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Goings On

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  By Richard Brody, Michael Schulman, Sheldon Pearce, Helen Shaw, Brian Seibert, K. Leander Williams, Jane Bua, and Adam Gopnik | Also: Adam Gopnik on where to eat near the Frick; Sondheim and Chekhov, Marisa Tomei and Lucas Hedges onstage; the kinetic Afro-pop of Youssou N’Dour; and more.
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Goings On

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By Richard Brody, Michael Schulman, Sheldon Pearce, Helen Shaw, Brian Seibert, K. Leander Williams, Jane Bua, and Adam Gopnik

April 18, 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.***

In the nineteen-seventies, U.C.L.A.'s Ethno-Communications program, founded to increase minority enrollment, attracted a critical mass of young Black filmmakers. They quickly began to make a widely varied range of independent films that were unified by their bold and intimate attention to Black lives and history, and by distinctive cinematic forms to match; the group eventually gained the nickname the L.A. Rebellion. Though few of its members have had careers commensurate to their great early achievements, the movement has had a delayed but powerful impact on later generations of filmmakers, as seen in the series **"L.A. Rebellion: Then and Now"** (at Film at Lincoln Center, April 25-May 4), which presents some of the movement's major works along with notable recent successors.

Kaycee Moore and Henry G. Sanders in Charles Burnett's "Killer of Sheep."Photograph courtesy Kino Lorber / Milestone Films

"Bush Mama," the thesis film that Haile Gerima (who entered U.C.L.A. in 1970) completed in 1975, is set in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles and stars Barbara O. Jones as Dorothy, who struggles to raise her young daughter (Susan Williams) when her partner, T.C. (Johnny Weathers), is incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit. (It screens April 25 and April 28.) Gerima's unflinching yet sometimes heartily humorous view of Dorothy's world ranges from documentary shots of street life and politically charged interactions with bureaucrats to confessional conversations with a neighbor (Cora Lee Day) and voice-overs evoking Dorothy's inner life.

Julie Dash entered U.C.L.A. in 1976 but didn't make her first feature, **"Daughters of the Dust"** (May 2 and May 4), until 1991; though it's her only feature to date, it marked the history of cinema by way of its approach to history. It's set in 1902, in a Gullah community on an island off the coast of Georgia, where a large extended family is preparing to move to the North. The intricate tensions of their relationships are deepened by evocations of the past—including their forebears' tragic resistance to enslavement—and of enduring African traditions. Dash (whose cast also includes Jones and Day) brings the region's culture to life by way of a resplendent, spiritually exalted style that's among the modern cinema's most distinctive visions.

One of the most acclaimed L.A. Rebellion movies, **"Killer of Sheep,"** by Charles Burnett—the first of the group to enter U.C.L.A., in 1967 (and a cinematographer on "Bush Mama")—is screening April 18-24 at Film

Forum, in a new restoration. This, too, was a thesis film, completed in 1977, but its release was long delayed because of music rights. It's a sharply observed, lyrically romantic drama of a young paterfamilias in Watts named Stan (Henry G. Sanders), whose harsh job in a slaughterhouse leaves him embittered and depressed. Burnett tenderly sketches the resulting stresses in Stan's marriage—a living-room dance scene with his wife (Kaycee Moore), set to Dinah Washington's record of "This Bitter Earth," is a classic in itself—and evokes the family's life in generous detail, with special attention to the couple's children.—*Richard Brody*

About Town

Broadway

In his historic career, Stephen Sondheim stripped the American musical of its schmaltz, tapping into the curdled emotions underneath. In **"Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends,"** a posthumous revue imported from the West End, the producer Cameron Mackintosh and the director Matthew Bourne smear it back on, giving Sondheim's complicated œuvre the sheen of supper-club entertainment. Bernadette Peters and Lea Salonga lead the cast, decked out in spangles and tuxes, as they cycle through the hits—"Send in the Clowns," "Broadway Baby," "The Ladies Who Lunch"—and deploy the occasional kickline. The evening lacks Sondheim's ironic bite, but, if you love his musicals, you could do worse than hearing Peters, his preëminent muse, sing "Losing My Mind." Featuring Beth Leavel, for shameless scene-stealing.—*Michael Schulman (Samuel J. Friedman; through June 15.)*

For more: read Sondheim's conversation with D. T. Max, from 2022, about the ideas he'd abandoned, the minutiae of his technique, and the lesson that any artist must learn.

Soul

For more than a decade the D.C.-born musician **Nick Hakim** has been wading deeper and deeper into a mind-bending sonic vortex. While studying at Berklee College of Music, the singer and multi-instrumentalist débuted fully formed, in 2014, on “Where Will We Go,” a two-part EP that outlined a rich neo-soul sound, robust yet seemingly out of focus. Hakim then released his opus “Green Twins,” in 2017, establishing himself as a purveyor of foggy psychedelic music. The albums that followed, including one with the jazz saxophonist Roy Nathanson, only furthered a hallucinatory appeal; the most recent, “Cometa” (2022), is sublime in its subtlety. Alongside special guests, Hakim celebrates the tenth anniversary of “Where Will We Go,” returning to the fount of a bewitching constellation.—*Sheldon Pearce (First Unitarian Congregational Society; April 25.)*

Off Broadway

Adeel Akhtar plays Lopakhin.Photograph by Amir Hamja

Benedict Andrews’s gorgeously performed modernization of Chekhov’s losing-the-estate drama **“The Cherry Orchard”** is a tale told in textures: soft kilim carpets define the playing space; the capitalist Lopakhin (Adeel Akhtar) flashes his gold watch, counting the minutes till the ruination of the aristocrat Ranevskaya (a stunning Nina Hoss), a woman as richly delicate as her own silk blouse. Andrews adds musical interludes, which don’t always work, and brutal jokes, which do. Here the estate’s weirdo, Epikhodov (Éanna Hardwicke), is an incel in a Virginia Tech windbreaker —“Have you read Žižek?,” he asks a woman who rebuffs him—and goofball Simeonov-Pishchik (David Ganly) bounds irrepressibly offstage,

already several symptoms into a heart attack.—*Helen Shaw (St. Ann's Warehouse; through April 27.)*

For more: read Hilton Als's review of a 2016 mounting, and the story of how the late actress Kim Stanley introduced him to Chekhov's greatness.

Dance Theatre

The director-actor-choreographer Celia Rowlson-Hall is best known for her idiosyncratic work in music videos (Alicia Keys's "In Common"), TV ("Girls"), and film ("Aftersun"; her own short films; and her surreal, feature-length "MA"). Her latest piece, **"Sissy,"** is made for the stage, but that doesn't mean it's any more conventional. Mixing a cast of dancers with actors such as Marisa Tomei and Lucas Hedges, it updates the myth of Sisyphus as the struggles of a pregnant woman whose Sisyphean tasks include motherhood and caring for an ill father, all while being an artist.—*Brian Seibert (Baryshnikov Arts Center, April 24-26.)*

Afro-Pop

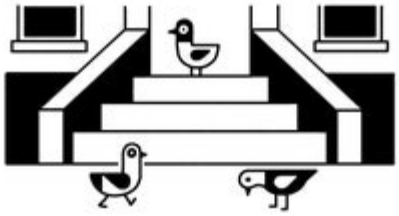
Photograph by Selly Sy

Music from the African continent may have no greater ambassador than **Youssou N'Dour**, the Senegalese singer and bandleader whose five-decade career has allowed mbalax, his country's signature sound, to join the likes of reggae, samba, and rumba in the international lexicon of pop. N'Dour remains a big-voiced traditionalist at heart, even as his music continues to

push Dakar-bred indigenousness to its pop limits. Recent albums, split between globalist studio confections, like the new “Eclairer le monde—Light the World,” and kinetic live workouts, have found a way to make mbalax’s big-beat tama and sabar drums the backdrop for both reflection and the dance floor. The glorious versatility of Super Etoile de Dakar, N’Dour’s longtime touring band, brings it all together.—*K. Leander Williams (Kings Theatre; April 27.)*

Classical

A bittersweet note of life is that tragedy reliably produces art. Five years ago, when the world was thrust into the devastation of the pandemic, the composer Michael Hersch embarked on what would become a twenty-nine-piece song cycle. Entitled **“scars plummet to the corners,”** the work uses only two instruments—the grounded, darkly warm piano and the aerial, acrobatic flute. The paired instruments establish an atmosphere of shadows and luminescence, isolation and companionship. Commissioned by the American Modern Opera Company, “scars plummet to the corners” will have its New York première, with the pianist Jacob Rhodebeck and the flutist Emi Ferguson. There are still many unfortunate echoes of 2020 today, but this is not one.—*Jane Bua (DiMenna Center; April 25.)*



In the Neighborhood

Adam Gopnik on where to eat near the Frick.

Illustration by Millie von Platen

The Upper East Side is a neighborhood that, it often seems, one has to be under seven or over seventy to enjoy—it is, of all New York City's enclaves, these days perhaps the chilliest and least loved. Yet an affectionate literature does wrap around it—from the Glass family apartment in the East Seventies to Claudia and Jamie, stowaways in the Met—and, therefore, affectionate feelings can be resummoned on foot. Begin a blessed Saturday morning at the newly expanded Frick Collection. Be sure to stop at James McNeill Whistler's "Arrangement in Black and Gold." Then, though Madison Avenue—heavily weighted down by flagship stores, making a touch monotone the once beautiful flow of galleries, boutiques, and coffee shops—is not all it was, it can still be a pleasure to stroll, staring down the enticing side streets that point toward Central Park. Where to stop for breakfast? There is the last remaining **Three Guys** coffee shop, right up Madison at Seventy-fifth. All the breakfast dishes are available there, along with the great and vanishing run of sandwiches—B.L.T., tuna on rye—that marked New York cuisine for so long. **E.A.T.**, the outpost of the Eli Zabar empire—which really is an empire, with a single emperor—is farther up, at Eighty-first Street, for unimprovable lox and soft scrambled eggs. And, for coffee after the meal, walk in the opposite direction to **Via Quadronno**, right off East Seventy-third, which makes one of the best cappuccinos in the city. Indeed, leaving the Frick, in the spirit of [Ed Sorel's famous cover](https://condenaststore.com/featured/monday-at-the-met-edward-

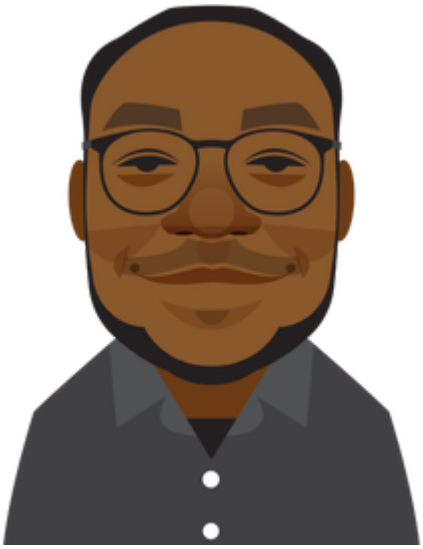
sorel.html), for an U.E.S. wander in the imaginative company of the saints and sinners contained in the pictures within its galleries, might evoke the single greatest one-liner in comedy: Steven Wright's remark that he went into a diner that advertised "breakfast anytime," and asked for scrambled eggs in the Renaissance.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- The best and worst of Coachella
- Danny McBride settles petty disputes
- "Hate Reads" takes on Instagram

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

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



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Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. His books include "The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery."

The Food Scene

Gjelina Imports the Fantasy of L.A.

The famous Venice Beach restaurant finally has an outpost in New York, but something is inevitably lost in the migration.

By Helen Rosner

April 13, 2025

A New York location of the acclaimed L.A. restaurant Gjelina has been in the works for nearly a decade. Now it's finally here.Photographs by Matt Genovese 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.***

Gjelina didn't invent kale, or wood fire, or treating vegetables as the stars of a restaurant menu. But when it opened, in Venice Beach, in 2008, the restaurant certainly did bring all of those things together, in a package that jolted the restaurant world like a shot of gingerroot. The food served at Gjelina was not the California cuisine that had come before. The kitchen borrowed the ingredient worship of Chez Panisse, but not its reverence for simplicity; the fancy culture-mash pizza of Spago, but not its Eurocentric hauteur; the cheffy precision of the French Laundry, but not its fussy formality. The chef, Travis Lett, was obsessive about nearly everything—produce, sourcing, seasonality, herbs, spices, the chewiness of a hunk of sourdough or a pizza crust—and this obsessiveness resulted in a restaurant that was more or less flawless. Still today, stepping off the blazing L.A.

sidewalks into the cool, rustic Gjelina interior feels like putting on a pair of full-body sunglasses. The enormous menu, printed in tiny type, gives an effect of shock-and-awe abundance. Nearly every plate is a showpiece for the triumphs of the prep kitchen: silken sauce, a house-made pickle, a zingy salsa, a curious ferment. It is, I'll admit, one of my favorite restaurants in the world.

An outpost of Gjelina in New York has been in the works for nearly a decade. It was first announced in 2016, as a partnership between the Gjelina team and the New York power restaurateur Ken Friedman, who at the time held the lease for the restaurant, a two-story space on a cobblestoned block in NoHo. Then a whole lot of things got in the way. Friedman became the subject of significant sexual-abuse allegations (he has denied engaging in nonconsensual activity) and left the project. A pandemic surged and ebbed. In 2023, just four weeks after an initial grand début, a fire ripped through the restaurant's ductwork. In November, Gjelina New York finally reopened, though it was hard, all these years later, to muster the same giddy sense of anticipation I felt when it was first announced. Mostly, I felt a little vinegary that New Yorkers barely got to bask in the glow of having a Gjelina of our own before another one opened at the Venetian in Las Vegas, a few weeks later. Vegas, of all places! They barely even have farms there to hyphenate with "to-table."

Is Gjelina, with its three locations, a chain now? It's certainly more than just a restaurant. Lett left the Gjelina Group in 2019, selling his stake back to the founder, Fran Camaj (whose mother is the restaurant's namesake). The company now operates a hotel, a takeaway, a home-goods store, a flower shop, and a foundation dedicated to vocational training in hospitality, plus Gjusta, a prepared-foods shop, which Camaj told *The New Yorker* he's planning to bring to New York, too.

Though specific items on Gjelina's menu have changed over the years since Lett's departure, the kitchens, now under the stewardship of the executive chef Juan Hernandez, still hew to Lett's philosophies and formulas. The dishes no longer feel as revolutionary as they did a decade and a half ago—pretty much everything that the restaurant serves could come straight from Lett's "Gjelina" cookbook, from 2015, a terrific volume full of

intimidatingly cross-referenced recipes and sub-recipes. But knocking off points for Gjelina's continued dedication to Brussels sprouts and pestos is a little bit like dismissing "Hamlet" for being full of clichés.

The menu at Gjelina is defined by market-driven abundance.

The kitchen at Gjelina New York, naturally, is open, situated behind a dining bar, and is visually punctuated by the orange flames of a wood-burning oven. The food is just as striking, and just as assertive, as it is in California, with saturated flavors deployed in a calculated balance. A lush lamb tartare is spiced with North African *baharat* paste as resonant and lingering as a foghorn. A bouquet of long-stemmed broccolini is charred and frizzy around the edges and dressed in a vinaigrette just slightly softened by the tangy sweetness of black garlic. A twirl of saffron-infused spaghetti is tossed in a sauce of confited tomatoes and bottarga that burns with a red-chile heat. You order the roasted fennel because you love fennel; you close your eyes in rapture because of the onion *agrodolce* on top, which turns out to be what fennel has always needed, along with a sprinkle of togarashi, and a few perfect supremes of orange, for good measure.

One recent night, I counted fifty-two items on the dinner menu, not including desserts. The servers were not especially helpful at navigating the plenitude. "What sounds good to you?" seems to be their go-to phrase, and fair enough: when a restaurant has been doing its thing this well, for this long, there really is no wrong way to go. "Should we get the fingerling sweet potatoes, or the pinto potato?" my friend inquired on one visit, considering some of the spud options (four, including a pizza topped with thin rounds of potato, with taleggio and garlic). We went with the

fingerlings—a row of blistered wedges with an edge of smoke and caramel, served in a pool of spicy yogurt under a shower of finely slivered scallions. What sounded good was indeed good; one of the promises of Gjelina is that what sounds good always will be.

What is different from the original, noticeably and significantly, is, in part, the physical space. L.A. sprawls; New York soars. This Gjelina is narrower, more vertical, a stack of boxy parlors with a scattering of street-facing windows and no fresh air to speak of. Sunny café vibes in a front room—pale wood, minimalist shapes—give way to moodier spaces inside: a large upstairs dining room, with the heavy wooden bar running along one wall; a quieter, upholstered dining area beyond that. At dinnertime, the restaurant is busy, but not slammed; the crowd seems to be largely made up of people with beautiful hair and compellingly hideous shoes. Compared with the L.A. Gjelina, the New York outpost, perhaps inevitably, has little sense of place.

Back in February, when New York was gray with slush, I fled for a bit to California, and one afternoon ended up at the original Gjelina for lunch. It was that kind of magnificent Los Angeles winter day where the sky is Delft blue and the bright-white sunshine ricochets off every surface directly into your eyes. The restaurant was packed, as it always is, with a strikingly heterogeneous crowd—very old, very young, buttoned-up, bohemian. My two-year-old daughter made eyes at a tie-dye-clad kid of about the same age at an adjacent table. I eavesdropped unsubtly on a nearby trio of silver foxes. Our meal was in Technicolor: the ruby-reddest raspberries, the greenest-green cucumbers, the bloodiest-blood oranges, frilly purple mustard greens, carrots in every color of sunset. I felt drunk on fructose and chlorophyll; I kept pressing orange slivers of dried persimmon onto my utterly uninterested toddler: You don’t understand, it’s wonderful, you will love it.

A few days later and twenty-five hundred miles away, I attempted to re-create the idyll at Gjelina New York. You could put together a facsimile meal, if you wanted to—the broccolini with black garlic was on the menu at both locations, as were the roasted fennel, most of the pizzas, and a wedge of dense, fudgy chocolate tart dusted with pistachio. But, for all its nuance

and verve, the food, over all, at Gjelina New York was simply less luminous than it had been in L.A.: paler, denser, more beige. Summer will be different, I know. The end of winter has already yielded fresh riches, such as puntarelle in a Caesar-ish anchovy dressing, and a pile of caterpillar-green new garbanzos next to a slick white ball of burrata. But eventually it'll be fall again, and winter, full of sober root vegetables, and meanwhile at the sun-dappled Gjelina in Venice Beach they'll be flinging strawberries around willy-nilly, free from the agricultural purgatory of temperate seasonality.

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

Gjelina does fit seamlessly into its little stretch of Bond Street, which has become the epicenter of a certain strain of aestheticized wealth. Some clever cartographer has dropped a label on Google Maps identifying the block as LiLA—Little L.A. Down the street from the restaurant is Reformation, the hip L.A.-founded clothing line. A few doors past that is the Goop store; just beyond is the flagship of Gigi Hadid's cashmere brand, Guest in Residence. But LiLA doesn't feel like California on Bond Street; it just feels like a piece of New York that has a handful of California businesses paying rent. In Gjelina's case, at least, the particularly Californian spark of organic, obsessive creativity seems to dull and cool as it's mechanically reproduced in new locations: a plate of butter-basted oyster mushrooms that seemed to glow and sing over there just seemed, over here, like a pile of lovely mushrooms. A relaxed service style that felt friendly and chill in Venice felt, in Manhattan, spacey and unsteady. New York has never been chill, nor does it aspire to be. Its virtues lie elsewhere, in its density, its urgency, its perpetual churn. (L.A. has never really been chill, either, let's be honest, but it does put on a convincing show.) Show up at Gjelina New York for breakfast and you might see a few copies of the day's L.A. *Times* fanned out on a countertop near the host stand. Pick one up and look in on the goings on of a faraway elsewhere, a place where it's always sunny, a place you might sometimes want to pretend to be. ♦

Helen Rosner, a staff writer at The New Yorker, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, The Food Scene.

The Talk of the Town

- **Donald Trump’s Deportation Obsession**
  By Jonathan Blitzer | Right-wing ideologues have long fantasized about the prospect of mass self-deportation: the Trump Administration is attempting something far more radical.
- **New York to Ford: NOT DEAD**
  By Zach Helfand | After a screening of “Drop Dead City,” a new documentary on N.Y.C.’s 1975 fiscal crisis, a crew of old union stalwarts—sanitation workers, Bernie Sanders’s art teacher—reminisced about saving the city from bankruptcy.
- **Billy Idol: Still in Leather, Still Hot in the City**
  By Sarah Larson | With a big year ahead, the British rocker visited his old West Village haunts and remembered the bourbon-soaked night when Mick and Keith didn’t think much of his idea for a song title, “Rebel Yell.”
- **Curb Alert! Junk Lugging for Art’s Sake**
  By Jake Offenhartz | Ser Serpas, a trash-art “assemblagist” who has been in the Whitney Biennial, takes her pick of New York’s litter, ahead of a new show at MOMA PS1.
- **Activism for Introverts! Copying the Constitution**
  By Henry Alford | Every month at the Old Stone House, in Brooklyn, citizens are invited to find consolation in troubled times by writing out the nation’s founding document, by hand.

Comment

Donald Trump’s Deportation Obsession

Right-wing ideologues have long fantasized about the prospect of mass self-deportation: the Trump Administration is attempting something far more radical.

By Jonathan Blitzer

April 20, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

Three years ago, in El Salvador, after the MS-13 gang killed eighty-seven people in a span of seventy-two hours, President Nayib Bukele called on his loyalists in the legislature to declare a “state of exception.” The government could arrest anyone it deemed suspicious, and those taken into custody lost their right to a legal defense. Since then, in a country of six million people, eighty-five thousand have been jailed, many without credible charges; according to the human-rights group Cristosal, three hundred and sixty-eight of them have died. The gangs have been decimated, but the “state of

exception” remains in effect, something that has earned Bukele plaudits from the *MAGA* movement and, last week, an invitation to the White House.

The Trump Administration is now paying El Salvador six million dollars to hold deported immigrants—among them more than a hundred Venezuelans removed under the rarely invoked Alien Enemies Act of 1798—in a supermax prison that Bukele built for his crackdown. He has proudly advertised his services as “outsourcing.” He has also offered to house American citizens convicted of crimes, and Donald Trump appears to be considering it. “Sometimes they say that we imprisoned thousands,” Bukele told the President and members of his Cabinet in the Oval Office. “I like to say that we actually liberated millions.” “Who gave him that line?” Trump said. “Do you think I can use that?”

Right-wing ideologues have long fantasized about the prospect of mass self-deportation: the idea is that, if the government is sufficiently hostile to immigrants, they will feel that they have no choice but to leave the country. The Trump Administration is attempting something far more radical. In a campaign reminiscent of Bukele’s “state of exception,” it has moved to suspend the rule of law; this is as much an attack on immigrants as it is a fever dream of untrammelled power.

At the White House, Bukele and Trump flaunted their defiance of a unanimous ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Justices had instructed the Administration to “facilitate” the return of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Salvadoran man who has lived in Maryland for nearly fifteen years and was deported last month to Bukele’s prison, owing to what government lawyers admit was an “administrative error.” Trump’s initial response was to say that he was powerless to bring Abrego Garcia back. Before long, top officials started calling him an MS-13 gangster and a terrorist, even though he’s never been convicted of a crime. Stephen Miller, a White House deputy chief of staff, simply asserted that the Court had ruled in Trump’s favor and that “nobody was mistakenly deported anywhere.” Last week, after Maryland’s senator Chris Van Hollen travelled to El Salvador and met with Abrego Garcia, who had been transferred to another facility, Bukele said, “Now that he’s been confirmed healthy, he gets the honor of staying in El

Salvador's custody." The White House tagged Van Hollen on X, saying that Abrego Garcia is "NOT coming back."

The premise appears to be that only the President can decide whether someone's legal rights are legitimate. Earlier this month, the Administration began the process of cancelling the Social Security numbers of immigrants who were in the country lawfully. The Social Security Administration had already agreed to share the "last known addresses" of nearly a hundred thousand people with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the *Times* reported, but this latest gambit involves adding immigrants to the so-called "death master file," a list of deceased Americans. According to the government, immigrants' "financial lives"—which could include assets such as homes and bank accounts—will be "terminated."

Shortly before Tax Day, flouting privacy laws that protect taxpayers' personal information, the Internal Revenue Service finalized a "memorandum of understanding" with *ICE* "for the exchange of information for non-tax criminal enforcement." Trump's Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, signed it, because I.R.S. officials refused to, according to CNN; several have since resigned. *ICE* said that it wanted to locate and deport some seven million people. Undocumented immigrants pay close to a hundred billion dollars each year in taxes, but the Administration's move will almost certainly lead many of them to stop filing. An analysis by the Yale Budget Lab estimated that losses to the government could amount to three hundred and thirteen billion dollars in the next decade.

Trump has never been much deterred by either the human or the material consequences of his policies, as long as they send a political message. During Joe Biden's Presidency, more than a million migrants came to the U.S. through a legal pathway called parole, which granted them temporary entry so that they could apply for a more lasting status. Trump has now tried to revoke their parole, plunging them into legal limbo and potentially creating a new population of people bound to become undocumented. Many have applied for asylum, but the Department of Homeland Security has been making arrests in spite of any pending legal claims. Most of the Venezuelans sent to El Salvador had hearings scheduled before immigration judges; at least one had Temporary Protected Status.

Legal permanent residents are being targeted, too. Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia University graduate, is currently detained and facing deportation because the Administration objected to his pro-Palestinian activism on campus. A current Columbia student, Yunseo Chung, who has lived in the U.S. since she was seven, was also identified for deportation and had to sue the Administration to get a federal judge to temporarily block it. Last week, Mohsen Mahdawi, a senior at the university and a student activist, was arrested by *ICE* when he showed up for his citizenship interview; he has held a green card for a decade.

When judges have challenged Bukele's authority, he has had them fired. Trump would clearly like to do the same. He has already called for the impeachment of James Boasberg, the federal judge who ordered the first deportation flights to El Salvador to be turned around. On Wednesday, Boasberg announced that he had "probable cause" to believe that officials had deliberately disregarded that order and could be held in contempt of court. Another judge, who had issued an earlier order to return Abrego Garcia, may soon initiate a similar process. On Thursday, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled strongly against Trump's latest appeal in the case. "It is difficult in some cases to get to the very heart of the matter," the judge, a Ronald Reagan appointee, wrote. "But in this case, it is not hard at all." The Administration seemed determined to force a constitutional showdown and has now succeeded. It threatens everybody, citizens and non-citizens alike. ♦

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

Bad Old Days Dept.

New York to Ford: NOT DEAD

After a screening of “Drop Dead City,” a new documentary on N.Y.C.’s 1975 fiscal crisis, a crew of old union stalwarts—sanitation workers, Bernie Sanders’s art teacher—reminisced about saving the city from bankruptcy.

By Zach Helfand

April 21, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

The year 1975: “*FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD*.” Also 1975: city does not drop dead. Everyone alive during New York’s fiscal crisis remembers the *Daily News* headline. Few people remember the saviors, who included the governor Hugh Carey, the investment banker Felix Rohatyn, and a bunch of union leaders whose uprisings kept the government from gutting essential services. Teachers risked their pensions to buy up the city’s distressed

bonds, thereby avoiding a bankruptcy by minutes. The other day, a few union stalwarts, octogenarians and nonagenarians, gathered at the Downtown Community Television Center, a theatre in an old firehouse. They were attending a private screening of “Drop Dead City,” a documentary that recounts the city’s near-collapse. Three of them—John Soldini and Millie Glaberman (teachers) and Anthony Lofaso (sanitation)—starred in the film, which was co-directed by Peter Yost and Michael Rohatyn, Felix’s son. The movie came on. When the head of the sanitation workers’ union appeared, Lofaso clapped. When the charismatic teachers’-union head, Albert Shanker, authorized a strike, Soldini and Glaberman cheered and giggled. Afterward, Yost announced that there would be drinks nearby. Soldini shouted, “Who’s buying?”

The group ambled to a speakeasy—orange lights, a wall of old speakers. Rohatyn made a toast: “To New York City, our beloved town. Past, present, and future. Thank you all for everything you’ve already given to our beautiful city.” The onscreen stars were jubilant. They shared labor war stories and grumbled about Elon Musk.

At a high top, Glaberman held forth while a teacher friend did three-sixties on a swivel stool. “I’m very old,” Glaberman said. “I’m ninety-four. I was out in 1960, in the first strike to organize a union.” She taught art at James Madison High, in Brooklyn. “Want to know my most famous students? Chuck Schumer, Bernie Sanders, and Judge Judy. Chuck was not a good artist, but he was wonderful. Bernie Sanders, no.” She ran into Judge Judy not long ago at the dermatologist. “She’s walking behind me with Cindy Adams, who’s her very good friend. I say, ‘James Madison High School?’ She said, ‘That’s where I went!’ I said, ‘I know, because I was a teacher, and you were a student.’ And suddenly she steps back, and in her Judge Judy voice, she says, ‘Wait a minute. She was a teacher when I was a student? What’s the doctor doing for her that he’s not doing for us?’ ”

A whippersnapper in attendance was struck by how different New York seemed in 1975, and by how much the averted catastrophe preserved for today’s city. “The bargain turned out to be: the city will be saved but rents will triple,” Rohatyn said.

At another table, Lofaso was showing some old sanitation-union photographs he'd held on to. He had slicked-back hair and wore a wool suit over a bright-red shirt. He cycled through pictures: masked workers picketing for a forty-hour workweek, packed meeting halls. He pulled out another one: "This is what I call Rockefeller Getting Down." Governor Nelson Rockefeller, beaming, was hoisted on the shoulders of workers at the union headquarters.

"It was a union town, a blue-collar town," Lofaso said. "There was ample opportunity for a guy like me that had nothing—I joke, not even good looks." He continued, "Sanitation workers didn't make enough money. I didn't stop having two or three jobs until I was promoted the third time. I was everything: I mixed cement, I did electricity, I was a messenger for the Bethlehem Steel Company. I worked for all the supermarkets." Other times, he was a cabdriver, a night-club m.c., an author, a pilot, and a dancer. "Not professionally, but I am a dancer, there is no question about that," he said. Eventually, he became the chief of the Sanitation Department—its highest uniformed position.

Lofaso had invited his seventy-two-year-old friend William Russo, a *NYCHA* veteran, to see the film. As another sideline, the pair co-hosted a couple of radio shows. "We did an interview program," Lofaso said. "Everything about New Yorkers and what New Yorkers do." They did more than a thousand episodes. "We had on cops, crooks. We had on doctors, patients. We had on rabbis, priests, atheists. We had actors, writers. We had singers of all kinds. Opera singers, jazz singers, doo-wop groups, rap singers."

"We had a woman who specialized as an agent for dogs," Russo said. "Then we had the dog whisperer, who could tell you what the dog is feeling."

"We had the sword swallower," Lofaso said.

"I remember trying to describe it, because on the radio you can't see it," Russo said. " 'She's opening her mouth! It's going down!' It became erotic."

Lofaso went on, “When you come to New York with whatever you do, you might not be with Gayle King on Channel 2, but there’s every level of venue,” he said. “People have an opportunity to see their play, write their book, build their dream. All these different kinds of people, they coalesce in what we call the city.” ♦

Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

Village People

Billy Idol: Still in Leather, Still Hot in the City

With a big year ahead, the British rocker visited his old West Village haunts and remembered the bourbon-soaked night when Mick and Keith didn’t think much of his idea for a song title, “Rebel Yell.”

By Sarah Larson

April 21, 2025

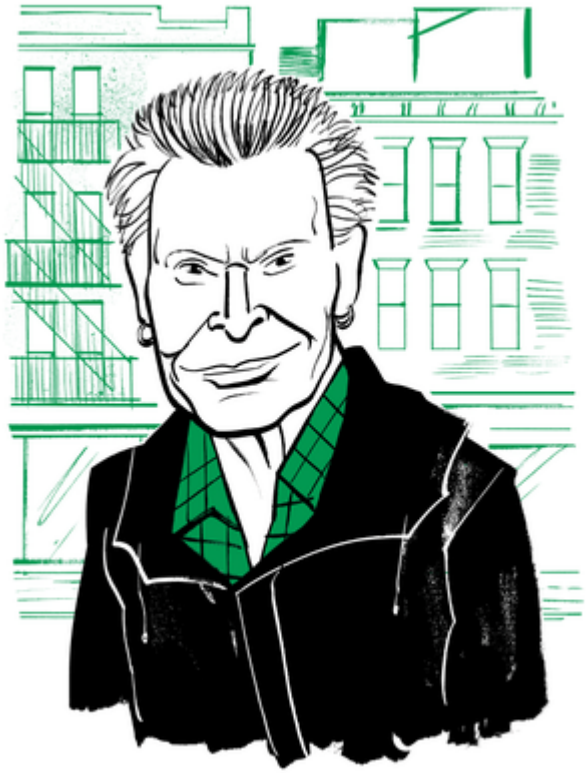


Illustration by João Fazenda

In 1981, Billy Idol moved from London, where he’d had some success with his punk band Generation X, to Manhattan. He found a one-room West Village apartment, at One Sheridan Square, where his friend Ace lived. Recently, Idol, on the cusp of a big year—new album (“Dream Into It”),

tour with Joan Jett (“It’s a Nice Day to . . . Tour Again!”), Rock and Roll Hall of Fame nomination, and documentary (“Billy Idol Should Be Dead”)—visited his old building. He emerged from a black S.U.V. in full Billy Idoliana: spiked blond hair, eyeliner, earrings, combat boots, leather jacket with zippers galore. Recalling his first New York summer, he made the doobie gesture, looking rascally. “Everybody kept their windows open,” he said, in a British accent with notes of Tufnel. “I could shout up, ‘Yo, Ace!’ ” A man inside the building opened the door.

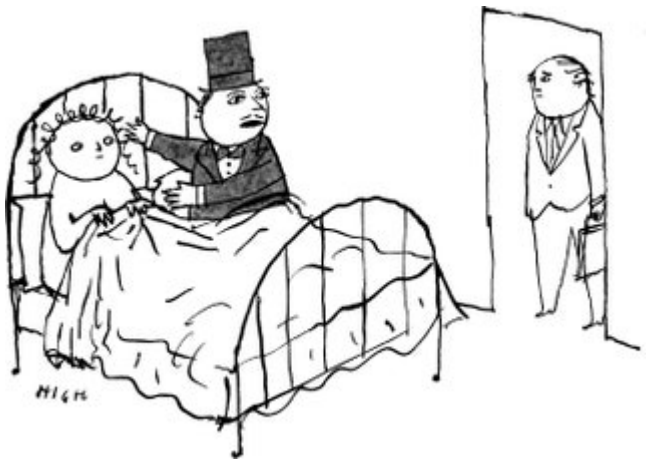
“Billy!” he called. “You used to live here, right?”

Idol said he had. “The eighties, yeah! I wrote ‘Rebel Yell’ here, ‘Eyes Without a Face.’ ” He pointed toward a tree. “On the street, there was a broken-down little couch.” He’d snagged it. “But I was sitting on the floor writing ‘Rebel Yell.’ ” Early on, he continued, “I didn’t know anybody much, but I knew Ronnie Wood.” One night, Idol attended a party at Wood’s place, uptown. Wood, Mick Jagger, and Keith Richards were drinking “this stuff Rebel Yell, a Southern-style mash from Tennessee,” with a Confederate officer on the label. “I know a bit about the American Civil War,” Idol said. “I thought, *Oh, I could use that title! But I won’t make it anything about the Civil War. I’ll just make it, like, an orgasmic cry of love*.” He asked the three Stones what they thought of it as a song title. “You know, ‘Jumpin’ Jack Flash,’ ‘Rebel Yell’? They looked at one another, went, ‘No, I don’t think we would.’ ”

Idol walked down the block, remembering boom boxes and kids break dancing. On weeknights, it was more subdued. “Me being an unknown quantity and not really knowing too many people, it was ‘lonely, black, and quiet’ that first summer, with the humidity and being rained on by the air-conditioners.” This inspired “Hot in the City,” his moody, sweaty-in-the-streets classic. “I walked around thinking, *I’m in ‘The Warriors’!* It’s so New York—boiling hot, you could see why they had just leather cutoffs on.” Locals appreciated Idol’s style. “Guys would come up and say, ‘Punk rock, don’t stop!’ and all that. ‘Where’s the party?’ I’d have leather jeans on, leg warmers over my Winklepicker boots, a New Romantic cape. I could get into all the clubs.” But sometimes loneliness could be existential:

“I knew who Generation X was, but who exactly is Billy Idol, you know?” He paused on a street corner, looking philosophical.

A guy in a sedan slowed down. “Hey, Billy Idol!” he called out. “Rock on, brother!”



“Is this your wife?”
Cartoon by Roland High

“Good to see you!” Idol said. “Rock on!” He extended a punk-rock fist.

Who Billy Idol was, he realized, had to do with the dance-punk New Wave sound of “Dancing with Myself,” which he’d co-written in Generation X, after making observations at a disco in Japan. “They were still in ‘Saturday Night Fever’ mode, guys dressing like John Travolta,” he said. He did a “You Should Be Dancing” arm shimmy. “I said, ‘Hey, they’re dancing to their own reflections. They’re dancing with *themselves*.’ ” At a New York club, he saw “Dancing with Myself” cause a ruckus—“people going crazy, pushing over couches and chairs to get to the dance floor.” MTV débuted that same year, and he eventually made a video. “I got Tobe Hooper to direct, which was fantastic,” Idol said. “Punk rockers love ‘The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.’ ”

On Bleecker, he pointed to John’s Pizza. “I met with Lou Reed at his favorite pizza place, right over there.” Idol hoped to write with him; Reed’s terms did not appeal. “It’s just as well,” Idol said. “Can you imagine if it said ‘Idol/Reed’ on ‘White Wedding’? People are going to think he wrote it.” Idol composed “White Wedding” himself, quickly, in a recording studio.

His sister was getting married, and “at the top of the foolscap I wrote ‘White Wedding.’ ” He kept brainstorming. “What if I was some sort of jealous brother who secretly was incestuously in love with his sister?” He cackled. “I just bounced off my sister’s wedding and wrote this weird, weird, sick song.”

In 1983, “Rebel Yell,” recorded at Electric Lady Studios, nearby, came out. The tour began in clubs and ended in arenas; afterward, Idol and his then girlfriend moved to a place on Jones Street, without the street couch. (“I could afford some black furniture, cool stuff.”) When fans began lurking outside their building, they moved to an area near the West Side Highway, “because no one fucking came out there.” They left New York when “we kind of decided, ‘Why don’t we have a baby?’ I was trying to get over drug addiction; we were living a vampire existence.” In L.A., they could “start living in the daytime.” Eventually, they did. Idol’s young grandchildren inspired the song “I’m Your Hero” on his new album. “They only know me as Granddad,” he said. “Quite soon, they’ll go to school, and they won’t give a shit about Granddad.” ♦

Sarah Larson, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2007.

Dept. of Picking

Curb Alert! Junk Lugging for Art’s Sake

Ser Serpas, a trash-art “assemblagist” who has been in the Whitney Biennial, takes her pick of New York’s litter, ahead of a new show at *MOMA* PS1.

By Jake Offenhartz

April 21, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

The artist Ser Serpas was riding shotgun in a rented U-Haul truck through Williamsburg the other day, lamenting the state of New York junk. “Our stuff is just flimsier,” she said. “I can spot *IKEA* from a mile away.” Just then, her driver, the art handler Neo Gibson, clocked a steel object nestled

in a heap of deli trash: a circular, city-issued bike rack, freshly ripped from the sidewalk. The pair put on work gloves, then slotted the rack into their truck between a rusted table frame, a purple vacuum, and the base of a futon. “Those exposed bolts!” Serpas said admiringly.

Serpas has transformed her haul into a series of junk-pile sculptures for “The Gatherers,” a group exhibition at *MoMA* PS1 opening later this month which focusses on contemporary waste. She will then fly to Switzerland to begin curbside scavenging for a show at Kunsthalle Basel. But new Swiss restrictions on bulk garbage disposal are creating panic among the curators. “They’re worried there won’t be enough trash for me to fill five rooms,” Serpas, who is twenty-nine and lives on the Lower East Side, said. She wore blue coveralls and old white Converses, her standard picking uniform.

As the U-Haul zigzagged beneath the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, Serpas ignored a hot-water heater (“too heavy”) and a mattress propped against a utility pole. “I’m not a mattress person anymore,” she said. An abandoned orange shopping cart was added to the pile, then quickly filled with silver snack-bag material pulled from a dumpster belonging to *NAP* Industries, “a leader in flexible packaging manufacturing since 1963,” according to a sign. Serpas beamed: “It’s so light and radiant. I can make a disco ball with this.”

In sanitation circles, amateur trash pickers are known as “garbage groupies.” The art world prefers “assemblagists.” Either way, Serpas is a rising star of the movement, earning accolades for recent biennials at the Whitney and the Hammer, in L.A. She favors worn-out home furnishings and industrial components for her combines, which she stacks precariously on-site and sometimes sets ablaze. “Tbilisi has the best trash because everything is passed down for so long,” she said. “Paris is also good. In New York, you need to know where to look.” The previous day’s trip to Red Hook had yielded the remains of an elevator shaft, a car windshield, a stack of mops, and a frayed trampoline. “We have a lot of flat things,” Serpas said. “Now I need orifices.”

On Wythe Avenue, the truck lurched to a stop behind a pair of professional junk luggers, who were hauling away the contents of a gutted luxury apartment. “They’re taking all our shit!” Serpas said, striding toward the

competition. One of the luggers offered her the pick of the litter but warned against some old chairs.

“Those are rotting,” he said.

“Like, bug-rotting?” Serpas asked. She plucked an umbrella stand and some lawn chairs from the pile instead.

Serpas got into assemblage eight years ago, after earning a fine-arts degree from Columbia. Struggling to produce mixed-media sculptures for a solo show at a gallery in Miami, she stumbled across the remains of a foreclosed house in South Beach. “It was a eureka moment,” she recalled. She stayed up all night assembling the detritus into gridded displays: an overturned armchair doused in gasoline, a glass tabletop balanced on a bookshelf wrapped in electrical wiring. The show was a success—the Rubell Museum acquired pieces—and also a lesson. “The bookcase had termites,” Serpas said. “They needed to get the gallery fumigated.” Otherwise, she said, “I’ve never caused an active infestation in any of the ten or fifteen galleries I’ve shown in. Knock on wood.”

Some institutions have their own sanitary precautions. Before her show at PS1, a vender from Ozone Park will treat the found objects with a substance known as Vikane. The Whitney has a fumigation guy who uses a process called ultraviolet germicidal irradiation. Last year, the museum rejected two pieces of metal sheathing that Serpas had intended to use in its biennial alongside a note: “Bird poop Serpas.”

Back at her studio, in Williamsburg, Serpas assessed the day’s collection. “They all have a good palette,” she said. “I can start to see it coming together.” She paused to rest in the studio’s “lounge”: a few tattered chairs and a coffee table—leftovers from past sculptures, already fumigated. ♦

Jake Offenhartz is a reporter for the Associated Press covering New York City.

Protest Dept.

Activism for Introverts! Copying the Constitution

Every month at the Old Stone House, in Brooklyn, citizens are invited to find consolation in troubled times by writing out the nation's founding document, by hand.

By Henry Alford

April 21, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

It is sometimes said that democracy wants education. Also: strong foundations make for good buildings. And: the more larnin', the more

votin’. So, the other night, when three New Yorkers showed up at the Old Stone House, a re-created 1699 farmhouse turned community center in Brooklyn, to take part in a social art project in which they would each write out a copy of the Constitution—or as much of the Constitution as they could in two hours—nothing less than the fate of the nation seemed to be at stake. One participant, upon sitting at one of the four tables in the house’s great room and eying the Uniball pen and xeroxed Constitution before her, cleared her throat with a vehemence that seemed to augur spitting.

Morgan O’Hara, an eighty-four-year-old conceptual artist who was raised in Japan, started handwriting documents that are meant to protect human rights—a practice she calls “activism for introverts”—in 2017. Appalled by the level of discourse in the 2016 Presidential election, she decided that copying out the Constitution in a public place would provide consolation by deepening her understanding of the document. She saw no need to *talk* about the Constitution, though. “There have been so many experiences in my life where I have a lot to say but the extroverts always win,” she said the other day, over the phone from Venice, where she lives now. So O’Hara took herself to the New York Public Library’s majestic Rose Reading Room with pen and paper and got monkish.

“I told one of my studio neighbors about it, and she asked, ‘Can I put it on Facebook? People want to share it with their friends.’ It spread that way.” Since that initial foray, more than two thousand people across the world—from Taipei to Toronto to Berlin—have hand-copied their own relevant rights-bearing documents, in a hundred and forty-seven public writing sessions. Participating institutions have included Paris’s Bibliothèque Nationale, Harvard’s David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, the central library in Macau, and a women’s correctional facility in New Hampshire.

At the Old Stone House, the three people who showed up to join the venue’s director of education, Maggie Weber, were all female Brooklynites: a political-science student, an attorney turned novelist, and a middle-school teacher. The U.S. Constitution is famously short—4,543 words, or 7,591 if you include all twenty-seven amendments—but don’t tell that to someone tasked with writing it down, which can take twelve hours. (The Old Stone

House will host sessions on the first Monday of each month for the rest of the year.) The four women, studiously bent over their work, looked by turns irritated, amused, and exhausted. One of those present thought, *Why does the phrase "foreign emoluments" always make me think of Bain de Soleil?*

Fifteen minutes before the end of the session, the women started talking politics. "Right now, we have a Department of Justice that's answering to the executive branch," the attorney-novelist said. "But that's not how it was set up." They discussed Mitch McConnell's legacy, Ruth Bader Ginsburg's reluctance to retire. The poli-sci student confessed, "I was secretive about coming to this. I thought, *Am I crazy to do this*?"

The attorney-novelist said, "Section 2, paragraph 3, brought me up short." She read aloud the passage about how the apportionment of "Representatives and direct Taxes" would exclude "Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons." The middle-school teacher commented on the irony that one of the Constitution's "shortest articles, the one about the judicial branch, is also the least understood one, but it'll be the most important one for getting us out of our current mess."

O'Hara, who has written out the Constitution in full three times, said, in a phone call, "It's a very calming experience. And when you're calm you make better decisions." She went on, "What really surprised me was the structure—that the executive is in between the judiciary and the legislative. That was a big relief when I found that out. And it shocked me how long it took for women to get the vote, and how long for slaves to be considered people."

At the Old Stone House, the mood was a mixture of satisfaction and unease. The attorney-novelist said, "Maybe we should do this with Congress." The others laughed.

Tariffs were in the news. Someone mentioned Article I, Section 10, which details duties and imports being "subject to the Revision and Controul of the Congress." But these days, it was observed, even "controul" is out of control. ♦

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

Reporting & Essays

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  By Clayton Dalton | Doctors are delivering lifesaving care in a ravaged health-care system—and risking their own lives in the process.
- **Subtitling Your Life**
  By David Owen | Hearing aids and cochlear implants have been getting better for years, but a new type of device—eyeglasses that display real-time speech transcription on their lenses—are a game-changing breakthrough.
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  By Antonia Hitchens | The President is at the center of a brazenly transactional ecosystem that rewards flattery and lockstep loyalty.
- **The Mexican President Who's Facing Off with Trump**
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Letter from Gaza

Hospitals in Ruins

Doctors are delivering lifesaving care in a ravaged health-care system—and risking their own lives in the process.

By Clayton Dalton

April 18, 2025

The view from the destroyed emergency department at Al-Shifa Hospital, in northern Gaza.Photographs and videos by the author

On January 29th, two weeks after Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire, I crossed into Gaza as part of a twelve-person medical mission. After traversing southern Israel in a U.N. convoy, we followed an Israeli military escort through a maze of concrete barriers. Then we got out of our vehicles and lugged suitcases full of essentials—gauze, antibiotics, catheters, trauma shears—through a metal blast door. We passed a no man's land of razor wire where, improbably, dandelions grew. Finally, we climbed into a van with a shattered windshield and drove to Khan Younis, a city of several hundred thousand in southern Gaza. Our driver swerved to avoid craters; almost every structure we passed was damaged. At one intersection, a minaret stood over a ruined mosque. Still, the city was alive. I saw a family drinking tea in a building with no roof. Laundry fluttered from balconies, and lettuce grew in the courtyard of a destroyed building. Nearly half of Gaza's two million residents are children, and they were everywhere—laughing, waving, flying paper kites.

When I first signed up to work in Gaza, in late 2024, the Israeli military was carrying out more or less daily ground and air offensives. Wounded patients were overwhelming the region's barely functioning health-care system. I was expecting to hunker down in a single hospital and spend two weeks helping to treat them. Instead, when I arrived, Israeli forces had withdrawn from parts of Gaza, air strikes had largely stopped, and displaced families were returning to places they had fled. This meant that our view was not

limited to the inside of one building. I would get an unusually complete picture of the state of Gaza's medical infrastructure.

We spent the night at Nasser Hospital, a five-story beige-and-brown building in Khan Younis. As we drove up to it, a bystander, recognizing us as aid workers, shouted a plea through the window of our van: "Stay with us! Don't just come and leave. Humanity is happening here!" Nasser had been the site of a major attack in February, 2024, when the Israeli military —the I.D.F.—shelled the hospital, cut off its power and oxygen, and raided the building. A doctor told CNN that he was strip-searched. "We are completely besieged," he said. "We have been without electricity, oxygen, heating, barely any food or water." Gaza's health ministry reported that a dozen patients died as a result of the attack; the World Health Organization warned that "further disruption to lifesaving care for the sick and injured would lead to more deaths."

The I.D.F. told a different story. It said that at Nasser it had found weapons, in addition to medicines meant for Israeli hostages. It also claimed that it had apprehended hundreds of suspected terrorists, including some who had allegedly posed or worked as medical staff. "The operational activity was conducted to ensure minimal disruption to the hospital's ongoing activities and without harming patients and medical staff," an I.D.F. statement said. "The IDF will continue to operate in accordance with international law against the Hamas terrorist organization, which systematically operates from hospitals." At Gaza's thirty-six hospitals, this dynamic has played out again and again. The I.D.F. has justified the bombing and raiding of hospitals, potential war crimes, by accusing Hamas of war crimes: turning medical centers into "terror hubs" and hiding behind civilian infrastructure. But Israeli officials rarely provide enough evidence for news outlets and international organizations to verify their claims. Hamas has denied using health-care facilities for military purposes.

Nasser had been largely repaired, but reminders of the violence were everywhere. In an adjacent field lay the twisted and charred remains of ambulances. On a balcony outside our sleeping quarters, a Palestinian doctor showed us bullet holes from sniper fire that he said had been aimed at him and his colleagues. A surgeon on our team said that, during a

previous mission, he had found a human finger bone on the hospital grounds; not knowing what else to do, he buried it.

The next day, several of us were driven to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, ten kilometres away, in central Gaza. Going north, we saw whole blocks of levelled buildings. Hundreds of informal shelters—cobbled together from sheet metal, car doors, carpets, tarps—had been erected amid slabs of concrete. People were sorting debris into piles; we passed a man sweeping the street with a broom.

Al-Aqsa, a cluster of shrapnel-scarred yellow brick buildings in a dense residential neighborhood, was originally built to accommodate a few hundred patients. Then air strikes, an I.D.F. ground invasion, and heavy fighting with Palestinian militants drove nearly a million people into the area. The facility sometimes received more than a thousand patients a day, and frequently ran out of fuel and supplies. Al-Aqsa also became a target. Air strikes hit a courtyard where thousands of people were sheltering in tents. The I.D.F. said the hospital was housing a terrorist command center.

Our guide at Al-Aqsa was a burly thirty-five-year-old orthopedics resident named Mohammad Shaheen. He joked that the conflict had been great for his figure—he'd lost thirty kilos. He slid open the door of a cavernous metal shed that had served as a makeshift ward. "We built it in ten days," he said. Now it was dark, with empty stretchers in the corners. "We are turning from trauma to reconstruction," he told me. Countless Gazans needed medical care for past injuries and untreated medical conditions. Entire neighborhoods had to be cleared of rubble and unexploded ordnance.

The Al-Aqsa emergency department was a dimly lit space that contained about fifteen beds. To my surprise, only one held a patient. My specialty, emergency medicine, had apparently not been in high demand here since the start of the ceasefire. Al-Aqsa's director suggested that, instead of staffing an eerily calm E.R., perhaps I should document the state of hospitals across Gaza. "We deserve a better life than this," he said.

That afternoon, in the operating room, I saw a young man whose left hand had been mangled. A surgeon scrubbed his hands while telling me what had happened: the man had returned to the wreckage of his home and a bomb

had exploded. There were no tourniquets available, so a bladder catheter had been tied around his arm to slow the bleeding. There were no hospital gowns, either, so he was wearing a red turtleneck when an anesthesiologist put him under.

Upstairs was the intensive-care unit. On its door, which was locked, someone had written “ICU” in red marker. A man in the hallway outside jimmied the door open with a spoon. Inside, one of my colleagues, a bearded intensivist named Shiraz Saleem, was treating a teen-age girl with diabetic ketoacidosis, a life-threatening complication of diabetes caused by a lack of insulin. But her doctors were having trouble monitoring her blood sugar because they didn’t have a glucometer, a device that American pharmacies sell for about twenty dollars.

In the pediatrics ward, a cramped space that had cartoon characters painted on the walls, a nine-year-old named Mariam cried softly as another of my colleagues examined her. Her hair was neatly braided and tied with a yellow scrunchie. Mariam had lost an arm to amputation after an air strike, and shrapnel had slashed a hole between her bladder and her rectum. She had already undergone five surgeries. On a bed next to her lay a three-year-old boy, who had needed surgery after he was injured in an air strike; his five-year-old brother was killed in the attack. The boy was suffering from an infected surgical wound. “It just doesn’t feel real,” Saleem told me later. “How can something so horrible be real?”

In the evening, a Palestinian urologist showed me photographs on his phone of patients he had treated. I saw a young man who had reportedly been shot in the groin by an Israeli sniper, a thirty-five-year-old woman with a blast injury to the vagina, a man whose scrotum had been blown apart. The urologist’s face, lit by the glow of these images, was ashen. He kept scrolling, deeper into the past, until his camera roll suddenly entered a different reality—photographs of family gatherings, children running in the grass.

On October 7, 2023, thousands of militants led by Hamas crossed into Israel and carried out numerous carefully planned attacks on civilians, many of whom were attending a music festival. Gunmen on motorcycles and in pickup trucks surrounded fleeing people and opened fire. In nearby

kibbutzim, they went house to house, shooting some residents and kidnapping others. About twelve hundred people were killed, including several dozen children, and more than two hundred and fifty people, ranging in age from nine months to eighty-five years old, were taken hostage. (Fifty-nine hostages remain in Gaza; twenty-four are believed to be alive.) Israel and the rest of the world were flooded with images of the bloody aftermath; some showed bodies burned beyond recognition. By the end of the day, Israeli leaders were talking not only about justice but also about retribution. “We will take mighty vengeance for this black day,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared. “All the places where Hamas hides, operates from—we will turn them into cities of ruins.”

Israeli forces have now dropped more explosives in Gaza than fell on London, Dresden, and Hamburg combined during the Second World War. More than fifty thousand Palestinians have been killed. Hospitals have not been spared; most are no longer functional. A few weeks before my trip, the World Health Organization reported that more than a thousand health-care workers had been killed, and that it had verified six hundred and fifty-four strikes on Gaza’s medical facilities. The territory’s health sector was “being systematically dismantled,” a W.H.O. representative said. Just last month, Israeli soldiers were filmed opening fire on ambulances in southern Gaza, killing fifteen rescue workers. An I.D.F. spokesperson initially claimed that the vehicles were “advancing suspiciously toward IDF troops without headlights or emergency signals,” but the I.D.F. walked back that statement and opened an inquiry after footage published by the *Times* showed a uniformed medic next to motionless and clearly marked ambulances, followed by five minutes of gunfire from the I.D.F.

The author in Al-Aqsa Hospital, in central Gaza. The ceasefire between Israel and Hamas offered an unprecedented window into devastated medical facilities.

Since October 7th, reporting from inside Gaza has been extremely limited. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least a hundred and sixty-nine media workers have been killed in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories—one of them in a media tent outside Al-Aqsa Hospital, last year, and another near Nasser Hospital, earlier this month. While I was there, the simple fact that I could leave the hospital felt surreal.

One evening, I took a walk with Saleem, Shaheen, and a twenty-two-year-old medical student. We passed venders selling mismatched shoes and recently arrived produce. I saw a man in a barber's chair, getting his hair trimmed. A few bursts of automatic gunfire echoed in the distance—gangs, I was told. I heard birdsong and looked around; three metal cages were tied to the side of a tent, each with a small pet bird inside. Then we came to a deserted school that had been used as a shelter. A group of children emerged from the shadows. "How do you do!" a boy called out. The children led us up to the roof and pointed down at a field of newly planted olive trees—a beautiful, hopeful sight. Before Saleem and I left the school, the boy, whose name was Ali, ran up to us, looped his arms through each of ours, and

swung his blackened feet as though they were a pendulum. His laughter rang through the school.

The next morning, the medical student took me to an ambulance station next to Al-Aqsa. Every ambulance showed signs of damage. A sixty-year-old paramedic told me that after a building was bombed drones often circled, and rescuers were afraid to enter until the drones left. I asked the paramedics what was hardest about this work. Responding to an air strike and discovering that it's your own family, one said. Recovering the bodies of children, another said. He paused, then added, "It is strange that the world has allowed this to happen to us."

The medical student also brought me to the orthopedics department. "Explosive injuries are contaminated," an orthopedist explained, lighting a cigarette. "We do damage control." You couldn't repair bones with plates and screws, he said, because the wound would get infected. Instead, in a process called external fixation, doctors pushed metal pins through the skin and into the bone; the pins were attached to a scaffold outside the body. The resulting infection rate was still as high as eighty per cent. Because the hospital lacked saline to irrigate wounds, doctors mixed tap water with chlorine meant for swimming pools.

That day, a young man was having an operation in what had once been an exam room. A surgeon said that a drone had shot him in the thigh, splintering his femur. External fixation had stabilized the fracture, but the bone had become uncontrollably infected. The surgeon swatted away a fly, then held the wound open to show me the bone's sharp, broken ends. He was planning an extreme form of amputation called hip disarticulation; if the patient survived, he was unlikely to walk again.

An estimated twenty-six thousand people have undergone external fixation in Gaza, and many will wait years for follow-up surgery. "It will be a miserable life for them," the orthopedist said. He showed me a photograph of a patient's mutilated feet, which had required amputation. Then he swiped to a photo of a silver missile sticking out of the ground in front of his home. "GBU-39" was stencilled on its side. Later, I looked it up. It was a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound guided American munition, manufactured by Boeing.

A badly damaged neonatal intensive-care unit at Kamal Adwan Hospital.

The worst devastation was in northern Gaza, which looked in some photographs like Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. Most of the twenty-two hospitals in the north had come under direct attack, according to CNN. I kept hearing that Al-Shifa, the primary teaching and referral hospital in Gaza, had been completely destroyed. On the morning of my fifth day, I set out on foot with Ahmed Alassouli, one of the coördinators of the medical mission, on the Al-Rashid road, which runs along the Mediterranean. We hoped to visit the most important hospitals in the north, something that hardly any outsiders had managed since October 7th; the I.D.F. had not permitted foreign journalists to visit without an escort, and medical workers often stayed in a single hospital, for safety reasons. To our left, we could see glittering waves and fishermen tending to nets. To our right was a wasteland. Black smoke rose in the distance, and a white flag licked the wind on the roof of a bombed-out building.

After we had walked for a few hours, Alassouli was able to hail a car, and we clambered into a metal trailer hitched to the back. A man riding next to me opened a package of crackers and offered me one. On the outskirts of Gaza City, we climbed into a battered S.U.V. I saw a woman dump a bucket of dust out an open window; a man smoked inside an apartment that was missing a wall.

The emergency department of Kamal Adwan Hospital, north of Gaza City, was unrecognizable as a health-care facility. We were accompanied by Ezz, a slight twenty-three-year-old medical student with dark, wavy hair, who

would be our interpreter in the north. The I.D.F. has alleged that Kamal Adwan was a military command center for Hamas. During an I.D.F. raid in December, the hospital was ravaged by a fire; I could see where smoke had poured out of broken windows, staining the exterior black. I put on a surgical mask and followed a surgeon named Sakher Hamad inside. A noxious odor permeated the space, and smashed glass vials crunched beneath our feet. We used our cellphones to light the way. Ezz pointed out a room where he had taken a standardized clinical exam during the conflict. It now contained only blackened bed frames. Hamad led me upstairs, to the maternity wards. They had also burned. In the neonatal I.C.U., which had been the last such unit in northern Gaza, destroyed incubators were strewn across the floor. After raiding the I.C.U., Israel had released a video of what it said were weapons found in an incubator.

In another wing, Hamad showed us three charred operating rooms. A beam of daylight slashed down through a crack in the ceiling. The dialysis wing, also ruined, was down the hall. We exited the hospital through what had once been the main entrance but was now a hole in a blackened, crumbling façade. In front of the hospital was a mass grave, Hamad told me. I asked how many people were buried there.“We don’t know,” he said.

A charred operating room at Kamal Adwan Hospital.

Ezz’s house had been destroyed on the second day of the war. He took up residence as a volunteer at Al-Shifa Hospital—the largest medical facility in Gaza, with seven hundred beds and twenty-five operating rooms. Then the I.D.F. said intelligence suggested that there was a Hamas command center in tunnels underneath the facility. In November, 2023, the I.D.F. began a siege that culminated in a raid; the hospital was incapacitated. Later, the I.D.F. released photographs of tunnels and weapons that it said were found there.

Ezz told me that during the raid doctors had to perform thoracostomies, in which the chest is cut open to relieve pressure from internal injuries, without pain medication or sedatives. “The screaming of the patients was very loud,” he said. They had no CT scanner or neurosurgeon; patients with severe head trauma eventually stopped breathing and died. Even after these

experiences, Ezz seemed intent on practicing medicine in Gaza, perhaps after a residency abroad. “This is my purpose,” he said.

Motaz Harara, the director of Al-Shifa’s emergency department, met us at a former outpatient clinic near the main hospital, which he had filled with twenty-eight beds and turned into a small E.R. After air strikes, Harara said, the makeshift space sometimes received three or four hundred patients. The rest of Al-Shifa, however, was abandoned. What had once been an airy hospital atrium was now a tangle of rebar and pulverized concrete. On one side of the space, an elevator shaft and part of a staircase had fallen into the basement. The rest of the staircase dangled from the ceiling. We carefully made our way past burned stretchers and equipment carts to the rear half of the ground floor, which had been the emergency department.

The E.R. was vast, largely empty, and black with soot. Several pillars were all that was left of the rear wall. Through the spaces between them, I could see a large graveyard behind the hospital, where rubble had been repurposed as headstones. When I asked Harara if any part of the hospital could be repaired, he shook his head. An official with Medical Aid for Palestinians, a U.K.-based charity, has said that its reconstruction could take more than twenty years.

Since 1950, Israel has been a signatory to the Geneva Conventions, which state that civilian hospitals “may in no circumstances be the object of attack, but shall at all times be respected and protected.” A 1977 amendment prohibits any attack “which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.” Since October 7th, Israel has publicly pledged to spare nonmilitary infrastructure and personnel. “We will do our best not to harm innocents,” Israel’s Ambassador to the European Union said in November, 2023. “We are bound to the international law.” A hospital retains its special status even if it is treating wounded combatants, but if it is used for an “act harmful to the enemy,” such as hiding soldiers or storing weapons—a violation of international law—it loses humanitarian protections. (Even then, civilian medical staff and patients are legally protected.)

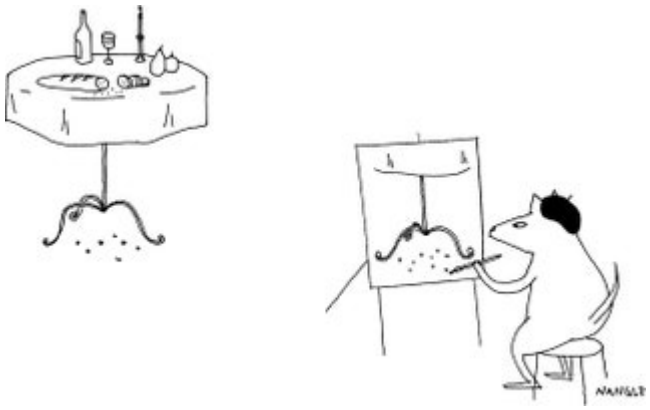
Last fall, a team of Harvard researchers published an analysis of the distance between Gaza's hospitals and the craters from two-thousand-pound M-84 bombs. An M-84 can displace more than five tons of dirt and create shock waves strong enough to burst lungs and sinuses. "It pancakes entire buildings," a former Pentagon official has said. The paper noted that, during the first six weeks of the conflict, eighty-four per cent of Gaza's hospitals were within the damage range of at least one such crater, and a quarter were within the lethal range. "I don't see any evidence that they tried to protect civilians or civilian infrastructure," one of the authors, a spatial epidemiologist and emergency physician named P. Gregg Greenough, told me. "How could you be using these kinds of weapons, in this kind of setting, and still argue that you are adhering to international humanitarian law?" The I.D.F. told *The New Yorker* that it "does not intentionally target uninvolved civilians." It said that it "recognizes the special protections granted to medical teams under international humanitarian law and is committed to taking all necessary measures to mitigate harm to them and minimize the disruption to medical services."

When we walked through the gate of Al-Ahli Arab Hospital—the closest thing to a functional hospital left in the north—we saw two tan-colored buildings and a modern-looking tower topped with solar panels. Most of its windows were jagged with glass shards. Al-Ahli was founded in 1882 by Anglican missionaries. A plaque commemorated a 2011 renovation sponsored by U.S.A.I.D. Mule wagons were constantly dropping off new patients, many of whom had external-fixation pins protruding from their arms or legs. A chapel, riddled with shrapnel damage, had been turned into a medical ward. Ezz led us to a small E.R. that, despite the ceasefire, was at capacity. There were no ventilators, defibrillators, or I.V. pumps. I counted two cardiac monitors and eighteen cots. "Two monitors for half a million people," Ezz said. "Unbelievable."

Ezz introduced me to Fadil Naim, who directs the facility. The hospital had space for about fifty inpatients but routinely cared for hundreds, so some slept outside. Naim was the only senior orthopedic surgeon in the hospital, but he'd gotten help by training whomever he could. "I have a third-year medical student that can now do orthopedic surgery," he said.

Early in the conflict, Naim called Ezz with terrible news. Ezz's mother had arrived in the Al-Ahli emergency room. His grandparents' house had been bombed. After rescuers arrived, a second bomb exploded nearby, Ezz said. His mother survived, but twenty of his family members, including his father, brother, grandmother, niece, and sister-in-law, were killed. "Some of them are still buried under the rubble," Ezz told me.

Many of the houses in Beit Lahia, in the northernmost part of Gaza, were not simply damaged but flattened. The Indonesian Hospital, a stately four-story building, was one of the few structures in the vicinity still standing, though it, too, had reportedly been shelled. Sparrows darted from one pile of rubble to another; I heard what was probably an unexploded bomb detonate in the distance. Marwan Sultan, a cardiologist and the director of the hospital, led us through darkened hallways, his white coat billowing behind him.



Cartoon by Jared Nangle

Only the E.R. remained operational. Doctors had performed neurosurgery in a dental chair and amputations on the ground, Sultan said. Outside, he showed me the wreckage of several generators and an oxygen station. Israeli forces "destroyed the lungs of the hospital," he said. I saw a hole in the side of the building where he said a tank had driven through the wall. In the hospital courtyard, there were grave markers made from ceiling tiles. An I.D.F. spokesperson said that weapons and tunnels were found at the facility.

Sultan led me upstairs, to the I.C.U., where wind blew through broken windows. He wanted to show me something that he had discovered after

Israeli forces left the hospital. He pointed to a cardiac monitor near a wall. It appeared to have a bullet hole in its screen. Next to it was an EKG machine whose screen had been smashed.

We entered a large storage room in the corner of the I.C.U. which was crammed with medical devices: ultrasound machines, I.V. pumps, dialysis machines, blood-pressure monitors. Each had apparently been destroyed by a bullet—not in a pattern one would expect from random shooting but, rather, methodically. I was stunned. I couldn't think of any possible military justification for destroying lifesaving equipment. When I asked the I.D.F. for comment, the spokesperson said, "Claims that the IDF deliberately targets medical equipment are unequivocally false."

The ceasefire in Gaza ultimately lasted just two months. In February, I flew back to the U.S. On March 2nd, Israel blocked all humanitarian aid, including medical supplies, from entering Gaza, in an effort to pressure Hamas into accepting revised ceasefire terms. On the night of March 18th, it resumed its bombing campaign. By morning, more than four hundred people had been killed, according to Gaza's health ministry. The hospitals in the north soon had too many patients and too few supplies to treat them, Ezz told me in a text. "Every day we face impossible choices," he wrote. This past week, the I.D.F. warned Al-Ahli's medical staff to evacuate patients; twenty minutes later, missiles disabled the emergency department and destroyed a genetics laboratory. The I.D.F. said that Hamas was operating there, which the group denied.

When bombs began falling in Khan Younis, Feroze Sidhwa, an American trauma surgeon who had been to Gaza before, was in Nasser Hospital, sleeping in the same room where I had stayed. I knew him from a group chat of health-care workers who had gone on medical missions like mine. Sidhwa, a stoic man with short hair, woke up when the pressure wave from an explosion blew the door open. He rushed to the E.R.

In the hours that followed, two hundred and twenty-one people were brought to the hospital. Ninety-two were soon pronounced dead. Sidhwa searched for patients who needed emergency surgery. "It was chaos," he said. "The rooms were full of kids dying on the floor, bleeding, screaming, crying." Some patients were alive but beyond saving with the hospital's

limited resources. Sidhwa saw several children with severe brain injuries. The hospital had no neurosurgeon, so there was little that could be done for them. After evaluating a young girl, he pointed her relative to a specific part of the E.R., where dying patients were sent. “Pick her up and take her over there, and just stay with her,” he remembers saying.

The next patient he evaluated was a five-year-old girl with shrapnel wounds to the chest, abdomen, and head. The E.R., which had been empty when I visited, in January, was so crowded with patients that he couldn’t push her gurney to the CT scanner. Instead, he picked her up and carried her. Her scans suggested that her brain injuries were survivable, so he carried her to the operating room and repaired her internal abdominal injuries. (Five days later, she would be talking again.)

Marwan Sultan, a cardiologist and the director of the Indonesian Hospital, points out medical devices that appear to have been shattered by bullets.

He proceeded to treat a tennis-ball-size hole in a woman’s back, another patient’s lacerated aorta, and a five-year-old boy whose entire body had been sprayed with shrapnel, causing cardiac arrest. One of Sidhwa’s colleagues opened the boy’s chest as though it were a clamshell and sewed up holes in the ventricles of his heart. The colleague re-started the boy’s heart by injecting epinephrine into it, and together they repaired damage to the boy’s liver, diaphragm, colon, stomach, and kidney. Despite their efforts, the boy died.

Sidhwa said that one of his last patients that night was a sixteen-year-old boy named Ibrahim, who had sustained intestinal injuries from shrapnel. Sidhwa stitched up the boy’s rectum and created an ostomy—a hole that exits the abdomen—to allow his digestive tract to heal. Ibrahim had black hair and looked thin from malnutrition. He was expected to make a full recovery. The boy’s father seemed to know only two words in English —“thank you”—and kept repeating them. “It was sweet,” Sidhwa told me.

Five days later, Ibrahim was almost ready to be sent home. That afternoon, Sidhwa was on his way to check on him when a colleague flagged him down. As they were discussing a patient, an explosion rocked the hospital. Sidhwa’s Palestinian colleagues pulled him away from the windows; the

building had been hit. The I.D.F later said that the strike had targeted a senior Hamas political leader named Ismail Barhoum. A spokesperson alleged that Barhoum was “in the hospital to commit acts of terrorism.” Sidhwa called this claim “fucking ridiculous.” Barhoum was related to Ibrahim, Sidhwa told me, so they received medical treatment in the same room. “He was wounded and he was here as a patient,” he said. “I’m telling you this as an eyewitness.”

After the attack, Sidhwa again raced to the E.R. “We didn’t know if the Israelis were going to raid the hospital, or bomb it again,” he told me. Eventually, several men rushed in, carrying a teen-age boy in a bedsheet. They brought him into the trauma bay and set him down on a gurney. When Sidhwa drew the sheet back, he was shocked. The patient’s abdomen was shredded and his bowels were spilling out. It was Ibrahim, and he was dead. ♦

Clayton Dalton is an emergency physician. He lives and works in New Mexico.

Onward and Upward with Technology

Subtitling Your Life

Hearing aids and cochlear implants have been getting better for years, but a new type of device—eyeglasses that display real-time speech transcription on their lenses—is a game-changing breakthrough.

By David Owen

April 21, 2025

There is no better time in human history to be a person with hearing loss.Illustration by Vartika Sharma

A little over thirty years ago, when he was in his mid-forties, my friend David Howorth lost all hearing in his left ear, a calamity known as single-sided deafness. “It happened literally overnight,” he said. “My doctor told me, ‘We really don’t understand why.’ ” At the time, he was working as a litigator in the Portland, Oregon, office of a large law firm. (He and his family had moved there from New York after one of his daughters pricked a finger on a discarded syringe while climbing on rocks in Prospect Park.) His hearing loss had no impact on his job—“In a courtroom, you can get along fine with one ear”—but other parts of his life were upended. The

brain pinpoints sound sources in part by analyzing minute differences between left-ear and right-ear arrival times, the same process that helps bats and owls find prey they can’t see. Now that Howorth had just one working ear, he didn’t know where to look when someone called his name on a busy sidewalk. In groups, he would pretend to follow what others were saying, nodding occasionally. “Even when I knew the topic, I was reluctant to join in for fear of being somewhat off point, or, worse, saying the same thing that someone else had just said,” he recalled. At dinner parties, his wife, Martha, always tried to sit on his left, so that he wouldn’t have to explain to a stranger why he had failed to respond.

Martha died in 2016. Perhaps because she was no longer there to act as an intermediary, he noticed that his good ear wasn’t very good anymore, and he was fitted, for the first time, for hearing aids. The type he got was designed specifically for people with his condition, and included a unit for each ear. The one in his dead ear had a microphone but no speaker; it wirelessly transmitted sounds from that side to the unit in his functioning ear. “I went to a bar with my brothers, and was amazed,” he said. “One of them was talking to me across the table, and I could hear him.” The amazement didn’t last. Multi-speaker conversations were still confusing, and he was no better at locating sound sources, since everything seemed to be coming from the same place.

One morning in 2023, Howorth put on his hearing aids and realized, with a shock, that his right ear had stopped working, too. He travelled to one of the world’s leading facilities for hearing disorders, the Shea Clinic, in Memphis. Doctors repeatedly injected the steroid dexamethasone directly into his middle ear, through his eardrum. Steroids are the standard treatment for sudden deafness, but they sometimes have no effect. For Howorth, they did nothing.

Last year, after he had given up all hope that the hearing in his right ear would return, he received a cochlear implant on the other side. A professor of otolaryngology at Harvard Medical School once described cochlear implants to me as “undeniably the finest biological prosthesis that we have today, for anybody, in terms of restoration of function.” Research on implants began in the nineteen-fifties, and the technology has improved

steadily since then. Contrary to popular belief, though, they don't magically turn normal hearing back on. The implants bypass the almost unimaginably complex sensory structures of the cochlea with relatively simple electrodes. Many recipients become adept at interpreting the electrodes' signals as intelligible sounds, especially if the implantation is done in infancy, but others struggle.

Howorth now has new hearing aids, and he can adjust them and his implant together, using his phone, but even when the devices are working optimally he can't understand much. "When I pee, it sounds like a roomful of people making conversation," he told me. "In fact, it sounds more like that than a roomful of people making conversation does." Nothing helps with music. Rush Limbaugh, who had bilateral cochlear implants, once said that they made violins in movie scores sound like "fingernails on a chalkboard." Howorth told me, "I'm not sure that's the analogy I would use, but it does get across the unpleasantness of the sound. You do want to say, 'Make it stop!' "

Nevertheless, Howorth says that, in many situations, he actually does better now than he did when he had one fully functioning ear. The reason is that he has begun using a free voice-to-text app on his phone, Google Live Transcribe & Notification. When someone speaks to him, he can read what they're saying on the screen and respond as if he'd heard it. He belongs to a weekly lunch group with half a dozen men in their seventies and eighties, and when they get together he puts his phone in the center of the table and has no trouble joining in. Live Transcribe makes mistakes—"One of the guys, a retired history professor, said something that it transcribed as 'I have a dick,' " Howorth told me—but it's remarkably accurate, and it punctuates and capitalizes better than many English majors I know. It can also vibrate or flash if it detects smoke alarms, police sirens, crying babies, beeping appliances, running faucets, or other potentially worrisome sound emitters, and it works, with varying degrees of accuracy, in eighty languages. Howorth remarried a few years ago; his current wife, whose name is Sally, never knew him when he had two good ears. He used Live Transcribe at a party they attended together, and she told him afterward that it was the first time she'd been with him in a social setting in which he didn't seem "aloof and unengaged."

A researcher I interviewed in 2018 told me, “There is no better time in all of human history to be a person with hearing loss.” Nearly every expert I spoke with back then agreed. They cited over-the-counter hearing devices, improvements in conventional hearing aids and cochlear implants, and drugs and gene therapies in development. Those advances have continued, but, for Howorth and many others with hearing problems, the breakthrough has been acquiring the ability to subtitle life. “It’s transcription that has made the difference,” Howorth told me. The main contributor has been the tech industry’s staggering investment in artificial intelligence. Live Transcribe draws on Google’s vast collection of speech and text samples, which the company acquires by—well, who knows how Google acquires anything?

Back in the days when software came on disks, I bought a voice-to-text program called Dragon NaturallySpeaking. I had read about it in some computer magazine and thought it would be fun to fool around with, but I had to train it to understand my voice, using a headset that came with the disk, and even once I’d done that it was so error-prone that correcting a transcript took longer than typing the entire text would have taken. Now there are many options (among them the modern iteration of Dragon). The dictation feature in Microsoft Word works so well that a writer I know barely uses his keyboard anymore. Howorth and I sometimes play bridge online with two friends. The four of us chat on Zoom as we play, and if I didn’t know that he couldn’t hear I would never guess. Zoom’s captioning utility shows him everything the rest of us say, identified by name, and he responds, by speaking, without a noticeable lag. The app even ignores “um”—a feature that I had trouble explaining to Howorth, because Zoom left it out of my explanation, too.

For people who couldn’t hear, silent movies were an accessible form of public entertainment, since dialogue that couldn’t be deduced from the action appeared on printed title cards. Talkies—movies with synchronized sound, introduced in the late nineteen-twenties—were a setback. Subtitles are easy to add to film, but, for the most part, they were used only when actors and audiences spoke different languages. In 1958, Congress created Captioned Films for the Deaf, a program that was meant to be analogous to Talking Books for the Blind. Subtitles for television came later. The first

captioned TV broadcast was an episode of “The French Chef,” starring Julia Child, which the Boston public station WGBH aired, as an experiment, in 1971. Other successful tests followed, and in 1979 the government funded the National Captioning Institute (N.C.I.), with the goal of producing more text. The first live network-TV broadcast that included real-time captioning was the 1982 Academy Awards show, on ABC. Most of the text that night was copied from the script; ad libs and award announcements were added, by stenographers, as they occurred.

Many of N.C.I.’s first captioners were moonlighting court reporters. They used stenotype machines, devices on which skilled users can produce accurate transcripts faster than typists can type. By the early two-thousands, the demand for captioning was outstripping the supply of trained stenographers, and N.C.I. began experimenting with Automatic Speech Recognition. The software couldn’t convert television dialogue directly; captioners had to train it to recognize their own voices, as I did with Dragon. Once they’d done that, they worked like simultaneous translators, by listening to what was said onscreen and immediately repeating it into a microphone connected to a computer. They were known within the organization as “voice writers.”

Meredith Patterson, who is now N.C.I.’s president, began working there in 2003 and was one of the first voice writers. “The software was great with vocabulary that you would expect to be difficult,” she said. “But it struggled with little words, which we don’t articulate well—like ‘in’ versus ‘and.’ ” Patterson and her colleagues had to insert all punctuation verbally, sometimes by using shortcuts—instead of “question mark,” they said “poof”—and they created verbal tags to differentiate among words like “two,” “to,” and “too.” Good short-term memory was a job requirement; if a TV business commentator rattled off stock names and prices, voice writers had to be able to repeat the information immediately without losing track of what came next. When hiring, Patterson said, “we used a screening process that was similar to what they use for air-traffic controllers.”

N.C.I. still employs voice writers, and even stenographers, but most captioning nowadays is automated. The transition began in earnest a little over four years ago, prompted by *COVID*-19, which pushed huge amounts

of human interaction onto screens and raised the demand for captioning. (N.C.I. provides its service not just to TV networks but also to websites, educational institutions, corporations, and many other clients.) Meanwhile, rapid improvements in A.I. increased transcription accuracy.

In December, I spent an evening with Cristi Alberino and Ari Shell, both of whom are in their fifties and severely hearing impaired. We met at Alberino's house, in West Hartford, Connecticut. They are members of the board of an organization called Hear Here Hartford, and Alberino is a board member of the American School for the Deaf (A.S.D.), whose campus isn't far from her house. They both wear powerful hearing aids, and are adept at reading lips. Alberino began to lose her hearing when she was in graduate school. Shell said that he's not certain when he lost his, but that when he was eight or nine he would sometimes go downstairs while his parents were sleeping and watch TV with the sound muted. "My dad came down once, and said, 'Why don't you turn up the volume?' " he told me. "I said I didn't need to, because I knew exactly what they were saying."

Alberino said that the pandemic had posed many challenges for her and other people with hearing loss, since masks muffled voices and made lipreading impossible. (Transparent masks exist, but weren't widely available.) Nevertheless, she said, the pandemic was hugely beneficial for her. She works as a consultant in Connecticut's Department of Education, and spends much of every workday on the phone or in meetings. "Ten years ago, we moved from a building with separate little offices into a giant room with floor-to-ceiling windows," she said. "It's two hundred and fifty people on an open floor, and they pipe in white noise. It's an acoustic nightmare."

The pandemic forced her to work from home, and her life changed. "Now I'm in a room by myself," she continued. "There's no noise except for me. No one cares how loud I am. And everything is captioned." Work meetings moved onto Microsoft Teams, a videoconferencing app, which she called "the single greatest thing ever invented." Teams includes a captioning utility, which works the way Live Transcribe and Zoom do. She can read anything her co-workers say, and respond, by speaking, without a lag. Before captioning, she had to concentrate so hard on what people were saying that she often had difficulty responding thoughtfully, and when she

got home in the evening she was exhausted. She said, “After the lockdown, I went to H.R. and asked, ‘Can I please stay home?’ Because I don’t ever want to say ‘What?’ again.”

When I have Zoom conversations with my mother, who is about to turn ninety-six, I usually see just the top of her head and the smoke alarm on her ceiling, because she doesn’t like to aim her laptop’s camera at her face. I can’t see her eyes or her expression—a drawback when we talk. Using transcription utilities can pose a similar challenge, because a person reading your words on a phone can’t also look you in the eye. Howorth told me that he had used Live Transcribe during a meeting with a pair of financial advisers, but hadn’t been able to tell which adviser was speaking and so had to keep looking up to see whose lips were moving. (His cochlear implant didn’t help, since it makes all voices sound the same to him.)

One solution was devised by Madhav Lavakare, a senior at Yale. He was born in India, lived in the United States briefly, and attended school in Delhi. “One of my classmates had hearing loss,” he told me recently. “He had hearing aids, but he said they didn’t help him understand conversations—they just amplified noise.” Voice-to-text software didn’t help, either. “Because he didn’t have access to tone of voice, he needed to be able to read lips and see facial expressions and hand gestures—things that he couldn’t do while looking at his phone.”

Lavakare concluded that the ideal solution would be eyeglasses that displayed real-time speech transcription but didn’t block the wearer’s field of vision; his friend agreed. Lavakare had always been a tinkerer. When he was six, he built a solar-powered oven out of aluminum foil because his mother wouldn’t let him use the oven in their kitchen, and when he was nine he built “an annoying burglar alarm that was hard to disarm” in order to keep his parents out of his room. As he considered his friend’s hearing problem, he realized that he didn’t know enough about optics to build the glasses they had discussed, so he took apart his family’s movie projector and studied the way it worked.

He built a crude prototype, which he continued to refine when he got to Yale. Then he took two years off to work on the device exclusively, often with volunteer help, including from other students. He’s now twenty-three,

and, to the relief of his parents, back in college. Not long ago, I met him for lunch at a pizza place in New Haven. He had brought a demo, which, from across the table, looked like a regular pair of eyeglasses. I'm nearsighted, so he told me to wear his glasses over my own. (If I were a customer, I could add snap-in prescription inserts.) Immediately, our conversation appeared as legible lines of translucent green text, which seemed to be floating in the space between us. "Holy shit," I said (duly transcribed). He showed me that I could turn off the transcription by tapping twice on the glasses' right stem, and turn it back on by doing the same again. He added speaker identification by changing a setting on his phone. The restaurant was small and noisy, but the glasses ignored two women talking loudly at a table to my left.

Lavakare's company is called TranscribeGlass. He has financed it partly with grants and awards that he's received from Pfizer, the U.S. Department of State and the Indian government, programs at Yale, and pitch competitions, including one he attended recently in New Orleans. His glasses require a Bluetooth connection to an iPhone, which provides the brainpower and the microphone, and they work best with Wi-Fi, although they don't need it. You can order a pair from the company's website right now, for three hundred and seventy-seven dollars, plus twenty dollars a month for transcription, which is supplied by a rotating group of providers.

Not long after our lunch, I had a Zoom conversation with Alex Westner and Marilyn Morgan Westner, a married couple whose company, XanderGlasses, sells a similar device. Alex was a member of the team that developed iZotope RX, a software suite that has been called "Photoshop for sound," and Marilyn spent six years working at Harvard Business School, where she helped build programs on entrepreneurship. In 2019, they decided to look for what Alex described as "a side hustle." They settled on helping people with hearing loss—which, according to the National Institutes of Health, affects roughly fifteen per cent of all Americans over the age of eighteen—by creating eyeglasses that would convert speech to text. (They found Lavakare through a Google search; the three keep in touch.)

XanderGlasses are fully self-contained. That makes them heavier, more conspicuous, and significantly more expensive than Lavakare's glasses, but it also makes them attractive to those who lack phones or access to the internet, a category that includes many people with hearing problems. (XanderGlasses are able to connect to Wi-Fi when it's available.) The Westners have worked closely with the Veterans Health Administration. Two of the V.A.'s most common causes of service-related disability claims involve hearing: tinnitus, or phantom sounds in the ears, which accounted for more than 2.3 million paid claims in fiscal year 2020; and hearing loss, which accounted for more than 1.3 million during the same period.

"Before I reassure the markets, I'd like to remind money itself that we all still love it very much."
Cartoon by Paul Noth

The Westners lent me a pair of XanderGlasses, and I tested them at home with my wife, Ann. The glasses have built-in microphones, and they come with two additional, wireless microphones, each of which has a sixty-five-foot range. For gatherings like Howorth's old-man lunch, the Westners suggest placing a microphone on the table and aiming it at the participant with the quietest voice. Ann took a microphone upstairs, to our bedroom, while I wore the glasses in the basement. She was too far away for me to hear her, but when she spoke her words materialized before my eyes. ("People often will put their glasses on and say, 'I can hear!,' but they can't really," Marilyn told me. "Their brain just thinks that they can.") That

evening, Ann and I took turns wearing the glasses during dinner at a local restaurant. I hadn't brought a microphone, so there was conversational spillover from loudmouths in the booth next to ours, but I had no problem reading almost everything the waiter said to me.

A few days later, I met up with a man named Omeir Awan and his mother, Shazia, in an enclosed "meeting pod" at Miller Memorial Library, in Hamden, Connecticut. Omeir is thirty. When he was in high school, he began suffering from a variety of mysterious neurological symptoms. Doctors eventually determined that he had Bell's palsy and neurofibromatosis type II (NF2), a rare genetic disorder that's characterized by the proliferation of tumors throughout the nervous system, including the parts that govern hearing and balance. Omeir's disease was relatively stable for a long time, and he graduated from both high school and college. In 2021, though, he suffered a catastrophic seizure, which left him unable to walk. "I woke up in the hospital, and I was freaking out," he said. "My dad was sleeping in the room. I'm, like, 'Where am I? What happened?' "

Over the next few months, he learned to walk again, though with a limp, but his hearing grew steadily worse, and today he can hear almost nothing. Some deaf NF2 patients are helped by cochlear implants, but implants are often useless in cases like Omeir's, in which tumors have damaged the nerves that the electrodes need to connect to. "I used to be a huge gamer," he told me, "but now I was too depressed to play anything." He hated leaving his room. Shazia said she worried that he might be suicidal. Then, late last year, he bought a pair of XanderGlasses. "The glasses changed my life," he said. "I'm me again. It's amazing. I feel normal." When I spoke, I could see his eyes moving as he read my words. But he looked at me as I was talking and responded to everything I said. No one eavesdropping on our meeting pod would have guessed that he couldn't hear me.

The standard last-resort intervention for deaf NF2 patients is a so-called auditory brain-stem implant, which almost never restores hearing but can create what is described as "sound awareness," such as the ability to tell the difference between a barking dog and a ringing phone. Some members of Omeir's medical team were unaware of transcription glasses, and were surprised when he demonstrated how easily he could communicate while

using them. I asked him how he'd found out about the glasses, if his doctors hadn't told him. "Google," he said.

Communication between the deaf and the hearing has a fraught history. American Sign Language (ASL) was developed mainly at A.S.D., beginning in 1817. Signing enabled the deaf to communicate easily with one another, and it helped to dispel the popular belief that people who couldn't hear were mentally deficient and therefore uneducable: "deaf and dumb." In 1880, though, delegates at the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, held in Milan, voted overwhelmingly to ban sign language in schools. A leader of the global anti-signing movement was Alexander Graham Bell, whose mother and wife were both deaf. In 1883, he presented a paper at a meeting of the National Academy of Sciences, in New Haven, called "Memoir: Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race." Bell argued that the existence of a private language made it too easy for "deaf-mutes" to socialize with and marry one another, and thereby "transmit their defect" to subsequent generations.

The pedagogic practice endorsed by Bell and the Milan conference was oralism. (Signing is manualism.) At pure oralist schools, deaf students were taught by hearing teachers, and were required to communicate only by reading lips and speaking aloud—a near-impossibility for many. The impetus wasn't solely eugenic; Bell and other advocates believed that only by learning to speak could the deaf function in a world in which the vast majority of people can hear. Nevertheless, the impact of the Milan vote was devastating. Deaf teachers lost their jobs, and deaf employees disappeared from many professions. ASL didn't vanish, but it wasn't widely restored to deaf education until the last decade of the twentieth century. The International Congress formally apologized for its 1880 vote, but not until 2010.

Gallaudet University, in Washington, D.C., was founded in 1864 and is the world's only institution of higher learning for the deaf and the hard of hearing. In 1988, the school's board concluded a search for a new president and selected the sole non-deaf candidate. The choice was viewed by many at the school as the latest affront in a long history of treating the deaf as incapable of functioning without help from the hearing. Students and

professors responded with what became known as the Deaf President Now protests, and within a few days the board's choice resigned. (A documentary about the protests, "Deaf President Now!," will air on AppleTV+ on May 16th.) The protests influenced the evolution of so-called Deaf culture, spelled with a capital "D." Deaf culture, among other things, encourages treating deafness as a sensory fact, not an impairment, and is committed to communication through sign language, without reliance on non-signing intermediaries.

Cochlear implants were becoming increasingly common around the time of the Deaf President Now protests, and, to many people who couldn't hear, they seemed like oralism all over again, and therefore like a Milan-scale threat to signing and to Deaf culture. In 2018, Juliet Corwin, a profoundly deaf fourteen-year-old in Massachusetts, wrote, in an op-ed in the Washington *Post*, that an ASL teacher, whom her parents had hired when she was an infant, quit when the teacher found out that Corwin was going to get implants, and that, for the same reason, Corwin was unwelcome in an ASL playgroup.

I wondered whether captioning might be perceived by the Deaf community as undermining ASL. Lavakare told me that he had received some pushback, but that younger deaf people, in particular, have almost always been supportive, even if they're also committed to ASL. "They're much more tech-savvy, and much more open to using technology than older generations," he said. That's not surprising, since much of modern life is essentially captioned, especially for the young. (A woman in a book group my wife belonged to complained that her children now conversed solely by text—and, when she said "text," she held a hand to her ear, with thumb and pinkie extended, as though it were a telephone receiver.)

There are also many deaf people for whom ASL alone is not a viable option. Omeir Awan told me, "I spent two or three months trying to learn to sign, but it didn't work out." The reason is that his conditions, in addition to making him hard of hearing, have partially paralyzed his face and hands. (He can't smile, either.) Howorth is good at languages—after he retired, he returned to college to study Latin and ancient Greek—but he's almost

eighty, and, even if he learned ASL, there's no one he knows whom he'd be able to sign with.

Some members of the Deaf community have collaborated in the development of transcription technology. In 1972, students and faculty at Gallaudet were the audience for a demonstration of a captioned episode of "The Mod Squad." They also worked with Google on Live Transcribe, by conducting focus groups, testing potential features, and making suggestions about issues such as the trade-off between speed and accuracy. (Improving accuracy increases latency, which is the lag between what is said and what is seen.) If you've watched football on TV during the past two seasons, you've almost certainly seen a commercial for A. T. & T.'s 5G Helmet, which was developed in collaboration with Gallaudet and its football team, the Bison. The helmet contains a small lens, mounted above one eye, on which a quarterback can receive plays from a coach. It's the visual equivalent of the radio systems that N.F.L. teams have used since 1994 and some college teams began using last year. The 5G Helmet would be a good replacement for those, too, since adopting it would reduce the disruptive impact of crowd noise.

Gallaudet's innovations have often had benefits for people who can hear. In 1894, a Bison quarterback realized that members of opposing teams, from other deaf schools, might be able to see the signs he was using to call plays, so he told his players to stand around him in a tight circle: the first huddle. Raja Kushalnagar, a Gallaudet professor who worked on the Live Transcribe project, told me that, although the development of captioning has been driven by the needs of the deaf, the vast majority of users are able to hear. (Live Transcribe has been downloaded more than a billion times.) Captioning is surprisingly popular among young people with unimpaired hearing, perhaps because it enables them to follow multiple screens at the same time. Most Netflix subscribers are not deaf, but, according to the company, more than eighty per cent of them use subtitles or captions at least once a month, and forty per cent keep them on consistently, whether or not they're trying to follow the dialogue in British mysteries.

Hearing difficulties pose challenges throughout the health-care system, even when the primary medical issue has nothing to do with ears. Older

patients, especially, mishear instructions or are too overwhelmed by bad news to listen carefully. Kevin Franck, who was the director of audiology at Massachusetts Eye and Ear between 2017 and 2021, instituted a pilot program in which Massachusetts General Hospital issued inexpensive personal sound-amplification products to patients with unaddressed hearing loss; medical personnel were also reminded to do things like turn off TV sets before asking questions or explaining procedures. He told me that the medical profession still resists captioning technology, primarily out of fear that transcription errors could lead to misunderstandings that result in lawsuits. “Nevertheless,” he continued, “I always urged my clinicians to suggest that patients download one of the apps on their own phone anyway,” and to encourage patients “to check it out for themselves and to use it for more than that day’s appointment.”

J. R. Rush retired from the Marine Corps two decades ago. He served in both Desert Storm and Desert Shield, and he suffers from several service-related conditions, among them auditory neuropathy and chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy, a rare autoimmune disorder that attacks the peripheral nervous system and forces him to use a wheelchair. He’s hard of hearing, legally blind, unable to feed himself, and in constant pain. For years, his medical appointments were stressful not only for him but also for his wife, Janet, because she had to act as his interpreter and surrogate.

“Those appointments were a nightmare,” Janet told me recently. J.R. still has some hearing, and he wears hearing aids, but he has problems with comprehension. Janet continued, “You only get ten minutes with doctors now, and most of the time their back is turned, or they’re writing. I would say, ‘Hey, you have to look at him, because if you don’t he can’t read your lips.’ ”

“The hearing aids just make the garble louder,” J.R. said. “It’s like listening to Charlie Brown’s mother.”

In 2023, one of his V.A. doctors connected him with the Westners, and he got a pair of XanderGlasses. He and Janet had been skeptical, because his vision is so poor, but he has no problem reading the text. During our

interview, he was in bed and my voice was coming from a speaker phone, but he followed everything.

“During those years when you’re a marine, you’re invincible,” he said. “You go to war, and you know you’re going to come back, because you know that nothing can hurt you. Then, of course, you get older, and they give you your vincibility back, and it all just melts down around you.”

“The glasses have improved our lives a hundred per cent,” Janet said. “We’ve even been able to go to the movies. And we can just talk, and have a conversation. It used to be impossible to tell him a story, or a joke, because I had to stop every five seconds to repeat what I’d just said. We get those good couple of hours every day, and that’s all we need.”

“I have the glasses on right now,” J.R. said.

“Well, of course you do,” Janet said. “If you didn’t have them on, you’d be asleep, because you’d be bored. And then next thing we knew we’d hear you snoring.” ♦

David Owen has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1991. He is the author of “Volume Control: Hearing in a Deafening World.”

The Political Scene

How Trump Worship Took Hold in Washington

The President is at the center of a brazenly transactional ecosystem that rewards flattery and lockstep loyalty.

By Antonia Hitchens

April 21, 2025

“Oligarchs, favor-seekers, and sycophants are all around,” a prominent Democratic lawyer said. “Either we’re at the beginning of the end of democracy or the beginning of a rebirth.”Photo illustration by Justin Metz; Source photographs from AP / Shutterstock

Representative Andy Ogles, a Republican from Tennessee, recently started making videos from his office on Capitol Hill. Ogles, a Freedom Caucus

member in his second term, often films himself in front of a reproduction of "Washington Crossing the Delaware," the painting by Emanuel Leutze. "What you have here is a moment in time that comes along once in a century," he says in a clip called "The Case for Trump 2028," in which he proposes that the President run for a third term. In another video, he walks through his office, with a chyron introducing him as "Judge Impeacher/Congressman." Ogles recently filed articles of impeachment against several judges who have blocked executive orders issued by Trump. "Political hacks and their decisions belong in my *SHREDDER*," he writes in a post promoting the video. Toward the end, he feeds a judicial ruling into an actual paper shredder. "Sicko Mode," by Travis Scott, plays in the background.

Ogles began the year under investigation by the Office of Congressional Ethics and the F.B.I. They were looking into allegations that he had violated federal campaign-finance laws by falsely reporting a three-hundred-and-twenty-thousand-dollar loan to himself, something Ogles maintained was an "honest mistake." (He had also allegedly raised nearly twenty-five thousand dollars on GoFundMe for a "burial garden" for stillborn babies—a project that donors say never materialized.) Before Inauguration Day, when Trump first displayed an interest in Greenland, Ogles proposed the Make Greenland Great Again Act, a bill authorizing the President to try to acquire it from Denmark. (The U.S. is a "dominant predator," Ogles said.) Ten days later, just after Trump was sworn in, Ogles announced his bid to allow the President to serve a third term, by changing the Twenty-second Amendment to the Constitution. "If the man who created the disastrous 'New Deal' gets more than two terms, then the man who created 'The Art of the Deal' should get the same," he said. The following week, in a Fox Business appearance, he echoed an assertion by Trump that D.E.I. might have caused a fatal plane crash over the Potomac River. Federal prosecutors withdrew their investigation into Ogles the next day.

Brazen transaction mixed with humbling obeisance is hardly unknown in Washington. "Shame is for sissies," the late lobbyist Edward von Kloberg used to say. (He referred to his clients, among them Saddam Hussein, as "the damned.") In Trump's Washington, the imperative has never been more plain: if you want to get ahead or stay out of trouble, praise the President as

much as he praises himself. “You are the leader of the world,” Archbishop Elpidophoros, of the Greek Orthodox Church, said, at a recent celebration in the White House’s East Room. “You remind me of the great Roman emperor Constantine the Great.” The crowd cheered. Elpidophoros presented Trump with a gold cross—the symbol, he remarked, that led Constantine to victory. “Wow,” Trump replied, as he cradled the cross. “I didn’t know that was going to happen, but I’ll take it.”

The gestures of servility come from all over. At a Cabinet meeting not long ago, Trump’s secretaries took turns: “Your vision is a turning point and inflection point in American history” (Brooke Rollins, Agriculture); “You were overwhelmingly elected by the biggest majority—Americans *want* you to be President” (Pam Bondi, Attorney General); “What you’re doing now is a great service to our country, but ultimately to the world” (Marco Rubio, State). Jeff Bezos, whose business empire can easily be affected by the favor or disdain of the White House, announced that the newspaper he owns, the Washington *Post*, would no longer welcome opinion columns outside certain boundaries. He redoubled his bow by licensing Trump’s reality-TV show, “The Apprentice,” in order to make reruns of it available to stream on Amazon. (Amazon also paid forty million dollars for the rights to two forthcoming documentary projects on Trump’s wife, Melania.) Senator Ted Cruz, who had once called Trump a “snivelling coward,” “utterly immoral,” “nuts,” and “a pathological liar,” now rushes to compliment the President, along with his main campaign funder and close adviser, Elon Musk; Cruz recently tweeted a photograph of himself with a red Tesla parked on the grounds of the White House. “This may be the coolest thing I’ve ever seen,” he wrote.

The list goes on. When Trump complained about an unflattering portrait that hung in the Colorado state capitol—“Truly the worst,” he said—the state’s legislature swiftly removed it. In Minnesota, Republicans in the state senate introduced a bill to codify “Trump Derangement Syndrome”—defined as “the acute onset of paranoia in otherwise normal persons that is in reaction to the policies and presidencies of President Donald J. Trump”—as a mental illness. Law firms are offering pro-bono services to Trump so that he will reverse executive orders that target them; in a memo, the U.S. Attorney in D.C. referred to his staff as “President Trumps’ lawyers.”

Brendan Carr, the head of the Federal Communications Commission, wears a gold lapel pin in the shape of Trump's head.

At the beginning of April, Trump instituted a tariff regime that sent markets plunging across the world. As losses in the S. & P. 500 neared six trillion dollars, he gloated about the many nations that wanted to negotiate with him. "These countries are calling us up and kissing my ass," he told the National Republican Congressional Committee. " 'Please, please, sir, make a deal. I'll do anything, sir.' " He was also eager to remind any members of Congress who were opposed to his "big beautiful bill," which called for tax breaks, spending cuts, and stepped-up immigration enforcement, to "stop grandstanding" and just vote for it. "Close your eyes and get there," he said.

These days, they almost always do. "There's never been anybody who has controlled that much of the base of any party," Steve Cohen, a longtime Democratic congressman from Memphis, told me. "I don't even think Franklin Roosevelt had that much power." A person close to the Administration said, "Trump's dealmaking often comes through a public assault." Ralph Norman, a Freedom Caucus member from South Carolina, told me, "This is a blood sport now, more so than I've ever seen it." Or, as a person close to Trump put it, "Republicans have an authority problem. Donald Trump is teaching them how to respect order."

"N*O DISSENT*," Trump recently posted on Truth Social. He was addressing House Republicans ahead of a vote on a stopgap funding bill. A lack of dissent is not what the Founders envisioned for the deliberative branch. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson assumed that Congress would be the strongest arm of the federal government. Madison wrote, in Federalist No. 48, that "the legislative department is everywhere extending the sphere of its activity, and drawing all power into its impetuous vortex." In 1960, Lyndon B. Johnson, then the Senate Majority Leader, initially balked at an offer to be John F. Kennedy's running mate, because he felt it would be a downgrade from the role he already had.

And yet it now seems that Congress—with both houses controlled by Republicans—exists to do little else but flatter the man who lives at the other end of the Mall, and ratify his edicts. A week after Trump was inaugurated, Anna Paulina Luna, a Republican congresswoman from

Florida, proposed legislation that would direct the Secretary of the Interior "to arrange for the carving of the figure of President Donald J. Trump on Mount Rushmore National Memorial." "Let's get carving," she tweeted. The freshman congressman Brandon Gill's third piece of legislation, the Golden Age Act of 2025, would require all hundred-dollar bills to feature an image of Trump. (This violates an 1866 law that forbids the Treasury to put the likeness of a living person on currency.) Claudia Tenney, a New York Republican, introduced a bill to make Trump's birthday, June 14th, a federal holiday. "Just as George Washington's birthday is codified as a federal holiday, President Trump's birthday should also be celebrated to recognize him as the founder of America's Golden Age," she posted. Addison McDowell, of North Carolina, wants a new name for Washington's Dulles Airport: Trump International. Last month, Darrell Issa, a Republican from California, announced that he was nominating Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize. "No one deserves it more," Issa said.

In late March, I sat in on a hearing of the House Committee on Natural Resources, where a dozen or so members were discussing the Gulf of America Act of 2025, sponsored by Marjorie Taylor Greene. Her bill would require Trump's new name for the Gulf of Mexico to be implemented across the government's vast bureaucracy. Jared Huffman, the ranking Democratic member, leaned into the microphone. "There is crazy, destructive, incompetent, corrupt things happening in the executive branch of our government right now, and the independent branch of government, the Article One branch that our Founders created in order to serve as a check on Presidential abuses of power, as a check on corruption and incompetence, is totally missing in action," he said.

“Let me repeat your order back to you, pronounced correctly.”
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

As a staffer positioned a map of the “Gulf of America” behind Greene, I noticed a man slip quietly into the hearing room—this was Brian Glenn, Greene’s boyfriend and a pro-Trump TV anchor. Glenn got his start at Right Side Broadcasting Network, which emerged in 2015 by marketing itself as a channel that truthfully showed the size of Trump’s campaign crowds. (He is now the White House correspondent for Real America’s Voice, another right-wing media outlet.) Greene smiled at him, then introduced a slate of expert witnesses she had brought in to speak about how renaming the Gulf of Mexico would bolster national security.

Huffman’s mood seemed to darken further. “This is remarkable new stuff in this committee, just bootlicking sycophancy of the highest order,” he said. (Not long after the hearing, Huffman suggested an amendment to rename Earth “Planet Trump.” This, he said, would amount to skating “where the puck is going.”) Discussion in the committee room turned to a bill authorizing the purchase of tracking devices for fish living in the Great Lakes, and another to remove the gray wolf from the federal endangered-species list. Groups of touring schoolchildren occasionally filtered in and out.

Later, I caught up with Glenn at the White House. He was standing around waiting to go on air from “Pebble Beach,” the long driveway leading up to the West Wing, where the various networks have little green cabanas from which anchors and officials broadcast. Glenn is tan and has a puffy face. (He addressed his puffiness on a recently televised segment about the

drinking habits of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth. “It’s called allergies,” Glenn said. “And it’s called testosterone. That’s why my face gets puffy. I’m not an alcoholic.”) He sees himself as a sort of self-declared liaison between the President and Congress, helping the latter to more efficiently follow the former’s instructions. “Part of my job is to put pressure on Congress,” he told me. “We have to sell the President’s message to them. I want a carrier pigeon to fly straight from Trump’s desk to Speaker Johnson. Like a bank slot where you just put it in here and it comes out there.”

Lately, the President’s directive has been to stop the courts from derailing his agenda. In the first three months of his term, district judges have issued seventeen nationwide injunctions, blocking executive orders that, among other things, sought to end birthright citizenship, defund the Department of Education, and ban transgender people from serving in the military. Issa had introduced the No Rogue Rulings Act, which would bar district judges from issuing such universal injunctions. “It’s becoming an accelerating problem,” he told me. On March 20th, James Boasberg, a district judge in D.C., ordered the government to stop deportation flights that were carrying Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador. Trump posted, “This judge, like many of the Crooked Judges’ I am forced to appear before, should be *IMPEACHED*!!!” Soon, House members were scrambling to do so. “All options are on the table,” House Speaker Mike Johnson said. Bondi, the Attorney General, accused Boasberg of “meddling in our government.” A growing number of Republicans were now calling judges “insurrectionists.” Ogles hung a “Wanted” poster displaying photographs of various judges outside his office, and issued “Impeachathon Updates” on social media. The updates got retweeted by Musk, who has donated the maximum amount to Ogles’s reëlection campaign.

I recently visited Issa’s office in the Rayburn Building, one of three outposts for House members. Issa is the wealthiest member of the House, with a net worth just under half a billion dollars. He made his fortune in the car-alarm business, eventually manufacturing an alert system that featured his own voice. “Step away from the car,” it boomed. (As a younger man, Issa might have better heeded his own admonition; when he was nineteen, he and his brother were indicted for grand theft auto. Prosecutors ultimately dropped the case.) Congress was out of session, on a district-work week.

The halls were empty and echoey. Jonathan Wilcox, Issa's deputy chief of staff, welcomed me at the congressman's office and led me into a sitting room. Wilcox was in a casual-Friday outfit of jeans and a vest. A commemorative book called "Save America," which was by Trump and filled with photographs of Trump, rested on a coffee table. I noticed "gold card" memes on various staffers' computer screens. (In February, the Administration announced a plan to replace an existing immigration visa with a "gold card," which would be available to purchase for five million dollars. They look like American Express credit cards, except with Trump's face on them.)

For many members of Congress, the week back home had become unexpectedly contentious. Various news outlets were reporting that constituents, even in deep-red districts, were berating their representatives over Musk's ransacking of the federal bureaucracy, via his Department of Government Efficiency, and Trump's encouragement of it. There had been a town hall in Issa's district, near San Diego, at which dozens of angry citizens addressed a stage with an empty chair. When I asked about the incident, Wilcox sighed, gesturing around the silent office. "Do you notice the phone ringing off the hook?" he said. "Our constituents love us." He went on, "We have our hands full trying to be a fully effective legislative body."

Two weeks ago, No Rogue Rulings came before the Rules Committee, which controls which bills go to the House floor. (Senator Chuck Grassley, of Iowa, proposed companion legislation in the upper chamber.) Jim McGovern, of Massachusetts, the ranking Democratic member, opened the discussion. "While students are getting literally kidnapped off our streets by masked *ICE* agents because they wrote an op-ed Trump didn't agree with, what are our Republican colleagues doing?" he asked. "Trying to undermine the Constitution by eroding the independence of an independent judiciary." McGovern continued, "If this were happening in another country, our State Department would condemn it. This regime is marching toward authoritarianism, trying to trample over the courts and undermine the rule of law." Issa viewed the situation rather differently; he argued that the Founders "did not anticipate quite as many checks and balances."

Issa isn’t the first member of Congress to take up the issue of nationwide injunctions, and he pointed out that Trump wouldn’t be the only President to benefit from a ban. “We don’t write laws for one President,” Issa told me. “We write them for all time.” But it was difficult to ignore the current timing and context: the President was posting online that “Unlawful Nationwide Injunctions by Radical Left Judges could very well lead to the destruction of our Country!” (Next month, as part of an emergency appeal by the Trump Administration, the Supreme Court will hear oral argument about whether the lower courts have gone too far.)

Nicholas Bagley, a law professor at the University of Michigan and a former chief counsel to Gretchen Whitmer, the state’s Democratic governor, opposes nationwide injunctions, because they allow district courts to make decisions that extend beyond the parties involved. Still, he told me, “there’s something grotesque about Congress focussing on the powers of district courts when there is such a grievous assault on the rule of law happening right now.” Many in Trump’s camp, meanwhile, have long pushed for the President to be less impeded by the law. Vice-President J. D. Vance recently questioned whether the Administration could afford to bother with “due process” at all. A person who served in Trump’s first Administration, and is poised to join the State Department in the new one, told me, “Trump stops listening to the courts? That’s my dream.” On April 9th, No Rogue Rulings passed the House, with just one Republican dissenter.

Over the decades, certain bars and restaurants in D.C. have served as a kind of political headquarters. Ebbitt House poured drinks for members of various Presidential Administrations in the later nineteenth century and the early twentieth. During the Kennedy Administration, New Frontiersmen could be seen tucking into a steak at Sans Souci. Richard Nixon liked Trader Vic’s; the Bombay Club was more Clinton era. In Trump’s first term, the main hangouts were BLT Prime, at the Trump Hotel, where you might find Rudy Giuliani, and Harry’s Bar, where members of the Proud Boys sometimes gathered. (Both have since closed.)

On a recent evening, I went to Butterworth’s, a Capitol Hill restaurant that has been dubbed a de-facto *MAGA* clubhouse for a newer, younger set. A man wearing an embroidered American-flag sweater walked in and greeted

a table of women. “I’m not a crook,” he said, doing the Nixon double victory hand sign. Raheem Kassam, a former editor of Breitbart, is one of Butterworth’s investors. He was chatting with Saurabh Sharma, who works in Trump’s Office of Presidential Personnel, and sending French fries to customers who were waiting on drinks.

In the wake of Inauguration Day, Kash Patel, who has made a career of attacking Trump’s enemies and in return got appointed to run the F.B.I., appeared at Butterworth’s, as did Curtis Yarvin, the fringe anti-democracy writer. I’d last been during the Conservative Political Action Conference, a convention of right-wing activists that has transformed into a full-blown Trump rhapsody. As I walked in, Steve Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist and the current host of the “War Room” podcast, was posing for pictures with fans. “Make a hole,” a staff member barked at me, so that Bannon, in his customary Barbour jacket, could pass through the crowd.

In past years, Butterworth’s might’ve been a safe haven for a movement that still saw itself in opposition to the establishment. That premise has become obsolete. “I’ve honestly had way more Democratic congressmen than I have had Curtis Yarvin appearances,” Kassam said. Crowds now intermingle with much less concern. Andrew Beck, a strategist who has had multiple clients go on to join the new Administration, told me, “Everyone’s just accepting this populist revolution. To maintain your standing, you have to take up what until recently would have been a ‘far-right’ position.”

Not long ago, when I got coffee with Beck, he still seemed bemused that, after working for many years outside the Beltway, he now had regular meetings in the capital. Beck is tall and seems to cast politics as an explicitly masculine project; he’ll lean across the table to say things like “It’s about men building civilization.” In the evenings, he sometimes goes to parties in a posh neighborhood in Northwest D.C., at the home of a tech billionaire who supported Kamala Harris but now finds himself with new friendships to maintain in Washington. “It’s the hottest ticket in town,” Beck said. One night, Beck invited his friend Trace Mayer, a Bitcoin evangelist and investor who hosts a cryptocurrency podcast, to a sort of *maga* salon at the house. State Department staffers were there, and over cocktails and crab cakes the chat briefly turned to a work-in-progress plan

to deport alleged members of the Tren de Aragua gang to El Salvador. The idea was to pay El Salvador to warehouse the deportees in a notoriously brutal prison, but there had been an impasse in the negotiations. Mayer, through his crypto connections, was able to help reopen the conversation between the staffers and members of the administration of the Salvadoran President, Nayib Bukele. “I had no idea it would set off a constitutional crisis,” Beck said. (The Trump Administration recently admitted that it had mistakenly deported a man living in Maryland to the Salvadoran prison, but has yet to comply with court orders, including from the Supreme Court, to try to bring him back.) For Beck, though, it wasn’t about what he saw in the headlines later. “It’s about being a spiritual king in the eyes of your bros,” he told me. “It’s about that validation in your group chats.”

Fluency in the folkways of the internet has become a valuable form of currency. “It used to be the gold standard was placing a *W.S.J.* editorial,” a D.C. political consultant told me. “Now the most important thing is an Elon tweet. That’s what everybody wants most.” He went on, “It’s X and podcasts. Heritage, A.E.I., Cato—they have a lot less influence. The Catturd Twitter account is way more important.” (Catturd—the nom de guerre of a man in Florida who turned to social media when arthritis prevented him from continuing to play the guitar—has helped to popularize various *MAGA* conspiracy theories: the F.B.I. planted evidence at Mar-a-Lago, the war in Ukraine is a “psy-op.” Trump has on several occasions retweeted him.) On a recent episode of “The Joe Rogan Experience,” Mike Benz, a former State Department official and an online crusader against the “deep state,” lambasted U.S.A.I.D. for nearly three hours. Musk reportedly listened to—and loved—the episode, before gutting the institution.

The other day, I met the consultant in an area of downtown that was surrounded by high-end co-working spaces and corporate-expense-account restaurants. When I told him that I was heading to the Hill, he said, “Congress doesn’t matter.” But he did see other industries acquiescing in ways that seemed consonant with congressional deference. Meta had paid twenty-five million dollars to settle a lawsuit with Trump for suspending him from Facebook and Instagram in the aftermath of January 6th; Comcast was trying to spin off MSNBC, which Trump routinely excoriates. They

were all, the consultant said, “either migrating closer to what their actual beliefs always were, or they’re bending the knee.”

On April 2nd, referred to as “Liberation Day” by the Administration, Trump invoked national-emergency powers to impose sweeping tariffs on nearly ninety countries. His Cabinet gathered in the Rose Garden alongside supporters wearing hard hats and reflective vests—a stagy reference to all the manufacturing jobs that would presumably be flooding back to U.S. soil. Trump held up an enormous chart that displayed the names of countries and corresponding tariffs.

The print was very small. “I think you can, for the most part, see it,” Trump said. “Those with good eyes, with bad eyes.” He moved on. “They charge us, we charge them,” he said. “How could anybody be upset?” Soon afterward, the stock market plummeted. Trump left for Florida, where he was hosting a three-day golf tournament. At first, nearly everyone in the *MAGA* movement, and even *MAGA*-adjacent financiers, fell silent. “Mostly everyone hates this, they are just too afraid of the Mad King,” Brian Schatz, a Democratic senator from Hawaii, remarked. On Truth Social, Trump insisted that an “*ECONOMIC REVOLUTION*” was under way.

As trillions of dollars of shareholder value evaporated, a coterie of defenders mobilized to quell any protest. Brian Glenn, of Real America’s Voice, was posting “#TrustTrump.” Those who were brave enough to betray their ambivalence about the tariffs were deemed “panicans,” a portmanteau of “panic” and “Americans.” (Trump considered them “weak and stupid.”) Jack Posobiec, a *MAGA* operative and podcaster, emerged as a primary enforcer. “Crush panicans, destroy panicans, deport panicans, roundhouse kick a panican into the concrete, slam dunk a panican into a trash can, banish filthy panicans,” he tweeted, to his 3.1 million followers. Early in his career, Posobiec had an internship in Shanghai with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; he later served as a naval intelligence officer. He was a fervent supporter of Trump’s first Presidential campaign, when he began to promote the idea that Democratic luminaries were holding sex parties with children in the basement of a pizza parlor. Posobiec’s brother, Kevin, with whom he co-hosts a podcast, told me, “Jack helped Trump get in the first time, but back then people thought he was a Russian asset pushing Nazi policies.”

Now he is a mainstream, almost avuncular figure in Trumpworld. The Administration has brought him along on official trips—to the Canadian border, with Kristi Noem, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and to Ukraine, with Scott Bessent, the Secretary of the Treasury. “Our job is to be that conduit between whatever the leader of the movement, which is of course Donald Trump, has been doing and our audience,” Posobiec told me.

Any objection, no matter how trivial, to what Trump has been doing is now grounds for punishment. In late March, the White House tweeted an A.I.-generated meme of a fentanyl trafficker weeping as she was arrested by *ICE*. Mike Solana, a venture capitalist and the editor-in-chief of *Pirate Wires*, who has been publicly supportive of Trump, wondered whether the image “inadvertently made a previously deported felon and literal fentanyl trafficker sympathetic.” Posobiec, sensing insubordination, responded, “Take note of counter-signalers.” (“The fuck kind of joseph stalin kgb shit is this,” Solana replied.)

Posobiec told me that he has spent years “making lists” of those who display insufficient fealty to Trump. He was especially vigilant about newcomers. “When people come alongside your movement and say they believe the same things as you, and say they want the same things as you, that’s when we have to be very wary of entryism,” he told me. “Just because they’re making pro-Trump statements right now—let’s be careful.” You were on board from the start or you were an object of suspicion. “Immigration and trade are the two biggest issues of the new right,” he said. “And everything else is ancillary to those, because otherwise we would just be Jeb Bush.” He went on, “Loyalty is the most important political virtue. . . . In Dante’s Inferno, the lowest circle of Hell was reserved for those who were betrayers.” His job, he said, was to have the President’s back.

“Looks like the flooding’s under control.”
Cartoon by David Borchart

Some loyalists have taken an even more active approach. Laura Loomer, a thirty-one-year-old far-right agitator and provocateur, has long made it her mission to root out potential turncoats circling Trump. Loomer twice ran (unsuccessfully) for Congress, and now conducts, in effect, an aggressive form of online obedience oversight. She travelled with Trump to his first Presidential debate with Kamala Harris, where he announced that migrants in Ohio were “eating the dogs.” She says that, “without Trump, we have nothing.” Trump has described her as a “great patriot” and sometimes calls on her for advice. Three weeks ago, she flew to Washington to meet with him in the Oval Office, where she suggested that he dismiss members of his National Security Council whom she deemed disloyal, largely because of loose associations with non-*MAGA* figures. The first targets were gone the next day. “People fail to do proper vetting,” Loomer told me. “A lot of these Republicans have a serious problem following instructions.”

In the wake of “Liberation Day,” and the catastrophic economic disruption that followed, Posobiec reminded me that this was all part of the plan. “It is *meant* to be a global shakeup,” he said. “All the right people are upset.” For the tech oligarchy, the business leaders, the rank-and-file Republicans, the tariffs were the ultimate loyalty test. He is focussed on insuring that the base remains committed.

Posobiec exists alongside a larger group of new *MAGA* enthusiasts in the White House press corps. In January, Karoline Leavitt, Trump's press secretary, opened briefing-room applications to any podcaster or "content creator" in the country. (Zero Hedge, a blog that claims to "liberate oppressed knowledge," was recently added to the pool rotation; a former writer once suggested that an ideological guidepost for the site was "Vladimir Putin = greatest leader in the history of statecraft.") New lines of inquiry have been pursued: What is Trump's opinion on why his approval rating is so high? Can the Administration sustain its commendably breakneck pace? Recently, a correspondent for LindellTV, the streaming channel started by the election conspiracy theorist and pillow magnate Mike Lindell, said, of Trump, "He actually looks healthier than ever before—healthier than he did eight years ago, and I'm sure everybody in this room could agree. Is he working out with Bobby Kennedy, and is he eating less McDonald's?"

"A lot of conservative outlets are in there to just sort of have a victory party for Trump," Natalie Winters, the White House correspondent for Bannon's "War Room," told me. "They link the access to being very hype squad, fanboy, fangirl. And then you see media outlets who were anti-Trump now slobbering on him."

Norm Eisen, a former Obama ethics lawyer who worked on the first impeachment case against Trump, told me, "It's North Korean bootlicking." Eisen understands where the impulse comes from. Many Republicans, he said, "live in red communities where a perceived act of betrayal to Trump is followed by an onslaught of targeting. They're physically afraid for their lives or families' lives. It adds up to an atmosphere of false fawning, pretend adulation, and genuine fear." And it wasn't just Republicans who had reason to be afraid. On a Friday afternoon in March, Trump had delivered an hour-long speech at the Department of Justice, in which he vented about the "tremendous abuse" he had endured during his criminal trials. He bragged about stripping security clearances from Biden-era officials, and pledged to continue to expose his political enemies, calling out Eisen by name. "They're horrible people, they're scum, and you have to know that," Trump said. (Musk has called Eisen a "criminal" online.)

At a recent executive-order-signing session in the Oval Office, Trump introduced “Maintaining Acceptable Water Pressure in Showerheads”—“I like to take a nice shower to take care of my beautiful hair,” he said. “It comes out drip, drip, drip. It’s ridiculous”—then directed the Department of Justice to investigate an official who had denied that the 2020 election was stolen. After Trump announced the cancellation of nearly half a billion dollars in grants to Columbia, which, he said, was allowing “illegal protests,” the university agreed to a list of demands, including that it hire a new internal security force that had the power to arrest students. Five more law firms reached deals to do pro-bono work to avoid Trump’s punishment. All of this made perfect sense to Beck, the consultant. “It’s restorative justice,” he said. “If you’re truly in charge, you better strike a degree of fear. Trump represents a father figure who is returning to the house, and there are various people living in it who are freeloaders and grifters and lowlifes abusing the kingdom. It says in the Bible, the city rejoices when the righteous rule.” Or, as Winters, of “War Room,” put it, “There’s a reason retribution was such a popular topic on the campaign trail. We operate in prison sentences.”

Eisen described Washington as “a wartime capital,” where the fight was between “the push of autocracy and the pushback of the Constitution.” He said, “Oligarchs, favor-seekers, and sycophants are all around. Either we’re at the beginning of the end of democracy or the beginning of a rebirth. There’s a surreal quality to that split screen.”

The Monday after “Liberation Day,” I went back to the White House. In the East Room, a brass band played “I Love L.A.”; Trump was hosting the Dodgers, to celebrate last year’s World Series win. As I waited for the party to start, I read an article about possible plans for a military parade to commemorate Trump’s birthday. The President had just returned from Florida, where he hosted a candlelight dinner at Mar-a-Lago. (The cheapest ticket was a million dollars.) On Air Force One, he told reporters that the golf had been “very good, because I won. It’s good to win. You heard I won, right? Did you hear I won?” As anxiety about the tariffs continued to spike, Trump linked on Truth Social to a post from an account called AmericanPapaBear: “Trump is playing chess while everyone else is playing checkers.” The world was meant to sit back and respect the sacred, obscure

geometry of his plan, but Congress, Wall Street, corporate executives, and even Musk were publicly backing away.

I found Glenn standing under a chandelier. “This event could take away some of the negativity,” he said. “Trump can do a lot of great stuff, but then nobody asks him to talk about it.” In Trump’s last term, the Dodgers’ manager had indicated that he’d decline an invitation to the White House. It was hard not to see this visit as a marker of changed times. Still, even Glenn admitted that the tariff rollout had left some cracks in the firmament. “If this goes on till September, the base is going to come unglued,” he said. Would he ever go on TV and criticize Trump? “Ask me in a year,” he said. “I’m scared about the midterms.” Republicans were mostly trying to put a good face on things. “Silently, they’re freaking out,” he said. Trump arrived. “You showed America that it’s not about individual glory,” he told the Dodgers. “It’s about the team digging deep.” He riffed on how many pitchers they had relied on to win the Series. “They had great arms, but they ran out,” he said. “It’s called sports.” He complained that nobody talks enough about how he lowered the price of eggs. Glenn grabbed my arm and said, “See, that’s the perfect example of what I would ask him about.”

The day before, I had gone to a brunch at the British Embassy in honor of the Shakespeare Theatre Company. In the garden, children played fetch with the Ambassador’s herding dog, who scurried up and down the sloping grass, underneath cherry trees in full bloom. “We like coming here, because it’s away from all the crazy,” a senior White House staffer told me. It was a sort of neutral space. A senior British diplomat said, “The golden-age *MAGA* people actually love this whole thing. It validates their status as the new D.C. establishment. Kash Patel comes and talks about the Premier League. We had one person giving a tirade about the Administration—I was at a table of Republicans who sort of gently rolled their eyes and we all just focussed on our soup.”

Peter Mandelson, the new British Ambassador, hasn’t always been a neutral operator. In 2018, when Trump, in his first term, threatened a trade war with China, Mandelson wrote that he was “a bully and a mercantilist.” Late last year, when Mandelson’s appointment was announced, Trump’s campaign co-manager, Chris LaCivita, called him an “absolute moron.” But, just

before Trump was inaugurated, Mandelson wrote a piece for Fox News stating that Trump was sure to be “one of the most consequential” Presidents ever, and went on to call his earlier comments “childish and wrong.” (Kim Darroch, a previous British Ambassador, resigned in 2019 after a tabloid leaked cables of him saying that Trump was “radiating insecurity.”)

Inside, as the guests ate eggs Benedict, Mandelson delivered a set of oblique remarks, with careful emphasis. “People say that Shakespeare’s tragedies, his comedies, his histories capture the bygone age from the long-distant past—the power struggles, the feuds, the controversial advisers,” he said. “He wrote about great leaders with very strong personal brands.” Mandelson went on, “I have a lot to learn from Shakespeare, including from ‘Henry IV, Part 1’: ‘The better part of valor is discretion.’ ” The room roared with laughter. “I’m trying. I’m learning. I’m breaking the habit of a lifetime here. I know that my job is to keep below the radar, not on the radar.” He introduced the artistic director of the theatre. Shakespeare’s themes, the director said, ranged through “deception, betrayal, artifice, kingship, human tyranny.” He closed on a quote from “King Lear”: “The weight of this sad time we must obey. Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated which party controls the Colorado state legislature.

Antonia Hitchens is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

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Profiles

The Mexican President Who's Facing Off with Trump

Can Claudia Sheinbaum manage the demands from D.C.—and her own country's fragile democracy?

By Stephania Taladrid

April 21, 2025

In response to a belligerent new Administration to the north, Sheinbaum has said, "It's always important to keep a cool head."Photo illustration by Mark Harris; Source photographs by Guillermo Arias / Getty; ObturadorMX / Getty

Mexico's most important venue for political theatre is the *mañanera*—the press conference that takes place each weekday morning in the Treasury Room, a vast Italianate hall in the Presidential palace. It took its current form in 2018, under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador—a pugnacious, swaggering populist known throughout Mexico as *AMLO*. López Obrador framed his daily encounters with the media as an exercise in openness. Over time, they became a stage from which he could lambaste his

enemies, advance his initiatives, and curate his public image. *AMLO*'s *mañaneras* began at 7 *A.M.* and often stretched on for hours, with guest speakers, musical interludes, and endless Presidential monologues. Because he was perennially at war with the press, they were often his primary mode of communicating with the Mexican people.

López Obrador's successor is Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico's first female President. She is as precise and controlled as *AMLO* was blustery, but she has kept up the tradition of the *mañanera*. If anything, she talks with reporters even less, so her statements in the Treasury Room often provide the best indications of her administration's priorities and plans.

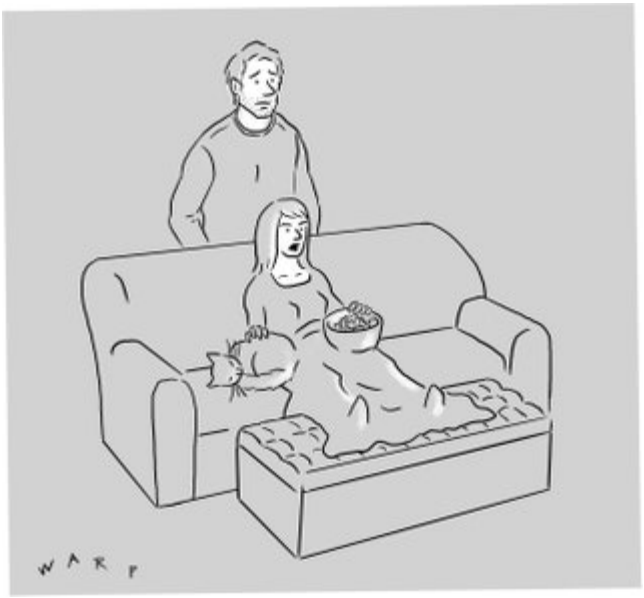
On the morning of January 21st, Sheinbaum's arrival was announced by the click of high heels on stone. "*Buenos días,*" she said as she walked onstage, wearing a black pencil skirt and a shirt embroidered with Indigenous motifs. It was the day after Donald Trump's Inauguration, and an expectant crowd had gathered to hear how the Mexican government would deal with the belligerent new Administration to the north. To everyone's surprise, Sheinbaum said that her comments that morning would focus on health.

Sheinbaum, who is sixty-two, had been in office almost four months, and for much of that time public discourse had been consumed by Trump's impending return to power. The American President had, once again, made Mexico a target. He vowed that on Day One he would impose "a 25% Tariff on ALL products" from Mexico. He claimed that he would declare a national emergency at the border, suspend refugee admissions, and designate Mexican cartels as foreign terrorist organizations, allowing the U.S. to pursue them more aggressively. Drug kingpins would "never sleep soundly again," he said.

How much any of this would translate into actual policy had been a subject of frenzied speculation in Mexico. Officials at the border had announced a state of emergency to prepare for mass deportations. Mayors declared themselves profoundly unprepared to deal with the legions of people Trump planned to send back. News outlets proclaimed the advent of "Trump Reloaded" and warned of "*La Invasión*."

Every Mexican President has to contend with the looming influence of the United States—accommodating its whims and imperatives while convincing citizens that their interests come first. López Obrador dealt with this mainly through force of personality. Despite the mayhem that Trump sowed in his previous term, the two men had temperamental similarities, and *AMLO* at times referred to Trump as a "friend." Though Sheinbaum is a protégé of *AMLO*'s, she does not entirely emulate his style. She trained as a physicist and spent years in academia before building a political career on technocratic competence. As Trump took office again, she seemed determined to project quiet control.

At the *mañanera*, she acknowledged the political atmosphere. "We will always defend our sovereignty," she said. "That is a maxim the President must live up to." Though Trump had already signed a flurry of executive orders, Sheinbaum reminded the audience, with a wry smile, "It's always important to keep a cool head." A screen behind her magnified the text of some of Trump's most controversial orders, which she proceeded to parse in the patient tones of a graduate seminar.



"When are they going to have some new murders? I've seen all these."
Cartoon by Kim Warp

Sheinbaum pointed out that this wasn't the first time that Trump had declared a national emergency at the border, or tried to get Mexico to take back migrants the U.S. didn't want. His declaration on the "Gulf of

America," she made clear, was hardly worth discussing. "For us, it will continue to be the Gulf of Mexico," Sheinbaum said. The only real novelty was the executive order to designate drug cartels as terrorist groups. But there, again, the Trump Administration had yet to determine who would actually be on the list. So why overreact now?

Sheinbaum invited up her minister of foreign affairs, Juan Ramón de la Fuente. A former psychiatrist with silver hair and rimless glasses, he had been sitting with a hand on his chin, looking unconvinced by his boss's assurances. Now he produced a graph showing that migrant encounters at the southern border had dropped nearly eighty per cent in a year, to "the lowest levels of crossings." Whether these numbers could help placate Trump was an open question. But Sheinbaum seemed determined to give at least the appearance of rationality.

Midway through the press conference, she tried to turn the subject decisively away from Trump. She called on the minister of health and his deputy to detail her administration's public-health initiatives. For nearly fifteen minutes, they discussed a campaign against dengue fever—which had spiked alarmingly the previous year—and an effort to treat cataracts for free.

After the presentation, Sheinbaum opened the floor to questions, and the conversation turned swiftly back to the U.S. Would Mexico take in all migrants? Who would cover the cost of deportations? How would the government respond to tariffs? Sheinbaum remained vague on details, but insisted that her administration would seek to work with Trump. "Step by step," she said, gazing levelly at the audience. As reporters shouted questions, she announced that the conference was adjourned. "Thank you, *compañeras*, *compañeros*," Sheinbaum said, and began heading for the exit. Then she backtracked to add, with a grin, "Don't forget about the cataract program—it is very important."

In the months before the Mexican Presidential election last June, banners went up across the country with the message "*Es Claudia*"—it is Claudia. The phrase, summoning a kind of papal succession, alerted the political faithful that Sheinbaum had been chosen to succeed López Obrador as the head of his party, the National Regeneration Movement, or *MORENA*.

Sheinbaum had spent most of her career in Mexico City; she was an urban intellectual, a type that populists tend to dislike. But *AMLO* was revered to the point of worship, and his endorsement gave her a potent advantage. When the votes were counted, Sheinbaum had beaten her closest competitor by thirty-one points. How she would govern was less clear. The view in Washington was cautiously optimistic, a senior Biden Administration official told me—though skeptics worried that "she'd have all the flaws of López Obrador without any of his authority."

When Sheinbaum talks about her ideological roots, she often describes herself as a daughter of *el sesenta y ocho*—1968, a year that Mexicans remember as a time of fervid student protests and brutal state repression. For most of the preceding four decades, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or *PRI*, had governed unopposed, and people were beginning to demand greater freedoms. When Sheinbaum was six years old, the military, on the President's orders, attacked a huge student protest in the Three Cultures square in Mexico City. Snipers opened fire, prompting a frantic stampede. Thousands were held at gunpoint and hauled off to jail. The death toll remains a state secret, but estimates suggest that more than three hundred people were killed.

Sheinbaum's family had intimate knowledge of political persecution. Her father, a chemical engineer named Carlos Sheinbaum Yoselevitz, was the son of Ashkenazi Jews who had fled Lithuania in the nineteen-twenties. Her mother, Annie Pardo Cemo, a biologist and academic, was born into a Sephardic family that left Bulgaria at the start of the Second World War. "It was a miracle they were saved," Sheinbaum has said. "Many family members from that generation were exterminated."

Compared with the U.S., which had strict immigration quotas, Mexico was a haven. Thousands of European Jews, including Sheinbaum's grandparents, settled in the capital's historic center. Still, Sheinbaum has said, "I grew up without religion." In her family's home, politics took its place. When students started protesting the *PRI*, Sheinbaum's mother took up their cause. She brought her children to visit Lecumberri, a forbidding prison where protesters were held. The family welcomed activists into their home and hosted long deliberations around the dinner table. Sheinbaum

recalls eavesdropping on their conversations, huddled on a staircase out of sight. When she found works by Marx and other subversive thinkers stashed around the house, she told herself, “Funny—there’s books in the closet.”

Her parents sent her to Escuela Manuel Bartolomé Cossío, a private school in the Tlalpan district, where children could shape their own curriculum. Early on, Sheinbaum got involved in a musical ensemble called Pilcuicatl—Nahuatl for “the children who sing.” Video from those years shows Sheinbaum, with her frizzy hair pulled back, strumming a charango, a small guitar carved from an armadillo shell. “The students all came from homes where writing, reading, and painting was encouraged and there was an appreciation for music,” Carmen Boullosa, a revered Mexican writer who was one of Sheinbaum’s teachers, said. Still, Boullosa distinguished her pupils from the city’s cloistered rich kids, chauffeured from one safe zone to another: “These were not children who were confined to their private gardens.”

At fifteen, Sheinbaum began to join protests in the streets. She participated in hunger strikes, and demonstrated alongside a group of mothers whose children had been disappeared by the state—“the very first night I spent away from home,” she later recalled. Imanol Ordorika, a social scientist and a high-school friend who joined Sheinbaum in the protests, said that the spirit of the sixties still lingered: “It all converged with the civil-rights movement, the music of Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul and Mary.”

After high school, Sheinbaum studied physics at the National Autonomous University (*UNAM*), Mexico’s premier state-funded institution, but she stayed interested in activism. At Ordorika’s urging, she joined a group called the Council of University Students, in 1986. The university’s president was pushing controversial reforms, including a tuition increase. The *CEU*, as the Council was known, rallied thousands of students and forced the school’s leaders to debate them in public. The debates went on for weeks, at Che Guevara Hall, where students with long hair and beards sat across from bureaucrats in suits, waving cigarettes as they spoke of constructing *una universidad democrática*. Sheinbaum was deeply engaged, but behind the scenes. Each night after the debates, she met with the students to help them plan the next day’s line of attack.

After the dialogues, the *CEU* called for a general strike and gathered hundreds of thousands of protesters at the Zócalo, Mexico City's grand central square. Within days, the administration had abandoned its reforms, and sympathizers celebrated across the capital. "We were effectively standing up to the government," Ordorika said. Throughout, the *CEU* had stayed in communication with the leaders of *el sesenta y ocho*. The older activists provided a bit of tactical advice about dealing with a more powerful opponent—a lesson that Sheinbaum seems to have retained. "They always warned us against putting our adversary between a rock and a hard place," Ordorika said. "We had to give them an exit."

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas is an extraordinary rarity in Mexican public life: a lifelong politician who has maintained an unblemished record. The son of a legendary President, Cárdenas grew up within the *PRI*, but broke away in 1986 to start a left-wing offshoot called the Democratic Current. Two years later, he defied the ruling party and ran for President—a crucial act in the inception of Mexican democracy.

Now ninety years old, Cárdenas still receives visitors at his home office, a single-story house shaded by a fig tree. One afternoon, he met me there and reminisced about the 1988 campaign. "These were our headquarters," Cárdenas, a sturdy man with a knowing expression, told me. "We'd gather everyone—or as many could fit—in this space." Though leaders of the *PRI* cast him as a traitor, he attracted support from young people who were drawn to his plainspoken, egalitarian ideas. In his view, "the power and authority of a government grow as more people participate in decisions and as actions are more democratic."

On Cárdenas's office bookshelf sits a photograph of him in 1988, addressing a vast crowd at *UNAM*. Early in the campaign, he sought support from the *CEU*. Sheinbaum, who was finishing her undergraduate studies, was still involved in the group, and had married one of its founding members, Carlos Ímaz. The Council held a meeting with Cárdenas at Sheinbaum's home, and afterward convened a rally on his behalf at the university. "It was the single most important event of the campaign," he told me. "It gave us the support of the intellectual class—not just the students but also the academics and the staff."

On election day, early results gave Cárdenas a commanding lead over the *PRI*'s candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari. But, as ballots were being counted, government authorities announced that the electoral system had collapsed. Poll watchers were ousted at gunpoint, and sacks of ballots were tossed in the trash. Cárdenas denounced the government's meddling and declared that voters had aligned against the *PRI*'s "authoritarianism." By then, however, Salinas had been pronounced the winner, and the *PRI*-dominated Congress subsequently ordered all the ballots burned.

"It's Ozempic and veneers."
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

After the election, Sheinbaum diverted some of her attention from politics. At *UNAM*, she became the first woman to pursue a Ph.D. in energy engineering, and then she and Ímaz moved to California to continue their studies. The couple had two children: Rodrigo, Ímaz's son from a previous marriage, and Mariana, their two-year-old daughter. Sheinbaum conducted research at Berkeley, where she found a thriving community of activists and intellectuals.

Yet her focus inevitably returned to Mexico, where a growing sector of society shared Cárdenas's outrage at the *PRI*. Cárdenas had founded a new opposition party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática. Sheinbaum

spread the word about the P.R.D. in study halls at Berkeley, and travelled to farm towns like Watsonville to speak with strawberry pickers. When Salinas toured California to promote the North American Free Trade Agreement, in 1991, Sheinbaum joined protests against his visit. The *Stanford Daily* ran a front-page photo of her, looking indignant in a headband and holding a sign that read “Fair Trade and Democracy Now!!”

When she and Ímaz returned to Mexico, a few years later, Sheinbaum worked in academia and remained active in the P.R.D. In 1997, Cárdenas ran in Mexico City’s first free election for mayor, and won decisively. The *PRI*’s monopoly was broken, and rival parties across the ideological spectrum began to gather strength. As Cárdenas later wrote, Mexico was at last on its way to “dismantling the state’s party regime.”

By then, the P.R.D. had found a new leader—López Obrador, who at the time was still an ambitious upstart. In the run-up to the 2000 elections, when he ran to succeed Cárdenas as mayor, Sheinbaum and Ímaz hosted campaign meetings for him. The son of shopkeepers from Tabasco state, *AMLO* had an outsider’s charisma: he drove an old Nissan to work and moved around the country without an entourage, talking with regular Mexicans. He vowed to purge the government of corruption. But, rather than encouraging unity, he inveighed against “élites” and the “power mafia”—a group that came to include seemingly anyone who opposed him. Nevertheless, Sheinbaum was fascinated by his political conviction. It was, as she saw it, the essential fuel for a “movement of transformation.”

The Legislative Palace of San Lázaro, a monumental complex sprawling across nearly forty acres, lies in the center of Mexico City. On the façade, a mural by a disciple of Diego Rivera presents visitors with a brief tour of crucial moments in Mexican history. Inside is the vast Chamber of Deputies, where the country’s past eight Presidents have been sworn in.

On the morning of Sheinbaum’s Presidential inauguration, last October, she left her home in Tlalpan and got in a gray sedan headed for San Lázaro. While she was still navigating the streets, *AMLO* arrived at the hall, where lawmakers greeted him with a laudatory chant: “It’s an honor to be with Obrador.” Inside, a raucous crowd had assembled. His coalition had won three hundred and sixty-four of the chamber’s five hundred seats, an almost

insuperable advantage. People swarmed around to take selfies, grasp his shoulder, offer praise. It took him more than ten minutes to reach the dais.

Outside, Sheinbaum climbed the stairs to the main esplanade, where an all-female delegation was waiting, then made her way to the lobby and saluted the flag. Throughout, López Obrador's name continued to reverberate inside. It was only when the hall's doors opened, revealing Sheinbaum, in a white sheath embroidered with tulips and daisies, that clusters of people took up a new chant: "It's an honor to be standing with Claudia today."

Sheinbaum began her speech by hailing *AMLO* as "the most important political leader and social activist in modern history, the most beloved President." Before she outlined her policies, she emphasized that she represented a break with the past. "For the first time, we women have arrived to lead the destinies of our beautiful nation," she said. Yet her platform closely matched her predecessor's. It was another reminder that, for nearly three decades, her career had been inseparable from his.

Their partnership began in late 2000. López Obrador had recently been elected mayor of Mexico City, and a longtime friend recommended Sheinbaum to lead his environmental agenda. Her credentials were undeniable: she held graduate degrees in energy engineering, and she had dedicated years to researching greenhouse-gas emissions. (At *unam*, she had spent time with the Purépecha Indigenous group, and developed a woodstove that would use less fuel while limiting women's exposure to smoke.) López Obrador invited her to coffee and told her that he wanted to address the city's noxious pollution. "You know how to do those things," he said. "Plus, you get along with all the scientists who are experts in this field." Sheinbaum accepted at once.

As environmental secretary, she worked to ease some of the city's intractable problems, including chronic water shortages. Over time, her responsibilities grew: in 2001, she was asked to oversee *AMLO*'s marquee project, a four-hundred-million-dollar renovation of Mexico City's beltway. She led a team of engineers who designed the *segundo piso*, or elevated highway—an eleven-mile extension hailed as a way to ease traffic and curb emissions. Environmentalists staunchly opposed the project. "They wanted the government to promote public transportation rather than facilitate car

use," Alberto Olvera, a sociologist and a prominent political observer, said. "Sheinbaum went with the contractors that López Obrador had appointed. And, to this day, no one knows how many contracts were appropriated, or how much money was spent."

In 2004, Sheinbaum was beset by a corruption scandal. A leaked video showed Ímaz, her husband, taking some forty thousand dollars in bribes from a prominent businessman. Images spread around the country of Ímaz, who was then an elected official in *AMLO*'s party, stuffing bundles of cash into a plastic bag. Ímaz claimed that the money was for an initiative to prevent voter fraud, but he was sentenced to three and a half years in prison. (He appealed, and was ultimately acquitted. He and Sheinbaum have since divorced.)

Sheinbaum, who wasn't implicated, kept pushing López Obrador's initiatives. The highway project was completed in early 2005, just in time for *AMLO* to announce his first Presidential bid. He appointed Sheinbaum as his spokesperson. She was not yet a stirring public speaker, but she was intelligent and effective—"a loyal soldier," as Paola Ojeda, a longtime aide to López Obrador, put it. *AMLO* lost the race by a fraction of a point, and he demanded a recount, claiming fraud. Sheinbaum was asked to help lead an investigation, and, with a team of mathematicians, she built a theory of how the election was stolen. Ultimately, most people found it unpersuasive: *AMLO*'s opponent, Felipe Calderón, was inaugurated, and the country moved on.

Many of López Obrador's allies abandoned him, but Sheinbaum didn't. When she wasn't working at *UNAM*'s Engineering Institute, she was often seen around his office, making calls to voters or helping plan rallies. "She maintained a quiet but constant presence," Ojeda said. In 2013, when *AMLO* fought a federal initiative to reform the state-owned oil industry, Sheinbaum took up his cause. They cast the effort as a brazen attempt to privatize Mexico's oil resources, which had been held by the government since the nineteen-thirties. "Scientifically, it's a hard position to defend," Vicente Ugalde, a scholar of environmental policy, said. "The evidence shows that we need to decarbonize. But López Obrador has defended hydrocarbons since his youth, and the energy reform became a rallying cry

for *MORENA*. Sheinbaum's political calculations at the time were at odds with her technical expertise."

After López Obrador lost his second Presidential bid, in 2012, he set out to form a new party, which he called *MORENA*, a Spanish word that can indicate either dark hair or dark skin. Sheinbaum helped draft a declaration of principles, filled with grandiose appeals to history. "There have been three main transformations in our country: the Independence, the Reform, and the Revolution," it read. "*MORENA* will usher in the fourth social transformation." Within a few years, the Party had picked up nearly a third of Mexico City's districts, and Sheinbaum had been elected the mayor of Tlalpan. By the time of the 2018 general election, *MORENA* had become the country's dominant political force.

Before the Presidential election, López Obrador asked Sheinbaum to manage his campaign, promising to appoint her secretary of the interior if he won. She politely declined, saying that she wanted to run for mayor of Mexico City. As *AMLO* wrote in his memoir, "Because she's a little stubborn, or, to put it elegantly, persevering—like you know who—she decided to enter the primary and won." Both she and López Obrador ended up winning decisively in the general election.

In a matter of months, Sheinbaum went from overseeing a district of fewer than seven hundred thousand people to governing a city of nearly ten million. Aides describe her administration as disciplined, exacting, and highly attuned to data. Officials were expected to traverse the streets, seeking problems. "You can't be a public servant without living like a citizen," José Merino, who led the Digital Innovation Agency, told me. "She took the subway, used the escalators, walked around, reporting the whole time. 'I tried to go online, but the internet didn't work.' 'The street lights on the avenue aren't working.' " Sheinbaum assembled facts and quickly came to unshakable conclusions. "She's not confrontational," Merino said, then corrected himself: "She's not *needlessly* confrontational."

One night in 2021, the city's newest subway line collapsed, killing twenty-six people. Sheinbaum's allies pointed out that the line had been built long before her time—and that López Obrador had imposed stringent austerity measures, gutting institutions across the government. Yet engineers and

operators had persistently raised concerns. One government employee recalled telling Sheinbaum in a meeting that an inquiry into the subway's finances had found that "practically no money was spent on maintenance in a full five years." The response was muted, the employee said, and "no one ever raised the subject again." It seemed clear that the people in the room were aware of the problem. When the collapse came, the only surprise was the timing: "I think they knew it was going to happen. They just didn't think it would happen under their watch."

In last year's Presidential race, Sheinbaum's main opponent was also a woman, so gender was much less of an issue than job performance. The subway collapse came up repeatedly. Sheinbaum countered by enumerating her achievements, including her management of the *COVID*-19 pandemic. While *AMLO* dismissed the severity of the virus, holding rallies and insisting that the talismans he carried around would protect him, Sheinbaum increased testing, quickly tripled the number of I.C.U. beds, and retooled a factory in Mexico City to produce masks.

Sheinbaum also boasted of reducing the homicide rate by more than fifty per cent, and of empowering her police chief to create an investigative unit to confront organized crime. She didn't mention that, while she strengthened Mexico City's civic forces, *AMLO* had largely handed over the national-security strategy to the Army. As Carlos Bravo Regidor, a noted political analyst, told me, "Sheinbaum championed the city's security efforts without ever facing the fact that there was an implicit criticism of López Obrador's policy. And it's taken on a second life now that she's President."

In the weeks before Sheinbaum's inauguration, violence rocked the cartel stronghold of Sinaloa. In the capital, Culiacán, drug gangs killed scores of people. Policemen were shot in broad daylight. Explosions and bursts of gunfire were heard almost every day.

After two boys, ages nine and twelve, were brutally murdered one Sunday morning, protests broke out, under the slogan "Not the children." Demonstrators called for the governor of Sinaloa to resign, and publicly torched a piñata made to resemble him. The governor was widely rumored to be linked to the cartels—but he was also friendly with López Obrador.

The pressure on Sheinbaum grew. “The President had to prove, from Day One, that she would confront organized crime,” Eduardo Guerrero, a well-regarded security analyst, said.

In recent decades, the cartels had increased their influence; according to the U.S. Northern Command, they controlled about a third of Mexico’s territory. “The government doesn’t have a strategy to reduce violence at the national level,” Guerrero said. “The situation in Culiacán has overpowered them.” López Obrador argued that the best solution was a philosophy of “*abrazos,no balazos*”—hugs, not bullets. His plan for containing turf wars between gangs was to allow monopolies to flourish. “In the best cases, it led to a reduction in violence for one or two years,” Guerrero said. “In the worst cases, it allowed criminal groups to grow more powerful and violent.”

When Sheinbaum became President, she did not remove the governor of Sinaloa. (He has denied any wrongdoing.) But, without acknowledging it, she took a radically different approach to security than her predecessor had. “There is no continuity whatsoever between the two leaders,” Guerrero said. The watchdog group México Evalúa compared her first hundred days to *AMLO*’s and found that Sheinbaum’s forces had carried out more than five times as many raids. Drug seizures increased from thirty-three kilos to 665,000, and arrests from thirty-one to 7,720. Guerrero said, “She’s going after cartel leaders, hit men, the people who transport drugs and guard safe houses.”

Guerrero suggested that Sheinbaum was motivated in part by scrutiny from the United States. Yet the U.S. helped bring on the recent spasm of violence in Culiacán, by creating a power vacuum. For years, American authorities had targeted the Sinaloa cartel, a major player in fentanyl production, but with limited success. “The United States grew tired of asking for Mexico’s coöperation in a number of areas, especially the arrest of high-profile individuals,” Guerrero said. In July, U.S. agents seized an opportunity to capture Ismael Zambada, the leader of the Sinaloa cartel. They secretly negotiated with his godson—Joaquín Guzmán López, a son of the former drug lord El Chapo—who lured him to an ersatz meeting. In Zambada’s telling, he was abducted and forced onto a plane to an airport outside El

Paso, where agents were waiting to take him into custody. It was only afterward that Mexican authorities were given notice.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

The news came as a surprise in Washington, too. “This was purely done through law-enforcement channels,” a senior Biden official told me. “There was never a discussion at the N.S.C. about its political implications, or the bloodshed that predictably ensued.” In Mexico, senior officials were left scrambling. Zambada’s kidnapping had shown that the U.S. was willing to pursue its objectives without Mexico’s consent. “The United States realized that organized crime had festered under López Obrador,” Guerrero said. “Now it’s figuring out whether the new administration is to be trusted.”

Sheinbaum has become a sharp observer of Trump’s behavior. Soon after he won last year’s election, she declined an invitation to join Joe Biden at a state dinner, apparently wary of angering the new President by acknowledging the old one. During the transition, her cabinet led a series of operations meant to send an unequivocal signal to the new Administration. Military personnel seized four hundred million dollars’ worth of fentanyl. Migrant caravans headed north were systematically dispersed. Tunnels used

for smuggling drugs and migrants into the U.S. were sealed off. The border was so quiet that National Guardsmen were reportedly struggling with boredom.

Trump wasn't pacified. He and many of his aides have declared that Mexico is "essentially run by the cartels." Among his advisers, there is an unprecedented insistence that the situation requires a military intervention, though they are debating whether to bomb Mexico or to lead a kind of "soft invasion." Days after Pete Hegseth was confirmed as Secretary of Defense, he told high-ranking Mexican officials that the Administration was taking no options off the table. Hegseth has publicly expressed a preference for targeted strikes. "Combine that with actual border security," he said, "now you're cooking with gas."

A succession of U.S. Presidents have considered and rejected the possibility of designating the cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. Even Trump, in his first term, ultimately decided against it. A military intervention would be a still more extreme departure from precedent. Leaving aside concerns about antagonizing a major trade partner, a strategy of targeted strikes rests on dubious logic. It assumes that Mexican cartels are integrated networks, like Al Qaeda, when in fact they rely on a patchwork of facilitators—lawyers, accountants, corrupt officials, lookouts—who vary from place to place. "We've got four cartels with regional presence across a third of the country," Guerrero said. "But we've also got seventy-eight regional mafias and more than four hundred gangs."

As the Trump Administration talks openly of sending troops across the border, Sheinbaum has denounced the "interventionist spirit at the door." She has promoted a constitutional amendment stating that "the people of Mexico will under no circumstances accept interventions," and raised the salaries of all military personnel, whom she hailed as "the guardians of our sovereignty." Sheinbaum likes to point out that the U.S. plays its own part in the drug trade. She often asks, Who sells the fentanyl once it crosses the border, and where do the profits end up?

Yet Sheinbaum's government is coöperating with Trump to an extraordinary degree. Her officials have agreed to continue an arrangement in which U.S. Special Forces train Mexican troops, and have reportedly allowed the C.I.A.

to expand its operations in Mexico, where it has been leading a program of drone surveillance. Soon after Trump took office, a U.S. military plane was spotted off the coast of Sinaloa, one of at least eighteen flights reported in a matter of weeks. At first, Sheinbaum argued that the reports were just part of a "*campañita*"—a petty campaign to make her look weak. Then, as the news spread, she grudgingly admitted that the operations had been carried out with her government's assent.

Early one recent morning, Mexico's secretary of the economy, Marcelo Ebrard, stood at his office window, looking out at the city's canopy of jacarandas. "They were a gift from Japan, like the cherry trees in D.C.," he said. "A form of floral diplomacy." Ebrard, who is sixty-five, with a fringe of graying hair, had just returned from his fifth trip to Washington in a little more than a month. He seemed wistful for a time when Mexico and its allies exchanged gifts rather than threats.

Two days before, Trump had unveiled an outrageous list of tariffs, throwing scores of countries—and trillions of dollars in trade—into turmoil. Mexico was among a few nations that escaped the levies, but Ebrard seemed only modestly reassured. "It's a system of comparative disadvantages," he said. "The question no longer is 'What advantages do you have as a country?' but, rather, 'What disadvantages are you up against?' "

Ebrard is perhaps Mexico's nimblest political operative—a canny centrist who served as secretary of foreign affairs under *AMLO*. He was in that position during Trump's previous term, when the U.S. proposed a five-per-cent tariff on all Mexican goods. The threat cast Mexico's leadership into disarray and allowed Trump to extract significant concessions on immigration. Compared with the current regimen, that threat seems almost negligible.

In the span of just a few months, Trump had vowed to impose wide-ranging tariffs on Mexico, then placed them on hold, then proposed them again. As the stock market plunged, the logic of the tariffs was elusive. When Trump's advisers defended them in public, they frequently contradicted one another, and even themselves. Ebrard put it diplomatically: "It's a system of thought with varied expressions." In the hope of finding basic precepts to engage with, he had studied the writings of Trump's current and former

trade advisers, including papers by Peter Navarro and the book “No Trade Is Free,” by Robert Lighthizer. “At its core, the system calls into question the benefits of free trade and the tenets of globalization,” Ebrard said. The essential premise was that the U.S. had largely been a victim of free trade with Mexico—an idea that Ebrard described, dryly, as “debatable.”

Ebrard was preparing for a sixth trip to Washington, to begin a new round of negotiations. He had a little more than a month to convince Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick that the tariffs were not in his country’s interest. Nearly all economists think that it is fantastical to believe that the U.S. can build enough factories to compensate for the loss of manufacturing abroad. “The United States will have to choose between two fundamentally incompatible objectives—reducing the deficit with Mexico and with Asia,” Ebrard said.

Since Trump’s first term, Mexico had become the United States’ top trading partner. The two countries exchange more than eight hundred billion dollars’ worth of goods a year, and industries throughout the U.S. rely on Mexican labor. “Mexico is deeply integrated with the U.S.—and that makes certain decisions very costly,” Ebrard said. But the decisions might be even costlier for Mexico, where trade accounts for about seventy per cent of economic activity, compared with twenty-five per cent in the U.S.

Ebrard argued that Mexico has another advantage: “Your bargaining power derives from the strength of your government.” He was referring to Sheinbaum, whose approval ratings were above eighty per cent. “She has built a rapport with President Trump by defending her viewpoints, while earning moral authority,” Ebrard said. Not long ago, this kind of praise would have been unthinkable from him. In the primary for last year’s Presidential election, Ebrard fiercely challenged Sheinbaum, and after he lost he threatened to abandon the Party. But those tensions had evidently been set aside. Ebrard had two framed photographs in his office: one of his wife, Rosalinda, and one of Sheinbaum, wearing the Presidential sash.

For months, her administration has been fighting what amounts to a war of attrition. In February, Trump threatened to impose a twenty-five-per-cent levy on Mexican imports, “until such time as Drugs, in particular Fentanyl, and all Illegal Aliens stop this Invasion of our Country!” Mexican analysts

warned that the economy was on the brink of a recession. Over a holiday weekend, Sheinbaum held half a dozen closed-door meetings with cabinet members. She sent a request to Washington to arrange a call with Trump before the tariff went into effect, that Tuesday. By the time word came back that he had agreed, people close to him had conveyed a message: “He’s looking for a way out. Let him claim a victory.”

Early Monday morning, Sheinbaum spoke with Trump, and afterward he announced that he would “immediately pause the anticipated tariffs for a one-month period.” In exchange, he said, Sheinbaum had “agreed to immediately supply 10,000 Mexican soldiers on the Border.” For the moment, Sheinbaum had averted disaster. She was hailed in Mexico as “*la nueva dama de hierro*”—the new iron lady. Opposition lawmakers praised her serenity and firmness. Europeans wondered, half in jest, if they could borrow her for a few days.

But the pause on tariffs was brief and tenuous. Amid the uncertainty, Mexico’s central bank halved its growth forecast, and business leaders acknowledged that sixty billion dollars’ worth of investments were frozen. Volvo and Nissan, which had built cars in Mexico for decades, entertained the possibility of leaving the country.

Ebrard was sent to Washington, along with Sheinbaum’s security chief, Omar García Harfuch, who had ties to American officials. The Mexican team was aware that its best hope of appeasing Trump was to offer some bit of easily publicized security coöperation. At one point, Ebrard turned to Harfuch and said, “It all depends on you, brother.” Mexico ultimately agreed to extradite twenty-nine cartel leaders, to be tried in U.S. courts. A Justice Department official bragged that the agreement was “a consequence of a White House that negotiates from a position of strength.”

As the negotiations dragged on into early March, Sheinbaum stalled to allow other players to exert pressure on Trump. “The tariffs went into effect on a Tuesday, just after midnight,” Bravo Regidor told me. “At the *mañanera* on Tuesday morning, Sheinbaum says, ‘I’m going to speak with Trump on Thursday and announce Mexico’s responses on Sunday.’ So she allows forty-eight hours for the stock markets to react, for Republicans in swing districts to weigh in, and for American companies with operations in

Mexico to respond. By Thursday, when she gets on the phone with Trump, he's already softened his stance. The call ends, and Trump says that, 'out of respect for President Sheinbaum,' he's decided to delay tariffs. I don't know if it's good policy, but it sure is good politics."

Under the new terms, all goods traded under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement were exempted from levies—though penalties remained on important exports like aluminum, steel, and auto parts. Ildefonso Guajardo, a former secretary of the economy who during Trump's first term led the team that negotiated the U.S.M.C.A., suggested that Sheinbaum's approach had limits. "You can't allow Trump a constant extortion, where he's extracting bargaining chips at every turn," he said. "If you do, you'll end up running out of chips."

During the recent negotiations, the Trump Administration boasted that Mexico had offered to match its sweeping tariffs on China. In Guajardo's view, "copying and pasting the U.S.'s trade policy would be a serious mistake." There are simply too many things that Mexico, like the U.S., cannot produce for itself. Sheinbaum is attempting to increase manufacturing capacity, through an initiative called Plan México—but, as Guajardo pointed out, there is not enough money to fund it sufficiently. Her administration inherited the largest budget deficit in decades.

Mexican officials describe a strategy of patience and prudence, aimed at preparing for a more momentous fight: the U.S.M.C.A. is up for review next year. With more conflict seemingly inevitable, some analysts question whether the brief respites justify the concessions. "I sometimes wonder if I'm looking at a close collaboration between two countries," Bravo Regidor said, "or if I'm looking at one of those nineteenth-century paintings of the Aztecs making offerings to wrathful gods, hoping to influence the weather."

Within Mexico, Sheinbaum faces far less resistance. Over the years, *MORENA* has accumulated so much power that many analysts are asking whether the country once again has a ruling party that wields total authority. With a majority in both chambers of Congress, *MORENA* has amended the constitution at will and dismantled institutions designed to keep the executive in check. Sheinbaum's coalition now governs three-quarters of Mexico's states and controls nearly all the local legislatures. Soon, it may

also control the judiciary: weeks before *AMLO* left office, he passed a controversial reform allowing judges to be elected by popular vote. Many of the candidates are affiliated with *MORENA*. If they win, the Party will effectively hold all three branches of government.

Cárdenas, who retired from politics a decade ago, believes that Mexico has progressed "in stumbles, from a dominant-party regime to a democratic system." When I asked if he recognized elements of the old *PRI* in *MORENA*, he offered a cautious assessment. "From an electoral standpoint, our democracy has improved," he said, noting that the votes had been properly counted in every election since 1997. But officials still regularly tried to influence outcomes at the polls, and criminal groups had become a lethally powerful force. In any case, democracy couldn't be measured in purely electoral terms, he suggested: "Equality is a fundamental principle of democracy, and we've seen important setbacks on that front."

Cárdenas has clashed with *AMLO*, but he was hopeful that Sheinbaum could bring about change. "I think she has an interest in raising people's standards of living," he said. "I want to believe that she's deeply invested in that." Yet the government seemed uninterested in engaging critics: "There has been no possibility for dialogue—not with the opposition, nor with groups, like intellectuals, that play an important role in the country's life."

I asked if, ten years after the birth of *MORENA*, he saw evidence that the Party had delivered the transformation it promised. "First, I'd need someone to explain to me what the transformation is about," he said. "I see social initiatives, I see public works under way, but I don't see any changes in the structures of society." He added, "I also don't see solid economic growth, meant to last into the future. So I don't see what would amount to a transformation. And I also don't see an ideological proposal—that is, what society do we want to build?"

Some of the most troubling developments involved the armed forces. For one thing, Cárdenas said, there was no reason for the military to be involved in public security. For another, authorities had long provided immunity to individuals within the military who committed abuses. "We've been carrying that at least since 1968," Cárdenas said. This was especially

concerning in cases of forced disappearances, which remain perhaps the greatest unresolved legacy of the country's history of violence.

People were disappeared first by the government, then by the cartels. The numbers of victims far exceeded those of military regimes in Chile and Argentina. "To speak of a country with more than a hundred and twenty-seven thousand disappeared people is to question democracy itself," María de Vecchi Gerli, who leads the Truth and Memory Program at the human-rights group Article 19, told me. A series of Mexican governments had tried to suppress the issue, often by questioning the accounts of family members. "They'd say that the people who were missing had actually abandoned their families or run away with their boyfriends," de Vecchi said.

As President, López Obrador said that he would make a priority of investigating forced disappearances, but it became clear that he had no intention of holding the military to account. Over time, he hobbled the very institutions that had been created to address the issue. In 2023, he announced a new census that would revise the official count of the disappeared—prompting the head of the National Search Commission, the main investigative body, to resign in protest. The results of the census, released as Sheinbaum was preparing to run for President, noted misleadingly that there were only twelve thousand "confirmed" disappearances in Mexico.

The families of the disappeared hoped for years that Sheinbaum, with her activist background, would be more assertive and compassionate than the men who preceded her. After she became President, though, she didn't mention the mothers of the disappeared in speeches, and she cut the National Search Commission's funding.

Then, between Trump's first and second tariff pauses, a scandal erupted. A group of people whose children had vanished followed an anonymous tip to an abandoned ranch in the coastal state of Jalisco. Their findings made national headlines. There were heaps of clothes and shoes, backpacks, half-torn photographs, a letter to a loved one. Teams of mothers got shovels and began digging, until they found the evidence that they had feared: hundreds of bone fragments.

Parents around the country reached out, certain that they recognized the shirt or the sandals their children were wearing when they last saw them. While news spread about the “Mexican Auschwitz,” as the site came to be called, Sheinbaum finally promised meaningful reform. But a familiar pattern soon set in. When reports described the ranch as an extermination camp, Sheinbaum quibbled in the *mañanera* that it was actually a recruitment site, where the cartel had lured young men with fake job posts on TikTok. Her security chief acknowledged that some had been tortured and others murdered—the prosecutor’s office would take up an investigation. Meanwhile, *MORENA* blocked a legislative initiative to appoint a special commission. “Who’s to say that those shoes belong to missing people?” Gerardo Noroña, the president of the Senate, said. When the U.N. Committee on Enforced Disappearances weighed in, Sheinbaum suggested that it was ill informed.

The mothers planned a protest, called 400 Shoes and 400 Candles, in honor of the people whose belongings were found at the ranch. Thousands gathered at the Zócalo, outside the Presidential palace. In a matter of hours, the entire square was covered with shoes. One pair belonged to Sara Hernández, a member of the Comité Eureka—the group of bereft relatives whom Sheinbaum had marched with decades ago. Hernández’s husband, Rafael, was detained by state forces in the late seventies and never seen again.

Hernández lamented the government’s years of inaction. “When the relatives say, ‘They took them alive, we want them alive’—it’s the same chant we’ve had since the seventies,” she said. Hernández had known Sheinbaum since she was a teen-ager, waving banners at protests, and she tried to reassure herself that the President had held on to those values. But when the Comité submitted a request to meet with Sheinbaum, the meeting was never granted. “The hope is there,” Hernández said. “It’s just becoming slimmer by the day.” Inside one of the shoes, she had stuck a handwritten note. “It said that the shoes bore traces of our struggle,” she told me. “They had wandered down many paths to find our missing relatives—and, now that we had reached a standstill, my hope was they’d be led on a new route.” ♦

Stephania Taladrid is a contributing writer. She was named a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2023 for her reporting on the fall of Roe v. Wade.

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Takes

- **Carrie Brownstein on Richard Avedon’s Portrait of Cat Power**
  By Carrie Brownstein | The space between the singer and the photographer’s lens is slippery, inaccessible; you’re not sure you were even invited.

Takes

Carrie Brownstein on Richard Avedon's Portrait of Cat Power

By Carrie Brownstein

April 20, 2025

August 18 & 25, 2003

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.*

It's 2003, and Cat Power exists in rarefied air. The word "chanteuse" is bandied about, an exotic label for an American singer-songwriter on an indie label. And, yes, Cat Power—a.k.a. Chan Marshall—*is* beguiling. But the Francophone descriptor fails to conjure the dust her voice kicks up, the grit and moan that hang in the air after each song. As Hilton Als noted in a review that August, a Cat Power show can be shambolic, with Marshall flipping through channels that only she is privy to, occasionally landing on a song. For the listener, the journey is both thrilling and desultory, like hanging out sober while your friend trips on mushrooms.

Richard Avedon’s accompanying portrait discards any notion of Cat Power’s caprice; there’s no bewilderment or confusion on display, no underlying contradictions. Here she is, in totality. It could be day or night—but who cares, because the scene seems to be happening right now. Your brain wants to dissect the image. Is she arriving home or going out, dressing or undressing? The Bob Dylan shirt is neither on nor off her body; she’s not covering Dylan, he’s covering her. Displaying. Discarding. Stop, it’s only a shirt. The unbuttoned jeans are going down, coming up; the pubic hair is staying either way. Take in her morning-after smoky eye. That half smile. Try squeezing between Cat Power and Avedon’s lens. The space is slippery, inaccessible; you’re not sure you were even invited. In the end, you’re the one who feels unknown, as temporary as the ash on Marshall’s cigarette. Everything else is Cat Power. ♦

Read the original story.

Wayward Girl

Cat Power demands attention, then resists it.

Carrie Brownstein, a writer, a musician, and a director, first contributed to The New Yorker in 2015.

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **Our University’s Commitment to You**
  By Cora Frazier | To students, faculty, and staff who may be wondering, Will our endowment face law-enforcement raids as it goes about its business, accruing further wealth? Absolutely not.

Shouts & Murmurs

Our University’s Commitment to You

By Cora Frazier

April 21, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Dear members of our university community:

Over the past weeks and months, our institution has been under unprecedented attack. Many on our campus and beyond are fearful, and are looking to us for leadership. I would like to take this opportunity to reassure each and every community member of my deep and unwavering commitment to the safety of our endowment.

To students, faculty, and staff who may be wondering, Will our endowment be called names?, the answer is no. Will our endowment be shouted at, as it sits quietly in various financial institutions? Of course not. Will our endowment face law-enforcement raids as it goes about its business, accruing further wealth? Let me be clear: No. As your president, I will physically throw myself between federal law enforcement and the New

York Stock Exchange, where exchange-traded funds, including those in our endowment, are traded. Endowments, you are safe here.

I have been made aware of troubling instances in which our endowment was stopped and questioned by plainclothes officers on its way to the Monday opening of trading. This is unacceptable. I witnessed several Vietnam War protests personally in my time, and I am prepared to establish, if necessary, citizen guardians for our endowment, to check on its well-being repeatedly in the course of a twenty-four-hour period by calling our brokers to ask about the day's distributions.

In response to these unprecedented circumstances, the university is taking unprecedented steps to combat government intimidation of our endowment. I am developing an Endowment Awareness Task Force, composed of myself, Dean Lindsey, and several student leaders, with the express purpose of starting a dialogue. We seek to fight misconceptions many people have about our endowment—for instance, that it is more than tens of billions of dollars, should be spent down during threats to American democracy, or is incapable of feeling pain. Our endowment has never participated in any protest against any cause. It has never spoken out against any politician or party. It has never spoken at all. But, if it wanted to, I would defend its right to do so with my last breath. Our endowment is a living, passively earning thing, and it deserves to thrive in a nurturing environment, as it funds in perpetuity the Gregor R. Vernon Natural Science Annex.

The current student body may not know this, but, before I joined the university administration, I was an educator myself. And, endowment, I got into teaching for you. I earned my Ph.D. in comparative literature, spending sixteen months studying stained-glass windows in the damp, airless abbey of Pérouges for you. You are the reason I got up in the morning, an old macroeconomics textbook tucked under my arm which I thought might appeal to you, you bundle of investment gifts. As I sat through observation after observation on my way to tenure, I thought of your asset allocation, and smiled. Endowment, you inspire me every time I see you struggle and then succeed, the value of your real-estate holdings rising. I care about you, endowment—not just your physical well-being but your spiritual well-

being. You are the reason I used to chuckle to myself after a difficult class and say, “You know, sometimes I feel like the *endowment* is teaching *me!* ”

You, the endowment, are the lifeblood of this university. Who would we be, what would our purpose be, without our endowment? And, to all future endowments that may be considering our university, we would like to welcome you. You are our most valuable asset, except, perhaps, for our leadership’s compensation packages. ♦

Cora Frazier has contributed to The New Yorker since 2012. She is a creator and writer of the podcast “I Think You’re Projecting.”

Fiction

- **“Tortoiseshell”**
  By Domenico Starnone | The most elaborate—and the most fragile—lie I’ve ever come up with is me.

Fiction

Tortoiseshell

By Domenico Starnone

April 20, 2025

Drawing by Saul Steinberg; 1946 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society

I have never been honest with myself. It's an attribute that has always disturbed me. I can't accept even the most basic truths. What I am good at is coming up with excuses; it's easy for me to invent excuses. And Giuseppe Trevisani, wonderful guy, is my favorite excuse of all. Many years ago, Trevisani, a translator, wrote an ending to a short story that, when I read it at the age of sixteen, led me to believe that the evil I felt inside me might actually be the mark of an exceptional character.

I'm saying this now, today, to set things straight, but I honestly know nothing about Trevisani: if he's dead or alive; if he was born in Treviso, as his last name would suggest, or in some southern city like Molfetta; if, when he wrote the line that proved so fundamental to me, he had a mustache or a beard or was clean-shaven; if he worked at night or during

the day, and where, in which city, on what street, in which building, on what floor. On the other hand, my ignorance is irrelevant: I have no use now, nor have I ever, for the true Trevisani. The Trevisani in question here is a figure I invent each time I mention his name: a young man from Lecce, who worked, during the period of interest to me—the postwar boom years—in Turin. This Trevisani has a bushy black mustache, an olive complexion, and a broad forehead. His shirt collar is frayed, and there's a hole in the right elbow of his sweater. He speaks English perfectly, one of the privileges of being a young man of around twenty. He sits at a worm-eaten desk in a freezing-cold garret on Via Ormea, not far from the central train station, smoking one Nazionale after the other, saying the lines out loud, softly, with a slight Pugliese accent: *She held a . . . cat . . . against her body.*

It's the details that count; it doesn't matter if they're banal—they lead to a sense of trust. Everything has to be real, first and foremost, for me. To *be*, not to *seem*. If I believe, then other people will, too. And so I believe. I like believing. This is why I'm never honest about anything, least of all with myself. The most elaborate—and the most fragile—lie I've ever come up with is me.

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

Keep in mind that I'm talking about the most common of lies here, and not about the artful deception that some people say is the foundation of literature. I was young when I discovered this aspect of the imagination. If I remember correctly, I was eight or nine when I consciously began to tell tall tales: one here, one there—soon enough I realized how much pleasure my stories brought, both to me and to others. By the age of ten, I had a devoted audience of cousins and friends, boys and girls, most of them my age, but some were older—even twelve or thirteen—who couldn't wait to hear my tales. They would gather around, slack-jawed with amazement, on those long summer days or winter nights of 1951, 1952, and 1953. And don't think for a moment that I was some kind of precocious raconteur of classic fairy tales; not once did I say something like "And then Little Red Riding Hood said goodbye to her mother and set off into the forest." The stories I told were always about me. What did I care about others, whether tin soldiers or sailors of the seven seas? The only thing I wanted was to put

myself smack dab in the middle of some extraordinary situation and be taken seriously. And, as far as the latter goes, I was almost always successful.

It probably sounds as though I had a happy childhood. Not in the least. The last thing my mother wanted was for me to tell lies. My father already told far too many, making her scream with rage and pain. Seeing her despair hurt me in turn, and I was terrified when my father, instead of apologizing, broke everything in sight and threatened to do awful things to her, himself, all of us. I listened in, I spied on them, I swore to myself that I'd never lie the way he did. But it was hopeless; the pleasure of lying always won out. One day, after playing football in the piazza, I came home all sweaty. What happened to you? my mother asked, concerned. I was playing football, Ma, and thanks to me we won! I scored a goal! I went on to tell her about the game in great detail—what an exceptional player I was, how I had scored. My mother listened attentively and with growing interest, and even became emotional. *Madonna mia*, she said, you really did play well. At that point, I stopped—I couldn't do it, I shouldn't, not to her. All the happiness I'd initially felt transformed into regret, and intolerable pain filled my head and chest. What was I saying? How could I deceive my mother, who cared so deeply about the truth? Why did she even believe me, she who was usually so cautious? And why did I enjoy it so much, when I knew what had actually happened? I burst into tears. It's not true, Ma, I stammered. I didn't score. I'm terrible at football. They made me goalie, and I couldn't even stop a single goal. I cried because I was sorry about lying but also because my sorriness had spoiled the pleasure of feeling as though the lie were the truth.

Maybe it was then that I started to suspect I was flawed. While trying to find a way of correcting my flaw, I did everything possible to conceal it, so that no one would notice. I never looked within to see exactly where I was defective, which only added to my anxiety. I tried to keep my darkness in check, but I did not succeed. All good intentions failed; lies fell from my lips not because I chose to tell them but because, while I was telling them, my understanding that they were lies faded, and they suddenly rang true. Oh, it was a mess. Then, when I was around twelve, I realized that I felt miserable when I stuck to everyday facts and happy when I told a fiction

that had me at its center. I couldn’t fight it, that was just how it was: good things felt bad, and bad things felt good. Kids would gather around me to listen, and I’d come back to life. Whatever my flaw was, no one seemed to notice it, and soon enough I forgot about it. While telling my stories, I felt as though everything else ceased to exist. There were no witnesses and the only voice I heard was my own; it was as if I had artfully managed to change time and, with it, my body, my age, my location, even the season.

Once, I told my cousins a story about a mysterious grotto situated in a field not far from my home. What made my lies unique was that they never took place in faraway lands, like America or Asia or the North Pole. With me as their protagonist, they unfolded where I lived, in the courtyard of my building or down the street or in nearby fields, and they included people who actually existed. That particular tale must have been especially convincing, because my cousins made me promise to show them the cave and all its splendid mysteries. I agreed. They lived on the other side of town, at the far end of Via Taddeo dei Sassi, and rarely came over anyway. But, regardless of whether they’d be back or not, I began to look for the grotto; the more I talked about it, the more I believed that it existed. All I needed for proof was to see the hint of a cleft in the earth, just a few centimetres deep. I found it, and that dark hollow became real, as did its many dangers and rewards. I thought about it constantly: at school, at home, and in bed at night before falling asleep.

Especially in bed. Suspended between sleep and wakefulness, my body felt like the movie projector at Cinema Stadio. I could see the tenebrous cavern and the glint of coins and jewels inside it. Words came to my mind that illuminated the images, and the images trailed jangling verbs behind them. The more time I spent in my secret grotto, the less I feared the moment when I’d have to show it to my cousins. Actually, each time I gathered them around me, I had new mysteries to add, new adventures to tell: the entrance to the grotto was marked by a peacock feather; a woman as beautiful as Deborah Kerr lived in the grotto; I snuck out of my house every night and slept in her arms until dawn.

My cousins, boys and girls both, couldn’t wait to come over to my house. I’ll cut to the chase; I’ve told this story a thousand times. The opportunity

arose on some holiday or another—I can't recall now if it was Easter, Christmas, or someone's saint day—and I wasn't the slightest bit worried. Sure, I realized that I should have been, as this was an irrefutable test of reality, and yet I felt no apprehension whatsoever. Initially, back when I started telling this lie, the verity of my cousins had been a little depressing: they existed and the grotto did not. But, as time passed and as I built on the details, my presence within the fiction became more real than theirs in reality, and they realized this, too: they wanted in, wanted to be part of it. I found this exhilarating. I believed that if they were real then my cave was more real, and that there was enough room in my tale for them, too. In short, I never feared for a moment that my cousins would be precluded from exploring all the nooks and crannies of the deep cavern that I had situated not far from my home: just across the street, to the right, over a barbed-wire fence, at the foot of a grassy knoll, and a few steps from a pear tree. And so I led them into the field and to the mound of earth with its slight indentation—a shadowy depression where the soil was slightly darker than in full sunlight, marked by a white chicken feather.

I scrambled up onto a nearby boulder and, with a grand and silent gesture that broke my chain of words, pointed to the entrance of the mysterious grotto; the reality was apparent and required no further embellishment. There was an extended moment of tension between what had long existed in my mind and what was quickly becoming clear to them. Then came the discontentment, and with it the first grumblings of disappointment. I lost face. *Siproprinustrùnz*, my oldest cousin, Franco, said with disgust, by which he meant: you're stupid and your joke is even stupider. I didn't know how to explain that it wasn't a joke, that I wasn't making fun of them, that, sure, according to my mother, I might be a liar, but *in my mind* I really had descended into a cave and really had slept with Deborah Kerr on very real piles of golden coins. They insulted me and ran off. Only my cousin Maria remained. She walked over to me and took my hand. Then she started to cry.

“I’m home, and none of the terrible things you warned me about happened.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

She cried and cried and cried; it was hard for her to stop. This was the first time that my storytelling had made someone else cry. In the course of my adult life, such scenes have occurred often, and in far more dramatic fashion. I have used lies (lofty sentiments, soothing tones, a mild manner, warm availability, and the modest way in which I describe my generous, if not heroic, actions) to build strong connections: friendships, amorous relationships, collegial bonds. For as long as the lies have held up, so has the fabric of a good life. Once people are caught in the mendacious web of my sensitivities and sympathies and my deep humanity, they have a hard time living without my artificial presence. They have the impression that life with me is not just more tolerable but at times even beautiful, while without me things would start to corrode—life itself would become corrosive. Even I, believing the liar within, have been afraid of the self-hatred and suffering I would experience if I stopped telling lies. As a result, whenever it has become apparent—because of my fatigue or distraction or impatience—that I was lying, there has been stabbing pain, along with hostile accusations, tears, rage, and even cruel words like those my mother directed at me shortly before she died: Aldo, Alduccio, you scare me.

Little Maria didn’t accuse me of anything. Her tears stemmed from a sense of disorientation that disoriented even me. I gasped for breath, felt a heavy weight on my chest, broke into an icy sweat. To alleviate her pain, I tried telling her more lies. They came compulsively, and she seemed willing to believe them if for no other reason than to regain a sense of calm. But her weeping and over-all discomposure were so real that I failed to be convincing. She wanted to keep believing me, but I suddenly felt ill and could no longer believe myself. That was when I realized that my evil ways

could do great harm, and that any well-being I derived from my lies would eventually have to battle with my sense of guilt. Enough. I had to stop. I had to learn to stick to the facts.

I grew into a confused teen-ager, scared to tell my stories and yet unable to stop. Then, one spring afternoon, at a bookstall on Via Foria, I bought a cheap, well-worn copy of Hemingway's "Forty-nine Stories," translated into Italian. I read them all in a matter of days and liked many of them. But one in particular, "Cat in the Rain," stood out. I felt as if it had been written just for me. It's the story of a young American husband and wife who are stuck in a hotel room in Italy while outside it's pouring rain. The man lies on the bed and reads, while the woman grows bored. Then she sees a cat outside and decides that she wants it. She goes out to get it with a hotel maid, who carries an umbrella for her. But the cat has disappeared, and the woman can't find it. She returns to the room, unhappy with herself and with everything around her. And then comes that ending, which back then I read so many times I knew it by heart:

> "Anyway, I want a cat," she said, "I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat."
>
> George was not listening. He was reading his book. His wife looked out of the window where the light had come on in the square.
>
> Someone knocked at the door.
>
> "Avanti," George said. He looked up from his book.
>
> In the doorway stood the maid. She held a big majolica cat pressed tightly against her body.
>
> "Excuse me," she said, "the padrone asked me to bring this for the Signora."

Oh, my lord, I read those final lines over and over without paying any attention to the punctuation, letting one line flow into the next. I was especially impressed by the figure of the padrone, the hotelkeeper, a very tall and elderly man, who managed to come up with the most wonderful and

unexpected thing: in lieu of a real cat, he had the maid bring the unhappy woman a large majolica cat. I could be like him, I told myself. That's the kind of man I could become, someone who knows when to say to the maid, Here, take this to the lady.

And, to some degree, that was exactly what happened. Thanks to majolica cats, I ended up with a wife, several lovers, two children, a decent career in a meaningless field not even worth mentioning, a lot of money, a lot of satisfaction, a lot of mental breakdowns, a number of guilt trips, and my fair share of suffering. Even when things shattered, I kept on inventing, in order to keep moving forward. For years, decades even, that faux feline impervious to the rain was my secret excuse. What was I doing with all my lies? I was providing myself and others with majolica cats. If life doesn't give you what you want, what's wrong with ignoring the facts and replacing them with majolica cats? And, besides, what are facts, if not an endless series of majolica cats? When you take a memory and touch it up, isn't the result a majolica cat? When you build a story around a chosen success or tragedy, aren't you creating majolica cats? And we—with our refined voices, careful gestures, studied gaits, hair styles, beards, with all our forms of grooming and the habits that we rely on to shape and present ourselves—aren't we all majolica cats? And in the moments when we are most ourselves, at our most genuine, don't we still meow in artificial ways? For decades, whenever the majolica shattered into a thousand pieces, and scorn and anger and sadness filled the air, Hemingway's cat helped me feel less divided, less tormented, less guilty. What's so wrong with that? All I did was provide myself and others with carefully articulated simulations of what we wished we could have been and never would have without the lies. When, many years ago, my wife finally saw me for who I really was (lucky her—I still have no idea who I really am), in terms of my sympathies, my work, and our children, her reaction was far worse than little Maria's had been all those years before. When the gentle world I had wrapped her in by falling in love with her suddenly cracked, so did she; she lost all sense of reason, withered, and never got over it.

I have never been particularly fond of reality, although I have pretended to love real life, to take a concerned interest in it and show it great humanity. All lies. In fact, despite the apparent contradictions, I have always been

more interested in fictional life and seen reality as a humiliating nuisance. Thanks to Hemingway's story, I've felt astonishment, at times even indignation, when people who once adored and appreciated me suddenly felt as though the ground were giving way beneath them, when they were no longer grateful for the majolica cats that had once appeased them. Naturally, I've always avoided asking myself—and definitely won't begin now—why my lies eventually crumble while other people's last a lifetime, resisting even facts. What can I say? There's something wrong with me. I simply don't know how—except through pretending—to show sensitivity, support, or love for either a single individual or the human species, or how to marvel at the wonders of nature. Perhaps that's what makes my lies defective and disjointed. And, anyway, if I were a sufficiently sensitive person, capable of awe and of showing love, why would I need to tell lies? The problem is that I've always wanted to be more than I am—better, in other words—but I've never been capable of it. This is where the pain comes from.

Enough! I have nothing to complain about. I've lived my life and, despite the lies, it's been a full one. Only once did I feel truly lost. It was when I learned that the ending of the story that had proved so useful to me for most of my life was written not by Hemingway but by Giuseppe Trevisani. While Hemingway wrote that the padrone of the hotel sent the American lady "a big tortoiseshell cat," Trevisani, sitting in his cold attic on Via Ormea, decided that "a big tortoiseshell cat" could only mean a large cat made of majolica. How long did my confusion last? A minute, maybe. As long as a dizzy spell. And then I said to myself, Who cares about Hemingway? Too bad for him—I've no idea what use I can make of his tortoiseshell cat. An alley cat in a Rapallo hotel room? I think not. I choose Trevisani, I love his translation, and I'm deeply grateful to him for it. For as long as I live, that old Italian padrone will continue to send the inconsolable young woman in her hotel room a majolica cat. Even though I know full well that in reality, where everything shatters sooner or later, the couple's relationship will only get worse, and no lie will ever save them. ♦

(Translated, from the Italian, by Oonagh Stransky.)

Domenico Starnone is a Strega Prize-winning author. His novels include "The Old Man by the Sea" (2025), translated by Oonagh Stransky.

The Critics

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- **The Quest to Build a Perfect Protein Bar**
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- **“Sinners” Is a Virtuosic Fusion of Historical Realism and Horror**
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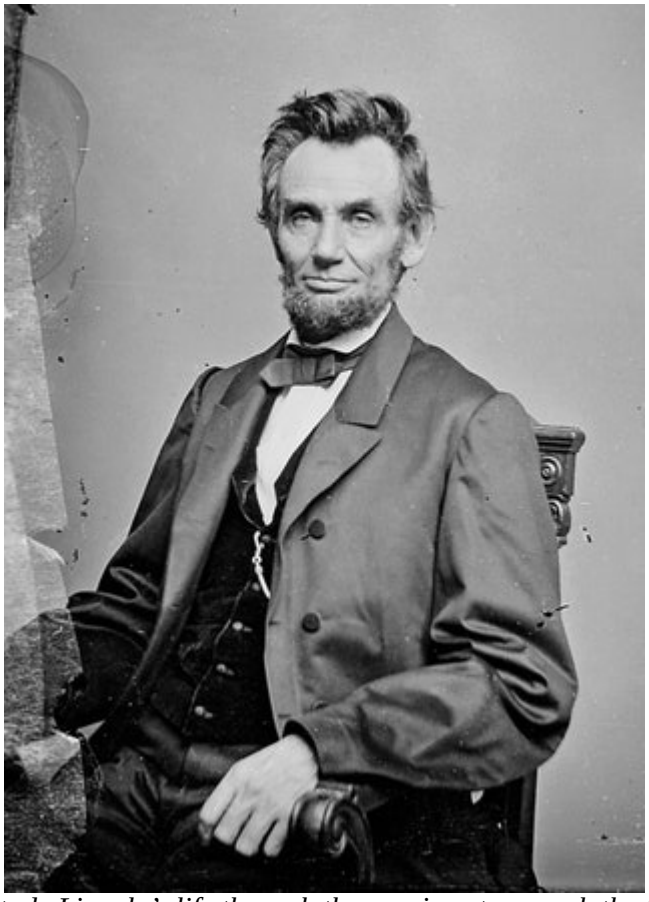
A Critic at Large

Was the Civil War Inevitable?

Before Lincoln turned the idea of “the Union” into a cause worth dying for, he tried other means of ending slavery in America.

By Adam Gopnik

April 21, 2025



What we feel when we study Lincoln’s life through the war is not so much the force of fixed convictions imposed on others as a sense of his discovery, in real time, of what he believed.Photograph from Smith Collection / Getty

Out of guilt or amnesia, we tend to treat wars, in retrospect, as natural disasters: terrible but somehow inevitable, beyond anyone’s control. Shaking your fist at the fools who started the First World War and condemned millions to a meaningless death seems jejune; historians teach

us to say that the generals did their best under impossible conditions. Mournful fatalism is the requisite emotion, even when mad fury would be more apt. Efforts at de-escalation are cast as weakness or cowardice, while those who lead nations into catastrophe are praised for their “strength of character,” or for stoically accepting what was supposedly unavoidable. We rarely honor those who turn back at the brink. John F. Kennedy’s compromise during the Cuban missile crisis is an exception, though only because prudence and caution—our removal of nuclear missiles from Turkey—were neatly covered up and presented as pugnacity and courage: we had made the Russians “blink.”

The habit of describing war with metaphors drawn from natural disasters is as old as war writing. Homer himself uses natural metaphors to ennoble violent human actors: Achilles is a wildfire sweeping across the Trojan plain. Given what Greek warfare actually entailed—pitched battles of close combat, where victory meant cutting others to death with edged weapons—the figure feels less like a metaphor than a mask.

So it is with us. The Civil War lingers in memory as brutal and heartbreaking, but also as heroic and tragic, accompanied by an Appalachian campfire fiddle. It is the altar of American existence—a sublime sacrifice and a perpetually contested example—so thoroughly sanctified that to ask if it might have been avoided by pragmatic compromise feels almost obscene. No war, no Lincoln, no Emancipation

Proclamation, no Gettysburg—neither the battle nor the address—to inspire and instruct us? And yet three-quarters of a million people died, and the enslaved people in whose name the war was fought emerged still trapped in an apartheid terrorist state. Was it worth it?

In “1861: The Lost Peace” (Grand Central), Jay Winik—the author of several fine works about American history—takes up that question of whether the Civil War might have been avoided. The title overpromises a little. Nowhere in the book do we encounter a truly plausible compromise that might have averted the conflict. What Winik offers instead is a portrait of two sides talking past each other, rather than with each other. Still, he traces the efforts of those who genuinely wanted to prevent war and the trauma of secession—and shows how Abraham Lincoln tried at first to listen and then at last refused.

The early chapters are given over to what will be, for many, a familiar story. We hear again how an underrated, grotesque-looking backwoods lawyer with scant experience (one term in Congress and two failed Senate runs) managed—by virtue of being a moderate and, usefully, an outsider; a man of the frontier rather than of Boston or New York—to wrest the Republican nomination from the seemingly inevitable William Henry Seward, of New York, and go on to win the national election against the pro-slavery Democrat John Breckinridge.

We’re told about the assassination plots brewing before Lincoln had even taken office, forcing him—in ways widely seen as comical, not to say cowardly—to sneak into Washington under the protection of the newly founded Pinkerton private-detective force. (By rumor, though not in fact, he was dressed in women’s clothes.) Southern states were already passing resolutions of secession one after another, with South Carolina taking the lead. Meanwhile, the Confederate noose was tightening around Fort Sumter, in the waters off Charleston, where the Northern garrison was effectively under blockade.

The reasons for the radical action were plain. Lincoln, despite his efforts to present himself as a moderate, was what we would now call a single-issue candidate. The issue was slavery, and his categorical rejection of it. “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong” was his most emphatic aphorism on

the subject, along with his famous injunction: “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.”

Though absolute on the moral question, Lincoln was neither the hard-core political abolitionist we may wish him to have been nor the apologist for slavery some later commentators have made him seem. He was, instead, a democratic politician trying to build a coalition—and he knew that, to keep the border states within it, a firm New England abolitionist line would fail, while a focus on containing slavery, not eradicating it, might succeed.

And so, during that strange American interregnum between election and Inauguration—it was even longer in the nineteenth century, with the ceremony held in March—Lincoln struggled to find common ground with the Southern secessionists. He began a pre-inaugural exchange of letters with Alexander Stephens, of Georgia, a friend from his congressional days who made it clear that, in the Southern mind, everything was secondary to the preservation of slavery. “We at the South do think African slavery, as it exists with us, both morally and politically right,” Stephens wrote. “This opinion is founded upon the inferiority of the black race. You, however, and perhaps a majority of the North, think it wrong. Admit the difference of opinion.”

“Someday, son, all this will be yours to downplay in the press.”
Cartoon by Emily Flake

The enterprise of avoiding war was likely doomed from the start. Nonetheless—and here lies the new emphasis of Winik’s book—there was an attempt at a “Peace Conference” (Winik oddly capitalizes it throughout) during this pre-inaugural period, and it was more substantial than most subsequent histories have acknowledged. If it didn’t resolve the crisis, it at least exposed the depth of the deadlock.

The conference took place in Washington, at the Willard Hotel, where Lincoln had stayed since his arrival, using his suite as his office. The Willard, like the Waldorf-Astoria, in New York, has gone through many incarnations, but in the nineteenth century it seemed more central to Washington life than either the White House or the long-unfinished Capitol. (Its cast-iron dome was still incomplete.) From February 4th to the 27th, the conference drew delegates from twenty-one of the thirty-four states then in the Union. It brought together representatives from the South—most notably from Virginia, the cradle of Presidents, which had not yet committed to secession—with Republicans from the North, many of them, as Winik reveals, operating under the direct or indirect guidance of Seward. Though the delegates were mostly former members of Congress, the gathering wasn’t limited to them; the former President John Tyler, of Virginia, who held no official position but remained influential, was present.

It was, by all indications, a comfortable negotiation. Both sides dined—if a Willard menu from that year is to be trusted—on lamb chops, stewed kidneys, and, precociously, frozen custard, which, like baseball, would not become a national mania until after the war. It is perhaps less surprising, then, given their shared table, class, and manners, that both sides, including almost all the Republicans, were ready to concede the permanence of slavery in the South in exchange for ending the threat of secession. A Thirteenth Amendment was proposed, and could probably have passed, guaranteeing the continued existence of slavery in the states where it already prevailed. Even Lincoln was prepared to accept this.

The unresolvable issue was the extension of slavery into the territories. Here, the arguments were fierce, layered with subtexts and overtones more audible then than now. For all the civility of tone and talk of compromise—Lincoln went so far as to agree that a fugitive slave could be recaptured and returned to bondage—the real conflict was profound and, in the end, unbridgeable. Like the conflict in the Middle East today, it was rooted less in clashing interests than in vast and irreconcilable mutual fears. The underlying meanings were evident to all: any limit placed on slavery, the Southerners believed, was intended to hasten its extinction; any constitutional blessing of slavery, the North understood, was intended to support its extension.

To use an awkward but apt modern analogy, it was as if the right-to-life movement, having won the Presidency, were to concede that reproductive freedom would remain protected in blue states like New York and Massachusetts, but be entirely eliminated in red states, with harsh penalties. Blue-state voters would see that the true goal was to end abortion everywhere, and that agreeing even to a temporary truce meant accepting the long-term influence of hostile neighbors on a vital and defining issue.

Behind the Southern delegates' suspicion was a kind of post-October 7th trauma: John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, in 1859, had convinced the South that the Black population was poised to rise up in bloody rebellion if given the chance. This, in retrospect, was plainly chimerical—the enslaved had not, in fact, joined Brown's insurrection, and, when Black enfranchisement did eventually come, however briefly, during Reconstruction, Black Americans, far from turning violently on their former masters, embraced electoral politics with enthusiasm. But the Southern establishment was unshakable in its belief that any concession to abolitionists would end in the massacre of white families. Stephens wrote indignantly to Lincoln of "such exhibitions of madness as the John Brown raid into Virginia, which has received so much sympathy from many, and no open condemnation from any of the leading men of the present dominant party."

Lincoln nonetheless participated warmly in the Peace Conference debate, insisting that his task was simply to follow the Constitution, which he

understood to prohibit secession from the Union as an act of treason. Yet, for all his provisional concessions, he effectively ended the conference by declaring, “In a choice of evils, war may not always be the worst. Still I would do all in my power to avert it, except to neglect a constitutional duty. As to slavery, it must be content with what it has. The voice of the civilized world is against it.”

Those words may now strike us as unduly mild, but behind them lay the doctrine of the “Scorpion’s Sting”—the idea, adopted by antislavery advocates around the world, that if slavery could be encircled and confined, it would destroy itself, as the scorpion is said to sting itself to death when trapped in a ring of fire. The scorpion metaphor, though pungent, was poorly chosen. Just as frogs do not, in fact, remain in water as it boils but leap out when they are scalded, scorpions are actually immune to their own venom, and, when encircled by fire, they die not by stinging themselves but from heat-induced convulsions that only appear to be self-inflicted. That image offers a better metaphor for the war to come. Stoic suicide doesn’t occur in nature. Frenzied, senseless self-destruction does.

Yet Lincoln’s words signalled—clearly, to anyone attuned to their overtones, and everyone at that conference was—that slavery was to be put, or left, in a position where it would have to end itself. Slavery had a cursed past, and a present to be tolerated, but no future. No one quite said this; everyone grasped it. And so the Willard Peace Conference quietly foundered. Its resolutions were rejected in the Senate and never even reached a vote in the House.

Southern paranoia and Northern complacency together may explain what, at first glance, seems to us the oddest feature of the Willard meetings: that no one on the Northern side proposed a rational plan for gradual emancipation and enfranchisement, presumably subsidized by the already wealthy industrialists of the North and carried out over some specified interval. Such plans had been tried before—in Pennsylvania, as early as the seventeen-eighties, and proposed for Virginia, though unsuccessfully, by Thomas Jefferson. Surely a similar scheme, however brutal its delay for the enslaved, might have spared the country the full scale of the war to come. Lincoln himself returned to the idea in 1862, when he proposed a program

of compensated, gradual abolition for the border states. Yet even then, at the height of the war, sympathetic border-state representatives refused to act. Slavery had embedded itself too deeply, not only as an economic engine but as a terror-bound cultural institution.

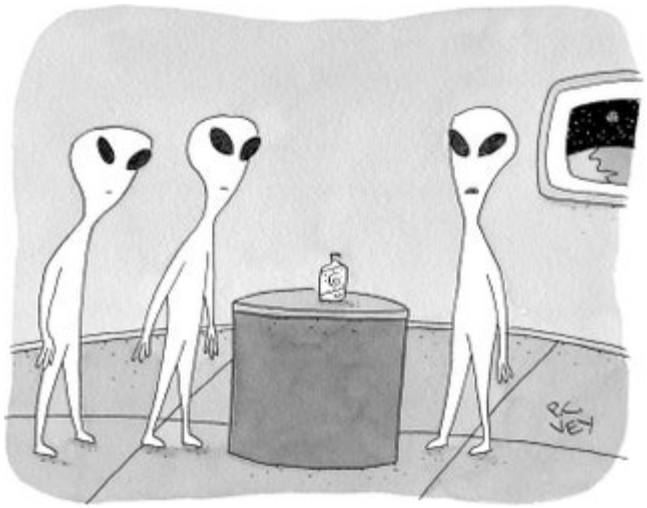
The tragedy was that, while the South could not overcome its paranoia about the violence it would suffer if the slaves were freed, the North could not imagine the scale of the violence it was choosing. The assumption, of course, was that the conflict would last twelve weeks—just long enough to put the erring states back in their place. But only a few months later Julia Ward Howe would be staying at the same Willard Hotel when, in the course of a day, she saw a column of freshly inducted Union soldiers, in blue uniforms, marching and singing lines from a newly adapted spiritual: “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the ground.” The words struck her as too direct, and she composed a loftier version in her hotel room, substituting God’s vengeance for that of the abolitionist: “He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword / His truth is marching on.” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” was born. It was only November, and already more than forty thousand soldiers had fallen. The eternal language of euphemism —swords and lightning—had begun its work, displacing the reality of bullets breaking bodies.

In the wake of the failed conference, Lincoln skillfully replaced “abolition” with “the Union” as the war’s compelling purpose. The case he made to connect the end of slavery with the preservation of a political arrangement was subtle. Secession, he maintained, was a denial of democratic rule. Slavery had, from the beginning, been a national issue. It could not be fenced off and become a parochial one now. This was the logic, easily lost to us because it’s so familiar, behind the memorable line in the Gettysburg Address, delivered two years later, that the great question of the war was whether “any nation so conceived and so dedicated”—that is, to liberty —“can long endure.” Without a strong central authority—not a dictator or a king but a unifying rule of law—a free state would be torn apart by demagogues and dissension.

Yet the argument, though it has come to seem foundational, is in some ways specious. As Southern critics noted at the time, for the wrong reasons but

not with the wrong logic, the American Revolution was itself an act of secession—from a functioning and successful union. Many regions have broken apart at the will of their inhabitants. It is easy to imagine horrors today that could make, say, California and Oregon and Washington want to declare themselves a separate polity, and it is hard to invoke a moral principle to tell them that they can't. From this perspective, the idea of "union" was one of the most disingenuous diversions in American history: the transformation of an abstract constitutional principle into a cause worth dying for.

Why this new argument proved so powerful remains something of a mystery. Edmund Wilson, in his study of Civil War literature, "Patriotic Gore," saw in it the blunt, power-fixated logic of human history: big states swallow small ones. The North was stronger and bigger, and it swallowed the South. The bleak truth, Wilson suggested, is that people like joining armies of conquest. Presumably, when the Great Canadian campaign begins, there will be no shortage of soldiers to fight it, or of apologists ready to enumerate the horrors of Canadian life that must be erased, poutine aside.



"They use lotion to protect themselves from the sun. This is the kind of people we're dealing with." Cartoon by P. C. Vey

And yet Canada, oddly, offers a clue to the peculiar appeal of Lincoln's abstract ideal of "union." Donald Trump's threats have, almost overnight, caused a famously divided and centrifugal nation to cohere into a single national front. Something like that happened across the North at the outset

of the Civil War, when “the Union” became not just a constitutional principle but a moral rallying cry. The South, for its part, responded in kind: secession swiftly forged a fractured region into a reactive unity, bound by fear of emancipation and faith in a mythic agrarian freedom.

In an illuminating study of American Jews during the conflict, “Fear No Pharaoh” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), Richard Kreitner notes that even pro-slavery rabbis in New York were converted by Lincoln’s unionist rhetoric. Morris J. Raphall, who led the Greene Street Synagogue and had defended slavery on Biblical grounds, abruptly reversed himself when Lincoln invoked the vision of a united America. American Jews, Raphall insisted, knew the “difference between elsewhere and here.” His son enlisted in the Union Army and lost an arm at Gettysburg. As in the post-mass-immigration moment of the First World War, a crisis proved necessary to forge a common identity. “Elsewhere” and “here” always make for more compelling rallying cries than “right” and “wrong.”

This bleaker view is reinforced by the historian Michael Vorenberg’s new book, “Lincoln’s Peace” (Knopf), which picks up the story at the other end of the conflict, as the war was drawing to a close after unfathomable death and suffering. Vorenberg’s account, despite the intervening carnage, returns us to a situation eerily similar to the one that preceded the war: the white South, though militarily defeated, had no intention of accepting anything resembling racial equality. And, while Robert E. Lee might have declined to resort to guerrilla warfare, many of his lieutenants carried on a program of suppression by terror. In that sense, Vorenberg argues, the Civil War never truly ended.

Lincoln’s assassination was, in this light, a last-ditch terrorist assault on the national government—one that very nearly succeeded. Seward and Vice-President Andrew Johnson survived the conspiracy only by chance. The pattern of compromise persisted, with the politics of the border states still exerting undue influence. Indeed, one of the most fateful disasters in American history—Johnson’s embattled Presidency—was a by-product of those very compromises: Johnson, a Tennessean, was chosen to replace Hannibal Hamlin, of Maine, on the 1864 ticket in a bid to appease the border states, with predictable results.

In “American Civil Wars” (Norton), Alan Taylor broadens the frame to include parallel struggles over national identity and democratic renewal in the eighteen-sixties—not only in the United States but in Canada and Mexico as well. One could broaden it further and argue that the period from 1848 to 1871—bracketed by the liberal revolutions and the end of the Franco-Prussian War—was marked by a series of violent shocks across the Western world, culminating in the establishment of a liberal political compact that, in some form, endured into our own time. Lincoln’s “passion” became so sanctified, in this reading, because it was the most extreme instance of a common struggle. In this view, the American experience was not exceptional but emblematic—a subset of the painful emergence of something resembling genuinely popular democracy.

What’s striking about the new literature on Lincoln and the war is that, though one may expect him to be in some sense debunked or “deconstructed,” he remains a largely idealized figure. Winik is admiring of his firmness of purpose at the war’s outset; Vorenberg mourns its absence at the war’s end. Matthew Stewart, in his recent study of the influence of idealist philosophy on abolitionism, “An Emancipation of the Mind,” goes further. Drawing on quotations from Karl Marx, a Lincoln enthusiast, Stewart argues that Lincoln was essentially the first Marxist President: embracing a view of labor not far from Marx’s own, and opposing the peonage of working people in all its forms.

This is obviously tendentious—nor does Stewart mean it entirely seriously—but, then, Lincoln, like Jesus, is easily made to conform to whatever ideological need the historian brings to him. If a left-wing, quasi-Marxist Lincoln is a plausible invention, so is a far-right, conservative one of the sort evoked by Harry V. Jaffa, the godfather of the Claremont Institute. Jaffa saw Lincoln’s choice of war in 1861 as wholly heroic—an almost Christlike epiphany that united revelation and reason in a moral crusade. He cast Lincoln as the embodiment of a set of absolute values: Biblical revelation and Greek reason joined in opposition to the relativism of modern liberal humanism, with its taste for irony and its acceptance of a plurality of forms of existence. Jaffa was, in effect, allying Jerusalem and Athens against New York. He wanted the American home built on rock, not shifting sand, and believed Lincoln was its carpenter.

In truth, we have no difficulty building our abodes on sand—that's why the most expensive homes in Los Angeles and Long Island are called "beach houses." There is no bedrock to build on, in the world or in morality. The political ground beneath our feet shifts, grows squishy, and is meant to. What we feel when we study Lincoln's life through the war is not so much the force of fixed convictions imposed on others as the gradual emancipation of his own mind—a sense of his discovery, in real time, of what he believed. A powerful intuition that slavery was absolutely wrong evolved into a tragic fatalism, haunted by a sense of Providence, and finally opened into a horizon of hope, shaped by the scale of suffering Lincoln had helped to unleash. This much death *had* to make for a better land.

Yet believing that the war was inescapable is not quite the same as believing that it was right. Was the Civil War "worth the sacrifice"? Suppose that someone had had the force and the imagination to craft a plan for gradual emancipation. Full enfranchisement might have been delayed for several years, but the enslaved would have been free at last. And what of the human cost? If eight hundred thousand people had been deliberately murdered over the next four years—in some expanded version of the Trail of Tears or the Bataan Death March—would we see that as an unfortunate necessity of history or as an unforgivable crime?

Of course, some eight hundred thousand *did* die—many in horrific ways—while the formerly enslaved were left to fend for themselves in a postwar state where apartheid was enforced by terror. Why, exactly, is that outcome morally preferable—or more readily excused? These were not slaves but soldiers, who, in some collective sense, chose to fight. But was that choice entirely their own? Or was it made for them, by circumstance, by duty, by the illusions of glory, not to mention the blunt force of conscription? We are far too ready to depict the suffering of others as the price of the history that seemingly rewards us now.

The truth is that we accept mass dying with enormous aplomb. More than a million perished in the *COVID*-19 pandemic, but those who complacently predicted that it would be no more than a season's pain appear to represent the new common sense: lockdowns were excessive, the health establishment overreacted. Mass dying barely fazes us—until, that is, it

becomes personal and particular. Leo Tolstoy revered Lincoln, calling him "a Christ in miniature, a saint of humanity, whose name will live for thousands of years." Yet in "War and Peace" he captures the raw vulnerability of a young soldier—brave, devoted, almost absurdly loyal to the cause and its flawed leaders—wounded in battle. As blood seeps away and he imagines death nearing, the soldier slips into a state of wonder at existence. These passages, among literature's most poignant and strangely affirming, bridge the gap between the vastness of war and the intimacy of a single death. A youth, swept into combat by patriotic fervor, faces bullets and, fallen, gazes at the sky, not with moral clarity or anger but with innocent bewilderment: *Existence is so good—why am I dying for this*? Major Sullivan Ballou, writing to his wife, Sarah, before the First Battle of Bull Run, mused, "I know I have but few claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me—perhaps it is the wafted prayer of little Edgar—that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, nor that, when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name." Early in the fight, a cannonball tore off his leg. He lingered in agony for a week, very likely in no condition to whisper anything, least of all her name.

Lincoln's elegiac words about the dead soldiers at Gettysburg remain true: from their sacrifice, we still can take renewed commitment to their cause, that of liberty against tyranny. But we should also remember that the purpose of the struggle of liberty against tyranny is not to carry on the fight but not to have to. We can't forget these soldiers' lives, but neither should we forget the manner of their dying. Even if we return to the original proposition—that the Civil War was unavoidable, or that of all the bad choices war was not the worst—it doesn't alter what happened at Bull Run or Antietam. Remaining alive to other people's pain, in the face of heroic rhetoric, retrospective rationalization, and two-sided tribal terror, is perhaps the hardest moral task we face—and one at which we almost always fail. Sometimes the only people who can see the sky are the soldiers who die beneath it. ♦

Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. His books include "The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery."

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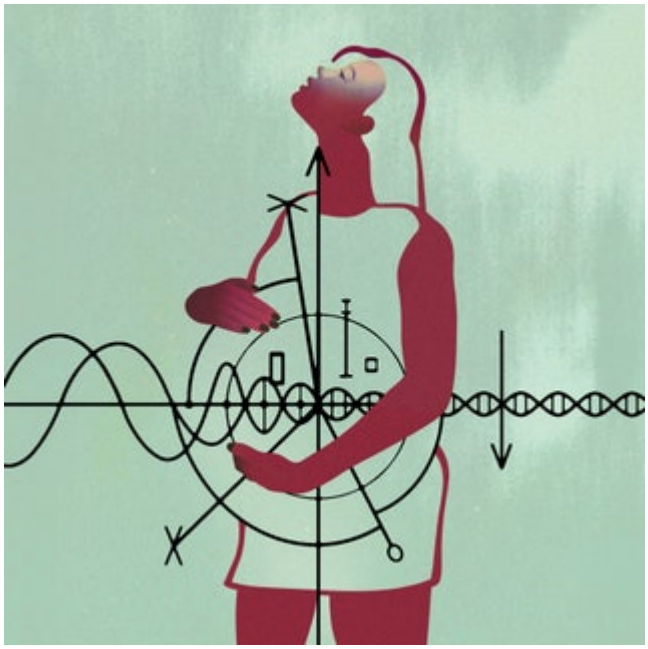
Books

How Much Should You Know About Your Child Before He's Born?

In "Second Life," the journalist Amanda Hess navigates the stratified landscape of contemporary reproductive technology.

By Jessica Winter

April 21, 2025



Becoming a parent, Hess writes, does not comport with the desire "to control and optimize every aspect of life."Illustration by Ard Su

When the writer Amanda Hess was twenty-nine weeks pregnant with her first child, her doctor, looking at an ultrasound, "saw something he did not like." He suspected a rare genetic condition; Hess underwent an amniocentesis and then an MRI. She sought out a second opinion—which augured catastrophe and, it turned out, was completely wrong—and a third, steadying one. Her son was eventually given a diagnosis of Beckwith-

Wiedemann syndrome, which puts babies at higher risk for hypoglycemia and certain cancers and makes their little bodies grow fast; often, their tongues become too large for their mouths, requiring corrective surgery.

Extensive testing showed no genetic or environmental cause for her son's condition, yet Hess felt somehow culpable. "I worried over what I had done to trigger it, over the dark secret of my body that had determined his suffering," she writes in her memoir, "Second Life: Having a Child in the Digital Age" (Doubleday). Her apprehensions were reinforced by her medical chart, which logged ominous-seeming F.Y.I.s that included "Advanced maternal age" (she was thirty-five), "Teratogen exposure" (owing to a tablet of the anti-anxiety medication Ativan, taken at the six-week mark), and "Anxiety during pregnancy." These facts revealed nothing about her baby's prospects, yet they followed Hess around like a misdemeanor rap sheet. Immediately after her son's birth, by C-section, a labor-and-delivery nurse turned to her—"the paralyzed, split-open, twenty-second-old mother"—and asked, "When did you stop taking the Ativan in pregnancy?"

"Second Life" is not mainly a medical odyssey but, rather, a mordant contemplation of the many screens—from ultrasounds and pregnancy-tracking apps to baby monitors and children's TV—that reflected and mediated Hess's experience of pregnancy and early motherhood. Through the porthole of her phone, she encountered the "freebirth" movement, made up of mothers who are skeptical of prenatal screenings and tests, hospital births, and pediatric vaccines, referring to conventional pregnancy care as "birth in captivity." Hess developed a queasy fascination with these women. "If I had had a wild pregnancy, dismissed prenatal care as a scam, I never would have received that terrifying ultrasound," she writes. "But I also would have denied myself the information that I needed to protect my child after he was born." The diagnosis fortunately led Hess and her husband to a physician who specialized in Beckwith-Wiedemann syndrome, and to a hospital with a suitable *NICU*.

What We're Reading

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Hess's book arrives at a historical moment—post-Dobbs, pro-natalist, techno-dystopian—in which both pregnant bodies and the stuff of reproduction itself have come under an extraordinary degree of scrutiny, judgment, and control. Some states routinely charge women with child neglect or endangerment for drug use during pregnancy (and even prescription medications have raised alarms). In Nebraska, a teen-ager and her mother both served time in prison after the girl took abortion drugs and delivered a stillborn infant. And many patients, including those who receive tragic prenatal diagnoses, cannot access abortion care unless they travel long distances out of state, often at great expense and even at legal risk.

Meanwhile, on the other side of what Hess calls the "reproductive technology gap," a number of startups are touting their powers to select for maximally optimized offspring. Sam Altman, the C.E.O. of OpenAI, is an investor in the biotech company Genomic Prediction, which offers the LifeView Embryo Health Score® Test. It claims to evaluate I.V.F. embryos for a host of polygenic conditions, including propensity for developing diabetes, certain cancers, or schizophrenia; Stephen Hsu, a co-founder of Genomic Prediction, has said that the company's technology can also predict I.Q., but that "society is not ready for it." A similar company, Orchid, has backing from Anne Wojcicki, the co-founder of the genetic-testing company 23andMe. "Sex is for fun, and embryo screening is for babies," Orchid's founder, Noor Siddiqui, has said. (Creating true designer babies using gene-editing tools such as *CRISPR* is still largely forbidden.)

In recent years, the term "snowplow parenting" has come into vogue to describe a certain strain of affluent, vigilant child-rearing, one that works to smooth an offspring's life path at every turn. Polygenic embryo screening

may represent the snowplow driven to its logical extreme: the kind of parent who can drop six figures on Ivy-feeder preschools or comprehensive college-admissions counselling might happily intervene at the embryonic stage if she can boost her future kid's I.Q. The ascendance of such technology, and its prohibitive expense, is a boon to the Nietzschean wing of the Silicon Valley overclass, which has long suspected that all its money makes it special. Perhaps now its genetically advantaged progeny can remove all doubt.

But most parents-to-be don't breathe that rarefied air, which swirls with false expectations and, for some, carries a whiff of eugenics. Hess, who is a critic-at-large at the *Times*, takes an ambivalent view even of the more ordinary, in-utero technology that offered such widely diverging predictions about her baby's health. Her prenatal diagnosis let her create a safe harbor for her newborn, yet the question of when or whether to receive such information remains an unsettling one. When a scientist tells her that, someday soon, a test that screens for Beckwith-Wiedemann and related disorders may be available much earlier in pregnancy, Hess writes, "I wasn't sure that I wanted it to exist. I thought about the expectant parents who might jump, scared, at an early chance to prevent kids like my son."

The "dark secret" that Hess ruminates on, one that can haunt the pregnant body and its progeny, hearkens back to a pre-Darwinian concept known as "maternal impression"—broadly speaking, the belief that a woman's ideas, fears, and experiences during pregnancy leave an adverse physical mark on her infant. "Early modern medical manuals understood the mother basically as a psychic inscription machine," the historian Hannah Zeavin writes in "Mother Media: Hot and Cool Parenting in the Twentieth Century." "If she ate, thought, or did the wrong thing, it would be recorded in and on her developing child." The maternal mind and body, Zeavin argues, was, historically, the ultimate transmission device, "the literal medium through whom the 'message' of the child had to pass into life."

This idea, Hess writes in "Second Life," "pitched forward through the centuries until it made its way to me." She sees vestiges of maternal impression in how that single tab of Ativan—along with the anxiety it was meant to treat—was enshrined in her pregnancy records. "Teratogen

exposure” refers to a substance that may cause malformation of an embryo; Hess notes, with dry horror, that the root “terato” means “monster,” and the suffix “-gen” is “thing that produces or causes.” “The online medical chart was supposed to be modern and scientific,” she writes. “But when I decoded its medical terminology, it said that I had created a monster.”

A largely unscientific hypervigilance about the blameworthy habits and behaviors of pregnant women is, as Hess discovers, a place of convergence for the medical establishment and the fringe-medicine crowd. At an outdoor retreat for freebirthers, she comes across a chiropractor-influencer who professes that most illnesses are created by “conflict shock”—some distressing life event that the patient has not resolved. When Hess later asks for “clues to why and how to treat” her son’s enlarged tongue, the influencer responds, in part, “The tongue is needed for speaking, sucking, and swallowing. During pregnancy did you experience a self devaluation related to one of these things? Did you need to ‘bite your tongue’?”

Although the reproductive-technology enthusiasts of Silicon Valley and beyond are not necessarily immune to such junk science, they are relatively sanguine about maternal impression. Elon Musk, who has fourteen-ish kids and has called declining birth rates “one of the biggest risks to civilization,” has fathered several of his children using surrogates and seems generally unfussed about where his sperm may roam. One of Orchid’s investor-clients told *The Information* that Siddiqui suggested she use a surrogate for her children, just because: “She was, like, ‘Well, this is nine months of your life, and it’s not that expensive.’ ” There is also the looming possibility of artificial wombs—which could eliminate the need for human labor altogether, bringing *DOGE*-like efficiency to the business of breeding.

It might come as a surprise that this tribe of biohacking control freaks is so blasé about outsourcing the work of gestating a human being to other, presumably less optimized vessels. And in fact the venture capitalists Malcolm and Simone Collins, who are the unofficial First Couple of American pro-natalism, have not used gestational surrogates for their children. Otherwise, though, they exemplify a hyper-rationalized faith in genetic determinism: that the message, in the form of DNA, trumps the medium. The Collinses have enlisted Genomic Prediction to run

background checks on their embryos and another DNA-testing company to assess the data and then rank ideal candidates for onboarding according to criteria such as potential I.Q. and risk of developing anxiety or “brain fog.”

Within this paradigm of preselection, the work of raising children is, to some extent, completed upon implantation, and allows for what Malcolm calls “intrinsically low-effort parenting.” As depicted in a viral profile of the family in the *Guardian* last year, this parenting style accommodates unlimited iPad time at age two and the occasional smack across the face.

The Collinses demonstrate how advances in reproductive technology are resulting in unexpected political, social, and even aesthetic realignments. In many respects, they resemble the neo-Quiverfull, self-isolating, homeschooling families who populate so much of the Christian-*MAHA* sector of social media, and who overlap with the freebirthers who command Hess’s attention in “Second Life.” But the couple’s embrace of avant-garde science and medicine, Simone’s C-section births, and their autistic identities —Simone and two of their children have autism diagnoses—put them at odds with the same group, which rejects the medical establishment and fetishizes maternal impression and “natural” birth, and whose antipathy to vaccines is rooted in an irrational fear of autism.

The collision of these stridently individualistic ideologies is manifest in an online homeschooling platform that the Collinses developed, Parrhesia.io, which sounds like a disease in a Pynchon novel, and is, per an introductory video, “Using AI to Create a Free Alternative to the Education System.” The online marketing includes a few photographs of what we can take to be young homeschoolers using the platform, and, aptly, they all appear to be alone at their screen, as if they’d been programmed from conception for self-sufficiency.

As techno-oligarchs increasingly supplant the democratic state, its functions, and its elected representatives through undue influence and brute force, a Silicon Valley brand of carefully curated pro-natalism can begin to look like top-down social-genetic engineering, in which the children themselves are abstractions. In an illuminating suite of reporting on the frontiers of fertility for the *Times*, the journalist Anna Louie Sussman summed up the tech world’s view of family as one “in which children are

often spoken of as a means to something else—staving off population collapse, an optimization project, a data-driven experiment—rather than an end in themselves." But what should that end be, ideally? And what means, technological or otherwise, are allowed in reaching it? When you close your eyes and imagine your future children, what is it morally permissible to see? What should a person want when a person wants kids?

The vast majority of expectant parents in the United States don't have access to the extreme-screening services provided by the likes of Orchid and Genomic Prediction, and thus don't have to personally confront the ethical questions that the technology raises. But, in the last decade, first-trimester blood tests that screen for a host of chromosomal anomalies have become increasingly routine. These tests, when they detect lethal anomalies, can be a mercy for pregnant people. But Hess observes that, among the sunny promotional materials for the biomedical company Natera and its prenatal genetic-screening blood test, Panorama, "there were no pictures of babies or adults who appeared to have any condition screened by the test." The unspoken assumption is that a patient who receives a positive test result will not want to become the parent of a child with a genetic disorder, however mild or compatible with a happy life it may be.

In "Unfit Parent: A Disabled Mother Challenges an Inaccessible World," the disability activist Jessica Slice posits that embryonic testing is a eugenic practice, and that the decision to end a pregnancy owing to an in-utero diagnosis is often "strongly influenced by medical and social ableism and misconceptions." Like Hess, Slice supports abortion rights, but she emphasizes the intertwined histories of the reproductive-rights movement and the early-twentieth-century eugenics campaign. Eugenics, Slice writes, is essentially capitalistic in its aim to eliminate those who are perceived as a drain on the collective; as she puts it, people with disabilities "are the weakest links of capitalism." This framework applies to how companies such as Genomic Prediction and Orchid create futures markets for babies, helping prospective parents to manage risk and calculate return on investment.

From Slice's line of reasoning, one might infer that fewer fetuses with serious anomalies are aborted in countries where the ruthless logic of

markets holds less sway over everyday life than it does in the U.S. But that does not seem to be the case in Denmark, for example, which has one of the most comprehensive and generous welfare states in the world. It also provides universal prenatal screening for Down syndrome, and more than ninety-five per cent of patients who receive a diagnosis decide to end their pregnancies (in the U.S., it's between sixty-seven and eighty-five per cent).

This silent consensus on Down syndrome, at least in some cultures and communities, might be seen as a consequence of "velvet eugenics," a term used by the bioethicist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson to describe "the enterprise of genetic technology and other medical interventions aimed at bringing all humans to a standard, 'normal' form and function." The coinage is vivid, useful, and flawed; deluxe I.V.F. for rich people and non-invasive prenatal testing for everyone else is a matter of choice, and not comparable to the legal violence of, say, Buck v. Bell, the Supreme Court case that, in 1927, upheld the state of Virginia's right to forcibly sterilize people who were deemed intellectually disabled.

Perhaps inevitably, some critiques of velvet eugenics enfold a soft, muffled doubt about abortion rights. In 2022, a couple of months after the Supreme Court delivered its decision in Dobbs, Garland-Thomson published a paper with the philosopher Joel Michael Reynolds that seemed to endorse at least some aspects of "fetal personhood," or the legal concept that would give a fetus constitutional rights under the Fourteenth Amendment. The co-authors' nomenclature aligned with that of Clarence Thomas, who has written that abortions based on prenatal diagnoses "constitutionalize the views of the 20th-century eugenics movement." By this logic, ending a pregnancy because of a prenatal test result might violate the Americans with Disabilities Act.

One can reject the supposition that establishing fetal personhood could be a boon to people with disabilities and still feel that there is something eerie and terribly sad about the near-unanimous verdict on Down syndrome in some countries, especially given the isolating and demoralizing effect it has on people with Down syndrome and their families. At the same time, the overwhelming result at least bespeaks equality of access to reproductive-health technology in those countries. The state of affairs in the U.S. is

different. A rich mother-to-be may get to have exacting input on whether an embryo meets her standards for becoming a person; if a pregnant woman is poor or in the wrong state, she may have none at all.

Both the ancient dogma of maternal impression and the emerging ethos of Silicon Valley baby-coders offer the promise of control. But parenting is not a programming language, and a child is not an engineering problem or a structure to be built to exact specifications. If that's what you want, you should design a night club or clone your dog. Becoming a parent, Hess writes in "Second Life," does not comport with the desire "to control and optimize every aspect of life. Babies don't work like that, and that's part of what makes parenting meaningful: you do not get to choose." What's more, the higher and more narrowly prescribed their expectations for their children, the more unmoored parents will be once their children inevitably outgrow and defy those expectations.

The moral and emotional wreckage of these thwarted conjectures can be witnessed in Musk, who has repeatedly made the appalling quip that his daughter Vivian Wilson, who is trans, was "killed by the woke mind virus." Most of Musk's children are boys, which has prompted speculation that Musk is engaging in sex selection; Wilson was assigned male at birth, a designation that she likened to "a commodity that was bought and paid for" in a recent Threads post. "So when I was feminine as a child and then turned out to be transgender," she went on, "I was going against the product that was sold." The commodity was found to be defective, perhaps falsely advertised, but not eligible for return. The only option, it seems, was to discard it. Unfortunately for Musk, there is no genetic test to predict whether a fetus will become a trans person, or if she is at pronounced risk of contracting the woke mind virus.

Reproductive technology may assume the chrome-and-glass form of an existential time machine, zipping frictionlessly into the future to retrieve high-definition images of a premium-grade child. But we can only presume so much about a child who is not here. "Second Life" is foremost a mash note to Hess's firstborn son, who is a complete and ongoing joy, and much of the book's charisma is rooted in its mood of droll astonishment. "The act of photographing him was a compulsive expression of my wonder at his

existence," Hess writes. "It's him: *tap*. He is here: *tap*. He remains: *tap*." The wild fact of her son installs an epistemological brick wall between the before and after of his being, and hers: "Past-me saw a prenatal diagnosis as a tragedy; present-me knew that no tragedy had occurred." Despite the oracular hubris of the genetic-screening vanguard, the story a parent wants has only one primary source, one reliable narrator. You have to wait for him. ♦

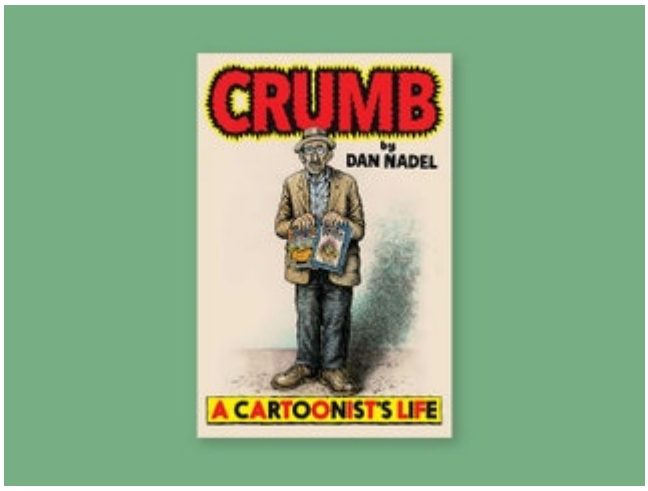
Jessica Winter joined The New Yorker as an editor in 2017 and became a staff writer in 2024, covering family and education. She is the author of the novels "Break in Case of Emergency" and "The Fourth Child."

Books

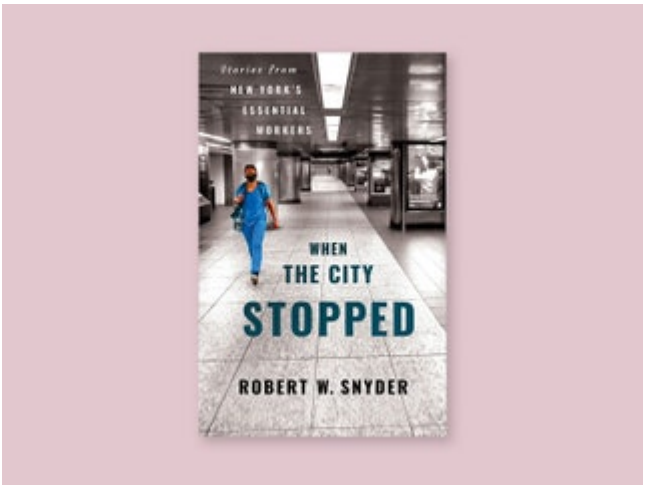
Briefly Noted

“Crumb,” “When the City Stopped,” “Mỹ Documents,” and “dd’s Umbrella.”

April 21, 2025



Crumb, *by Dan Nadel (Scribner)*. In this diligently researched biography, the graphic novel finds its forebear in the cartoonist Robert Crumb. The book chronicles Crumb’s aberrant life and career, from his early success as the “cartoon voice of the underground” in the nineteen-sixties, when his visual style became emblematic of the counterculture, through his illustrations of the Book of Genesis, in the early two-thousands. Nadel balances admiration for Crumb’s craft with critical evaluations of the artist’s racist caricatures and overt misogyny. What emerges is a complicated and occasionally grotesque portrait of an artist whose “id was out on the page,” and who, Nadel argues, laid the groundwork for a range of successful graphic masterpieces, including Art Spiegelman’s “Maus” and Alison Bechdel’s “Fun Home.”

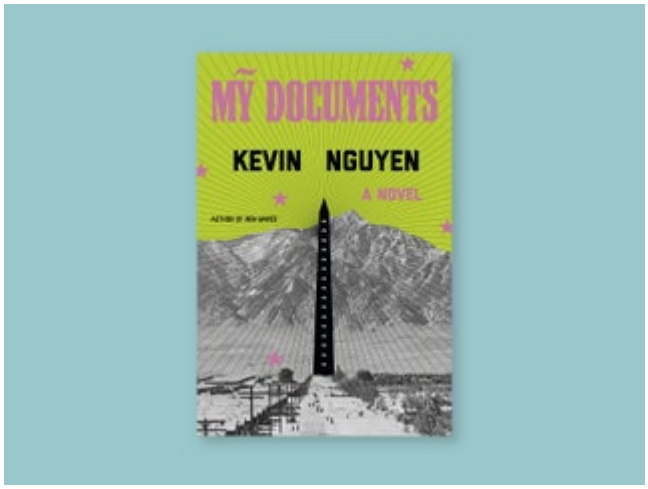


When the City Stopped, *by Robert Snyder (Three Hills)*. The real-life experiences of New Yorkers during the *COVID*-19 outbreak are at the heart of this collection of as-told-to stories. Snyder highlights the actions, big and small, that people took to help the city survive, including medical personnel who collaborated across hospitals to find health-care solutions, and bus drivers who stayed on their routes. Snyder writes that, while working on the book, he "glimpsed a little-recognized truth of the pandemic: in the days when New York felt abandoned and besieged, it was saved from the bottom up." He posits that remembering the sacrifices of the types of people he features—teachers, retail workers, E.M.T.s—"is the way to prepare for a better future."

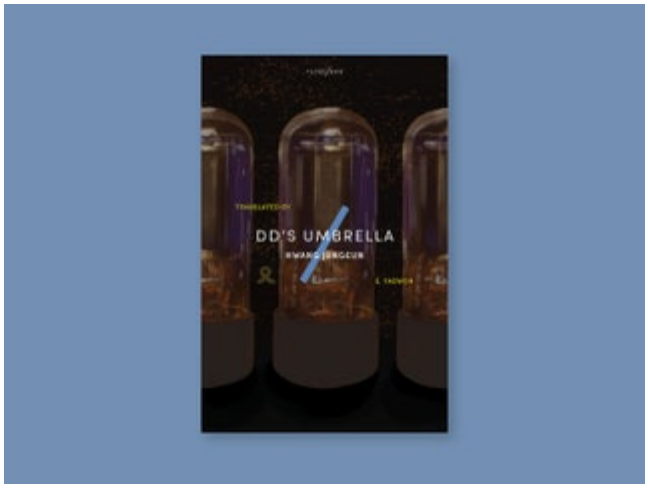
What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



Mỹ Documents, *by Kevin Nguyen (One World).* In this novel, the U.S. government interns thousands of people of Vietnamese descent in camps across the country following a series of attacks by Vietnamese terrorists. Staring down indefinite detainment, the prisoners rely on documents—identification papers, computer files, ownership records, underground newspapers—to validate their experiences, past and present, as they make their best attempt at "adapting and creating meaningful and fulfilling days," even when each one is "the same as the last." Focussing on one family's struggle to endure a period of intense racial hostility, Nguyen examines the distinct forms that survival can take: withstanding state violence, overcoming familial rifts, and reclaiming one's life.



dd's Umbrella, *by Hwang Jungeun, translated from the Korean by e. yaewon (Tilted Axis).* Two novellas—linked loosely by their respective characters' queer identities and affection for an old-fashioned, near-empty

electronics market in Seoul—unfold in the aftermath of a deadly ferry disaster and a movement to oust a corrupt President. Like Hwang's previous novels, this book is a tender, spooky portrait of outcast friends and lovers. In the first story, d and dd share a "shoddy, exhausting" life that, though cut short, is also happy. The narrator of the second helps raise her sister's child while struggling to write an elusive "story in which no one dies." In the face of tragedies both local and universal, the characters ask, "How will today be remembered?"

On and Off the Menu

The Quest to Build a Perfect Protein Bar

A great number of Americans wish to optimize their diets—and their lives.

By Hannah Goldfield

April 21, 2025

Most protein bars range in texture from paste-like to crumbly; often, their flavors suggest more playful indulgences, such as doughnuts or mint-chocolate-chip ice cream.Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

In the past seventy-five years in America, the nutritional bar has gone from niche to mainstream. In the fifties, Bob Hoffman, of York, Pennsylvania, known as “the father of weightlifting,” and an early manufacturer of barbells, hawked a product called Hi-Proteen Honey Fudge. Made from

soybean flour and peanut butter, it was touted as offering “strength and endurance,” without “commercial” sugar—“not candy, just a good health, energy and body building food.”

In 1969, Pillsbury attempted to capitalize on Americans’ excitement about the moon landing by releasing Space Food Sticks, a grocery-store adaptation of a product developed for astronauts: compact tubes made with corn syrup, vegetable oil, and sodium caseinate, a derivative of cow’s milk, meant to be consumed through a helmet port. By the turn of the century, the form wouldn’t seem so futuristic, or novel. As fitness evolved from pastime to life style, the PowerBar, created in 1986, became a staple even for amateur athletes, and a Clif Bar seemed as crucial for a hike as boots.

Today, the question of how to eat with extreme efficiency extends beyond space travel and sports. Soylent, the meal-replacement shake, first appealed to coders who subject themselves to punishing hours at a keyboard. It’s not unusual to see someone unwrap a protein bar for a one-handed lunch in any workplace. Though most Americans are already meeting or exceeding their recommended daily amount of protein, recent surveys show that a growing number are trying to eat even more of it. Protein is venerated by adherents of keto and paleo diets, and by the plant-based crowd and extreme carnivores alike. It’s essential to building muscle mass, making it the coveted macronutrient for gym rats, perimenopausal women, and people using GLP-1 drugs to lose weight. In the past few years, I’ve watched the word move front and center on a preposterous range of packaged goods, from obvious items like cottage cheese to unlikelier specimens such as breakfast cereal and lemonade.

Increasing one’s protein intake requires an annoying amount of foresight, a willingness to experience short-term displeasure, or both. Many protein-dense foods, such as meat and eggs, are expensive, and adding protein powder (usually made from whey or legumes) to any food is an almost surefire way to make it taste worse. There’s an appealing transparency to the protein bar, which purports to be little more than a shape. “It’s a perfect vehicle, because it doesn’t have an identity to begin with,” Andrew Lipstein, a novelist who is perhaps the most devoted protein-bar consumer I know, observed recently.

“Before I’ve even wiped the sleep from my eyes, there’s usually a Quest bar in my mouth,” he said. It’s a habit that emerged about a decade ago, during a solitary breakup-inspired stint in Oregon—years before he published three books, had three children, and started working full time in fintech. “It’s very funny to imagine that I thought I needed to shave off minutes in my day back then,” he said. “I was living in a place where I knew no one, I didn’t have kids or a romantic partner, I didn’t even have a job—and I was, like, I need to cut out ten minutes.”

Most of the protein bars on the market are indistinguishable, ranging in texture from paste-like to crumbly, in flavors that suggest playful indulgences such as doughnuts or mint-chocolate-chip ice cream. One distinctive offering is Rxbar, whose spartan ingredient lists read like recipes for upscale bird feed—“3 Egg Whites, 6 Almonds, 5 Cashews, 2 Dates”—and are proudly printed on the front of the wrappers. Rxbar was débuted in 2013, in Chicago, by a pair of childhood friends named Peter Rahal and Jared Smith, after Rahal, a CrossFitter whose family was in the juice-concentrate business, noticed a lack of nutritional bars that were both high in protein and made of whole foods.

After Rahal and Smith developed a recipe in Rahal’s parents’ kitchen—the resulting product, gummy and nutty, tastes like something that might have been served as dessert on a commune in the seventies—they went around convincing CrossFit studios to carry them. In 2016, President Obama was ridiculed after the *Times* reported that he consumed exactly seven salted almonds each evening, yet the Rxbar, similarly austere, was soaring in popularity.

Rahal and Smith sold the product to Kellogg’s in 2017, for six hundred million dollars. By the time their noncompete agreement expired, a few years ago, Rahal had experienced a shift in his “nutritional philosophy,” he told me. With a new partner, Zach Ranen, he set out to make a bar with the best possible proportion of “macros”—a bar whose caloric efficiency might inspire the heights of human accomplishment. Last fall, they unveiled their creation: a pale, sticky rectangle that clocked in at twenty-eight grams of protein (more than double that of Rxbar), a hundred and fifty calories, and zero grams of sugar. It came wrapped in gold foil, printed with the brand’s

name in a large serif font that evokes early Mac ads. They called it David—as in Michelangelo's.

One afternoon in February, I visited the David offices, on the eleventh floor of a building in Manhattan's flower district. Rahal, who has icy blue eyes, dark, curly hair, and a compact, muscular build, sat behind a pair of monitors at a long desk that he shares with several of his employees. In conversation, he is direct and intense, cordial but too methodical to make small talk. "I was a consumer of bars—they're convenient, they're value-dense, they have a ton of utility," he said, telling his origin story. "Utility is a value of mine."

From the desk, we could see directly into the David kitchen-laboratory, a small, glassed-in room presided over by a cardboard cutout of the Michelangelo sculpture (its genitals covered with a cutout of a David bar) and by a twenty-six-year-old food scientist named Gracyn Levenson, who joined the company after working on research and development for Taco Bell retail products, among others, at Kraft Heinz. Now she spends her days painstakingly adjusting the formula of what she and Rahal call the bar's systems: its combinations of proteins (egg white, collagen, derivatives of milk and whey), fats, binding agents, and flavorings.

Among Levenson's tasks is figuring out how the taste of each bar changes during its shelf life, and even from bite to bite. In the case of David's newest flavor, cinnamon roll, she said, "the first thing we wanted to hit in your mouth was cinnamon, then, in the crescendo, the yeasty, darker notes, and then finish with sweet icing." Levenson had noticed that the icing notes were fading after a few weeks, "so that's the one that we've been pushing up."

The first bite of a David bar tends to leave a thin film on the roof of my mouth. But I reliably go back for another when a big hit of salt lands on the back of my tongue, then another, goaded by the crunch of crispy orbs dispersed throughout the bar. It's far from my favorite way to consume calories, yet it leaves me with a perverse sense of accomplishment and control.

The idea that more protein optimizes fitness in anyone besides serious athletes remains up for debate. Christopher Gardner, a nutrition researcher and a professor at Stanford, has argued that most Americans are eating enough protein to maintain a healthy life style, without supplements. He emphasizes in his scholarship that the human body has no way of storing excess protein, as it does for fat and carbohydrates. “The muscleheads who are having a lot of meat and regular meals and a protein shake and a protein bar are turning all that into carbs and fats at the end of the day,” he said on a podcast in 2023.

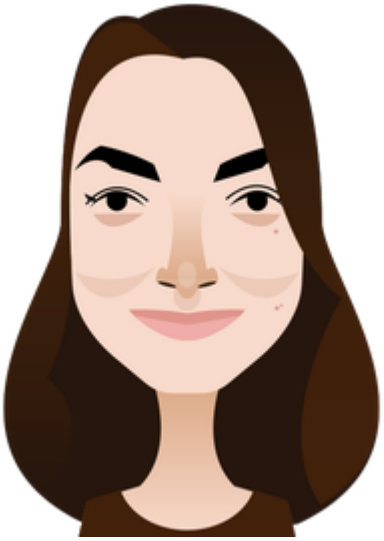
David Allison, the dean of the public-health school at Indiana University-Bloomington and an obesity researcher who, along with Peter Attia, has advised Rahal, frames it differently. “If I said, ‘You make a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year, that’s enough’—well, it depends where you want to live, it depends what your goals are,” he told me. “You can say, ‘Walk every day so you don’t get diabetes, do this so you don’t have a heart attack.’ But I don’t want to just not have a heart attack. I want to be as vital and energetic as I can for the rest of my life.”

Allison acknowledged that the subject is freighted. He recounted a conversation he had with the late Richard Deckelbaum, a nutrition scientist at Columbia. “I was lamenting some of the nonsense in the field of nutrition, and he said, ‘David, I’ve worked in three fields: pediatrics, gastroenterology, and nutrition. Nutrition is different. Nutrition’ ”—he paused for effect—“ ‘is religion.’ ” Conor Heffernan, who lectures on the history of sports and fitness at Ulster University, in Ireland, said the current vogue for biohacking, and its protein boosterism, reeks of snake oil. “You cannot buy yourself out of your body aging and dying,” Heffernan said. “You cannot hack a system that has existed for millennia.”

The day after I visited the David offices, I met Rahal for lunch near Union Square, at abcV, a renowned restaurant that serves no meat. He and his wife, a French model with whom he has an eleven-month-old son named Matisse, are vegetarians, and go out to eat infrequently. “I always just let the waiter decide,” he said, when we sat down. At our server’s suggestion, he ordered a whole roasted cauliflower, seasoned with Middle Eastern

spices—a meal that, he admitted, did not have as much protein as he would like. “I have David to bail me out,” he said, smiling.

Rahal spoke of bonding with his father in the kitchen, and of the importance of gathering around a table with family and friends. But his stance toward eating—the experience around which I have organized my life—is staunchly pragmatic. We reached something like common ground when we discussed the advantages of a bar over, say, a protein shake. “Shakes are great, but they’re difficult to carry around, and liquid is not as satiating,” Rahal said. He paused for a moment. “Eating is more pleasureful. It is one of life’s pleasures—macerating, the dynamic texture, the journey, the story that something tells you.” ♦



Hannah Goldfield, a staff writer covering restaurants and food culture, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her Profile of the chef Kwame Onwuachi.

The Theatre

London Theatre Shimmers with Mirrors and Memory

New productions of Shakespeare's "Richard II," Annie Ernaux's "The Years," Robert Icke's "Manhunt," Tennessee Williams's "The Glass Menagerie," and more.

By Helen Shaw

April 17, 2025

Nicholas Hytner's "Richard II" is less medieval London, more "Succession" New York.Illustration by Bill Bragg

Long before Richard II ran afoul of mutinous nobles, and almost two centuries before Shakespeare wrote Richard's portrait in majestic verse, the King took refuge in the Tower. Near the beginning of his reign, when he

was only fourteen years old, he retreated there during the Peasants' Revolt, as enraged farmers beheaded his advisers down below. Now the tragedy "Richard II," directed by Nicholas Hytner and starring the "Wicked" heartthrob Jonathan Bailey, is at London's Bridge Theatre, right across the Thames from young Richard's bolt-hole. If his boy self had stood at one of the Tower's high windows long enough—say, for around six hundred and fifty years—he would have looked out at another teeming mob, lining up, still eager to see him die.

Hytner's version of Plantagenet England seems less overtly medieval and rather more like the New York of the HBO series "Succession." The play's piano-and-strings compositions, by Grant Olding, closely recall Nicholas Britell's discordant TV soundtrack; Richard wears sumptuous suits and velvet loafers without socks, then goes to prison in comfy gray sweats, sporting quiet luxury to the end. Bailey, who flounces magnificently—"We shall descend," he drawls, hopping into a pit—certainly plays Richard more as a media mogul's son than as an anointed monarch: coke-sniffing, sulky, louche. "Within the hollow crown," Richard says, "keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits, / Scoffing his state." Bailey, deft and playful, chooses to be his own antic, a droll and often hostile jester. This entertaining portrayal, though, can threaten the play's sense of spiritual loneliness. Richard's power is undone by his cousin Henry, but in his cell Richard finds wisdom, and the still, true call of his soul. By making his milieu familiar to a modern audience, Hytner and Bailey ignore the profound strangeness of Richard, who gains dominion over himself only by letting a nation slip through his fingers.

This spring, the London theatre shimmers with this kind of ambiguity—real king, false king, portrait, mirror. It's a season awash in memory plays and history plays that reflect upon themselves, and then reflect again. The finest example of this dizzying mise en abyme is "The Years," a staggering adaptation of the Nobel Prize winner Annie Ernaux's 2008 memoir, at the Harold Pinter, in the West End. Ernaux structures her account of six decades of her life by describing, in the third person, images of herself at different ages: "In the photo, a tall girl blinks against the sun." As each chapter begins, we therefore see her first in our mind's eye, already contained in a lens, at a careful focal distance.

Ernaux's celebrated *écriture plate* (her soi-disant "flat writing," stripped of metaphor and flourish) requires a concordantly plain performance style. Eline Arbo, who wrote the adaptation and directs, casts the largely unadorned production with five women, each of whom matter-of-factly plays one of Ernaux's ages, from pinafore-wearing child to grandmother, and speaks directly to us about sex, family, divorce, cancer, and sex again. Sometimes they do a bit of stage business, like pin a tablecloth (splashed with wine or afterbirth) onto a clothesline, but these acts, too, enhance a feeling of clinical distance. The play's centerpiece is a brutal, clear-eyed recounting of an illegal abortion, spoken by Tuppence Middleton, which has been causing audience members to faint. When this happens, Middleton pauses, and she and the other actors wait at the rear of the stage, murmuring to one another, like a row of specialists at a medical consultation.

Ernaux's great subject is youth, the way it pains us at different ages, and how quickly its lessons can be absorbed or lost. "We who had undergone kitchen-table abortions, who had married and divorced, no longer knew if the women's revolution had really happened," the excellent Gina McKee tells us, wryly. Year follows year follows year, but it's impossible to forget the long silent moment when Middleton stands stone-faced as the other women carefully wash blood from her legs. Arbo and Ernaux's patient masterpiece makes time palpable; you feel it flickering through a woman's life, like a projector's light moving through film. I felt another flicker, too, when someone fainted behind me. I wasn't going to pass out, but I did find myself mentally reaching to steady *something*—it might have been my own consciousness, moving backward out of reach.

I was less bowled over by "Kyoto," Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson's well-meaning epic about the decade of negotiations that led to the Kyoto Protocol, issued in 1997 (if not implemented until 2005). The directors Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin arrange the @sohoplace theatre like a huge meeting room, and the audience wears delegate badges, creating a Model U.N. atmosphere. Our narrator is the insinuating Don Pearlman (Stephen Kunken), an American oil lobbyist who does everything he can to sabotage the international process. Our horror at the damage he has done swims slowly through the long procedural drama, like a duck through crude. The play fumbles, though, when it tries to interest us in Pearlman as

a man and a husband. Creating character is not among Murphy and Robertson's strengths, and their pivot to awkward sentimentality throws the whole negotiation into disarray.

Robert Icke's troubling "Manhunt," at the Royal Court, is a wilder, more fractured account of a different set of real crimes—namely, Raoul Moat's homicidal attacks on police, his brutal assaults on the mother of his daughter, and his murder of her boyfriend. Samuel Edward-Cook plays a jacked-up, roided-out Moat, shouting and cajoling his way through a kind of inquest, arguing fluently to his judges, and the audience, that he has been slandered. Reality shifts around him, and we come to understand that certain scenes he has conjured never actually took place. Though Icke has a weakness for clichéd references to a man's "story," his ear for Moat's northern dialect is superb, and his use of real evidence—Moat's social-media posts, for instance—illustrates the fugitive's hectic delusion. In the play's finest scene, a sympathetic drunk (Trevor Fox) tries to reel Moat back from his horrors. By this point in the show, however, we know that there could not have been any such rescue. Moat did attract a sick fandom, but that sort of ugly love does not stay a killer's hand.

All these plays which chart the secret, internal practice of making a self—the bad king becoming good, youth becoming age, men becoming villains—hark back (or forward) to Tennessee Williams's "The Glass Menagerie," the first true memory play. I felt lucky, then, to find myself at a warehouse space called the Yard, where Jay Miller has directed a gorgeously atmospheric version of the 1944 classic. Miller's blue-lit, abstract netherworld set (designed by Cécile Trémolières) contains a sand dune, where props lie half buried and half remembered. A young man named Tom (Tom Varey) is both explicator and abandoner of his vulnerable, mentally fragile sister, Laura (Eva Morgan). We know from the beginning that he will someday leave her to the rough treatment of their garrulous, agitated mother, Amanda (Sharon Small), which is the same as leaving her to die.

In this production, Miller erodes nearly every "real" thing around Laura, so people emerge magically from her wardrobe, startling her (and us), or songs from other eras begin to play, penetrating her private bubble. She clings to her record player and, of course, to her little glass animals. It had never

struck me until seeing Morgan's nervous, colt-like Laura that she is similar to Richard II, happiest when far from human company, capable of mysterious insights as long as her eyes are turning inward. Morgan gives a weightless performance here, one that tugs like a restless balloon at this Tom, who clearly knows that she will eventually float away. Laura seems impatient to get to whatever comes next. "Mount, mount my soul," Richard says, "Thy seat is up on high." ♦

Helen Shaw joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.

The Current Cinema

“Sinners” Is a Virtuosic Fusion of Historical Realism and Horror

Ryan Coogler’s vampire movie mines vampirism’s symbolic potential to tell a tale of exploitation and Black music in nineteen-thirties Mississippi.

By Richard Brody

April 17, 2025

In Coogler’s historical horror film, Michael B. Jordan plays twin brothers, veterans both of the military and of organized crime, who return from Chicago to their home town.Illustration by Raj Dhunna

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the bloodstream, along comes a new horde of vampires, in Ryan Coogler’s “Sinners,” to taint it with yet another metaphysical curse. But Coogler is, by temperament, an analytical filmmaker: his first feature, “Fruitvale Station” (2013), dramatized a factual case of police violence; with “Creed” (a “Rocky” sequel) and the two “Black Panther” films, his artistry advanced as he mined mythologies for their political substance. In “Sinners,” he deploys gory fantasies to undergird his realistic vision. The film’s vampires are essentially metaphors, and the bodies they ravage are, above all, bodies of work and the body politic.

Indeed, until Coogler’s sanguinary predators show up, midway through, “Sinners” plays as a work of minutely observed historical fiction. It’s set in

the Black community in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in the course of the day and night of October 15-16, 1932—which is to say that it's a historical horror film, because its reality is scarred by the horrors of Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan. The drama starts with a young man named Sammie (Miles Caton) driving up to a church and stumbling into a Sunday-morning service led by his father (Saul Williams); Sammie's face is bloodied and gashed, and he's holding a snapped-off guitar neck. Thus, from the start, Coogler brings together music and horror. From there, after a title card announces "One day earlier," the movie unfolds as a flashback, filling in the events leading up to Sammie's agony.

The story centers on the return to Clarksdale of long-absent twin brothers, Elijah and Elias Moore, called Smoke and Stack, respectively—both played by Michael B. Jordan. They fought in the First World War, then moved to Chicago and got involved with gangsters; now they're back with money and a plan. They buy a vacant mill from a jovially menacing white man named Hogwood (David Maldonado), where they plan to open a juke joint that very night; they recruit Sammie, a precociously talented blues singer and slide guitarist who's also their cousin, to play there. Sammie's father disapproves of his performing for "drunkards" and warns, "You keep dealing with the Devil, one day he's gonna follow you home."

Although "Sinners" takes a while to turn fantastical, it rests on myth throughout. Clarksdale, after all, calls itself the birthplace of the blues and is also the site of the crossroads where, around 1930, Robert Johnson supposedly sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for supreme guitar artistry. Coogler builds musical mythology into a tensely realistic drama, zooming in on backstories—personal and political—that emerge in action. While Smoke heads to town to buy provisions for the club, Stack and Sammie hire another musician, the elderly Delta Slim (Delroy Lindo), who has been playing harmonica for coins at the train station. There are quick but indelible glimpses of signs for the whites-only ticket booth, waiting room, and rest room; when Stack, seeing a white woman nearby, orders Sammie to avert his eyes and walk away, the screen shivers with the ambient terror underlying the banalities of segregation.

Driving back from the station, the three men pass Black chain-gang prisoners doing hard labor at the roadside, and Slim talks about a time when he and a musical partner, after a trumped-up arrest, ended up at a white man's home to entertain his guests. "See, white folks, they like the blues just fine," he says. "They just don't like the people who make it." He adds that, soon thereafter, his partner was stopped by Klansmen, falsely accused of rape, and lynched. At the end of that story, Slim, mournfully and bitterly, starts to hum, then to sing, and implores Sammie to join in—a symbol and a reminder of the birth of the blues.

On the film's way to its vampiric turning point, it develops a richly delineated dramatic ethnography of Black life in the age of Jim Crow. Coogler invests daily activity with ample detail, even paying close attention to money matters. It's a pet peeve of mine that movies often show characters doing business—going shopping, taking jobs—without specifying prices or wages, but Coogler writes "Sinners" in dollars and cents, and locates the history behind the figures: one customer at the brothers' night spot, Club Juke, a plantation laborer who has only thirty cents for his fifty-cent shot of corn liquor, offers to pay the rest in plantation scrip. Coogler also keeps a keen eye on the region's ethnic mix, foregrounding Choctaw residents and a couple of Chinese descent, Bo (Yao) and Grace (Li Jun Li), who run a grocery. Moreover, the reunions sparked by the brothers' return prove as sociologically significant as they are dramatically crucial. The white woman (Hailee Steinfeld) at the train station is actually a mixed-race woman passing, and her background—along with the dangerous deceit of her daily life—is itself a chapter of history. So is Smoke's relationship with Annie (Wunmi Mosaku), a hoodoo healer, which reaches deep into their shared past and evokes the spiritual dimensions of tradition.

Here's what "Sinners" isn't: a story of a musician selling his soul to the Devil. It's clear from the outset that Coogler's view of myth is sharply revisionist; the movie opens with a voice-over monologue about musicians with seemingly supernatural talent, known by various terms in various cultures—including, in West African ones, as griots—whose art "can bring healing to the community but it also attracts evil." In other words, evil isn't *in* the music but comes from the outside and *finds* the music. The movie's

pivot to vampires is a supernatural vision of the real-life snares set for great Black musicians. Coogler transforms the faux-Faustian blues legend into an allegory of historical horror.

The diabolical metaphysics of Coogler's Clarksdale blues are centered not on the creation of music but on its dissemination—on the fate of a community-based creator in society at large. The movie's leading vampire, named Remmick (Jack O'Connell), is also a musician—a white cultural appropriator who schemes, with soft words and sharp teeth, to get hold of the music played by Sammie, Slim, and other Black musicians in their circle. He wants their songs and their stories, he says—but, of course, he has nothing of the experience or the history that gave rise to them. "Sinners" features only two kinds of white people—Hogwood and his crew of violent racists, and Remmick and his cohort, whose violence is hidden under the guise of love. The vampires present themselves as warmhearted integrationists, but their egalitarian welcome comes at the price of their victims' souls—even while bestowing on them the ironic gift of immortality (of the literal sort). Their bites turn Black victims into vampires who willingly integrate—and who turn into similarly smiling predators all too comfortable with their new, culturally homogenized surroundings, as if suggesting a metaphysical form of the pitfalls awaiting artists whose parasitic acolytes lead them to the blandishments of crossover.

Coogler presents a provocatively Africanist view of Black American experience, and does so with exuberant inventiveness; the uncompromising political essence of his allegorical vision is expressed with aesthetic delight. The pistol-packing, battle-hardened Smoke and Stack are sinners, too—but ones who know who they are, where they came from, and what they're fighting for. Smoke disabuses Sammie of halcyon ideas about freedom up North: "Chicago ain't shit but Mississippi with tall buildings instead of plantations." The brothers, having both military and criminal experience (not to mention their Chicago armamentarium), confront white racists with startling boldness, openly threatening Hogwood. Jordan brings them both to distinctive life with his powerful presence and a virtuosity that wears its effort lightly. The entire cast carries the action with fierce, pressurized commitment and delivers the characters' lofty thoughts and sharp-edged talk forthrightly; their performances feel conjured, not acted. Caton, a deep-

voiced singer with no prior screen credits, endows Sammie with a preternatural sense of purpose and poise; it's an extraordinary début.

To stage Jordan's dual role, for which both brothers are often together in the same frame, Coogler, relying on elaborate technology, displays a modest yet astounding craft. Perhaps his two spectacular and effects-driven movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe helped him to cultivate a feel for complex methods that, here, don't replace reality but expand it. Although Coogler's film encompasses legend and mysticism, his manner is rationally extravagant; the action, even at its most fantastical, is underpinned by audacious ideas. The enormous scope of "Sinners" provides a grand canvas for some thrilling set pieces, deftly realized by the cinematographer Autumn Durald Arkapaw, including a floridly choreographed dance-floor scene that links Club Juke's homegrown blues to other cultures and other times; an apocalyptically metaphysical conflagration; and a wild shoot-out that breaks its action for a glimpse into the beyond. (Also, as a Marvel veteran, Coogler teases that franchise's conventions to look beyond the beyond: stick around for his mid-credits and post-credits scenes.) ♦

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

- **“Madrigal”**
  By Spencer Reece | “Minnesota, I hardly know you anymore.”
- **“Beforetimes”**
  By Margot Kahn | “And there were pieces / of love but it wasn’t love—it was the right / thing for the moment.”

Poems

Madrigal

By Spencer Reece

April 21, 2025

Minnesota, I hardly know you anymore.
Who knows when grief ends—
if ever. The two who preoccupied me
have turned and gone through the door.
The land grand, the land wide, the land gold.
I knew them here. They were strong
and the man adored the woman.
They waved to me from a red barn
with hay inside, and there was an auburn field,
yes, I am sure of that, then, perhaps,
a bank of blue-brown trees. And didn't I see
a man on his knees? Didn't I see that?
Such is the powder-blue business of heaven.
Beautiful woman, ample as the country,
you stood and sighed at a simple sink.
Whatever her wish, he attempted to fulfill it.
A golden woman with a golden look.
O God, the wheat and the oak and the loon!
The substantial suburbs, then the land,
open and bright and empty.
There was much promise in those days.
The young woman wore a Dr. Zhivago fur hat,
and laughed in a contagious way.
Burgundy lips, bright teeth, tea-rose perfume.
Snow fell. I will see them both soon enough.
Minnesota, I hardly know you anymore.

Spencer Reece is an Episcopal priest. His third book of poetry, "Acts," was published in 2024.

Poems

Beforetimes

By Margot Kahn

April 21, 2025

When I run into an ex on the way
to the D.M.V., it's fall,
or maybe spring, I can't say,

but it's one of those days you go
back to school, or skip school in some small
revolt. He's wearing a white T-shirt and oh

if I'm telling the whole story, you'll
have to know he looks a hell of a lot
better than when we dated, so I'm all

having a moment, questioning my past
decisions, the spiral of my life,
on Eighth Avenue between Fourth and Fifth Street,

and the fact that maybe part of why
I dumped him had to do with the red Chevy
festooned with plastic animal figurines—

the dash, the hood, and the shelf behind the back seats
where in a taxi you'd find a box of Kleenex—
you'd see it and think *Who drives that beast*?

Those were the days of grunge, before the tech
when we all still said hi. There was a naked
parade and no one wore a skin suit—dicks

and tits hung loose, flapping in the wind
as the cyclists cruised the route up Thirty-fourth
through the neighborhood where I lived,

where D and I lay on a futon and laughed
exploring each other's orifices
like dogs, shamelessly, used every word to ask

And this? *And now*? And there were pieces
of love but it wasn't love—it was the right
thing for the moment. And now, in all senses,

it's some real universe bullshit
that we're living ten blocks apart
and, since he has the day off, he comes to sit

with me on a bench at the D.M.V.
in a windowless basement in Brooklyn.
While we're there, half the day, he tells me

he's in love with someone named Esther.
Years later, he'll marry her. But on this day
we sit in that room and play cards together

while I slip my papers in the half-moon tray
and take a number, wait for someone
behind the bulletproof glass to say

take another. And I feel only love.
I don't remember the fear of that year,
or the fear of the years that hover

before and after. I remember
the windowless room and, outside, all
the free books on the steps of stoops, flowers

in buckets at the bodega, his arms
where the shirt stops and the skin begins,

the ziggurats of oranges—the way

I buy some and carry them home
carelessly, in a flimsy plastic bag.

This is drawn from "The Unreliable Tree."
Margot Kahn is the author of "Horses That Buck: The Story of Champion Bronc Rider Bill Smith" and the début poetry collection "The Unreliable Tree."

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the April 28, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Wednesday, April 16, 2025**
  By Robyn Weintraub | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, April 16, 2025

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Robyn Weintraub

April 16, 2025

Robyn Weintraub has been constructing crosswords since 2010 and began contributing puzzles to The New Yorker in 2020. Her puzzles have appeared in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.

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