’t make any progerin. It’s possible that suppressing the protein could help mice, and perhaps one day people, live longer.

Trikafta, the treatment for cystic fibrosis, targets a specific protein and therefore can be used only to treat cystic fibrosis. But a successful gene editor could remedy any number of harmful mutations, solving a fundamental problem in rare-disease research: if there are just a small number of people to pay for novel treatments, companies won’t invest in them. Genetic diseases, in aggregate, afflict more than a quarter of a billion people around the world; every year, they kill millions of children before the age of five. “If something else were killing this many children, there would be an international uproar,” Liu said. “The problem is that all those patients are divided into a thousand subcommunities.” Collins, who directed the N.I.H. until 2021 and left the agency this year, told me, “The dream I have is that you end up with a scalable approach to virtually any genetic disease where you know the DNA mutation. You don’t really even have to understand how a mutation is causing the disease. You just fix it!”

In April, I visited Kaylee at her redbrick home in Perrysburg, Ohio, about fifteen miles south of the Michigan border. My route from the airport passed thick cornfields, lush trees, and expanses of green grass. Kaylee welcomed me into a cozy dining room, where her parents and three adult brothers had gathered for a weekly family dinner. “I hope you like taco bowls,” Marla called out from the stove. Bowls of lettuce, cheese, chicken, and salsa were arranged on a kitchen island.

One of Kaylee’s brothers, Brendan, rose to help her into a seat, then scooped some fruit into a bowl for her. “They’re not always this helpful,” their father, Tim, said, smiling. “In high school, they’d just take her to the mall because they realized that more girls would come talk to them. Kaylee’s a good wingwoman that way.”

“Actually, I just hang out with you to cut the line at airport security,” Brendan offered.

“I put you in my college essay,” another of Kaylee’s brothers, Jacob, said. “Only reason I got in.”

“You owe me!” Kaylee retorted. They reminded me of my relationship with my sister, who was born three months prematurely and given a diagnosis of cerebral palsy. She uses forearm crutches to get around, but for many years she refused to let our family get a disability placard. For her, walking the length of a parking lot was a mark of self-reliance; to me, it seemed like a needless struggle. I feel protective of my sister, but, in part because of her sense of independence, I also try to treat her as I would anyone else. My favorite memories of our childhood are some of the simplest: taking the bus to school; staying up late playing video games; a day we spent on a ranch together, riding horses.

“Who’s the oldest?” I asked, looking around the table.

“Well, T.J.’s twenty-seven, Brendan is twenty-five, and Jacob is twenty-three,” Kaylee said. “But, technically, I’m aging faster than everyone, so that makes me the oldest.”

The next morning, Kaylee picked me up from my hotel for a game of pickleball. Through the windshield of a black van, I saw her slight figure in the driver's seat. She was wearing sunglasses and peering over the steering wheel. When I climbed into the passenger side, I could see that she was sitting on a kind of booster seat. On her left was a lever that functioned as the brake; on her right, a joystick rotated the vehicle's wheels. Nearby, a small screen displayed speed and other information. Marla and Iris sat in the back.

"How's the new medicine been?" I asked as we started driving.

"Pretty good, actually." There weren't many side effects, her appetite had improved, and she felt more energetic. Later in the year, her blood would be drawn for a test of its progerin protein levels. "I just hope it gets me to the point where I can benefit from the gene therapy," she said. "But, in the medical field, everything moves slower than you think. If they say something is one year out, that means three." Last month, Kaylee celebrated her twenty-second birthday.

We arrived at a park, where a gentle breeze rustled the trees. Brendan and one of Kaylee's childhood friends, Faith, met us at the courts. Kaylee walked with care, swaying from side to side; she picked up a black racquet and joined Faith on one side of the court, facing off against Brendan and her mother on the other.

After a short rally, Marla knocked the ball into the net. Kaylee turned to me and said, "When you write about this, can you just blame everything on the wind? Like, 'Four expert players took the court and hurricane winds threw them off their game'?"

Kaylee cautiously bent over to pick up a ball. On the next rally, she accidentally tapped the ball high into the air; Faith ran over and slammed it to the other side. "Assist!" Kaylee yelled. Everyone laughed. A few minutes later, I took Marla's spot and drove the ball into the net on consecutive points. I could only conclude that the wind was, indeed, a serious impediment.

On a subsequent rally, Kaylee smacked a fierce shot past me, scoring her team a point. She pumped her fist and turned to rile up an imaginary crowd. Then she walked gingerly to the back of the court, took her position, and readied herself for whatever came next. ♦

Dhruv Khullar, a contributing writer at The New Yorker, is a practicing physician and an associate professor at Weill Cornell Medical College. He writes about medicine, health care, and politics.

Profiles

Is Mac DeMarco the Last Indie Rock Star?

The musician’s overwhelming popularity can overshadow his ethos of self-reliance. On his new album, “Guitar,” he played every instrument and is releasing it on his own label.

By Amanda Petrusich

August 11, 2025

It’s easy not to think about the machinery that motivates culture. In an era when anything goes, DeMarco’s gestures at sovereignty feel less cranky and more radical.Photographs by Grant Harder for The New Yorker

The musician Mac DeMarco recently bought a rambling, hundred-year-old farmhouse on an island off the coast of British Columbia, deep in the Salish Sea and accessible only via boat. A ferry runs a few times a day from Tsawwassen, near Vancouver; the trip takes about two hours. In late June, DeMarco picked me up from the ferry terminal in a vintage Land Cruiser, its halogen headlights covered by yellow smiley faces. The house came

with some eighty olive trees, in varying states of vibrancy or decline. DeMarco had been pruning dead branches, attempting to conjure what's known as the "open vase" shape, gutting the brittle center growth to promote air circulation. During my three days on the island, he was messing around with the trees more or less constantly, hacking away with clippers or an electric saw, hurling tangles of foliage into a wheelbarrow and dumping its contents in the woods. Sometimes I would lodge my recorder between tree limbs so that we could talk while he worked. There, DeMarco was transforming from a rascally indie-rock icon into a gap-toothed, D.I.Y. frontiersman in disintegrating red Vans.

In 2012, DeMarco released his début EP, "Rock and Roll Night Club," on Captured Tracks, a Brooklyn-based independent record label known for its deep bench of spacey, lo-fi guitar bands. By the time he put out his second full-length album, "Salad Days," in 2014, he had been anointed a kind of debauched slacker king. DeMarco's records were easy, loose, and cool, with echoes of Neil Young and Brian Wilson, if they'd been reared on dank memes, legal weed, and back issues of *Thrasher*. *Pitchfork* gave "Salad Days" its Best New Music designation. Prior to the album's release, the rapper Tyler, the Creator tweeted, "*DEAR MAC DEMARCO I LOVE YOU YOU ARE AWESOME*." DeMarco's followers were passionate and occasionally deranged. (That year, a female fan brought him a pig fetus suspended in a jar of formaldehyde; it was tattooed with a picture of DeMarco as a mermaid.) DeMarco described this period of sudden cultural ascendance—"when things started goin' wackadoodle"—as disorienting. "The cool kids would come from every city, and they were expecting some kind of sexy famous guy, but I was just a dumbass with a tuque on," he said.

DeMarco has become only more popular in the past decade. "Chamber of Reflection," a teetering, synth-driven track from "Salad Days," is ubiquitous on TikTok, and has been streamed nearly a billion times. DeMarco himself has more than twenty million monthly listeners on Spotify, a remarkable number for a dude who plays dazed, quivery guitar songs about whatever's on his mind. A TikTok account dedicated to his work has more than eight hundred thousand followers and features videos of DeMarco telling jokes that are sometimes scatological and always

absurd. (Picture, say, a pleasingly unhinged-looking DeMarco, hoodie up, placing a fake phone call in which he attempts to order half a million dollars' worth of poop and pee.) DeMarco's fans have always been young, but he thinks that they might be getting younger. "There was a point where I kind of understood my audience. Now I have no fucking idea," he said. "I grew up and they didn't."

His new house sits in thrilling but somewhat perilous proximity to the ocean. From the deck, which runs parallel to the shoreline, you can spot orcas, humpback whales, bald eagles (a pair were nesting nearby, atop a gargantuan Douglas fir), otters, and harbor seals, whose speckled heads periodically popped out of the water, peering around for snacks. The property had been sold as is. The guest cottage, where I slept, had a handsome, airy bedroom jutting out over the beach, buttressed by an ad-hoc foundation that resembled something a juiced-up toddler might manufacture from glue and Popsicle sticks. At night, I could hear waves crashing loudly against the western wall. ("It's comin' down!" DeMarco joked one morning. "*C'est la vie!* ")

DeMarco and his longtime partner, Kiera McNally, had already fixed up a place in Echo Park, in Los Angeles; he was perhaps overly cognizant of the financial and psychic ferment that accompanies home renovations. Shortly after I arrived, I idly inquired if the property had a well—once you have lived with a well, the health and viability of all wells somehow remain inescapably present in one's consciousness, a source of endless small talk, like weather, or sports—and his face lit up. "Do you know about wells?" he asked. Freshwater had been on his mind. He'd been monkeying around with an old concrete cistern and a pump, trying to figure out how to irrigate some raised beds. He'd been researching local rules about rainwater collection. The whole situation was making him a little nervous. "This might have been a big mistake," DeMarco said. But he was eager to be humbled. "I thought I knew everything when I was in my twenties. I want to stay in a place where I'm constantly reminded that I don't know jack shit, I will never know jack shit, and then someday I'm dead."

Later this month, DeMarco, who is thirty-five, will release "Guitar," his tenth record and his first since 2023's "One Wayne G," a nine-hour

compilation of mostly instrumental demos. DeMarco made “Guitar” at home in L.A. last November, in about two weeks. Just before that, he recorded an entirely different album, “Hear the Music,” which he has played only for McNally. “That’s the only time anyone will hear it, I think,” he said. “With the second one, I played her a bit as I was recording it, but I didn’t tell anyone I worked with for a good four months. I just didn’t want to start the doomsday clock: ‘Well, now, where are the photos?’ It was a really nice experience to have it as a thing I could enjoy for a while.”

“Guitar” is an exceptionally self-contained record. DeMarco played every instrument; produced, engineered, and mixed the songs; shot the album cover and music videos using a tripod; and is releasing it on his own label. He is sometimes modest about his chops—“I can specifically do the little thing that I’ve done that has put me where I am now, but I can pretty much just do the little thing,” he said—but “Guitar” is stunning and deeply idiosyncratic, unlike anything else in his discography. It contains some of his most intimate and sophisticated songwriting. “That’s the advancement,” DeMarco said. (He was more reserved about his musical performance: “The guitar playing sounds like I went back ten years, maybe.”) It’s possible to locate points of comparison—I hear the closeness of Nick Drake’s “Five Leaves Left,” the psychedelic wobble of David Crosby circa “If I Could Only Remember My Name”—but it is hard to tether DeMarco to any particular tradition. “I just don’t feel unsure about it at all,” he said of the album.

DeMarco spoke about the work of songwriting as compulsory, as if he were fulfilling a prophecy. “I think if I don’t do it, I will be punished by the universe,” he said. “When I’m making the songs, I feel satisfaction, and maybe that’s also some kind of addiction—‘You did it again, pal!’—but I think it’s just that I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing.” He went on, “I can have other hobbies. I can poorly renovate houses or fuck up motorcycle engines. But when I do those things I feel guilty.” That notion—an ineluctable vocational calling—is central to “Punishment,” a new song featuring a swaying guitar line:

> Backwards, but without plans to regress
> You can have all of me, a pound of my flesh

’Cause Mama, I was told that punishment will come to
Those of us who don’t do what we’re made to.

On the night of my arrival, DeMarco became briefly preoccupied by a wobbly deck chair. After dinner, he retrieved a saw from the shed, cut a new support beam, and held court for a bit on the utility and character of the Robertson screw, which features a tapered square at its center and was patented by a Canadian tool salesman in 1909. DeMarco eventually got the chair stabilized, though the next day he brought it up as an example of his innate antsiness. “Sometimes all this just feels like a distraction from something,” he said. “I just get a little . . . homed in.”

DeMarco was born in 1990 in British Columbia, and was brought up in Edmonton, Alberta. His birth name, Vernor Winfield MacBriare Smith IV, has an aristocratic jangle, though his mother, Agnes DeMarco, changed it to MacBriare Samuel Lanyon DeMarco after his father left, when Mac was five, and failed to pay child support. “On my dad’s side of the family, there was money, but I just didn’t really know those people,” he said. He believes that being reared by a single mom might have given him a certain scrappiness. He referred to his fellow-Albertans as “utility people.” “In Canada, especially out here, even the tradespeople are, like, ‘I *could* do it for ya, but framin’ somethin’s not that hard,’ ” he said. “It’s almost like ‘What, you can’t do it yourself?’ I appreciate that.”

DeMarco doesn’t smoke or drink anymore. It’s hard to overstate his prior dedication to these vices. There was a period of time in which it was not unusual for him to empty an entire bottle of Jameson during a set. In 2012, he wrote a woozy, lovesick ballad, “Ode to Viceroy,” about his preferred brand of smokes. (“And oh, don’t let me see you cryin’ / ’Cause oh, honey, I’ll smoke you ’til I’m dyin’,” he sang, his voice notably scratchy.) The photographer Danny Cohen once shot a portrait of DeMarco submerged in a bathtub brimming with cigarettes; he was also photographed under what appeared to be a gentle rain of loosies. (“So you made cigs popular with kids?” the podcaster Adam Friedland once asked him.) Back then, DeMarco’s unabashed libertinism was sort of charming—he is almost preternaturally charismatic—though on occasion it felt depraved. (If your tolerance for tomfoolery, body horror, and the gnarliest corners of the

internet is high, you can find a video online of a nude DeMarco onstage, drunk, consummating his relationship with a drumstick.) “I definitely had a pretty severe drinking problem,” he said. “It was bad. I’m glad I’m away from it. Would I be here doing the peaceful thing if I hadn’t gotten sober? Probably not. Would I even be alive? I don’t know. I see photos of myself in 2018 or 2019 and I look near-dead.”

Now DeMarco wakes up early, around seven. He and McNally make coffee and sit on the deck with their dog, Bear. One morning, DeMarco put on a record by the electronic composer Tim Story, whose ambient works, though elegant, would not be out of place in a fantasy series about dragons. That quality—a kind of fundamental uncoolness, or at least a disregard for the demands of the marketplace—is appealing to DeMarco. “That’s what I like about it,” he said of the album.

After breakfast, DeMarco and I scrambled down a pebbly embankment to the beach. “This fell over,” DeMarco observed, cocking his head at a small tree that had recently been uprooted. “Whatever. Wabi-sabi—imperfect. But you keep it tidy, and that feels good enough.” The idea of finding something beautiful in impermanence and inevitable decay is essential to his art.

For years, DeMarco has held fast to a salty ethos of self-reliance that includes resistance to the notion of scaling up. He has at times also willfully disregarded his own celebrity. At the end of “My House by the Water,” which closes “Another One,” his fifth release, he recited his home address, then a four-bedroom house in the Rockaways, along the ocean in Queens. “Stop on by—I’ll make you a cup of coffee,” he said. “See ya later!” Thousands made the pilgrimage and were amicably received. When I asked McNally if DeMarco had cleared it with her first, she gave me a look like *What do you think*?

“Nothing that insane ever really happened,” DeMarco piped up. “It just was a little overwhelming.”

McNally laughed. She is easygoing and gentle. “It was like a really silly, lighthearted version of the movie ‘Mother!’ He invited everyone for a cup of coffee. But we didn’t have a coffee maker. We had this antique hand grinder, and one French press, so we could only make half a pot at a time.

People would be, like, ‘I’m here for my coffee!’ It was so insane.” (The couple moved eleven months later.)

The same year, DeMarco hosted a barbecue on a street in Brooklyn. “I grilled hot dogs for five hundred kids or something,” he said. Those sorts of stunts—vaguely reckless, endearing, kind of funny—feel indicative of DeMarco’s general lack of interest in taking himself too seriously. During my time in Canada, he periodically slipped into a booming patrician voice, as though he were narrating an episode of “Masterpiece Theatre.” This allowed him to make comedic observations at some remove, but also to defuse any conversational threads that felt too self-aggrandizing. Though DeMarco can be incredibly serious, even obsessive, about his work, he is also constitutionally averse—in a way that feels self-protective—to sounding pretentious or gassy.

DeMarco and McNally met as teen-agers in Edmonton. They have the type of instinctive, knowing rapport that develops when you come of age alongside someone. “Kiera was part of the crew I hung out with,” he said. “I went to a high school where I didn’t have very many friends. It was kind of a jock high school, close to my house. Kiera went to the performing-arts high school.” He slipped into the voice. “Which I longed to have gone to . . .”

“It was all girls,” McNally added.

“It wasn’t about that, Kiera!” DeMarco interrupted, still in character. “I wanted to express myself artistically, to fit in with people who understood my guitar playing!”

DeMarco moved to Vancouver after high school. He began releasing music under the name Makeout Videotape, often recording songs with his friend Alex Calder. In 2011, he and McNally moved to Montreal, joining a young and slightly lawless D.I.Y. loft scene that included the electronic musician Grimes and the experimental-pop trio Braids. DeMarco signed with Captured Tracks in 2012, and moved to Brooklyn shortly thereafter. He had not previously considered the possibility that making music could be a full-time profession. “I did road construction, I worked at a veterinary hospital,” he said. “I did these medical tests in Montreal. There was one where they

made me dip my hand into a nearly freezing bucket of water, then they'd come in and say, 'We forgot to turn on the test equipment. We have to run it again.' The whole test was to see how you reacted to them being, like, 'Psych!' "

Back then, indie rock had not yet been subsumed and neutered by the mainstream. Today, the idea of adhering to the internal politics of a scene (avoiding a major label, not selling a song to a corporation) seems quaint, if not incomprehensible; an ethos of relentless growth has mostly replaced any spirit of rebelliousness. In many ways, DeMarco feels like the genre's final ambassador. This summer and fall, he will tour the U.S. and Canada in a Sprinter van with just his band and two crew members, an unusually low-key operation for a tour that includes consecutive sold-out nights at Radio City Music Hall. DeMarco is planning to do the bulk of the driving himself. "The way the music industry operates is that everybody wants to push it, to get the bigger thing. I don't want to do that," he said, then paused. "We could, you know? I haven't done anything for five years, and, somehow, things keep getting bigger and bigger. Which is great—I can't complain about it. But I don't want to play a fucking pavilion. I don't want to play a fucking arena." He went on, "It's not cool. I don't want to have to get a fucking video wall to supplement the size of stage we're playing on. That's not my vibe." Sometimes, DeMarco said, if a venue felt too vast or professional, "we'd just kinda throw the show. Like, fuck this place—this sucks." Even that brought him a perverse pleasure. "I like being at the level where you can play a really bad show," he said. "I want to see the bad show. I don't want to see the perfect show. I think it's important to shit the bed every once in a while."

DeMarco suffers from something he calls "demo-itis," wherein he ends up preferring the earliest recording of a song—scrappy, crooked, lo-fi—to the formalized version that follows. He spends most of his time in the studio chasing after the magic of that first iteration. "Purity and cohesiveness are more important to me at this point than if people like the songs," he said. DeMarco often uses the phrase "no masters" to describe a particular sort of self-sufficiency, in which he is not beholden to anything but his own taste and instinct. "I tried to have somebody else mix it," he said of "Guitar." "It sounded great." In the end, he didn't use the mix. "It's not about something

getting better or worse. It's just about it being me." For "Here Comes the Cowboy," from 2019, DeMarco rented a suite at Capitol Records. "We'll put it on the big board, and do it big-dog style," he remembered thinking. "I lasted twelve hours before I was, like, 'Let's go back to the garage. I feel so fucked up in here.' "

DeMarco recently bought an old farmhouse on an island off British Columbia, and has been fixing it up.

Grousing about purity can seem petulant or out of touch—DeMarco enjoys pejoratively referring to himself as a boomer—but he's right that in the past couple of decades we've loosened our grip when it comes to our standards for art-making, particularly the way we consider intentionality or even truthfulness. It's easy now, possibly advantageous, not to think too critically about the machinery that motivates culture, especially when nobody has to worry about getting called a poser or a sellout. Anything goes. In that context, DeMarco's gestures at sovereignty feel less cranky and more radical. He is simply trying to reclaim some ground.

DeMarco stopped drinking in 2020, but he didn’t give up smoking until 2022, when he drove alone from New York to Los Angeles. “I left New York and I was, like, ‘I’m just gonna quit, right now.’ ” At the time, he was also using a Juul. “I put it down in the cup holder in my truck. I thought it would be three and a half hours of discomfort and then I’d just be done. It was the worst thing ever. It was so horrible. Very classic withdrawal: angry, sweaty, couldn’t sleep, I’m callin’ Kiera, just, like, screaming about nothing. I stopped in Lincoln, Nebraska, and tried to go to this Italian restaurant, get a chicken Parmesan. I was so dizzy that I couldn’t order.”

Along the way, he wrote and recorded the spindly instrumental songs that would eventually make up “Five Easy Hot Dogs,” his eighth record. “When I got back to L.A., I shelved those songs, and then when I listened back a while later I was, like, ‘Oh, I like this a lot.’ I put it out, and people had been waiting for a while, and they were, like, ‘Yeah, it would be really nice if he sang on this.’ Go fuck yourself. Take it or leave it.”

His sobriety has felt more complicated recently. “The first couple years, I was, like, This is fine, everything is the same,” he said. “But, as you keep going through it, the harder it becomes.” He added, “Emotions become amplified, slowly. Someone’s turning the dial up. Things become more painful, but the magic increases as well. That slide from up to down can be steep.”

On “Nothing at All,” a new song, he sings of having to contend with the harrowing work of being fully conscious:

> Hairpin trigger, volatile
> No denying
> Tread much lighter, try to smile
> But feel like crying
> With all your cures up on the shelf
> You’ve no control now.

Earlier in the summer, DeMarco had discovered a small aluminum fishing boat overturned in some tall grasses by the shoreline; in the garage, he found a rusty outboard motor of indeterminate age. Now he’d enlisted Ryan, an old friend living in Vancouver, to help get the boat running. First,

they had to scrub untold decades of gunk off the motor. “Bit of filth, but nothing we can’t handle, right, Ry?” DeMarco said. They started messing around with the starter cord. “That thing looks funkadelic,” DeMarco observed. (It came whipping off when they pulled it.) Eventually, after searching the garage for a gas tank and a new sparkplug, they got the motor running; DeMarco threw his head back and let out a peal of laughter. Minutes later, they clamped it to the back of the boat and took a victory lap around the bay.

DeMarco has always been invested in this style of improvisational repair, in part because it allows him to hold on to objects that he’s imbued with meaning. “I used to play this old piece-of-shit guitar,” he said. “That was my style of fixing back in the day: ‘Oh, I found a piece of siding in an alley, and I’ll use it as the pick guard.’ I needed that guitar or I couldn’t do my show.” For years, he was superstitious about leaving a venue between load-in and showtime, a self-imposed stricture that he now described as “a load of fuckin’ dog shit. I’m trying all the time to not be insane about shit like that. Those curses are just like smoking cigs—I’m done.”

He had a brief foray into obsessively following hockey (he is a supporter of the Edmonton Oilers, who were defeated in the Stanley Cup Finals the past two years), though, in the same spirit of no masters, he is contemplating some time off. “The Cup final two years ago, the Oilers lost the first three—it was depressing,” he said. “It was also consuming my life. So, for Game Four, I rented a movie theatre in Hollywood and I went, alone, to watch. I thought, I’m gonna quit hockey in the same way I quit smoking. It’ll be like ‘A Clockwork Orange.’ They’ll whoop our ass and I’ll never wanna watch hockey again. Walking in, the guy was, like, ‘Just you?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Sportsnet?’ ‘Yeah. You got popcorn?’ ‘Uh-huh.’ We won 8–1. Then we go to Game Seven and we lose.” He continued, “Why did I just waste all this time watching sports?”

DeMarco has wondered if his fixations are somehow linked to his addictions—if he’s merely rerouting energy, supplanting one pathological behavior with another. “I don’t wanna replace it, I wanna erase it, which I don’t think is fully possible,” he said. “The secret—and everybody fucking says it—is that you have to train yourself to enjoy every step. Even when

I’m here, I’m kind of, like, ‘This is good, but I felt a certain way when I was in L.A. . . . Why don’t I feel that here?’ But in a few months, when I’m in Rotterdam, playing some venue that smells like cigarette butts, I’m gonna think, Sitting with Amanda looking at the island was pretty good.”

DeMarco also recently bought and renovated a house in Victoria for his mother. He retiled the bathroom himself. “Even getting Mom set up with the house—it’s all great, but there are things that are ingrained in me that will never go away: ‘This is nice, but who knows if it’ll be here tomorrow?’ That’s a quote-unquote poor-person mentality. I think even the D.I.Y. thing—I mean, I enjoy it,” he said. “Here I am, snipping fucking trees. But I see things crashing. I’ll look at the bank account and be, like, ‘Soon it’s all gonna be gone!’ ”

One evening, after dinner, DeMarco and I took a canoe out on the water. The night was chilly and noiseless. Earlier, DeMarco had shown me some videos of the Canadian naturalist Bill Mason (in one, titled “Waterwalker,” Mason calls the canoe “the most beautiful and functional craft ever created”), and talked me through the J-stroke, a paddling technique that helps a canoe travel in a straight line. I practiced. We glided around the bay. As the sun set, we waited for a ferry to pass, taking temporary cover on a beach littered with the bleached bones of some midsize animal. When we got back to the house, DeMarco built a bonfire on the beach, and we basked in the glow and crackle until the tide pushed in.

In 2021, DeMarco’s father died of cancer. Four years earlier, DeMarco had made a record, “This Old Dog,” about their stifled, anemic relationship. “I didn’t know him very well,” DeMarco said. “He was a heavy drug-and-alcohol user. His body was slowly shutting down for seven years or something. There were a lot of times he would go into the hospital and we’d be, like, ‘Well, see ya.’ Then he’d get out. When he was passing away, I tried to—not heal it, but I got him an iPad, and, even when I was speaking with him a lot, he had this attitude of ‘Why are you doing this? Really? You wanna call me again today?’ ” DeMarco went on, “I don’t know why I did it. It would’ve been cool to understand more about where I came from. It’s almost an animalistic thing—that’s my blood.” Yet DeMarco said that when his and McNally’s tabby cat, Pickles, died, in 2023, he felt a more acute

grief. “It’s crazy to even say that out loud: I knew the cat way better than I knew my dad.”

“This Old Dog” is a beautiful and emotionally charged album. On “My Old Man,” a mournful folk song with a jaunty synthesizer beat, he reckons with the inevitability of genetics. “Uh-oh, looks like I’m seeing more of my old man in me,” he sings, his voice low.

“I was at a point where I was, like, ‘Fuck you, I’ll write this record about you, motherfucker.’ Would I do that now? I don’t think so,” he said. “When I was making ‘This Old Dog,’ I was thinking, I don’t have a choice, I’m shackled to the path that my father has cut. That’s not true. His passing away was a relief in a lot of ways. For me, making music was always either about impressing girls, acceptance from my peers, or revenge against my father. Now one of those just gets ticked off, washed away.”

DeMarco left Captured Tracks and started Mac’s Record Label in 2018. “Yeah, things go well” is how he described his commercial success. DeMarco founded the label because he wanted control over his work, though he also believes that the mainstream music industry is mercenary and corrupt, and that it’s benefitting from the uncertainty wrought by streaming and social media. “Labels were, like, ‘Shit! TikTok! We don’t know how to get the money outta TikTok! Oh, fuck!’ But I think they’ve figured it out,” he said, laughing. “They’d just like it to still appear confusing.”

In 2023, when DeMarco released “One Wayne G,” which comprises a hundred and ninety-nine demo recordings, some critics interpreted it as cynical: more songs, more streams. “It’s none of that,” DeMarco said. “Some of it sounds like I’m banging on a pipe in a boiler room. Which I love! For me, that’s so interesting. There are a lot of songs on there I like. I thought, Well, I could maybe put these on a record later. But that would be the demo-itis thing again.” He paused. “Putting it on Spotify was just free web hosting for me.”

There’s a tenderness to “Guitar” that feels unusual for DeMarco. “I think I’m being a little less defensive than usual,” he said. One night, I asked if he thought of his work as autobiographical. “I mean, it always is,” he said after

a while. “It means something to me, but it can also mean whatever to whoever. Maybe that’s some kind of line of defense. But, when music touches me, I’m not thinking, What exactly did this mean to the Moody Blues?”

The unexpected grace of “Guitar” can feel slightly at odds with DeMarco’s jokester persona. “It’s got the Robin Williams effect,” he said. “Which is what I’ve always strived for—I just need a little more body hair.” He continued, “Robin Williams is all fun and games, and then you watch ‘Good Will Hunting’ and you’re like—*fuck*. It’s good.” He paused. “I think this is the record where you can hear me the most.”

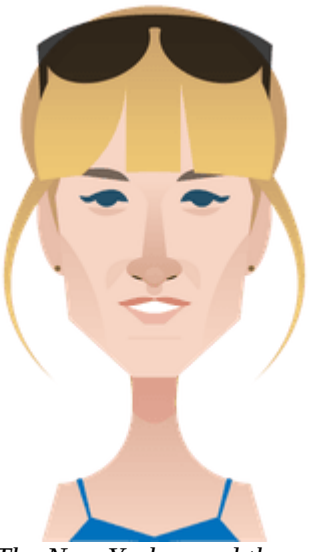
The next day, we stopped by the farmers’ market, placed an order at the hardware store, got ice-cream cones at the marina. DeMarco and McNally’s life on the island is sweet, easy. Friends come through. DeMarco rips around on his motorcycle. He carts things to the recycling center. He churns the compost. He spends a lot of time in the olive grove. It is challenging for him to sit still. “Nearly impossible,” he said. “If I’m idle, I feel like I should be working on music. But I have a complicated relationship with music, too, because I just want to have this pure experience with it, as opposed to thinking, Well, maybe I should put the b.p.m. up on this one, because they’ll want us to play it on Jimmy Fallon’s show.”

I supposed that was part of the job. “That’s the thing,” he said. “I will never call this a job. I get paid. But a job is fixing an engine, mowing a lawn. Writing songs? Going on vacation for free? Sometimes younger bands are, like, ‘Touring is so hard.’ Maybe these people have been going on vacation their whole life? For me, I’m kinda, like, ‘I’m in Chinaaaaa!’ It’s a paid rock-and-roll adventure! What is wrong with you?” He continued, “I get it. Not for everybody. But I love it. I didn’t get to go to these places, and now I’ve been to fuckin’ China! I wiped my ass with used toilet paper in the Forbidden City. Gave me giardia. It was horrible. Nobody told me that you need to take your own toilet paper. There were a lot of toilets with no amenities. *That* is amazing! Because I wrote some little songs? What a gift!”

In 2017, DeMarco did an interview with Charlie Rose, in which he referred to himself as a con artist. “I do feel like a con man sometimes,” he said. He

was back in the olive grove now, slicing away at some branches. “There was a run-and-gun vibe back in the day,” he continued. “We barely rehearsed. When you’re making money off of something that doesn’t feel like real work—con man.” He went on, “I never understood people who were, like, ‘I wouldn’t want to be famous.’ Why? Now I get it. You’d rather trim trees. If I worked at a hardware store, I would do the job well. I would make sure my hardware store was clean, and I would treat the customers nice. That would be that.”

But could he be happy in a hardware store, year after year, organizing garden hoses, mopping floors? “Probably not,” he said. “I’m not tuned that way.” He paused. “But you tune yourself at a certain point.” He thought about it for another minute. “It would drive me crazy. It would drive me *crazy* in that store. I feel like this place is almost an experiment,” he said, gesturing around. “It’s a hardware-store-style experiment. We’ll see what happens.” ♦



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

A Reporter at Large

The Number

How much is Trump pocketing off the Presidency?

By David D. Kirkpatrick

August 11, 2025

I decided to tally up the Trump family's profiteering, including five Persian Gulf mega-projects, a luxury jet from Qatar, a sprawling resort in Hanoi, half a dozen projects peddling crypto, and MAGA merch.Illustration by Ben Wiseman; Animation by Nicolo Bianchino

At a press conference on January 11, 2017, President-elect Donald Trump explained for the first time how he would handle the many conflicts of interest that his business empire posed for his new role. His company, the Trump Organization, collected money from all over the world for luxury condos, hotel rentals, development projects, and club memberships, and he had made deals that put his name on everything from mail-order steaks to get-rich-quick courses. Could citizens trust him to put the common good ahead of personal profit? How would he assure Americans that payments to his business weren't doubling as payoffs?

A journalist asked Trump if he would release his tax returns, as Presidents had done for decades. Trump said no, and then explained just how unconstrained he felt by such conventions. He'd recently learned that the President, being beholden only to the voters, is subject to none of the regulations that restrict subordinate officials from conducting private business on the side. He called the loophole "a no-conflict-of-interest provision," as if it were a perk of his employment contract.

To illustrate just how glaring a conflict the law allowed him, Trump volunteered that, during the transition, he'd entertained a two-billion-dollar offer "to do a deal in Dubai." The offer had come from Hussain Sajwani, an Emirati real-estate tycoon with close ties to his country's rulers. Trump emphasized that he "didn't *have* to turn it down." Nevertheless, he'd passed, because he didn't "want to take advantage of something"; he disliked "the way that looks." Therefore, he continued, his eldest sons,

Donald, Jr., and Eric, would assume daily management of his businesses until he left office.

Trump then turned things over to Sheri Dillon, one of his tax lawyers, who argued that he could hardly be expected to do more than the temporary handover. Trump would not “destroy the company he built.” Since Trump’s star turn on the NBC reality show “The Apprentice,” the Trump Organization had mainly sold the use of his name. Most of its profits came from developers who flew the Trump flag over buildings that he didn’t build or own, or from businesses that used his name to sell shirts, mattresses, or pizza. If Trump tried to off-load his whole company, Dillon explained, a buyer might overpay in order “to curry favor with the President,” or, just as worrisome, might demean the highest office in the land by crassly cashing in on the President’s name. Trump and his family, Dillon declared, would never do anything that might “be perceived to be exploitive of the office of the Presidency.”

That was a different era. Dillon’s firm stopped representing Trump in 2021, after the mob he stirred up attacked the U.S. Capitol. And in Trump’s second term the President and his family have paid no mind to their lawyer’s promise. During Trump’s first term, they pledged to abstain from any new deals overseas. That’s out the window. The Trumps are now cashing in on five major deals in the Persian Gulf alone. Donald, Jr., on a recent visit to Qatar, said that the family’s restraint during the first Trump Administration had not stopped his father’s critics from constantly accusing the family of “profiteering.” So the Trumps would no longer lock themselves in “a proverbial padded room, because it almost doesn’t matter—they’re going to hit you no matter what.” (A spokeswoman for the Trump Organization told me that it employs an outside ethics adviser—currently, Karina Lynch, a lawyer and a lobbyist who previously worked as a Republican Senate staffer and has represented Donald, Jr.—to “avoid even the appearance of impropriety.”)

Many payments now flowing to Trump, his wife, and his children and their spouses would be unimaginable without his Presidencies: a two-billion-dollar investment from a fund controlled by the Saudi crown prince; a luxury jet from the Emir of Qatar; profits from at least five different

ventures peddling crypto; fees from an exclusive club stocked with Cabinet officials and named Executive Branch. Fred Wertheimer, the dean of ethics-reform advocates, told me that, “when it comes to using his public office to amass personal profits, Trump is a unicorn—no one else even comes close.” Yet the public has largely shrugged. In a recent article for the *Times*, Peter Baker, a White House correspondent, wrote that the Trumps “have done more to monetize the presidency than anyone who has ever occupied the White House.” But Baker noted that the brazenness of the Trump family’s “moneymaking schemes” appears to have made such transactions seem almost normal.

How much money does it all amount to? What’s the number? In March, *Forbes*, known for ranking the wealth of billionaires, estimated that Trump’s net worth had more than doubled in the previous year, surpassing five billion dollars. In July, the *Times* put Trump’s wealth at upward of ten billion. Yet both estimates included billions of dollars in paper profits that would almost certainly disintegrate if the Trumps pulled out of certain investments. (What’s Truth Social worth without him?) These estimates also included assets untainted by any obvious exploitation of the Presidency, such as properties that Trump owned before entering office, or fees paid by resort customers who simply want to play golf or book a hotel room.

Although the notion that Trump is making colossal sums off the Presidency has become commonplace, nobody could tell me how much he’s made. Norm Eisen, a government-ethics lawyer and a vocal Trump critic, said, “We don’t know the full amounts.” Robert Weissman, a co-president of the left-leaning advocacy group Public Citizen, said, “We will never really know.” Wertheimer noted that for decades Trump had boasted constantly, and in detail, about how rich he was. “He doesn’t talk about it anymore,” Wertheimer said. “He may be the greatest con artist in American history.”

A more considered accounting seemed in order. I decided to attempt to tally up just how much Trump and his immediate family have pocketed off his time in the White House.

In financial terms, the Presidency came to Trump at a fortuitous moment. Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig, the *Times* reporters who obtained some of Trump’s tax returns, conclude in their book, “Lucky Loser,” that by 2015

he had burned through much of the vast fortune passed on to him by his self-made father—an inheritance worth as much as half a billion dollars today. If Trump had put that money into the stock market, he could have ended up much richer. His life style also guzzled money. In 1990, in a deal to keep the Trump Organization out of bankruptcy, his lenders agreed that he needed four hundred and fifty thousand dollars a month just to make ends meet.

“The Apprentice,” on which he played the outsized version of himself that he has always tried to project to the world, once covered his losses. In the seven years following its début, in 2004, the show paid him $135.2 million. And its glamorizing effect allowed him to make money without buying or building anything, just by licensing his name and selling endorsements. Nearly all the real-estate projects he announced during this period—from Hawaii to Israel—were licensing deals. Licensing and endorsements made him $103.2 million in riskless profit. “I don’t want to say it was free revenue,” Donald, Jr., later testified in a New York court. But he did allow that the company’s licensing business was “a pretty spectacular system.”

Yet even the “Apprentice” windfall wasn’t always enough to keep Trump in the black. According to annual reports that the Trumps sent their lenders from 2011 to 2017, during those years Trump brought in $259 million from television and licensing contracts, but, thanks to his habit of overspending on properties, he still reported a negative cash flow of $46.8 million. Dwindling viewership numbers had killed “The Apprentice” in 2010, and by 2015 its doubly gimmicky offspring, “The Celebrity Apprentice,” was ailing, too. Trump’s licensing, endorsement, and “Apprentice” income fell to $22 million that year. Buettner and Craig note that between 2014 and 2016 Trump sold about $220 million in stock—nearly all his stock holdings—apparently to make up for losses as that income tapered off. Then, on June 16, 2015, Trump launched his first Presidential campaign with a speech in which he described Mexican immigrants as criminals and “rapists.” NBC kicked him off the air. Macy’s, Serta, and Phillips-Van Heusen ended endorsement deals.

After Trump won the election, lawsuits filed in the backlash against his Presidency added some big new expenses. By the start of his second term,

he owed nearly five hundred million dollars to New York State, which had sued him for fraud, and more than $88 million to E. Jean Carroll, who had sued him for sexual assault and defamation. (Appeals are still pending.) Trump, in short, was in a tight spot when he first entered the White House and in an even tighter one when he returned. Just six months later, his financial situation has vastly improved.

Trump's critics often describe his Administration as an oligarchy or a kleptocracy, conjuring parallels with Vladimir Putin. Yet experts who track international corruption told me that this is going too far. Global titans of self-dealing—such as Najib Razik, Malaysia's former Prime Minister—divert vast sums from national coffers directly into their bank accounts. U.S. prosecutors have charged that Razik stole about four and a half billion dollars, including by transferring about seven hundred million into his personal accounts. Nobody has credibly accused Trump of simply embezzling payments to the I.R.S. Gary Kalman, the executive director at the U.S. branch of the corruption watchdog Transparency International, cautioned against "making stuff up just because everything is believable."

Critics of Trump's "oligarchy" invariably point to his relationship with Elon Musk. Musk contributed more than $290 million to back Trump and other Republicans in 2024. Trump then gave him an Administration role with seemingly extralegal power to reorder federal agencies; all the while, Musk's businesses Tesla, SpaceX, and Starlink were profiting from government contracts or subsidies. In March, the President performed in what was effectively a television commercial on the White House lawn. Trump, after announcing that he would purchase a red Tesla parked there, declared, "It's a great product—as good as it gets." All that may be unseemly. Yet every American political campaign relies on private donations. All modern Presidents have sold access for campaign money, and all have rewarded donors with political appointments—especially ambassadorships.

More important, campaign-finance laws restrict how Trump can use his political war chest. Since reëntering the White House, Trump has raised the record-breaking sum of six hundred million dollars for his political operation. He can tap into that reserve to attack congressional enemies, and

he can direct it toward other campaigns. (Donald, Jr., has contemplated a Presidential run.) Yet the money generally can't bankroll personal expenses. In the campaign-money game, Trump plays at an Olympian level, but he hasn't changed the rules.

Cartoon by P. S. Mueller

Personal self-enrichment is where Trump is a true innovator, and his winnings in that category are also harder to quantify. On his tax returns, Trump has aggressively minimized the value of his assets and maximized the extent of his losses. On loan applications, he's done the opposite, puffing up his wealth to borrow as much as possible. And on the financial-disclosure forms he's been required to file as a candidate or as President, he usually provides only a business's gross revenue, not its bottom line, thus reporting tens of millions of dollars in "income" from hotels that are actually losing money.

Bruce Dubinsky, a forensic accountant who testified in the fraud trial of Bernie Madoff and investigated the collapse of Lehman Brothers as a part of its bankruptcy, closely followed Trump's New York fraud trial. Dubinsky told me that the opaque ownership structure of the Trump businesses makes it difficult to assess changes in his net worth. It's similarly hard to isolate his Presidential profits, in part because estimating how much his businesses might have made if he weren't President would require detailed

comparisons with similar enterprises that have non-Presidential owners. By way of example, Dubinsky, who lives in Florida, noted that he'd recently visited the Trump golf course in Jupiter, "just to play golf." He added, "So how much value to assign to his status as President is a daunting task."

That blurriness is why ethics experts say that *any* outside business can pose a conflict of interest and may open a conduit for bribery. But, propriety aside, I was after a fair, dispassionate quantification of the Trumps' profits from two Presidencies. Mar-a-Lago, the for-profit club that has become the *MAGA* mecca and the weekend White House, was an obvious place to start.

MAR-A-LAGO

In 2016, Trump, while running for President, was also suing a restaurateur for cutting ties over his bigoted comments about Mexican immigrants. In a deposition that summer, Trump testified that the Presidential race had so far had no "huge impact" on his hotel and resort businesses, which were "fairly steady." One exception, he said, was Mar-a-Lago, the Palm Beach estate he'd turned into a private club after acquiring it, in 1985, for roughly ten million dollars. As though surprised by a happy accident, Trump testified that, according to the club's manager, the campaign had given Mar-a-Lago "the best year we've ever had."

If many Presidents have traded access for campaign donations, only Trump has run a business selling an open-ended opportunity to mingle with him and his circle. In addition to the revenue he generated by holding his own campaign events at his club, he has profited from other candidates, conservative groups, and influence seekers rushing to hold events there, too. The club says that it limits membership to five hundred people; each reportedly pays an annual fee of about twenty thousand dollars. But after the 2016 election Trump began jacking up the initiation fee. In 2016, it was a hundred thousand dollars; last fall, it was set to rise to a million.

Trump's financial-disclosure forms indicate that since 2014 Mar-a-Lago's annual revenue has jumped from ten million dollars to fifty million. At the same time, *Forbes* reported, operating costs have been stable, ranging from twelve million to sixteen million dollars a year. Adding it all up, I calculated that Trump's Presidencies have brought him at least $125 million in extra profits from Mar-a-Lago.

Estimated gain: $125 million

LEGAL FEES AND TRUMP MERCH

Although candidates cannot pocket campaign contributions, no President has ever tried as hard as Trump to siphon off at least some of that money. According to the nonprofit OpenSecrets, in the past decade Trump's campaigns have spent more than twenty million dollars at his own hotels and resorts, contributing to Mar-a-Lago's spike in profits. But how much, if any, of this money reached his personal accounts is impossible to guess.

Trump's 2016 and 2024 campaign operations paid him a total of eighteen million dollars for the use of his own Boeing 757—the so-called Trump Force One. (Air Force One ferried him around during the 2020 campaign, as is standard for a sitting President.) But Barack Obama, in 2008, and Mitt Romney, in 2012, each spent a comparable sum to charter campaign planes.

Trump, however, is the first Presidential candidate to run a private online store that competes against his own campaign in selling campaign-style merch, effectively diverting his supporters' money into his own pocket. It's as if a fashion designer had set up a table in front of a department store to sell knockoffs of his own company's products, at the expense of its shareholders. Among the Trump Store's wares: a red "Gulf of America" baseball hat (fifty dollars), a pair of Trump beer koozies (eighteen dollars), and Trump flip-flops (forty dollars). Buyers might well believe that such purchases fund the *MAGA* cause or its candidates, yet Trump's financial-disclosure forms indicate that he has made more than seventeen million dollars in income from such sales. At those prices—with negligible marketing expenses, thanks to his role as head of state—that income is surely almost all profit. Trump's most recent disclosure form also listed licensing income of $1.1 million from a Trump guitar, $2.8 million from Trump watches, $2.5 million from "sneakers and fragrances," $3 million from an illustrated book called "Save America," and $1.3 million from a "God Bless the USA" Bible. That adds up to at least $27.7 million from faux campaign paraphernalia.

A political campaign fund cannot pay a candidate's personal legal bills. But Trump found a loophole: a campaign fund *can* be converted into a political-

action committee, and the looser restrictions on a *PAC* allow the use of donor funds to pay such expenses. Through his *PAC*s, Trump has spent more than a hundred million dollars of his supporters' contributions to defend himself against an array of charges: that he defamed E. Jean Carroll while denying her account of his sexual assault, that he fraudulently hid a payoff to a porn star during the 2016 campaign, that he conspired to overturn the results of the 2020 election, and that he stole and hid classified documents after leaving the White House. Unless all those charges are part of a vast deep-state conspiracy, relieving Trump of the bills looks like a hundred-million-dollar gift for personal expenses.

Estimated gain: $127.7 million
Running total: $252.7 million

THE D.C. HOTEL

During the President's first term, no business figured more prominently in Democratic allegations of corruption than did the Trump International Hotel in Washington. Zach Everson, who wrote an online newsletter about the scene there, told me that the hotel was "the epicenter of the swamp." Foreign leaders booked blocks of rooms. Industry trade groups held conventions. Lobbyists, lawmakers, and Cabinet officials crowded the bar. Trump often visited; staff told Everson that tips suffered because guests stayed at their tables to gawk until the President left. If you wanted to curry his favor, where else in Washington would you stay? In 2018, when T-Mobile was seeking regulatory approval to acquire Sprint, John Legere, then T-Mobile's chief executive, was spotted there. In ten months, he and other company executives spent nearly two hundred thousand dollars at the hotel; Legere denied any scheme to influence the White House and said he was a "longtime Trump-hotel stayer." (The merger was approved.)

All this patronage surely flattered Trump's ego, but it never fattened his wallet. The hotel lost money each year of his first term—a total of more than seventy million dollars. Industry executives familiar with the hotel's operations told me that Trump's Presidency repelled as many potential customers as it attracted. Many foreign leaders, lobbyists, and executives who might otherwise have paid handsomely for the Trump hotel's location and luxury stayed elsewhere, fearing entanglement in an influence scandal.

(T-Mobile's Legere endured a grilling on Capitol Hill about his choice of accommodations.) In the two years after Trump's election, hotels in Toronto, New York, Rio de Janeiro, and Panama City that had licensed the Trump name ditched it, presumably in part because it was driving away business. A Hawaii hotel followed suit in 2023.

Trump had agreed in 2012 to pay the federal government at least three million dollars a year for a long-term lease of the D.C. building, a former post-office headquarters, and to invest at least two hundred million in renovations. The hotel opened in 2016, and Trump sold it in 2022 for $375 million. Craig and Buettner, after reviewing his tax returns, conclude that he roughly broke even. Hilton Hotels took over the management, under its Waldorf Astoria brand, and people familiar with its operations said that its financial performance has improved markedly.

During Trump's first term, Trump Turnberry, his golf resort in Scotland, also drew allegations of improper Presidential self-enrichment, because the U.S. military sometimes paid to put up service members there during overnight stops at the nearby Prestwick Airport. During the twenty-three months ending in July, 2019, the Pentagon spent at least a hundred and eighty-four thousand dollars at Trump Turnberry (at a discounted nightly room rate averaging $189.04).

Yet that property, too, lost money all four years of the first Trump Administration. It finally entered the black in 2022. And U.S. service members continued to stay there under President Joe Biden. An Air Force spokesman told me that there had been "no change" in the military's use of the facility: "Aircrews are allowed to select the Trump Turnberry Resort, along with other hotel options in the area, if the lodging meets specific criteria of availability, suitability, expense, and proximity."

Spending at Trump's hotels by government agencies and influence seekers looked to me like a wash.

Estimated gain: $0
Running total: $252.7 million

THE PERSIAN GULF

The Persian Gulf has posed a unique commercial opportunity and ethical challenge for the first Commander-in-Chief who's also a real-estate salesman. The Gulf's Arab monarchs play complementary double roles: each is both a head of state and a major buyer of U.S. real estate and other assets. The Gulf royals put money in the very kinds of properties and investments that Trump's family sells. In a recent interview with Tucker Carlson, Steve Witkoff, Trump's Middle East envoy and a fellow real-estate mogul, expressed delight that the mind-set of Gulf rulers facilitates dealmaking: "Everybody's a business guy there!" But these business guys were deeply entangled with the Trump crowd. Trump, Witkoff, and others in the two Trump Administrations—including Jared Kushner, the husband of Trump's daughter Ivanka—had sold or tried to sell assets to the Gulf's ruling families before entering government. And both sides can expect to do business again once Trump leaves office.

Unlike heads of state in, say, Western Europe, the Gulf monarchs wield extraordinary power over the businesses of their subjects. A Gulf monarch controls the fossil-fuel revenue that ultimately drives every enterprise in his country, from the lowliest shawarma stand to the finest resort. And he is unconstrained by independent courts or Western-style laws that might protect private interests. The richer a Gulf tycoon, the more he must depend on his sovereign's good will. So a deal with a private firm is sometimes not much different from a deal with a ruler.

During the 2016 Republican primaries, Trump boasted of having sold condos to Saudis: "They buy apartments from me. They spend forty million, fifty million. Am I supposed to dislike them? I like them very much." Nevertheless, he'd struggled to make licensing deals in the Gulf. The few developers outside North America willing to pay for the use of his family name were mostly building condominiums in lower-rent parts of the developing world. He'd made hundreds of thousands of dollars a year licensing his name for a two-tower project in Istanbul. (On his three most recent annual disclosure forms, he reported receiving $489,182, $392,360, and $288,061. Reporting periods can be irregular.) He'd also licensed his name for four apartment towers in India, six in South Korea, one in the Philippines, and another in Uruguay. (Resorts or other planned ventures in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and elsewhere fell through after he was elected.)

Trump’s only beachhead in the Gulf was a deal with Hussain Sajwani, the tycoon close to Emirati rulers. In 2013, Sajwani, the self-styled “Donald of Dubai,” had agreed to pay the Trump Organization to manage a Trump-branded golf course, surrounded by villas, in Dubai.

When Trump was running for President in 2016, at least one emissary from the campaign suggested to the Emirati rulers that Trump’s deal with Sajwani gave them an in. Tom Barrack, Trump’s friend and informal adviser, wrote in an e-mail to the Emirati Ambassador, Yousef Al Otaiba, that Trump “has joint ventures in the U.A.E.!”

“It appears your house was built on an ancient Smurf burial ground.”
Cartoon by David Borchart

Barrack prompted the U.A.E. to begin courting Kushner, Trump’s incoming Middle East adviser, and this effort appeared to pay off stunningly. Through Kushner, the Emiratis helped persuade Trump to travel to the Persian Gulf for his first Presidential trip abroad. They also helped get Trump to support their preferred heir to the Saudi throne, Mohammed bin Salman, now the crown prince and de-facto ruler, instead of a royal cousin who’d long been the American favorite. Most remarkably, in 2017 Trump supported the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia in a feud with neighboring Qatar. The Emiratis and the Saudis had accused their regional rival of supporting Islamist movements, and organized a blockade designed to starve the country. Qatar is a Pentagon partner, largely funding an American airbase west of Doha, and Trump’s stance contradicted the positions of his Secretaries of State and Defense. (The Saudis and the Emiratis patched things up with Qatar at the end of Trump’s first term; he and the rulers involved now act like the blockade never happened.)

Had the payments for the Dubai golf course helped the Emiratis win Trump's favor? Would a deal with the Trump Organization have protected Qatar? A senior official of a Gulf state told me that the region's rulers now view business with Trump "as a kind of safeguard."

It did not take long after Trump's first term for his family to return to the Gulf. He had left the White House in disgrace following the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol, but the scandal didn't dislodge him from his position as a political kingmaker. Kevin McCarthy, the House Republican leader, had to make a pilgrimage to Mar-a-Lago to atone for declaring that Trump must accept responsibility for instigating the riot. Yet Trump and his family were now liberated from the duties of public office, and freer than ever to cash in on his status as the once and future President.

Kushner went first. During Trump's first term, he'd quietly backed Mohammed bin Salman during the prince's consolidation of power in Riyadh, even pushing Trump to stand by him after Saudi agents murdered Jamal Khashoggi, a Washington *Post* columnist and a Virginia resident. Shortly after leaving the White House, Kushner asked the Saudi sovereign wealth fund to invest two billion dollars with a private-equity firm that he was founding, Affinity Partners.

The Saudi fund's panel of investment advisers unanimously objected. Kushner had worked almost exclusively in real estate and never in private equity, and he was asking the Saudis to put up a vast sum when no American had invested a penny. The panel called the management fee that Kushner wanted—1.25 per cent of the firm's assets, or $25 million, each year—"excessive," given his lack of relevant experience. The advisers also worried about a "public relations" problem: the deal might look like a payoff.

The Saudi fund's board, controlled by the crown prince, ignored the advice. Two billion dollars it was. Emirati and Qatari investors soon kicked in hundreds of millions more. Terry Gou, the Taiwanese businessman and politician who founded the manufacturing giant Foxconn and maintains close ties to China's leaders, also invested. (While in the White House, Kushner helped arrange subsidies for a Foxconn factory in Wisconsin.) And in 2024, as Trump was poised to retake the Presidency, Kushner's firm

raised an additional $1.5 billion from the Qataris and Emiratis, bringing its assets under management to $4.8 billion.

If all the investors besides the Saudis pay the industry-standard management fee of two per cent a year, Affinity's annual revenue comes to $81 million. Under conventional private-equity terms, Kushner's firm, after repaying management fees, can keep an additional twenty per cent of any returns on its investments (although Kushner agreed to share some of that with the Saudis). That cut of the profits is typically the biggest windfall for a private-equity firm, and reports indicate that at least some of Kushner's early investments, including in an Israeli financial firm and a German fitness company, are paying off. But even if Kushner fails utterly—a renewable-energy lender that his fund invested in, Solar Mosaic, recently filed for bankruptcy, in part because of Trump policy changes—Affinity still stands to take in $810 million over ten years, a typical life span for such a fund.

Congressional Democrats have asked if Kushner might be selling influence as part of the deal. Since leaving the Trump Administration, Kushner has described himself as an informal foreign-policy adviser to his father-in-law and to members of Congress. He's also reportedly conversed with the Saudi crown prince about such foreign-policy matters as relations with Israel, and at a conference last year he said that, thanks to his White House experience, he and his firm could "do things on the geopolitical side, on the connections side."

Last fall, Senator Ron Wyden, of Oregon, and Representative Jamie Raskin, of Maryland, unsuccessfully urged the Biden Administration's Department of Justice to appoint a special counsel to investigate whether Kushner was illegally acting as an unregistered foreign agent. In a public letter, Wyden and Raskin argued that "the Saudi government's decision to engage Affinity for investment advice" appeared to be "a fig leaf for funneling money directly to Mr. Kushner and his wife, Ivanka Trump," possibly "to curry favor" or "reward them for favorable U.S. policy towards Saudi Arabia during the first Trump administration." (Kushner called the letter a political stunt, and has argued that critical coverage of the Saudi deal only helps his firm. Although journalists "think they're writing a bad thing," he told

Forbes, businesspeople who read those articles discover “that I’m very trusted by my partners.”)

Affinity’s fees, of course, must cover overhead, from staff compensation to office space. But Kushner is the founder and sole owner, and it’s unimaginable that the firm could have reaped such sums from those investors without his father-in-law’s Presidencies. We might conservatively assume that he personally keeps between half and two-thirds of Affinity’s fees over ten years. (He will make far more if the fund turns a profit.) Half would be $405 million. On Wall Street, the “present value” of that stream of future income—taking into account the cost of delay—is about $320 million.

Kushner also has real-estate projects in the works that pose additional conflicts of interest for Trump. A partnership with the Serbian government (backed by an Emirati investor) to build a Trump-branded hotel in Belgrade has been derailed by the discovery that its approval was based on a document that a Serbian official allegedly forged. But in January the Albanian government preliminarily approved a partnership with Kushner to build a hundred-and-eleven-acre resort on one of the few undeveloped islands in the Mediterranean. The project is said to entail a $1.4-billion investment. Still, both are real-estate developments—Kushner’s area of expertise. Unlike with the Saudi investment, it’s unfair to attribute those deals entirely to Trump’s public office, and it’s premature to guess what Kushner or his investors in the projects might someday earn. It is safest to say only that his private-equity firm has added at least $320 million to the family’s Presidential profits.

Estimated gain: $320 million
Running total: $572.7 million

MORE SAUDI DEALS

Trump’s first business with the Saudis upon leaving the White House involved golf. After the Capitol riot, the P.G.A. of America cancelled a contract to hold its televised championship the next year at his course in Bedminster, New Jersey, depriving Trump of valuable publicity. Fortunately for him, Saudi Arabia was launching its own pro-golf association, *LIV*, and

it agreed to hold a televised tournament at Bedminster. (The next year, *LIV* announced a “framework agreement” to merge with the P.G.A. Tour; the deal hasn’t yet closed.)

But holding the *LIV* tournament at Bedminster may have made sense for both parties even if Trump had never been President. Trump has said that he got only “peanuts” from *LIV*, and that’s normal: clubs host such events mainly for publicity. The Saudis, for their part, secured access to a nice golf course at a time when many wouldn’t welcome them, given their human-rights record and *LIV*’s rivalry with the P.G.A. Tour. This alliance of pariahs may have drawn Trump and the Saudis closer together, but it’s hard to say that he benefitted more than they did. And not much money changed hands.

The Trump Organization has recently signed or completed some deals to license the President’s name for real-estate projects that extended the company’s “Apprentice”-era business model. Before the President took office in 2017, a businessman and politician in Indonesia had licensed the Trump name for two golf projects. One opened in 2025; the other is still in the works. A longtime Trump Organization partner in India is adding six Trump residential projects to the four that predated Trump’s election. Indians evidently wanted to live in Trump towers even when he was just a fading reality-television star.

Cartoon by Will McPhail

A recent rush of Saudi investments in Trump-branded real estate in the Gulf, however, would be hard to fathom without the Trump Presidencies. By 2020, with Trump’s image tarnished by his tumultuous political career, many developers saw less economic value in his name than they once had.

The number of international developers paying to license his name had fallen to five, down from eleven before he ran for President.

But in November, 2022, Trump, after becoming the presumptive Republican Presidential nominee, announced an anomalous new deal. Dar Al Arkan, a Saudi real-estate company, had agreed to pay the Trump Organization to manage both a Trump hotel and a Trump golf course at a vast cliffside development in Muscat, Oman. In addition, Trump would likely get a cut from sales of villas surrounding the course. (The Sultan of Oman is also a partner.) The project, when completed, will be the Trump Organization's first hotel-management deal overseas. Small-scale managers like the Trump Organization—which currently runs just eight hotels—can typically land only ten-year contracts. But the Oman project reportedly made a three-decade commitment. Developers tend to grant such terms to behemoths like Hilton or Marriott, whose scale enables them to lower costs and attract customers in ways that the Trumps never could.

In the months after Trump's reëlection, Donald, Jr., and Eric signed a blitz of licensing deals with the same Saudi company, for major projects in Riyadh, Jeddah, Dubai, and Doha. Given that the family has acknowledged trying for decades to plant the Trump flag in the Gulf, these mega-deals are inconceivable without Trump's Presidency.

How much are they all paying? After the pandemic, the financial performance of the Dubai golf course stabilized. Trump reported on his last three annual disclosure forms that managing the course paid him $1,283,889, $1,109,950, and $1,078,967. He now stands to make at least a million dollars a year as long as Sajwani renews the management contract—and Sajwani would be foolish to cancel while Trump is President. I estimated that Trump, by the end of his second term, will have made more than nine million dollars from managing that course.

Golf-industry experts say that, in effect, the Trump Organization merely oversees the local operations of the club and probably keeps more than eighty per cent of those fees as profit. That would net Trump about $7.2 million. In addition, the licensing fees from the Dubai golf course which Trump reported on his last three disclosure forms totalled $9.7 million;

much of this money likely comes from his cut of sales of condos around the course. Such fees are usually almost all profit.

Trump's new Gulf deals are even more lucrative. Although the Oman project isn't scheduled to open until 2028, Trump has reported on his three most recent annual disclosure forms a total of $8.8 million in licensing income from it; this presumably includes a cut of villa presales.

He will also manage new golf courses in Muscat, Riyadh, and Doha; extrapolating from the one in Dubai, these three could bring in more than $24 million in profit in their first ten years. (Present value: $19 million.) Moreover, Trump's name will hang on four other new condo or villa projects, in Riyadh, Jeddah, Dubai, and Doha. Taking the average of his licensing fees from the similar projects in Dubai and Muscat, we might estimate that each one brings in nine million dollars in profit in the first three years of sales—for a total of $36 million. (He recently reported five million dollars in licensing fees just a few months after announcing the Dar Al Arkan project in Dubai, suggesting even higher profits.)

Another prize will be the management and licensing fees from planned hotels at the projects in Dubai and Muscat. Because the Trumps had never managed an overseas hotel before, I looked at the income from a Trump-branded hotel in Honolulu. Before its owners took down his name, it typically brought him about two million dollars a year in licensing and management fees, according to his financial-disclosure forms. Assuming thirty-year deals at both Gulf hotels and extrapolating from the Hawaiian model, managing the two hotels for the full term might bring in $120 million in fees.

To break out Trump's bottom line, I spoke to Dan Wasiolek, a hospitality analyst at Morningstar, an investment-research firm. (He has been willing to speak publicly about the Trump Organization's finances; many prefer to avoid the President's wrath.) Wasiolek told me that a typical profit margin on hotel-management fees is about sixty-five per cent. That would net Trump $78 million (present value: $42 million)—but he'll probably make much more, because some of that is all-profit licensing income. In all, the Gulf projects that the Trump Organization has signed since 2022 are worth at least $105.8 million.

Estimated gain: $105.8 million
Running total: $678.5 million

THE PRIVATE JET

In May, the President returned from formal state visits to Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., and Qatar with his most unusual deal so far, one without any pretense of a sale. He announced that the Emir of Qatar had agreed to make a “free gift” of a royal Boeing 747-8 for Trump’s use as a flashy Presidential jet. Trump characterized the transfer as a boon for American taxpayers: the Air Force would retain ownership of the plane until he left office. Yet Trump also said that the Pentagon would then pass the jet to his Presidential-library foundation. This “free gift” looked enough like a personal favor that the Emir has requested a memorandum of understanding confirming that it’s a donation from one government to another, in order to protect him from allegations of bribery. He also wants it in writing that Qatar didn’t propose the handover, and made it only at the President’s request. (A Qatari official told me that negotiations are ongoing.)

In the end, Trump may never get to enjoy it. Upgrading the plane to meet Presidential-security requirements could cost more than a billion dollars, which would normally require appropriation by Congress, and the work might not be finished before Trump leaves office. Still, on May 21st, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth announced that he’d accepted the jet.

The Qataris bought the plane from Boeing thirteen years ago. Its list price was $367 million. The *Times* reported that it might sell on the used-jet market for a hundred and fifty million. Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, told me in an e-mail that “any gift given by a foreign government is always accepted in full compliance with all applicable laws.” But it’s risible to suggest that the jet would have been offered to any President but Trump. Perhaps the Gulf rulers see such transactions as a form of insurance—a way to avoid the kind of hardship that befell Qatar during Trump’s first Administration. The payments may also have bought good will. Trump, standing near Mohammed bin Salman on the recent trip to Saudi Arabia, unexpectedly announced that he would end sanctions against Syria—currently led by a former Al Qaeda fighter who is trying to prove that he has reformed. “Oh, what I do for the crown prince,” Trump reflected

aloud. During his first term, Trump had disappointed the Arab Gulf rulers by declining to retaliate against their regional nemesis, Iran, after an attack on the Saudi oil-processing facility at Abqaiq. In June, when Trump ordered air strikes on Iran, the Arab monarchs surely cheered.

Estimated gain: $150 million
Running total: $828.5 million

TRUMP HOTEL HANOI

In September, 2024, with polls forecasting Trump's likely return to office, Tô Lâm, the General Secretary of Vietnam's ruling Communist Party, visited New York and dispatched a Central Committee member to wrap up a Trump resort deal. The Central Committee member oversaw the signing of an agreement between the Party committee of Hung Yen Province and a consortium of investors arranged by the Trump Organization. The same day, Trump took time away from the campaign to join Eric in signing an agreement with a Vietnamese company, known for its office parks, that will build the property and pay the Trumps for the use of their name. The planned development, with a projected cost of $1.5 billion, will include a hotel, residences, and fifty-four holes of golf, occupying an area three times the size of Central Park. It appears to be the largest Trump-branded development in the world.

Trump's past levies on imports from China spurred businesses to shift operations to Vietnam, and exports to the U.S. now account for about a third of Vietnam's economy. Trump's protectionist tariffs therefore pose both a threat and an opportunity to Vietnam, giving it a singular incentive to cultivate his good will.

Perhaps with that in mind, Vietnamese authorities have expedited the resort project, overriding local laws and procedures. In a letter obtained by the *Times*, Vietnamese officials said that they were accelerating the project because it is "receiving special attention from the Trump Administration and President Donald Trump personally."

Would this deal have happened in this form if Trump had retired to Mar-a-Lago in 2021? Unlikely. On his most recent financial-disclosure form,

Trump reported five million dollars in initial income from licensing his name to the project, which is expected to open in 2027. The development's huge scale and the unique character of the Vietnamese market make projecting profits difficult. Even if the deal extends for just ten years and the Trump Organization makes only as much each year as it did in the first few months, that will be fifty million dollars. (Present value: $40 million.) Judging from other Trump licensing deals, the actual profits will likely be higher.

In July, Trump said that he had reached a provisional trade agreement with Vietnam. He had been threatening a forty-six-per-cent tariff, but he said that the new deal lowered that to twenty per cent. The Vietnamese, contradicting him, have insisted that they are negotiating for an even lower rate.

Estimated gain: $40 million
Running total: $868.5 million

THE CORPORATE SQUEEZE

In a 2016 law-review article, Susan Seager, a First Amendment lawyer and a professor at the University of California, Irvine School of Law, described Trump as a "libel loser." In the past five decades, he has lost or withdrawn a dozen suits against media companies, and failed to follow through on many other threats. The handful of claims that he filed after leaving the White House all seemed certain to end similarly. Last spring, for example, he sued ABC News for defamation because its anchor George Stephanopoulos said that a court had found Trump "liable for rape." The court had found Trump liable for sexually abusing and defaming E. Jean Carroll, and the judge had emphasized that Carroll had *not* failed to prove "that Mr. Trump 'raped' her as many people commonly understand the word." To win his lawsuit, Trump would have to prove that Stephanopoulos spoke with "actual malice"—a seemingly insurmountable burden.

But after the election ABC News, a unit of Disney, abruptly settled the case. Confronting a plaintiff who now held enormous sway over its future regulation, Disney agreed to pay fifteen million dollars to Trump's Presidential-library foundation—the same nonprofit that will presumably take ownership of the Qatari jet.

Trump also sued Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram. After January 6, 2021, Meta, having concluded that he'd used its platforms to incite violence, suspended his accounts. His suit's tenuous claim was that Meta had somehow violated his First Amendment rights by yielding to pressure from Democratic officials. Yet, a month after ABC's payment, Meta settled, too, paying $22 million to Trump's "library." Then X, formerly known as Twitter and now owned by Elon Musk, reportedly paid about ten million dollars to settle a similar suit. (X has not said whether the company is paying the nonprofit or Trump himself.) In July, CBS News, a unit of Paramount, agreed to pay the nonprofit sixteen million dollars to settle a lawsuit over which snippets of an interview with Kamala Harris it had chosen to broadcast.

Media-law experts considered all of Trump's recent claims ridiculous. Trump appears to be the first sitting President or Presidential nominee in American history to sue for libel or defamation. Such contests could never be fair—a sitting President holds too much power over any defendant. "None of these companies would have settled if Trump weren't President and wielding power over mergers and regulations and government contracts," Seager said. Yet most of the settlements, like the Qatari jet, were paid to Trump's foundation. Should they count as personal profits?

Twenty-five years ago, President Bill Clinton endured an epic scandal related to a much smaller contribution to a similar nonprofit. Denise Rich, a Democratic donor, gave four hundred and fifty thousand dollars to his Presidential-library foundation, and Clinton, on his final day in office, pardoned her ex-husband, Marc Rich, a tax dodger and a sanctions evader who'd fled to Switzerland. Presidents George W. Bush, Obama, and Biden followed stricter procedures to avoid any appearance of selling a pardon, even for campaign donations. Trump has had no such qualms. The *Times* reported that he pardoned Paul Walczak, another wealthy tax evader, shortly after Walczak's mother paid a million dollars to attend a Trump fund-raiser. Walczak's pardon application reportedly cited his mother's contributions to Trump and to other Republicans.

The Walczak payments, though, were political funds, which politicians cannot use as personal piggy banks. Presidential-library foundations have

far fewer restrictions. The board of the Trump-library foundation consists of one of his lawyers, one of his sons, and one of his sons-in-law. The foundation needs only to adhere to the purpose stated in its articles of incorporation: “To preserve and steward the legacy of President Donald J. Trump.” Harvey P. Dale, who heads the N.Y.U. School of Law’s National Center on Philanthropy and the Law, told me that Trump’s foundation couldn’t simply transfer its money to Trump or his sons. But it could feasibly pay for Trump to travel the world. It might even be able to pay him directly, as an adviser. (After all, who knows better how to steward his legacy?) Trevor Potter, the president of the nonprofit Campaign Legal Center and a Republican former chairman of the F.E.C., told me that Trump’s foundation “will constitute an additional account that the former President will control and can use to benefit his post-Presidential life style.” That’s why I counted the Qatari jet as personal profit. The same applies to the settlement payments.

With another media giant, Amazon, the Trumps worked more directly. In December, over dinner at Mar-a-Lago, Melania Trump pitched Jeff Bezos, Amazon’s chairman, on a documentary that she hoped to produce about her return to the White House. The competition for the rights was flaccid: the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Disney had offered fourteen million dollars; Netflix and Apple had declined to bid. But Amazon agreed to pay forty million dollars. Of course, former Presidents and their wives routinely earn gigantic advances for memoirs. Yet First Couples have customarily waited until they’ve left office to open those auctions, avoiding the appearance that they might be selling influence. Amazon’s data-center business and Bezos’s Blue Origin space-travel company both receive billions of dollars in government contracts. Melania Trump’s cut of Amazon’s payment is reportedly about $28 million.

Estimated gain: $91 million
Running total: $959.5 million

TRUTH SOCIAL

In October, 2021, Trump announced a plan to launch his own social-media platform, Truth Social. The social-media market was crowded. Yet Trump, who had formed a shell company for the platform, said that he had already

agreed to a lucrative merger. His shell company was combining with Digital World Acquisition Corp., a financial contrivance called a special-purpose acquisition company. *spac*s, a Wall Street fad at the time, are also known as blank-check companies. A *spac*'s sponsor raises capital through an initial public offering of shares in an empty vessel that operates no business at all. The offering sells only a pledge that the *spac* will use its funding to buy some enticing enterprise. Digital World, headed by a Miami financier friendly with Trump, had raised $293 million, and it agreed to put that money into a merger with the Truth Social shell. The combined company, now called Trump Media & Technology Group, then handed Trump a roughly sixty-per-cent stake and named him its chairman. His share of the $293 million was equivalent to $175 million. (In a press release, Trump Media projected that, on the stock market, the combined company would be worth $1.7 billion, making the President's stake worth more than a billion dollars.)

In retrospect, this chain of promises looks like a watershed moment in Trump's evolution from builder to entertainer to pitchman to political entrepreneur. At each stage, he has hawked products that are harder and harder to measure or touch.

Any money that the President makes from Trump Media unquestionably depends on his status as the former and current Commander-in-Chief. The company's customer base is the *MAGA* movement. And Trump releases news-making Presidential statements exclusively through Truth Social, exploiting his public position to draw attention to his private platform. But how much of that apparent $175 million Trump might pocket is a trickier question. Trump Media's market value has gyrated with its share price, ranging from as high as six billion dollars to as low as $1.6 billion.

Trump Media lost more than four hundred million dollars last year, and in each of the past four quarters the company has brought in only about a million dollars or less in revenue. It has never shared a convincing plan for making Truth Social profitable. Institutional investors call it a meme stock; that is, Trump Media's share price fluctuates with small investors' *feelings* about Trump, regardless of any underlying value. If Trump tried to cash out,

he’d undoubtedly set off a stampede that would trample the stock’s price before he could make off with much.

This past spring, I asked Dubinsky, the forensic accountant, to estimate how much Truth Social had added to Trump’s wealth. Applying metrics used to evaluate other social-media companies, such as daily users (it has about four hundred thousand), Dubinsky put the value of Trump’s stake at between four million and twenty million dollars. Though he considered twenty million “very generous,” to be charitable he suggested adding another five million, putting Trump’s stake at about $25 million. He commented, “I personally would never invest in it.” (In response to detailed questions, Trump Media & Technology Group declined to answer and threatened to sue.)

Estimated gain: $25 million
Running total: $984.5 million

1789 CAPITAL

On January 31st, Ned’s Club, a chain of luxury social clubs with locations in London, New York, and Doha, opened an outpost near the White House. Ned’s is owned by the investor Ronald Burkle, a Democratic donor, who is also the chairman and majority shareholder in Soho House, a kind of sister company. The Washington Ned’s is a joint venture with Michael Milken, the financier who was convicted in 1990 of securities fraud and pardoned in 2020 by Trump. Kellyanne Conway, the former Trump adviser, sits on the club’s membership committee. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, and former Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin have reportedly been seen there.

Regular members pay a five-thousand-dollar entry fee plus five thousand dollars a year; élite members can pay as much as a hundred and twenty five thousand dollars up front and twenty-five thousand a year for access to all Ned’s and Soho House locations. The D.C. Ned’s, which occupies the top three stories of a historic building, has a leafy roof deck overlooking the Mall, three restaurants, and a capacious library that serves cocktails at night.

In April, Donald, Jr., circulated plans for a rival club, Executive Branch, which would initially cap its membership at two hundred people, and charge an initiation fee of up to half a million dollars. A person involved in the club told me that twenty "founding members" paid the half-million-dollar fee; regular members paid closer to a hundred thousand. Donald, Jr., formed the club with his friend Omeed Malik, who is a financier, a Trump donor, and a Mar-a-Lago member; Zack and Alex Witkoff, the sons of President Trump's old friend and current diplomatic envoy Steve Witkoff; and Christopher Buskirk, a conservative writer who is also a Malik associate. Malik told the Washington *Post* that friends from the 2024 Trump campaign "wanted to be able to catch up when our paths crossed in D.C.," adding that Executive Branch's founders sought an "experience comparable to the finest social clubs in the world." He said that its élite members don't need to pay for access because they are "already plugged in." He called the club's name "tongue in cheek."

How do Donald, Jr., and his partners plan to compete against Ned's? Malik, in addition to offering a *MAGA*-friendly atmosphere, has promised to bar journalists and lobbyists. (An exception was made for Jeff Miller, a lobbyist who is a friend of the founders and paid half a million.) The person involved also said that Executive Branch has recruited a renowned chef and a team from Carriage House, a club in Palm Beach. Malik told the Washington *Post* that the club will provide multiple lounge areas and a mezzanine V.I.P. section, creating the atmosphere of an elegant mansion. The New York *Post* reported that Executive Branch had spent ten million dollars on art. Yet it's hard to imagine all that opulence in the venue that the partners have leased: a reported nine-thousand-square-foot subterranean space beneath an unexceptional condominium on a busy avenue in Georgetown, next to a TJ Maxx and an office of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Until March, the space housed a series of bars that struggled to keep out underage drinkers.

Executive Branch held a soft opening for founders in June, and then closed again for the summer, to make final renovations. Perhaps the new club has pulled off an interior-design miracle. Even so, its biggest draw is surely the offer of intimacy with the President's family and their associates. The soft opening drew at least seven Cabinet secretaries.

Donald, Jr.,’s stake in Executive Branch hasn’t been disclosed, and the club’s bottom line is difficult to forecast. (Its ability to attract members *after* Trump leaves the actual executive branch is even more speculative.) The person involved told me that the founders saw the club as a “social vanity project,” comparable to the way many rich people dabble in the arts, and “not a money-making venture at all.” Still, the two hundred memberships have already sold. If twenty founding members paid half a million dollars and the rest paid a hundred thousand dollars, Executive Branch has already generated twenty-eight million. A deluxe renovation of the space, even at the extravagant cost of a thousand dollars a square foot, would still leave more than nineteen million. Given that association with the Trumps and their circle defines the club, Donald, Jr., would be foolish to expect less than a fifth of any profits. That would amount to more than $3.8 million before the club opens. But the person involved, listing various costs, made a strong case that running a high-end club is likely to burn through that sum quickly. Until it opens, then, Executive Branch’s profits remain hypothetical.

“My manager just asked if I have time for a quick call but not if I have the emotional strength. What do I say?”
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

Malik has also paid Donald, Jr., in other ways. In the past several years, investment vehicles founded by Malik have acquired at least one company in which Donald, Jr., had already invested: PublicSquare, an “anti-woke” online marketplace. And Donald, Jr., was an adviser to an online gun retailer, GrabAGun, and received a stake—currently worth about two million dollars—as part of its acquisition by a Malik investment vehicle. Last fall, Malik made Donald, Jr., a partner in a venture-capital firm he co-

founded, 1789 Capital, which looks to apply high-tech solutions to government failures and to exploit opportunities neglected by “woke” thinking. They have raised about a billion dollars for the company’s first fund, from such investors as the conservative mega-donor Rebekah Mercer. A person familiar with 1789 Capital’s fund-raising told me that the firm has also sought investors from the Persian Gulf. The firm backs only U.S. startups, and it has acquired minority stakes in several companies that are affected by the decisions of the federal government, including defense contractors. (Malik has stressed that nobody at the firm has ever worked with the federal government, and that it publicly discloses all its investments.)

It’s unlikely that Donald, Jr.,’s experience at the Trump Organization would have landed him any similar job in the venture-capital industry had his father never entered the White House. He hasn’t disclosed any of his compensation. But John Gannon, the chief executive of Venture5, a media company focussed on the venture-capital industry which conducts surveys of compensation, told me, “If Trump, Jr., is splitting his time between 1789 and his other responsibilities, it’s not unreasonable to assume a low-six-figure annual salary”—upward of two hundred thousand dollars. Most firms, by the end of a typical ten-year life span, at least double the capital they’ve invested. Under standard industry terms, the 1789 partners would then divide at least two hundred million dollars in profits. The firm’s website lists Donald, Jr., as the third among seven partners, after Malik and Buskirk. Gannon estimated that Donald, Jr.,’s share of those profits would be about ten per cent, so he might eventually take home at least twenty million dollars (present value: $16 million), in addition to a two-hundred-thousand-dollar salary (present value: $1.6 million). Excluding any provisional profits so far from the “social vanity project,” Donald, Jr.,’s take from 1789 and GrabAGun adds $19.6 million.

Estimated gain: $19.6 million
Running total: $1 billion

CRYPTO

Eric Trump, the public face of the Trump Organization while his father is in office, often says that his family first “fell in love with crypto” in the years

after the Capitol riot. Big banks dropped the Trumps—including Deutsche Bank, their most important lender, and Capital One, where the Trump Organization had hundreds of accounts. At a recent crypto conference, Eric framed this blackballing, as he often does, as an example of bias against "a political view that might not have been popular with some of the big financial institutions." He also described his family's embrace of digital finance as a form of revenge: "The banks made the biggest mistake of their lives."

Like many boosters of crypto, Eric sometimes struggles to explain what it's good for, aside from crime and casino-like speculation. Cryptocurrency essentially refers to marks in an online ledger called a blockchain, which tracks the contents of digital wallets. The blockchain is like a giant spreadsheet in the sky—though, as the journalist Zeke Faux notes in his terrific account of the crypto boom, "Number Go Up," its promoters often talk as if the system's "incomprehensibility was almost a selling point."

A hot topic among crypto investors is the question of a "use case." At the recent conference, Eric responded to this by complaining, not for the first time, that it took him a hundred days to close a home mortgage: "Can you imagine how punitive that is to the average person out there that might not have our resources or might not have our net worth, you know, filling out *paper forms*?" Sometimes he gripes that Trump Organization executives still have to worry about getting large wire transfers done before banks close, at 5 *p.m.* "How, in 2025, could that possibly be the case?" he has said. "Crypto solves all these problems." But outdated technology isn't what slows down mortgage applications or big wire transfers; it's the due diligence that banks perform to address the riskiness of a loan or the legitimacy of a payment. Molly White, a software engineer and a prominent skeptic of digital finance, told me that, for many boosters, getting around anti-money-laundering laws and other regulations appears to be the main appeal of crypto.

Indeed, criminals love crypto. The decentralized nature of that spreadsheet in the sky, maintained by a vast network of computers, makes it difficult to hold anyone accountable for unlawful transfers. Plus, each digital wallet is anonymous, identified by a string of letters and numbers, and often

protected only by a hackable password. For years, the best-proved use case was Silk Road, a bitcoin-enabled black market in narcotics, hacking services, and other illicit transactions. In 2015, a federal court sentenced its founder, Ross Ulbricht, to life in prison for drug distribution, money laundering, and other crimes, and forced him to forfeit $183 million. Ulbricht reigned as the crypto-criminal *GOAT* until last year, when a court ordered the crypto savant Sam Bankman-Fried, a founder of the exchange FTX, to surrender eleven billion dollars in fraudulent gains.

Trump initially saw crypto with clear eyes. In 2019, he tweeted that the volatile prices of cryptocurrencies were “based on thin air,” and that “unregulated Crypto Assets can facilitate unlawful behavior.” As recently as 2021, he told an interviewer that crypto “seems like a scam.” FTX’s spectacular collapse, the following year, appeared to vindicate his warning.

But by then he’d got into the game. At the time, celebrity endorsements had driven a frenzy of speculation for non-fungible tokens, or N.F.T.s, which are essentially marks on that spreadsheet in the sky proving that a buyer has paid, often dearly, to own a digital image. Trump was reportedly introduced to the concept by Bill Zanker, the entrepreneur behind the Learning Annex. (Zanker had paid Trump to lecture about getting rich in real estate, and in 2007 the two men co-authored a book, “Think Big and Kick Ass: In Business and in Life.”) If Snoop Dogg and Paris Hilton were selling N.F.T.s, Zanker must have reasoned, why not Trump?

In Trump’s progression from brick-and-mortar developer to hawker of intangible projections of himself, his N.F.T.s were another milestone. They depicted him as a muscled superhero in a cape, a guitar-wielding biker, and so on, and on Truth Social he announced that they cost “only $99 each!” On his past three disclosure forms, Trump reported that he had earned $13,180,707 in N.F.T.-licensing fees. The forms also show that Melania Trump made $1,224,311 from licensing an N.F.T.

Estimated gain: $14.4 million
Running total: $1.02 billion

TOKEN INVESTMENTS

Trump collected some of his N.F.T. fees in the form of digital currency, giving him his first incentive to start talking it up. In December, 2023, Arkham, a research firm, reported that a digital wallet linked to Trump held about four million dollars' worth of crypto. On his most recent disclosure form, Trump reported that his digital wallet contained at least a million dollars' worth of crypto.

Trump, in contrast with Eric, has said that his love affair with crypto began in 2024. At a bitcoin conference that July, he warned the audience that "most people have no idea what the hell it is—you know that, right?" But his Presidential campaign had begun receiving big contributions in crypto. If he still sounded hazy about how it all worked, he nonetheless promised the conference attendees that he'd make the U.S. "the crypto capital of the planet." He also repeated a pledge to free Silk Road's Ulbricht. (In January, Trump pardoned Ulbricht.)

Around the time of that conference, Donald, Jr., and Eric started dropping hints about a new crypto venture of their own. It formally appeared in September, 2024, under the name World Liberty Financial. The company entered a sector known as "decentralized finance" that involves the borrowing, lending, and trading of cryptocurrency. Competitors already filled the field, and nobody at World Liberty had a successful track record in decentralized finance. The startup offered few details about its plans, saying only that it would begin selling digital tokens that entitled a buyer to vote, at some point, on what its future plans would entail. The tokens somewhat resembled stock certificates, except that they conferred no share of the company's profits, couldn't be sold or transferred, and came under scant government regulation. Accordingly, only non-Americans and certain big investors could legally buy them. The founders said that they intended to raise three hundred million dollars by selling the tokens, but by the start of November World Liberty had brought in only $2.7 million.

Soon, however, World Liberty had an edge—the President. The company billed itself as the only decentralized-finance company "inspired by Donald J. Trump." A photograph of Trump raising his fist dominated the company's website, which called him its "chief crypto advocate." Trump participated in a desultory two-hour live stream introducing the company, in which he

portrayed investing in crypto as a kind of national duty, “whether we like it or not.” The President’s youngest son, Barron, an N.Y.U. freshman, was also involved in the company, as were Steve Witkoff’s sons, Zach and Alex. Most of World Liberty’s profits belonged to the Trumps, too. The company’s website said that the President had agreed “to promote the WLF and the WLF protocol from time to time,” and in exchange a shell company controlled by his family would receive roughly three-quarters of the revenue from the voting token. World Liberty initially said, on its website, that the Trumps would own sixty per cent of its eventual business; around June, it lowered that to forty per cent, without explanation. White, the crypto skeptic, told me that it was still unclear what, if anything, the Trumps might have contributed other than their name: “The whole thing has been a Trump business that aimed to give some plausible deniability to the Trumps.” (Cynical buyers of the token may have bet that if Trump won the election and loosened crypto rules, World Liberty might let investors *resell* their tokens, potentially at a profit. The rules did indeed relax, and in July the company announced that it will allow trading. The Trumps, as part of their deal to promote World Liberty Financial, were given millions of tokens, which they will be able to unload.)

The Trump connection began paying off shortly after his election, beginning with a bellwether investment by Justin Sun, a Chinese-born crypto billionaire. Sun founded a crypto network called Tron and his own cryptocurrency, Tronix. In 2023, the S.E.C. accused him of orchestrating bogus trades in order to fraudulently inflate prices. The S.E.C. also said that he’d made undisclosed payments to Lindsay Lohan, Lil Yachty, and other celebrities to get them to hype his crypto; the celebrities agreed to turn over more than four hundred thousand dollars in penalties and illicit gains. The S.E.C. further alleged that, although Sun could not legally sell to Americans, he had found furtive ways to do so. (He has denied any wrongdoing.) Nonetheless, crypto traders revered him for his riches. After Trump’s 2024 victory, Sun bought $75 million in World Liberty tokens and signed on as a formal adviser. Not long after the Inauguration, Sun’s imprimatur had helped bring in $550 million; the Trump family’s cut appears to be about $412.5 million. (Trump reported an initial $57.4 million from World Liberty on his latest financial disclosure.) Trump’s new Administration soon ended virtually all legal or regulatory actions against

crypto traders, and on February 26th the S.E.C. put its case against Sun on hold, with the aim of negotiating a resolution.

Estimated gain: $412.5 million
Running total: $1.4 billion

THE CRYPTO GULF

In March, World Liberty announced that it would sell a type of cryptocurrency known as stablecoin. Unlike buying bitcoin or other digital assets, purchasing stablecoin is supposed to resemble putting money into a checking account. A buyer can pass them to other digital wallets the way you might transfer money from one checking account to another; an owner of stablecoin should always be able to redeem them for dollars, at a constant value. Until July, stablecoins were largely unregulated, and the best known have become a mainstay of money laundering; some issuers, meanwhile, have diverted supposedly secure deposits into crypto Ponzi schemes.

World Liberty, however, offered the special credibility of a Presidential endorsement, and promised to back its stablecoin, USD1, with short-term U.S. Treasury bills. In the interval between the sale of USD1s and their redemption for dollars, the company stood to profit from interest that it would earn on those T-bills. At present Treasury yields, World Liberty can earn more than four per cent annually on the value of any stablecoin it sells—a profitable business with little risk, if the company can persuade buyers to embrace USD1.

On May 1st, Zach Witkoff, flanked by Justin Sun and Eric Trump, announced at a crypto conference in Dubai that a company owned by the U.A.E.'s ruling family had become World Liberty's first major stablecoin customer, buying two billion dollars' worth of USD1. Doing business with the U.A.E.'s rulers posed an obvious conflict of interest for the Trumps. But it was equally significant that the Emiratis planned to use USD1 as payment for a stake in Binance, the world's largest crypto exchange. Binance and its controlling shareholder, Changpeng Zhao, known as C.Z., pleaded guilty in 2023 to evading U.S. sanctions and violating anti-money-laundering laws. He served two months in prison; Binance agreed to pay $4.3 billion in fines

and forfeiture, and to submit to government monitoring. Binance will now determine when to cash in the two billion dollars in stablecoin from the Emiratis, thus controlling World Liberty's ability to collect interest on it. That gives C.Z. leverage over the Trumps at the same time that government-appointed monitors are supervising Binance. In May, C.Z. acknowledged on a podcast that he'd applied for a pardon. Binance has reportedly also sought to have its monitoring withdrawn.

"This year, instead of sharing a summer rental, we decided to destroy our friendship from home."
Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

Bloomberg News recently reported that Binance accounts for ninety per cent of the USD1 in circulation. If C.Z. holds on to it for the remainder of Trump's term, and Treasury interest rates stay at or above their current level, World Liberty will likely make more than $280 million. Under the ownership split at the time of the sale, about $168 million would go to the Trumps. I'd be surprised if Binance sells while Trump is in office.

Two weeks after World Liberty's announcement in Dubai, Trump declared that the U.S. would provide the U.A.E. with advanced technology for a joint ten-square-mile artificial-intelligence data center. This decision overrode long-standing American concerns that the U.A.E.'s close ties to China made it vulnerable to espionage and to the theft of sensitive technology. Some news outlets have reported that those security concerns might yet stop the

project; but, if completed, it could vault the tiny monarchy to the forefront of the A.I. race—and lock the U.S. in to dependence on Abu Dhabi.

With the data center awaiting final approval, a shadowy new Emirati fund, the Aqua 1 Foundation, announced on June 26th that it would buy a hundred million dollars in World Liberty voting tokens. Aqua 1, which has no public history, said in a statement that it would make the hundred-million-dollar payment "to participate in governance of the decentralized finance platform inspired by President Donald J. Trump." Since World Liberty has said that the Trump family gets roughly seventy-five per cent of the proceeds from sales of those tokens, that's seventy-five million in Trump profits. This would bring the family's profits from Emirati deals with World Liberty to $243 million.

Estimated gain: $243 million
Running total: $1.7 billion

AMERICAN BITCOIN

The origins of the Trump family's third crypto business date back about five years, to when Donald, Jr., and Eric got to know Kyle Wool, a stockbroker who had recently left Morgan Stanley. Wool wore his hair in the slicked-back style of Michael Douglas in "Wall Street" and golfed at the Trump club in Jupiter. At the time, he oversaw wealth management at an obscure brokerage, Revere Securities. (Morgan Stanley paid fifty thousand dollars to settle a lawsuit claiming that Wool had made unauthorized trades with a client's money—one of several similar allegations he has faced. He has denied any wrongdoing.)

Wool's career path from there has been convoluted. He joined the board of Aikido Pharma, a penny-stock biotech company that had reported no revenue for years. Wool helped Aikido transform itself into another small brokerage, called Dominari Holdings. The company rented office space in Trump Tower, and in 2023 Wool became the C.E.O. of its main business, Dominari Securities. It has reported losses of more than fourteen million dollars in each of the past three years.

In early February, Donald, Jr., and Eric joined Dominari's board of advisers and were given a roughly six-million-dollar stake in the company. In the days before this was announced, Dominari's share price doubled, to six dollars—it's not clear why—and afterward it doubled again, giving the Trumps a sizable paper profit. On February 18th, Dominari and the Trump brothers announced a new joint venture—a third of it owned by Dominari, virtually the rest by the Trumps—which would invest in A.I. data centers.

A month later, they sold most of that nebulous partnership, at a windfall profit, to Hut 8, a publicly traded bitcoin miner. ("Mining" refers to computing involved in tracking and recording bitcoin transactions on the blockchain—that spreadsheet in the sky. Under the software protocol governing bitcoin, miners receive new bitcoin as payment for this computational labor.) Hut 8 had agreed to buy eighty per cent of the Trump-Wool partnership. As payment, it contributed to the new company almost all of its mining operation—including equipment that, according to a press release, was worth a hundred million dollars.

It's unclear what the Trump brothers added to the new company, to be called American Bitcoin, aside from their family name. They haven't disclosed any financial contribution or payment, but they will own about thirteen per cent of the company—indirectly owning thirteen million dollars' worth of equipment. Molly White told me that many people in the industry believe that, to a crypto company like American Bitcoin, "the Trump name alone is worth thirteen million." Investors would bid up the company's price purely "because it is associated with the President," she argued. In a press release, Hut 8 said that Eric Trump would be American Bitcoin's "chief strategy officer," and praised his "commercial acumen, capital markets expertise, and commitment to the advancement" of crypto.

Other metrics suggest that the Trumps' stake could be worth a lot more than thirteen million dollars. American Bitcoin plans to become publicly traded by merging with a penny-stock bitcoin miner, Gryphon Digital Mining. Bitcoin miners typically trade for three or four times the value of the crypto they produce in a year. At current prices and recent mining rates, that could put the value of American Bitcoin at about $610 million, making the Trumps' stake worth about $79 million. In an interview with a crypto

website, Eric Trump said that he got “a little special twinkle” in his eye whenever he saw the Dominari team, adding, “They’ve brought a lot of great things to us in the past, and so many of those great things have worked out so incredibly well.”

The executives of Hut 8, Dominari, and American Bitcoin all declined to talk to me, or to answer e-mailed questions about why the transaction seemingly gives the Trumps so much for so little. Mining bitcoin is an increasingly difficult way to make money. To limit the total amount of bitcoin on the market, the software protocol governing the cryptocurrency caps the amount that can ever be “mined.” About ninety-five per cent of that has already been mined, and the protocol preserves that limit by periodically halving the amount of “new” bitcoin rewarded for the work of tracking transactions. Since that game is getting harder, the Trumps and their partners in American Bitcoin have said that they intend to use mining as part of a more speculative strategy. Instead of merely selling the bitcoin they mine, they will follow a current trend in the crypto industry, pioneered by the financier Michael Saylor, and borrow money to buy more when the price falls. This makes speculating in bitcoin even riskier. But that leverage multiplies the payoff if bitcoin’s price keeps rising.

That may be where Donald, Jr., and Eric come in. With the special credibility of being sons of the President, they have become tireless salesmen for crypto, touting bitcoin in particular as “digital gold.” At a recent bitcoin conference in Las Vegas, Donald, Jr., implored every “average American” to “buy as much as you can.” He and Eric promised the public that even the smallest amount of bitcoin would soon be worth “an absolute fortune,” and they emphasized that the President and his crypto-policy team now had a personal stake in cryptocurrency. “The people who are making these rules,” Donald, Jr., said, are now “invested in it themselves.”

If bitcoin crashes, ordinary Americans who heeded the Trump brothers’ advice to buy as much as possible could lose their savings. As for Wool, his friendship with Eric and Donald, Jr., has already paid off, through Dominari’s stake in American Bitcoin. And in June Justin Sun and his family hired Dominari to arrange a takeover. The Sun family agreed to pay

as much $210 million to transform a publicly traded maker of theme-park knickknacks into a vehicle for Sun's crypto.

The Trump brothers, through the stake in Dominari they were given, stand to profit from the Sun transaction, too. Their stake is currently worth about nine million dollars. But, since Dominari's stock would likely tumble if they sold, I won't count that as profit.

If the price of bitcoin soars "to the Moon," as the Trumps predict it will, their stake in American Bitcoin could deliver profits far beyond the current value of its assets. Until that happens, though, I will take the current value of their stake in the venture's mining equipment as a conservative estimate of their profits so far: thirteen million dollars.

Estimated gain: $13 million
Running total: $1.71 billion

TRUMP MEDIA GOES CRYPTO

The family's fourth crypto venture is an attempt by Trump Media & Technology Group to reinvent itself. In April, the company capitalized on the new Administration's crypto-friendly policies by announcing a plan to sell volatile crypto assets to ordinary investors. The technical difficulty of buying crypto has long deterred most small and unsophisticated investors. But, under Trump, the S.E.C. has made it much easier for investment companies to sell crypto to anyone with a standard brokerage account, through shares in what are known as exchange-traded funds, or E.T.F.s, that track the price of bitcoin, Ethereum, or other digital assets. The policy change represents a giant advance for the crypto industry. Trump Media jumped on the bandwagon, making plans to sell Trump-branded E.T.F.s, which will trade on the New York Stock Exchange. To do so, the company formed a partnership with Crypto.com, a Singapore-based exchange that was fighting an S.E.C. enforcement action for violating the agency's regulations. Crypto.com had sought to win Trump's favor by donating a million dollars to his Inauguration; a few days after its deal with Trump Media, it announced that the S.E.C.'s investigation had ended.

Dozens of better-established investment firms are also setting up crypto E.T.F.s. But Trump Media, which trumpets slogans about the Patriot Economy, is the only one tied to the President. Devin Nunes, the C.E.O. of Trump Media and a former Republican congressman, said in a statement that its E.T.F.s would offer an alternative to “woke funds” and cater to “investors who believe in America First principles.” The size of the market for Trump Media’s planned E.T.F.s remains to be seen.

Not long after the Trump brothers put American Bitcoin in motion, Trump Media began speculating on crypto. This past spring, the company, taking advantage of its high meme-stock share price, raised more than $2.3 billion by selling shares and convertible bonds in private transactions to about fifty big investors. Then, in July, Trump Media said it had spent that money on bitcoin and on options for more.

In the past year, Trump Media has also been quietly raising cash by selling off other new shares in private transactions, ending the first quarter with $759 million in cash and short-term investments. With its bitcoin stockpile, the company held $3.1 billion in liquid assets. Trump Media could now arguably maximize its returns simply by shuttering its money-losing Truth Social platform. Trump Media’s crypto strategy is a gamble: in the past year, the price of a bitcoin has fallen below fifty-five thousand dollars before rising again to its current price, about a hundred and fifteen thousand. Yet while the price remains at this level those liquid assets put a floor under the stock price. All the equity that the company has issued has reduced the President’s stake to about forty-two per cent. (The potential conversion of notes to shares could someday lower it further.) At current bitcoin prices, Trump’s stake in that stockpile of bitcoin and cash is equivalent to $1.3 billion. If the company chose, it could conceivably sell that hoard and pass all the money to shareholders as a dividend—thus passing that stake to Trump in cash. Astonishingly, for now, the financial alchemy of turning a meme stock into cash and bitcoin has added some $1.3 billion in Presidential profit to our tally. Dubinsky, the forensic accountant, told me the gambit was “just north of selling snake oil.”

Estimated gain: $1.3 billion
Running total: $3 billion

$TRUMP

Three days before his second Inauguration, Trump launched the fifth of his family's crypto vehicles: selling $TRUMP, a digital token. $TRUMP doesn't purport to hold value in the way that bitcoin or stablecoins do. Nor does $TRUMP entitle a buyer to a vote on a company's future direction, as World Liberty's initial token does. It does not even convey the right to own a digital cartoon of Trump. It's a meme coin, a novelty, a bit of fun—the fun, for those who enjoy it, of paying Donald Trump. Eight years after his lawyer promised that his family would never exploit the Presidency for profit, Trump had distilled that exploitation to its purest possible form.

The $TRUMP concept apparently originated with Zanker, the mastermind behind the Trump N.F.T.s. On launch day, a partnership they formed began selling about two hundred million $TRUMP "coins" while holding on to eight hundred million more. Trump declared on Truth Social, "It's time to celebrate everything we stand for: WINNING!," and urged his fans to "GET YOUR $TRUMP NOW." The *Financial Times* calculated that, within three weeks, sales of the tokens had netted $314 million.

The venture also created a digital marketplace for people to buy and sell $TRUMP, collecting additional fees when the coins were traded. According to the *Financial Times*, after eighteen days—as the price of $TRUMP soared to seventy-five dollars, then plunged to seventeen—the venture made more than $36 million in trading fees, bringing its total profit to $350 million. (Since Trump holds all the leverage in the Zanker partnership, I assume that he has kept almost the whole take.) On paper, the eight hundred million $TRUMP tokens that the partnership still holds are potentially worth several billion dollars.

Cartoon by Maggie Larson

Two days after the launch, another Trump venture began selling $MELANIA meme coins, quickly earning about $65 million in sales and trading fees, according to the *Financial Times*. Crypto researchers reported that about two dozen unknown buyers scooped up cheap $MELANIA in the minutes before the First Lady announced the token's début, then flipped them for a profit of $99.6 million. (The flippers' identities remain unknown.)

The paper profits in $TRUMP can't be counted on. When $MELANIA hit the market, the price of a $TRUMP token plummeted from seventy-five dollars to about thirty-three, indicating that buyers feared a glut of Trump-related meme coins. The *Financial Times* reported that the partners behind $TRUMP curtailed the crash by quietly pumping a million dollars of their own money into the tokens; nevertheless, by April $TRUMP had fallen below ten dollars.

That's when Trump announced that he'd host an exclusive dinner for the two hundred and twenty people who held the most $TRUMP. The top twenty-five holders would also get a tour of the White House. The stunt sent the price back up to fifteen dollars, earning Trump more trading fees.

White House officials defended the dinner by noting that Trump had held it at his golf club in Virginia, not at the White House, as though crypto traders would have paid millions of dollars each to have dinner with a former reality star. In a statement, Karoline Leavitt told me, "The claims that this President has profited from his time in office are absolutely absurd." She

contended that Trump had sacrificed “hundreds of millions of dollars” that he could have made if he had devoted himself to his business instead of serving in the White House, and that “the American people love him precisely because he is a successful businessman.”

Around the time of the dinner, the widely cited crypto-research firm Chainalysis, using its own methodology, put the $TRUMP venture’s total earnings at $320 million. Adding only this more conservative tally to the estimated early profits from Melania’s meme coin yields a total profit of about $385 million.

Estimated gain: $385 million
Running total: $3.4 billion

DINNER AND DESSERT

During the dinner, I stood outside the Trump National Golf Club in Sterling, Virginia, trying to glimpse some of the buyers hoping to whisper in the President’s ear. Dozens of protesters held banners reading “Stop Trump’s Crypto Corruption” and “America Is Not for Sale.” Senator Jeff Merkley, an Oregon Democrat who has introduced a bill that would bar senior officials from selling meme coins or stablecoins, addressed the crowd, calling the dinner “the Mt. Everest of corruption.”

To my surprise, most attendees weren’t shy about showing their faces. Many got out of ride-share cars and walked right past the protesters. A few took photographs of the demonstration, as though the outrage were part of the fun. Many were shaggy-haired men under forty, scruffy-looking even in tuxedos. Quite a few had already bragged online about the dinner. Lamar Odom, a former N.B.A. basketball player and Khloe Kardashian’s ex-husband, evidently borrowed enough $TRUMP to attend so that he could plug sales of his own meme coin, $ODOM. Nicholas Pinto, an entrepreneur and a TikTok influencer, pulled up to the event in a red Lamborghini. Another guest arrived wearing a mask of a pixelated ant, but his crypto company’s X account posted videos of him in the mask, so his getup was more of a publicity stunt than an attempt at disguise. After the event, the *Times* published a roster of more than fifty attendees. Several said they’d wanted to influence Trump, hoping that he would keep backing crypto. But

most seemed intent mainly on promoting themselves. They were untroubled that a President was so blatantly selling access for personal profit. The crypto trader Brian Ng told the *Times*, “Everyone is out for themselves,” but “at least Trump is out in the open.”

Anyone who’d bought $TRUMP hoping to buttonhole Trump left disappointed. From outside the gates, I heard Marine One whirring as it landed, around 7 *p.m.*; it took off half an hour later. The guests documented the intervening minutes in videos, which they posted online. Trump, standing at a podium bearing the Presidential seal, rambled for about twenty-five minutes, calling his guests “some of the smartest minds anywhere.” He noted that “a lot of people” had begun to believe in “the whole crypto thing,” adding, “Who knows?”

Justin Sun had bought nearly twenty million dollars in $TRUMP before the dinner, making him the biggest holder. (In July, he announced that he would buy an additional hundred million in $TRUMP.) For the distinction of holding the most $TRUMP, the President gave Sun a Trump-branded watch that one of his online stores sells for a hundred thousand dollars. At one point, Sun took the podium and thanked Trump for everything he’d done “for our industry.” Before Trump’s reëlection, Sun had worried about being arrested if he entered the country. Giggling, he said that if a guy like him could now come to the U.S., “*everybody* gonna come here!”

By the time I finished adding up the Trump family’s profits, I was almost inured to it all. To address conflicts of interest among elected officials, U.S. laws generally require only disclosure, allowing voters to judge any self-dealing for themselves. Nobody can say that Trump has failed to disclose his recent money-making; he might as well have shouted about $TRUMP from the White House roof. And only his fans have been shelling out for $TRUMP or Trump sneakers, or sending fifty-dollar campaign donations that get diverted to pay his legal fees. His critics have always called *MAGA* a movement of suckers.

Yet there was a reason that Trump, through his lawyer, promised in 2017 that his family would shun anything that might “be perceived to be exploitive of the office of the Presidency.” Even if nobody at his meme-coin dinner received official favors, Trump was selling off slivers of the public

attention that comes with his office, and diminishing the Presidency in the process. The advocacy group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington has tried to track Trump's money-making. Noah Bookbinder, its president, told me, "When you're talking about making billions in cryptocurrency, people's eyes glaze over." But he said he still believed that "the American people ultimately don't like people using public office to enrich themselves. It's like a President turning a national park into his summer home—and, in this case, maybe building a skyscraper there."

I'd suspected that my estimation of the family's profiteering from the Presidency would disappoint the haters who saw Trump as a Putin-level kleptocrat. Yet some three and a half billion dollars in Presidential profits—even though my accounting is necessarily approximate—is a dizzying sum. I shared my tally with Gary Kalman, of Transparency International. He said that Trump's profiteering resembles that of an Arab monarch: he treats his public office as personal property, as an asset that is his to exploit as if he owned it. Kalman said, "One of the differences between a monarchy and a democracy is that the President should not start to view the Presidency as his personal fiefdom."

Selling increasingly vaporous goods for ever more profit, as Trump has done since his "Apprentice" makeover, inevitably raises questions about what buyers are really getting for their money. Counting it all, I was struck by the frantic, almost desperate pace of the Trump family's efforts, as though they're afraid to miss any opportunity. The family isn't just passively accepting the Saudi private-equity investments, the Persian Gulf licensing deals, and Justin Sun's millions for digital tokens. They've sought those payments eagerly, and at a speed suggesting that they badly want—or need—the money. The family's thirst for cash makes questions about conflicts of interest all the more pressing.

Did Trump strike tacit deals with Justin Sun or C.Z., or with the media companies that paid him big settlements, or with Gulf monarchs? Will Qatar's airplane gift protect it from another blockade? Did the U.A.E.'s two-billion-dollar stablecoin purchase give it access to sensitive American technology? Did payments from the Arab monarchs incline Trump toward air strikes against Iran? Quid pro quos are exceedingly difficult to prove.

But Wertheimer, the government-ethics reformer, said of Trump, “The way he pursues every possible avenue he can think of for money gives people who provide that money a clear sense that they are going to get *something* in return. Almost anyone who sees what’s going on has to assume that this money is buying the President’s favor.”

Trump has been back in the White House for a little more than six months, and his family’s zeal is unflagging. In June, Donald, Jr., and Eric celebrated the tenth anniversary of their father’s first Presidential run by announcing yet another licensing deal: they sold the Trump name for use on a mobile-phone service, which Donald, Jr., said was “building on the movement to put America first.” Dial 888-TRUMP45 to sign up, and pay $47.45 a month.

A few weeks later, the brothers travelled with their father to promote a newly opened Trump golf course in Balmedie, Scotland, which the President touted as “an unbelievable development.” On August 4th, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Trump brothers had been given a total of five million shares in a new blank-check company that aims to raise and spend at least seven hundred million dollars to buy American manufacturing companies. The brothers are advisers to the new venture, and so is their friend Kyle Wool. Like the digital clock counting the national debt, the meter on the Trump family’s Presidential profits ticks ever faster. ♦

David D. Kirkpatrick, a staff writer at The New Yorker, is the author of “Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East.”

| Section menu | Main menu |

Takes

- **Andrew Marantz on Janet Flanner’s “Führer”**
  By Andrew Marantz | Flanner’s tone was cool and ironic, above taking sides. But, in a Profile of Adolf Hitler, refusing to take sides can be a way to miss the story.

Takes

Andrew Marantz on Janet Flanner's "Führer"

By Andrew Marantz

August 10, 2025

February 29, 1936

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.*

Janet Flanner's job was never easy, exactly, but for the first decade it wasn't all that morally freighted. Beginning in October of 1925, using the pseudonym Genêt, she mailed her editors at this magazine a fizzy bimonthly column under the rubric Letter from Paris. Instead of telling readers what they needed to know—that was what newspapers were for—she focussed on what they might *want* to know: the new fad of backless dresses in the cabarets, the rising cost of champagne. "She thought of herself as a high-class gossip columnist," Brenda Wineapple writes in her biography "Genêt." Striving for an "unflappable, ever-ironic" style, "she did not predict outcomes, take sides, or search for causes. Obviously, this itself was a side, but Janet was not yet willing to admit that."

The New Yorker was inventing its voice, and Flanner was in the clique of tinkerers. "Lunched with D. Parker," she wrote to Harold Ross, the founding editor, from her rented fourth-floor room on Rue Bonaparte. "How dare you say Thurber uses more parenthesis than I? . . . I'll stop, (if I can.)" When Flanner first arrived in Europe, as an expat from Indianapolis, she was still married, technically, to a man; but they soon divorced and she lived openly (in both senses) with her female partner, the poet Solita Solano. They were chummy with everyone who was anyone: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Djuna Barnes. Flanner roamed the Continent, filing occasional reports from London and Berlin. "I think a Brussels Letter a good idea," she wrote to Ross. "I'm passing by there anyhow." She filed pieces on Edith Wharton and Igor Stravinsky, and a subtly undermining story about her frenemy Gertrude Stein, and a write-around Profile of the Queen of England. In time, she became more than a gossip columnist; she became one of the great journalists of her generation.

In early 1936, she published her weightiest piece yet—a three-part Profile of Adolf Hitler. This one, too, was a write-around: unlike Dorothy Thompson, an American journalist who had interviewed Hitler for *Cosmopolitan* (and whose unflattering portrayal got her kicked out of Germany), Flanner never secured an interview with the Führer, and it's not clear how hard she pushed for one. She was neither an antifascist, like her friend Dorothy Parker, nor a Fascist, like her friend Ezra Pound; she was against crude bigotry, but she was not the world's greatest philo-Semite. (In a letter to her mother, she once denigrated the writer Rebecca West as "a

little Jewish.”) “Dictator of a nation devoted to splendid sausages, cigars, beer, and babies, Adolf Hitler is a vegetarian, teetotaller, nonsmoker, and celibate,” the first sentence of the Profile read. She had him pegged as a strange little man, teeming with contradictions—true, but hardly the most salient of his known flaws, even then.

In the first installment of the Profile, we learn about the Führer’s taste in movies, his “second-rate tailor,” and his preferred recipe for South German porridge. Readers would have to wait until the following week for a mention of the Nazi Party’s increasingly visible repression of German Jews, which Flanner dispatched in a single paragraph (“The Jewish problem Hitler has raised is a vast one in emotional importance . . . numerically, from the German point of view, it is a small one”). A few lines later, she was on to a night-club comedian who told sly Hitler jokes. (“No one knows why he isn’t in a concentration camp.”) There were a few intimations of violence, but in the mode of pointing out Hitler’s personal inconsistencies: “He becomes sick if he sees blood, yet he is unafraid of being killed or killing.”

The piece was ambiguous, and it had a mixed reception. “I was in Hollywood yesterday and the Jewish film gentlemen candidly said they thought my Hitler article was not unfriendly enough!” Flanner wrote in a letter. “No pleasing everybody.” Still, for the rest of her life she never included the Hitler Profile among her collected pieces. For a writer who wants to seem sophisticated and all-knowing, it may feel intolerably risky to pick sides in a grubby political fight, or to make falsifiable predictions about the future. But refusing to take sides can also be a way to miss the story. As Flanner wrote in a Letter from Budapest in 1938, “History looks queer when you’re standing close to it.” ♦

Read the original story.

Führer—I: The Sublimated World of Adolf Hitler

Fanatic, celibate, vegetarian—the man who brought the Nazis to power.

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

Shouts & Murmurs

- **When I’m Ninety-five**
  By Bruce Handy and Jay Martel | Woke up, got out of bed / So glad I wasn’t dead.

Shouts & Murmurs

When I’m Ninety-five

By Bruce Handy and Jay Martel

August 11, 2025

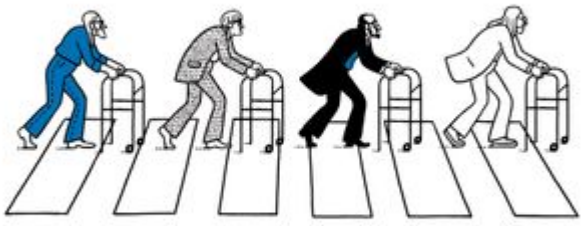


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Beatles lyrics updated for their contemporaries, on the occasion of Ringo Starr’s recent eighty-fifth birthday.

Listen
Do you want to know a secret?
Do you promise not to tell?
Whoa, oh, oh
Closer
Let me whisper in your ear
It’s the left one that still hears?
Now I’ve forgotten what I wanted to say
Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh ooh.

•

Anytime at all
Before 9 *p.m.*

Anytime at all
Before 9 *p.m.*
Anytime at all
If I'm not in bed just call
And I'll be there.

•

All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
You'd think some of them would've at least sent food for Eleanor's wake.

•

Doctor Robert
You're a new and better man
Though he's off most Medicare plans
Pay out of pocket if you can
Doctor Robert.

•

When I get older, losing my mind
Not that long from now
Will you still be sending me a valentine
Birthday greetings, hydralazine?
If I keep napping past quarter to three
Would you assume I'm alive?
Will you still feed me, please don't delete me
When I'm ninety-five.

•

Why don't we do it if we can
Why don't we do it if we can
Cialis will be helping us
Why don't we do it if . . . oh, well.

•

I call your name
But you’re not there
Was I to blame?
For not texting instead?
Oh, I left a long voice mail
Though no one listens to them anymore
(I just wanted you to know that Rachel’s cousin’s brother-in-law has leukemia, but I think the good kind.)
I never keep it short
I call your name.

•

Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream
It is not dying
It is not dying
Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void
I really hope it’s not dying
It feels like it might be dying
That you may see the meaning of within
I think I’ll get up now
Thank God I can get up now.

•

Asked that gal what she wanted of me
She said, “Listen, babe, come and see.
My kids took my car and it’s breaking my heart
But let’s take a spin in this sweet golf cart.”

•

Here comes the sun
Doo dun doo doo (phew!)
Here comes the sun and I say
I’m still here!

•

Well, she was just seventy
Work done, from eyes to knees
But I’m almost sure she still had her own hair
Well, I couldn’t dance with another
Ooooo!
Or anyone in level-four care.

•

Woke up, got out of bed
So glad I wasn’t dead
Found my way downstairs despite my knees
And looking up . . . I forgot why I’d walked into the room
[*Breathing sounds*]
Found my phone, but not my keys
If you see them, tell me, please
Found my way upstairs to make a call
But couldn’t make it work, these new phones are such a pain
Iiii . . . Iiii aiii aiii . . . Iiii aiii aiiiiiii . . . .
I’d love . . .
To turn . . .
This on.

•

Yesterday . . .
That’s all I really have to say. ♦

Bruce Handy is the author of “Hollywood High: A Totally Epic, Way Opinionated History of Teen Movies” (2025) and the picture book “There Was a Shadow” (2024), illustrated by Lisk Feng. Jay Martel is the author of the novel “The Present.” A film adaptation, which he also wrote, was released in May, 2024.

Fiction

- **“The Corn Woman, Her Husband, and Their Child”**
  By Annie Proulx | The Earliwoods didn’t recognize that they would be outsiders forever, people denigrated for being unable to hold on to a weathervane.

Fiction

The Corn Woman, Her Husband, and Their Child

By Annie Proulx

August 10, 2025

Illustration by Marc Martin

Jaron and Zilpha Earliwood had put some years into their marriage before their daughter, Goldie, was born. There had been differences between the couple from the beginning, and Jaron flinched every time he watched Zilpha make sandwiches. His mother's cook had always cut sandwiches with trimmed crusts and an elegant catty-corner slice, but Zilpha left the crusts on and whacked them into rectangles that seemed to him quite—trashy. How could a woman who made sandwiches like that cherish rare fabrics? Something didn't fit, and, though Zilpha considered herself as flexible as a silk scarf, Jaron saw her as more of a curtain rod.

Oh, please, Jaron thought, watching Zilpha, *can't you cut them the other way*? But they had recently had a fight and because he was anxious to heal the rift he did not challenge the sandwich-maker aloud. Jaron was tall and thin, with conjoined eyebrows, his usual mien the dazed air of someone just getting off a long flight.

Zilpha was plain, short-legged, and a bit fat; her notable feature was a cascade of heavy black hair that hung to her waist when undone, but was usually in braids that she then wrapped around her head. No thug could ever fell Zilpha with a knock on such a thick, resilient helmet. She never quite got over her amazement at being the mother of a child with spun-gold hair. As she made the sandwiches, she knew very well what Jaron was thinking. *Y'know, fella*, she said in silent rebuttal, *if you want sandwiches that look like the Taj Mahal, why don't you make them yourself* ?

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

There was no chance that Jaron would ever make a sandwich. To Zilpha he seemed utterly useless; yes, he was kind and charming—unusual attributes for someone who had grown up in an affluent family—and was quick-witted and clever, but he could not fix anything, and despite a neophyte's skill at gaslighting he was the easy prey of fast-talking service people. He had a hopeless love for old trees and forests. He read too many books. He sometimes spoke German. His toenails were lethal; once, she had woken with the sense she was sharing the bed with a rodeo of horned beetles. As the years inched along, he took up drink, not beer or decent whiskey but wine—expensive, mystery-shrouded wine with ornate labels and pointless rituals. Zilpha did not really understand Jaron or the nature of his well-paid hedge

work. She had been with him through his early job changes, and she knew that he was tormented by an office setting, not unusual, perhaps, for someone who worked with hedges. He said that in office buildings he felt he was “in one of Bulgakov’s nightmares—interlocking rooms and goddam elevators that always go to the roof. Try that for a work atmosphere.”

Still, they knew they were suited to each other, until some odd word or glance set off one of their fights. For, when they argued, husband and wife put the cats of Kilkenny to shame. Zilpha cried, and she was a noisy, messy crier, mouth distorted, slobbering and growling. Jaron gave an unmuffled sound like a deer snorting and then went out, just out—walking, running, driving. Goldie, their child, watched it all.

•

They had met in the long-ago nineteen-seventies era of Earth shoes and disco at the Rhode Island School of Design, where Zilpha was studying fibres and textiles, and Jaron, who wasn’t sure where his career would take him, was a part-time student trying to grasp a few design elements, in the belief that such studies could put a sparkle in his ideas and give him a gloss of quirky individuality that would pay off. They saw each other as brilliant mavericks, different from other people even in a milieu where brilliant mavericks and differences were two for a dime. Jaron impressed Zilpha as the only person she had ever known who could rapidly fold a fitted sheet into a neat rectangle. After college, they went their separate ways until by chance they met again in New York, in the eighties, at a Fast Folk concert of banjo players.

They were not students now but serious people. They married and repented it, signed up for and saw marital combat. After the birth of their golden-haired daughter, Goldie, they seemed immobilized and stayed for years in the same tight-roomed apartment, captive to the endless keening of sirens. With the innocence of city dwellers, they believed that country air and a roomy house would smooth things out. A big reason to move would be collision-free space. There had to be trees, Jaron said.

One day, walking in Central Park with two-year-old Goldie, Jaron pointed out her shadow, an extension of herself that danced, kicked, moved as she

did. This was nothing new for Goldie, but it was the first time she'd understood that the shadow was herself appearing and disappearing. Yet it was also a different entity; she was two people, separate but one. She pointed at her shadow and said, "What's his name?" Jaron laughed and said, "You tell me!" She thought a little, then said, "Billy Goat Gruff."

Jaron felt it had gone a little too far when at noon Goldie's shadow was a small blob at her feet and she howled, "Billy Goat Gruff is melting!"

"Don't worry, dear child," he said. "The old goat just needs some lunch and a nap. Then he'll be right back—unless it's raining." And some of this was true.

•

Years later, after Jaron's disappearance, when the Swiss police asked Zilpha what her husband's occupation was, she said vaguely that it had something to do with hedges; she meant horticultural hedges, for in fact Jaron had told her of his youthful year abroad living with a family in Cornwall. The grandfather was a forester and hedge restorer who invited Jaron to join him on his daily walks. Jaron absorbed the grandfather's love for shadowed forests, for grounders and stones with seven sides, for thousand-year-old hedges topped with gorse and blackthorn. The grandfather also showed him the sorry sight of contemporary hedges deformed by diabolical flail trimmers that chewed the natural architecture of branches into an anarchy of twigs.

Zilpha still thought of Jaron as a man of Cornish hedges, although his work was with Charles Upchurch Sway Partners (*CUSP*), a hedge fund operated from a central trunk in Lausanne and its stout branch in New York. Charlie Sway, the fund manager, was an old prep-school friend, who knew that Jaron had an eye for the sleeping dog, an ear for the silent canary. Jaron became something of an investment scout. His time at *RISD* had fostered his talent for recognizing marginal novelties, and this was valuable to *CUSP*. He made quarterly trips to corporate HQ in Switzerland, where he stayed at the Hotel Voltaire, in the Grindelwald region. Two of his least likely picks had translated into floods of money: the spinach-infused peanut butter in a blue glow-in-the-dark throwaway flashlight tube that was a craze in Australia; and the his-and-hers glove set that was sensitive to the wearers' chemistry

and, when activated, disclosed to what degree two people were simpatico or inimical. The public immediately called them “love mittens” and they became as necessary to modern life as social media and credit cards. Jaron knew that fooling the gullible was a filthy way to make a living, yet he wanted enough money to live the high life—and accepted the guilt.

•

The old *RISD* days had been important for Zilpha, too. There, for the first time, she was moved by the deep past. Two guest lecturers showed slides and described early examples of fibres and textiles. After a dozen views of clay spindle whorls, they turned off the projector, cleared a table, and opened a velvet-lined box containing a single Paleolithic bone needle.

Zilpha felt the jolt of connection just in seeing the needle. Her arm bones seemed to heat up and burn in the crook of her elbows. She wanted to pick up the needle and run a thread through its unwinking eye. She knew that needle; she knew it as well as the woman who had plied it thirty thousand years before. Until that moment, Zilpha had considered antiquity remote and unreachable. But in a flickering glance she was transported to the mouth of a cave where the light was good and the needle was hers.

Her attention turned to the unknown inventors and makers of needles, the anonymous spinners, the invisible scutchers, the unrecorded dyers, the disappeared weavers who worked the flax, the bast, the wool, the silk. She thought of them as she handled scraps of mysterious garments—not wondering whether this was a pocket or a surviving shred of a rich cloak, but asking, *Whose hands twisted these fibres*? She sometimes tried to talk about this with Jaron, but he quickly went deaf or remembered an errand un-run.

2.

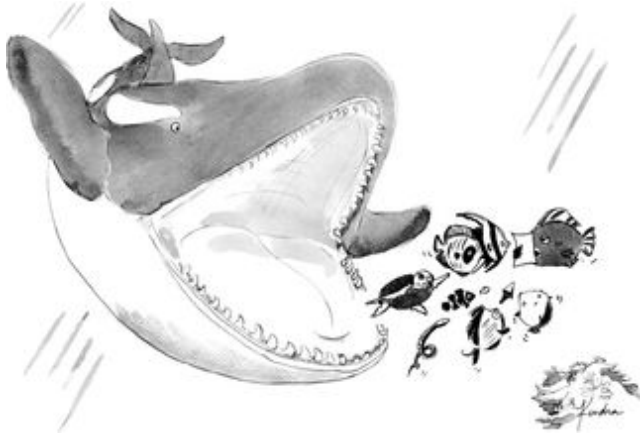
One October in the nineties, when Goldie was nearly six, Jaron heard about a house for sale in South Northburn, New Hampshire, for only a minuscule hundred and fifty thousand dollars—a run-down white elephant with twelve acres of woodland that were said to be a burden to the owner. Jaron rented a car, and the Earliwoods drove northeast to see it. The journey was exotic.

There were few cars, and as they moved along the narrow roads cascades of red maple leaves gave the illusion of blood spatter. Horse-and-buggy speed limits made the trip long. Toward sunset, they crossed a small bridge, and it was Goldie who spied the “For Sale” sign at the foot of a gravel driveway with a line of weeds growing up the center. No house was visible. They crept up the driveway, where the downed red leaves lost color to the gray-brown understory. The house, standing in clear light, seemed to coalesce from the shadows—an edifice of rough-squared brownstone with a tower, hipped roof, abundant arches. “It looks like a small-town public library,” Jaron said. “But there is smoke coming out of the chimney.” Zilpha pointed at a copper eagle weathervane touched by a last ray of autumnal sunlight. “Nice!” she said.

The owner, Johnson Wheatley, opened the door and stood aside, hand still on the doorknob. He was a tired man in a sagging tweed jacket, elbow patches adrift. He held his head cocked slightly to the left, and his eyes looked over Jaron’s shoulder at something in the distance, a falling leaf or perhaps his imminent escape from rurality.

“Huh. Thought you would show up earlier,” Wheatley said.

“So did we,” Jaron said. “It took time to pick up the rental car and then get through traffic. And those twenty-five-mile-an-hour speed limits didn’t help.”



“I hereby declare that all members have finally ratified the Pan-Ocean Peace Treaty.”
Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

“Huh,” Wheatley said. “Rental car? You better know that you can’t get around up here unless you own a car. There used to be trains, but they are pretty much gone. No ‘public transport.’ ” He made it sound like a vulgar sex act.

After they’d walked through the ground-floor rooms, they went upstairs, where Wheatley turned on the lights to show off the four empty chambers that he called spare bedrooms. He then led them down to the basement, where an old round-bodied washing machine was making the sounds of a starved creature who had found a bucket of shucked oysters. Wheatley said fondly, “Noisy. But you get used to it.”

Back on the ground floor, in front of the fireplace, Jaron and Zilpha stood with Wheatley, thrilled by the incendiary scent of wood smoke, Jaron rubbing his hands as though he were cold, while Goldie thundered up the staircase into the still unseen upper rooms of the tower screaming, “I love it! I love it up here!”

Wheatley flinched at the uproar, and Zilpha understood that the man didn’t like them and didn’t like Goldie; he was internally dancing with impatience, wanting them to go. She looked pointedly at Jaron—*Let’s get out of here*—and he winked and asked Wheatley, “Is there a hotel or motel nearby?”

“Nearest is Maple Lodge in West Northburn. You won’t get any dinner there, but they got a hamburger takeout at the intersection.”

“Which intersection?” Jaron asked.

“There’s only one.”

•

“Well, that was something,” Jaron said, as they descended the drive through rising ground mist. “You notice he didn’t smile a single time? Not so friendly. What do you think about the house?”

Zilpha said, “I think I don’t look forward to going back to the garbage in the city, the noise and stink.” A bird flew across the drive almost level with their windshield, and Goldie shrieked, “What was that thing!”

“It was an owl,” Jaron said. “I think. Or maybe a whip-poor-will. If we buy this place, you will see plenty of owls—maybe lynxes and eagles. You’ll have a chance to experience nature up close.”

“There’s plenty of room, and the scenery is really beautiful,” Zilpha said in a low voice. “Let’s do it.”

So at the bottom of the drive they turned around and drove back up, and Jaron told Johnson Wheatley they would buy his stone “*bibliothèque*” outright, no mortgage—on the proviso that they could close the sale within a week. Jaron and Wheatley shook on it.

In the car, the Earliwoods were silly with joy. Jaron said, “Listen. Instead of going back to the city, let’s stay for a couple of nights in a motel, then, soon as he’s out of the house, we’ll just camp out in it and get a feel for the place.”

In the week it took Wheatley and his movers to clear out the house, the Earliwoods bought three cots and sleeping bags at a sporting-goods store near Portsmouth, coffee, granola, and bacon. The first night in his cot, Jaron stretched out his hand and touched Zilpha’s fingers. “Now we can get it together,” he said. “We’ve got a real house. In the woods.”

While Goldie slept, Jaron and Zilpha talked about renovating the grim bathrooms, and about their permanent move in the spring. They would keep the city apartment for Jaron’s winter meetings, and Zilpha would take her time buying furniture for the new place.

Jaron said, “Don’t get any of that *Ikea* stuff—let Romania keep its old forests. We can make the move in April or May. I’ll stay in the city all week and be here on weekends. Holidays. Except when I have to be in Switzerland.”

On the second night they owned the house, they heard a helicopter that seemed to hover directly overhead, and the next morning Jaron flew into a cursing rage when he saw that the weathervane was gone.

•

The town police station was two rooms at the rear of the white clapboarded town hall. Chief Bob Perkins had a soft face that could easily be re-molded into any expression needed. As the Earliwoods unreeled their account of the helicopter-in-the-night, Chief Perkins made tic-tac-toe designs on a yellow pad. A young uniformed policeman with bad posture and a bristly little chin stood listening. Chief Perkins was vaguely sympathetic but said that nothing could be done unless they had closeup photographs of the weathervane showing distinctive marks that could prove ownership, or if they had registered the weathervane with the County Antiquities Board.

Jaron squinted, looked at his watch, and in his coldest voice said, “In the forty-six hours that we have owned the house there has not been much time for making distinctive marks on the weathervane or registering it with any organization.”

Chief Perkins mumbled, “There’s a gang a weathervane thieves with a helicopter working the area. Hardly a vane left in this county. New Yorkers buy them for wall decorations. They say. Or they could be going to a Foreign Power.”

Or to extraterrestrials, doncha think? Zilpha said to herself.

Jaron took the dark view; he said nothing more to Chief Perkins, but told Zilpha that he was pretty sure Johnson Wheatley had been in that helicopter. Zilpha thought Chief Perkins might have been at the controls.

•

Spring came with the air full of flouncing sunlight and great slabs of bent gold between the trees. The Earliwoods arrived, movers brought their furniture.

But from the beginning there was trouble with Goldie. Every few weeks a letter or phone call requesting a conference with Zilpha and Jaron came from Mr. Darwin, the school resource manager, a roly-poly man with a lovely voice. The subject was always the same: Goldie had slugged, punched, beaten, scratched, or pummelled another student. She sassed teachers.

“Where does this behavior come from?” Zilpha asked, thinking of the many ways Jaron picked a fight. “Oh, I wonder,” said Jaron, who saw strong similarities with his wife’s elbows-out style.

Despite these altercations, Goldie still looked after her shadow. One sunny weekend morning, Jaron found her in a bad temper, crouched on the porch floor in front of the door with a black crayon in her hand.

“Rats! I can’t do it!” Goldie said.

“Do what?”

“Draw my shadow. I’m too close—it squishes when I get down close.”

Jaron thought she was too old now for this shadow stuff, but he volunteered to trace her image. “Here, let me do it,” he said, but he rejected her crayon and went inside for a black marker. Goldie struck a dancing pose and Jaron traced it.

“Now you,” Goldie said. She guided Jaron’s hand so that it hovered above her shadow and outlined it with her black crayon. A few days later, Zilpha flopped a large welcome mat over the tracings.

“To protect them,” she said, thinking the outlines were childish and the less seen the better.

•

The pleasure of the new place did not wear off for Jaron. His attachment to the crumbling house and broken woodland deepened. He learned to keep that affection to himself rather than put up with Zilpha’s run-on complaints that, yes, the woods were beautiful but also full of “bugs and boring, scratchy bushes.” Inevitably, he and Zilpha slid back into their usual verbal barn burnings. Afterward, they cold-shouldered each other for days, and Zilpha’s smile at her husband was only a slight improvement on a primate’s bared-tooth display. As for Goldie, the breakfast atmosphere after a fight was so tense that she, trapped between parents crunching their granola with tight jaws, came to loathe the aroma of toasted pecans and dreamed of living with a different family in a distant place like Zimbabwe or Montana. Sometimes

the fights ended in mutual tears and regrets, and then Jaron and Zilpha went together to the roadhouse in Cow Lumber Center, where a man in a tan suit sat at a piano and they drank gin, wept discreetly, ordered the tough, gray steak, and swore affection to each other while greasy glissandos of piano notes washed over them.

Back home, Jaron fell onto the bed like a cut tree. Zilpha lay beside him and said, “It’s you and only you I truly love.” But her tone was that of someone saying, “I am just going to change the light bulb.”

“I know,” the tree said. But their fights continued just as peppery dishes appear on a table again and again over the years—and Goldie, too, became a notable slugger.

3.

Despite the quarrels and Goldie’s wish to be in another family, despite Jaron’s immoderate affection for the battered woodland, they all liked the ugly house and the deer-gnawed forest. Jaron gathered acorns and planted some at the back of the house. On stormy days, undulating branches seemed to be trying to pull loose from the maples and oaks. Goldie hoped to see that happen. The first summer was a time of shifting winds that swept heat away and set billions of leaves and small branches in susurrous motion. Zilpha wondered if that was what the pointillists had tried for—to give that light-shifting quiver to painted trees.

Zilpha bought a bird book as well as other books to put names to butterfly and moth, tree and fern. Near a white birch on the property, she saw a small, brilliant moth with wings of blue-black, white, and a rich orangey red. There was something familiar about it, something she could not quite recall—something with a raised hoof. Her moth book identified the insect as *Psychomorpha epimenis*, which meant nothing.

At the end of the Earliwoods’ first winter—a horrible icy mess that broke oak trees as though they were pretzels—Jaron tried to rake up the sodden leaves. Oak leaves were the worst. They seemed to be made of some kind of remorseless plastic that did not decay but lay in smothering brown layers

that no spring growth could pierce. Even after weeks of drying winds, the crackly leaves worked themselves into every corner and declivity. But Jaron had a new acquaintance—Nortal, an old reprobate who ran the town dump. Jaron persuaded the elderly man to help him clear the leaves, but, while Jaron was in the garden shed looking for leaf bags, Nortal siphoned half a cup of gasoline from his truck, set the leaves on fire, and went home. Jaron stamped out the smoking mess. He later raked the clumped and gasoline-reeking leaves himself.

“If it was me,” Zilpha said, “I would show that old boy the gate. He’s useless.”

Cartoon by Tom Chitty

“He’s got some skills,” Jaron said. “He says he used to be a metalworker. And he’s got an offset screwdriver. I might ask him to make us a new weathervane. And it won’t be any damn eagle. But I don’t know—he’s not very interested.”

•

Zilpha had found a bargain car in the “For Sale” listings of a regional paper—a decrepit Mini Cooper with a dozen dents. After she bought the heap, she began driving the back roads, past fields framed by unravelling stone walls—property boundaries of the old farms. She watched for preserved traces of that mythical farm past: gristmill stones for front steps, sagging-roofed barns

converted to garages for Porsches. She sometimes thought of the stolen weathervane.

It was on one of her back-road rambles that Zilpha added to her local reputation. She was already suspect for the way she dressed; a scarlet silk blouse and embroidered Turkish trousers were not the thing in South Northburn. One day, late in their first October, she foraged the farm stands looking for a certain end-of-season regional strain of corn long ago grown by the Nashua Indians. She found some at a roadside stand—a wheelbarrow with two planks laid across it—tended by an elderly woman in a filthy apron. “Indian corn. Just picked an hour ago. It’s the last. No more till next year,” the woman said, stuffing the ears into a much creased Walmart bag. In a hurry to get home before twilight, Zilpha stepped on it. The *Psychomorpha* moth came to mind, and with a click she knew why it was familiar. Of course—the moth had the identical color scheme as certain woven silk rugs from the Central Asia of the Sasanids.

She especially remembered one museum rug with four prancing horses in pale roundels. The horses were so alike that it seemed as if there had been one original vivacious animal with a red neck and head, blue-black body, and snappy red hooves, and that it had been put through a machine resembling a deli ham slicer so that identical cuts of horse fell away from the original. All of them showed pulsating red hearts and frisky tasselled tails; all had red hooves. They confronted one another with a slight air of amusement, as if one slice murmured to the next, “Well, hello, you!” Each steed had a lifted forefoot, and those tensed muscles communicated the animal’s need to stamp, to leap out of the roundel and gallop across the woven landscape. A siren interrupted Zilpha’s vision. She was being stopped for speeding.

She rolled down her window, recognized the young town cop with the nascent whiskers, and said, “Look, I know I was going too fast. I’m sorry. I was hurrying to get home and cook the corn.” She reached into the bag and seized two ears, the husks a healthy dark green, the end silk brown and twisted like a comic mustache. With a flourish she thrust them forward as though displaying an ikat table runner. She jiggled the ears in front of Officer Brad Crabbit, who took the gesture as a bribe, waved the corn away to show that he was incorruptible, made a face, and let her off with a

warning. Later, he elevated the event to a talking point with everyone he knew. It hit the town's newssheet—*South Northburn Doin's*—as "Last week, a speeder tried and failed to bribe Police Officer Crabbit with sweet corn." Zilpha never saw the story, but at school two girls said mysteriously to Goldie, "Your mother is the Corn Woman! Nyah nyah!"

•

The Earliwoods didn't recognize that they would be outsiders forever, people denigrated for being unable to hold on to a weathervane that had ridden the shifting winds for more than a century. They were people who expected special treatment because they were different, who didn't know that haughtily proffering ears of corn to a decent employed man as though dispensing alms was offensive.

Jaron was unaware of the ostracism. And Zilpha, driving around the county, noticed how South Northburners, many of them members of the county Antiquarian Society, showed that they believed they lived in the continuum of a law-abiding, free-speaking country. South Northburn was a place where an imaginary rose-colored past comfortably overlay historical realities just as Granny's colorful quilt covered a worn and smelly mattress. The locals, when they thought about the past at all, preferred nostalgia and dismissed as quaint exaggerations the stories of "eighteen-hundred-and-froze-to-death," when Tambora's world-circling ash cloud diminished sunlight and half-starved New England farm families loaded their wagons and hauled west to continue maiming the continent with their destructive style of agriculture. No one in the Antiquarian Society gazing at a hand-hewn oak hayloft beam accepted that the farmer's wife had hung herself from that beam the day after it was raised; no one believed the moldy gossip that drunks had once been forced to dig stumps out of roadways, or the whispered tales of ignorant, home-bungled abortions, or accounts of the old grandpa who'd taken his little granddaughters out behind the barn for fondling and penetration.

4.

Goldie grew taller, Jaron showed a little gray at the temples, and Zilpha put on more weight while longing for conversations with someone who

understood warp and weft. She never stopped trying to convince Jaron of the rich history of fibres only to see him slither away. One day, though, he stood and listened.

“There is no other art that has been such a major force in human history,” Zilpha droned for the twentieth time. Jaron went to his file cabinet, where he stored ideas and sketches, and took out a large photograph, handed it to her, stood watching.

“See what your textiles have done to one of the most remote places on Earth.”

The photograph had been taken from above the Atacama Desert of Chile, where crystalline, cloud-free skies lured telescope-toting scientists. But it was not a view of the yellow salt grass, or of the swollen *llareta* plants that suggested Roche Bobois gone horticultural, or the stark jags of rock against a flaring night sky, or the lithium-rich brine lakes. It was an aerial view of a giant rag-strewn dumping ground of discarded clothing covering miles of sand and stone. All the knit-tank, batwing, pleated-floral-stripe shirts and skirts and jogger shorts on the planet were dumped here along with all the ruffle-washed, machine-embroidered, relaxed, poofy, dog-ripped bedding. Here were Ignatius J. Reilly’s crusty lumber jacket, rustic beach towels and Egyptian-cotton pot holders, trompe-l’œil printed jeans and tufted pillow slips, the threadbare and faded, the unstylish toss-outs flung away by vast consumer populations who knew not what they had worn.

Jaron braced himself, his face bunched in trepidation, waiting for her outburst. But Zilpha said nothing about the Atacama Desert to him then or ever.

•

Zilpha and Jaron went on together toward the new millennium, adapting to computers and the internet, and to the time when Goldie became restive and sarcastic. “I guess she’s getting to be a handful,” Jaron said when Zilpha complained of their thirteen-year-old daughter’s rudeness and refusal to do household chores. Goldie now thought that watching for owls and high-kicking with her shadow were the stale amusements of childhood. She had

outrageous ideas that she kept to herself, until one morning, at the inevitably tense weekend breakfast table, she stood up and told her parents that she was a boy, the opening salvo in a severe and relentless campaign for private schooling, hormone treatments, and a new wardrobe.

Zilpha gasped at this declaration and the trouble that would come of what she believed was a whim. She yanked Goldie into the kitchen and said, “All girls get jealous of the privileges that boys and men have and want to have those same privileges. But this is ridiculous. You cannot just change your sex overnight. You simply cannot do it.” The battle between mother and child went on and on for weeks; not the least fractious were the violent discussions about personal pronouns. “It isn’t just me!” Goldie shouted. “It’s thousands of people born different that don’t want to be trapped. It’s gender freedom!” Goldie would fight for it, and Zilpha and Jaron would have to accept it.

Zilpha gingerly examined her own feelings. Did she wish it were not happening? Yes. Must she disguise her disapproval? Certainly not. Could she still love this difficult child? Not easily, but she would force herself to do it. Hypersensitive Goldie must not be damaged any more than she was already ruining herself. But then there was more.

“Anyhow, it’s not just that,” Goldie said. “I don’t want to go to school anymore. I quit.”

“Oh, yes, you have to go to school,” Zilpha said. “You only have one more year of middle school. You need to graduate so you can go to high school and then college.”

“No! No more. I’ve had enough.”

“It’s the law. You have to go.”

“I won’t go! I don’t want to be a girl.”

“So we hear.”

“And I don’t want to die.”

“For pity’s sake,” Zilpha said, “you won’t die. What do you mean?”

“Kids die! Do you know how many nut cases there are in schools? Dumb, hopeless guys. It happens in schools. It’s on the TV, kids shot, all bloody—Arkansas, Oregon, Colorado. How do I know if South Northburn isn’t next? There’s some mad, angry guys there. And they are mad at me. Because I am ‘weird.’ So I won’t go to school and get shot.”

To Goldie, Jaron said in his stuffiest voice, “Well, as to your first statement, I believe very deeply that evolution and diversity are interlocked since every known form of life on Earth has shifted and changed over time. The central thing about life is its diversity, its ability to make minute, adaptive changes over the millennia. And why would we think humans are different from other life-forms? We have all heard of young people discovering that they are not cookie-cutter male and female. Nature uses a sliding scale. As to the second statement, I agree. Sometimes distraught kids or outsiders come to school with a gun and shoot students. And teachers. I trust your read of the school’s temperature. And I agree that we need to find something else for you.”

Later, he said to Zilpha, “School shootings are one of this country’s dirtiest failures. Goldie is better off and certainly safer not going to that school. Goldie is very smart, good head on her—his—their shoulders, and, if she says he’s a boy, then I, for one, am inclined to believe it. And that shooting threat. We live and learn. Don’t make a big thing out of it.”

“But it is a big thing,” Zilpha said. “She’s only a year from her middle-school graduation.” She imagined the awkwardness of chatting with a grownup masculine Goldie and reminiscing “once when you were a little girl.” But Jaron imagined a scene of the graduates onstage in a line to receive their diplomas and in the wings behind the curtain the jealous psychopath raising his nickel-plated revolver. “Pretend it is not a big thing,” Jaron said, “and it won’t be.”

“Oh,” Zilpha said, “spare me your insights and aperçus. Am I going to wake up one morning and hear you announce that you are my wife?”

“I might,” Jaron said, “but not right now.”

•

Inevitably, the news of the girl-to-boy conversion reached a vociferous local woman, Beryl Slope, she who called the police to report suspicious cars parked near the woods or a “strange man walking funny” along the highway. She homed in on the Earliwoods.

Until Goldie’s change, most of the town’s Earliwood opprobrium had fallen on Zilpha, whose clumsy attempt to bribe Officer Brad Crabbit had made her known around town as the Corn Woman. That event, in Beryl Slope’s view, now took on deeper meaning. The Earliwoods had money; everyone knew it, and everyone resented it. It was said that they had bought out the old woman who grew those special ears which Zilpha had flashed before Crabbit’s eyes. And it was further said (always “on good authority”) that this particular corn had rare powers that enabled it to cure memory loss and nervous tics, though on the dark side it was known to cause cancer and sex change. Proof was in the Earliwood kid. Word went out that the corn was being grown in fenced and guarded fields in Massachusetts and sold for high prices. At the police station in South Northburn, Chief Bob Perkins looked sourly at Brad Crabbit.

“Y’know, Brad,” he said. “If you had taken them corn ears and planted the seeds, today you would be a rich man, growin’ your own special corn.”

Brad Crabbit snapped back, “Yeah? You see what it done to that female kid a theirs. Turned her into a boy. How’d you like to eat that corn, wake up some mornin’, and look in the mirror and wonder, Where is Police Chief Perkins? Who is this old lady lookin’ back at me?”

•

Jaron was pleased with his new son. It was Jaron who took Goldie out of the local school and set up a course of home study that mostly consisted of voluminous reading about the Maunder Minimum and how long it takes for sulfur dioxide to turn into sulfuric acid and what happened to the forests that once grew in Chaco Canyon. He had a hazy idea of the education enjoyed by privileged English boys in an earlier century, to which he added weekly visits from a karate master specializing in the hard-soft lessons of Goju-ryu.

Goldie, like Bucephalus, seized the bit and galloped into the intoxicating world of knowing, of finding out, of discovering reasons and causations. Jaron neglected his work with *CUSP* to give Goldie the benefit of his advice and affection. “Art,” he said, “is important. Goldie, make a habit of going to galleries and museums. Art can show you depth and sensibility. Without art, people become narrow-minded and prejudiced.”

Of course, Goldie had to leave South Northburn. After months of Jaron vs. Zilpha, after wrangling, after long father-son talks and phone calls, Jaron sent him west to a prep school that moved him onto the conveyor belt that took him to the university where he majored in geology and fell hard for volcanoes. Goldie was in love with magmatic geology: in a bakery window, he saw the rising hulks of sourdough loaves as rhyolite domes; if he squinted, a bowl of rice became pumice lapilli, and a shaken bottle of beer bursting from its glassy confines an explosive eruption. Even the words “chamber music” made him think of gulping, incandescent magma chambers seething for release. Like everyone else, he enjoyed the thrill of fiery eruption, the towering pyroclastic cloud that in ancient times may have urged humans to build ziggurats, steeples, towers, and monoliths, an idea not entirely contradictory to the usual reasoning that biological priapic events inspired high-rise architecture. But he especially grasped the invisibility of massive forces working far under the surface, unseen and unsuspected until they exploded. He had a feeling for such situations.

•

To satisfy his keenest interests, Goldie was drawn to the University of Oregon’s Center for Volcanology. One attraction was the nearby real volcano —Mt. St. Helens, in neighboring Washington State, which had erupted in 1980, killing fifty-seven people, including a young volcanologist whose last words into his field phone were “This is it,” a tense phrase well known to soldiers in battle. Goldie faintly hoped that, with luck, sleepy, close-by Mt. Shasta might surprise everyone by waking up and outdoing St. Helens, but he learned that St. Helens was not to be outdone. In a warming world where every glacier was in retreat, in the heart of post-eruption St. Helens an anomalous and quixotic “Crater Glacier” was growing. For the volcano, it was business as usual. For Goldie, the affirmation that fire and ice were reciprocal geologic bedfellows reinforced what he was learning from his

own life: nothing stands alone as an isolate entity; there are always connections, dependencies, if-this-then-that situations. Stasis exists only in the human imagination. Where there is fire there will—eventually—be ice.

5.

Goldie's combative nature softened; he had found something that could not be mangled, quelled, or repackaged by humans. He thought of planet Earth as a twitchy gambler trying out climatic variables over the millennia and, when the mix went wrong, ending the game with a card from the sleeve—the extinction card. Goldie admired the bitter finality of extinctions, and the Earth's deep breath before a new kind of life began, the details working themselves out to fit the times. Watching a simulation of a volcano erupting as it heaved out its monstrous pustular cloud, he felt a quiver of real affection. He had sometimes envied his mother her jackdaw delight in sparkle and flash, in the color and glaze of fabric. But now, against that human-made kaleidoscopic beauty, he had discovered incendiary truths—something altogether different, yet which moved him as deeply as Zilpha had been moved by a bone needle, as Jaron by a few acorns and the loss of a weathervane.

It was an unfortunate day when Goldie, still in college and on his first field trip to Iceland, stood near a river of lava oozing over the landscape like some hellish red porridge and learned that he could not bear heat without losing his senses, staggering about and crying, repeating the lyrics of country-and-Western songs as though they meant something. He saw aging volcanologists affected by long heat exposure whose speech stumbled, whose observations were skewed. At the side of a live volcano, he believed he could literally feel the heat damaging his brain cells.

“O.K., so you have to be the Bride of Frankenstein professionally. But what about the Girlfriend of Dave with our friends and family?”
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

“Human brains did not evolve in furnaces,” he said to Professor Scrawn, his adviser, a scarred and damaged man with burn-furrowed skin who looked as though he had personally put that assumption to the test. This heat sensitivity forced Goldie toward the forensic study of cold volcanoes. Postdocs and immersive projects followed until he found a job with *IVOGI*, the International Volcanological and Geophysical Institute. He specialized in making counts of tephra particles—ash and volcanic debris—from exceedingly old locations. His isopach maps of amoeba-like shapes represented the central locations and sizes of ancient eruptions. Mathematical formulas based on known fallout statistics figured in his accounting of what was “probably missing” as a result of erosion and particles too tiny to detect. Goldie loved the even more subtle cryptotephra, the sly tephra fallout from many thousands of years ago, doubly elusive when hidden under layers of sediment, as in the bogs, lake beds, or ponds that filled extinct volcanic craters. His life’s work became esoteric spectrometry—specifically, laser-ablation inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry—and he did very much like saying this to himself while brushing his teeth or to others when asked what he did for a living.

•

As he matured, Goldie fitted himself into the encapsulated identity of the lone scientist too absorbed in his work to waste time on people. It was common to see him sitting folded up, arms crossed, legs crossed, leaning forward, black sweater, black trousers, black shoes—a self-enclosed man, a black envelope. Those who noticed him saw a human raven in the corner, his mind sifting through deep volcanic thoughts as though they were dirty diamonds. He spent his vacations hiking, sometimes with a friend but most often on solitary treks across the Seward Peninsula, wandering from one extraordinary blue maar to the next, those poignant lakes filling ancient and eroded volcanic cones. His private tastes in music were the recordings of the late, lamented qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan or, when he wanted his hair to stand on end, the flaring voice of the long-gone flamenco singer Manuel Ávila.

In the lab, Goldie's thoughts circled and surrounded the minutiae of analysis and computation, sorted microscopic comparisons, developed overviews that laid out sequences and processes logically and accurately in theories not otherwise comprehensible. Though he had to watch eruptions from afar, he knew that the real throb and pulse of volcanism was in the history of what lay invisibly below. He looked at the singed field volcanologists who came with their boxes of samples, their unfiltered measurements. They were a cohort gathering incremental proof of unstoppable planetary change, and all of them were excited for the planet's bang-up future. After hours, they met up in Oasis Krakatoa—O.K. for short—a local bar run by Joe Sommier, a crutch-and-cane geologist maimed by a landslide. The lava people, like fond parents bragging about the mischief of unruly children, described the latest tricks of their special mounts, for there is a belief that every volcanologist will find one volcano to love more than any other in arcane ways understood only by the lover—if not a hot volcano that speaks the ancient secrets of boiling lava and flying pumice bombs, searing steam and throat roars, then an eroded cinder cup filled with the bluest water. Goldie knew that the number of active volcanoes in the world was more or less the same as the number of volcanologists—which made it possible for these enchantments to work out for everyone. But not for him. He had no volcano. Tephra was too much like dust to be loved.

6.

A few years after Goldie left home for laser-ablation high jinks, Jaron, following a business meeting in Zurich, disappeared suddenly. Goldie wondered if his father had changed his identity and moved to Pago Pago, where breakfasts were quiet affairs of fruit and cold mountain water, but discarded the idea as out of Jaron's character.

Zilpha flew straight to Switzerland, where she tortured the manageress of the Hotel Voltaire and the local police with pleas to discover her husband's whereabouts. Jaron's clothes and papers were still in his room, and the police felt that he had been lured away by some unknown person or situation. There was no other trace of him, but Zilpha, for the one week of her residence in the hotel, made a powerful effort to get at the facts of his mysterious evaporation. The hotel manageress said something elliptical about sailors and ports, and Zilpha realized she was suggesting that Jaron, like free-sailing mariners with their household arrangements in different ports, might have had another wife somewhere in Switzerland. She was shocked, then infuriated. She knew damn well it wasn't true.

•

In her hotel room overlooking a shrivelled glacier, Zilpha assessed her position without Jaron or his income. True, he had set up a trust account with each of them as co-trustees, and Goldie as successor trustee "if something happened." She did understand that, if Jaron were dead, she and Goldie would share the account assets. But was he dead? She did not know. She did what people do when their lives become a dropped cream pitcher: she plunged into work. She decided to stop being a collector and become a businesswoman. She would buy fabrics and she would sell them. Since she was already in Europe, why not hit the flea markets and enlarge her stock? There was small solace in the thought that the trip might be a deductible business expense.

She went first to Portobello Road, where the entire world seemed channelled into an emporium of knickknacks, statuettes, brown curled photographs, trinkets, musical instruments, wagon-wheel spokes—all the splendid detritus swept up from Persia, Tashkent, Turkestan, Tabriz, the Kyzyl Kum. She

unfurled the textile riches of India from the centuries before individual handwork was made obsolete by Richard Arkwright's spinning frame, and thought of Gandhi's spinning-wheel protest against British mass-produced textile domination. She went on to Lisbon's Feira da Ladra, then to the *vrijmarkt* in Amsterdam, and, with grim purpose and her last traveller's checks, to the souks of Morocco, where there was yet a chance of finding some fabulous rag of long ago lost on its way to an Eastern European prince—just one of Harun al-Rashid's four thousand turbans or a pair of his embroidered sable-lined boots would support her for the rest of her life.

No turbans, but she did come home with a haul of scraps, shreds of fabrics and pieces that had once swayed in camels' rhythm over the old tangle of interlinking merchant routes of the deserts. She would specialize in what crows and humans love best: glitter, reflection, light-ray-bending beads and gems, and threads of extraordinary colors. And she would give it all up to have Jaron home again.

•

Back in South Northburn, Zilpha converted the dining room into a showroom, invested in a humidity-control system. She put a sign at the end of the driveway—"Moon Silk Rare & Antique Fabrics." But where were the fabric-loving people? Very few got the word that in the New England backwoods Zilpha Earliwood had a stone house full of dappled weavings and fine shawls, embroidery-crusted vests, brilliantly dyed hangings, and diaphanous yardage. Customers were scarce, and she took the lack of interest as an insult. Abruptly, she realized that she did not want to sell off her finds piecemeal. It would be painful to part with her collection piece by haggled piece. She took down her sign.

There was still a considerable sum in the trust account—enough to take her to the end of her life, although she didn't believe this. She could hear Jaron saying in his dry, quiet voice, "If anything happens, you and Goldie will be fine." But Zilpha doubted the money would last. She felt poor, and she considered new sources of income. Perhaps she could teach? No, impossible. Then she looked into collecting Jaron's Social Security—*every little bit helps*—and learned that without proof of death she'd have to wait seven

years before Social Security would cough up. It had been only two years at this point, but she felt imprisoned in a roundel as much as any woven horse.

7.

Over the years, she and Goldie connected only in rare e-mails or two-minute phone calls. What could they say to each other? Jaron had been and still was their balancing point, and without him the gap seemed unbridgeable. By ignoring Goldie's existence, she could avoid coldheartedly thinking about Jaron's whereabouts. To cope with his disappearance, Zilpha chose to believe that husband and father Jaron Earliwood was, as usual, travelling. There was no way she could know that Jaron had decoupled himself from the world on an evening walk in the mountains. He remained distant and undiscovered under a pile of rocks and gravel at the base of a small precipice, for Switzerland is a vertiginous country packed with Alps, where forests and high-altitude trails traverse scree slopes. Yet one day, as Zilpha stood at the sink, her hands in hot water, a towering, Hokusai-like wave of grief crashed upon her, and she knew with surety that Jaron was dead. She sent an e-mail to Goldie: "Please call me. I want to talk with you about your father."

He did not call that day, but the phone rang two days later. At first, they moved gingerly around the subject of Jaron until Zilpha said, "I have accepted that he is dead." As she said it, an ancient howl rose in her throat and she made a dreadful sound of loss as old as humanity.

"Ma, I thought that years ago. If he were still alive, still living, we would know. We'd know!"

"Can you come home, Goldie? Even for a short time?" She forced her voice to stay level.

"I truly cannot get away right now, but I think I can come home in late summer or September. To spend some time. Like, weeks. Ma, in the meantime let's talk, let's talk a lot more, like every day or ten times a day? Let's write letters, let's send telegrams, and I will hire an airplane dragging a sign that says 'I Love You.' "

•

And so they reconnected, initially through brief messages almost professing affection. He told her about his tephra work, about problems recovering the data, daring hypotheses.

In an e-mail to Goldie, she told him that her brain ached with the effort to understand why humans no longer took pleasure from painstakingly crafted ancient fabrics, each an individual work of art, design, and labor, how people had come to look away from clothing made of natural fibres and threads, clothes so beautiful, so intense, so complex that they could not be duplicated in modern times, such as—for example—the shining, iridescent purple color of the *yan bao* jackets made by the Dongs of Guizhou Province, a drowning-deep color made with indigo, extract of water-buffalo skin, eggs, and blood.

“But now no one wants to duplicate any of the beautiful fabrics. Why?” she asked. “I truly want to understand why.” For a long time, she had thought about this, trying to see the stitches not only of the history of fabrics but of her own life; she felt she was undoing age-old knots of loss and possession. She tried to explain her confusion to Goldie in a long handwritten letter.

Goldie telephoned back, his voice warm, his pronunciation of words shaped like Jaron’s: “It looks on the surface like you are concerned with social—uh, social-media—influencers who push the consumption of goods. On a basic level, it is the money-government system we live in, and that’s the way it is. The so-called influencers show people that they really need dozens of changes of clothes, seasonal wardrobes, garments that express mood and status, clothes that show young, beautiful people having fun and good times. Clothes that are new. New is really important. Keep them wanting, keep them getting, then keep producing more. But the fabrics that you value—they’re old, y’know. Took somebody years to make, and then got handed down through the generations.” He burst into a fit of coughing that left him wheezing.

Well, of course she saw it. The rapacious, mush-brained public was groomed to desire bright-colored, chemical-based fabrics that poured out of machinery—disposable synthetics designed by mass popularity and artificial intelligence, made by machines, marketed, worn, and thrown away only

weeks later, so rapidly did fashions mutate. Humans could not consume quickly enough.

“I’ve been to the Atacama,” Goldie continued. “The central volcanic zone. *IVOGI* has a small lab in Camar.” He coughed. He said nothing about his back-burner search for a volcano, whether young or a crumbled old cone.

“Goldie—what’s that cough? I know that you work with dust particles.”

“Ma, over the years I’ve probably inhaled enough tephra to give me a cough, but it is not as bad as it sounds. I’d worry if I was exposed to fresh tephra with high silica content from some active volcano, but my field work is with really ancient stuff. I’m usually not out there digging. I’m in the lab most of the time. Minimal health risk. I have checkups. I wear masks. I’m O.K. And about that discarded clothing—I think that might be changing now. They say that people are tightening their belts, going back to making do with old stuff.”

“I’ll believe that when I see the charter flights to the Atacama and the crowds picking through the rags for their next wardrobe,” Zilpha murmured. She laughed and repeated their old family joke. “So—save your peanut-butter jars.”

•

All the hot, humid summer, she slept badly until in a single night the temperature fell like a dropped stone. She woke in the novelty of a cold morning knowing by some alchemy that it was time for her to sell her fabric collection, not in dribs and drabs to an uninterested public but to a textile museum that would value the knowledge behind her treasures. She wrote to the three fabric museums she thought would make offers. There was one piece she hesitated over, a very old Chinese runner the nascent green of spring fog; centuries past, it had been artfully water-stained in a subtle pattern that Zilpha saw as an ebbing tide on a fine-sand beach. Even Jaron had admired it and quoted a line from a Tang-dynasty poem by Wang Wei: “A thousand level miles of evening cloud.”

Then, when she was most deeply worried about money, Goldie telephoned. Slowly, carefully, he said that he had lung cancer, fortunately one lung only, fortunately early-stage non-small-cell, fortunately Stage 0. Oh, fortunate indeed.

“After you asked about my cough, I went in for a checkup, and they found a tumor. But there is a good chance I could be freed of it and go on for many years. There’s more. *IVOGI*’s been hit with funding cuts and tephra studies are on the chopping block. Anyway, before the surgery I want to come home. To South Northburn.” He surprised himself with how strongly he wanted to see Jaron’s woods again, the wild turkeys, the dying white ash struggling to withstand the emerald ash borer.

“I’ll do tests here for a few more days, then I will pack up and head out,” he said. “The docs are encouraging. I actually feel pretty good.”

“I can come out and help you pack—and whatever else,” Zilpha said.

“Ma, I can pack up myself and make the trip. Easy. I’ll see you in a few days.”

Zilpha had always believed she was resilient and could come back from crises and damage that would lay other people low. She brimmed with energy: to save Goldie the stair climb to his old room in the tower, she fixed up one of the spare bedrooms for him; she cleared her green folder of unpaid bills. In her ambitious mood, she went to the mailbox at the foot of the drive and found it packed full.

She brought the mail into the kitchen, dropping the papery mass onto the table, where it knocked over the saltcellar, sent envelopes and slick magazines cascading onto the floor. When she sorted it out, there was an envelope from the Styx Textile Museum, in Los Angeles. She squawked with delight at the generous offer for her fabric collection. She could stop worrying about running out of money. Suddenly, she was exhausted by loss, by rescue, by losing hope, by regaining it. Goldie would visit, go back, have his surgery, and he would get better, she knew it. Too tired to go to bed, she slept in the wingback chair.

8.

She met Goldie at the airport on a day of fast-moving clouds and swarms of spiralling leaves. Goldie said that he wanted to drive to the house.

“I remember the way. You don’t forget landscape and roads. And I’m not really tired. After all these years, I want to see what’s different.” But he complained about the traffic and was disappointed that the old bridge they had used for years was barred off, adding an extra three miles to the junction and a back-road approach.

“Technically, we rescued him, but we like to say he rescued us.”
Cartoon by Jake Goldwasser

“What happened to the bridge?” he asked.

“Stressed out. A lot more vehicles now. Too much heat, too much cold, too many floods, too much heavy truck traffic. Climate change. All the small bridges are failing. Not just here, all over the world, they say.”

Zilpha had been stealing glances at Goldie as he drove; he looked rough and tired. He looked middle-aged. Well, he *was* middle-aged. As he pulled up in front of the house, he was barely listening to her continuing talk about the decline of small bridges. He stared upward. “What the hell is that? I don’t believe it.” He pointed up. They got out and she followed his gaze.

“You mean the weathervane? After you left, Jaron had that old man who ran the dump make a new one. To replace the one the helicopter stole way back.

I know, it’s pretty depressing—the sinking Titanic.”

“Titanic, hell!” Goldie said. “Ma, it’s a volcano.”

Zilpha looked hard at the weathervane she had been seeing for decades. It looked like the Titanic, stern upthrust and smokestack belching, on her trip down to Davy Jones.

“That’s a volcano, Ma. Erupting.”

It took a few minutes until she could see it, and, yes, she could see that it might be a volcano, not a sinking ship, but only for a moment, before it returned to being the Titanic. She had always seen the world her own way.

Oh, man, Goldie thought. *It’s my volcano. And it’s here*. He wanted to laugh but clenched it down; yet in the night, in the spare bedroom, he did laugh quietly.

•

The next morning opened on a high sky with hooked filaments of cloud, with leaves skating and sliding down as though on tilted blue glass. Goldie and Zilpha brought their coffee cups outside, sitting at the splintery picnic table. Goldie saw Zilpha’s braided white hair and elderly face, her swollen fingers. He had not quite reckoned she would be old, and he felt a pang of pity for both of them.

“Let’s take a look at what happened to those acorns your father planted the first year we lived here,” Zilpha said. They walked around to the back of the house through the sibilant rustling leaves. Jaron’s acorns had become tall red oaks, higher than the house.

“Jesus! I remember the day he did that,” Goldie said.

Back again at the front, they looked up. Apricot-colored sunlight illumined the stone house and its Titanic-volcano against the leaf-racing sky. They sat in garden chairs that were falling apart and talked. Too long submerged in suppressed grief, Zilpha now came up from its depth like any swimmer

stroking toward light and sweet air. Suddenly, she asked the question that had nagged for years.

“Goldie—when did you first know that you were—you know, different? A boy?”

He said nothing, and she wanted to bite her tongue for asking. But then he said, “I think I always knew. But if there was a moment it was the day that Dad introduced me to my shadow—Billy Goat Gruff. That shadow was my true self. And I knew it.”

“I remember the fuss about Billy Goat Gruff, but you were just a baby—still a toddler.”

“Do you think that babies and toddlers don’t have any sense of themselves? The world would be surprised to glimpse what babies know. I knew. And I was damn lucky that you and Dad sent me away to a school where I was accepted as myself. I had an easy time of it compared with today. It couldn’t happen now.”

They sat silent and remembering. Goldie said, “I wonder if the other shadow is still here?”

Zilpha couldn’t imagine what he meant. “What shadow?”

“On the porch. Under the doormat?”

Zilpha had not thought about that particular shadow for years—it must have faded away. She half rose, but Goldie rushed at it, picked up a corner of the dirty mat, and flung it off the porch.

The light at the front of the cave is always best, and, as strong sunlight fell across the floor, after the long years they saw Goldie’s shadow. The marker ink had soaked into the wood floor and preserved the ghostly image of a skirted shadow-girl. But the crayoned tracing of Jaron’s hand above Goldie’s head was almost invisible. A few waxy flecks persisted, but to see it you had to know that it was there. Goldie raised his hand as if to say, “Behold.”

Goldie and Zilpha had seen Jaron’s presence in his ephemeral marker strokes, in the red-oak height, in the weathervane. He was still with them, and who, in our land of illusions, can say that was not a fair assessment of a united and happy family?

Then Zilpha said, “Goldie, what about a quick bite of lunch?”

“Sounds good.”

They went into the kitchen together. Goldie sat at the little table near the window. Zilpha said, “Can you get the blue plates out of the sideboard? I’ll make us a couple of tuna-salad sandwiches,” as she cut the celery and onion, slivering in a bit of mango for piquancy. The sandwiches waited on the cutting board, the blue plates were ready. Zilpha glanced at Goldie. Her hand turned. She lifted the knife, trimmed the crusts and with a single clean stroke cut the sandwiches into catty-corner elegance. ♦

Annie Proulx is the author of “Fen, Bog & Swamp: A Short History of Peatland Destruction and Its Role in the Climate Crisis.”

The Critics

- **The Lives and Loves of James Baldwin**
  By Louis Menand | An older generation dismissed him as passé; a newer one has recast him as a secular saint. But Baldwin’s true message remains more unsettling than either camp recognizes.
- **Why Hasn’t Medical Science Cured Chronic Headaches?**
  By Jerome Groopman | More than 1.2 billion people worldwide suffer from migraine and other debilitating conditions that are under-studied and often not taken seriously.
- **Briefly Noted**
  “Shade,” “Empty Vessel,” “Culpability,” and “Lili Is Crying.”
- **Hollywood’s Conservative Pivot**
  By Inkoo Kang | After the success of “Yellowstone” and “The Chosen,” the industry is chasing other red-state hits—an uneasy context for the revival of the Texas-set “King of the Hill.”
- **“Weapons,” “Harvest,” and the Shackles of the Horror Genre**
  By Richard Brody | Zach Cregger’s and Athina Rachel Tsangari’s films show different ways of working within a genre whose stories are preordained by a need to scare.

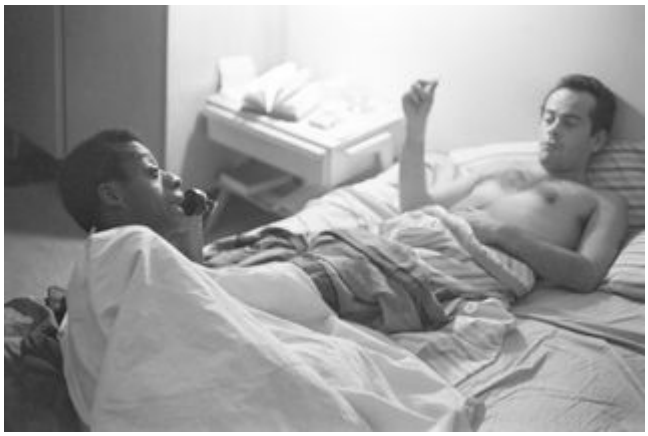
A Critic at Large

The Lives and Loves of James Baldwin

An older generation dismissed him as passé; a newer one has recast him as a secular saint. But Baldwin's true message remains more unsettling than either camp recognizes.

By Louis Menand

August 11, 2025



Baldwin photographed in 1963 with Lucien Happersberger—"the one true love story of my life," Baldwin maintained. Alongside the public crusade for civil rights, there was always a private search for a secure, loving relationship. His thesis about our fear of love linked the two.Photograph by Mario Jorrin / Michael Ochs Archives / Getty

An interviewer once asked James Baldwin if he'd ever write something without a message. "No writer who ever lived," Baldwin said, "could have written a line without a message." This is true. People write because they have something to say. Baldwin had something to say, and he spent his life saying it. But many who thought they got his message didn't get it at all.

Baldwin was high-strung and emotionally labile. He wasn't exactly charismatic—there was a strangeness about him which he did nothing to conceal—but he was magnetic. The poet Richard Howard described him as a "rather silly, giddy, predatory fellow who was extremely unattractive-

looking. There's a famous eighteenth-century person who used to say, 'I can talk my face away in twenty minutes.' And Jimmy could do that." He put his hands on you. He looked you in the eye. He poured you another drink. When he gave a lecture, he held the room. He had been a preacher when he was very young, and he knew how to work a congregation.

He could charm, he could engage, and he could also rant. Some people who knew him thought that the ranting was an act, and to some extent it was: it was a calculated way of making a point. He spent the winter of 1961 living in the guesthouse of the novelist William Styron, in Connecticut, while he worked on a novel. "We'd feed him," Styron remembered, "and he'd come around at night. We'd have these very liberal political people over, and Jimmy . . . used to stand in front of the fireplace and say, 'Baby, we're going to burn your motherfucking houses down.' " The liberals no doubt loved it. As he no doubt knew they would.

Baldwin did not follow a healthy or a domestically stable life style. He chain-smoked, wrote all night, and drank his way through countless bottles of Johnnie Walker Scotch. He believed in family. He was close to his own, and toward the end of his life he said that not having children was his only regret. But he had numerous casual liaisons, several unrequited crushes, and a few long-term love affairs, all of which ended unhappily. He tried to kill himself at least three times.

Most of his journalism and all his books were published by white editors who did not always share his ideas on race relations. He was naturally fearful, but he was on the road and out in public during a time when people like him, including people he knew, were getting shot. Putting his message out took an enormous physical and psychic toll.

That message was simple. We're afraid of love, because we're afraid of exposing our true selves. To manage that fear, we invent meaningless categories—Black, white, homosexual, heterosexual—and "other" the groups we don't belong to in order to avoid a reckoning with ourselves. In America, this manifests as "the race problem." Until white Americans—or Americans who "think they are white," as Baldwin sometimes put it—stop posing as innocents and confront who they are, until the country faces its history, until white people learn to love, there will never be genuine equality.

That's pretty much all that Baldwin ever said, and he said it over and over in almost every essay, every book, every speech, and every interview. He had no interest in politics in the usual sense; he wasn't interested in social programs, or civil-rights laws, or the equal-protection clause. If you asked his opinion on those things, he'd politely (usually) change the subject. He was quick, always ready with an answer, and it was always the same answer. William F. Buckley, Jr., was a champion debater at Yale, and fancied himself a forensic maestro; in a famous debate at the Cambridge Union in 1965, Baldwin clobbered him. He carried the room.

But what even sympathetic audiences often failed to grasp—misled, perhaps, by Baldwin's sermonic style—was that his message wasn't just hortatory. He meant it literally. He didn't believe in reform; he believed in revolution. Anything less than a total social reckoning—a complete psychological makeover of white America—was worthless.

This is end-of-days talk. If a total makeover is your goal, then everything is going to fall short. In 1984, reflecting on a career that began in the nineteen-forties, Baldwin judged that although there had been "superficial" changes in race relations, "morally there has been no change at all, and a moral change is the only real one. . . . What has happened, in the time of my time, is the record of my ancestors. No promise was kept with them, no

promise was kept with me, nor can I counsel those coming after me, nor my global kinsmen, to believe a word uttered by my morally bankrupt and desperately dishonest countrymen."

Three years later, he was dead. He was only sixty-three, but he had long since lost his readership. In 1976, the *Times'* daily book critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt opened a review, "So James Baldwin is still here, still pursuing us, a ghost of 60's past." Three years before that, the young Henry Louis Gates, Jr., had travelled to France to interview Baldwin for *Time*. When Gates filed the piece, editors told him the magazine wasn't interested; Baldwin was "passé." Just a decade earlier, he'd been on the cover. Even Gates, who'd once found Baldwin inspirational, came to believe that, in trying to keep up with the times, Baldwin had given up his critical independence. He had become an echo. He no longer mattered.

Yet today Baldwin is an icon. He has acquired an aura of infallibility, and critical independence is precisely what he stands for. People who once wrote him off have pivoted. And, if you ask college students now what Black American author they want to read, they don't say Toni Morrison. They say James Baldwin. What happened?

The consensus formed early that Baldwin, who broke through with his first two novels, "Go Tell It on the Mountain" (1953) and "Giovanni's Room" (1956), and the essay collections "Notes of a Native Son" (1955) and "Nobody Knows My Name" (1961), was a better essayist than novelist. The novels have their moments, but they have the humorless and fatalistic quality of literary naturalism. They are not books you are eager to get back to. Truman Capote, in a letter to a friend, called Baldwin's fiction "crudely written and of balls-aching boredom." Compared with much literary fiction of the time—"Invisible Man," "The Adventures of Augie March," "On the Road," "Lolita," "The Catcher in the Rye," "Rabbit, Run"—Baldwin's novels are less formally adventurous and far less entertaining.

Still, the early ones were well received. "Giovanni's Room"—though it's the story of a love affair between two men, a risqué topic for fiction in 1956—was a critical success, at least among white reviewers. It sold briskly and was a National Book Award finalist. Maybe setting it in Paris made it seem exotic rather than prurient.

The scope of those early novels was narrow, though, and the stories were not anchored in current events. It was with the essay collections that Baldwin caught a wave. The Montgomery bus boycott began in 1955, the battles over school desegregation in 1956, the Southern lunch-counter sit-ins in 1960, the Freedom Rides in 1961. There was something happening here, and, for many white readers, Baldwin was the unfiltered voice of Black experience. He told it like it was.

This is the historical moment—what has been called the "classic phase" of the civil-rights movement, from Brown v. Board of Education, in 1954, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965—that Baldwin will forever be a part of. It was a time when a book could make a difference: "The Feminine Mystique," "Silent Spring," "The Other America." Baldwin's contribution was "The Fire Next Time." It made a bigger difference than most people think.

"If we don't get more funding, the rat's going to be really bored."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Baldwin's nonfiction is first-person and autobiographical. That was how he established his authority as a "witness" (the term he preferred) to American race relations. He had walked those mean streets. In Harlem, where he was born, and Greenwich Village, where he moved at nineteen, he had known poverty, police brutality, sexual assault, and racial discrimination. He had fled the country, going to Paris in 1948, when he was twenty-four. He did not return until 1957.

Even then, he was semi-expatriated. From 1961 on, he spent more and more time in Istanbul, although he was often in the United States speaking on behalf of the civil-rights movement. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, basically ended that, and in 1970 Baldwin moved to Saint-Paul de Vence, in the South of France, where he lived for the rest of his life. This man who wrote obsessively about America spent half his life elsewhere.

It's a life appealing to biographers, full of historical incidents and famous names, and featuring a complex, quotable, and slightly otherworldly human being. The first Baldwin biography, "The Furious Passage of James Baldwin," by Fern Marja Eckman, a reporter at the New York *Post*, came out in 1966, when its subject was only forty-two. There have been a number since, including, most recently, Douglas Field's "All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin" (2015), Bill V. Mullen's "James Baldwin: Living in Fire" (2019), and now Nicholas Boggs's "Baldwin: A Love Story" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

There will be more. In 2017, Baldwin's papers were acquired by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, giving biographers access to an extensive archive. But a definitive life is still out of reach, because Baldwin's correspondence with four people—including his brother David (Baldwin had eight siblings) and his Swiss lover Lucien Happersberger, whom he called "the one true love story of my life"—is under seal until 2037. (As was generally the case with the men Baldwin was attracted to, Happersberger was mainly interested in women. In 1964, he married the Black actress Diana Sands—while she was performing in Baldwin's play "Blues for Mister Charlie," something that Baldwin, understandably, regarded as a betrayal. That's what I mean by "ended unhappily.")

Another biographical challenge is that the source for a lot of what we know, or think we know, about Baldwin's life is Baldwin. He told many stories about himself, particularly in the book-length essay "No Name in the Street" (1972), and also in interviews. The difficulty is that Baldwin tended, as we all tend, to dramatize—not to dissemble, necessarily, but to highlight the significance of an experience. When most of us do this, it doesn't

matter. If an event wasn’t quite the way we’ve chosen to remember it, who cares? But we’re not James Baldwin.

The flight to Paris is an example. Baldwin frequently said that it was after a Black friend, Eugene Worth, jumped to his death off the George Washington Bridge that Baldwin realized he had to leave America before he killed someone or was killed himself. He claimed that he picked Paris at random, knew no one there, and arrived with forty dollars, which was gone in two days. He avoided Americans, he insisted. “My friends were Algerians and Africans,” he told an interviewer for *Essence* in 1970. “They are the people who befriended me when I arrived here broke. In a sense, we saved each other, we lived together.”

This version of events is hard to verify. Baldwin gave the suicide of Eugene Worth a prominent place in his writing: Rufus, the central character in Baldwin’s third novel, “Another Country,” also jumps off the George Washington Bridge. But Douglas Field reports that although Worth appears in the 1930 census as an eight-year-old, there’s no record of his death in city or Social Security files. There is no reason to doubt that Worth existed and was Baldwin’s friend; what actually happened to him, though, is unclear.

Nor did Baldwin pick Paris out of a hat. Richard Wright, an early mentor of his, was living there. (That relationship, too, would have an unhappy ending.) Postwar Paris was a magnet for American writers, artists, and musicians. During Baldwin’s years there, Robert Rauschenberg, Romare Bearden, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Chester Himes, Allen Ginsberg, Susan Sontag, and John Ashbery were all in town.

Many veterans went to Paris after the war to “study” at the Sorbonne on the G.I. Bill. The city had plenty of English-language bookstores and magazines, and was known for welcoming Black Americans. (Africans were another story.) Baldwin, who didn’t speak French when he arrived, fit right in; Parisians were used to Americans. The real draw of the City of Light, though, was that it was incredibly cheap for people with dollars. Exchange rates were wildly favorable, and the black market offered even better deals. (After 1959, when reforms stabilized the franc and made Paris expensive, most American artists and writers stopped going there.) Baldwin came prepared: he had writing assignments lined up with New York editors,

to be paid in dollars, and plenty of contacts in Paris. When he stepped off the train at the Gare des Invalides, two Americans were there to meet him and bring him straight to Les Deux Magots, where Richard Wright was waiting.

The business about the Africans and Arabs seems to have been largely made up. Baldwin actually wrote an essay in Paris, “Encounter on the Seine” (1950), about how hard it was for a Black American to relate to Africans. “The African,” he wrote, “has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past. . . . He has not, all his life long, ached for acceptance in a culture which pronounced straight hair and white skin as the only acceptable beauty.” When Baldwin gave that *Essence* interview, in 1970, he may have been hoping to obscure the fact that most of the people he knew during his nine years in France were white.

Baldwin could also exaggerate his closeness to King. “We had been young together,” he told a writer from *Life* in 1971, “we had tramped all over the South together, we had even dared hope together.” King knew Baldwin but kept him at arm’s length, worried about rumors that he was gay—Baldwin had not in any public sense “come out”—and Boggs speculates that this was a reason (along with his unpredictability) that Baldwin was left off the platform at the March on Washington. Baldwin had written some remarks for the occasion, but they were read to the crowd by Burt Lancaster, with no acknowledgment that the words were Baldwin’s. One of the weirder moments in civil-rights history, as Boggs says.

A lot of people write about Baldwin because they have cathected with him along some dimension. For Boggs, it was Baldwin’s sexuality. In ninth grade, Boggs borrowed “Giovanni’s Room” from his sister and never returned it. Later, in college, he discovered in the Beinecke Library, at Yale, the manuscript of a children’s book that Baldwin had written with the French artist Yoran Cazac. It took Boggs more than twenty years, but he was able, in 2018, to bring the book into print. Meanwhile, it bothered him that earlier biographers had downplayed Baldwin’s love life, and he set about to fill in some of the blanks. Hence his subtitle, “A Love Story.”

Boggs's book is a full-scale biography, more than six hundred pages. Though it is principally concerned with Baldwin's personal life, it is good at showing how the life seeps into the fiction; political events receive less attention. There's heavy use of the correspondence; unfortunately, Baldwin's letters, at least the ones currently available, tend to disappoint—they are typically eloquent, sometimes anguished, but rather formal and rarely gossipy. They don't capture what the *Life* reporter called the "amusing bitchy bon vivant" side of Jimmy.

Still, Boggs's biography makes a hugely important contribution, because it takes us to the heart of Baldwin's message—the fear of love—and shows how urgent that problem was for him. Alongside the public crusade for civil rights, there was always, as Boggs shows us, a private search for a secure, loving relationship. From both angles—if you accept Baldwin's own verdict that race relations hadn't improved in his lifetime—the life was, in a sense, a failure, or at least incomplete.

Boggs sometimes strains to detect homoeroticism in Baldwin's relations with men he was friendly with. Marlon Brando and Baldwin, he writes, "may have had an intermittently sexual relationship." Sure, maybe. But there is no evidence for it. On the whole, though, he sticks to the facts and avoids sensationalism. It's a sad story in many ways, though it reminds us that Baldwin, unlike Wright or Ellison or even Mailer, was a true bohemian. His own freedom was what mattered. "I was not born to be what someone said I was," he pronounced in the last interview he ever gave, in 1987. "I was not born to be defined by someone else, but by myself, and myself only."

A difficulty for Boggs is that Baldwin had no interest in gay rights or the "gay community." "The word 'gay' has always rubbed me the wrong way," he told the writer Richard Goldstein, who interviewed him for the *Village Voice* in 1984. "I never understood exactly what is meant by it." He thought that "homosexual" was not a noun. One of his first pieces, published in *Zero* in 1949, was an essay on homosexuality in the novel. Novelists, he argued, know that human beings are not reducible to such labels: "Once the novelist has created a human being he has shattered the label and, in transcending the subject matter, is able, for the first time, to tell us

something about it and to reveal how profoundly all human beings interlock."

One of his last pieces, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," published in *Playboy* in 1985, concludes, "We are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it."

Baldwin was an enemy of identity politics. His message wasn't an imperative to declare your Blackness or your queerness. It was simply to live your life. His favorite writer was Henry James, another expatriate. (A visitor to the house in Saint-Paul de Vence reported seeing a wall of books on James.) A key text for Baldwin was "The Ambassadors," and the key line in it was Strether's advice to Little Bilham: "Live all you can." Baldwin had "The Ambassadors" in mind when he wrote "Giovanni's Room."
" 'Giovanni's Room' is not really about homosexuality," he told Goldstein. "It's about what happens to you if you're afraid to love anybody. Which is much more interesting than the question of homosexuality."

There is nothing stereotypically gay about the lovers in Baldwin's novel: David, a blond American living abroad, and Giovanni, an Italian bartender. They meet in a tunnel-like gay bar in Paris that Boggs identifies as La Reine Blanche, which is where Baldwin met Happersberger. There are, however, some stereotypically gay characters in the book—older men ("fairies") pathetically cruising for trade, for example, and transvestites. Here is one, encountered in the gay bar:

> There was the boy who worked all day, it was said, in the post office, who came out at night wearing makeup and ear-rings and with his heavy blonde hair piled high. Sometimes he actually wore a skirt and high heels. . . . People said he was very nice but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs.

> They might not mind so much if monkeys did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings.

This is told from David's point of view and is meant to reflect his ambivalence about his own sexual instincts. (He has a girlfriend.) But the disgust is a little over the top. "I didn't understand the necessity for all the role playing," Baldwin said about gay men to Goldstein. For Baldwin, sexual preference, like skin color, is accident, not essence. "The people who were my lovers," he told Goldstein, "were never, well, the word 'gay' wouldn't have meant anything to them." "That means that they moved in the straight world," Goldstein said. "They moved in the world," Baldwin replied.

From the beginning, Baldwin walked a tightrope. He needed both white readers and Black readers to trust him, and this proved impossible. "The Fire Next Time" was published by Dial Press in January, 1963. It consists of an article that had appeared in this magazine the prior November, under the headline "Letter from a Region of My Mind," plus a short letter to his nephew, titled "My Dungeon Shook," which he had published in December in *The Progressive*.

The *New Yorker* article is partly a memoir of Baldwin's time as a preacher and partly a report on a visit to Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam and a racial separatist, and it ends with a version of Baldwin's core message. It stretched across eighty-five pages. (The magazine was fat with luxury-brand advertising in those days; that issue had two hundred and forty-eight pages.) *The New Yorker's* editor, William Shawn, handled the article himself and called it "one of only two or three things that really caused a sensation during my time at the magazine." The book was among the top five titles on the *Times* best-seller list for forty-one consecutive weeks.

"Another Country," which had come out the previous June, was also a best-seller. The only book that sold more copies in 1963 was "Lord of the Flies." In May, Baldwin's face was on the cover of *Time*, and *Life* ran a photo essay on his trip South to report on the civil-rights movement. *Life's* circulation was around seven million. Now everybody knew his name.

That month, Birmingham police went after civil-rights demonstrators with fire hoses and dogs. Days later, King's brother's home and a motel where King had stayed were bombed. Baldwin fired off a telegram to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, accusing the President of failing to exercise moral leadership. On May 24th, at Robert Kennedy's request, Baldwin brought leading Black figures—including celebrities like Harry Belafonte and Lena Horne—to meet with him in New York.

It did not go well. The celebrities berated Kennedy, told him he didn't get it; Kennedy bristled and insisted that they should show more appreciation for what the Administration had done. Although the meeting was supposed to be confidential, Baldwin leaked news of it to the *Times*, and the story was on the front page for two days running: "*Robert Kennedy Fails to Sway Negroes at Secret Talks Here*." Kennedy was pissed.

The meeting is usually described as a fiasco, but it accomplished what civil-rights leaders wanted. The Kennedys were political animals. They knew that they could not afford to alienate people such as Harry Belafonte. White folks liked Harry Belafonte. In fact, the President had already read, and been impressed by, Baldwin's *New Yorker* article, and he must now have realized that Baldwin's warning about "the fire next time" might not be hyperbole. On June 11th, John F. Kennedy delivered a televised speech announcing his intention to submit a civil-rights bill to Congress. After his death, it became the Civil Rights Act of 1964—one of Congress's most consequential laws, protecting twenty million people from racial discrimination. Baldwin should get a little of the credit. He wrote a book, and lives were changed.

But Baldwin was now in a tight spot. He risked being seen as a Black writer co-opted by white liberals—not a role he wanted. White liberals thought of themselves as the Negro's friend; they didn't like being blamed for Southern racism. They were the good guys. Yet Baldwin's point was that there are no white good guys. Every white person benefits from white supremacy. Acknowledging that is a necessary step toward real equality.

Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

Many readers, white and Black, missed this. Most white liberals didn't feel especially targeted by Baldwin's message in "The Fire Next Time." They read the book as a homiletic. Donald Fine, the editor-in-chief at Dell, which published the paperback edition, called it "an almost overelegant, altogether polished exposition of black-white relations that white Americans could embrace without discomfort, and which really was considerably less fiery than its biblical title."

Some Black writers missed the message, too. Soon after "The Fire Next Time" came out, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka, but then known primarily as a Beat poet) published "Brief Reflections on Two Hot Shots," in the magazine *Kulchur*. The hot shots were the Black South African writer Peter Abrahams and Baldwin, whom Jones called the "Joan of Arc of the cocktail party." Baldwin and Abrahams, he said, "will not even open their mouths to say anything but that they are well-dressed, educated, and have feelings that are easily hurt." They "want the hopeless filth of enforced ignorance to be stopped only because they are sometimes confused with the sufferers." Which was pretty obtuse. Had he actually read the book?

At the same time, the very first piece in the very first issue of *The New York Review of Books*, dated February 1, 1963, was a critical review of "The Fire Next Time," by F. W. Dupee, of the Columbia English department. Dupee objected to Baldwin's apocalyptic tone. "Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?" Baldwin had asked. The answer, Dupee wrote, is,

“since you have no other, yes; and the better-disposed firemen will welcome your assistance.” He thought that Baldwin was goading white racists, to no one’s benefit. The poet Kenneth Rexroth echoed that criticism in the San Francisco *Examiner:* “ ‘The Fire Next Time’ is designed to make white liberals feel terribly guilty and to scare white reactionaries into running and barking fits.” Hannah Arendt, in a letter to Baldwin about his *New Yorker* piece, was blunt: “What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy.”

“Blues for Mister Charlie,” which ran on Broadway in 1964, was widely dismissed as agitprop. Susan Sontag complained that in Baldwin’s writing “passion seems to transmute itself too readily into stately language, into an inexhaustible self-perpetuating oratory.” In 1964, with his high-school classmate Richard Avedon, Baldwin published a deluxe slipcased coffee-table book, “Nothing Personal,” featuring Avedon photographs of assorted random figures including Dwight Eisenhower, Bertrand Russell, the Everly Brothers, and the inmates of a mental hospital. Baldwin’s accompanying essay offered lines like “When a civilization treats its poets with the disdain with which we treat ours, it cannot be far from disaster; it cannot be far from the slaughter of the innocents.” In *The New York Review of Books*, Robert Brustein, soon to become the dean of the Yale School of Drama, compared Baldwin to “a punchy and pugnacious drunk awakening from a boozy doze during a stag movie, to introduce his garrulous, irrelevant, and by now predictable comments on how to live, how to love, and how to build Jerusalem.”

And, in 1966, the left-wing muckraker *Ramparts* published an article by the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, who, the magazine explained, was imprisoned in Soledad, California, for “assault with intent to murder,” omitting mention of his rape conviction. “There is in James Baldwin,” Cleaver wrote, “the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in any black American writer of note.” He suggested that Black homosexuals like Baldwin “are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a

baby by a white man." The article was reprinted in Cleaver's prison book, "Soul on Ice," in 1968—a work that received respectful and often enthusiastic reviews. In an introduction to "Soul on Ice," the critic Maxwell Geismar credited Cleaver with "the best analysis of James Baldwin's literary career I have read." It is hard to believe that people once took this confused thinker seriously, but Cleaver clearly spoke to a moment.

Faced with a choice of allies, Baldwin sided with the militants. His view was that when Malcolm X or the Panthers talked about arming themselves against the cops, they, and not King or Thurgood Marshall, were speaking for the Black street. The police were armed. Why shouldn't the Panthers be? So he embraced Stokely Carmichael and the Black Power movement, Huey Newton and the Black Panthers, and Angela Davis after she was jailed on charges of providing the guns in a courtroom shoot-out in which a judge was killed. (He wrote an open letter to her which he published in *The New York Review of Books.*) He made friends with Amiri Baraka, who would speak at his funeral. When Eldridge Cleaver hit him up for money, he gave him some.

Yet Baldwin's midlife radicalism satisfied no one: to the activists, he was an interloper; to the critics, he was yesterday's news, chasing an energy he could no longer generate. In 1970, Baldwin sat down with Margaret Mead, then a celebrated anthropologist and a *Redbook* columnist. A transcript of their seven-and-a-half-hour conversation was published, seemingly unedited, as a book called "A Rap on Race"—two hundred and fifty nearly unreadable pages in which Baldwin tries to get Mead to acknowledge her guilt for Black oppression. Mead professes bafflement. She hadn't oppressed anyone; why should she feel guilty? *The New York Review of Books* headlined its review "Tape's Last Krapp." In the *Times*, the book was described as "the same old bilge you've heard from the fellow on the next stool to you in the saloon." In 1973, Baldwin wrote and narrated a show for the Newport Jazz Festival called "The Life and Times of Ray Charles," at which Charles performed. The *Times'* reviewer wrote that "the molehill that this mountain of talent produced was shocking."

Irving Howe called Baldwin's fourth novel, "Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone," published in 1968, "remarkably bad." The *Times* called it "a

disaster in virtually every particular." His fifth novel, "If Beale Street Could Talk" (1974), fared no better. "I get the feeling," the *Times'* reviewer wrote, "that Mr. Baldwin doesn't worry overmuch about the authenticity of his books. He knows that, with all his faults, a sizable portion of the American public will love him still. He is a brand name by now. In fact, he is so dated . . . that he might even qualify for our current nostalgia craze."

The critical temper was no friendlier in the years that followed. Baldwin's "The Devil Finds Work," a 1976 book on Hollywood, was described as "a rococo parody of his own work." *The New York Review of Books* called his last novel, "Just Above My Head" (1979), "repetitious and inert." When the Library of America issued two volumes of Baldwin's work, edited by Toni Morrison, in 1998, the *Times* review was headlined "*Trapped Inside James Baldwin*." The reviewer for this magazine wrote that, "by 1968, Baldwin found impersonating a black writer more seductive than being an artist." All those takes were by Black critics.

During the urban unrest that followed King's assassination, with arson and looting that arguably helped elect Richard Nixon, Baldwin defended the arsonists and looters. "You're accusing a captive population that has been robbed of *everything* of looting," he said to a reporter from *Esquire*. "I think it's obscene." People in the liberal mainstream thought it was political suicide to defend the looters; they could interpret Baldwin's statements as posturing. If they had taken him seriously the first time around, they would have known that it was not. In 1963, Baldwin's anger had felt cleansing. In 1968, he seemed just part of the chaos.

There were also more Black literary voices by then. Books like "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1969), "Roots" (1976), and "Song of Solomon" (1977) offered readers a different way of thinking about the Black experience in America. But Baldwin was not only criticized. He was dismissed as a has-been. He was the Ghost of Civil Rights Past, someone who went out with Jim Crow. His fame was identified with a particular historical moment, and he could appear to be struggling to keep up.

It's hard to deny that the work deteriorated. The life style—the alcohol, the partying, the all-nighters, the continual travel (he rarely said no to an invitation)—must have worn Baldwin down. He made some bad choices,

like the Avedon book and the Mead interview. And he was repeating himself. His fictional characters—for example, the pregnant Black teenager Tish, who is the narrator of “If Beale Street Could Talk”—tend to sound a lot like James Baldwin. The narrator of “Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone,” a famous Black actor named Leo Proudhammer, is an obvious stand-in for Baldwin. Those novels are also badly designed; they end abruptly, as though the author had a deadline to meet.

But now, in the twenty-first century, Baldwin is back. What happened? Trayvon Martin happened. Michael Brown and Eric Garner happened. Freddie Gray and George Floyd happened. Their deaths fit a pattern that Baldwin had spent thirty years trying to get white people to see. That Garner may have been selling cigarettes illegally, or that Floyd may have tried to pass a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, only illustrated what, according to Baldwin, Black people had always understood white people to be telling them: stay in the place assigned to you, and you’ll be fine; step one inch out of line, and you’re dead.

This time, white people seemed to get it. The Black Lives Matter movement, started in 2013, raised awareness that problems Baldwin had described—police brutality, the white foot on the Black neck—had changed little in half a century. Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “Between the World and Me” (2015) and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.,’s more measured “Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own” (2020) channelled Baldwin’s anger and became best-sellers. “At the root of the Negro problem,” Baldwin had written in 1963, “is the necessity of the white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to live with himself.”

On January 20th of this year, the page turned again. We are now in a looking-glass world in which whites are cast as the ones in need of government support and protection. This Administration—along with this Supreme Court—doesn’t even want to see the word “race,” or any of its cognates, like “diversity.” Baldwin, too, had hoped for a world in which nobody talked about color. This is not the form he imagined such a world would take. There’s not a lot of love out there. ♦

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.

Books

Why Hasn’t Medical Science Cured Chronic Headaches?

More than 1.2 billion people worldwide suffer from migraine and other debilitating conditions that are under-studied and often not taken seriously.

By Jerome Groopman

August 11, 2025

The cause of migraine is controversial, with some researchers seeing it as primarily a blood-vessel abnormality and others as emanating from the brain itself, like epilepsy.Illustration by Rune Fisker

Two decades ago, I was leaving my morning clinic at the hospital where I work when I suddenly felt an excruciating pain in my head. It was as if my skull were exploding while simultaneously being gripped in a vise that was getting tighter and tighter. I became nauseated and dizzy, and made my way

unsteadily to the emergency room. I was in my early fifties, and my first thought was that this could be a burst aneurysm, known to some physicians as “the worst headache of your life.” To my relief, a *CAT* scan showed no sign of bleeding in the brain; then came the bad news. A neurologist arrived, examined me, and said he thought that I was suffering from a migraine. I had never had one before, but his diagnosis turned out to be correct, and, since that time, migraines have been an indelible feature of my life. Their frequency and severity have varied over the years, but once you become a migraineur, as doctors sometimes call us, you are always wondering when your next attack will be, planning how you might strategize around it, scrutinizing your life for possible triggers, and looking for some new treatment that might curb the agony.

As Tom Zeller, Jr., writes in “The Headache” (Mariner), the unpredictability of chronic headache conditions is particularly unnerving for those who suffer from them: “You may be delivering a speech before a large crowd, cooking dinner for a friend, or simply lazing alone on a hammock staring at the sky. You may even be sound asleep when it happens. At any moment it can appear, creeping in like a shadow in some cases, ambushing like a predator in others.”

Zeller, a science journalist, does not get migraines. He suffers from something generally acknowledged to be even worse: cluster headaches. Often featuring in lists of the most painful conditions in medicine—along with trigeminal neuralgia, sciatica, and gout—cluster headaches are named for the way that they descend in clusters, several times a day. The intensity of the pain is reflected in another name for the condition: suicide headache. Zeller describes the pain as “white-hot, blinding but invisible, frantic but elephantine” and writes of “writhing on the bathroom floor; of spittle and drool; of fingertips ground furiously into the scalp in a futile attempt to soothe whatever shrieking complex of anatomy is tearing at the right side of my head.”

What We’re Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Cluster headaches are relatively rare, affecting less than one per cent of the population, whereas migraine is among the most common serious maladies. Globally, some 1.2 billion people suffer from it, some forty million of them in the United States. Men are more likely to experience cluster headaches, whereas female migraine patients outnumber their male counterparts at a ratio of about three to one. The two conditions provide the focus of Zeller's book, which weaves together history, biology, a survey of current research, testimony from patients, and an agonizing account of Zeller's own suffering, which began when he was in his twenties. Readers with migraine or cluster headaches will find themselves, as I did, comparing their own experiences with the rich material in the book, which is both a survey of the field and a great cry of pain.

Migraines vary widely from person to person—in terms of how they are experienced, what seems to trigger them, and how responsive they are to various drugs. They may begin in adulthood, as they did in my case, but they can also afflict children. More than half of women with migraine suffer attacks during menstruation, suggesting hormonal fluctuation as a trigger. Migraines may be preceded by a variety of subtle symptoms; Zeller lists "constipation, food cravings, frequent yawning, stiffness in the neck, or increased thirst and urination." There is also the phenomenon known as aura, an array of sensory or motor symptoms that often portend the onset of pain, nausea, and a heightened sensitivity to light.

Aura is one of the most striking features of a migraine, but only about a third of sufferers experience it. I am one of them, and my experience is intensely visual. Before my headache arrives, there's a kind of flashing light in the shape of a crescent moon with sawlike teeth, and this apparition

gradually expands until it blocks the vision in my right eye. Oliver Sacks, in his masterly first book, “Migraine,” from 1970, includes paintings by various migraine patients of their auras. One that looks very much like mine bears the caption “A classical zigzag fortification pattern—its brilliance, in life, is as dazzling as a white surface in the noonday sun, and the edge is in continual scintillation.” Some relatively lucky migraineurs get aura but no pain following it. But for most, both with and without aura, the attacks are debilitating. During and after, I need to rest in a dark room. Even a glimmer of light is painful, and I feel physically and mentally spent, unable to function for the rest of the day.

Migraines typically affect one side of the head. (Indeed, etymologically, the term comes, via Latin, from a Greek word referring to this, *hēmikrania*, which lost its initial syllable as it passed from language to language.) The condition has been recognized through most of recorded history. Hippocrates described what appears to be an aura. “He seemed to see something shining before him like a light, usually in part of the right eye,” he wrote of a patient. “A violent pain supervened in the right temple, then in all the head and neck.” Aretaeus of Cappadocia, thought to have lived in the second century C.E., possibly at the same time as Galen, described a headache disorder similar to my experience: “These were bouts of head pain involving much torpor, heaviness of the head, anxiety, and weariness. . . . Patients fled light because the darkness soothes their disease.” A remedy recommended by Galen involved applying a torpedo fish—a member of the ray family—to the heads of sufferers, a treatment that Zeller speculates may have served as a counter-irritant. Aretaeus favored bloodletting, cupping, blistering, and, if all else failed, a gruesome cauterization of the scalp.

The occurrence of chronic head pain doubtless goes back much further. Zeller observes that the “portion of the population experiencing migraine and other headache disorders appears to be remarkably stable, neither ebbing nor flowing very much over time, and with only small variations across ethnicities and geographies”; this suggests that the problem may be as old as our species. He spends several pages outlining the practice of trepanation—drilling a hole in the skull—evidence of which has been found in skeletons dating back to the late Paleolithic era, some twelve thousand

years ago. He cites not only historians and medics who take this as confirmation of early headache treatments—among them the seventeenth-century doctor Thomas Willis, who coined the term “neurology”—but also those who persuasively argue against that assumption. Still, he admits that his sufferings predispose him to think there must be something in that idea. “Anyone who has experienced the pain of a cluster attack will have at least contemplated an act of self-violence commensurate with trepanation,” he writes. “When there is a terror unfolding inside the skull, how crazy is it to think that another terror might let it out?”

For most of history, there was little advance in the treatment of headaches and a corresponding curiosity about what might work. Charles Darwin, himself a sufferer, recorded in the journals documenting his time aboard H.M.S. Beagle a folk custom that had been shared with him during a bad bout in Argentina. “A common practice is, to bind an orange-leaf or a bit of black plaster to each temple: and a still more general plan is, to split a bean into halves, moisten them, and place one on each temple, where they will easily adhere,” he wrote. “If a man, with patches on his head, is asked, what is the matter? he will answer, ‘I had a headache the day before yesterday.’ ”

Medical science may have had little to offer headache sufferers, but, as Zeller notes, “prior to the twentieth century, unexplained head pain was considered a consequential matter—a mysterious and even baffling affliction that warranted serious medical consideration, accumulating documentation, and frequently dramatic interventions.” An important theme running through his book is the scant attention these conditions now receive, given how many people suffer from them, and the difficulty that patients have in being taken seriously. There are far fewer caregivers and researchers tackling the headache conundrum than there are working on movement disorders such as Parkinson’s, degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s, and vascular maladies such as stroke. Patients seeking solutions often experience frustration and desperation. They visit neurologists, anesthesiologists, pain-management specialists, alternative healers, and online chat groups, trying to find explanations and relief.

Sufferers have also long been stereotyped by doctors, a tendency exacerbated by the fact that migraine patients are predominantly female.

Zeller quotes an interview from the nineteen-forties with Walter C. Alvarez, a prominent physician on the staff of the Mayo Clinic: “Women who are most easy on the eyes, charming, dazzlingly intelligent and highly sensitive, are the very ones who are particularly prone to attacks of migraine headache.” Joan Didion addressed this denigrating view in her essay “In Bed.” “All of us who have migraine suffer not only from the attacks themselves but from this common conviction that we are perversely refusing to cure ourselves by taking a couple of aspirin,” she wrote. “ ‘You don’t look like a migraine personality,’ a doctor once said to me. ‘Your hair’s messy. But I suppose you’re a compulsive housekeeper.’ Actually my house is kept even more negligently than my hair.”

The question of what causes migraine and other chronic headaches is controversial, with two schools of thought, both of which can be traced back to the nineteenth century. One school contends that migraine is primarily an abnormality of the blood vessels and targets treatment accordingly. That is what I was taught in medical school nearly fifty years ago, and one of the first neurologists I consulted, noting that I would get a migraine while resting on Shabbat after a stressful week, suggested that my blood vessels, which had been tight and constricted, were relaxing, causing excessive blood flow into the brain and, thus, the headache. (It occurred to me that one solution might be never to relax.) His advice for prevention was vigorous exercise to enhance vascular tone, a regimen that, in my case, didn’t work.

The other camp holds that migraine emanates not from blood vessels but from the brain itself, like epilepsy. In a phenomenon known as electrical depolarization, an abnormal flux of ions triggers neurons to fire, moving up from the brain stem and into regions including the cortex. This mechanism can account for such symptoms as aura, nausea, photophobia, and tingling, and the weight of brain-scan evidence favors this hypothesis. Those who subscribe to it see blood-vessel contraction and relaxation as mere epiphenomena. Zeller offers a useful synthesis of the two views: “If one were to boil down existing knowledge of primary headache mechanics, these three statements would more or less cover it: (1) key parts of the brain seem to be involved; (2) certain neurochemicals seem to be important; and

(3) we still aren’t entirely sure about the role of blood vessels in the whole matter.”

Depending on the doctor, and on the theory that he or she held, I have been prescribed various medications, sometimes in sequence, sometimes in combination. I began with tricyclic antidepressants, which, years ago, were found to be helpful for some migraine patients. But they affected my blood pressure—if I got up quickly from bed, it dropped to the point that I’d almost faint—and also made it hard to urinate. I moved on to verapamil, a drug that blocks calcium’s entry into the smooth-muscle cells around blood vessels, causing the vessels to relax and widen. It made my vascular tone and blood pressure plummet. Next was Topamax, an antiepileptic medication, whose nickname in medical circles is Dope-a-max, because it makes you feel stupid. Indeed, I felt as if my head were filled with potatoes; I could barely think and could speak only slowly. I then added propranolol, a beta-blocker that reduces the effects of adrenaline on the heart and the blood vessels. It also brought on a degree of fatigue and gloom that became intolerable, a known side effect of the medication. During acute migraine attacks, I took triptans, targeting the neurotransmitter serotonin, which ameliorated the headache in the short term by blocking pain receptors in the head. But triptans can be taken only in limited doses because of their risk of inflicting rebound headaches and their side effects of nausea, vomiting, and chest pain.

One weekend, in the midst of this trial and error of remedies, after stopping propranolol, I had an explosive series of unrelenting migraines, each episode dovetailing into the next. There was a brief respite of an hour or two between waves of auras and pain. I couldn’t leave my darkened room and feared I would be consigned to a life of debility. A neurologist prescribed high doses of prednisone, a corticosteroid, which broke the vicious cycle but induced severe anxiety and insomnia, so much so that I had to take lorazepam, a Valium-like benzodiazepine. None of these numerous medications were consistently beneficial.

Zeller aptly captures my experience. “What works for one person today may not always work, which will force them to seek out a new remedy from a well of options that necessarily shrinks with every change,” he writes. His

own pharmaceutical quest is nothing short of hair-raising. The book opens with him high on psilocybin from magic mushrooms; he writes of a time when, working on a big story for the *Times*, he was "ingesting high doses of magnesium; inhaling up my nose regular squirts of water and capsaicin; popping calcium-channel blockers like candy; and practically mainlining caffeine, which sometimes seemed to abort an individual headache if taken quickly, but also, probably, helped to make the headaches worse overall." At one point, he blacks out from taking too much verapamil: "I registered an abiding sense of thanks—not because I'd survived a reckless overdose, but because I had finally slept through the night without a headache."

Despite our limited understanding of the biology of chronic headaches, there have been recent advances in identifying molecules in the brain which mediate pain. The discovery of a neurotransmitter called calcitonin gene-related peptide (CGRP) has markedly advanced the understanding and the treatment of migraine. This discovery came about when researchers inserted cannulas around patients' fifth cranial nerve to sample the release of proteins during migraine and found CGRP in abundance. It was released from trigeminal nerve endings surrounding cranial blood vessels. Subsequent experiments found that intravenous infusions of CGRP invariably produced migraines.

Drugs developed to block the effects of CGRP arrived for patients in 2018. I was initially prescribed Aimovig, an antibody that is self-administered by injection once a month. For eight months, I didn't have a single migraine, having previously averaged one every few weeks. At first, I thought I might be among the lucky twenty per cent of patients whom Zeller describes as "super responders"—"their lifelong, personal narratives of disabling, unexplained, recurrent head pain being completely rewritten in ways that would have been wholly unheard of just a few short years ago." Alas, for me, the effects of Aimovig gradually waned, and I became despondent. Fortunately, another CGRP-targeting drug came on the market: Emgality. This worked for me, too, but, again, the benefit wore off after about a year.

Both Aimovig and Emgality were prescribed for me by a pain specialist. When they stopped working, I saw a neurologist who is in the migraine-as-epilepsy camp. She recommended Lamictal, an antiepileptic medication

that is also used for psychiatric conditions such as bipolar disorder. It suppresses electrical depolarization and has been shown to be highly effective in people who have migraine with aura but not in those who have migraine without aura, a fact that lends credence to the hypothesis that aura represents an epileptic-like event in the brain. The benefit for me was substantial and has been ongoing. Meanwhile, the pain specialist I was consulting encouraged me to add on a long-acting CGRP antibody called Vyepti, which is given every three months. Sometimes, during the week or two before my Vyepti infusion, I feel tingling in my neck, without the flashing light in my eye but with moderate one-sided head pain. I've come to think of this as a mini-migraine. Immediately, I take Nurtec, another CGRP blocker, which can abort a full-blown attack.

The use of multiple medications is common among headache sufferers. One study cited by Zeller found that the average patient was taking at least four medications and that forty per cent were taking five or more. Lamictal, Vyepti, and Nurtec are all preventative. During a full-blown attack, I take triptans.

Why are migraines such a common part of human experience? Zeller notes that animals do not seem to suffer chronic headaches. "I've never seen one of my pets lie in its bed with its paw over its head," an Australian pharmacologist tells him. This may indicate that migraines are produced by the interaction of the most primitive parts of our brain and the cortical structures that have evolved more recently. Zeller suggests that evolutionary biology may hold an explanation for chronic headaches. "It's not hard to imagine that an acutely sensitive nervous system, attuned and highly responsive to sounds, sights, smells, and threats, would be valuable to our primitive forebears on the predatory savannah," he writes. "Maybe the desirability of these triggerable, keenly attentive senses meant that our internal wiring would evolve to a razor's edge, forever spring-loaded, but prone, in some of us, to errant firing under the wrong conditions."

This hypothesis sounds persuasive, albeit frustrating for me. We are no longer on the predatory savanna, and I, for one, would prefer to have a nervous system that was not on a razor's edge requiring multiple medications to restrain it. Still, with the four drugs I now take, migraines

have lost much of their power to dictate the shape of my days; I suffer the full force of one only a couple of times a year, with “mini-migraines” marking the waning of my quarterly infusions. For me, that’s a huge improvement, enough to move through the world without the old dread always trailing behind. Reading Zeller’s book, I was reminded that there is a kind of uneasy fellowship in this condition—a vast, involuntary community of people mapping out their lives between attacks, haunted by uncertainty but sustained in part by accounts like his. If there’s a lesson here, it’s that pain resists mastery, but understanding, however incomplete, can offer its own form of relief. ♦

Jerome Groopman, a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998, writes primarily about medicine and biology. His books include “Your Medical Mind: How to Decide What Is Right for You,” with Dr. Pamela Hartzband.

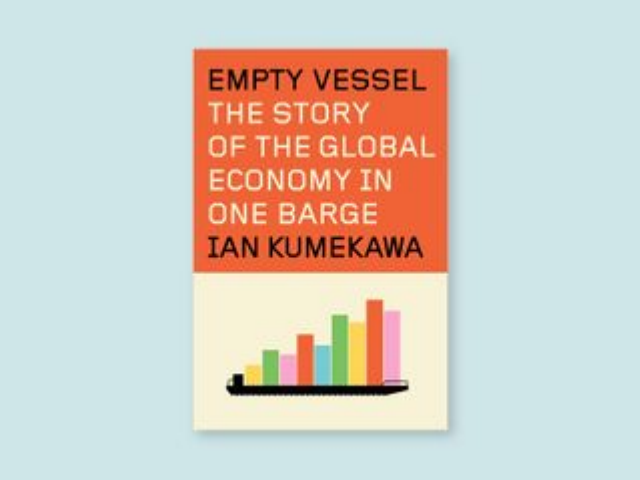
Books

Briefly Noted

“Shade,” “Empty Vessel,” “Culpability,” and “Lili Is Crying.”

August 11, 2025

Shade, *by Sam Bloch (Random House)*. Shade is a straightforward solution to the problem of a warming world. But as this thought-provoking series of dispatches about the history of shade shows, its deployment is uneven and often politically charged. Providing protection from the sun was long considered a civic responsibility: in Mesopotamia, it was achieved by building cities on grids. But in the twentieth century the development of air-conditioning and automobiles stymied community-minded urban planning. Bloch, an environmental journalist, examines how shade is now a privilege, often denied to farmworkers, the homeless, and residents of poor neighborhoods.



Empty Vessel, *by Ian Kumekawa (Knopf)*. This clever micro-history tracks the voyage of two barges through the roiling economic changes of the past half century. Built near Stockholm in 1979, the vessels swapped names, owners, and flags as they took in British troops in the Falkland Islands, held prisoners in New York City, and housed oil workers in Nigeria. In Kumekawa's telling, theirs is an itinerary that drifts along deep historical currents, from British imperial decline and mass incarceration to globalization, financialization, and the development of the offshore economy. Along the way, Kumekawa brings readers on excursions into the collapse of Sweden's shipbuilding industry, the rise of automation at Volkswagen, and the emergence of the Bahamas as a tax haven.

What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Culpability, *by Bruce Holsinger (Spiegel & Grau)*. In this tightly paced novel, domestic intrigue is transposed into the fraught world of A.I. The inciting incident is a car crash that takes place while a teen-age boy is at the wheel, driving with the help of an automated assistant. As the boy's family, who was in the car with him, regroups at a vacation rental after the accident, questions about responsibility arise. Who, they wonder, was really driving? Who is liable, financially or morally? This Zeitgeisty discussion is balanced with plenty of drama: as it turns out, the family's vacation house is next to a compound owned by a shady tech billionaire—a discovery that unleashes a torrent of deception.

Lili Is Crying, *by Hélène Bessette, translated from the French by Kate Briggs (New Directions)*. This propulsive mother-daughter psychodrama was published to great acclaim in France in 1953 before falling into obscurity. It begins with a young woman named Lili living in a Provençal

village, where she works at a boarding house run by her mother, who is alternately coddling and domineering. Eventually, Lili manages to escape and marry, though in the process she loses her illusions about love. When the couple moves back to town, a fierce rivalry forms between mother and husband, setting off a widening conflict that involves sexual jealousy, the Holocaust, and wartime profiteering. The novel's signature is its unusual form, which strings together short, hypnotic phrases, blurring the boundary between novel and poem.

On Television

Hollywood’s Conservative Pivot

After the success of “Yellowstone” and “The Chosen,” the industry is chasing other red-state hits—an uneasy context for the revival of the Texas-set “King of the Hill.”

By Inkoo Kang

August 8, 2025

Hollywood, according to one talent agent, is newly “heartland-curious.”Illustration by Emmanuel Polanco

“King of the Hill,” the animated sitcom that first ran for thirteen Americana-powered seasons between 1997 and 2010, had a deceptively simple premise. The family at its heart collectively represented the median of their suburban Texas milieu: the middle-aged Hank Hill was an uptight fusspot who clung to old-fashioned virtues; his sparkplug wife, Peggy, balked at being labelled a feminist; and their preteen son, Bobby, searched for alternatives to his parents’ cultural inertia. Hank’s passion for the propane business was mirrored by Bobby’s prop-comedy aspirations—one of many quirks that prompted Hank to mutter, “That boy ain’t right.” But

the show was full of sly reminders that it's easier to spout traditional values than to live by them.

At the time, "King of the Hill" was widely praised—the critic James Poniewozik declared it "the most acutely observed, realistic sitcom about regional American life bar none"—but its return to Hulu, this week, has been met with an unusual amount of hand-wringing. The series' co-creator Mike Judge, whose wide-ranging credits include "Office Space," "Idiocracy," "Silicon Valley," and "Beavis and Butt-head," strenuously avoids discussing his political alignment. But the question has become more charged amid current existential anxieties in Hollywood. Battling competition from the internet and a bustling conservative-media ecosystem, many in the industry have concluded that they have to win back audiences by producing more content that represents the working class, red-state values, and religious sensibilities. The new season of "King of the Hill" nods at the dearth of such programming when a channel-changing Hank expresses dissatisfaction with what's on offer: "I'll wait until Hollywood makes something for us again, like 'Forrest Gump.' "

The original series often found a way to satirize both sides of an argument, and its depiction of Republicans was scarcely an endorsement: in the Season 5 première, set shortly before the 2000 Presidential election, Hank's support of George W. Bush is eroded by the candidate's weak handshake. But, in our polarized times, for every left-leaning fan comforted by Hank's fundamental decency, another might see his brand of conservatism as a nostalgic gloss on an increasingly ugly movement.

This soft-pedalling impulse is evident in the revival's treatment of Hank's next-door neighbor Dale, a conspiracy nut who blames the U.N., the U.S. military, and the Cuban government for life's inconveniences. Since "King of the Hill" went off the air, in the late aughts, real-world events like the Capitol riot have revealed the hazards of such alternative facts. The new episodes acknowledge that there are now a lot more people like Dale, but they're presented as essentially harmless. Dale, who's elected mayor after running on an anti-mask platform at the height of the pandemic, talks himself out of the position after thirty-six hours. As he puts it, "Any

democratic process that would put *me* in office doesn't deserve the title 'fair.' "

Hank's fuddy-duddiness arose from his conviction that the world was veering off course—a sentiment that many liberals now share. The series' new showrunner, Saladin K. Patterson, makes the most of this common ground, relying more on character-based comedy than on political commentary: the season's strongest elements are the shifting relationship between Hank and Bobby, now a twenty-one-year-old food-world prodigy, and Hank's ongoing frustration with a culture in decline. His disdain for the Walmartesque Mega Lo Mart, his horror at oversharing influencers, and his dismay that too many people today opt to give credence to the most entertaining version of reality—all components of this season—allow a viewer to believe, just for a moment, that most of this country can still agree on *something*.

The red-state audience that Hollywood is chasing isn't a monolith, and there's an experimental energy in the crop of shows catering to this newly prized demographic. There are Bible stories translated for the screen, including the independently funded phenomenon "The Chosen" and the Amazon series "House of David," made in collaboration with a faith-based production company. The head of the talent agency U.T.A.'s Nashville office told *Business Insider* that the streamers are "heartland-curious," which helps explain Netflix's spate of family-friendly small-town dramas, such as "Virgin River" and "Ginny & Georgia," as well as its partnerships with comedians who've long since alienated the left. More sinister is the sense that entire corporations are bowing to powerful right-wing actors: Disney recently renounced "woke" values, with the company's C.E.O., Bob Iger, declaring that its mandate is to "entertain" rather than to advance "any kind of agenda." A long-planned merger between Paramount and Skydance Media, which required the Trump Administration's blessing, appears to have led to the cancellation of the resistance comedian Stephen Colbert's late-night show.

Such pandering is a harbinger of further media fragmentation, but it doesn't have to be. I watched every episode of the "Roseanne" revival and its matriarch-free spinoff, "The Conners," which ABC commissioned

explicitly to represent more blue-collar families. And Taylor Sheridan, whose ranching drama “Yellowstone” is now a multibillion-dollar franchise, seems to have mastered the art of crossover appeal. The showrunner has flaunted his distaste for mainstream Hollywood, and the feeling may be mutual: this summer, his six ongoing series were once again snubbed by the Emmys. But his latest project, “Landman,” demonstrates better than most how conservative shows might be a damn good time even for a liberal viewer.

The drama, which streams on Paramount+, follows the sixty-year-old Tommy Norris (Billy Bob Thornton), a fixer at an oil company in West Texas. Tommy, who distrusts the news and has no patience for the government, describes himself as “a divorced alcoholic with five hundred thousand in debt.” But that wealth of experience has made him the sage of the Patch, the site of his company’s rigs and of rampant drug-cartel activity. The show’s rural setting and its lopsided gender dynamics stand out in a TV landscape where “quality” programming has calcified into a fatal sameness. HBO and the like are chockablock with wealthy families mired in dysfunction, well-heeled white women harboring secrets, and the world falling apart in artful tableaux. There’s so much crime that the transgressions seldom register. “Landman” ’s cartel subplots are as hokily violent as anything else on TV, but the change of scenery offers different stakes—and a different look. The cold blue lighting that’s become a visual shorthand for prestige is replaced by beautiful outdoor shots of dawn and dusk, usually populated by men at work. Sheridan struck gold with the decision to set the series in the Patch, which he presents as a Wild West: a place where every hole drilled is an expensive gamble and any day can be a laborer’s last. Tommy ping-pongs from crisis to crisis, taking the chaos in stride. When his citified boss, Monty (Jon Hamm), tries to alert him to a fresh catastrophe, Tommy sighs, “An airplane full of drugs being run over by an oil tanker ain’t news. That’s just another Monday.”

Unlike “King of the Hill,” “Landman” doesn’t distance itself from its protagonist, who can seem like a mouthpiece for Sheridan’s views. In an early episode, Tommy delivers an extended lecture to a newcomer to the Patch about how “clean energy” is far from clean. His argument is muddled, decrying our reliance on fossil fuels while dismissing efforts to devise

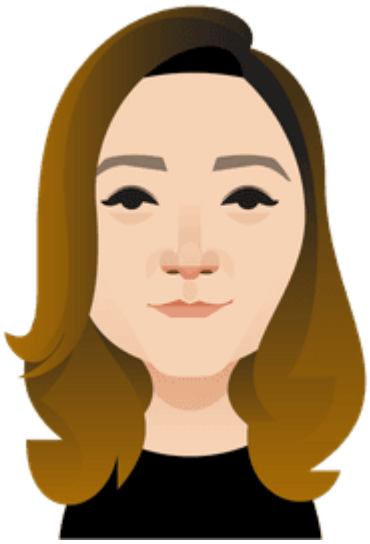
alternatives. He gives voice to his industry's aggrievement at being attacked by the left: "Getting oil out of the ground's the most dangerous job in the world. We don't do it because we like it. We do it because we run out of options. . . . There ain't nobody to blame but the demand that we keep pumping it." I came away from the scene unconvinced by his fatalism but also invigorated by a mass-market drama challenging me to think about energy policy. If I'm not necessarily Sheridan's target audience, it's still fun to debate his hero in my head.

The show's regressiveness is most evident in its core female characters: a pair of proud bimbos—Tommy's ex-wife, Angela (Ali Larter), and their teen-age daughter, Ainsley (Michelle Randolph)—and a huffy young attorney named Rebecca (Kayla Wallace), who's eternally eager to take offense. It's Rebecca whom Tommy lectures about clean energy; after his monologue, he saves her from a rattlesnake on the verge of attack. She responds by crying, "You didn't have to kill it!" Her impracticality and ingratitude, it's implied, are classic lib behavior. (Naturally, the scene went viral.) I wouldn't blame a female viewer if she found these overripe portrayals to be a deal-breaker. As the sex-obsessed Angela, Larter has the thankless task of flaunting her body for the camera even as her character is ridiculed for it. At one point, her crankiness about being underappreciated for her domestic efforts is blamed, without irony, on her period.

Angela explains to Ainsley that the easiest route in life is to please a rich man so that he'll buy her things. Ainsley, in turn, tells an N.F.L.-aspirant love interest that she intends to major in philanthropy in college—so that she can assist her wealthy husband by reducing his tax burden. The admission is meant to illustrate her savvy, even if she can conceive of herself only as a helpmeet. Her world view is reactionary, but, as a critic craving departures from the now rote girlboss archetype, I discovered I didn't mind; young women like Ainsley exist, however rare they may be onscreen. By the end of the season, her transactional approach to romance yields some modest form of progress: getting her hunky new boyfriend interested in community service.

A series like "Landman," retrograde and occasionally nonsensical as it is, might be less compelling in a different era. (One could say the same about

the year’s big hit, the winsomely formulaic “The Pitt.”) But, if conservative media has blossomed by offering alternatives to the same old fare, there’s nothing that says progressive projects can’t do the same. And there’s much to be mined from our cultural and political disconnect. In the new season of “King of the Hill,” Hank insists that “America is still the best got-dang country on Earth”—but even he prefers a version of it that never was. ♦



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

The Current Cinema

“Weapons,” “Harvest,” and the Shackles of the Horror Genre

Zach Cregger’s and Athina Rachel Tsangari’s films show different ways of working within a genre whose stories are preordained by a need to scare.

By Richard Brody

August 8, 2025

Children mysteriously disappear from a suburban community in Zach Cregger’s film.Illustration by Emiliano Ponzi

Horror is an accursed genre. Because it promises to deliver a specific sensational effect, its stories are obliged to fit into preordained patterns. Its popularity depends on predictability, and the task of providing the expected thrills renders the genre even more formulaic than superhero blockbusters. Zach Cregger’s new movie, “Weapons,” is, in this regard, an exemplary horror film—reducing social complexity and elaborate fantasy to a narrow outcome. The action starts at 2:17 *A.M.* on a week night, in a middle-class suburban neighborhood somewhere in Pennsylvania, when seventeen (of eighteen) students in a local elementary-school class get out of bed, leave their homes, and vanish. A voice-over narration briefly recounts the departure and sets up the subsequent investigations by police, administrators, parents, and the teacher, Justine (Julia Garner), whose students these were.

The parents turn on Justine, blaming her for the disappearances. She, meanwhile, suspects that the one remaining pupil in her class—a quiet, and, if not bullied, at least slighted and aggrieved, boy named Alex (Cary Christopher)—may have been involved. The principal, Marcus (Benedict Wong), puts her on leave, both to placate the parents and for her own protection, and forbids her to have any contact with Alex. As the investigations continue, they lay bare a tangle of neighborhood ties and conflicts: Justine reconnects with a police officer named Paul (Alden Ehrenreich), who is in a relationship with Donna (June Diane Raphael), whose father, Ed (Toby Huss), is the chief of police and therefore Paul's boss; a petty thief named James (Austin Abrams) learns of reward money and works to rescue the children; when the most vociferous of Justine's accusers, a man named Archer (Josh Brolin), is stonewalled by the police, he gathers clues independently and comes up with his own theory.

"Weapons" is essentially a mystery, and a good one, if conventional. In a clever move, Cregger divides the film into discrete chapters, each labelled with the name of the character at its center. To show events from different points of view, time frequently rewinds, revealing intersecting moments in the characters' lives. Coincidences mount up, creating a tension-filled labyrinth that emphasizes the inescapable role that serendipity plays in the rational, deductive process of investigating. Yet Cregger's storytelling is slick and textureless, featuring characters whose personalities are reduced to their plot functions and a town that has no characteristics beyond its response to calamity. In order to stoke shocks early on, when the action is still mundanely procedural, Cregger shows characters' nightmares. Later, once a series of gory doings propels matters into prime horror territory, the movie takes an altogether different path, a supernatural one.

It turns out to be a road to nowhere. The many physically revolting and morally repellent acts that ensue amount to little but a gross-out joke. The source of evil? Don't expect to find it in "Weapons." Is corruption festering in the apparently homogeneous suburb? Not particularly. Does hatred brew within? Look, rather, for an excess of trust and generosity. Does the horror go beyond mere sensation to embody the unconscious or introduce potent symbolism? "Weapons" forecloses such inner reverberations and outward implications by its rigid adherence to plot and to superficial effect. This loss

is all the greater because Cregger makes the central disappearances powerfully unsettling, the fleeing children running from their homes with their arms reaching downward in an inverted V. Behind the visual jolt of these outstretched arms is a disconcerting historical echo; they call to mind the arms of the fleeing napalm-burned Vietnamese girl, Phan Thi Kim Phúc, in the famous 1972 photograph of the aftermath of a South Vietnamese air raid. Nothing in the film suggests that the resemblance is intentional, but the coincidence, if that's what it is, is indicative of Cregger's tunnel vision. Oblivious of resonances, he seems not to see what he's doing. Facile sensationalism cuts the movie off from its own most powerful implications, blocking any view of a recognizable world.

In "Harvest," Athina Rachel Tsangari's adaptation of a 2013 novel by Jim Crace, horror doesn't arrive until midway through. Once it arises, though, it retrospectively clarifies the dramatic setup and determines the rest of the action. The movie, set in a remote Scottish village in what seems to be the Middle Ages, is in the subgenre of folk horror, which locates destructive power in pre-modern lore. (Prime recent examples of the form are "Midsommar" and "The Northman"; classics include "The Wicker Man" and "The Juniper Tree.") But, whereas the plot of "Weapons" is driven by the demands of genre, "Harvest" uses some of the trappings of folk horror to deliver shocks that aren't sensational but intellectual.

The village seems a harmonious place. Its land is farmed communally, and its lord, Master Kent (Harry Melling), is a benevolent soul who prefers coaxing and rewarding to ordering and punishing. When his barn mysteriously burns, the villagers exert themselves, at great risk, to put out the fire. In voice-over, one of them explains that there won't be an investigation; there's no constable anywhere nearby, and treating the disaster as an act of God at least maintains unity. The speaker is Walt Thirsk (Caleb Landry Jones), who serves as Kent's unofficial foreman. The son of a wet nurse who nourished the infant Kent, Walt was brought up and educated alongside him, destined for a similar life of privilege until he married a village woman. The men remain friends, a bond tightened by their both being widowed, and their warm rapport is of a piece with a prevalent feeling of good cheer. The villagers sing while threshing, gossip as they shear Kent's sheep, and make merry by dark.

Tsangari intensifies the rustic idyll with rapturous attention to natural beauty: there are extreme closeups of flowers and insects and beatific wide shots of verdant coastal landscape. Much of this attention is filtered through Walt's consciousness: he's the brains of the town, as he wryly declares, and his learning makes him of use to a mysterious visitor named Earle (Arinzé Kene), who's first seen on a nearby hillside, standing before an easel and painting the scene. Earle—whom the villagers nickname Quill, after the implement he uses—turns out to be a surveyor brought in by Kent, and his painting is actually a map. Further light is shed on Quill's presence when three more outsiders arrive—two men (Gary Maitland and Noor Dillan-Night) and a woman (Thalissa Teixeira), whom Walt refers to, collectively, as the Beldams. The villagers, hostile to outsiders, suspect the trio of burning the barn and turn on them. These outsiders aren't marauders, however; they are avatars of the near future. Their village has been taken from them, just as this one is now being targeted by yet another outsider (Frank Dillane), whose designs are both predatory and entirely legal. (The scheme resembles the historical British process known as enclosure.) What's planned is something like the shifting of the agrarian village to an organized industry—producing wool for garments to be sold for the benefit of an absentee owner.

"Harvest" is fundamentally a work of political cinema, a social archeology of the emergence of capitalism—of the depravities of modern economics and the inherent injustices of its legal premises. Tsangari, who's Greek, makes use of the medieval setting much as many American filmmakers have made use of Wild West ones, to dramatize abstract forces of society and government. In the conflict between Hobbes and Rousseau, between visions of primordial humankind as inherently brutal or inherently peaceful, Tsangari stacks the dramatic deck in favor of benign and placid human nature. The residents are aggressive only toward outsiders, and this attitude is at least partly justified, given the role of Quill's work in imposing legal order on the inchoate village. What's more, in Rousseauian fashion, Walt's own gifts of learning and insightful observation prove to be of dubious value, inhibiting actions that might save the village.

The fervor of Tsangari's large-scale historical vision gives the movie heft, but the philosophical ambitions of "Harvest" aren't matched by its dramatic

specifics. Tsangari doles out information cagily, turning over narrative cards with calculated delay, a bare sufficiency that undercuts her world-building in favor of point-making; the just-enough story is also a just-so story. To heighten the placid charm of the remote village, she soft-pedals its physicality: the place is sanitized, full of clean people and clean places, untroubled by human or animal waste, by disease, by weather. (Even the largely handheld camerawork, by the innovative Sean Price Williams, seems becalmed.) The insistent images of nature are merely pretty, devoid of wonder or menace. Tsangari's pre-modernity is an abstracted fantasy of innocence; the villagers live childlike lives with no culture besides song and dance, no desire beyond lust, no will beyond subsistence, no restlessness, no curiosity, no speculative inclinations, no untoward energies. Tsangari's view of her world is blocked by her ideas; she is so concerned with what she has to say that she doesn't see what she's not showing. For Tsangari and Cregger alike, visions of horror get in the way of mere seeing. ♦

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

Poems

- **“Covid Snow”**
  By David Baker | “Six squirrels on the dead ash and the living pear.”
- **“I Was a First Alto in the 1980s”**
  By Deborah Garrison | “I used to sit for hours / at an electric typewriter. / I remember well its hum.”

Poems

Covid Snow

By David Baker

August 11, 2025

Six squirrels on the dead ash and the living pear.
No. Seven. Swish of tails across the branches.

They've pulled me from my sick chair to watch them
skip, stop. Fly back up the snowy trunks. White tails!

They bounce on such slender limbs. Now two or three
go high over the barn—and they're chasing back down.

I'm just cold hands, cough, and white dust for a mind.
The nurse on the phone this morning calls it brain fog.

But no, more like covid snow. I suppose, either
way, weather's how we track the changes inside.

The snow is done. Squirrels have moved on. No, wait—
a few flakes come dusting down, where one limb shakes.

David Baker is the author of the poetry collections "Whale Fall" (2022) and "Transit" (2026), among others.

Poems

I Was a First Alto in the 1980s

By Deborah Garrison

August 11, 2025

I used to sit for hours
at an electric typewriter.
I remember well its hum.

I used to drink glasses of wine—
well, anyway,
I would drink one.

I used to sing in a chorus.
I remember my voice
entering the blend, the anonymous shallows

clean and barely rippling,
or sharing a duet with Krista,
a bent harmony, our first altos meeting

and crossing
like a pair of notched
sticks.

Our bit was from a poem of Lorca
set to music:
Ay amor, que se fue por el aire—

That was the line.
Bill, on the podium, was still alive.
The eighties, you brutal

darlings—
We married in you.
We even gave parties.

And the great Russian poet
spoke his fortieth-birthday
poem for us in a small room—

the one about munching
the warty bread of exile.
Which he was doing right then

at one of those institute luncheons
where the intellects reeled, the writers
gossiped and bloomed.

However, there was
a genuineness.
A hush and ripple of pain

as the Russian language
surged over us, clanging and bitter.
Not a song but a cry, *Ay amor!*

He sat in a folding chair
and declaimed, yearning into
our empty hearing.

Why remember
these things
and not others?

Well, later we had
a big black dog
with a noble, curly snout

who leapt
straight up
into the air—pure vertical

he was, the dog
of my children's
childhood,

which is now
over and gone
like so much, so much.

Deborah Garrison is the author of the poetry collections "A Working Girl Can't Win" and "The Second Child."

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the August 18, 2025 magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Wednesday, August 6, 2025**
  By Caitlin Reid | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, August 6, 2025

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Caitlin Reid

August 6, 2025

Caitlin Reid has been constructing crosswords since 2017. Her puzzles have appeared in the Times, the Wall Street Journal, and USA Today.