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## Goings On

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By Helen Rosner | The new restaurant, near Union Square, offers hard-to-find regional dishes.  
But you’ll have to wait in line.

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## [Goings On](#)

# Summer Is the Time for Off Broadway Comedy

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By [Helen Shaw](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Vince Aletti](#), [Dan Stahl](#), and [Sheldon Pearce](#)

July 25, 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.](#)*

**When the political activist**, comedian, and performance artist Morgan Bassichis premiered their exquisitely funny show **“Can I Be Frank?”** in New York last summer, they were already picturing a splendid return. Dragging a crummy prop staircase laboriously across the tiny club stage at La MaMa, Bassichis promised us that the show had grandeur in store. “Frank”’s director, after all, was the deft Sam Pinkleton, who, at the time, was in the middle of steering Cole Escola’s **“Oh, Mary!”** to the upper echelons on Broadway. Bassichis assured us, gravely and hilariously, that when *their* show went to Broadway, too, the resulting budget would be startling. “We’ll fly this in,” I heard them murmur, gesturing at the stairs bumping along behind them.



Illustration by Harrison Freeman

Well, the production's triumphant return is *actually* to the postage-stamp-size SoHo Playhouse (through Sept. 13), but Bassichis will surely wave such minutiae graciously aside. (Bassichis's stage persona is simultaneously that of a diva in the grand style and an anxious, rod-and-felt Muppet.) The "Frank" of the title is the groundbreaking, if now little known, comic Frank Maya, who died young, in 1995, of complications from AIDS, after achieving stardom in both avant-garde spaces downtown and on Comedy Central. Bassichis inhabits Maya, re-creating—and constantly interrupting their own re-creation of—one of Maya's manic "rants," a standup aria about sex and death, a high-octane mode which dovetails beautifully with Bassichis's own agitated, often romantic energies.

Improbably, the hitmaker Pinkleton is simultaneously directing another show by a lanky, dark-haired, chaotic comic only a few blocks away: "**ta-da!**," by Josh Sharp, at the Greenwich House Theatre (through Aug. 23). Sharp, like Bassichis, oscillates between mayhem and deep feeling: he co-wrote and co-starred in the queer absurdist gay-twins-in-love film "Dicks: The Musical," and, at Greenwich House, Sharp's monologue embeds an attempt to memorize two thousand PowerPoint slides into his tale of coming out. Pinkleton came on board after seeing a version he called an "idiotic feat of theatrical wizardry"—at this point, I would see *anything* that catches Pinkleton's eye; certainly there is no surer guarantee of silliness honed to a cutting edge.—Helen Shaw



## About Town

### Movies

Hard on the heels of the new “Superman” comes **“The Fantastic Four: First Steps,”** which shares its sentimental tone and surprisingly many of its themes, including a hostile populace, a gigantic menace, and the rescue of a baby. Here, the baby is that of Mister Fantastic (Pedro Pascal) and Invisible Woman (Vanessa Kirby), who join with their comrades, the Thing (Ebon Moss-Bachrach) and Human Torch (Joseph Quinn), to protect the infant from Silver Surfer (Julia Garner) and the colossal Galactus (Ralph Ineson). The action, set mostly in an early-sixties New York, involves faster-than-light travel, but there’s more energy in the eye-catching production design than in the drama. The director, Matt Shakman, evokes little struggle, terror, or wonder, and the fine cast delivers amiable and mild performances.—

*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

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### Dance

When journeying into the woods, it’s usually safest to be home before dark. But **“The Woods,”** an immersive concert conceived by the composer Ellis Ludwig-Leone, of the band San Fermin, and the choreographer Troy Schumacher, the artistic director of BalletCollective, extends into the night. The cavernous hall of Pioneer Works is overgrown with roots, branches, and platforms, courtesy of the designer Jason Ardizzone-West (who forested a Broadway stage for “Redwood”). Seventeen dancers and singers surround free-roaming audience members, drawing on songs by San Fermin to tell how confusion and loss can be eased by communal gathering and love.—

*Brian Seibert (Pioneer Works; July 31-Aug. 2.)*

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### Art



*“Punk Donna in Boots and Backseat,” 1982. Photograph by Ryan Weideman / Courtesy Bruce Silverstein gallery*

Since the Bruce Silverstein gallery moved to larger quarters in Chelsea earlier this year, it's put on two excellent, unusually wide-ranging group shows. The current one, **“In Sequence,”** gathers work that counters the decisive moment with a series of moments, both charged and incidental. Four Man Ray filmstrips from 1928 establish an elegant cinematic model echoed here by Barbara Morgan, F. Holland Day, Francesca Woodman, and Aaron Siskind, all of whom shatter narrative into separate frames. Ryan Weideman's black-and-white photos of the dramas, comedies, and spontaneous portrait sittings of passengers in the back seat of his taxi fill one wall: a night in the life of a New York cabbie unreeled in a series of moody noir stills with a cast of intriguing characters.—*Vince Aletti*  
*(Through Aug. 29.)*

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## Off Broadway

The 1988 movie “Heathers” came out when teens killing their classmates could still play as dark comedy, without darker echoes of reality. The current production of **“Heathers: The Musical,”** which premiered in 2013, offsets its disturbing subject with Crayola-bright costumes and performances to match, a fast-paced, funny score, and an even funnier book. At an archetypal American high school, the resourceful Veronica (Lorna Courtney) ingratiates herself with the popular girls—the Heathers—complicating her relationship with her unpopular best friend (an endearing Erin Morton) and with a Baudelaire-quoting bad boy (Casey Likes), who

wants to uncomplicate things through murder. The first casualty is the Heather-in-chief (a majestically merciless McKenzie Kurtz); then, anything—or anyone—goes.—*Dan Stahl* (*New World Stages; open run.*)

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## Movies



Abou Sangaré, in “Souleymane’s Story.” Photograph courtesy Kino Lorber

The title character of the French director Boris Lojkine’s drama **“Souleymane’s Story”** is a Guinean migrant in Paris (played by Abou Sangaré) who has applied for asylum, claiming political persecution at home. Souleymane works illegally, and at great risk, delivering food by bike while awaiting his hearing. Lojkine (who wrote the script with Delphine Agut) pays meticulous attention to Souleymane’s relentless daily struggles—his inescapable dealings with predatory middlemen, his efforts to send money home to his family and to sustain a relationship with his girlfriend there, and his labors to avoid the police. The drama is short on Souleymane’s inner life but filled with startling details: even France’s humanitarian infrastructure poses practical menaces, and the government’s bureaucratic hurdles loom like soul-crushing nightmares.—R.B. (*Film at Lincoln Center and IFC Center.*)

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## Folk Rock

Since the twenty-tens, the L.A. folk-rock band **Lord Huron** has offered a captivating take on Americana, filled with vagabonds and pariahs hoping to avoid haunted afterlives. The front man Ben Schneider has followed meticulous world-building impulses, drawing more listeners with each

album by nurturing an absorbing, cinematic sound. With “Vide Noir,” from 2018, Lord Huron’s music grew more nocturnal and cosmic, fleshing out its own arcane mythology. The band’s new album, “The Cosmic Selector Vol. 1,” continues this tradition as a lonely, regretful transient finds himself in “one alien world after another”—ghost towns, painted deserts, neon temples—its sense of the uncanny bordering on science fiction.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*Madison Square Garden; July 30.*)

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## Bar Tab

*Dan Stahl checks out a drag show at a queer hangout in Park Slope.*



*Illustration by Patricia Bolaños*

A sticker on a hand dryer in one of the gender-neutral bathrooms at Park Slope’s [Good Judy](#) reads “GIRLS GAYS THEYS.” It’s a fair description of

the queer bar's demographic. On a recent Friday night, the crowd included a young man in a cropped polo shirt and two drag queens, one trans and one cis female. At the bar counter, people practiced the arcane art of saying hi to strangers IRL, and a bartender greeted patrons as “hon” or “babe” before slinging, say, a Don’t Stop Now, a fizzy strawberry-peach cocktail—one of several appropriately fruity drinks. The friendliness was also apropos: a “good Judy” is gay slang for a close friend, in etymological homage to the vaunted Judy Garland. An underpopulated dance floor opened onto a cozy patio, where leafy trees were visible through exposed rafters. Into this oasis burst the two drag queens to announce their show, “Bad Judys.” It would start upstairs in ten minutes; your presence was kindly expected. “I didn’t wear all these clothes for nothing,” one of them said. (It was hard to tell whether she was joking: her outfit largely consisted of fish-nets cinched with pleather belts.) Upstairs, the queens lip-synched their hearts out to ABBA and SZA; when they twirled into the audience to collect tips, at least one patron was swished in the face with wig hair. They concluded their set with a game of “drag roulette,” in which spectators requested songs for a mix that the queens then performed. To the pair’s delight, a slight white man with a mustache wanted “Yo Quiero Bailar.” The performers were New Yorkers with Latin roots, they explained: one was from the South Bronx; the other was of Ecuadorian descent, by way of Queens. Where was the gentleman from? “Chattanooga.”

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## A New Yorker Quiz

*Test your knowledge of these New Yorker reads turned watches.*

- **Which fiction piece, about a man who decides to pool-hop his way home from a friend’s house, was made into a movie from 1968?**  
Hint: The adaptation stars [Burt Lancaster](#).
- **Which story, about a rare-bloom orchid hunter and his battle with the state of Florida and its Seminole tribe, became a film in 2002?**  
Hint: The adaptation stars [Meryl Streep](#).
- **Which story, about a brilliant bank robber and prison-escape artist whose career spanned six decades, was brought to the silver screen in 2018?** Hint: The adaptation stars [Robert Redford](#).

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

- [The defining person type of 2025](#)
- [A big-book book club](#)



[Helen Shaw](#) joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.



[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of [“Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard.”](#)

[Brian Seibert](#) has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2002. He is the author of [“What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing,”](#) which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

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

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



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

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[The Food Scene](#)

# Next-Level Vietnamese at Bánh Anh Em

*The new restaurant, near Union Square, offers hard-to-find regional dishes. But you'll have to wait in line.*

By [Helen Rosner](#)

July 20, 2025



*Even in the city's flourishing Vietnamese dining scene, Bánh Anh Em stands out for its ambition and care. Photographs by Amy Lombard 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.](#)

Bánh, on the Upper West Side, is one of the city's most reliably excellent Vietnamese restaurants, a beacon in an otherwise dull food neighborhood. It's a sunny, casual spot serving excellent renditions of crowd favorites: enormous bánh mì stuffed with pickled vegetables and fatty pork belly, rich and aromatic bowls of phở, the butter-sizzled beef-noodle dish *bún bò bo'*. A few months ago, after much anticipation, Bánh's chef-owners, Nhu Ton and John Nguyen, expanded their footprint downtown, to the East Village, with the opening of Bánh Anh Em. *Anh em* is Vietnamese for "brothers," and the two restaurants do have an unignorable shared DNA, but the downtown spot feels more ambitious, more focussed, more mature. The beef phở features long-simmered broth scented with star anise and black pepper and the chewiest, springiest noodles, made fresh daily on an enormous,

imported noodle-extruding machine whose retrofuturistic bulk crowds the space behind the bar. There are bánh-mì sandwiches, but, unlike the uptown restaurant, whose baguettes are sourced from Balthazar, Bánh Anh Em bakes its bread in-house—enormous, airy rugby balls of yeast and flour, with crackly thin crusts and a crumb as light as soufflé.

What really sets the restaurant apart, though, is its attention to Vietnamese dishes that can be hard to find in New York City—even now, in the flush of evocative, exploratory, unreservedly ambitious new Vietnamese or Vietnamese-inspired restaurants such as Măm and [Ha's Snack Bar](#). At Bánh Anh Em, you'll find such rarities as *bánh chưng chiên*, a dense cake of sticky rice filled with sweet minced pork belly, a traditional dish for the Lunar New Year, whose preparation takes two to three days. (“I don’t think anyone else in New York City is making this,” a server said, as she carefully untied the aromatic banana-leaf wrapping in which the rice and meat had steamed.) The *bún riêu*, a soup made with those marvellous fresh noodles, features an international-orange tomato broth in which swim enormous, fluffy pork-and-crab meatballs, hunks of fried tofu, and slices of crispy pork. An order of the *bánh mì pate*, a style of sandwich that’s a specialty of the northeastern Vietnamese city of Haiphong, comprises two petite loaves, each filled just enough—not overstuffed, not mega-smeared—with smooth, sweet, funky pork pâté fluffed up with pork-floss batting. They come with a dipping dish of fermented sauce, hot and sour, to slice through all that richness, though I recommend taking your first bite without it: the crust of the bread shatters against your teeth, the crumb pulls tenderly, and the meaty filling reveals a potent, symphonic intensity.

Several precious feet of space in the restaurant’s trim open kitchen are dedicated to a volcanically hot charcoal grill, to properly impart the smoke and char that give the sweetness of so many dishes a dimensional, toffee-like edge. There are few things on this earth quite so satisfying as a Vietnamese pork chop, sliced cutlet-thin and bathed in sugar and fish sauce, cooked quickly to exquisite tenderness over blistery coals; that same heat, applied in the lightest kiss to meaty oysters on the half shell, ruffles their edges and merges their briny liquor with the scallion oil drizzled on top. The touch of the grill is felt in every corner of the room, like a high-sillage perfume made of the primal, appetite-turbocharging molecules of smoke

and meat and sweetness. The space feels sturdy; I recall colors and comfortable seats and murals and plants, though to be honest the vividity of the food largely stole my attention from the room. I did note the nostalgic primary-color polka dots on the water glasses, and the wiggly wooden chairs carved with jaunty little rosettes, and the scalloping curve of round-table banquettes along one side of the dining area. The kitchen seemed to be just teetering on the edge of overwhelm—the menu’s lone dessert, on my visits, was never available—and the overarching feeling in the restaurant is one of joyous urgency.

As always with great new restaurants these days, getting a table is a bit of an investment, though Bánh Anh Em takes the fundamentally democratic approach of allowing no reservations at all. Instead, in the hour before opening, a line grows to the corner, and by the time the doors unlock there’s a digital wait list, which often stretches to ninety minutes or more. As an inveterate line loather, I can say with authority that it’s totally worth it. Put in your name, and then wander around for a drink somewhere or browse the racks at the ritzy secondhand shop two doors down. Those truly allergic to delayed gratification can order takeout online, from a slightly abridged menu, though be forewarned that those glorious bánh mì start to lose their vividity as they vegetate inside their packaging, the distinct textures and temperatures devolving, with each ticking second, from extraordinary to average; if you’re ordering a sandwich to go, plan to tear into it immediately.

### Helen, Help Me!

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

Dining in, you get the pleasure of dishes not available on the to-go menu. Among these is *bánh ướt chõng*, a photo-ready centerpiece that’s a specialty of Chef Ton’s, originating from her home town of Buôn Ma Thuột. Its arrival involves some spectacle: first, a vertical rack featuring half a dozen stacked plates lands at your table, each dish draped with an open sheet of soft rice crêpes strewn with golden ribbons of fried shallot; moments later, more plates of varying sizes appear, holding an array of potential fillings: long, thin planks of grilled pork jowl, smoky and sweet; strips of pink cured

sausage, salty and funky; pickled mustard greens; fresh cucumber; green mango; a mountain of herbs, as well as an assortment of sauces. It's a pick-and-mix delight, playful and unself-conscious, even if the whole towered presentation feels a little stumpy. Just as theatrical—and perhaps even more thrilling—is the restaurant's turmeric-marinated catfish, the fish cut into hunks and twice-cooked: first, with a crisping swim in the kitchen's deep fryer, offstage in the kitchen, then at the table, in a sizzling skillet set over a portable burner. The pan is filled with a garden of herbs and green onions, which give off a transportive perfume that lingers—in your memory, on your fingertips, in the spring in your step as you leave, with vows to return. ♦



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

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# The Talk of the Town

- **What to Do When the Supreme Court Rules the Wrong Way**

By Amy Davidson Sorkin | The blows have been coming weekly, as Trump tries to ransack the Constitution. Yet recent Court history shows that what feels like the end can be a beginning.

- **Trump's Birthday Parade Was a Hollywood Job**

By Alex Carp | When the reality-TV President needed to outfit his martial procession, organizers turned to props once used by Mel Gibson, Paul Giamatti, and a Dodge car commercial.

- **Dolce & Gabbana's Spartacus Moment**

By D. T. Max | Fresh from trussing Lauren Sánchez for her Venetian wedding, the designing duo hit Rome for their annual Alta Moda couture extravaganza.

- **The Joy of Cooking (for Gertrude Stein)**

By Anna Russell | To launch her new biography of the often impenetrable author, Francesca Wade presided over a literary feast devised by Alice B. Toklas.

- **From "I, Tonya" to Chris Farley, Pound by Pound**

By Michael Schulman | Need a meaty, clodish, yet affable Everyman who can act? Paul Walter Hauser knows how to own the body type.

[Comment](#)

# What to Do When the Supreme Court Rules the Wrong Way

The blows have been coming weekly, as Trump tries to ransack the Constitution. Yet recent Court history shows that what feels like the end can be a beginning.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

July 27, 2025



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

In February, 1983, lawyers for the American Civil Liberties Union in Georgia faced a dilemma. After years of looking, they believed that they had found the ideal plaintiff to challenge a state law against “the offense of sodomy,” which carried a sentence of one to twenty years. He was Michael Hardwick, a twenty-eight-year-old bartender who had been arrested after a police officer, following up on an old ticket for drinking in public, came into his home and found him having oral sex with another man. No one involved was a minor, or a sex worker, or afraid of being outed—Hardwick

was openly gay. And he'd immediately asked the officer a question that many jurors might have: "What are you doing in my bedroom?" An A.C.L.U. lawyer later said that it was "the best fact pattern we will probably ever get in a sodomy law case." But, perhaps for that very reason, the Fulton County district attorney stalled on bringing it to trial. So the A.C.L.U. sued to force the issue: it was the eighties, a decade and a half after Stonewall; Georgia's law was archaic and cruel. It was past time.

Yet when the case, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, came before the Supreme Court, in 1986, a 5–4 majority upheld the law—a profound shock for many people in and outside the gay community. As Martin Padgett writes in a new book, "The Many Passions of Michael Hardwick," some factors contributing to the defeat were specific to that period, including the rise of Reaganism, fearmongering about *aids*, and the personal pique of Justice Lewis Powell, who later said that he had found the whole business "frivolous." But its lessons may be useful in these unsteady days, too, with our own uncivil Court.

President Donald Trump is trying to ransack the Constitution, and the Supreme Court's conservative majority too often appears to be either complacent or just lost. The blows come weekly, even daily, with headlines about, say, the Court permitting the deportation, without adequate due process, to South Sudan of migrants with no connection to that country. The Court has also allowed Trump to begin dismantling the Department of Education, and issued rulings constraining trans rights. Most remarkably, in *Trump v. CASA*, a decision whose declared purpose was to stop lower-court judges from issuing nationwide, or "universal," injunctions—in itself a reasonable enough move, as such injunctions have been misused in partisan ways—the conservative Justices acted as if there might be some constitutional mystery about the citizenship of babies born in the United States. There is not, under the plain language of the Fourteenth Amendment. "Shamefully," as Justice Sonia Sotomayor put it in a scathing dissent, the majority seemed too timid to say so.

There have been wins; in a case now known as *W.M.M. v. Trump*, the Court, ruling after midnight, temporarily blocked some deportations. But there are more tough fights ahead, involving universities, law firms, cities,

and, crucially, Trump’s ability to assert that the U.S. is under invasion by foreign forces, which would give him certain wartime powers. There will likely be more losses.

One lesson of Bowers, however, is that what feels like the end can be a beginning. Sarah Schulman’s “Let the Record Show,” from 2021, a history of the *act up* coalition, describes how going to a Bowers protest was often the first step on a path to activism. The streets were not the only venue; advocates also pursued parallel campaigns at the ballot box and in state courts and legislatures. The Court finally overturned Bowers in 2003, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, but the Georgia Supreme Court had thrown out the state law in question five years earlier. The lawsuits need to keep coming.

The birthright-citizenship question will surely be back in the Court soon. It was prompted by Trump’s January 20th executive order to begin denying citizenship to babies born to mothers who have either no legal status or a status that is lawful but temporary and to fathers who are neither citizens nor green-card holders. Lower-court judges quickly blocked this wildly illegal order by issuing universal injunctions. The *CASA* decision, written by Amy Coney Barrett, took that particular legal tool out of their hands, saying that those judges could give “complete relief” (a legal term for remedying harm) only to the parties before them, and to no one else. Some observers feared that only children with a lawyer ready would be able to secure their citizenship. Thankfully, that worry has abated.

For one thing, an option left standing in what Sotomayor called “the rubble” of *CASA* is a class-action suit, which she urged the parents of affected babies “to file promptly.” Such suits, in which a small number of plaintiffs are recognized as representatives of a larger group, have a longer and far sounder track record than do universal injunctions, which have become common only in recent years. *Brown v. Board of Education*, for instance, was a class-action suit. (Justice Thurgood Marshall, who argued *Brown* as a young lawyer, dissented in *Bowers*.)

Sotomayor’s advice was heeded: on July 10th, a federal judge in New Hampshire provisionally certified a class of all babies targeted by Trump’s order born on or after February 20th, when it originally would have gone into effect, and enjoined its enforcement against any of them. The class-

representative babies are known in court papers as Matthew, born in Florida in March, and Sarah, born in Utah in April. The A.C.L.U. and others have also brought a class-action suit on behalf of all detainees at Alligator Alcatraz—the actual name of the now notorious migrant-detention facility in Florida—on the ground that they don’t have access to lawyers.

In addition, the plaintiffs in *CASA* included twenty-two states, and Barrett herself came frustratingly close to acknowledging that complete relief for *them* would require something very much like a universal injunction. The alternative could be a dizzying situation in which people lost or gained their citizenship as they crossed state lines. But Barrett left that call to the lower courts. Indeed, last Wednesday, in a case brought by Washington, Arizona, Illinois, and Oregon, the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit blocked the order nationwide—at least for now—finding that states would otherwise be in an “impossible” position.

The Court’s conservative majority seems at times uncomfortable with the position that Trump has put it in. It has largely expressed this unease by being avoidant—focussing on ancillary technical issues, sending questions back to lower courts, or deferring decisions to another day. But the Justices can’t procrastinate forever, unless they’re ready for a constitutional crisis. The danger is that some of them may be. ♦



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[Amy Davidson Sorkin](#) has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2014. She has been at the magazine since 1995, and, as a senior editor for many years, focussed on national security, international reporting, and features.

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[\*\*Make-Believe Dept.\*\*](#)

# Trump's Birthday Parade Was a Hollywood Job

When the reality-TV President needed to outfit his martial procession, organizers turned to props once used by Mel Gibson, Paul Giamatti, and a Dodge car commercial.

By [Alex Carp](#)

July 28, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Los Angeles's big prop shops can supply a thousand films and TV shows a year, outfitting crime procedurals to Bible epics with satchels, spears, and pogo sticks. This spring, a manager at such a shop got a request for help with a different kind of production.

“One of our salespeople picked up a cold call,” a firm manager said recently. The unknown dialer wanted to equip sixteen hundred soldiers in the style of every major U.S. war. “The Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World Wars One and Two, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf. The helmets, the weapons, everything they’re carrying,” the manager said. The caller wanted it in three weeks, in Washington, D.C. “We were sort of treating it as a believe-it-when-you-see-it kind of thing,” the manager went on.

Nevertheless, four of his staffers were soon in the nation’s capital, acting as weapons specialists and prop masters at Donald Trump’s June 14th birthday parade. “At first, we were just told it was the Army’s two hundred and fiftieth anniversary,” the manager said. “Which, objectively, it was.” Then the staff realized that they were outfitting the Presidential birthday spectacle.

Some of the props parading past the President, who rose to fame as a star of reality TV, had their own television pasts. For instance, cartridge boxes had previously supplied Paul Giamatti when he played a mossy-toothed John Adams in a 2008 miniseries. Canteens had been carried by Mel Gibson and his castmates in Roland Emmerich’s 2000 action flick, “The Patriot.” Other bits and bobs had been seen on the History Channel, furnishing the Continental Army and, on the CW, a vampire who deployed with First World War infantry in France.

The President might have recognized the khaki-colored field gear filing by, which had appeared in the 2020 HBO reboot of “Perry Mason,” starring Matthew Rhys. Flashback scenes show Mason as an officer in the First World War. “They rented, I think, probably eighty-five belt equipment sets from us,” another prop manager said. “They did a trench-warfare scene where they charged the German trench.” (Trump is likely a fan of the old Raymond Burr classic; in 2023, he angrily posted on Truth Social that court testimony against him by his former fixer Michael Cohen was like a “Petty [sic] Mason episode.”)

None of those productions, however, had a thousand soldiers in one place at the same time. The shop manager who first received the call set up a two-thousand-square-foot staging area in a warehouse, sorting the requested items by era. “You need to know when a rifle should be an M1 Garand and

when it should be a carbine,” he said. He and his staff forged buckles for Revolutionary War shoulder slings—he has an in-house fabrication shop—and painted helmets in a period-correct shade of green. “Eventually, we treated it the same as if it was a movie,” he said.

Just before the parade, the manager dispatched a platoon of weapons specialists and prop masters to D.C. to receive and prepare the gear, which was shipped by bonded carrier. The number of soldiers had been downsized. (The war on terror was nixed close to showtime.) Every soldier had a personal fitting. “You want to make sure that, you know, no one was putting a harness on backward,” the manager continued. “Fitting a thousand people took less time than you might think. It was the Army, you know? There wasn’t a lot of horsing around.”

At least four prop or wardrobe companies participated in the extravaganza. (The managers requested not to be identified.) One manager regularly provides free prop service flags to a local Memorial Day celebration. “I’m sure parade-goers are sitting there, like, ‘Oh, these are the sacred flags that belong to the regiments of the state of California!’ ” she said. “What they don’t realize is that one was in ‘Dick,’ ” the 1999 comedy, in which Kirsten Dunst and Michelle Williams find themselves accidentally mixed up in Watergate. “And those other ones were on ‘The West Wing.’ ”

One prop-house manager who worked on the Trump parade mentioned a favorite job of his: outfitting a 2010 TV commercial for the Dodge Challenger. “Go to YouTube and type in ‘Dodge commercial George Washington,’ ” he said. In the ad, over elegiac fiddle music, a fleet of Dodge Challengers speeds through a bucolic landscape and scatters a regiment of musket-bearing redcoats. Cut to a grim-faced George Washington behind the wheel of the lead Challenger, which has a big American flag sticking out of the window. “The belt, the equipment, the flag—all that stuff’s ours!” the manager said. “You see the canteen? The haversack and the bayonet belt? That’s the same stuff that we sent to the parade.”

The commercial ends with a voice-over. “Here’s a couple of things America got right: cars and freedom.” The manager gave a short laugh. ♦

*Alex Carp is a research editor at the Times Magazine.*

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[Rome Postcard](#)

# Dolce & Gabbana's Spartacus Moment

Fresh from trussing Lauren Sánchez for her Venetian wedding, the designing duo hit Rome for their annual Alta Moda couture extravaganza.

By [D. T. Max](#)

July 28, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The first presentation in Dolce & Gabbana's annual couture extravaganza—a display of its fine-jewelry line Alta Gioielleria—was supposed to take place on a summer's eve at Hadrian's Villa, in Tivoli, near Rome. At 6 P.M., the gods sent a rare thunderstorm. Hadrian hasn't had a roof on his house

for almost fifteen hundred years, so the designers delayed the glittering affair, waiting for a reversal of *fortuna*.

The label's clients, almost five hundred of whom had gathered from more than two dozen countries, were happy to wait. Back at the Hotel de la Ville, four Floridian members of the hard core drank champagne and Hugo spritzes and eyed the sky in their respective Dolce getups: Suzy Buckley wore a purple sequin gown. Krista Rosenberg was in silver sequins, from a 2024 collection. Lydia Touzet had on a coppery number bought at the New York boutique. Eilah Campbell-Beavers wore a sequin ensemble, too, but crowned it with a tiara. The husbands wore—well, who cares?

Dolce & Gabbana is known for projecting optimism, and the women remarked that, weather-wise, they'd endured worse. In 2021, there'd been a hailstorm before the Alta Sartoria show, in Venice. Buckley recalled, "We got the strangest text alerting us that transportation was going to be moved two hours *earlier* than expected." Scores of loyalists had to scramble to reschedule their hair and makeup appointments.

Isabella Rossellini, an old friend of the designers', walked into the hotel lounge; heads swivelled. Later, she considered the shimmering sea of décolleté emerging from tight bodices. "Dresses like that," she said, "I can't do those anymore, at seventy-three." She had on a flowy D&G jumpsuit in floral-patterned crêpe de Chine, a legend in pajamas.

With rain back at Hadrian's place bathing the visage of the mighty statue of Mars, the event looked like it would be scuttled. Worries that Domenico Dolce, half of the designing duo, was likewise in tears were contradicted by one of the brand's top American clients, Shawn Goodman. (Her Instagram handle is @dolcevitatoo.) She'd received a text from Dolce's partner, Guilherme. "We're cancelling," she quoted aloud. "What can we do?"



*"Welcome to . . . Elizabethan Park!"*

Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

The next night, at the Forum, only Beethoven thundered—from overhead speakers. With the sky purpling, the throng of clients (plus Cher) was sated. A legion of models walked a runway laid atop the Via Sacra, showing ninety new looks: a shiny gladiator's belt spelling out "*Veni Vidi Vici*," golden breastplates, a Trevi Fountain coat with rippling chiffon for water. Two actors hired to do Spartacus-style cosplay in velvet cloaks fell from their posts in the heat. A drone droned overhead. The faithful fans stood and applauded: we who are about to buy salute you.

Afterward, a swarm of black S.U.V.s ferried guests to the Hotel de Russie for dinner. There, Goodman, who is sixty-eight, reminisced about buying her first piece of Dolce & Gabbana, a pin-striped suit with corset underneath, around 1990. The brand, she said, has always fit her both physically and mentally. "I'm a little bit rock and roll for my age," she said, "but I love the beauty." She wore a gold-embroidered gown and gold piqué slippers—"All Alta Moda." Goodman's love runs so deep that her daughter allowed her to name her granddaughter Dolce. "If she were to marry Domenico Dolce's nephew Alfonzo," Goodman said, "she'd be Dolce Dolce!"

The night before the rainout, Goodman had attended an Alta Moda welcome party. "So I was dancing in my two-hundred-thousand-dollar gown," she said. "All of a sudden, my partner twirled me, and *whoops!*" A shoulder strap snapped—couture wardrobe malfunction. "I ran over to

Domenico and said, ‘Fashion emergency!’ ” she recalled. Dolce evaluated the damage with a tailor’s eye. “He says, ‘Oh, O.K. Shawn, turn around.’ He took the other strap, ripped it off the dress, and he tied the two in a knot in the back and made me a halter dress.”

The morning after the Forum show, clients would file into a showroom at the Westin Excelsior to place orders and put in bids on the one-of-a-kind garments. Goodman had lined up the first appointment—eight-forty-five. ♦



*D.T. Max* has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2010. His books include “[\*The Family That Couldn’t Sleep: A Medical Mystery\*](#)” and “[\*Finale: Late Conversations with Stephen Sondheim\*](#).”

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[The Literary Life](#)

# The Joy of Cooking (for Gertrude Stein)

To launch her new biography of the often impenetrable author, Francesca Wade presided over a literary feast devised by Alice B. Toklas.

By [Anna Russell](#)

July 28, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Janet Malcolm once remarked that most well-read people have not read Gertrude Stein's "The Making of Americans." Famously inscrutable, Stein's opus exceeds nine hundred pages and sets out to tell the story of "everyone

who ever was or is or will be living.” When Malcolm was tackling the novel, she chopped it into six parts with a kitchen knife.

In London the other evening, a gaggle of literary types took up knives and forks to honor a new biography of Stein, Francesca Wade’s absorbing “*Gertrude Stein: An Afterlife*.” The book, which is out in the U.S. in October, bills itself as a “literary detective story.” It details both Stein’s life —her bohemian friendships, her years of toil and eventual fame—and the fastidious creation of her legacy, a task overseen by her longtime partner, Alice B. Toklas.

However unreadable Stein’s work, in life she was the approachable one; Toklas watched over their raucous parties in nineteen-twenties Paris with a beady eye, artfully guiding undesirable guests away from Stein. Sharp, private, often silent, Toklas would serve magnificent dish after magnificent dish to guests. After Stein’s death, in 1946, friends realized that they had almost never heard Toklas speak. But they had eaten her wonderful food: carp stuffed with chestnuts, braised pigeon *en croûte*, bouillabaisse, and flaming peaches. Toklas believed in going the extra mile. Once, she served Picasso a poached striped bass decorated with an elaborate design of sieved hard-boiled eggs and red mayonnaise, only to have the artist suggest that the dish would be better suited to Matisse.

In her later years, Toklas carefully guarded Stein’s legacy, rebuffing, and sometimes actively thwarting, biographers. In 1952, though, she granted rare access to a young researcher named Leon Katz. Nearly every day for four months, Katz interviewed Toklas about her life with Stein, amassing a trove of coveted material. But—to the dismay of Stein scholars—Katz never published his notes. When he died, in 2017, his papers, including the notes, went to Yale, where Wade tracked them down. Her book is the first major biography to make use of Katz’s legendary work.

What did Toklas reveal? First, that she was utterly devoted to Stein. “She felt Stein was doing something important and new—she didn’t quite know what it was at first, but she believed in it,” Wade said at the book event. Also, that she herself was indispensable. “What Toklas did for Stein for the rest of her life was create the conditions, material, domestic, and also sort of

emotional,” which allowed Stein to work. Stein without Toklas is “totally impossible to conceive,” Wade said.

Speaking with Katz opened Toklas up to the possibility of writing her own book, an idea she had long rejected. (Stein was the writer; she was the cook.) In 1953, during a bout of jaundice that left her bedridden, she wrote “The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book,” a collection of recipes and memories from her life with Stein. In the book, which became a best-seller, she’s self-deprecating, ending with the sentence “As if a cook-book had anything to do with writing.” “It fits perfectly with her desire to stay in the shadows,” Wade said. “But it’s beautifully written and full of memoir.”

The dinner for Wade’s book was held at the restaurant Toklas—named after Alice B.—and featured a menu of its namesake’s recipes. Two long tables had been laid for a hundred guests with white linen and roses. (Stein: “A rose is a rose is a rose.”) Guests sipped Kir Royales and bought Stein T-shirts that read “Literary Freak.” Wade had consulted on the menu. “There’s not very many drink recipes,” she said, of Toklas’s book. Besides the black-currant cocktail, “it’s all hot chocolate, and one sloe gin, which takes seven years.”

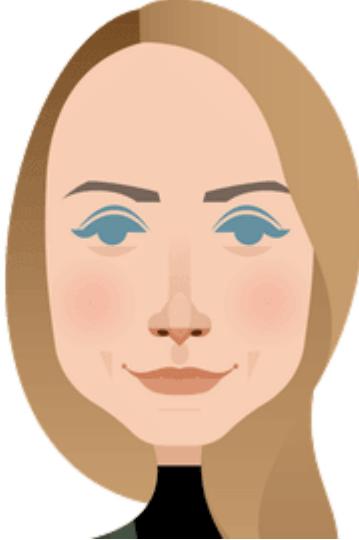
A chef for the dinner, Alex Jackson, had revisited the cookbook. “I think ‘eccentric’ is the right word,” he said. “Some of the recipes are perfectly simple, and some of them are just bonkers and fantastic.” He briefly considered, and then rejected, *gigot de la clinique*, a dish that requires using a syringe to inject a leg of mutton with Cognac and orange juice for eight days, and then roasting it. (“Like, who would do that?”) He was intrigued by Picasso’s fish, but he couldn’t picture the mayo design. Ultimately, he settled on a summery menu of mushroom sandwiches, oysters Rockefeller, and eggplant à la Provençale, followed by pink pompadour bass and chicken à l’estragon, with a Mâcon cake to finish.

“She says to decorate the chicken with tarragon in an Indian-tree pattern,” Jackson said, puzzled.

The food was served on great sharing platters: the oysters on a bed of sand, the tarragon leaves in a treelike tangle, the Mâcon cake with candied

angelica. One guest wondered aloud over Stein's remark "Forget grammar and think about potatoes." "What was that about?" she asked.

"Often, the real world crept into Stein's prose," Wade replied. Perhaps Stein was hungry? "I mean, writing is hungry work," she said. ♦



*[Anna Russell](#), a contributing writer for The New Yorker, began writing for the magazine in 2016. She lives in London.*

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[The Pictures](#)

# From “I, Tonya” to Chris Farley, Pound by Pound

Need a meaty, cloddish, yet affable Everyman who can act? Paul Walter Hauser knows how to own the body type.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

July 28, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The actor Paul Walter Hauser emerged onto Fifth Avenue to pick up an açai bowl from a guy on a bicycle, then headed back up to his hotel room. He wore slippers, shorts, and a black tank top that exposed his biceps tattoos: on the right arm, his nineties comedy heroes (“Short & Stern & Farley &

Varney & Carrey & Williams"); on the left, "1 Corinthians, 6:19-20" ("Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit"). "I was in a weight-loss challenge with my brother-in-law," he explained. "We said whoever loses has to get that tattoo, which is very like my family: just hella religious and extreme decisions. I lost thirty-five pounds. Then I booked 'I, Tonya' and had to put it all back on."

"I, Tonya," in which Hauser played one of the bumbling lowlifes who plans an attack on Nancy Kerrigan, was his breakout role. Since then, he's been a dognapper ("Cruella"), a Klansman ("BlacKkKlansman"), a serial killer ("Black Bird," for which he rapped his Emmy acceptance speech), the emotion Embarrassment ("Inside Out 2"), and the title character in Clint Eastwood's "Richard Jewell," about the security guard who discovered a pipe bomb at the 1996 Olympics and was then falsely suspected of planting it. Hauser has cornered the market on a certain kind of meaty, cloddish, yet affable Everyman, his roles a confederacy of scene-stealing dunces. This summer, he plays Liam Neeson's police sidekick in a "Naked Gun" reboot, a lovesick ranch hand in "Americana," and Mole Man, a subterranean supervillain, in "The Fantastic Four: First Steps."

The promotional marathon was wearing on him, so Hauser had arranged for an I.V. drip that morning, to "give me a jolt." Carla Nilo, who runs a mobile service called the Glow Café, arrived in his room. Hauser was getting the Glow Latte, which contained a high dose of Vitamin C and other nutrients, and guaranteed a "lit-from-within look."

Hauser flung his bare feet on a sofa and held out an arm. "One litre of I.V. fluid is equivalent to drinking two gallons of water," Nilo told him, as she set up a fluid bag on a stand.

"Oh, praise God," Hauser said. He'd been dehydrated after starting Zepbound, a weight-loss drug. But he didn't want to lose too much weight, because he's been cast as Chris Farley in a bio-pic. "Part of playing Chris is owning the body type," he said. His stout figure has been a mixed blessing in Hollywood: "The very thing I begrudge has also given me opportunity."

Nilo inserted a needle, as Hauser lay back and ate his açai. He grew up in Saginaw, Michigan, the son of a Lutheran minister. "I tell people I'm a

Jesus guy, because ‘Christian’ just sounds like you love Donald Trump and you’re terrified of gay marriage,” he said. When he was sixteen, he started doing standup at bars and church functions, riffing on the McDonald’s mascots. (“The Hamburglar—he’s like a homeless Zorro.”) At twenty-two, he auditioned to be an extra in the movie “Virginia.” He told the director, Dustin Lance Black, that his Oscar speech for “Milk”—in which Black had promised queer youth that God loves them—had moved him to tears. Black ended up giving him a speaking role.

Hauser relocated to L.A. and booked a few sitcom parts. But he ran out of money and had to return home and work at a bowling alley. “It’s the most demoralizing feeling ever, to be giving people their bowling shoes while they’re quoting a line you said on television,” he said. In a funk, he drank and smoked pot. (He’s now three years and nine months sober.) He hit three hundred pounds and contracted gout. A few years later, he tried L.A. again, sleeping on a kitchen floor in a house with five roommates. “Shit was gnarly,” he said. At auditions, “it was always ‘Can you be a Cheeto-dust-fingered, basement-dwelling idiot?’ ” Then he booked “I, Tonya” and had to regain weight to look like the “sonuvabitch” he was playing. “Taking it off took months. Putting it on was, like, three weeks of just ice cream and whiskey and bread.”

“I love bread,” Nilo chimed in.

“Ah, bread,” Hauser said. “Our dear friend and foe.” Lately, he’s getting in shape by pursuing another dream: pro wrestling. After fighting in a charity match, he’s teamed up with Major League Wrestling and now has a signature move: the Haus Arrest. “I wrap my arms around the body, and then I pull them forward, and they land face-first onto the mat, because I have them in a straitjacket,” he explained.

I.V. done, Nilo bandaged his arm. The drip had given Hauser a “surge of confidence,” he reported, but the açai-Zepbound combo wasn’t sitting well. “I’m in hell right now,” he said, as his stomach squealed. “Fuckin’ hell.” ♦



*[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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# Reporting & Essays

- **[“No Tax on Tips” Is an Industry Plant](#)**

By Eyal Press | Trump’s “populist” policy is backed by the National Restaurant Association—probably because it won’t stop establishments from paying servers below the minimum wage.

- **[The Vatican Observatory Looks to the Heavens](#)**

By Rebecca Mead | It’s run by a Michigan-born Jesuit—and a meteorite expert—known as the Pope’s Astronomer.

- **[Israel’s Zones of Denial](#)**

By David Remnick | Amid national euphoria over the bombing of Iran—and the largely ignored devastation in Gaza—a question lurks: What is the country becoming?

- **[Mexico’s Molar City Could Transform My Smile. Did I Want It To?](#)**

By Burkhard Bilger | More than a thousand dentists have set up shop in Los Algodones. Their patients are mostly Americans who can’t afford the U.S.’s dental care.

**Dept. of Labor**

# “No Tax on Tips” Is an Industry Plant

*Trump’s “populist” policy is backed by the National Restaurant Association—probably because it won’t stop establishments from paying servers below the minimum wage.*

By [Eyal Press](#)

July 28, 2025



*The poverty rate among tipped workers is more than double the rate of other employees. Illustration by Till Lauer*

Hearings before the Commerce Committee of the Arizona House of Representatives normally draw a modest crowd of lobbyists in suits. On March 19, 2024, a throng of people in more casual attire appeared. They wore matching green T-shirts adorned with the message “Save Our Tips.” The slogan caught the eye of Analise Ortiz, a Democrat on the committee. She assumed that the visitors were bartenders and waitstaff who had come to voice opposition to a bill that could lower their salaries.

The bill was called the Tipped Workers Protection Act, a name that disguised its true purpose. The legislation, if approved, would place an initiative on that November’s ballot to amend the Arizona constitution so that employers could pay tipped workers twenty-five per cent less than the state minimum wage, then \$14.35 an hour. In Arizona, the minimum wage

for such workers was already \$11.35 an hour. The formula being proposed would allow employers to pay tipped workers just \$10.76 an hour—a pay cut that would reduce a full-time server’s annual salary by twelve hundred dollars.

Ortiz, who had worked at a restaurant to help pay for college, knew from experience that servers were vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment. She’d noticed that the chief supporter of the Tipped Workers Protection Act was the Arizona Restaurant Association, an industry lobby that represents the interests of owners. It had persuaded Republicans to introduce the measure as a way of blocking another ballot initiative, the One Fair Wage Act, which called for raising Arizona’s minimum wage to eighteen dollars an hour and insuring that by 2028 tipped workers would be paid that amount (without relinquishing their gratuities).

As the hearing progressed, Ortiz expected the workers in the green T-shirts to explain why they deserved a raise or, at the very least, did not want their salaries lowered. But, when three members of the group came forward to testify, all expressed support for the Tipped Workers Protection Act and opposition to the One Fair Wage Act, which they portrayed as an effort to steal their tips. A waitress named Jaime Sarli said, “If restaurants had to pay us more money and eliminated tips, why would I want to do this?” She explained that she made such “great money” as a server that she’d turned down salaried managerial positions. “I don’t want to work a minimum-wage job,” she said.

Ortiz, who is now a state senator, told me that, as she listened, she “became confused.” The One Fair Wage Act proposed guaranteeing servers a full minimum wage that would still be supplemented by tips. She found it odd that workers would instead promote a bill that cut their base salaries, especially at a time when the price of virtually everything—food, gas, rent—was rising. Ortiz subsequently came across a video, produced by a YouTuber called HistorySock, that clarified what she’d witnessed. The Save Our Tips activists all had ties to the Arizona Restaurant Association, the video revealed, and none were entry-level servers. Sarli, the waitress who’d testified about her fantastic tips, was an assistant manager at Streets of New York, a pizza chain whose owner, Lorrie Glaeser, was the vice-chair of the

Arizona Restaurant Association's board. Beth Cochran, who testified after Sarli, was the vice-president of Snooze A.M. Eatery, a breakfast chain, and served on the same board. "These people were management and were advocating for a bill that would allow them to undercut their own workforce," Ortiz said. "That really upset me."

Some workers at the hearing did speak against the Tipped Workers Protection Act. Meschelle Hornstein, a waitress at a restaurant in the Phoenix airport and a member of the trade union Unite Here, said that the measure "would harm the working-class people that make up the majority of tip positions." Her testimony didn't persuade the Republicans on the committee. One of them said, "Except for some of the unions, it's clear the employees are happy with the situation as it is." This message was echoed by Dan Bogert, the chief operating officer of the Arizona Restaurant Association, who urged the committee to "really just listen to the workers who are *here*." He didn't mention that the slogan on the green T-shirts matched the name of a new political-action committee, Save Our Tips AZ, that his organization was funding. According to a form filed with the Arizona secretary of state last October, the *PAC* received nearly a quarter of a million dollars from the Arizona Restaurant Association in the months that followed. The form was signed by Bogert, who was listed as the *pac*'s treasurer.

Until recently, tipped workers were politically all but invisible. This changed last summer, when Donald Trump appeared at a campaign rally in Las Vegas. Nevada was a swing state with many tipped employees in hotels, night clubs, restaurants, and casinos. Trump had a message for such workers: "You're going to be very happy, because when I get to office we are going to not charge taxes on tips."

Had Trump abandoned this pledge after winning Nevada and the general election, few observers would have been shocked. During his first term, the Department of Labor had hardly championed the interests of tipped workers, issuing a proposal that would have enabled restaurant owners to pocket pooled tips, under the guise of redirecting them to untipped, back-of-house workers. The Labor Department didn't lay out what this would cost tipped workers, perhaps because it didn't want the public to know. An

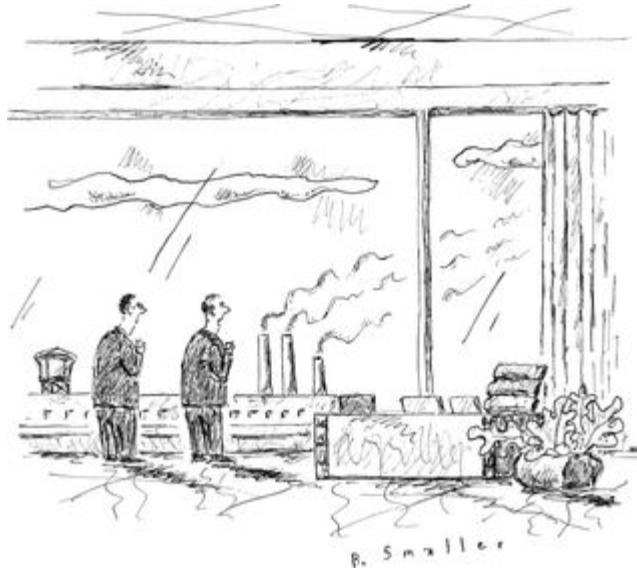
analysis by the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal think tank, estimated that it could deprive employees of nearly six billion dollars in tips annually. (After a public outcry, Congress blocked the move.)

Trump recently claimed that the idea of eliminating taxes on tips was inspired by an exchange he'd had with a waitress he'd encountered at a dinner in Vegas. "She happened to be beautiful," he told a group of blue-collar workers who were invited to the White House in June. "And she looked at me—she said, 'Sir, there should be no tax on tips.' " This was "the coolest thing I've ever heard." The idea was included in Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which he signed on July 4th; it was one of the few items in the package that some Democrats supported. Republicans released a video playing up the bill's benefits for people like Peggy Weir, a waitress in Indiana who praises Trump for "fighting for the working men and women." Many economists, however, consider the notion misguided. According to Yale's Budget Lab, thirty-seven per cent of tipped workers don't make enough money to pay any federal income taxes. Under the new law, casino dealers earning six-figure salaries with tips will receive large tax breaks, whereas busboys making poverty wages will get no benefit. And, though ending taxes on tips has a populist veneer, it won't cost the owners of hotels and restaurants a penny. (This may be why Trump—himself a member of this class—embraced the idea.) The policy could even encourage employers to shift more kinds of work to tipped, subminimum-wage positions—thus reducing labor costs.

In February, Congressman Steven Horsford, a Democrat from Nevada, tried to rally support for an alternative measure called the Tipped Income Protection and Support Act, a bill that advocates a different approach. In addition to ending taxes on tips, it proposes to eliminate the subminimum wage that tipped workers are paid—a rate that, in sixteen states, is just \$2.13 an hour before tips. Currently, the poverty rate among tipped workers is more than double the rate of other employees. Tipped workers are also more likely to rely on food stamps and other federal assistance.

Raising the minimum wage is popular even in red states—in 2022, voters in Nebraska, which Trump won by more than twenty points, approved a ballot measure to increase it from nine dollars to fifteen dollars an hour in the

course of four years. But raising the subminimum wage for tipped workers has proved far more challenging, owing, in no small part, to the power of the National Restaurant Association, an industry lobby that some labor advocates call “the other N.R.A.” The lobby, which has a partnership with the Arizona group and similar associations in all fifty states, emerged as a potent force in the nineteen-nineties, under the leadership of Herman Cain, previously the C.E.O. of Godfather’s Pizza. (In 2012, he unsuccessfully ran for President.) During Cain’s era, the N.R.A. helped to fight President Bill Clinton’s 1993 health-care-reform plan, which would have required restaurant owners to provide insurance to full-time employees. Later, when Clinton sought to raise the federal minimum wage from \$4.25 to \$5.15 an hour, the N.R.A. went along with the idea on the condition that the subminimum wage for tipped workers remain \$2.13. This two-tiered wage system had existed since 1966, when an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act permitted tipped workers to be paid a fixed portion of the standard minimum wage as long as gratuities covered the difference. For decades, the two rates rose in tandem. In 1996, they were decoupled, and the \$2.13 federal subminimum wage has been locked in place ever since.



*“True, only God can make a tree, but only man can make it into a cardboard box.”*  
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Robert Reich, Clinton’s first Labor Secretary, described this situation to me as “utterly outrageous.” He also called it a corporate giveaway that shifted the cost of paying restaurant workers from employers to customers and taxpayers: “American taxpayers are subsidizing the biggest restaurant

chains in the country with food stamps and other benefits that go to their tipped workers, because these workers can't afford to make it any other way."

In 2021, an amendment to raise the federal minimum wage to fifteen dollars an hour and phase out the subminimum wage for tipped workers was attached to President Joe Biden's pandemic-relief package. But the Senate parliamentarian removed the proposal from the bill, on procedural grounds. Bernie Sanders, then the Budget Committee chairman, forced a vote on the bill anyway, with the provision included. This decision sparked a furor among supposedly liberal lawmakers, according to Ari Rabin-Havt, Sanders's legislative director at the time. "I got such an incoming of shit, like nothing else I've *ever* gotten, from Democratic legislative directors about how dare I force their bosses to take this terrible vote," Rabin-Havt recalled. "I'm talking four-letter-word screaming—stuff I didn't even get when we were doing something on Israel that people didn't like." The source of the rage wasn't the raising of the federal minimum wage, a proposal that had broad support, but eliminating the subminimum wage for tipped workers and potentially incurring the wrath of the National Restaurant Association. In the end, seven Democrats and an Independent voted against the bill—among them Joe Manchin, of West Virginia, and Kyrsten Sinema, of Arizona—and the legislation was defeated, 58–42. A few weeks later, Manchin and Sinema spoke at the N.R.A.'s annual public-policy convention.

The outsized power of corporate lobbies is often attributed to their vast financial resources and to the absence of meaningful restrictions on campaign spending since the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, in 2010. According to the nonprofit OpenSecrets, which tracks money in politics, the N.R.A., during the 2024 election cycle, disbursed nearly a million dollars to various *PACs*, party committees, and candidates, money that flowed to both Democrats and Republicans. But this isn't the real source of the group's power, Rabin-Havt said. "What makes them uniquely powerful is they have a grassroots network of members and supporters," he said. "Everyone has restaurants in their districts. And all these elected officials are on the road a ton, so they're *in* these restaurants, and they use them to host fund-raisers." The N.R.A. knew, he said, that politicians were

afraid of alienating these crucial constituents. “It’s very good at politics,” he conceded.

Few people have clashed more frequently with the National Restaurant Association than Saru Jayaraman, the founder of the U.C. Berkeley Food Labor Research Center and the president of an advocacy organization called One Fair Wage. As this name suggests, the group favors eliminating subminimum wages, a goal that it has tried to advance in numerous states, including Arizona, where it led the drive to place the One Fair Wage Act on the ballot last year. The proposal never made it to the referendum stage, because the Arizona Restaurant Association filed a lawsuit challenging the validity of signatures collected in support of the idea. The alternative pushed by the A.R.A. did appear on the ballot, after Republicans on the House Commerce Committee approved it, in a party-line vote.

It was a striking illustration of the restaurant lobby’s influence; nevertheless, Arizona voters ended up rejecting the industry-backed measure, by a three-to-one margin. Jayaraman sees this as a sign that, for all the N.R.A.’s resources and connections, resistance to its agenda is growing. She has been a leader in this area since 2002, when she co-founded an organization called the Restaurant Opportunities Center to help workers who had been employed at Windows on the World, a restaurant in the World Trade Center, after 9/11. The organization was soon flooded with appeals from servers at other restaurants who complained about more systemic problems—wage theft, sexual harassment, paltry pay. Jayaraman, who is Indian American, attributes the pervasiveness of some of these problems to gender and race. The idea of tips as a substitute for wages is “a direct legacy of slavery,” she said when we met at a Mexican restaurant in the East Village. After emancipation, the practice flourished at firms such as the Pullman Company, which hired formerly enslaved men as porters but declined to pay them a salary, causing them to rely on handouts from white customers. It’s no coincidence, Jayaraman said, that immigrants and Black people are overrepresented among the ranks of tipped workers today. So, too, are women, whose dependence on tips makes them vulnerable not only to harassment but also to discrimination. In a recent book, “One Fair Wage: Ending Subminimum Pay in America,” Jayaraman cites a study revealing that, in New York, Black women at dining establishments earn eight dollars

an hour less than their white male peers, in part because customers tip them less.

The restaurant where we met is called La Palapa. Jayaraman said that she chose the place because it's an establishment that pays employees a living wage, which, she argues, is not only fair but also good for business. (The restaurant's owner, Barbara Sibley, agrees; she told me that eliminating subminimum wages had significantly reduced staff turnover.) During the pandemic, many workers at restaurants with less enlightened owners quit their jobs, Jayaraman noted, signalling their frustration with the low and erratic pay. Cities such as Chicago have since passed legislation to phase out the subminimum wage. "We are in a worker-power moment," Jayaraman said. "Finally, we are winning."

But, as she acknowledged, one of the N.R.A.'s most effective tactics has been persuading restaurant workers that "winning" entails defeating the agenda of organizations like hers. Last year, a canvasser named Mitchell Gaynor became aware of this strategy while campaigning for the passage of Ballot Question 5, a Massachusetts proposal to raise the base pay of tipped workers from \$6.75 an hour to \$15 an hour—the state minimum wage—by 2029. Gaynor, who grew up in a working-class household in the North Shore region of Massachusetts and has often worked in restaurants for meagre pay, figured that it would be easy to persuade his peers to back the proposal. Instead, he "lost friends over this," he said, as many servers became convinced that approving Question 5 would force restaurants to raise prices so high that customers would either stop tipping or stop eating out. This was a message crafted by the Massachusetts Restaurant Association—which, like all the state groups, has a written agreement with the N.R.A. that reflects a shared mission. The notion was often relayed to tipped workers directly by their bosses. One waitress told me that the owner of her restaurant pulled servers aside before a shift and urged them to "get the word out to vote no on Question 5," so that their tips wouldn't be taken away. In some restaurants and bars, signs saying "Vote No on 5" were hung in prominent places, to insure that customers got the message, too. Another waiter sent me photographs of the checks that he and his co-workers were handing out to diners. "Your Crew Votes 'NO' on Question 5," they stated at the top. (The waiter voted yes, a fact that he hid from his boss.)

The N.R.A.'s Massachusetts campaign was a huge success. In a liberal state where Elizabeth Warren, one of the Senate's fiercest champions of labor, cruised to reelection, nearly two-thirds of voters rejected Question 5. "We got our asses kicked," Gaynor said.

I recently visited the N.R.A.'s headquarters, in Washington, D.C. Sean Kennedy, the executive vice-president of public affairs, told me that it's entirely reasonable for bartenders and waitresses to fear that eliminating the "tip credit"—the difference between the minimum wage and their base pay—will be detrimental to their interests. Kennedy has a polished manner and a fluency with social policy that was honed on Capitol Hill. He was an aide to the former Democratic Missouri congressman Dick Gephardt and a special assistant for legislative affairs to President Barack Obama before becoming a corporate lobbyist. Kennedy told me that, if labor costs suddenly tripled, restaurants would need to either raise prices (which could lead customers to tip less) or hire fewer people. Both scenarios would harm the servers whom the policy was designed to help. Question 5 in Massachusetts and similar measures elsewhere have not failed because of the restaurant lobby, he insisted, but because owners and employees "recognized what was at stake and engaged their local policymakers to say, 'This is a bad idea.' "

Kennedy continued, "Every business economist has said that, if you raise the minimum wage, there's going to be a reduction in jobs that's going to be particularly intense in labor-intensive industries." For much of the twentieth century, this was indeed the prevailing view among economists. But in 1994 the *American Economic Review* published an article that challenged this belief. Its authors—David Card, who would go on to win a Nobel Prize for his research on labor markets, and Alan Krueger, then a professor at Princeton—tracked the employment levels at fast-food restaurants in New Jersey before and after the state raised its minimum wage, then compared these data with the situation in neighboring Pennsylvania, where the minimum wage hadn't changed. They found "no indication that the rise in the minimum wage reduced employment." In 2010, a team of economists examined three hundred and sixteen pairs of counties on the opposite side of state borders where, during a period of sixteen and a half years, the

minimum wage rose on one side but not on the other. They, too, found no adverse employment effects.

Michael Reich, a labor economist at U.C. Berkeley who co-authored the 2010 study, told me that most economists today no longer believe that raising the minimum wage will substantially reduce employment among low-wage workers. Doing so will cause restaurant prices to rise, he acknowledged, but the change will be far smaller than many people assume, in part because raising the minimum wage often lowers the cost of recruiting and retaining workers. In a recent policy brief, Reich examined the effects of California's adoption, in 2024, of a twenty-dollar minimum wage for fast-food workers, a policy that the N.R.A. strenuously opposed. He found that the measure has led to price increases of less than two per cent—roughly six cents on a four-dollar hamburger. In February, Reich's analysis was cited, misleadingly, by the Employment Policies Institute, which opposes raising the minimum wage. A blog published by the group quoted a sentence in which Reich made note of "a very small negative employment effect" from California's wage increase. It didn't quote the next line of the study, which explained that, when a statistical method controlling for trends in related industries and other variables was used, there was no decline in employment. The Employment Policies Institute has received funding from the N.R.A. and was founded by Richard Berman, a retired lobbyist and public-relations executive who specialized in creating nonprofit organizations that served as fronts for corporate clients, including the tobacco, alcohol, and restaurant industries.

Michael Reich's research focusses on the fast-food industry, not on independent, full-service restaurants. Such businesses would be more endangered if the tip credit were eliminated, Kennedy told me. But the claim that they would go bankrupt if they had to pay waitstaff and bartenders the full minimum wage is belied by the fact that seven states, including Alaska, Minnesota, and California, already require restaurants to do this. Sylvia Allegretto, a labor economist who studies the minimum wage, noted that people still eat out (and tip) in those states: "I'm here in Oakland, where the restaurant industry is booming and everyone tips."

In 2023, Allegretto published a study that compared “high-road” states that have no tip credit and “low-road” states, where restaurant workers get \$2.13 in base salary. In the high-road states, the poverty rate of waitstaff and bartenders was significantly lower. And restaurant jobs had not grown scarce. In fact, between 2012 and 2019, the number of businesses and the rate of employment growth in full-service restaurants were *higher* in these states.

The N.R.A. claims that there’s no need for restaurants to pay tipped workers the full minimum wage, because servers already do so well. “You can bring home a really impressive paycheck,” Kennedy told me. Before we met, the organization had sent me some industry data, including this statistic: “The median hourly income of a tipped server is \$27/hour, with the top earners making over \$41/hour and the low end making \$19/hour.” It came from a survey of more than two thousand full-service restaurants that the N.R.A. itself conducted. No economist would regard a lobbying group as a reliable source for such information. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median hourly pay of waiters and waitresses (including tips) was \$15.36 in 2023. A quarter of full-time servers earn less than twenty-four thousand dollars a year. Although waiters in fine-dining establishments can make several times this amount, there are far more low earners who work at places such as *IHOP* and Cracker Barrel. Restaurant servers are also much less likely to receive health insurance, paid sick leave, and other benefits than other private-sector employees.

Allegretto acknowledged that small, family-owned restaurants could “struggle disproportionately” if the tip credit were eliminated, and that these institutions helped give many communities their charm. “We definitely don’t want to lose the restaurants that make your neighborhood so wonderful to live in,” she said. But there are ways to help such businesses —lowering their tax burden during a transition period, for example. Countries that have never expected servers to rely on tips, including Italy and France, are full of family-owned restaurants. “Why are we the only country in the world doing this?” Allegretto asked. “The model we have is very unfair, and it’s not necessary.”

One afternoon, I met a bartender named Max Hawla, who lives in Washington, D.C., where the debate about tipped workers has been particularly heated in recent years. Hawla is in his early thirties, with a laid-back manner and a boyish face framed by a mop of reddish-blond hair. In 2018, he was working at a bar in Dupont Circle when he heard about Initiative 77, a ballot measure backed by Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, which proposed to raise wages for D.C. servers from less than four dollars an hour to the standard minimum wage by 2026. After his manager told him that the measure would “mess up our wages,” Hawla became opposed to the idea, to the point of changing his profile picture on Facebook to an Initiative 77 sign with a slash through it.

Despite stiff opposition from the N.R.A. and the Restaurant Association Metropolitan Washington, voters approved Initiative 77, by a nearly twelve-point margin. Later that year, under pressure from the restaurant lobby, the D.C. Council overturned it. When Hawla heard this, he was relieved. Sometime later, he visited a friend in Seattle. One night, they went to a speakeasy and chatted with the bartender. Hawla thought that he had a “very bro-ish, bodybuilder vibe,” and was the kind of guy who probably made a nice living just on tips. Hawla decided to ask him what he thought of the tip credit.

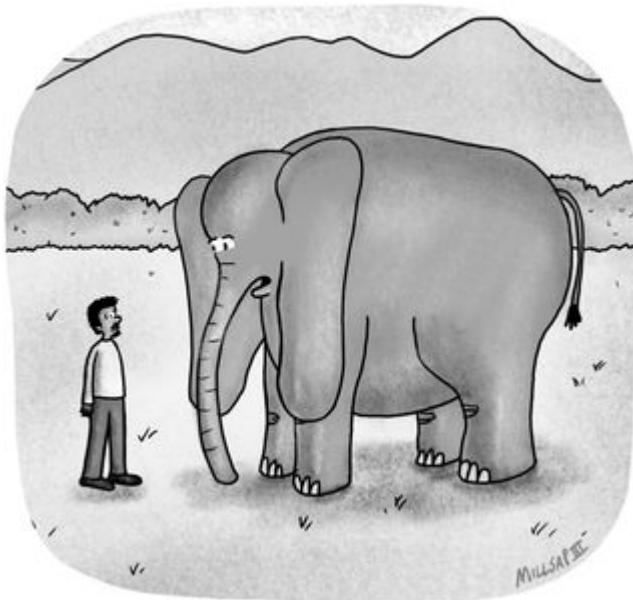
“What’s a tip credit?” the man said. There wasn’t one in Washington State or in Montana, where he’d grown up.

“You know—because you get tips, your employer can pay you a lower wage,” Hawla explained.

“Well, that sounds stupid,” the bartender said, noting that he made fifteen dollars an hour, and still got good tips on top.

In 2022, a proposal to phase out the tip credit in D.C. was again placed on the ballot. This time, Hawla voted for the measure, having come to believe that he’d been fed “a lot of misinformation” that was designed to get tipped workers to fight against their own interests. The proposal, Initiative 82, passed by nearly fifty points, seemingly settling the matter. But this past January a friend alerted Hawla that the D.C. Council was hosting a public hearing on the issue. The friend, a fellow-bartender named Rachelle Yeung,

had been working a shift at a brewery when a canvasser dropped off a flyer encouraging servers to attend the hearing and testify about the “negative impact” Initiative 82 was having. “Have you or your co-workers lost hours?” the flyer asked. “Lost jobs?”



*“I'll remember anything you want for a peanut.”*  
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Workers who'd experienced these problems were instructed to contact a server named Joshua Chaisson, whose e-mail address was printed at the bottom of the flyer. Chaisson had personally handed a flyer to Yeung. A week later, Chaisson, who goes by @MrTipCredit on X, appeared at the hearing in a black sweatshirt emblazoned with the logo “*SAVE THE TIP CREDIT RWA*”—the initials of a group called the Restaurant Workers of America. This organization, which Chaisson co-founded, first attracted media attention in 2018, after its members began speaking out against campaigns to eliminate the subminimum wage. Some media outlets credulously depicted it as a grassroots network of servers who opposed an imprudent policy shift. “We keep screaming from the rooftops, ‘Please don’t help!’ ” one member told BuzzFeed News. The tone of reporting on the group changed after the *Columbia Journalism Review* published an article revealing that most of its members were restaurant owners, each of whom paid between a hundred dollars and five hundred dollars to join. BuzzFeed News later reported that the Restaurant Workers of America’s most prominent spokesperson, Chaisson, had strategized with the P.R. firm

founded by Richard Berman, the man who created fronts for lobbying groups.

Sean Kennedy, of the N.R.A., told me that his group has no financial ties to the Restaurant Workers of America, though he acknowledged that the organizations have had “intel-sharing conversations.” In recent years, Chaisson appears to be keeping a lower profile—he didn’t respond to a request for an interview—but he’s continued to push for maintaining the tip-credit system. His crusade against Initiative 82 might seem strange, given that he waits tables in Portland, Maine, more than five hundred miles from the nation’s capital. Nevertheless, at the hearing, he blasted the measure for creating a “dumpster fire” in D.C., saying that restaurants were closing at a record pace and servers were losing hours and jobs. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics paint a less dire picture. Since Initiative 82 was adopted, employment at full-service restaurants in D.C. has hovered at about thirty thousand jobs. Nonetheless, in June the D.C. Council overrode voters for a second time. It paused the minimum wage for tipped workers, which was scheduled to go up to twelve dollars an hour in July, at its current level—ten dollars an hour. The city’s minimum wage is \$17.95.

Nina Mast, an analyst at the Economic Policy Institute, has studied the methods of the restaurant-industry lobby closely. She’s an expert on child labor, which has grown increasingly pervasive in recent years, as states have loosened restrictions on the number of hours that teens can legally work on school nights, and permitted their involvement in alcohol service and hazardous jobs such as roofing. In Iowa, Florida, and several other states, the restaurant lobby has pushed for these policies, she told me, in part to address what the lobby claims were labor shortages caused by the pandemic. Recently, Kennedy was quoted in a press release introducing a federal bill that would let teens work longer and later. N.R.A. associations and their members have portrayed the changes as harmless, family-friendly reforms. “What they do is recruit mostly white teens who work at a family-owned small business to testify that working a few extra hours a week will benefit them,” Mast said. “Of course, this is strategic. They don’t want lawmakers to hear from teens who are getting injured working in slaughterhouses owned by multinational corporations or who can’t stay awake in school, because they’re being scheduled to work late on school

nights. But *these* are the young people who will be harmed.” The N.R.A.’s agenda went far beyond defeating efforts to eliminate the subminimum wage, she added: “The N.R.A. and its state affiliates are heavily invested in lobbying for anti-worker policies across the board, in areas from paid sick leave to overtime pay.”

Jessie Danielson, a member of the Colorado State Senate whom I met in May, has seen this more sinister face of the restaurant lobby. Danielson is a progressive Democrat and an outspoken champion of workers’ rights. One bill she recently co-sponsored would require the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment to publish on its website the names of employers who engaged in wage theft—a widespread problem in the restaurant industry—and report these violations to licensing and permitting bodies. Last year, a study published by the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations estimated that, in the Denver-Aurora metropolitan area, forty-five thousand workers a year were paid below the minimum wage, costing them, collectively, at least a hundred and thirty-six million dollars in earnings. Among the occupations subject to the highest violation rates were servers, hosts, and chefs. Few people would defend employers who steal money from their workers, but the Colorado Restaurant Association opposed the wage-theft bill. Danielson also sponsored a bill called the Worker Protection Act, which sought to eliminate an onerous requirement for workers seeking to form a union: that they hold a second election, and win seventy-five per cent of the vote, a burden unique to Colorado. The Colorado Restaurant Association opposed this measure, too. “Does this lobby oppose *anything* that gives workers rights?” she said. “In my experience, yes.”

The Colorado restaurant lobby did support one piece of labor legislation this year—a bill, H.B. 1208, that proposed lowering the base pay of tipped workers in cities that have raised their minimum wages above the statewide level. One such city is Denver, where the measure would have cut the minimum wage for tipped workers from \$15.79 to \$11.79. The bill’s supporters claimed that this was necessary because labor costs were decimating Denver’s restaurant industry. They cited the fact that since 2022 the number of licensed establishments in the city had fallen by twenty-two per cent. This figure, which appeared in the *Denver Post* and was circulated

widely, came from the Department of Excise and Licenses. But, as Denver Labor, a division of the city's auditor's office, pointed out, that department didn't give licenses only to restaurants; it issued them to all food and retail establishments, a category that had recently been redefined, with many food trucks and concession stands removed from the department's database. As the department itself made clear, this meant that the statistic was an unreliable barometer of the restaurant industry's health.

After meeting Danielson, I visited the offices of the Colorado Restaurant Association to speak with Sonia Riggs, its president and C.E.O. Riggs maintained that labor costs were devastating Denver's restaurant scene. "I talk to restaurateurs every day who are crying or are looking for an exit strategy," she said. "When you hear those stories over and over, it literally breaks your heart." Riggs went on to frame H.B. 1208 as a matter of fairness, not only for struggling owners but also for back-of-house workers who didn't get tips. "Why are the lowest-paid people in the company the least important and the ones that nobody wants to help?" she asked. Servers in Denver, she said, earned an average of thirty-nine to forty-two dollars an hour—far more than chefs and dishwashers.

This was another statistic touted by H.B. 1208 supporters. It came from a survey of a hundred and thirty restaurants which was conducted by a possibly biased source: the Colorado Restaurant Association. If true, it would mean that the typical server in Denver makes more than seventy thousand dollars annually. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, however, the average salary of bartenders and servers in Denver is less than forty thousand dollars; economists say that this isn't enough for a single person to cover living expenses in the city, much less to support a family. "These are economically vulnerable people," Matthew Fritz-Mauer, the executive director of Denver Labor, told me.

His view was echoed by Joseph Mitchell, a waiter at the Alamo Drafthouse, in Littleton. He told me that last year he made forty thousand dollars working full time. He lives paycheck to paycheck, he said, without health care, and couldn't imagine getting by if his hourly salary was cut by four dollars.

I met Mitchell at the Weathervane Café, a restaurant in Denver whose owner, Lindsay Dalton, has vocally opposed H.B. 1208. Dalton admitted that, in many restaurants, there were tensions between front-of-house and back-of-house employees. This was why she and her husband, who co-owned the café, pooled all tips and divided them evenly among the staff. Nothing prevented restaurants in Denver that cared about fairness from doing the same, she noted. The most surprising thing about H.B. 1208, she said, wasn't that the restaurant lobby had pushed for it but that its sponsors were all Democrats. Judy Amabile, a state senator from Boulder, was one of them. Amabile, a co-founder of a sports-water-bottle company, told me that she supported the bill because she believed that restaurants in places such as Boulder were hurting, and that flexibility on the tip credit was needed to avoid damaging "one of the big economic drivers of our community." A spokesperson for EatDenver, a coalition of more than four hundred and fifty independent restaurateurs, told me that the rising cost of labor was their biggest concern. But the damage didn't seem to be as grave as the restaurant lobby claimed. In 2023, a study by the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment found that, in the two years after Denver raised its minimum wage above the state level, business boomed. Per-capita sales-tax revenues at bars and restaurants in the city increased by eighty-five per cent—double the rate of the rest of Colorado.

Serena Gonzales-Gutierrez, a member of the Denver City Council, appreciated the challenges that restaurant owners faced. Her parents started a restaurant some years ago, and they had to close it after having problems with the landlord. But she didn't believe that cutting workers' wages was the only solution. "Can we look at the inflation of food costs—or the cost of rent?" she asked. Gonzales-Gutierrez was one of thirty-seven legislators who signed a letter opposing H.B. 1208, maintaining that it undermined the authority of local governments to set the minimum wage. On this occasion, as in the past, she said, the Colorado Restaurant Association presented itself as the champion of mom-and-pop restaurants while advancing an agenda that she felt primarily benefitted large chains. In 2023, when she was a state representative, the N.R.A. lobbied against a fair-workweek law that would have required employers to give workers advance notice about their schedules. The law, which she co-sponsored, would have applied only to businesses with more than two hundred and fifty employees. The restaurant

industry brought out more than eighty people to speak against it at a hearing, including the Latino owner of a small Mexican restaurant. “It wouldn’t even apply to them, but they testified,” she said.

Kjersten Forseth, the legislative consultant for the Colorado A.F.L.-C.I.O., told me that she’d struggled to contain her fury as she watched the leaders of Colorado—a blue state where Democrats control all branches of government—advance a bill to cut the wages of servers, especially after an election in which many working-class voters left the Democratic Party because they felt that it didn’t care about them.

A coalition of progressive groups, including Towards Justice and Coloradans for the Common Good, mounted strong resistance to H.B. 1208, and the bill’s sponsors were forced to amend it, stripping out the mandatory wage cuts and settling for giving municipalities more flexibility to alter the tip credit in the future. Colorado’s legislature also approved the Worker Protection Act, removing the burden on employees to hold a second election before forming a union. But Governor Jared Polis, a tech entrepreneur, promised to veto the bill. Before he did so, reports surfaced that Polis had floated to labor advocates the possibility of not vetoing it if other items returned to the negotiating table—including the original version of H.B. 1208.

Dennis Dougherty, the executive director of the Colorado A.F.L.-C.I.O., told me that the Colorado Restaurant Association was in on these negotiations, and that Polis appeared to expect the A.F.L.-C.I.O. to make a deal that sold out tipped workers to advance its agenda of facilitating unionization. But it refused to do so. Dougherty doesn’t regret the decision, even though Polis did veto the unionization bill. “They thought we were going to roll these workers,” he said. “We didn’t.” ♦



*Eyal Press has been writing for The New Yorker since 2014 and became a contributing writer in 2023. He is a Puffin Foundation Fellow at the Type Media Center.*

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# The Vatican Observatory Looks to the Heavens

*It's run by a Michigan-born Jesuit—and a meteorite expert—known as the Pope's Astronomer.*

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

July 28, 2025



*Guy Consolmagno, the head of the observatory, says of celestial revelations, “Even scientists who don’t believe in God have to believe in ‘Oh, my God.’ ” Photographs by Marta Giaccone for The New Yorker*

When the late Pope Francis was elected, a dozen years ago, and famously declined the pomp and perquisites typically associated with the office, among his renunciations was the use of the papal summer residence—a seventeenth-century palazzo in Castel Gandolfo, about fifteen miles south of Rome. Generations of Popes had enjoyed the use of the mansion, which overlooks a volcanic lake and is surrounded by spectacular terraced gardens. The palazzo is now a museum where visitors can admire a gallery of papal portraits, of varying quality, and imagine the dreams that visited the successive occupants of the papal bedroom, with its narrow twin bed. Castel Gandolfo is also home to one of the Holy See’s more unexpected

institutions: the Vatican Observatory, which since its founding, in 1891, has been dedicated to the scientific study of the heavens.

Guy Consolmagno, the director of the observatory, first came to Castel Gandolfo as a newly minted Jesuit brother, in 1993. When I met him outside the palazzo, early this spring, he gestured at a window overlooking the building's courtyard. This was the location of his first, decidedly modest bedroom in the mansion. Consolmagno, who grew up in suburban Detroit and retains a buoyant, emphatic, Midwestern manner, told me, "The Pope then was John Paul II, and when he was first elected he had made a rookie mistake, as we say in America. Somebody, a journalist—one of those *terrible* journalists—had asked him, 'What's your favorite hymn?' And, being a fool, he actually gave the name of a hymn that he happened to like. So, every Sunday during the summertime, when he was living here, the doors would open at 10 a.m., and this place would be filled with two thousand Polish pilgrims singing that hymn underneath my window. I got totally sick of it." Consolmagno never got sick, though, of being saluted by the Swiss Guards stationed at the palace gates.

Consolmagno, who has a prodigious white beard, wavy gray bangs, and dark, beetling eyebrows, is one of fifteen scientists who currently make up the scholarly staff of the Vatican Observatory—all Jesuits and, inevitably, all men. (Their meals, perhaps equally inevitably, are prepared by a local woman.) At any given moment, about half of the fraternity is in Castel Gandolfo, which has been the institution's home since the nineteen-thirties—although, for the past fifteen-odd years, the staff's living quarters have been situated in a former convent a short distance from the palace. The other half of the team is in Arizona, a state that offers a remote mountain environment more conducive to astronomical observation than the light-polluted suburbs of Rome do. In the early nineties, at the Mt. Graham International Observatory, near Tucson, the Vatican installed a powerful four-million-dollar telescope and an astrophysics facility, together known as the Vatican Advanced Technology Telescope, or VATT. Consolmagno, like many of his colleagues, shuttles frequently between Italy and Arizona, rarely spending more than a few months in one place.

Consolmagno likes to say that, when he arrived in Castel Gandolfo, the director at the time, Father George V. Coyne, told him that he had only one job: to do good science. At first, Consolmagno was engaged mostly with taking painstaking measurements of specimens from one of the world's preëminent collections of meteorites, which was bequeathed to the institution, in the early twentieth century, by a French nobleman, the Marquis de Mauroy. Consolmagno and several colleagues developed a new method for measuring the density and porosity of meteorites. The approach is not a million miles from the revelation delivered to Archimedes as he displaced water in his bath: the specimens are submerged in a vessel filled with helium gas, the molecules of which are small enough to penetrate tiny nooks and crannies in the rocks; if the specimens are then submerged in a vessel filled with glass beads that are tiny but too large to penetrate such spaces, the difference between the two volumes helps reveal the rock's porosity. Sara Russell, a planetary scientist at the Natural History Museum in London—and a friend of Consolmagno's since the mid-nineties, when they met on a meteorite-hunting expedition in Antarctica—told me, "He started out making simple measurements, and over the years his method got more and more sophisticated, and managed to make fundamentally important observations." Among other contributions, the Vatican Observatory has made available to scientific researchers fragments of a rare meteorite, known as Chassigny, whose chemical composition suggests that it originated in the mantle of Mars.



*Consolmago holds a specimen from the meteorite Alfianello, which fell to Earth, in 1883, in the Italian province of Brescia. The Vatican Observatory has one of the world's finest collections of meteorites.*

Like research institutions that are not staffed with those who have taken religious vows, the Vatican Observatory collaborates with scientific colleagues around the globe. These have included, in recent years, NASA, whose *OSIRIS-REx* mission (2016-23) collected samples from the Bennu asteroid, which measures a third of a mile across and has been calculated to have a not infinitesimal chance of colliding with Earth in the twenty-second century. Bob Macke, another Jesuit brother in Castel Gandolfo, has developed a specialty in documenting the properties of meteorites, and several years ago he was invited to join an international team analyzing the Bennu samples; in 2023, he built a device specifically adapted for carrying out these delicate measurements. “NASA needed help with a mission. The Vatican came to the rescue,” read one headline about the collaboration.

Although the Vatican Observatory produces a wealth of peer-reviewed science, its structure is much different than, say, an astronomy department at a university. The Arizona telescope’s daily operations are funded by private donors to a not-for-profit foundation, and the Jesuit staff’s

administrative costs and salaries are covered by the Holy See. Scientists at the observatory are liberated from the secular scholar's pursuit of tenure, grant money, and commercial investment; moreover, the Jesuits, having taken a vow of poverty, have extremely low living costs. Like the builders of a fourteenth-century cathedral, they are able to take the long view. In Castel Gandolfo, Consolmagno explained that, nearly two thousand years ago, the site had been the location of a palace belonging to the Emperor Domitian. (Some fragmentary ruins remain on the castle grounds.) Christians were exiled under his rule, "and now his gardens belong to the Pope," Consolmagno said as we walked beneath cypresses and umbrella pines, with evident satisfaction at the comeuppance.

As director, a post he has held for the past decade, Consolmagno spends far less time peering through a telescope or a microscope than he once did, and far more time explaining to the public why doing those things is not incompatible with religious conviction. He is constantly on the road, all over the world, giving talks to religious and secular audiences alike, often billed as "the Pope's Astronomer." At these events, he fields such questions as whether there is any recorded evidence for an actual Star of Bethlehem. (There is nothing conclusive, but scientists have identified various suggestive celestial phenomena in the years around the birth of Christ, including alignments of planets which might, to the naked eye, look like bright stars.) Consolmagno is also well known in the science-fiction community, of which he became a devout member as a young adult. He still shows up at sci-fi conventions whenever he can. His preferred subgenre is the space opera, with its dramatic adventures and heroic plots; he confesses to reading such works on his phone before bed, in violation of sleep-hygiene strictures. Patrick Nielsen Hayden, an editor at Tor Books, which publishes science fiction, and a friend of Consolmagno's from the scene, told me, "He's, like, the least proselytizing dude you could possibly imagine, given that he's a Jesuit brother and it permeates his whole identity." Nielsen Hayden, who characterizes himself as a "grumpy, reluctant, argumentative Catholic," added that Consolmagno "has a tremendous capacity for affable friendship and civilized exchange with people from belief structures completely different from his own." Consolmagno has written numerous popular-science books for general audiences, ranging from a plainspoken credo, "Finding God in the

Universe,” to the puckishly titled “Would You Baptize an Extraterrestrial? . . . and Other Questions from the Astronomers’ In-Box at the Vatican Observatory,” which he wrote with Father Paul Mueller. (The short answer to the extraterrestrial question: only if the alien asked him to.)

Brother Guy, as he is widely known, never suggests that science might offer a means to prove the existence of God, or even to indicate a high probability of His existence. Consolmagno does not subscribe to what is known as the anthropic principle, which argues that the physical properties of the universe are so fine-tuned within the extraordinarily narrow range allowing for the emergence of intelligent life that the cosmos must have been made for us. Nor is he tempted by concordism—the idea that the discoveries of modern science can prove that events described in the Bible are grounded in reality. “Scripture was not written to tell you about the natural world,” Consolmagno told me. “It was to tell you about God.” The most egregious example of concordism, he said, was offered by Pope Pius XII, who had studied science and was interested in astronomy; in 1951, Pius XII gave a speech to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in which he characterized the big bang as confirming the Book of Genesis by “bearing witness to the august instant of the Fiat Lux, when, along with matter, there burst forth from nothing a sea of light and radiation.” Pius XII stopped suggesting that the big bang required the orchestration of God after he had a conference with Georges Lemaître, the Belgian scientist and Catholic priest who had laid the groundwork for the theory with his hypothesis that the universe had expanded from a “primeval atom.”

Pope Francis, under whose papal reign Consolmagno was appointed head of the Vatican Observatory, was a Jesuit, the first member of that order ever elected to the papacy. Although Francis did not have a particular interest in astronomy, he believed that scientific inquiry and the mission of the Church could meaningfully intersect: among his most significant statements was the encyclical “*Laudato Si’*,” which urged action against global warming and environmental degradation. Consolmagno approved of this intervention, and also admired Francis’s humility and spirit of intellectual openness. Unlike Lemaître, Consolmagno and his colleagues do not advise the Vatican on celestial matters; they are left to get on with their work, and have nothing to do with doctrine. Consolmagno rarely goes to the Vatican proper;

he's too busy elsewhere. When I visited him in Castel Gandolfo, he told me it had probably been a decade since he had been inside St. Peter's Basilica.

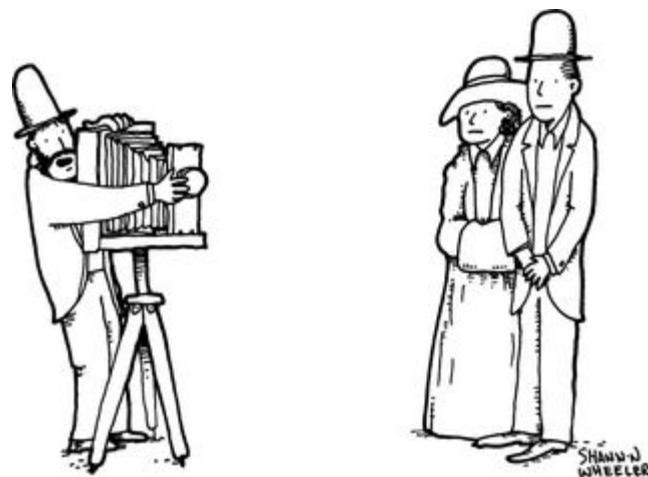
Consolmagno believes in the big bang, at least as a provisional explanation of the universe's origins, and also in a creator God who exists before and beyond the big bang. In his understanding, the spheres of science and religion do not entirely overlap. Rather, they "live together—the one doesn't replace the other," he told me. "Using science to prove religion would make science greater than religion. It would make your version of God subservient to your understanding of the universe. And not only does that make for a pretty weak God, but it is also crazy, because in a thousand years' time the scientific questions that people ask are going to be very different. Science goes obsolete—it doesn't progress otherwise."

Among the research projects to which the telescope in Arizona has contributed is a fifteen-year analysis of objects in the Kuiper Belt, a band of ice-rich asteroids in the distant solar system. Many of the objects have been found to have curious orbits that, according to some scientists, suggest they are under the gravitational sway of a massive planet—as yet undiscovered—beyond Pluto. Other colleagues have used the *VATT* to observe near-Earth asteroids that may offer the possibility of commercial exploitation. Consolmagno characterizes the Vatican Observatory as deliberately doing middle-of-the-road science and practicing middle-of-the-road religion. "If people think you have to be a weird kind of scientist to be religious, or a weird kind of religious to be a scientist, then we've missed the point," he said. "The point is that our faith—our ordinary faith—fits perfectly with our ordinary, but wonderful, delightful science." Some years ago, the International Astronomical Union named an asteroid in honor of his contributions to science. Somewhere between Mars and Jupiter, the asteroid 4597 Consolmagno continues its celestial course.

The Church's study of the stars dates back at least as far as the late sixteenth century. Under the leadership of Pope Gregory XIII, a meridian line was installed in the Vatican to illustrate the need to reform the Julian calendar. A Jesuit, Christopher Clavius, helped propose that the Vatican adopt the Gregorian calendar, which it did in 1582. According to the historian Jonathan Wright's book "The Jesuits," when the realignment caused ten

days to be subtracted from the year, mobs across Europe attacked Jesuit houses to protest the time stolen from them.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an observatory was built atop the Vatican Library and Museum, in what is known as the Tower of the Winds. Eclipses were observed and meteorological measurements were taken. The Vatican Observatory that exists today was set in motion by Pope Leo XIII when, in the late nineteenth century, he devoted a second observation tower in the Vatican to astronomical work. Fortunately, this occurred around the time that an international community of astronomers, at a gathering in Paris, decided to embark on a collaborative project to make the first photographic map of the sky. Responsibility for charting different zones of the heavens was assigned to different national observatories; the Vatican was granted its own share of the sky to map, and was thus able not only to participate in cutting-edge science but also to assert its identity as a sovereign nation, despite being less than a fifth of a square mile. By the thirties, however, light pollution had made the center of Rome inhospitable to the observatory, and the Pope—now Pius XI—offered the use of Castel Gandolfo as a future base of operations. Two new telescopes were built there, and the running of the observatory was formally taken over by the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits, the Church's most intellectually powerful division.



"Now say 'Cheese' for three minutes."  
Cartoon by Shannon Wheeler

During the Second World War, the papal property in Castel Gandolfo was neutral territory; two thousand people displaced from local villages flooded

into the palazzo's gates to seek shelter, sleeping in a grand hall previously used for papal audiences or dwelling in a shantytown on the castle grounds. In subsequent years, research once again flourished, with the construction of another new telescope in the papal gardens. It was through this device that the Pope—now Pope Paul VI—peered at the moon on the night of July 20, 1969, when Apollo 11 made its historic landing. Afterward, he addressed the astronauts: "Honor, greetings, and blessings to you, conquerors of the Moon, pale lamp of our night and our dreams! Bring to her, with your living presence, the voice of the spirit, a hymn to God, our Creator and our Father."

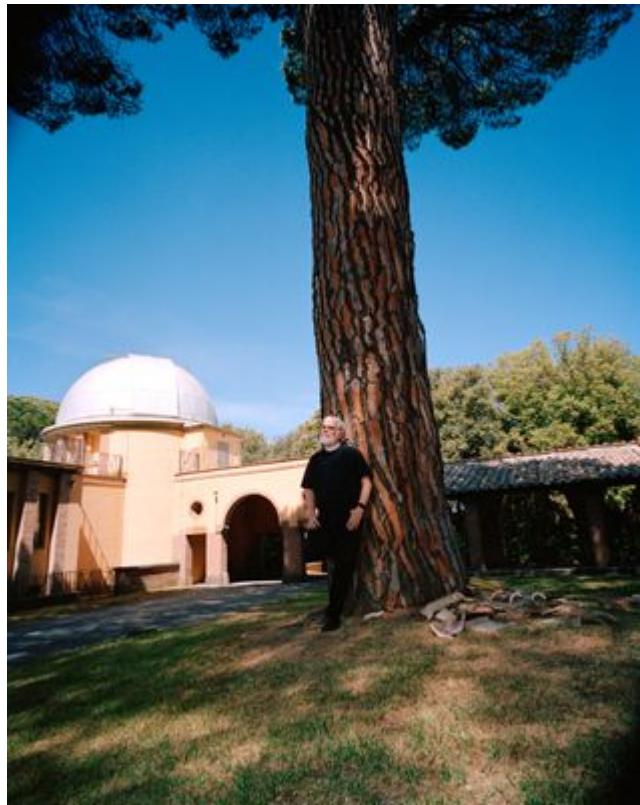
At the time of the moon landing, Consolmagno was about to begin his final year of high school, in Detroit. His father, an executive at Chrysler, had soldered a recording device to the family television to preserve the audio of the momentous occasion. Later, in college, Consolmagno taped over most of the recording with music, but, he recalled, "the very tail end was the actual landing, so, whenever I got to the end of whatever that record was, I would hear, 'Drifting to the right a little. . . . Tranquility Base here, the Eagle has landed.' " His family was Catholic on both sides; his mother, a schoolteacher, was of Irish descent, and his father, who had been a journalist before becoming a P.R. man for the auto industry, traced his roots to a village in southern Italy. (Family legend has it that Consolmagno's great-grandfather immigrated to America after being run out of town for uprooting and then stealing other people's fig trees.) As a boy, Consolmagno was taught to identify the constellations by his father, but his academic interests grew to include the humanities. "The smart kids at the Jesuit high school did Latin and Greek, so that's what I did," he told me. He enrolled at Boston College to study history, but wasn't happy there: "It was a party school, and I didn't like to party—it made me uncomfortable." He transferred to M.I.T., lured in part by the science-fiction club's impressive library, and switched his major to Earth and Planetary Science.

After getting his doctorate, at the University of Arizona, in Tucson, he went back East for postdoctoral work at Harvard and at M.I.T. By the time he was thirty, however, Consolmagno had failed to gain traction in his academic career, and, perhaps not coincidentally, had become disillusioned with the prospect of pursuing ever more esoteric science. "I'd be

wondering, Why am I doing this?” he said recently. “Why am I beating myself up writing papers about the moons of Jupiter when there’s people starving in the world? Papers that only five people in the world are going to read, and two of them are my enemies?” He enrolled in the Peace Corps and went to Kenya, hoping to be sent to teach at a rural school. His academic credentials, however, led him to be assigned to one of the country’s premier high schools, in Nairobi, and then reassigned to a university there, training others to become science teachers. On weekends, he would travel to visit friends who had been assigned to remote schoolhouses, where he gave talks about astronomy. During these visits, he often set up a telescope so that locals could gaze in wonder at the moon.

After nearly two years in Africa, Consolmagno got a job teaching at Lafayette College, a liberal-arts school in Pennsylvania. He loved the work, but still felt that something was missing in his life. As an undergraduate, he had flirted with the idea of joining the Jesuits, having admired the mental acuity of the members of the order he’d known in high school, but he had decided that wanting to be part of a clever cohort was not a sufficient motivation. Now he considered the possibility of becoming a Jesuit brother —a member of the society who takes vows and lives in a community with other Jesuits but is not ordained. “I loved teaching, and I thought, Well, this must be what I am good at, and I wouldn’t have to do the priest things that I *wouldn’t* be very good at, like hearing people’s confessions,” he told me.

For Consolmagno, abandoning secular life wasn’t the hard part. “I can’t relate to the things that most people are tempted to do,” he said. “Drinking? I’ve tried. It’s like drinking mouthwash. I dated for twenty years. I wasn’t happy.” He wasn’t tempted by gambling, and found that he had no hunger for worldly advancement. “It’s not to say I’m a saint,” he said. “It’s just that I can’t relate to people who do have real struggles with these things.” When Consolmagno told his parents of his intention, his mother, who was devout, was worried about the lifelong commitment. “And my dad’s answer was ‘I could have told you that in high school,’ ” Consolmagno told me. “He’s not the only one who told me that, including women I dated in high school.”



*The gardens in Castel Gandolfo.*

Jesuits undertake extensive studies in philosophy and theology, and they also take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Consolmagno jokes that life as a graduate student prepared him for the first two vows; the third was the most challenging. Yet, by the time he completed his training, at the age of thirty-eight, he was willing to go wherever the Church wanted him to be, and to do whatever it asked. To his surprise, he was sent to a hilltop castle outside Rome, and he was encouraged to do whatever he liked with its celestial rock collection.

The idea that religion and science are inevitably at odds is widespread among secular observers. The Church, in its two millennia of existence, has played a role in this perception, by punishing people who dared to challenge its orthodoxies. In 1600, the cosmologist Giordano Bruno, who proposed that the universe was infinite and that stars were distant suns, was burned at the stake for his heresies. Galileo Galilei, who, in 1632, published a book supporting the Copernican theory that the Earth revolves around the sun, was accused of heresy, obliged to recant, and condemned to house arrest. It was not until 1992 that the Pope at the time, John Paul II, officially

acknowledged that the seventeenth-century clerics who had prosecuted Galileo were wrong. (As for Bruno, the Church has conceded only that the killing was a “sad episode.”)

The secular world, meanwhile, has often attacked the Church as a peddler of absurd fantasies. In recent decades, writers grouped under the rubric the New Atheists—among them Christopher Hitchens, the swinging author of “God Is Not Great,” and Richard Dawkins, who wrote the intemperate book “The God Delusion”—have decried organized religions for their damaging superstitions and mystifications, and have championed an explanatory rationalism in their stead. In “God Is Not Great,” Hitchens, who died in 2011, wrote, “If you will devote a little time to studying the staggering photographs taken by the Hubble telescope, you will be scrutinizing things that are far more awesome and mysterious and beautiful—and more chaotic and overwhelming and forbidding—than any creation or ‘end of days’ story.” The New Atheists were revisiting debates from the nineteenth century, when influential critics, among them Andrew Dickson White, the first president of Cornell University, sought to reexamine established religions in the light of recent scientific discoveries. In “A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom,” published in 1896, White wrote that “dogmatic theology”—rigid interpretations of religious doctrine—inherently clashed with scientific findings, which were constantly evolving because of new thinking and technologies.

According to Consolmagno, the arguments put forward by the New Atheists and their ilk invoke what you might call a straw God. “When I say, ‘I believe in God,’ it means that I believe in *one* God, which means there are a whole lot of versions of God out there that I *don’t* believe in,” he told me. “An atheist, in order to be an atheist, has to have a really clear idea of who the God is they *don’t* believe in. More often than not, they are right—the God they *don’t* believe in I *don’t* believe in, either.” Consolmagno’s Catholic faith does not require that he believe the world was literally created in seven days, and he pities would-be astrophysicists who grew up in fundamentalist Christian traditions. Once, while visiting Oral Roberts University, in Tulsa, he stumbled across a way of expressing his perspective on the Book of Genesis: “I pointed out that the seven days of creation tell us not about creation but about God,” he recalled. “If you put that emphasis on

it, I think you get closer to what the author of Genesis really wanted to do, which was to talk about God. What's the goal of Genesis? It's the seventh day, the Sabbath. And what's the Sabbath? It's when we start thinking about the universe, and the creator, rather than just worrying about feeding ourselves, and that's what makes us people, rather than animals. God calls us to be astronomers. Not only is it clever—it might even be true.”

For Consolmagno, human accounts of occasions when the divine has made its presence felt—including reports of miracles—constitute data that he would be foolish to dismiss out of hand. “I’d be a pretty poor scientist if I rejected the evidence of so many experiences (including my own) that prayers are answered and that miracles do occur, just because they don’t fit my preconceived theory for the predictability of the universe,” he observed in “God’s Mechanics” (2008), in which he interviewed various other religious scientists and explored the basis for his own faith. Consolmagno wrote, “God is God; he can, in theory, do anything he likes. But, by seeing what it is he actually does and how he does it, I can begin to get an idea of what it is he likes to do and how he likes to do it. And I would have to say that the God who created this universe is someone who loves to act with elegance, economy, predictability, and consistency.”



*A fragment of Lançon, a meteorite that fell in France in 1897. Consolmagno oversaw the development of a new protocol for determining the porosity of such extraterrestrial rocks.*

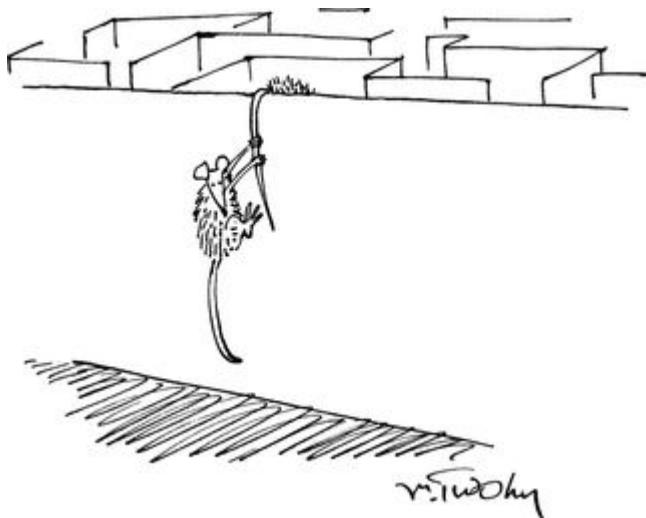
Although Consolmagno enjoys talking about his thoughts on science and religion, he has generally refrained from discussing his views on politics. But the American government's recent assault on research universities, and its dismantling of international health services—in the realm of astronomical sciences alone, the annual funding for grants from the National Science Foundation has been slashed by more than half—has prompted him to be more outspoken. "The uncertainty has already created chaos in my field, and certainly in the health field," Consolmagno said. "It will be a while before it recovers just from this chaos, and that damage has already happened, and people will die because of it." He went on to explain that President Trump is "doing damage not only to the science that I love but to conservative principles that I might want to embrace. He's a *terrible* representative of that. So it's one thing to say, 'I hate him because I'm a liberal,' but I think it's more important to say, 'I despair of him in the places where I'm *not* a liberal.' "

Recently, the new Pope, Leo XIV, gave a speech to the College of Cardinals in which he said that the Church was eager to offer "the treasury of her social teaching" to address "developments in the field of artificial intelligence that pose new challenges for the defense of human dignity, justice and labor." Consolmagno similarly feels that the Church could play a role in establishing ethical norms for space exploration, especially in an era in which billionaires are sending up their own rocket ships. At a recent lecture that I saw Consolmagno deliver in a crowded church hall in Glasgow, he suggested that the Vatican, as an independent country, could serve as a neutral place where questions of scientific ethics and priorities can be hashed out among nations. He cited a workshop that he and his colleagues held a few years ago to discuss the peaceful use of outer space. He noted, "The rules are only as good as what people will agree to follow. With some of the personalities involved, I fear that it's going to take a disaster in space before they decide, 'O.K., we need to get our act together.' " He went on, "We are human beings, and, ultimately, when we have people living on the moon, there are going to be drunkards. There are going to be guys who smell of stale beer, like the guys in my freshman dorm. But there are also going to be people who love what they are doing, and love the people they are with, because that is what it means to be a human being, and to be a sinner drawn to the God who loves us all."

When Pope Francis died, in late April, Consolmagno was on tour in the United States. A few days after the funeral, Consolmagno was in Glasgow, to deliver his lecture. When we met in the city, he said of Francis, “He was a wonderful person who I had gotten to know, who had gotten to know me. When you would walk into a room, his face would light up in a smile—and, boy, what that did to you when he reacted like that. I’ll miss his good humor, and his gentle support.” We were sitting in a Tim Hortons, where Consolmagno had ordered an enormous cup of watery coffee and an execrable-looking apple pastry—despite living in the land that graced the world with the cappuccino, he is sometimes homesick for the comestibles of the Great Lakes.

Consolmagno told me that he had no preferred candidate for Francis’s successor. “The most important thing is that they are people of God, that they are really committed to the religion, that they have faith in the Holy Spirit,” he said. Lots of cardinals have little understanding of science, “and they’d be the first to admit that,” he added. “In some ways, they’re easier to work with. It’s the ones who think they know that you kind of get worried about.”

There were scattered clouds in the sky over Rome on the night of May 7th, when the cardinals were in seclusion in the Vatican, having not yet selected a new Pope from among their number. Consolmagno was still out of the country—he had more talks to give in Scotland—but I happened to be in Rome. There, on the elegant Ponte Sisto, a stone footbridge commissioned, in the fifteenth century, by Pope Sixtus IV, an enthusiastic young man had set up a telescope, and was charging passersby a few euros each to look at the moon, which was waxing gibbous. I asked him if he knew about the Vatican Observatory. “Of course!” the man said. “They’re the best.” I took a turn at the eyepiece and gasped: I could see the moon’s silvery surface, so dense with craters that it appeared almost crenellated in its texture. Like the Kenyans who looked through Consolmagno’s telescope decades ago, I was filled with wonder.



Cartoon by Mike Twohy

Consolmagno, in his writings and in conversation, is reserved about giving testimonials of his personal experience of God. Perhaps the subject is too private, or the moments of conviction too fleeting. When we first met, in Castel Gandolfo, Consolmagno spoke of the awesome and sometimes destructive powers present in the physical universe, from tsunamis to earthquakes to supernovas. “Things that can cause pain are also things that have an innate beauty in them, and bending your brain around that is one of the great challenges of life,” he remarked. “Just like the pain of trying to understand physics—why does it have to be so hard? And yet there is a sublime beauty to how the universe works that we can only begin to touch. That, to me, is where I see the presence of God.” Does he see the presence of God when he looks through the Vatican’s telescopes? Yes, he said, but that’s only part of what he sees: “I see the presence of God—and I see the astronomy instructor who is explaining that thing to me, and I see my father telling me as a child, ‘That’s Jupiter,’ and I see the joy I felt as a three-year-old looking at the stars, or the joy as a ten-year-old watching the moon set, and seeing that it actually *moves*. All of those things, layered together.”

Looking at the moon suspended in the sky over the Tiber, I remembered what Consolmagno had told his audience in Glasgow: that he doubted his faith “only about two or three times a minute.” The line got a big laugh. “But the opposite of faith isn’t doubt,” he continued. “The opposite of faith is certainty. Being comfortable with doubt, just as I doubt my science, just as I am constantly questioning my science, I do that because it makes my science stronger, and I do that because it makes my faith stronger.”

Consolmagno went on to describe a sense of transcendence he had once experienced while laboring over his meteorite measurements in his laboratory in Castel Gandolfo. “You take a lot of data, and you plot everything against everything else, to see if there’s a pattern,” he said. “And there was one moment where—oh, my God—the pattern was perfect. The density matched with the magnetic susceptibility on a perfect line, with one type all over *here*, and the second type over *there*. I had this feeling of God peering over my shoulder, going, ‘Isn’t that cool? Let me show you the next one.’ ” Nonbelievers might share this occasional sense of numinous exhilaration, even if their interpretations of the data diverge, Consolmagno acknowledged. He said, “Even scientists who don’t believe in God have to believe in ‘Oh, my God.’ ”

When the cardinals elected Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost to be the Pope, after slightly more than one rotation of the Earth, one of his first public acts was to make known his adoption of a new papal name: Leo XIV. The choice was inspired by Leo XIII, the late-nineteenth-century cleric who was outspoken in his support for working people and the poor—and who also happened to be the founder of the modern Vatican Observatory. In an e-mail the day after the conclave reached its decision, Consolmagno told me that he had never met the new Pope, but that everything he had heard about him was very encouraging. “It’s great fun to think of somebody who grew up in the Midwest not far from where I grew up, and as I understand it he even went to high school in Michigan,” Consolmagno wrote. “I think that means it will be very easy to talk with him, because there won’t be the barrier of language or culture; I think we will be able to understand each other.” After ten years as the Pope’s astronomer, Consolmagno would like to retire soon —the travel is getting to be a bit much—but his vow of obedience means he’ll stay at his post as long as he’s needed. He wrote, “As for my future plans, it’s entirely in his hands.” ♦



*[Rebecca Mead](#)* joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 1997. Her books include “[Home/Land: A Memoir of Departure and Return](#).”

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[\*\*Letter from Israel\*\*](#)

# Israel's Zones of Denial

Amid national euphoria over the bombing of Iran—and the largely ignored devastation in Gaza—a question lurks: What is the country becoming?

By [David Remnick](#)

July 28, 2025



*On June 13th, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched the first in a series of attacks that his military and intelligence establishments had been preparing for more than a decade, striking at the heart of Ayatollah Khamenei's nuclear program. Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty*

One night, not long after a ceasefire between Israel and Iran took hold, I was sitting at the bar of a crowded restaurant north of Tel Aviv, a place buzzing with high-spirited talk and laughter, jokes shouted over bottles of wine. All at once, every phone in the room lit up with alerts. One read:

BREAKING: The I.D.F. has identified a ballistic missile launch from Yemen toward Israeli territory. The Israeli Air Force is operating to intercept the threat, the I.D.F. said.

The news came with a map scarred with a blob of angry red, covering nearly all of central Israel—including, as far as I could tell, the bar where I sat with a burger and a beer. For a moment, everything seemed to pause.

Starting on June 13th, with the onset of Israel's prolonged bombardment of Iran's nuclear facilities and the aerial assassinations of many of its military and intelligence chiefs and nuclear scientists, Israelis had regularly been warned by wailing sirens and bulletins on their phones that ballistic missiles and drones of retaliation were headed their way. They had just a few minutes to clamber out of bed, wake the kids, and get to municipal bomb shelters or to a *mamad*, a safe room equipped with steel doors, reinforced concrete, and blast-resistant windows. Through twelve days of war, schools and most businesses closed. The streets were nearly abandoned.

In the early days of the war, the Israel Defense Forces estimated that between eight hundred and four thousand Israelis would be killed. In the end, the number of dead was twenty-eight. Physical damage, to be sure, was widespread. Windows were blown out at the headquarters of Mossad. Missiles had hit the Soroka hospital, in Beersheba; several buildings in central Tel Aviv close to the Kirya, the country's military nerve center; the Bazan oil refinery, in Haifa; the Weizmann Institute of Science, in Rehovot; the Tel Nof airbase; the Zipporit armor-and-weapons-production base; and a ten-story building in Bat Yam, where nine people were killed, including five members of a Ukrainian family. Not far down the road from the restaurant, in a northern neighborhood of Tel Aviv called Ramat Aviv, I'd checked out an apartment complex that a ballistic missile had left uninhabitable. A few kids climbed on a teetering stanchion to gawk at the ruins. They took selfies with the caved-in concrete as background. Throughout the country, thirteen thousand people were left without homes. The damage in Israel, however, was modest compared with that in Iran, where the death toll was more than a thousand people, around half of them civilians.

In the restaurant, the alerts lingered on our screens. Yet after a moment it was clear that nobody much cared about the Houthis in Yemen or their impudent missile. The conversation resumed; the laughter echoed. People stashed their phones, poured another glass, ordered another plate. The missile could have been a stock-market fluctuation—distant, routine,

ignorable. Part of it was danger fatigue, and part was confidence in Israel's air defenses, which, for twelve days, had intercepted the vast majority of Iran's missiles and drones. That Israel's onslaught on Gaza, not much more than an hour down the coastal highways, was still raging, the body count among Palestinians rising by the dozens nearly every day, seemed not to dampen the mood, either. That war, which had begun some six hundred days earlier, was the moral nightmare that everyone tried to ignore, aside from the shared hope of bringing home the twenty living hostages presumed to remain in the airless tunnels of the Strip.

In Israel and well beyond, people were calling the conflict with Iran the Twelve-Day War—an echo of the Six-Day War of 1967, which itself was an echo of the six days of creation. Euphoria was in the air. Earlier, I'd spoken with Michael Oren, a former Knesset member and Israeli Ambassador to Washington, who, two decades ago, published a book about the Six-Day War. Like many who once served under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Oren had since become a critic, but that didn't stop him from praising Netanyahu's decision to strike Iran's nuclear facilities—and the "coup de grâce" of persuading Donald Trump to send B-2 stealth bombers to drop thirty-thousand-pound bunker busters on the installations at Natanz and Fordow, while targeting Isfahan with two dozen Tomahawk missiles. Despite Trump's morning-after declaration that the nuclear sites had all been destroyed, Oren conceded that the true damage report could easily be more complicated and many things could still go wrong. Yet he couldn't shake the sense of history unfolding. "There is a very good chance," Oren said, "that you won't be able to understand the twenty-first century without understanding the Twelve-Day War."

Oren, like many I spoke with in government and the security establishment, allowed himself to imagine that what had begun nearly two years ago in horror might end in a sweeping transformation of the Middle East. In the "optimistic scenario," as he described it, the region would settle into a new era of stability and Israel would finally enjoy a far less embattled existence. Egypt and Jordan had signed treaties with Israel decades earlier, and that cold peace still held. Now the Abraham Accords—the U.S.-brokered normalization pacts between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan—might expand to include the most powerful Sunni

Arab state, Saudi Arabia. That would likely require, as Prince Mohammed bin Salman insisted, some yet to be defined movement toward justice for the Palestinians.



*"I've been deceived by a beautiful tomato once too often."*  
Cartoon by William Haefeli

The possibilities didn't end there. With Hezbollah, Iran's most formidable proxy, crushed as a military force, Lebanon could become more stable and independent. Maybe the new leader of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, who went by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, would shed his jihadi past and guide the country toward a pacific future. And maybe, this line of thought continued, the Islamic Republic of Iran—its main clients hobbled, its economy failing, and its theocratic leadership losing support—would finally cut a nuclear deal with the United States, or implode altogether. Then, at last, phones would no longer light up with missile alerts to respond to, or even to ignore. The Startup Nation's best minds would stop fantasizing about Palo Alto and choose to stay. Such was the peaceable dreaming, the end-of-history thinking, in the wake of the Twelve-Day War.

In earlier periods of crisis, Israeli writers stood at the moral center of the nation, whether forging its myths or exposing its delusions. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the poet Natan Alterman, famous for "The Silver Platter," a poem about the founding of the state, described a people "drunk with joy" as they celebrated the lightning victory and marched into the Old City of Jerusalem, which for two decades had been under Jordanian rule.

The messianic fervor was such that General Shlomo Goren, the chief rabbi of the I.D.F., implored his commanding officer, Uzi Narkis, to blow up the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy place situated on the Temple Mount.

“Tomorrow might be too late,” Goren said. Fortunately, Narkis rejected the plea. Alterman used his cultural eminence to exhort the Israeli government to hold on to the territories taken in the war. Together with S. Y. Agnon, Haim Gouri, and other prominent literary artists, Alterman created the Movement for Greater Israel. “We are hereby loyally committed to the wholeness of our land,” they declared in a manifesto, “and no government in Israel is entitled to relinquish this wholeness.”

In those same intoxicated days, Amos Oz—a young novelist who was raised in Jerusalem under British rule and served in a tank unit during the Six-Day War—emerged from the fighting wary of expansionism and the abuse of power. He divined the cost of victory. In a newspaper article, he urged Israel to avoid the role of occupier and to begin peace negotiations with the Palestinians of the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem. Zionism, he said, was about the redemption of a persecuted people, not about clinging to “dust and stone,” sanctified bones and ancient ruins. “We have not liberated Hebron and Ramallah and El-Arish,” he maintained. “We have conquered them, and we are going to rule over them only until our peace is secured.” If Alterman’s ecstatic nationalism prevailed, Oz warned, the Middle East would become an unending “battleground of two peoples, both fighting a fundamentally just war.”

Years later, when I came to know Amos Oz, those memories still haunted him, as settlements kept spreading unchecked. “I couldn’t help thinking of my own childhood under the British in Jerusalem,” he once recalled at his home in Arad, a desert town near the border with Jordan. “As a child, I had nightmares—genetic, family nightmares—of uniformed aliens coming to our little street to kill us: the British, the Arabs, the Romans, tsarist soldiers, anyone from the long Jewish martyrology. My father bowed to the uniformed British, the same way he had in Lithuania. In 1967, suddenly I was the uniformed alien. I was in the West Bank in uniform, with a submachine gun, released for reserve service, and those Palestinian kids were willing to kiss my hand for chewing gum.”

Oz died in 2018. Today, the only novelist with comparable moral authority is David Grossman, now in his seventies. Since October 7, 2023, Grossman has spoken out occasionally, and always with anguish. He has described the country's tenuous sense of security and the global surge in antisemitism. "Only when it comes to Israel," he has written, "is it acceptable to publicly demand the elimination of a state." Grossman has also written, as he has for decades, about the government's cruelty toward Palestinians, and the nation's collective guilt "for the thousands of children we have killed."

Such gestures, however, carry little moral weight for most Israelis now. Since the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the rise of the second intifada, the activist left has almost vanished. Labor, the party of Yitzhak Rabin, is a shell of what it was, holding just four seats of the Knesset's hundred and twenty. The other left-leaning parties barely register. Public debate, especially on television, is often marked by racist and reactionary rhetoric. After October 7th, no leading politician outside the Arab parties has dared propose anything concrete for the Palestinians. Yair Golan, a former I.D.F. deputy chief of staff and the leader of the left-leaning Democrats Party, told me, "We are fucked. We have two million Palestinians in Gaza and three million in the West Bank. Are we headed toward separation or annexation?"

Gestures toward universalism invite sanction and worse. Ayman Odeh, a Palestinian Israeli member of parliament who is fond of invoking Martin Luther King, Jr., posted during a ceasefire that he welcomed the release of both Palestinian prisoners and Israeli hostages, and that "both peoples must be freed from the yoke of occupation." The result was impeachment proceedings, which he barely survived. Earlier this month, right-wing protesters in the town of Ness Ziona surrounded and attacked Odeh's car, shouting "Death to Arabs!," as he arrived to speak.

In the seventeen years that Netanyahu has been Prime Minister, he has waged a culture war against those to his left and transformed Israel's political climate. Backed by secular conservatives, Russian émigrés, settlers, religious nationalists, and the ultra-Orthodox, he has been the main force behind the creation of right-wing media outlets. He has pushed to diminish the Supreme Court's power and has forged a ruling coalition with

the help of far-right zealots. Above all, he has postponed any reckoning with an occupation that has lasted fifty-eight years. Netanyahu and his circle speak *MAGA* fluently—“deep state,” “wokeness,” and “fake news” have all made their way into political Hebrew—while his son Yair, an Israeli version of Donald Trump, Jr., rails against “post-national, globalist” leftists and lauds Viktor Orbán, Nigel Farage, and Jair Bolsonaro. Netanyahu’s outlandish obeisance to Trump, from posing with a “Trump Was Right About Everything!” cap to nominating him for a Nobel Prize, underscores the alignment.

In such an atmosphere, Etgar Keret just might be the emblematic writer of today’s Israel. It’s not that he represents the spirit of the age; it’s that his sensibility helps interpret it. Keret is a Tel Aviv liberal, as familiar to listeners of “This American Life” as to readers of *Haaretz*. The son of Polish Holocaust survivors—his mother watched her mother and brother die at the hands of the Nazis; his father hid for six hundred days in a hole in the ground—Keret writes with irony, woundedness, and, sometimes, an accent of defeat. His family, scattered across the spectrum (with a brother who regularly attends peace demonstrations and designs save-the-world websites, and an ultra-Orthodox sister in Jerusalem), mirrors the country’s fragmentation. He lays no claim to prophecy or to moral leadership on the grand scale.

Keret is a miniaturist, known for stories that are super brief, often funny, always enigmatic. He began writing just two weeks after his closest Army friend shot himself—leaving Keret, at nineteen, to find him. The result was “Pipes,” a story about a factory worker who crawls inside a pipe to find a way out of this world. “Writing is like the ‘Superman’ movie when Superman takes a lump of coal and crushes it into a diamond,” Keret told me. “The process of writing, to me, is taking a piece of painful crap and doing something to it so it becomes something endurable.” When Keret turns to politics, he does so without the high-mindedness of Oz or Grossman, instead offering an allusive, prismatic relationship to current events. In his own estimation, he is a failed polemicist—he’s written ten stories about Netanyahu, he says, “all of them bad.”

We met for lunch by the beach in Tel Aviv, at a place called Manta Ray. Keret, in his mid-fifties and modest of stature, is a conversationalist in the sense that a howitzer is a gun: a long lunch with him is a near-monologue, punctuated only by Keret ending one tale and then asking, “May I tell you another?” His anecdotes, by turns elliptical and jagged, can resemble Kafka’s fragments, though his tone is pop-eyed and modern in a way that suggests two of his other passions, Kurt Vonnegut and the Coen brothers.

Keret, for all his twitchy volubility, seemed exhausted. He and his wife, Shira, hadn’t been sleeping much. The sirens still rang in their ears. They do not have a *mamad* in their apartment, and so, in the middle of the night, they had to respond to the alarms by running a hundred yards down the road to a kindergarten. Soon, Keret gave up the midnight dashes and took his chances. “I studied math,” he said. “If I am in the *mamad* and there is a direct hit, I am dead anyway. Going to the *mamad* is like riding a bike with a helmet. It’s very important, but I don’t bother. My head gets too sweaty. Stupid, huh? In the shelter, there was this fat boxer dog that was breathing heavily. He had hemorrhoids and was rubbing his ass along the floor. I looked at him and I thought, He is me. I’m on a leash. I’m breathing heavily because I’m in a small room and I’m asthmatic. I see that the dog wants out. I thought, That dog is me, and I never returned to the shelter.”

As we ate, gulls stopped by to inspect our orders, and Keret’s talk came in bursts: “The sense of continuity, of any agreed-upon set of facts or story, is gone. If you were to try to write ‘War and Peace’ today, you would start in rhyme about something, then show a canary in a bathtub, then move to fiction—and then end up with a big fish.” Or: “The genius of Trump is that he has internalized social media and how it works. He knows that saying something is no different than doing something, that it’s just one damn thing after another and nothing matters. Trump realized you don’t have to do things. You just need to say things and then it’s all wrapped in one big burrito of dream and fantasy.”

Keret teaches at a university in Beersheba, the largest city in the Negev. Gaza isn’t far away. A colleague at the university, Ravit Levin, told him that as a child she wasn’t able to join her classmates on a trip to Auschwitz because her father was disabled and she couldn’t afford to travel. Many

years later, when she was in her forties, her father finally scraped together the money and urged her to go. While she was in Poland, an Iranian missile destroyed her house and everything in it. For several days, stranded in Poland with no flights home, she stayed calm. Only when she arrived at Ben Gurion Airport and learned that her suitcase was lost did she break down. The airline employees tried to reassure her: it's only a suitcase. "You don't understand," she told them. "This is the only thing I have left."

Most Saturday nights, Keret and his wife join demonstrations in downtown Tel Aviv. Some protesters hold up pictures of the hostages and call on the government to end the war and bring them home. Others, including Etgar and Shira, hold photographs of Palestinian children killed in Gaza.

"You can't cut yourself off," Keret said. "When we go to the beach, you can hear the booms from Gaza. When you eat a lollipop or an ice cream, you hear things being blown up."



*"It's the same dream every time—I'm in a screaming match with my mother, and then I win, and then I wake up feeling rested and refreshed."*

*Cartoon by Charlie Hankin*

One outcome of the Twelve-Day War, Keret said, is that Israel is now a proxy of the United States. "It's the opposite of the Biden era, when the government here was basically telling him to fuck off," he said. "With Trump, it's like the Purim story and Queen Esther. We send Ron Dermer"—a close confidant and emissary of Netanyahu's—"on secret missions to Washington, and he brings Trump a pretzel and a pickle and says, 'Donald, do us a favor. Throw a bomb on Iran.' Trump finds the treat enticing and agrees. So now Israel is a collective proxy to the United States. Now we have Trump telling Israel to drop Netanyahu's corruption trial. What could

be a more internal issue? When Macron says something about Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, our leaders tell him, ‘Fuck off! It’s an internal issue!’ But when President Trump gets involved in our legal system that’s fine!”

Amos Oz once told me that he dreamed of being Prime Minister. The prospect would seem beyond absurd for Keret. “We are doing horrible things, and it’s important for me that people know I oppose this,” Keret said. But he knows his own limits and how much Israel has changed. As for his tribe of liberals, he said, “it feels like it’s nonexistent.” He does the best he can, all the while knowing that he can do only so much. Just after October 7th, he visited survivors whose kibbutzim had been incinerated. One day, he encountered a woman from Kfar Aza with an infant in her arms. Keret introduced himself and asked what the baby’s name was. “I don’t know,” she replied. “Ten minutes before you came, a woman was breastfeeding her. Then someone told her that her husband had died. She gave me the baby and fainted.”

We listened to the waves for a while. Then Keret said, “Not only is reality horrible, you also don’t know what the real story is.”

In the early-morning hours of October 7th, as Hamas fighters streamed into southern Israel, the group’s top leaders—Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Deif, Marwan Issa—dispatched a secret communiqué to Beirut and Tehran. Their message, which was eventually discovered by Israeli intelligence and published in the newspaper *Maariv*, was intended for Hassan Nasrallah, of Hezbollah, and Mohammed Saeed Izadi, of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. It was both an apology and a desperate plea: Forgive our secrecy, but now is the time to join the fight. The hope in Gaza was that, with Israel reeling, Hezbollah’s élite Radwan force would strike from the north, transforming a Hamas raid into a regional war.

That hope was swiftly dashed. Nasrallah hesitated; the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, held back. In the days that followed, Hezbollah’s military volleys amounted to symbolic support—enough to empty towns along Israel’s northern border, but a far cry from the full-blown, two-front assault that Hamas had imagined. The “axis of resistance” proved, at the critical hour, to be anything but a unified war machine.

For Israelis, the sense of betrayal and exposure came from the failure to anticipate and respond to the October 7th attack. Intelligence had long suggested that Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran saw Israel as divided and fragile, and there was no shortage of threats—the eliminationism touted by Hamas’s original charter and the rhetoric of its leaders over the years; Nasrallah’s boast that Israel would prove to be “weaker than a spider’s web”; the Ayatollah’s declaration that Israel would be destroyed by 2040. Even so, the reality of the breach was stunning: the agencies and the armed forces had dismissed evidence and ignored warnings, and when the attack began they failed to act with coherent urgency. For many hours, in some places a day or more, civilians were left to fend for themselves.

In a country created to vouchsafe the safety and liberty of a people persecuted for centuries, the security collapse remains a source of trauma and shame. Many senior military and intelligence officials have resigned or been forced out. Privately, officials spoke to me in the most abject terms about their own guilt. “Everyone was to blame—it was a collective failure,” one former analyst told me.

The one official who has refused to acknowledge responsibility, or display a sense of fellow-feeling, is the Prime Minister. Even many of his supporters find this hard to stomach. It was only in early July, six hundred and thirty-six days after the attack, that Netanyahu and his wife, Sara, visited Nir Oz, a kibbutz so savagely hit that one in four residents was killed or kidnapped. At the gate, a sign called him “Mr. Abandonment.” Survivors spoke openly of their grief—and their fury at what they saw as a photo op, not an apology. “My dead family is not your P.R. backdrop,” Reuma Kedem, an elderly kibbutznik who had lost multiple family members at Nir Oz, said. “You won’t get the closure you seek—not on the blood of my children.”

Netanyahu’s lack of evident remorse contrasts with the behavior of earlier Israeli leaders. Golda Meir, after the Yom Kippur War, resigned under public pressure. Menachem Begin, after the failure of the first Lebanon war, told his Cabinet ministers that he would “ask for forgiveness, absolution, and atonement”; he soon resigned and withdrew from public life. But Netanyahu has insisted that any independent inquiry be deferred (until

“after the war”) and has sought to keep all eyes focussed on enemies elsewhere.

In some quarters, this cynicism has bred its own theology. Aryeh Deri, who leads the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, went so far as to declare that October 7th had “saved the nation.” He said, “I see in this what the Prophet Isaiah said in his prophecy: ‘For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with greater compassion will I gather thee.’ ” In Deri’s view, the Hamas attack was a day when God forsook Israel briefly, only to gather it back with greater compassion. By forcing Israel’s hand, Sinwar had delivered an unlooked-for blessing: the chance to destroy Hamas, decimate Hezbollah, and expose Iran.

One retired senior security official told me that this way of thinking is not an aberration. “A lot of people in Israel think we need to change the date of Independence Day,” he said tartly. “Suddenly, Israel got the license to go and kill our enemies.”

Even after the Twelve-Day War had concluded, the memory of October 7th as well as the frequent reports of soldiers being killed and wounded in Gaza haunted public life. At Ben Gurion Airport, portraits of hostages, living and dead, lined the walkway leading to the gates. Their faces loomed from billboards everywhere, along with signs reading “Bring Them Home Now.” In group chats, Israelis traded accounts from released captives—stories of shackles, fear, and abuse.

Yet the horrific scale of suffering among Gazans is nearly invisible in the Israeli media, aside from the liberal paper *Haaretz* and a few smaller outlets. Media executives seem convinced that they will alienate audiences if they give the subject much attention. Though the fighting long ago shifted from all-out assault on Hamas to a grinding, sporadic campaign, hospital officials in Gaza report dozens of Palestinians—sometimes more than a hundred—killed on most days. They’re killed in their homes or in the streets. They’re killed lining up for a sack of flour or a jerrican of water at aid stations. They perish of starvation. Or as “collateral damage” during targeted strikes. Often enough, the “targets” surpass understanding. While I was in Israel, the country’s Air Force dropped a five-hundred-pound bomb on the Al-Baqa café, a two-story seaside refuge with cool drinks and

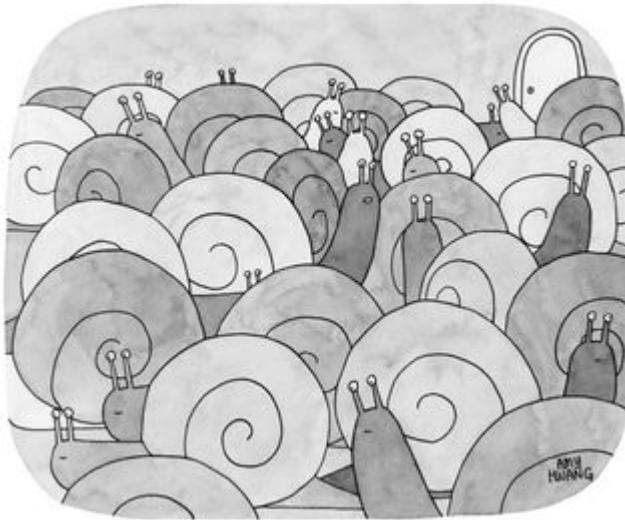
internet access. Saher al-Baqa, the owner, was killed. So were forty others, many of them women and children. Among the dead were Mustafa Abu Umeira, a celebrated soccer player; Malak Musleh, known as the most promising female prizefighter in the Strip; and Ismail Abu Hatab, a photojournalist and a creator of an exhibition that appeared in Los Angeles, Chicago, and elsewhere. An I.D.F. spokesman promised to review the bombing but maintained that “prior to the strike, steps were taken to mitigate the risk of harming civilians using aerial surveillance.”

In periods of conflict, it is exceedingly rare for people to acknowledge the humanity of the other side or the inhumanities perpetrated by their own side. That Americans have a long record of averting their gaze from the dead in Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan is sometimes ascribed to distance. But in Israel there is no geographic remove. To look away is an act of both will and denialism, a form of self-preservation.

A precise death toll is elusive. In late June, Gaza’s Health Ministry distributed an updated list of the dead, a thousand pages complete with names and family records: more than fifty-five thousand killed, seventeen thousand of them children—nine hundred and thirty-seven less than a year old. Israeli officials, and many citizens, reject these numbers out of hand, because the Health Ministry is under the control of Hamas. In fact, the Health Ministry’s numbers are based mainly on bodies that have been brought to hospital morgues, and researchers say that many more dead might be found later under the rubble. Whole cities in Gaza—Rafah in the south, Beit Hanoun in the north—have been flattened. The U.N.’s World Food Programme has declared that a third of the population is going without food for multiple consecutive days, and the World Health Organization has reported that ninety-five per cent of households are struggling to access water. The readiest comparison is to the Nakba, the great catastrophe of dispossession suffered by the Palestinians, in 1948, but the images of ruined villages of that era have been eclipsed by the scale of today’s devastation, the hunger, the casualties—whole families and neighborhoods gone. One Israeli source who has repeatedly visited Gaza compared the landscape of the Strip to “ten little Hiroshimas.” The vast majority of buildings have been damaged or destroyed. The military

deploys Caterpillar D9 bulldozers—known as *doobim*, or “Teddy bears”—to level the remnants.

“The Strip is a pile of rubble,” Mohammed Mhawish, a Gazan journalist who has lost family and friends, told me. “Every sector of life has been destroyed. Schools are now shelters, hospitals are nearly inoperable. Every day is a fight for survival: children go hungry, parents risk their lives just looking for food.”



*“I can only stay for as long as it will take me to get out of here.”*  
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

In June, *Haaretz* published an investigation reporting that Israeli soldiers stationed around aid-distribution sites had been ordered to shoot at Palestinians “to drive them away or disperse them, even though it was clear they posed no threat.” The sources for the story were Israeli officers and soldiers. More than five hundred people had been killed near the aid centers and U.N. food trucks since late May, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. (It is unclear how many were killed by I.D.F. soldiers.) One soldier said, “It’s a killing field. Where I was stationed, between one and five people were killed every day. They’re treated like a hostile force—no crowd-control measures, no tear gas—just live fire with everything imaginable: heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, mortars. . . . Our form of communication is gunfire.” Netanyahu and his Defense Minister dismissed the claims as a “blood libel.” No matter. In the weeks since the *Haaretz* article appeared, hundreds more have been killed.

Some commentators were quick to dismiss the investigation or shift the blame, saying that Hamas fighters had been stealing aid shipments and selling the food and medicine at wildly inflated prices, or claiming that Hamas had been firing on Palestinians. And yet one former security official I spoke to didn't dispute the substance of the report; rather, he compared it to other instances in history of soldiers who were enraged, vengeful, afraid, exhausted, trapped in an aimless war. "They say Israel has 'the most moral military in the world,'" he told me. "Bullshit. The way young soldiers and commanders sometimes use their weapons is terrible. They don't care about the rules. They think, Kill them all! They deserve it after what they did to us, they are not human beings, don't ask your commander."

Most members of the Knesset and commentators on television have rallied behind the I.D.F. But as the war has dragged on, as the number of deaths has risen, and as images of devastation have circulated worldwide, protest has hardly been limited to demonstrators abroad. Two hundred and fifty former officers in the intelligence establishment, including three ex-chiefs of Mossad, signed an open letter of protest. In another open letter, almost a thousand Air Force veterans and reservists stated that the continuation of the war is risking the lives of hostages, soldiers, and innocent civilians "without advancing any of the declared goals of the war" and "serves primarily political and personal interests." Moshe Ya'alon, a former Defense Minister under Netanyahu, said that the government was carrying out a policy of "ethnic cleansing." Omer Bartov, a leading historian of the Holocaust and a veteran of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, said that it was a "misnomer" to call Israel's operation in Gaza a "war"; instead, he writes of "genocide" and of Israel's attempt to "wipe out Palestinian existence in Gaza."

"What we are doing in Gaza now is a war of devastation: indiscriminate, limitless, cruel and criminal killing of civilians," Ehud Olmert, a former Prime Minister, wrote in *Haaretz*. He said that his country was guilty of war crimes. "We're not doing this due to loss of control in any specific sector, not due to some disproportionate outburst by some soldiers in some unit. Rather, it's the result of government policy—knowingly, evilly, maliciously, irresponsibly dictated."

Hamas launched its October 7th attack with the knowledge that it would provoke an immense Israeli reprisal. To regain control of historical Palestine for the Palestinians and to eliminate the Zionist state, Sinwar once remarked, “we are ready to sacrifice twenty thousand, thirty thousand, a hundred thousand.” He knew that the war could bring horrifying casualties; he had helped construct, with Iranian and Qatari money and the cynical complicity of the Israeli government, a militarized landscape of tunnels and outposts embedded in schools, homes, hospitals, and U.N. sites. The suffering of Palestinian civilians wasn’t merely a foreseeable consequence; it was an integral part of the strategy. It is only faintly remembered now, but in the immediate aftermath of October 7th Joe Biden not only threw his arms around Israel but also counselled its leadership not to act out of “an all-consuming rage.” On the nightly news, Israelis have scarcely seen the ruins, the atrocities, the outcome of that rage as it has been unleashed for nearly two years.

“Everyone believes in the atrocities of the enemy and disbelieves in those of his own side, without ever bothering to examine the evidence,” George Orwell wrote after fighting on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. “Unfortunately the truth about atrocities is far worse than that they are lied about and made into propaganda. The truth is that they happen.”

Before October 7th, Netanyahu, like much of the Israeli security establishment, regarded Hamas as a problem to be managed, not as an existential threat. A nuclear Iran was the obsession: the shadow on the wall. For more than half a century, Israel has been the region’s only nuclear power. This reality underpins Israel’s doctrine of deterrence, and its deepest anxieties. It has kept Iran at the top of every Prime Minister’s agenda, no matter how many rockets fell from Gaza. Iran covets what Israel has; Israel fears what Iran could build. The irony is that Israel’s nuclear advantage began with a different kind of crisis entirely.

In 1956, after Egypt’s President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal—ousting the British and French as colonizers—the evicted powers asked Israel to invade Sinai. Britain and France were looking for an excuse to intervene as “peacekeepers” and regain control of the canal. Shimon Peres, then director general of Israel’s Ministry of Defense—and decades

later a Nobel laureate for his role in the Oslo Accords—helped hammer out the deal: in return for Israel’s part in the operation, France agreed to supply nuclear technology.

The Sinai campaign was a disaster, but the French Prime Minister, Guy Mollet, kept his side of the bargain. “I owe the bomb to them,” he said. The Israelis soon established a nuclear program at Dimona, a village in the Negev. In a bit of global fakery, David Ben-Gurion claimed that the reactor was for desalination, to make the desert bloom. President John F. Kennedy was unconvinced, and alarmed by the prospect of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. But, after Kennedy’s assassination, American opposition subsided. Today, Israel has a substantial stockpile of nuclear bombs but does not acknowledge it. Instead, Israeli officials maintain a policy of *amimut*, or strategic ambiguity. Recently, I was interviewing a retired leader of one of the intelligence agencies. After he described the power of Israel’s arms and its ability to cope with its adversaries, he added, with a thin smile, “And, of course, we possess, according to foreign sources, other strategic advantages.” “According to foreign sources”: that’s always the phrase.

At the same time, Israel—which has been threatened since its inception—has taken pains to deny its adversaries such “strategic advantages,” backing vigilance with force. In 1980, Menachem Begin and his intelligence services had to reckon with the fact that the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, was building Osirak, a reactor in an isolated outpost near Baghdad. For Begin, whose father, mother, and brother were murdered by Nazis, this augured a second Shoah. He told his military chiefs, “This morning, when I saw Jewish children playing outside, I decided: No, never again.” Despite the ardent warnings and objections of Peres and other officials in his government, Begin won support in the Cabinet and, in June, 1981, dispatched eight U.S.-made fighter jets to drop sixteen bombs on the Osirak reactor. Israel was condemned in the United Nations, including by the United States.

Begin, ordinarily protective of Israel’s relationship with its American patron, believed that he was duty bound to strike Iraq. In a letter to President Ronald Reagan, he wrote, “A million and a half children were killed by Zyklon B gas during the Holocaust. This time, it was Israeli

children who were about to be poisoned by radioactivity.” The attack on Osirak became the foundation of the Begin doctrine, which held that no adversary in the region would be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon. If one tried, Israel would act.

In 2007, Mossad agents broke into the Vienna apartment of Ibrahim Othman, the head of the Syrian Atomic Energy Commission. According to a comprehensive account by David Makovsky in *The New Yorker*, the agents extracted conclusive evidence from Othman’s computer: Syria was secretly building a plutonium reactor, Al Kibar, with help from North Korea. The Mossad chief, Meir Dagan, brought the findings to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who decided to attack before the reactor went “hot,” lest radiation leak into the Euphrates.

The Israelis were eager for American backing, but the George W. Bush Administration, still reeling from the debacle in Iraq, was hesitant. “Every Administration gets one preëemptive war against a Muslim country,” Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense, told an aide, “and this Administration has already had one.” Condoleezza Rice and other senior officials, mindful of Israel’s faltering war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, worried that an Israeli strike would spark an even wider conflict. Meanwhile, Israeli officials looked back at failed global efforts to stop North Korea and Pakistan from acquiring nuclear weapons as a matter of “too early, too early—oops—too late.” They were convinced that they couldn’t afford to wait. The signals between Bush and Olmert were purposefully vague. Olmert didn’t ask for a green light, and Bush didn’t give one—but he didn’t flash red, either.

Around midnight on September 5, 2007, eight Israeli jets crossed into Syria and dropped seventeen tons of explosives on Al Kibar. Syrian state media claimed that the aircraft had been confronted and driven off, “after they dropped some ammunition in deserted areas without causing any human or material damage.” Once the jets had landed safely, Olmert called Bush and said, “I just want to report to you that something that existed doesn’t exist anymore.” In the weeks that followed, Bashar al-Assad denied that Israel had struck anything of consequence in Syria. The Israelis, for their part, maintained their silence. This “zone of denial,” as security officials called it, allowed Assad to avoid public humiliation and kept him from retaliating.

Netanyahu has been warning about an Iranian bomb since 1992. Back then, as a young Likud member, he told the Knesset that Iran would have the capacity to build a nuclear weapon “within three to five years.” Since then—in speeches to the United Nations and Congress, in books, in Cabinet meetings—he has sounded the alarm about nuclear imminence at every opportunity.

There are many reasons to distrust Netanyahu: his habitual lying; his willingness to prop up his coalition with religious zealots and racists; his brutal, protracted prosecution of the war in Gaza, a strategy that seems motivated in no small measure by a desire to cling to power. It seems clear that he has sometimes exaggerated the speed of Iran’s progress toward becoming a nuclear-threshold state. But the reality of Iran’s ambitions can’t be dismissed. Iran has repeatedly called on its own scientists and turned to the network of Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of Pakistan’s atom bomb, for help. It has systematically flouted international inspections, and developed a far more sophisticated, dispersed, and hardened program than Saddam Hussein or Assad ever managed—learning from the Israeli strikes on Osirak and Al Kibar and making a single knockout blow nearly impossible.



*“I would have thought the tinfoil hats would have kept me from hurting your feelings.”*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Israel’s anxieties cannot be easily dismissed, either. It is, after all, rare for one member state of the United Nations to threaten another with elimination. I was present at a New York press breakfast of bagels and lox that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hosted in 2006, at which he described Israel as a “fabrication,” a passing disturbance that would be “eliminated” in due course. In less decorous settings, Ahmadinejad said that the Holocaust was

a “myth” and that Israel should “vanish from the page of time.” A previous Iranian President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, judged that Israel was small enough to be “a one-bomb country.” In September, 2015, Khamenei was clear: “Israel will not exist in twenty-five years.” A few years later, the regime installed a digital clock in Tehran’s Palestine Square, counting down the days to 2040 and the anticipated victory over Israel.

No matter how much American Presidents have come to resent Netanyahu—Clinton, Bush, Obama, Biden, and Trump have all had their moments of fury with him—none have doubted the presence or the peril of the Iranian nuclear program. And none have protested loudly as Israel has carried out a series of clandestine missions, including, in 2018, the theft of Iran’s nuclear archive and, in 2020, the assassination of Iran’s chief nuclear scientist, with a remote-controlled gun operated by satellite link.

The last time Netanyahu seriously threatened to send bombers to Iran was during the Obama Administration. In 2012, I travelled to Israel to meet Meir Dagan, who had just stepped down as the head of Mossad and was now leading an unofficial opposition from his new perch in retirement. Although Netanyahu and his Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, favored striking Iran’s nuclear facilities, Dagan—along with a remarkable number of senior intelligence and military officials—was firmly opposed to it.

Netanyahu invoked the Holocaust and Tehran’s eliminationist rhetoric; Dagan, himself a child of the Shoah, insisted that the mission was reckless. He had been born on a train carrying his family from the Soviet Union to a Nazi detention camp in Poland, and in his office he kept a photograph of his grandfather—an old man draped in a tallit, kneeling before Nazi soldiers about to execute him. As a young intelligence officer, Dagan infiltrated terrorist cells and killed Palestinian operatives with chilling efficiency. (Ariel Sharon once said, “Dagan’s specialty is separating an Arab from his head.”) As the Mossad chief, he oversaw Israel’s campaign of sabotage against the Iranian nuclear program, including the Stuxnet cyberattack, which was deployed around 2007.

Dagan was bald, round, and not much more than five feet tall. When I visited him at his apartment, in Tel Aviv, he waddled around wagging his finger at the absent Prime Minister. “Don’t be mistaken—I am not a liberal

by point of view,” he said. “If I thought the use of brute force on Iran would stop the nuclear threat in the region and to Israel, that would be one thing. I am judging things from a practical point of view. . . . You have to take into consideration the following questions about an Israeli attack: What would be achieved? What about five minutes after? And what are the consequences of such an attack?” He answered his own questions with a stark logic that resonates today. “It would galvanize Iranian society behind the leadership and create unity around the nuclear issue. And it would justify Iran in rebuilding its nuclear project and saying, ‘Look, see, we were attacked by the Zionist enemy, and we clearly need to have it.’ ”

Tamir Pardo, a specialist in cyber warfare, succeeded Meir Dagan as the head of Mossad—and was just as wary of launching an attack. Appearing before his commanders, he said that the development of a nuclear project was a political decision, and that it could be reversed only with a political decision. For Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions, he said, its leaders would have to conclude that investing in education, health, and agriculture served their interests better. Israel’s intelligence and military services, he acknowledged, have vast capabilities, “but we should be very careful that whatever we do does not ignite them and have them running for a nuclear weapon.” To humiliate an enemy, he warned, is to provide it with a vendetta.

Netanyahu also faced determined resistance from Barack Obama, who had won the Presidency in 2008 largely because, unlike Hillary Clinton, he had opposed the Iraq War. Obama’s hope was to use diplomacy to stave off yet another bloody confrontation in the Middle East. “It would be profoundly in the interest of citizens throughout the region if Sunnis and Shias weren’t intent on killing each other,” Obama told me in 2013. “And although it would not solve the entire problem, if we were able to get Iran to operate in a responsible fashion—not funding terrorist organizations, not trying to stir up sectarian discontent in other countries, and not developing a nuclear weapon—you could see an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there’s competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare.”

Netanyahu dismissed this kind of thinking as naïve, and pressed Obama to support a strike. He got nowhere. Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national-security adviser, told me recently, "We told him it was a bad idea, but he could have done it." Obama and his team argued that an attack would merely push Iran to take its program further underground. "Even the most successful strike," Rhodes said, "would set them back only a year."

Instead, Obama pursued the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—a multilateral agreement with Iran that offered sanctions relief in exchange for more scrupulous inspections and limiting its nuclear program to civilian purposes. Talks began in secret in 2012, in Muscat, Oman, and the deal was signed in 2015, with many provisions set to expire in October, 2025. Critics in the U.S., Israel, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere said that the J.C.P.O.A. failed to address Iran's ballistic missiles or its support for proxies like Hamas and Hezbollah. They argued that the inspections regime was too lax, and that the "sunset" clauses lifting some restrictions after a decade made the agreement precarious. In these objections, Netanyahu would find an ally in Donald Trump, who, two years into his Presidency, scrapped the deal—leaving nothing in its place.

This year, when Netanyahu again pressed his case for striking Iran's nuclear facilities, he did so in the language of imminence: thresholds, red lines, breakaway points. In reality, he was exploiting a series of openings. Rather than bow to the majority of Israelis, who, a year earlier, were demanding an end to the war in Gaza—or betray even a glimmer of moral uncertainty to the outside world—Netanyahu refocussed the country's anxieties and ambitions on Iran. Partly, it was political calculation: changing the subject from Gaza to a crisis abroad. But it was also about timing: Iran's defenses were unusually weak.

Military and intelligence officials told me that Hezbollah made a fateful mistake on July 27, 2024, when it launched an Iranian-made Falaq-1 rocket that landed on a soccer field in the Druze community of Majdal Shams, in the Golan Heights. The blast killed twelve children and teen-agers and wounded dozens more—the most serious Hezbollah attack of the conflict. Netanyahu seized the moment, escalating the fight and setting in motion a

chain of events that would cripple his enemies and redraw the map of the Middle East.

Three days later, Israel struck a building in Haret Hreik, south of Beirut, killing Fuad Shukr, a senior Hezbollah commander, along with five civilians, including two children. In September, Netanyahu authorized an attack nicknamed Operation Grim Beeper. In an intricate scheme carried out over many years, Mossad had managed to plant explosives in the communications equipment of thousands of Hezbollah fighters. The losses were devastating and the message was unmissable: Israel's reach inside Hezbollah was total.

Yet, even as the assassinations mounted, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, remained in denial about his own vulnerability. "Nasrallah didn't understand that these assassinations were not a limited campaign, but that they would come for him, too," Michael Milshtein, a former defense-intelligence analyst, told me. "He thought he understood Israel and its logic. But, like Sinwar, he didn't fully understand Israel." According to another well-informed source, Israeli intelligence even hacked a call between Nasrallah and his intelligence chief, who warned, "Listen, if you keep firing at the north, Israel will have to go to a full-scale war and kill you." On September 27th, Israeli jets struck a Hezbollah headquarters in Dahieh. Nasrallah's body was found under the rubble. While Israel was conducting its war in Gaza with a merciless bludgeon and no conception of an ending, its tactics against Hezbollah—setting off the beeper bombs, wiping out its missile stocks and weapons depots, killing its military and political leaders—proved far better targeted. As a fighting force, Hezbollah, the most powerful of Tehran's proxy forces since 1982, was defeated.

The Iranian regime seemed slow to grasp the nature of Netanyahu's escalation. On April 1, 2024, Israel struck an Iranian consulate annex in Damascus, killing several senior commanders of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps along with a Hezbollah official. In response, Iran launched a combined salvo—around a hundred and seventy drones, thirty cruise missiles, and a hundred and twenty ballistic missiles—against Israel, though few landed or caused serious damage. In strikes later that month, and in another exchange of missile and drone attacks in October,

Israel succeeded in destroying much of Iran’s air defenses. This was the first time that Israel and Iran had engaged in open armed conflict since the Islamic Republic had come into being, in 1979. With its nuclear and security establishments thoroughly infiltrated by Israeli and Western intelligence agencies, and with its defenses in a state of radical disrepair and its economy in tatters, the regime appeared to be newly vulnerable.

This year, Netanyahu caught three further breaks. For one thing, the Presidential election in the U.S. had gone his way: Kamala Harris would never have matched the uncritical support offered by Trump. Although Netanyahu worried that Trump, unpredictable as ever, was tempted by the prospect of a dramatic deal with Iran—one that might serve his own ends, whatever Israel’s objections—those talks, which began in April, quickly stalled, to Netanyahu’s relief. And then, on June 12th, the International Atomic Energy Agency, for the first time in two decades, declared that Iran was out of compliance with its nuclear obligations. Iran had amassed four hundred kilograms of uranium enriched to sixty per cent.

It wasn’t just the right wing that saw opportunity in the moment. “Liberals are always reasonably anxious about the use of force in the region,” Ari Shavit, a centrist journalist and the author of “My Promised Land,” told me. “First, because it is associated with Netanyahu. Second, because it is associated with Trump. And after Iraq—to say nothing of Vietnam, Afghanistan, and more—we are reluctant.” And yet, Shavit went on, “there was once a ‘nuclear club’ of five, and then the breakouts: Pakistan, North Korea, India. If there is a complete collapse of nonproliferation, the twenty-first century will be a catastrophic mess.”



*“He was called away on an urgent matter.”*

*Cartoon by Paul Noth*

On June 13th, Netanyahu launched an attack that his military and intelligence establishments had been preparing, on and off, for more than a decade. With Iran’s air defenses and missile launchers already degraded, the Israelis had an “open highway” to Tehran; not a single Israeli fighter pilot was lost. At first, Trump refrained from blessing the war publicly. But as Israeli successes mounted he quickly shifted to using “we” and made it clear that he was more than willing to be a partner in the campaign.

“Whether it was a green light or a yellow light or a yellow light with sparkles, it’s hard to say,” Eyal Hulata, a former head of the Israeli National Security Council, told me. In the end, Trump sent the U.S. military to join in the attacks on Iran’s nuclear sites at Natanz, Isfahan, and Fordow, and triumphantly declared that the heart of Ayatollah Khamenei’s nuclear program had been “obliterated.”

One evening after the fighting, I visited the studios of Channel 13, one of Israel’s main television stations. After a panel discussion on the war, Alon Ben David, the channel’s chief defense analyst, stood in the parking lot, basking in the moment. His sense of victory was unalloyed. “This is bigger than the Six-Day War, particularly in operational terms,” he said. “Even the war planners didn’t expect it to be so successful, so easy. In twelve days, we became the regional superpower. Iran was the demon we always feared, and it was so easy!”

Brigadier General Amir Avivi, a retired officer and the founder of HaBithonistim, a group of several thousand conservative reserve officers,

had also appeared on the panel. A bald bullet of a man in his mid-fifties, Avivi represents the ascendant right in the security establishment. He, too, saw the recent campaigns in Beirut and Tehran, as well as the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, as the dawn of a new era. “Israel is about to enter its golden age!” he told me, eating from a container of cookies that his wife had baked. His vision lacked Michael Oren’s to-be-sures and caveats: without qualification, he anticipated the country enjoying peace and untold prosperity, becoming “the world’s Singapore.” As for the Palestinians, he foresaw their “voluntary relocation,” claiming that “Gazans are interested, even excited about that.” Meanwhile, Netanyahu would only grow stronger, while his rivals—Naftali Bennett and the rest—would fade into irrelevance.

Some version of this kind of thinking is widespread in Israel. Amit Segal, perhaps more than any other journalist, captures the temper of the country as it is now. He grew up in Ofra, a settlement in the West Bank; his father was a member of the Jewish Underground. Segal is forty-three but looks ten years younger, and he’s everywhere—writing for one of Israel’s most popular newspapers, *Israel Hayom*, appearing on television, posting ceaselessly on social media. There’s talk that he’ll eventually enter politics. Netanyahu considered him for Minister of Justice. Segal can be variously acidic and charming. As a right-winger on the more liberal Channel 12, he describes himself as the network’s “pink panther, a strange animal from National Geographic.” But it’s no mystery why Channel 12 brought Segal on board: the Tel Aviv liberals who once dominated the airwaves no longer represent the majority of the country. Segal says that he agrees with Netanyahu “about seventy-five per cent of the time,” though his dissents can run to the right as well as to the left of the Prime Minister. He regrets Ariel Sharon’s dismantling of the Jewish settlements in Gaza, in 2005, and wouldn’t oppose resettling the Strip, at least in its north. The settlements that have proliferated across the West Bank since 1967, he insists, are there to stay.

When I met Segal for coffee, in Jerusalem, he was clearly delighted by the results of Netanyahu’s war with Iran. “I don’t live under the illusion that peace will come to the Middle East, but I do think that what ended was the second era of big wars,” he said. “The first era was against secular Arab

dictatorships—Egypt, Syria, Jordan—and now we sort of ended the war against Iran and its proxies.”

Segal reserves particular disdain for the denunciations of Israel’s campaign in Gaza. He opposes any talk of a ceasefire or an armistice. The Army, he says, needs just a few more months to finally defeat Hamas. The compounding misery in Gaza hardly registers. “I don’t know of any precedent on earth in war when one side provides the other side with constant humanitarian aid,” he said. “Such aid only prolongs the war, and more people are killed.”

Segal talks to Netanyahu with some frequency. When I asked whether Netanyahu would declare victory and give up power, Segal said, “I don’t think he has that feature in his system to resign. ‘Power-addicted’ is a strong term, but I don’t think he can leave and be without the power to shape the Middle East or the world. The excuse he gives himself is that he still has a way to go with peace agreements with Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia.”

Even as most Israelis exulted in the aftermath of the Twelve-Day War, I found skeptics inclined to take a longer view. One recently retired official with deep inside knowledge of the security establishment scoffed at Netanyahu’s ostensible *casus belli*: he didn’t think that Iran’s Supreme Leader was exactly *racing* toward the bomb. “After two years of war, all the stars were in place,” he told me. “But we needed to create some narrative. It was all a bunch of bullshit. . . . It’s easy to tell stories about things. Ninety per cent of the people are not interested in details. Are they a huge threat or not? Nuclear or not? Ceasefire or not? Look outside! This is Israel one week after the war. The stock market is jumping!”

Nahum Barnea, a columnist at *Yedioth Achronoth* who is widely considered the dean of Israeli journalism, detects “a big smell of hubris.” He supported the attacks against Iran, but, he told me, “when it comes to the lessons we should learn from it, the danger of celebration is much bigger than the benefits.”

The experts I spoke with in Israel and the U.S. were in general agreement: no one could say for certain that the Iranian nuclear program had been

damaged to the extent that Netanyahu and Trump claimed. Their worries recalled Meir Dagan’s warnings, back in 2012, about the risks of a strike. Ariel (Eli) Levite, a longtime Israeli civil servant currently at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, noted that Iran effectively expelled international inspectors—and that no one knew for sure where those four hundred kilograms of enriched uranium had gone. “The Iranians can say it is buried under the rubble, and we will be living with considerable anxiety until we have a rude awakening,” Levite said. Shavit, the journalist, put it more bleakly: “There is still the chance from Iran of a Samson option because we are at war, after all, with four-thousand-year-old Iran. It’s definitely not over. They are still there.”

There’s a persistent illusion in Israeli and American circles that the Iranian people would somehow welcome regime change imposed from abroad. It’s not the first such fantasy: the Israeli government once thought that the Christian militia commander Bachir Gemayel could be both its protector and Lebanon’s savior; the George W. Bush Administration had similar delusions about Ahmed Chalabi in Iraq. Ben Rhodes, the former deputy national-security adviser, is in regular touch with Obama, and he was confident that the former President shares his concerns that the bombing campaign in Iran will ultimately resolve nothing. “What drove Obama insane,” Rhodes told me, “was that the same people who complained about the ten-year limitation” of the J.C.P.O.A. “are celebrating setting things back for a year with bombs—with no verification and sending them underground.”

Rob Malley, a lead negotiator for the J.C.P.O.A. who later served as Biden’s special envoy to Iran, was cautious, too, when I spoke to him. “The day of reckoning for the regime is approaching,” he told me. “Every investment they made—in nukes, in ballistic missiles, in relations with China—it all amounted to a hill of beans. They lost everything. Their nuclear program is in shambles. And Russia, which was prepared to give them drones? Russia gave them nothing! Every bet they made turned out to be the wrong bet. Clearly, Israel faced an Iran that had no means. They saw a window of opportunity that may not be as wide open again.” And yet, Malley warned, “you can argue that all the dominoes will fall the right way. But this is a long movie. We are not even done with the opening credits.”

Malley and Hussein Agha, who was once a peace negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organization in the era of Yasir Arafat, have written a coruscating book, “Tomorrow Is Yesterday,” that surveys the folly and missed chances of Israeli-Palestinian relations, and expresses deep despair over the brutality of the Gaza war and its implications. “The Israelis are more powerful and feared now than you and I can remember, but there’s a clear line between fear and acceptance—which is what the whole normalization process with the U.A.E. and the Saudis was about,” Malley said. “Officials in the Middle East won’t deny their anxieties about Iranian hegemony. But that doesn’t mean they welcome Israeli hegemony.” As for the Palestinians, he said, the war in Gaza has produced a people “who have lost everything and feel only humiliation and abandonment—and despise hypocritical Western moralism. This will feed future militants, and how they behave will be shaped by old grievances and new technologies—which Israel masters today, but they could master, too.” In the familiar pattern, today’s resolution is tomorrow’s tinderbox.

For all the triumphalism, for all the talk about an imminent golden age, Israel’s future is still shadowed by the ugly persistence of occupation, the long and bitter memory of its enemies, and the deepening moral cost of Gaza. The battered, nearly levelled cities of the Strip look like a reckoning deferred. Iran’s regime may be chastened, but it is not gone, and the nuclear question may resurface before long.

Meanwhile, the cafés and bars of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem are packed and noisy, as if the country could celebrate its way to safety. I recalled Etgar Keret’s remark that “the sense of continuity, of any agreed-upon set of facts or story, is gone.” Or maybe it’s that the story never quite resembles the narratives issued from the offices of Presidents and Prime Ministers. Israel has shown, time and again, that it is better at winning wars than at winning what comes after. The celebrations are real, but so is the dread—about the next missile, the next front, the next generation raised amid the rubble and the rage. ♦



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

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[\*\*A Reporter at Large\*\*](#)

# Mexico's Molar City Could Transform My Smile. Did I Want It To?

*More than a thousand dentists have set up shop in Los Algodones. Their patients are mostly Americans who can't afford the U.S.'s dental care.*

By [\*\*Burkhard Bilger\*\*](#)

July 28, 2025



*Los Algodones was built on leaps of faith. A short walk from the United States, it's a place for the poor, the afflicted, the huddled masses without dental insurance. Photographs by Ariel Fisher for The New Yorker*

On weekday mornings in late winter, they start to arrive before dawn. They drive in from Arizona or California, catch a shuttle from Yuma, or park their car in a lot in the Sonoran Desert and cross the border on foot. The path for pedestrians follows State Route 186, past a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses offering free Bible courses, along a twisting corridor of razor wire and chain-link fence, through passport control, and into Los Algodones. By noon, more than a thousand people will have walked from the United States to Mexico, in the shadow of the thirty-foot wall that divides them. They come on bicycles and in wheelchairs, pushing walkers and leaning on

canes. They come to be healed or transformed or to put an end to their pain, preferably at deep-discount prices.

Los Algodones is part Lourdes and part Costco. It has no cathedral, shrine, or holy well, yet it draws more than a million pilgrims every year. For most of its history, the town has had little to offer the average visitor. It sits with its back to the Colorado River, in the empty floodplain where the Quechan people first raised crops—*algodón* means “cotton” in Spanish. Ranch hands and migrant farmers arrived in the eighteen-hundreds, followed by bootleggers, bartenders, drug runners, and pimps. In the nineteen-twenties, when all of Yuma had gone dry with [Prohibition](#), Los Algodones had forty-eight bars and strip clubs a ten-minute stroll from the border. I spoke to one local man who grew up in San Luis Río Colorado, twenty-five miles to the south. As a teen-ager, he recalled, he used to ride to Los Algodones on horseback, swim across the river to the United States with a backpack full of weed, and return home to Mexico, flush with cash. “It was all whorehouses and cantinas here,” he said.

Then came the dentists. In 1969, Dr. Bernardo Magaña, newly graduated from dental college at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, set up shop directly across the street from border control. Within a year, he was treating dozens of patients a day, most of them Americans. It would be more than a decade before many other dentists joined him. The town was just too rough, Magaña’s son, Bernardo, who now runs the practice with his brother and his mother, told me. “So my dad took it upon himself to clean it up.” In the early eighties, Magaña was elected mayor of Los Algodones. Backed by the state government in nearby Mexicali, he cracked down on vice and shuttered the most notorious establishments in town. Year by year, the bars gave way to dental clinics, the partygoers to patients. According to Roberto Díaz and Paula Hahn, who run a website about medical tourism called Border CRXing, Los Algodones now has the highest per-capita concentration of dentists in the world: well over a thousand in a population of fifty-five hundred. It’s known as Molar City.

When I first arrived, on a Sunday evening in March, the clinics were all closed. At the Quechan Casino, on the Fort Yuma Indian Reservation just across the border, the slot machines were thronged with patients killing time

before their appointments or flights home. Myron Arndt, a former tire-shop owner from Minnesota, was hunched over a Rich Little Piggies machine. He was scheduled to get four new front teeth the next day. Mike Sherer, a tinsmith from Michigan, was having some dentures and implants put in, and Terry Bussard, a retired magnesium-plant foreman from Utah, was sporting two new plates of dentures. One of the few without an appointment was Conny Everett, who runs a pretzel stand at local fairgrounds. She needed a cavity filled but couldn't bring herself to go. She has a tendency to gag during procedures, she told me. "Last year, I got in the chair—it was all paid for—and I just chickened out. I'm, like . . ." She put her fist in her mouth and widened her eyes.

It has been more than a century since the invention of Novocain, but dentistry is still the stuff of frayed nerves and bad dreams. The recumbent chair and whining drill, the blinding lights and masked faces overhead, the needle, the spit basin, and the X-ray film clamped between your teeth—every detail seems designed to inflame our fears. "My family dentist when I was a kid, there was something wrong with the guy," James Murphy, a retired bookstore clerk from Rhode Island, told me, between spins on a Dragon Link slot machine. "He drilled every tooth in my head. That's what made my teeth rotten. But he was Irish, and you got to go with the Irish guy." Murphy was due to fly home the following day with a full set of implants in his upper jaw, and he'd be back in three months to do the bottom teeth. The total cost would be seventeen thousand dollars. "I've never smiled so much," he said. "Back home, it would have been thirty-nine thousand just for the top. And they wonder why people are coming here."

Crossing the border can be a little daunting the first time, some said. "Took us three years to work up enough nerve," Ken Foshaug, a retired Coast Guard engineer who was staying at a nearby Sleepy Hollow R.V. park with his wife, told me. "All the guys holding guns and checking you out. Plus the whole thing of going to a foreign country to let someone drill into your teeth." But Molar City was built on leaps of faith. It's a place for the poor, the afflicted, the huddled masses without dental insurance. Just a short walk away, on the other side of the wall.

I first heard about Los Algodones from my friend Todd, who lives in Mexico for part of the year. He'd been reading about the town for a while and thought I was made for the place—cheap, poorly insured, mouth a mess. My bottom teeth lean this way and that in a wandering line, like first graders on a field trip. The top row is reasonably straight on the left, but, on the right, one rogue tooth is tilted back so far that it's half hidden by an incisor. In pictures from that angle, I have a gap-toothed grin, as if I've just come from a bar fight or a remake of "Deliverance." "Snaggletooth" is the term that my wife likes to toss around if I annoy her. When we first met, in fifth-grade orchestra, we were a perfect pair: she had big buckteeth. But by the end of junior high, after her braces came off, her teeth were as straight and prim as everyone else's. Mine only got snagglier.

A succession of dentists of varying skill and congeniality have worked on my teeth over the years, to no great effect. When I first moved to Brooklyn, the best I could afford was a gruff woman in a practice misleadingly labelled as "modern" above the door. A Russian émigré, perhaps accustomed to patients of a doughtier nature, she was stingy with anesthesia, I felt, and barked through her mask when I fidgeted. A few years later, when I lived in Germany, the health-care system there paid for regular visits to a gleaming, high-tech office in a lofty penthouse. At my first appointment, the dentist peered at an X-ray of the metal post that my Russian dentist had planted in my jaw and shook his head: "When was this work done? The nineteen-fifties?"

Still, technology has its downsides. The more advanced the imaging system, the more expensive the visit, and the more problems it can find with your teeth. Last year, at a routine checkup in Brooklyn Heights, I mentioned that one of my teeth had been feeling a little sensitive. My dentist spent the next hour searching for the cause: he rapped the tooth with a metal tool, had me chomp down on a stick, and, when I still didn't feel any pain, sent me to the next room for a panoramic X-ray of my skull. He eventually found a hairline fracture in the tooth's root. It was so faint that I could hardly see it, even under extreme magnification, but he urged me to get a root canal and an implant for three thousand dollars. I kept the tooth and haven't felt any pain since. What stuck with me, instead, was the sight of my skull. It looked like something unearthed by paleontologists in Tanzania: ancient, battered,

encrusted with minerals. When the dental assistant sent the picture to my phone, she glanced up at me and said, “This is what you’ll look like when you’re dead.”

The truth is that our ancestors had much better teeth than we do. Neanderthals and other early humans, like the aptly named Nutcracker Man, had burly, oversized molars for grinding down tough stems and coarse grasses. Modern teeth are much daintier, yet they were still built for diets heartier than ours. Eating was meant to be a workout. Chewing raw plants and sinewy meats both strengthened and lengthened the jaw. Without that exercise, our oral growth tends to be stunted. The soft, processed foods we eat offer so little resistance that our jaws end up shorter than they should be, our teeth overcrowded—ninety per cent of us have some misalignment. Early humans didn’t need orthodontia. Their incisors fit together tip to tip, and their wisdom teeth were ten times less likely to be impacted than our own. Their teeth also lasted a lifetime. The food they hunted and foraged wasn’t laced with sugar, so their teeth weren’t infested with bacteria that exude acids that eat through enamel. Our ancestors, for all their lack of flossing, rarely had cavities.



*“If I had known we’d have to keep moving, I wouldn’t have packed so much crap.”*  
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

Dentistry is a losing battle between form and function. Our teeth were ingeniously shaped by evolution, just not for the way we use them now. Most of medical history reads like a long, triumphal march: surgeries refined, diseases vanquished, life spans extended. But dental history—in books like “[Evolution’s Bite](#),” by the paleontologist Peter Ungar, or “[The Smile Stealers](#),” by the historian Richard Barnett—always seems to lead

backward as well as forward. Agriculture is invented, only to wear down farmers' teeth with grit from the stones used to mill grain. Food production is industrialized, only to riddle our teeth with cavities. Anesthesia is perfected, only to encourage people to get rid of their imperfect teeth and replace them with less durable implants, crowns, and veneers. And each advance, at least initially, makes dentistry more exclusive, more expensive, more out of reach for the average patient. Hence the crowds at Molar City.

Every morning at the Hacienda Los Algodones, guests gather over breakfast to trade stories about their teeth. The hotel is owned by the same family that owns the area's largest clinic, Sani Dental, and most of its guests are also patients. They get a free night at the hotel for a thousand dollars in dental procedures, two nights for two thousand. The Hacienda is a rambling villa on the outskirts of town, with arched walkways, shady courtyards, and adobe walls painted a rich annatto yellow. It was once the private residence of Enrique Jiménez, the founder of Sani Dental, and his wife, Adriana. Enrique's brother Jorge and his sister Mayra also own dental clinics in town, as do his daughters Marcela and Angelina. The Jiménez family is dentists all the way down.

The Hacienda's guests are mostly snowbirds—Northerners who migrate south to Arizona and California every winter, following the sun. They're a restless, nomadic folk, usually retired, who descend in vast numbers on the R.V. parks and rentals of Yuma, Quartzsite, and surrounding towns. (The population of Quartzsite balloons from less than three thousand to more than a million in the winter.) Theirs is a community built on chance encounters between campsites, so they've learned to strike up acquaintances quickly—to plop down beside a stranger at an open table and start telling stories. And they all have stories. If they've made it to Molar City, they're adventurers of a sort, and the town has become a bargain hunter's El Dorado. Cut-rate pharmacies, opticians, dermatologists, massage therapists, hair-transplant specialists, and exotic medical practitioners line the streets around the dental clinics, promising deals unheard of back in the U.S.

On my first morning at the hotel, I looked up from my eggs and beans to find a tall, craggy-looking man standing beside me. His name was Denvy

Larson, he said, and he had just driven down from Oregon with his brother. He was a devout Mormon, seventy-nine years old, and had done mission work in the Philippines. But he wasn't here for that. He'd come to Mexico to turn his pickup into the truck of his dreams. "I want leather bucket seats and pearlescent paint with metal flakes on the bodywork," he said. "It'll have live flames in front that taper into ghost flames." At the next table, Donna LaTorre, a middle-aged woman from North Carolina, was talking about the stem-cell infusion she was getting later that day. She had long, platinum-blond hair, thick eyelashes, and a slight tremor in her hands from [Parkinson's disease](#). She used to be a bodybuilder, she told me—"a hundred and twenty-three pounds and built like a truck"—but had refused to take growth hormones, so she couldn't make a career of it. She blamed her Parkinson's on the pesticides at a tobacco farm where she'd once worked. "Last July, I couldn't walk," she said, but she was back on her feet now thanks to the infusions.

Guests like these were the outliers, though. Most were here for their teeth. I met Billy and Nancy Martinez at dinner on my first night. Nancy, who was seventy-three, had long dark-brown hair parted in the middle like [Joan Baez](#) and spoke in soft, falling cadences. Billy, four years younger, was short and round and full of vinegar. He would nudge me with his elbow when he told a story, then roll around in his chair laughing at the punch line. They were from Red Cliff, Colorado, an old mining town two hours west of Denver. Billy drove a snowplow and other heavy equipment for the public-works department, and Nancy was a retired customer-service representative for an electrical coöperative. They showed me pictures of the abandoned railroad track where they liked to walk their dog, Miner Jack. Then Billy leaned over and bared his gums at me. He was getting two implants and a few crowns in the morning, he said, yanking his mustache sideways so I could see the gaps between his teeth. He grinned like a ten-year-old on the night before his birthday.

I glanced over at Nancy, who was picking at her plate. "I'm just going to have a consult," she said. She'd always been self-conscious about her smile, she said. When she was a girl, she had a small, fanglike canine that jutted between her front incisors. The other kids used to call her Dog Tooth. "Oh, yeah, it was cool!" Billy said. Nancy wrinkled her lips: "I didn't think so."

She finally had the tooth taken out twenty-three years ago, when she turned fifty. But now there was a gap where it used to be, and the edges of the teeth to either side were stained. She still imagined people were staring at her. Two years ago, she and Billy had managed to save enough money to put new crowns on those teeth. But then Miner Jack got cataracts, and they used the savings for his eye surgery. “It’s a standing joke,” she said. “‘Oh, when we have money, we’ll get your teeth fixed.’”

Molar City seemed to be the solution: the prices were a fraction of those at home. But she wasn’t quite convinced. “I thought maybe I’d think about it but not actually do it,” she said.

Billy and Nancy weren’t especially vain. They just wanted “to face the world with dignity,” as Brett Kessler, the president of the American Dental Association, put it recently, when I asked him about the goals of dentistry. Good teeth have become a social norm in America. The more money you have, the straighter and whiter they’re expected to be. It wasn’t always so. For centuries, the wealthy had terrible teeth. In the sixteenth century, when sugar first made its way to England in large quantities from Brazil, it was an aristocratic indulgence. By 1700, the country was importing twenty-two million pounds a year, a disproportionate amount of which was consumed by the upper classes. When their teeth rotted, they had no choice but to see a tooth puller or a barber-surgeon—sometimes just a blacksmith with a side gig. If his iron pincers didn’t work, the preferred tool was a pelican: a fearsome-looking device with two hooks to grasp a molar and a lever to wrench it out. In France, the most famous of the tooth pullers, le Grand Thomas, plied his trade on the Pont Neuf, in Paris. He took as his motto “*Dentem sinon maxillam*”—“The tooth, and if not, the jaw.”

It was an egalitarian sort of torture: even monarchs fared no better. Queen Elizabeth I was so fearful of dental work that she lived with aching teeth for years. It wasn’t until the Bishop of London volunteered to have one of his own teeth pulled, as proof of the procedure, that the Queen consented to do the same. In France, a courtlier breed of tooth pullers began to cater to the affluent in the late seventeenth century. Known as *dentistes*, they had milder manners and better tools—the pelican was replaced by the tooth key, a corkscrew-like device that could fasten onto a tooth and twist it out of the

jaw—but only marginally improved results. When Louis XIV had a tooth pulled at Versailles, his dentist yanked at his jaw with such zeal that he tore a hole through the palate and into the nasal passage. For a while after that, any liquid that the King drank would come spraying out of his nose. To plug it closed, his surgeon had to cauterize the hole with a red-hot iron.

Dentistry would have its own parade of progress eventually. Anesthesia was introduced in 1846, the pneumatic drill in 1868, dental X-rays in 1896. Ether gave way to cocaine, Novocain, lidocaine, articaine, and laughing gas for the lucky few. As always, though, there were unintended consequences. Dentures, carved from walrus ivory or other materials and tied in place or mounted on sprung-steel plates, were excruciating to wear and reeked after use. Nonetheless, the ones made with real human teeth were so popular that some parents were said to pull their children's teeth to sell them. In morgues and on battlefields across Europe, the dead were scavenged for donations—"Waterloo teeth," they were called, after [Napoleon's](#) great defeat in 1815. Well into the twentieth century, preventive dentistry was beyond most people's means. My mother-in-law, who grew up on a farm in Nebraska during the Depression, lost most of her teeth by the age of fifteen. Her parents couldn't afford fillings, so any tooth with a cavity was pulled. When she married, she had partial dentures on top and bottom—a fact my father-in-law didn't learn until years later. "It wasn't hard to fool him," she told me. "I'd take them out after he went to sleep. Or I'd wake up, take them out, and go back to bed."

Any neighborhood dentist is capable of miracles nowadays—even root canals can be relatively painless. And more wonders are in development: gene therapies that grow new teeth, stem-cell treatments that coax teeth into filling their own cavities, nanoparticles that loosen teeth so that braces can realign them more easily. But the gap between the best care and the worst has only grown. Less than half of all Americans go to the dentist in any given year, the American Dental Association estimates, and the procedures they most need are the ones they can least afford. In 2019, for example, close to two million emergency-room visits were caused by dental problems; oral cancers alone—often detected too late—kill some twelve thousand Americans a year. Whether by cause or effect, Peter Ungar notes in "Evolution's Bite," poor oral health has been linked to [Alzheimer's](#),

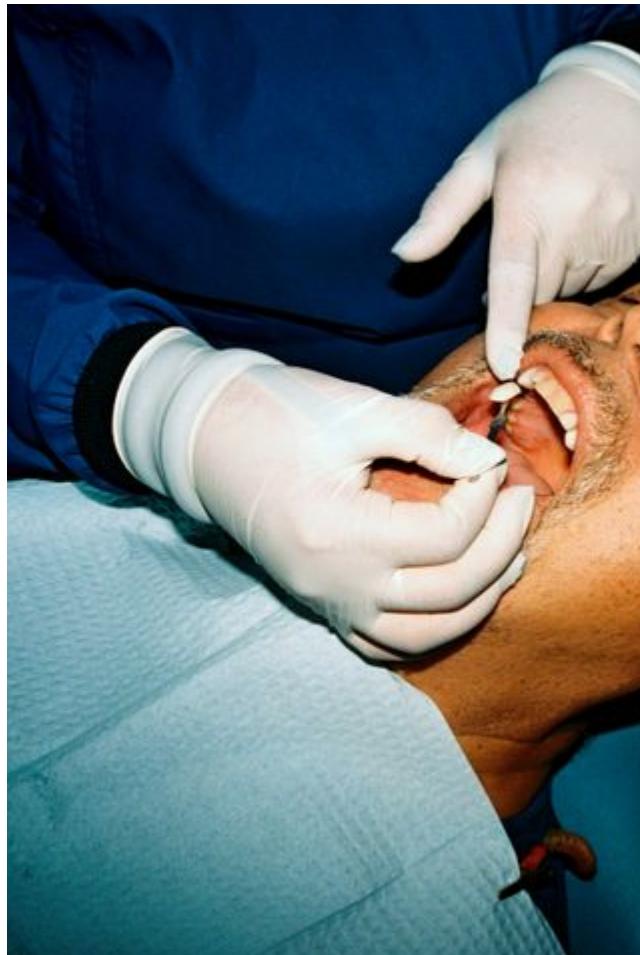
diabetes, heart disease, [H.I.V.](#), osteoporosis, premature births, sepsis, and a host of other conditions. “As your teeth and gums go, so goes the rest of your body,” he writes.

The symptom most common to our dental shortcomings is a seething resentment, occasionally flaring into rage. Dentists may be the most abused professionals in the country, next to airport check-in agents. In 2020, in a survey by the New York University College of Dentistry, three-quarters of dentists reported that they’d been verbally attacked by a patient, and nearly half had been physically assaulted. Dental students were treated even worse: eighty-six per cent had been verbally abused in the previous year. The aggression toward dentists was remarkably indiscriminate: age, sex, race, and years of experience made no difference, nor did the number of patients that they saw per day. The rate of abuse remained the same.

Three years ago, at a dental clinic in Tyler, Texas, a forty-year-old man began to berate the nurses working on his dentures. When a dentist asked him to leave and never return to the clinic, the patient pushed him to the ground. Then he walked out to his truck, came back with a handgun, and shot the dentist and one of his colleagues to death. Two years later, in New Orleans, a fifty-five-year-old woman was accused of stabbing her dentist in the eye. A month after that, in a suburb of San Diego, police reported that a twenty-nine-year-old man stormed into a dental clinic and opened fire with a semi-automatic handgun. He hit the receptionist in the leg and the office manager in the hand, elbow, and torso, then went looking for the dentist. When he found him, hiding inside an office, he shot him multiple times in the upper body.

The alleged shooter in San Diego, Mohammed Abdulkareem, was Muslim; the dentist, Benjamin Harouni, was Jewish. Some speculated that the killing was a hate crime, but the police found no evidence of that. Abdulkareem had been coming to the clinic for months, complaining that the dentures he’d been given didn’t fit. The office manager had taken to intercepting him at the door because he frightened the staff. The attack on the clinic may have been planned—Abdulkareem had bought the gun five days earlier—but it was also strangely impersonal. Harouni wasn’t the dentist who had fitted the dentures, and he had tried to fix the problem at no charge. He was

just twenty-eight, less than two years out of dental school, and had made a point of working in a clinic with poorer, subsidized patients. But none of that mattered. Abdulkareem was angry and in pain, it seems, and he wanted someone to pay. Any dentist would do.



*Sani Dental's Dr. Sofia Terrazas fits a patient for a veneer, matching the color to insure it blends with the surrounding teeth.*

"I'm a psychologist, and I deal with a lot of dentists," Harouni's uncle, Daniel Sadigh, told me. "When this happened, every one of them reached out to me. They were really scared." Even with their modern tools and targeted anesthetics, dentists see patients at their most anxious and vulnerable. The mouth is so close to the brain, so tightly encircled by sense organs, that drilling can trigger a fight-or-flight response. *Get that damn thing out of there.* For a long time, going to the dentist brought with it the certainty of pain. Now it brings a fretful uncertainty. Will the scans uncover issues I can't feel? Will my dentist suggest a treatment I don't need? Can I

afford the one I do need? And will it hurt after all? “That part of it I’m not so sure has gone away,” Sadigh said. “Nobody goes to a dentist with pleasure.”

The walk to Sani Dental from my hotel was less than reassuring. Every twenty or thirty feet, a hawker would shout and cross the street to shake my hand, or step away from a storefront and fall in beside me. “Hey, buddy, you looking for dental work? Pharmacy?” Before coming to Los Algodones, I’d envisioned the town as a kind of outlet mall: strip after strip of stucco-clad clinics, with parking lots in between. The actual place was more unruly. The dental clinics rose from the streets at regular intervals, some of them sleeker than any I’d seen in Brooklyn (not a high bar, admittedly). But the gaps between them overflowed with street venders, curio shops, taquerías, liquor stores, and T-shirt stands, with the hawkers scouting the crowds around them. “You need a root canal? Twenty per cent off!”

The glass door to Sani Dental was outlined by a giant tooth. Stepping inside from the clattering street felt like a jump cut in an action film, with a subtitle saying “Miami” or “Dubai.” The lobby was hushed and spacious, with two eager young receptionists in matching polo shirts. A long arched corridor stretched behind them, soothingly lit like an undersea passage. There were seventeen examination rooms on one side and a row of white leather couches on the other, with waiting patients. The clinic’s thirty-five dentists and sixty-six support staff see more than nine thousand clients a year. (Sani also has branch offices in Cancún and Playa del Carmen, as well as a plastic-surgery and hair-transplant clinic in Los Algodones called Sani Medical.) At its newly built, three-story laboratory, teams of designers create digital models of implants and dentures, then fabricate the molds with 3-D printers. The finished products are cast in ceramic, gold, titanium, steel, or chromium cobalt, then glazed by local artisans to match the patient’s teeth and gums.

Being a patient at Sani Dental is a bit like being a car chassis at a Ford factory. For the next three days, my teeth and I would get passed from scheduler to diagnostician to clinician to lab tech, then back to the clinician, and finally to an accountant to settle the bill. Each member of the chain was

expert at a given task and did it over and over again. Depending on whom you ask, this assembly-line method is either Sani Dental's strength or its weakness. "They do things fast and cheap and get you out the door quick," one dentist in Los Algodones told me. "But sometimes it's detrimental of quality." To Dr. Juan Carlos Miranda Villa, my diagnostician at Sani, the clinic's speed and efficiency only increase its quality. "When you do more, you have more skills to do it," he said. "If I was a patient and I had to choose between a doctor who does five hundred surgeries per year and a doctor who does eighty or a hundred, I would choose the one with more experience. Their hands are faster, their work is better."

Miranda Villa is a compact forty-two-year-old with a peppery beard and dark, probing eyes. He grew up in a family of doctors—his father was a gynecologist, as is his brother—and speaks with the melancholic air of a man accustomed to navigating his patients' self-doubts and fears. "You are a curious case," he told me. "You have that one tooth on the right side. It's so far back that we could either pull it or grind it, but it would take so much grinding that it might not be worth it." I had asked him for two assessments, one functional and one aspirational. What did my teeth need to stay healthy, and what would it take to straighten them out—to make them look like those on the posters in his office? The second question seemed to bother him. "My specialty is cosmetic, but function needs to be first," he said. "If a patient comes in and says, 'I don't like my crooked teeth. I want you to just pull them and give me implants'—which is something we hear daily—we tell them no. We won't pull healthy teeth."

Still, by the end of our session, he had answered both my questions. To stay healthy, he said, my teeth would need ten fillings, mostly to plug the gaps exposed by receding gums. Straightening them out would take a little more work. All but four of my teeth—twenty-eight in total—would need to be reshaped. This meant grinding them down to little nubs of enamel, like pegs on a cribbage board, then capping them with crowns. The Sani lab would cast the crowns out of white zirconia, a ceramic much harder than stainless steel, tint them to my specifications, and shape and size them to fit my jaw. Then a clinician would cement them into place.

The ten fillings would be seven hundred dollars—about a fourth of the going rate in Brooklyn. The full treatment would cost fourteen thousand. Before I made my decision, though, Sani Dental would mock up some plastic crowns that could fit over my existing teeth. “Smile Design,” Miranda Villa called it. “It’s like trying on a suit before you buy it,” he said.

When I left the examination room, I passed Billy and Nancy Martinez, sitting on a couch in the hall. Billy’s cheeks looked a little puffy—he’d had the first of his temporary crowns put in—but he managed to twist them into a grin. His dentist was great, he said. “I think I got lucky!” Nancy was less pleased. “I think you got lucky, too,” she said. She had decided to go ahead and get her front teeth fixed, only to be told that she needed a root canal as well. “She had some pain,” Billy said, glancing at her. Nancy nodded: “My dentist kept saying, ‘Oops!’” Her front incisors were now capped with temporary crowns, so the gap between them was gone. When I asked if I could take her picture, she laughed and said no, covering her mouth. “I’m definitely not photogenic.” The temporary crowns did look oddly artificial —like the plastic vampire teeth that children wear, except more elegant. Costume jewelry for the mouth.

The line between medicine and cosmetics isn’t always clear when it comes to teeth, and insurance companies have smudged it further. Nancy’s crowns were mostly cosmetic, Billy’s mostly functional, but neither would have been covered by dental insurance. Most policies pay for preventive care, like fillings and teeth cleanings, but not cosmetic work, and major procedures like root canals are largely charged to patients. Dental insurance is the opposite of health insurance: the more serious your condition, the less likely your plan is to pay for it. An abscessed tooth can kill you, but if you can’t afford to get it treated you may have to wait until the infection sends you to an emergency room—at which point your health insurance will kick in. Even if your dental plan does cover it, it will pay only a small part of the cost: reimbursements are usually capped at one to two thousand dollars a year. It’s no wonder more than seventy million Americans don’t have dental insurance—three times as many as lack health insurance.

The more sophisticated our medicine, the more demanding our health standards. We expect medical insurance to cover everything from a balky

knee to [Ebola](#). “But there is no established minimum standard for oral health,” Brett Kessler, of the American Dental Association, told me. “If I had mouth cancer, Medicare would pay to remove the tumor but not to replace my teeth. If I have a hip problem, I can get a hip replacement. Why can’t I get a tooth replacement?” This unnatural divide goes back to the beginnings of medicine and dentistry. Physicians insisted on it at first—they didn’t want their work tainted by tooth pullers. Then dentists followed suit: by the late eighteen-hundreds, they had their own schools, offices, and specialized equipment, and little interest in being governed by doctors. In 2010, the [Affordable Care Act](#) declared that children up to the age of nineteen have an essential right to dental insurance, but adults were left off the bill. By 2019, eighteen per cent of adults couldn’t afford dental care. Kessler believes that medicine and dentistry should be part of a single health-care system—“It’s time to reconnect the mouth to the body,” he says. But it’s a long-term project: the American Dental Association’s latest strategic initiative is called Oral Health 2050. In the meantime, having healthy teeth will be part right and part privilege, with dentists walking the uneasy line between them.



*“There’s no bump in salary, but I can have people beheaded.”*  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

I have a clear memory, from when I was eleven, of sitting in a dental chair in a sunny examination room, watching with a rising sense of panic and entrapment as a dentist told my mother that I needed braces. My mother looked concerned but unconvinced. Why braces? The dentist frowned, as if to say, Isn’t it obvious? Then he tried another tack. Without them, he told her, I was likely to get gum disease. This was debatable. The evidence for

the health benefits of braces has never been very strong. In 2008, a review of twelve studies found that orthodontia had actually increased gum recession and bone loss. Another review, in 2020, looked at eighty-seven studies and found “an absence of evidence” for the connection between dental health and misaligned teeth. Braces bring their own risks: they can build up plaque, inflame gums, and erode enamel. If wearing them is worth thousands of dollars and years of discomfort, it’s rarely for medical reasons. It’s because they make your teeth look nice.

My mom promised to make an appointment with the orthodontist, but she never did. She had five children, each with teeth in some state of disorder, and couldn’t afford to refurbish us all. I doubt she would have even if she could. In Germany, where she and my father were born, crooked teeth were just another intrinsic feature, like a big nose or protruding ears. You would no sooner change them than change your eye color. Americans are a little more finicky. As many as three-quarters of all teen-agers now wear braces at some point—up from thirty per cent in the eighties and five per cent in the fifties. Two-thirds of today’s Germans have worn them, but only a third of the French and even fewer of the British. When I was in seventh grade, my father took a sabbatical in southern France, and my parents put us in public schools for two years. I remember looking around at my new classmates—skinny, sardonic, unashamed of their strange knitwear and meandering teeth—and thinking, *My people*.

These days, my people all seem to have straight teeth. If not, they’ve probably thought about fixing them. Cosmetic dentistry has become a four-billion-dollar industry in the United States, according to one estimate, and it’s projected to double in size by 2034. When I first went to Sani Dental, I had no intention of getting any cosmetic work done. It was just a thought experiment, I told myself. But after talking to Miranda Villa the idea was almost tempting—at least compared with getting braces. The process would take three days rather than three years, he said, and with enough anesthesia I would hardly feel it. I could leave Mexico with new teeth.

Dr. Sofia Terrazas, the clinician in charge of my fillings and Smile Design, was the same dentist who was working on Billy—the one he’d felt so lucky to get. She was thirty-three years old, born in Mexicali, and trained in

dentistry and prosthodontics at the Autonomous University of Baja California and the Technological University of Mexico, in Mexico City. She had a high, piping voice and big round glasses that gave her a look of perpetual surprise as she hustled from room to room, chatting with patients and staff. Procedures at the clinic sometimes ran through the night—the record for the latest was four in the morning—but Terrazas never seemed to tire. “We look like a factory,” she told me. “But you see me—I take one patient and stay with them for two or three hours, and the next day the same. I do nothing quick.”

Terrazas’s examination room was surprisingly bare-bones, given the clinic’s often state-of-the-art equipment. Her dental chair had no faucet or spitting basin, and the office’s side walls were partially open to the rooms next door. “I haven’t taken my amoxicillin yet!” I heard a patient say, while Terrazas was placing my fillings. “I need it for my heart murmur before the cleaning.” Then, a few minutes later, in a higher voice: “I thought the bridge was supposed to go on the other side!” Terrazas chuckled and kept on working. She put in six of the ten fillings in a little less than two hours, yet managed to be more attentive than any dentist I could remember. “Pain?” she kept asking, “Pain?” But my mouth was too swollen to answer. She had shot it so full of anesthetic that my right eye and nostril had gone numb, too.

The Sani Dental lab, meanwhile, was working on my mockup crowns. On my first day at the clinic, Terrazas had run a handheld scanner around my mouth, then projected the 3-D images onto a screen. When I looked up, my teeth and ragged gums were smiling back at me, as if ripped from my mouth by an alien predator. During the next two days, the lab used these scans to create the molds for the plastic crowns. When they were ready, on the third morning, Terrazas filled them with a gooey white resin and pressed them onto my teeth, pushing out any air gaps. A few minutes later, when the molds came off, the new crowns encased my teeth like hard shell on a row of tiny ice-cream cones.

Terrazas spent the next twenty minutes chiselling off any rough edges and seams. It was an oddly claustrophobic experience: I felt like a statue trapped inside a piece of marble, slowly getting released by a pick and a drill. When

Terrazas was done, she handed me a mirror. The crowns felt rough and intrusive inside my mouth, so I expected them to look just as unnatural. But the reflection in the mirror was weirdly familiar. The smile that the lab had designed wasn't meant for some toothy ad salesman. It was what I might have imagined as a boy, when I used to hide the gap in my teeth behind my hand when I talked. The new crowns were a pale ivory, as craggy and dully serrated as the old. They just happened to be straight.

Before the procedure, a photographer at the clinic had taken a head shot of me baring my teeth in a big grin. Now she took another. Once Terrazas had pried off my fake teeth, I texted the before-and-after shots to my friend Todd, who had first told me about Molar City. "Do it!" he said. All it would take was fourteen thousand dollars and the destruction of my natural teeth.

One afternoon in early April, a month after my trip to Molar City, I went to Beverly Hills for a second opinion. The dentist I visited, Dr. Kevin Sands, does much the same work as Sani Dental but for very different clients. In an era when closeups of celebrity teeth have become objects of obsession on social media, Sands is the premier dentist to the stars. His patients have included Emma Stone, [Ethan Hawke](#), [Justin Bieber](#), [Kanye West](#), [Matthew McConaughey](#), [Miley Cyrus](#), Robert Downey, Jr., and members of the ruling families of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as Steve Jones, of the Sex Pistols, and Jiffpom, the celebrity Pomeranian.

Sands's office is in Beverly Hills, on the ninth floor of a building famous for its high-end dermatologists, plastic surgeons, and anti-aging specialists. (Sands told a reporter from *GQ* that in 2001 he paid the previous tenant four hundred thousand dollars just for the right to take over the lease.) In the waiting room, the walls were decorated with framed magazine covers scrawled with signatures and testimonials. "Dr. Sands—I couldn't smile in this pic bc I hadn't seen you in a while," Kim Kardashian wrote on a picture of herself, glowering on the front of *Vogue*. "JK. You're the best dentist ever." A light pop soundtrack thumped along in the background as a succession of patients wandered in and out: a pair of chatty actors, a raffish young man with golden lips and glittery tattoos, an elderly woman blissed out on anesthesia, wobbling on her granddaughter's arm. After a while, a

sylphlike receptionist named Chanel, clad in chic black scrubs like the rest of the staff, brought me a glass of hot green tea.



*“To me, the fact that you’re still wearing that old glove says that you’re not ready for a new falcon yet.”*

Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

“Just a few more minutes and I’m all yours!” Sands said, when he came to introduce himself. He bowed low and spread his arms wide, as if accepting the crowd’s applause, then bounded back to his office. Sands is fifty-two, with the fit look and insistently upbeat manner of a life coach or a personal trainer. He has thick brown hair and a wide, flat grin that squeezes his eyes into crescents. His own veneers are so true to life, he told me in the examination room later, that his mother couldn’t even tell that he had them. I asked him what it would take to straighten my teeth and how much it would cost. “Smile for me,” he said. He took a quick look, nodded—“All right, I already know what I’m going to do”—and left the room. His assistant pulled out a pair of what looked like rotisserie skewers. She clamped them into my mouth to stretch the lips apart and took snapshots and X-rays of my teeth. Then Sands came back carrying a ring binder full of pictures of former patients—like a Big Book of Dental Problems.

“Here is a gap you can drive a truck through,” he said, pointing to a picture as he leafed through the album. “Here is meth mouth—very common in this town. It just bombs out your teeth.” A brief tour of gum recession and misalignment followed, culminating in an especially unfortunate case: “This guy fell on his teeth. They’re worse than yours!” For every unsightly before photo, he showed me a triumphant after, with rows of shiny incisors redeemed through the artful deployment of porcelain and implants. Then he turned his attention to me. “Your teeth are a little messed up,” he admitted. “See these spikes of plaque back here?” He pointed to one of the X-rays.

“And see how uneven your gums are? I’m going to go in there with the laser to even that out. Your back teeth are ground down, these front teeth are, too, and your molars are kind of chipped. It’s just age—a lot of wear and tear. Honestly, in your case, a full-mouth reconstruction is the best thing. Get your cusps back to where they were when you were twenty.”

When Sands had finished describing his plans, he left the room again, and his office manager, Andrea Aro, took his place—the good cop to his bad. Young and soothing in manner, with long black hair and warm, wide-set eyes, she had perfect teeth, like the others—veneered by Sands himself—and wanted the same for me. “He is going to rebuild your bite with the magic of porcelain,” she said. “And the prosthodontist will make sure that it works from a mechanical point of view.” This office was only twelve hundred square feet, yet a whole team of specialists would be working on my mouth, including tooth sculptors of the highest calibre. “We make it look easy, but it’s not easy,” she said. “People don’t realize how many people are involved with one tooth.” She smiled, lost in a reverie of Old World dental craftsmanship. “I could talk about it all day,” she said. “I think it’s very special.” Then she handed me the price list.

What are good teeth worth? In 1997, William Ecenbarger, a reporter for the Philadelphia *Inquirer* and the *Reader’s Digest*, had his teeth examined by fifty dentists in twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia. Before his trip, Ecenbarger got a baseline diagnosis from a panel of four experts, including a former dean of the University of Kentucky College of Dentistry. The panel agreed that his teeth were in good condition, aside from one molar that needed a crown, and that the work should cost less than fifteen hundred dollars. Four months and fifty dentists later, the diagnosis was less clear. One dentist told Ecenbarger that he needed six crowns, but not on the molar the panel had singled out. Another recommended four crowns—again, not including the damaged molar—and nine thousand dollars in cosmetic work. Others suggested five crowns, seventeen crowns, twenty-one crowns, twenty-eight crowns, or a full-mouth reconstruction. Their prices varied from less than five hundred dollars to nearly thirty thousand.

Ecenbarger’s dentists were from the same country, but their suggestions were all over the map. My dentists were from different countries, but their

recommendations were the same: twenty-eight crowns and one implant. The only difference was in cost. Sands wanted a hundred and nineteen thousand dollars for the work—more than eight times the Sani Dental price. The dentists in Los Algodones seemed as well qualified as those in Beverly Hills, and their equipment was often more sophisticated: Terrazas and Miranda Villa checked my teeth with a digital panoramic X-ray machine and a handheld 3-D scanner; Sands used a point-and-shoot camera, standard X-ray film, and a small mirror that his assistant stuck in my mouth. “We keep it old school,” Aro told me. “We aren’t doing 3-D printing or A.I. That’s not going to be the same as a handmade tooth.” To Sands, this was his biggest selling point. “I have real artists do each tooth,” he told me. “And I have different ones make them for males, females, and older people. That’s what separates me. The artist that did my teeth will be doing your teeth.”

What are good teeth worth? To some of Sands’s celebrity clients, the answer could be tens of millions of dollars. Their handmade crowns, magnified a dozen times onscreen, may well look more shapely and natural than Sani Dental’s computer-designed, assembly-line versions. Whatever their price, veneers and crowns can crack or come loose if poorly installed, and what’s left of the teeth beneath them can start to decay. Like nose jobs and face-lifts, they can also look disturbingly artificial—oversized, rectilinear, glaringly white. Two years ago, fans of the actress and singer Selena Gomez became convinced that she’d had her teeth veneered. When Dr. Jordan Davis, a dentist in Utah with a large Instagram and TikTok following, posted a video with closeups of her teeth, it got nearly ten million views. They were too uniform, he said, too white, too opaque. “Her original smile, her natural teeth, I feel like, are much better,” he concluded.

Teeth are emblems of character, people have long believed, whether consciously or unconsciously. “Clean, white, and well-arranged,” they reflect “a sweet and polished mind and a good and honest heart,” the nineteenth-century Swiss physiognomist and theologian Johann Kaspar Lavater wrote. Crooked or decaying, they bespeak “sickness or some mélange of moral imperfection.” Richard Barnett, in “The Smile Stealers,” contrasts Lavater’s quote with one from a booklet published by the American Association of Orthodontists in 2000. Straight teeth demonstrate

“a highly visible commitment to self-improvement,” the booklet claimed. They express both “the beauty of conformity” and “the beauty of achievement.”

Still, there’s something to be said for staying crooked. The more I looked at the Smile Design picture from Sani Dental, the more I knew that I’d miss my old biters. (My wife, for all her talk of snaggleteeth, was appalled at the idea of straightening them.) If teeth are emblems of character, mine seemed true to form—jumbled, contradictory, ground down in spots but still good for chewing things over. They went off in every direction but somehow got their work done. In Beverly Hills, after Sands had enumerated my dental flaws and Aro had told me the price to fix them, she noted that I’d still have to wear a mouth guard at night for the rest of my life, because I grind my teeth in my sleep. Then she smiled and added, offhandedly, that my teeth were in good shape over all. “At the end of the day, this is all elective,” she said. “You will live a perfectly fine life without it.”

I felt like I was eleven years old again, hearing the dentist say that I needed braces. This time, I was the one who’d asked about straightening my teeth, but Sands required little prompting. One look at my teeth and he knew that they needed fixing. It reminded me of something Miranda Villa had said when I last saw him at Sani Dental: “Pay attention to the TV commercials. All the actresses with the white teeth—that is what they are selling. But white teeth are not normal. Our teeth are yellowish. As long as they are working, they are nice. If they are straight or crooked, they are nice. It’s God’s creation.”

Before I left Molar City, I checked in on Billy and Nancy at the clinic. Billy looked even more beat up than before. His upper lip was swollen and bruised a mottled pinkish blue, and the skin on his face was rubbed raw. He’d had three root canals that afternoon—“I got a piece of tooth in my eyelash,” he told me—and a set of crowns had been put on his upper teeth. Between procedures, he’d gone out to get a microdermabrasion, a HydraFacial, and a hair-growth treatment. He bent over to show me the bald spot on top of his head. He wasn’t a good candidate for plugs, he said, so the specialist at Sani Medical had drawn some of his blood and injected the

plasma into his scalp to spur natural growth. “Next time you see me, I’ll be like the jungle man!”

Nancy had just had her permanent crowns installed. Milk white and smoothly sculpted, they were more natural than her temporary crowns, but I still missed her old gap-toothed smile. Unlike Billy, who’d been rolling through Molar City as if it were one long amusement-park ride, Nancy looked spent. Most of the patients at the clinic seemed happy with their work, and my own fillings had gone in without incident, but her visit had been a comedy of errors. At dinner the previous day, she’d swallowed one of her temporary crowns. Then its replacement fell off, too. She was so sore from the procedures by then that she told Billy she wished she’d never done them. I asked her how she felt now—was it worth it after all? “Yeah,” she said, with a wary smile. “But I have to wait and see.”

Billy put his arm around her shoulders. Earlier that day, he’d pulled a ziplock bag from his pocket and shown me two pieces of what looked like broken ivory. The dentist had just removed these old implants from his jaw, he said. They’d cost him eight thousand dollars back in Colorado. “I’m going to make Nancy a necklace,” he said, then laughed. “What an adventure!” ♦



*Burkhard Bilger* has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2001. His books include “*Fatherland: A Memoir of War, Conscience, and Family Secrets*.”

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# Takes

- **Bill McKibben on Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring"**

By Bill McKibben | Her reporting was quickly attacked by the industry she called into question, setting the playbook for companies that profited from tobacco, opioids, and fossil fuels.

[Takes](#)

# Bill McKibben on Rachel Carson's “Silent Spring”



By [Bill McKibben](#)

July 27, 2025



June 16, 1962

[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.](#)

To call something “middlebrow” seems to dismiss it as unserious, but, when America was arguably at its intellectual peak, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, this was the territory in which its writers excelled: distinguished work, aimed at readers who took the world seriously, available in mainstream magazines. That was the ocean in which Rachel Carson swam like few others. Her lyrical “[The Sea Around Us](#)” won the 1952 National Book Award and appeared on the *Times*’ best-seller list for an astonishing eighty-six weeks, a stretch when other recent releases included “[East of Eden](#),” “[Invisible Man](#),” and Anne Frank’s “[The Diary of a Young Girl](#). ” Oh, and “[Charlotte’s Web](#). ”

As it happens, the author of that last volume, the *New Yorker* essayist E. B. White, could have written Carson’s classic “[Silent Spring](#),” which exposed the dangers of DDT and other pesticides. In the late fifties, Carson tried to interest White in the dangers of the chemicals then used for insect control on American farms and in gardens; White, after all, had written memorable reflections from his Maine cabin about the era’s most important environmental issue, the fallout from nuclear testing. But White encouraged an overworked Carson to do the job herself and alerted *The New Yorker*’s editor, William Shawn.

Before Carson turned to writing books, she had spent much of her career as a marine biologist at the federal Bureau of Fisheries, the kind of job that would now likely be *DOGE*’d. By the fifties, she had earned enough from her best-sellers to write full time, but she was taking care of her mother; also, she had breast cancer, which required a full mastectomy. But she worked steadily on “Silent Spring,” presenting it to Shawn in January, 1962; he responded, “You have made it literature, full of beauty and loveliness and depth of feeling.”

Indeed she had. “Silent Spring,” which Shawn published in [three parts](#), in June of that year, was the best kind of middlebrow: powerful enough to activate emotions, never florid, willing to use the tropes of pastoral Americana for all they were worth. In reporting on the emerging science of pesticides, “Silent Spring” knocked some of the shine off modernity, nailing difficult questions to the door of the Church of Progress. Carson thought that man had grown overlarge and was upsetting a necessary balance.

She was immediately attacked by the industry she had called into question, in a way that set the playbook for the companies that profited from tobacco, asbestos, opioids, and fossil fuels. Pesticide producers assailed Carson's credentials, her childlessness, and, more broadly, her gender. But she triumphed on the force of her writing and on the credibility that came from her centrality in mainstream intellectual life—a Book of the Month Club edition came with a special pamphlet by the Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, who called it "the most revolutionary book since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*"; when she testified before Congress, some people, paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln when he met [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#), called her "the little lady that started it all." In 1962, John F. Kennedy—whose "[Profiles in Courage](#)" had won a 1957 Pulitzer Prize while sharing the spotlight on best-seller lists with Carson's "The Sea Around Us" follow-up, "[The Edge of the Sea](#)"—saluted "Miss Carson's book" and launched a Science Advisory Committee investigation. The next year, the committee largely confirmed her reporting, and more rigorous federal regulation of DDT followed.

By then, events were gathering pace. On the one hand, environmentalism, which Carson had done so much to launch, gained momentum; within a decade, Earth Day became the largest political protest in the country's history, and public scrutiny spread to a wide range of pollutants. But the era's turbulence also began the erosion of the culture that lent Carson its powers, replacing ascendant middlebrow authority with the ten thousand flavors of contrarianism that have come to dominate civic life. That J.F.K.'s nephew now stands astride D.C., [contaminating health policy](#) with the crank complaints of Carson's time—about [fluoride](#) in water, for instance—is as sharp a repudiation as one could imagine of everything that she stood for. ♦

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[Read the original story.](#)



[Silent Spring—I](#)

If we are living so intimately with chemicals, we had better know something about their power.



[Bill McKibben](#) is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker* focussing on climate policy. His books include “[Here Comes the Sun: A Last Chance for the Climate and a Fresh Chance for Civilization](#)” (August, 2025).

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# Shouts & Murmurs

- **“Emma” Unrated**

By Ian Frazier | In which Jane Austen’s Miss Emma Woodhouse is bestirred by “Jackass” ’s Mr. Knoxville upon his presentation of a “Fire-Hose Rodeo.”

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

# “Emma” Unrated

By [Ian Frazier](#)

July 28, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

“Emma” and “Jackass 2 Unrated”

—*Movies rented by my daughter and son, respectively, many years ago, and watched on our TV, in that order, the same evening.*

Emma Woodhouse, not quite twenty-one years of age, and blessed with a comfortable home and the expectation of an ample income in due time, found herself curious, one spring day, about a young man named Knoxville, the new neighbor across the grange. Frequenters of the village and dispensers of its gossip told extraordinary stories. Mr. Knoxville, they said, had offered the villagers on Michelmas Day last an entertainment he called a “Fire-Hose Rodeo,” in which he suspended a canvas fire hose from a thirty-foot-tall cranelike structure, climbed the structure, clutched the fire hose with both arms and legs near its nozzle, and attempted to hold on as the hose writhed and flapped about with water from the village hydrant rushing through it at extremely high pressure.

Nor was that all. Mr. Knoxville and several of his young male companions then arranged to be sealed up in a touring carriage to prove that they could remain inside after several others of their companions threw in a nest of enraged bees. The carriage, with a matched pair of bays in harness, was positioned in front of the parsonage, where the cries of the young men soon penetrated the very walls. Though they begged and pleaded and beat against the interior of the carriage so the impressions of their fists could be seen from the outside, their tormentors merely laughed all the louder. Soon the rector himself came out and insisted that Mr. Knoxville and company be released, whereupon he and his fellow-sufferers ran through the streets swatting at themselves with the bees in pursuit.

One could see how such a sequence of events might set the quiet village astir, Emma reflected.

Mr. Knightley, a respected local landowner and a friend of Emma's, had disapproved of these proceedings, though Emma suspected that at first he had been as intrigued by them as she was. Recently, however, his opinion of their new neighbor had become decidedly more critical. One afternoon, in the spirit of welcome, he had paid a call on Mr. Knoxville, who greeted him warmly and remarked that Knightley was just the man he wanted to see. Escorting him to the parlor, he showed him a letter, in a feminine hand, which Mr. Knoxville had thumbtacked to the wall. Saying that the letter's contents concerned Mr. Knightley, he invited him to read it. Though shocked at the irregularity of putting a personal document thus on display, Mr. Knightley leaned over to look at it, hoping that it did not compromise in any way Miss Harriet Smith, whose handwriting he thought he recognized.

The script was rather small, and, as Mr. Knightley put his face even closer to the paper to read it, a spring-loaded boxing glove at the end of a pole burst through the letter and struck Mr. Knightley squarely on the nose. What he had not realized, nor would anyone else among the good people of the village have ever imagined, was that Mr. Knoxville and his companions had cut a hole through the wall of the adjoining room (a butler's pantry) and mounted the boxing-glove contraption in it for the purpose of giving a surprise to the letter's unwary readers, of whom Mr. Knightley had the ill luck to be the first.

After this unsuitable beginning, Mr. Knightley always “cut” Mr. Knoxville and his cronies when he passed them on the street. For Emma, however, the incident revealed a previously hidden depth to her friend’s character—namely, his lively interest in and concern for their mutual friend, Miss Smith. Emma decided to bring the two together, with the help of an unlikely ally—Mr. Knoxville.

According to rumor, the latter had plans to launch himself into the sky over the millpond astride a large red rocket just five days from now, on Saturday next. By way of a postboy, Emma sent Mr. Knoxville a note requesting that he paint “Harriet” on the rocket in silver letters surrounded by pink hearts with arrows through them. By Emma’s calculation, Mr. Knightley, when he saw the apparent seriousness of Mr. Knoxville’s intentions, would declare his love for Harriet then and there, with a proposal that they be immediately married.

All went as planned. At ten o’clock on the morning of the appointed day, Mr. Knoxville climbed upon his unlikely craft decorated to Emma’s specifications, and, with his arms and legs spread wide, clung to handles on its exterior. A match was put to the fuse.

But what was Emma’s surprise when she saw Harriet Smith weeping with consternation! Could it be that her real affections inclined toward Mr. Knoxville? Sparks and a loud roar followed as rocket and passenger rose above the pond. At a goodly height, the device’s fuel seemed to fail, and the rocket began a slow tumble earthward. Mr. Knoxville released his grasp and somersaulted as he, too, fell. He landed in the pond with a splash. Moments later, he surfaced, waving cheerfully. Miss Smith’s screams, which had been deafening, turned to tears of relief and joy. Mr. Knightley, guessing Emma’s hand in all this, afterward told her privately that it was wrong to interfere in the lives of others, and Emma ruefully agreed. ♦

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

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# Fiction

- **The Bridge Stood Fast**

By Anne Enright | These are the things that change a child, he thought, but what can you do?

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[Fiction](#)

# The Bridge Stood Fast

By [Anne Enright](#)

July 27, 2025



Photograph by Timothy O'Connell

She was a busy little item. There was a doll to be fixed up and chastised with a hairbrush that was twice its length. Also a coloring book and a packet of markers, which she took out of the soft plastic sleeve and spilled all down herself so she was in the footwell and up again seventeen times between the Walkinstown roundabout and Newlands Cross. Ivor waited for her to settle, but she was too excited to settle, and he finally said, “Wiggle in there into the back and be quiet.”

She looked over at him.

“Hop in, go on.”

It was her first time sitting in the front seat.

“Or put the things back there. Just throw them in and be quiet.”

The child clambered arse about face, then turned back and sat still for two seconds before lurching forward. She hung there, dangling from the seat belt and making fussed-old-lady noises.

“Uhh. Ahh.”

There was a single marker rolling about the footwell.

“Get up,” he said. “Leave it, leave it.”

Realizing, as he saw her there, that the floor of a car was surprisingly close to the road.

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

He remembered once getting a lift from a Connemara man who used his car on the beach and its floor was all rotted out by the salt. One summer evening, himself and the lads had their thumbs stuck out for a lift home to Galway, and, when they sat in the back of the Datsun, the seat went under them—two inches, six inches lower. It was not so much a jolt as a subsidence, ending in a creak of agonized metal. When they looked down, they saw that a gash had opened up in the floor by their feet. There was the

tarmac scudding along, edged in a filigree of rust-eaten tin, close enough to reach down a toe.

Lose your leg.

You rarely thought about the road as a weapon and yet there it was, tearing along beneath.

He turned the radio on.

The program was all talk about free buses to Phoenix Park for the papal visit. Ivor hit the off button so that Orla would not get excited, but his daughter was looking out over the dash with her chin high. She pointed at the pub with the thatched roof and the cart in front with its wheels painted red, then sat back as though she owned it all. When he next glanced over, she had a strand of black hair pulled into her mouth, in that way that drove her mother mad but which he found pleasantly feral. My little goose, he called her. My own pigeon. Eating at her round tummy with his whole face. Rasping it with his five-o'clock shadow. Or he used to.

**Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Anne Enright read “The Bridge Stood Fast.”](#)

She was beyond that now, and not yet somewhere else. She was just turned eleven and still very stuck on her Dada. Last week, she trailed him as he took up the last of the onions, and when he turned up a fat worm—“There’s one for the robin!”—she did not know whether to hunker over it or recoil. The thing twisted about on the clay and she decided on squealing, “Ew, Dada!,” as if it were his fault. At two, she would have eaten the thing; at three, she might have killed it. Now it was “Yuck! Worm!” Learning how to be fake, because fake would soon be required of her.

The robin beady-eyed on the wall.

“Sure, what harm?” he said.

And he turfed it toward the bird with the neat tip of his shovel.

A silent snap of heartbreak in there, for him. His last child on the cusp.

Of the three of them, Orla was the most curious and direct. He sometimes thought she would have made a grand little boy, the way she looked out at the world and not at herself. Then he felt guilty, because his daughters did nothing but spoil and delight him. He was that fool, the father of girls.

“Take Orla with you, sure,” his wife, Emer, had said, because the other two were in secondary school and they could not miss the days. “She’d love it.”

And he was glad to have her as a distraction, not on the road, where the solitude suited him, but for whatever lay ahead in the house to which he had been summoned by his wife’s family, during a school week in September.

It was something to do with the land, Emer said.

“The land?”

This was, Ivor thought, code for “money.”

“Do you think maybe it’s the will?” she said.

Her grandmother had died the year before. But the sums involved could not be large.

“You tell me,” he said.

The issue could not be communicated down a telephone line, being far too private and important. Indeed, that house had only recently got a phone—Seán, his father-in-law, did not believe in them. In the end, his mother-in-law, Melia, had had one installed “on the advice of her G.P.” and she used it whenever her husband was out of the house. If you ever rang the number, you had to wait through many intimate clanks and rustlings before Melia found her own ear and fluted, “Hay . . . loh?”

The child would, indeed, be a welcome distraction.

“Look, look at that.”

“What?”

“That fella undertaking, God almighty.”

Up ahead, a white Fiat was on the hard shoulder, its left wheels right up on the grass, belting along beside an indifferent Ford Capri.

“What’s ‘undertaking’?”

“That, right there.”

“I thought it meant a coffin.”

“It will in a minute,” he said.

She liked the joke.

“Where are we now?”

The answer was that they had barely started.

“We’re a third of the way to Moneygall.”

They did the list of towns together: “Naas, Newbridge, Kildare, Monasterevin, Portlaoise.” She had them all by heart, even the little, in-between ones. “Borris-in-Ossory, Moneygall, Nenagh, Five Alley, Cappadine, Killaloe, Garrenboy.”

It was nice having her on her own. She was usually mixed up with her sisters, who would be so giddy by now he’d have to reach his hand into the back seat to admonish them. They drove this route every summer to spend three weeks or a month—however long he could stand it—all sleeping in his in-laws’ good front room. Ivor dodged back up to Dublin on the excuse of work, or he hacked the sixty miles up to his own father, in Galway, for an awkward couple of evenings spent watching TV. Sometime in July, he brought the family home the long way round, stopping in Galway for sandwiches at the Great Southern Hotel, where his father slipped the girls some paper money and proceeded to ignore them, talking local politics and the recently deceased while they itched and squirmed in velvet button-backed chairs. There was something useless about his father, Ivor thought, in a flash of feeling. He did not know how to talk to people. A game of golf

every Thursday. Lunch out, some kind of snack for dinner. Nothing in the fridge except bacon and gin.

Ivor had not told him that he was coming west this week. In every marriage there was the busy side and the boring side, and there was no doubt that he had, some years ago, been taken hostage by the Loughnanes. Swept up. Discussed. Owned. First by his wife and then by Melia, a woman who crooned at men as soon as she saw them, offered chairs and biscuits, as though everything they said was very sad. A great woman for a fancy plate under your actual plate, and maybe a paper doily in between. There was no resisting her. Though her own sons had managed, it had to be said, with the simple ruse of getting on a plane. Still, Melia's fussing was better than the chink of ice in his father's glass, a radio in the kitchen giving way to the television in the living room, a kind of static that was his dead mother's absence, and every light on all the time.

Beside him, Orla was wondering whether a hamster could ever go blind.

“What?”

“I just don’t think that could happen,” she said.

“A hamster?”

She turned to sulk out the window. “Why would she even say that?”

It must have been some pal at school.

“Or maybe they can?” he suggested.

“The vet said that hamsters don’t need to see. They use their whiskers.”

“They took a hamster to the vet?”

“It was sick,” she said.

“They must be made of money.”

After a moment’s regret, he said, “Poor hamster.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it,” Orla said, grandly. “I honestly think the stupid girl was just looking for attention.”

Ivor leaned in to turn the radio on again and then decided on silence. Somewhere beyond Monasterevin, a flickering line of greenery rose up the window on the passenger side and he had the feeling that the road was sinking under his wheels, that they were sliding underground.

“The bridge stood fast,” he said, as they crossed the Shannon into Killaloe. This was the poem he quoted every time they took the single-lane bridge, with its thirteen arches and recesses in the side walls, for people to stand clear of the traffic. “And nigh and nigher / The foe swarmed darkly, densely on.”

The house was a hop and a skip away now and they reached it just before one. Melia was at the door, undoing her apron at the sound of the car.

“There you are, now.”

She fumbled for Ivor’s two hands and lifted them in hers.

“You’re very welcome.”

Looking up at him with her fervent eyes.

Melia thought him handsome, his wife said, and Ivor found the idea unlikely, but not entirely unpleasant.

“Dote.” Melia touched a dry knuckle to the child’s cheek. “Look at you.”

Inside, she had the teapot on the table as soon as he had set their bag down. There were plates of triangular sandwiches, scones, cake.

“Will you sit in, Seán?”

On the other side of the kitchen, his father-in-law was pushing out of his easy chair. He came side-on, swinging round for the handshake, putting his shoulder into it, and said, “The rain held off, anyway.”

“It did.”

Seán Loughnane was wiry and a bit bandy and he hitched up his trousers on the way back to the chair.

“Will you sit in, Seán?” Melia said again.

“I won’t.”

Melia scabbled the bottoms of plates and dishes to free them of cling film and she unscrewed the lid of a jar of mayonnaise, which was set on a saucer with a fancy spoon.

“Be careful, now, I put a bit of scallion in the egg.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

“Lovely. Perfect.”

Ivor looked around the kitchen: the same tiles and little ornaments, the same letters, perhaps, jammed in a wooden holder on the dresser. The calendar on

the wall was two years out of date.

“Is that Orla?” Seán said from his corner. The child pulled her hand back from a plate of buns, chewed mightily, and gulped a “Yes.”

“My goodness, you’re as big as your sisters. Tell me, are you nearly as clever?”

She looked at him.

“You are, of course. Up there in that good school.”

He liked to tease his granddaughters.

“It is a good school, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.”

“*I suppose.* What are they teaching you? Do they teach you maths?”

She nodded.

“And are you any good at it?”

“No.”

They all laughed.

“She’s good at English,” Ivor said.

“Did I tell you,” Melia said. “There’s new kittens in the car house.”

Orla, released, took a big wedge of cake with her as she ran out the back door. After which it was just the adults.

“Will you have a scone, Ivor?” Melia said, sorrowfully, and he said, “Honestly, Melia, I won’t. I’ll stick to the sandwiches for now.”

The hour crept on with *How’s this one?* and *How’s his cousin?* Seán had views on local sports teams and the usual politicians, but he also came aslant

at issues of the day. Anticlerical, a little scurrilous. He was terrific company.

Sometime around three, Orla's grandfather drove her to the shop to get ice cream and the papers, and Melia took a turn in the single easy chair. When they came back, Seán read the headlines aloud, commenting on the stories that caught his eye. Later again, the men walked out the road to check on a bullock, and there was more food on the table when they returned. After which Orla cleared plates and dried dishes for Melia, activities unknown to her at home. The television was switched on. The sofa beds fussed over and warmed. Orla said her good nights. A glass of whiskey was twice offered and twice declined, and then, just as the television was switched off, Seán said, "We'll head over in the morning, so."

Which was the first mention of whatever crisis had required Ivor to drive down on a Thursday in September, missing two full days of work to see to it.

"Right," he said. "Whenever."

In the front room, he undressed by a crack of light from the hall and clambered onto his spongy bed. He could hear Seán finish his round of bolts and locks, and the hall light went, leaving them in country darkness—a black so complete that it was worth keeping your eyes open to look at it. Across the room, the child whimpered some long complaint in her sleep, like a dog dream-barking at rabbits, and then she settled.

"The morning," for Seán, meant sometime around eleven, after a breakfast both fried and lavish.

"What about me?" Orla hissed, not wanting to be left behind.

"What?" her grandfather said, in mock horror. "There's blackberries down the side of the long field, sure. Your Nana Melia will give you a bucket. Do you like blackberries? You do. And mushrooms for breakfast tomorrow, in the corner where the ground gets soft, the ones with the big, flat heads."

Ivor wasn't keen on her picking mushrooms, but Seán said that there was only one kind. "Don't eat any till we look at them, sure."

They sat into Seán’s old banger and belted along the narrow lanes, never indicating left or right. An oncoming tractor was intuited by some mysterious, extra sense, and his father-in-law slammed on the brakes before reversing with enthusiasm, his body twisted to look out the rear window and one hand on the wheel. After twenty minutes, they drew up outside a cottage in the beginnings of dereliction, and Ivor recognized it as the one that had belonged to Melia’s mother.

“I’ll show you, now,” Seán said.

He unstuck the tiny front gate but ignored the path up to the front door, skirting the cottage to go round the back instead. Here, they beat through undergrowth to the place where the ghost of a garden gave way to a prickly wilderness of gorse.

“Look at that.”

“Right,” Ivor said.

His father-in-law spat into the grass.

“How long would you say it’s there?” he said.

Seán reached into his back pocket for a much folded, grubby map of the land they were standing on. Ivor checked it, and then spotted the line of barbed wire threaded through the scrub.

The metal was weathered but not rusted.

“A fair while,” he said.

Melia’s mother was more than a year dead, but she had moved in with her daughter in her final infirmity, so the place had been empty for five years at least. Sometime in her absence, a neighbor had fenced off the bottom ten feet of her land. Maybe twelve.

“Who is he, anyway?”

Seán gave a contemptuous uptick of his head. There was a house on a rise about four fields away.

“He’s on his own up beyond.”

He kept his voice low, though Ivor did not think he could be heard from that distance. He could barely be heard a foot away.

“He has no claim,” Ivor said.

He thought they were going home to Garrenboy, but they drove into Killaloe, where Seán parked by the church and stiff-legged out to the newsagent’s for the paper and a packet of fruit pastilles. These he ate with deliberation in the front seat, leaving the driver’s door open. When there were three sweets left in the roll, Ivor could not take the suspense any longer.

“What are we doing?” he said.

“Sure, what would we be doing?” Seán said. “We’re due to see Matt Thornton.”

From the plaque on the wall, Ivor gleaned that this was the name of a local solicitor, though “Matt Thornton” was now Matt’s daughter, her father being recently retired. She was very young, and she spoke with an odd, puppetlike authority that was, Ivor thought, entirely charm-free. The legal term they were looking for was “adverse possession,” she said, and this could not be argued for another seven years. She advised them simply to put a new fence along the legal boundary, which was fixed and on the deeds.

Seán nodded judiciously.

“He has no claim,” he said.

“Not yet,” she warned.

And Seán stood to go, as though this were what he had come to ascertain. He reached across the desk to shake the girl’s hand.

“I suppose she’ll bill me for that,” he said, when they sat back into the car.

As if he were about to put a fence through gorse, he said, in full view of a man obsessed with shooting crows.

“You could sell as is,” Ivor said. “Let the new owner deal with it.” Though the truth was that no one wanted the place except the man who was causing the trouble. Besides, even the rumor of a boundary dispute could spoil any chance of a sale. The Loughnanes had been outplayed.

Outside the house at Garrenboy, Seán killed the engine and, in the silence, the smells in the car seemed to rise around them; the malt of calf nuts, diesel from an empty jerrican, his father-in-law’s boots and sweat and work clothes.

“He came to the wake,” Seán said, staring at the windscreen. “He leaned over the coffin and he touched her dead hand.”

Then he got out of the car.

Inside, Melia had a tea brack set out, with butter in curls on a glass dish, and she stood stirring blackberries reducing in sugar on the stove. Orla was sitting in the easy chair reading a book and Ivor got a fright when she looked up at him, her smile was so bruised about with berry juice. There was a colander half full of them on the draining board and, as he looked at the tiny flies floating above it, he saw how drowsy and full the air was, on this warm September day. Beside the colander were three enormous mushroom caps.

“The size of a dustbin lid,” he said.

Orla hefted one into his hands and he knocked on top of it, for the hollow sound. Then she showed him the underside, running her finger along the dark, velvety frill.

They mopped up the blackberry sauce with the last of the cake, and Orla was so proud of her day’s haul, the pleasure of eating it made her seem more solid.

“She’s like her mother,” Seán said.

“How do you mean?” Orla said, brightly.

Her grandfather gave her an appraising look.

“You’re not adopted, anyway.”

Ivor had an impulse to protect the child from Seán’s attention. But what harm? he thought, as the phone went off in the hall. They watched Melia get up and make her way out to it. A long silence after she picked up the receiver. More silence.

“Hay . . . loh?”

Ivor recognized Emer’s voice from the tinny sounds in the speaker and he found it strange that he was sitting in her childhood home while she was far away. He missed her. He missed the way she might say, “Oh, for God’s sake, Daddy. Would you leave the child alone.”

He took the receiver.

“Yeah. Hi. How are things?”

Melia did not step back from him in the ordinary way. She turned briefly to the side and seemed to droop over a cloth she held in her hand. And this distracted him so much that he could not understand what Emer was saying. His father was what? he said.

His father was in the Galway Regional Hospital and they were calling the relatives in.

Melia, as though released by this news, launched herself toward the front room, and Emer started all over again. They could not give details, though she had a phone number, if he wanted to ring first. But, really, they said he should just arrive and someone would speak to him. He should go tonight. Her voice was very kind.

When he got to the front room, Melia was at his open suitcase, and the sight of his mother-in-law fumbling through his shirts and underwear was too much for him.

“Leave it, Melia. Just drop it. I’ll do that.”

He put the case up on the bed and pulled Orla's few bits out of it. And he was slamming the car boot closed before he thought to speak to his daughter—partly because he did not know what to say.

*My father is dying.*

It seemed an odd thing to tell your child.

"I'll be back," he said. "I have to go, love. But I'll be back tomorrow, or I don't know. Be good, all right?" Her face in the rearview mirror was a thumbprint in the shadow of the doorway, as he bumped along the boreen to the main road.

"It's the color of a mouse's tummy"—that was what she'd said about the mushroom's underside. As soon as she said it, Ivor had seen it, too: a transparency of pink at the base of the brown gills.

The next few days were lonely ones. Ivor squared his shoulders, kept himself neat; he took the priest's blessing and the ward maid's cup of tea. He phoned his brother in Riyadh from the phone in his father's hall, and he slept in his childhood bedroom for one night and then the next. On the third evening, he left out a note to cancel the milk. The next day, he took his lunch at the hotel where his father liked to go, and he found himself making the same fuss with collar and cuffs that his father made before picking up his silverware. It was as though the dying man had entered him briefly: they were, for a moment, one and the same.

When he got back to the hospital, two women were working fast around the bed, and one of them glanced up and paused. "Ah, you missed him," she said, as though his father's death were a departing bus. They left Ivor to sit with the body, now free of tubes and wires. The priest spoke to him in the room, the undertaker in the corridor. His father would repose in the funeral home. There was a hotel by the cemetery, which could take any number for lunch. The gurney arrived, and he was free to go. The staff nurse put her arm around him all the way to the exit. Everyone was great. Everyone knew more than he did. Back in the house, he opened the study door and saw last week's newspaper on his father's desk, folded to the crossword, which Ivor

had an impulse to finish—“Could a bad legume make ten ill?”—and then did not.

The next day, he thought to go and pick up Orla, but Emer said not to complicate things, and, besides, what would he do with her?

“I suppose,” Ivor said, thinking the better question was what he would do with himself. There was a meeting at the undertaker’s and on the way back he bought a few bits for lunch in the local shop. He went from room to room, feeling slightly indecent—or perhaps the word was “previous.” It was too soon: death had made the place more private, not less. In the utility room, he came across his mother’s flower vases, long unused. In the small conservatory, he picked up and folded again a blanket she had crocheted. He tried the string that pulled down the ladder to the attic and put his head through the hatch. Then he sat on a lower rung and stayed there for a long time.

In the evening, Ivor walked out along Salthill with an old school friend who was always good value. The fine weather was holding, and when he came back he mowed the grass against the coming winter. He wondered about the phone bill, including that last call to Riyadh. He did not sleep, then fell into an unconsciousness so total you could walk around in it.

Emer arrived at the train station the next day with his good suit and the two older girls. Then his brother came in from Saudi, wrecked under his tan, and crawled upstairs to sleep. Suddenly it was tremendously busy. Everyone showed up for the reposal—neighbors and all sorts.

“Now, there’s a blast from the past,” he kept saying; his whole childhood was in the condolence queue.

Ivor was doing up his tie on the morning of the funeral when his father-in-law walked into the living room. The hall door was open; it was like dressing in public, the amount of traffic coming through.

“I am very sorry for your trouble,” Seán said, offering his roughened hand. “I met him only that one time, but he was a gentleman.” He brought his other hand to Ivor’s shoulder. “And a good man, if he made you.”

The compliment hit home. And Ivor felt how weak the last days had left him, physically. How much he wanted to lie down.

“Thank you. Thanks.”

His father-in-law turned away, giving the room a slight, almost furtive nod of approval, and Ivor realized that it was the first time Seán had been in his family home. Melia, too, seemed out of her element, though her manners were as beautiful as ever. She left a trembly light kiss on Ivor’s cheek; she held his hand and petted the back of it.

Meanwhile, Orla was upstairs with her sisters, changing into her good clothes. Ivor thought she might be ignoring him, but after the Mass, as people filled the church porch, she slammed into his chest.

“I am so sorry,” she said. “I am so sorry.”

“What?”

Orla raised a face of tear-stained theatricality.

“About Gramps. I am so, so sorry he died.”

He knew it wasn’t his loss that upset her so much as the fact that she had been left behind in Garrenboy. And, indeed, for the most part, he had forgotten all about her. Ivor clamped her to his shirtfront, tears and all.

“Come here to me,” he said.

The grave was the worst of it. From the other side of the hole, Ivor saw that Seán had showed up in the same bad anorak he always wore. It seemed wrong to notice this, but Melia had a good scarf over a half-decent coat; she had made the effort. Ivor took the offered spade, threw dirt on the coffin lid, passed it to his brother. Then he went over to where his children stood, to be with them and reassure.

There were so many practical issues to be sorted with the Galway house that he was up and down on the train all year. He did not even make it to Garrenboy the following summer: Emer had passed her driving test and she

took the girls without him. The next time he made the trip, the two older girls were at the Gaeltacht learning Irish and Orla, nearly thirteen, was digging in her heels. It was not fair, she said. She hated the country, there was nothing to do, she would not go. On the drive down, she sulked in the back seat and ate her hair and drove her mother to such a pitch of distraction that Ivor had to pull off the road at Naas until the pair of them quieted down.

But “the bridge stood fast,” as the poet said. The same thirteen spans across the mighty Shannon. “And nigh and nigher / The foe swarmed darkly, densely on.”

“*Da-ad*,” Orla said.

“What?”

“I am going to actually kill myself.”

When they reached the house, it looked as though Melia had been standing at the front door for a while.

“You are very welcome.”

She looked up at him with the same ardency, but her trembling vagueness, Ivor saw, was now a definite waggle of the head.

“Come in. Come in.”

In the kitchen, Seán bounded out of his easy chair.

“Is it yourself?”

“You’re looking well,” Ivor said.

“The doctor has me on the beta-blockers.”

“Emer told me.”

“I recommend them,” Seán said. “He’s put me into reverse.”

Ivor fetched the bags and set them in the front room, where the sofa beds had already been folded out and dressed. The kitchen table was laden, as ever. Emer and Melia held hands where they stood, their voices echoing over and back. Orla slid onto a chair, opened a sandwich to look at the contents, then rejected it and opened another.

“Orla,” her mother said, sharply.

“Take what you fancy,” Melia said. “Sure, what harm.”

The room was the same—a little less clean, perhaps. The calendar on the wall, Ivor observed, was now four years out of date.

“Will you sit in, Seán?” Melia said.

“I won’t,” he said.

Somewhere between the first and second cup of tea, Ivor thought he heard the phone ring, but it was just the idea of the phone—quite real—in his head. They moved through scones and jam to shop-bought cake, while, on the other side of the table, Orla picked the ham out of a sandwich and left the bread on the plate.

Seán watched his granddaughter, looking for a way in.

“That’s a grand thing you have on you. What do you call that, now? Is it a dress or dungarees, or what?”

“Sorry?”

“The thing you have on you.”

“Oh. Maybe ‘dungaree dress’?” Orla said, and Ivor was taken by a new, small touch of disdain.

In the afternoon, she did not want to go to the shop to get ice cream with her grandfather, to Melia’s consternation.

“Ah, Dotey.”

“No, thank you,” she said.

Her grandfather ducked as he passed her, and squeezed a bare knee.

“Put a bit of meat on that,” he said.

Perhaps by way of revenge, Orla occupied his easy chair and did not relinquish it when he got back with the paper. This was clearly a new situation for Seán, who stood a moment, nonplussed.

“Would you get up out of that?”

She was sitting sideways and akimbo, one bare leg hooked over the chair arm, knickers on show, the whole nine yards.

“Orla.” Ivor’s tone was more harsh than he had intended. “Get up. Now.”

“Why is there only one chair?” she said, looking up at them, fully aggrieved.  
“Why isn’t there a chair for Nana Melia?”

“Because there isn’t,” Ivor said.

“Because it’s mine,” her grandfather said. He bopped her briefly on the head with the newspaper, gave a swift poke to her ribs.

“Mine.”

He reached under her knee to tickle it, and she gave a reflex kick. There was a moment’s pause as they looked each other in the eye.

Slowly, Orla unhooked her leg and stood up. She wriggled her outfit straight before stalking across the room and out the door to the hall.

By teatime, Emer was in one of her silences, and Ivor felt the itch to go up to his father in Galway, even though he knew his father was nearly two years gone.

They all sat around the table, waiting to be done.

“Tell me, Seán. Did you ever sort the other thing?”

“Which one is that?”

“The thing beyond.”

“Oh.” Seán rolled his jaw as though tasting something. “Sure, that fella’s gone in the head.”

Melia was up again, waving at a fly.

“You’ve sold your own place,” he said.

“Slow enough to shift,” Ivor said, carefully.

“The interest rates are prohibitive,” Seán said.

Indeed, what had looked like a fortune—the bay window, the fancy bannisters, the evergreen magnolia in the garden, which his mother had grown from a clipping taken in Lissadell—all of it had gone for the price of a fast car.

They sat a moment.

“And tell me,” Seán said. “Did you use an agent, at all?”



*“Daisy is rated for indoor use only.”*

Cartoon by Edward Koren

“I did,” Ivor said. “I think that would be the normal way now.”

“Sure, they’re queuing up to hand over the money to the middleman.”

Some remnant there, Ivor thought, of the old days and the landlord’s agent. He was trying to ease his way into a useful response when Orla piped up with “It’s not your house.”

Her tone was very cool.

“It was my Gramps’s house.”

“Arragh, what?” Seán said, flustered by her cheek.

“You’re not in charge of it.”

It was then that he lowered his voice and called her a little whore, though Emer heard “hoor,” which was a harmless country term, almost affectionate. Whatever word he used, Orla fled again, this time through the back door of the kitchen, across the yard to the barn. Emer looked down at her lap. After a moment, Ivor got up to follow the child and Seán said, “Sure, let her go.”

And he did.

There was something wrong, Ivor thought later, lying in the country blackout, and he did not know what it was. He recalled his wife's tinny voice coming through the phone in the hall, how it had felt so strange that he was sitting in her childhood house and she was up in Dublin. The way Melia did not move away when he took the receiver, the oddness of that. And he realized that it was not solicitude that had held his mother-in-law in place but some other problem. Something neurological. The lurch she made toward the door of the front room. Parkinson's, maybe. Did women get that?

He wondered if Melia had been to the doctor. She had lost quite a lot of her hair, the past couple of years, and Ivor did not know if that was part of the same thing. The loveliest woman on this side of the county.

There was a story that Seán had been due to marry another girl fifty years ago. It was all arranged. But, as she walked up the aisle, he pulled his best man across him. He swapped places with this best man, who was also his brother, so the bride arrived at the altar to the wrong Loughnane and was married to him instead. Afterward, the couple went to America.

Ivor did not think it was true. There might be a germ of truth in it, there might have been a broken engagement or something like it, but at the altar? You'd have to give notice, or whatever they did, back in the day. Call the banns. You'd need a very tame priest.

In any case, Seán got Melia, the woman he had wanted all along.

The next day, Ivor watched Melia's tremor and he wondered what to say to his wife. But Emer was concerned by the lack of hay in the barn; that was what she asked her sisters about when they came in from Limerick and Carrigaholt. The afternoon was filled with cousins for Orla, who was flying around in her new denim skirt and cheesecloth top.

“What age are you now, Orla?” her aunt Triona asked.

Orla did not seem to hear. The top was gathered in a way that drew attention to her chest.

“I wonder will she be tall,” Triona said, to no one in particular.

The Loughnane women had the food set out on a garden blanket, a chance to speak in the open air. There was no new hay in the barn because Seán had leased out the land, did Emer not know? The stock in the long field belonged to Magennis, from the other side of the river. The farmwork was beyond Seán now, with his dicky heart. He had an appointment every six months up at the hospital and there was talk of a pacemaker further down the line. Though everyone agreed that he looked better and better. One of the brothers-in-law said, “He’s in reverse.”

And then he was there, behind them.

“What does a man have to do around here to get a cup of tea?”

“Will you sit in, Daddy?” Triona said. “Will I get a chair?”

“I won’t,” he said.

He stood where he was and surveyed the scene, empty cup in hand, as the women fussed about him. Triona patted the teapot to see if it was hot enough still.

“Did you catch the match results?” her husband, Brendan, said.

“I did.”

When Ivor went inside to rinse out his cup, the house seemed dark after the sunshine. Melia was sitting on a hard kitchen chair, her hand on the table, the fingers dabbing over and back.

It was only after everyone was gone that they missed Orla, who had vanished into the long summer evening, probably off with the cats, somewhere about the farm. Emer and Melia continued to clear up and the two men watched the news. A little Italian boy who had fallen down a well was declared dead. Melia crossed herself.

“Bless us and save us,” she said.

The weather would continue fine.

Ivor went to use the bathroom and checked the front room as he walked back, in case Orla had come in quietly. Yesterday's pink dungaree dress, or whatever it was called, was still on the floor: an empty circle of fabric, as though she had just stepped out of it. He picked the thing up and hung it by the straps from a chair. When Orla had come in from the barn after her grandfather had called her a whore, Ivor had tried to touch her, to give her a hug, but she had become untouchable. When had that happened?

He counted the days that she had been left behind, the week his father died, and the number shifted from three to four. The day he had spent going about the house, walking Salthill, mowing the lawn. The day his father's crossword could be neither finished nor thrown out. He might have fetched her then—two hours down the road, two hours back—but Emer had said no. And she was right. There were a hundred reasons for no.

These are the things that change a child, he thought, but what can you do?

At half nine, her mother called from the back door, and a little later Melia stood in the dusk and banged a pot. It was nearly dark by the time Ivor reached for his car keys, and Seán said, in an oddly indifferent voice, "You might check along the river."

Which was what Ivor went out to do, not knowing what he was looking for. Orla lost, walking the road. He tried to remember what the child had on her: the flimsy top gathered about her little bust. He found it hard to catch his breath. Something bad had happened to her, the week he'd left her behind. All this time, he thought he had lost his father, and he had lost his daughter instead.

The hedges flared green; the gateposts sprang shadows. A man in a house he passed was drawing the curtains against the dark. Ivor checked the verges to the limit of the headlights, his mind gone lurid and blank.

It was three minutes to the bridge, maybe four. Ivor waited as a car came against him, with another on its tail. As he took his turn to cross, he saw Orla

standing in one of the recesses built into the bridge wall. She did not recognize the car. Ivor calmed his voice as he rolled the window down.

“You looking for a lift?”

“You’re going the wrong way.” She was eating crisps.

“Where did you get the money?” he asked.

“I have money.”

“Hop in there,” Ivor said. “Your mother is worried about you.”

She walked around the front to the passenger side, her body lit and then lost by the headlights.

Ivor drove the rest of the bridge and turned the car around at the small shop car park. He waited at the yield sign while a farmer came over in his tractor.

“Probably going to the pub,” Ivor said.

As they recrossed, the Shannon’s broad waters swirled black on either side.

“You should always walk around the back of a car,” he said. “When the engine is on. In case it’s still in gear. In case the driver’s foot slips.”

“When are we going home?”

“What day are we now?” he said.

It was good to have her beside him in the passenger seat: half child and half woman, still the same Orla. They pulled up to the house and sat a moment in the car.

“I just don’t know what you see in him,” she said. “That’s all.”

“Who? Your granda?”

“He’s mean to everyone. Horrible to Nana Melia.”

“Was he mean to you?”

“No.”

But Ivor did not know if she meant “Yes.”

“He’s a character,” he said.

Emer was at the kitchen window, trying to see if Orla was in the car with him. Then she was coming out the front door in a rush, and Orla was reluctantly unclipping the seat belt and opening the door.

Inside, Seán glanced briefly away from the television as the women fussed at Orla’s return.

“Would you keep it down?” he said.

Ivor thought of the story of the swapped groom. That sense he got, when Seán looked at him—or at any of his sons-in-law—that they might be easily replaced.

It was not Melia who had driven their sons away.

Later, on the spongy sofa bed, he turned to face Emer and stroked her hair. The depths of his wife, her silences—it was always hard to tell, with her, when she was awake and when asleep.

“We could send her to the cousins for a few days,” she whispered into the solid blackness of the air between them. “I’ll ask Triona.”

And “Thank you, God,” Orla said from across the room, loud and clear.

That autumn, Ivor waited for the next disaster, whatever it would be. In October, there was a flurry of chat on the phone: the car in Garrenboy had finally given up the ghost and they had no money for another one. Seán did not do the talking; he let Melia fuss and fret through various impossibilities, until her daughter stepped up to suggest a loan. This offer had to be rejected and then made again, personally, by Ivor. The loan then became a gift, one that was accepted with reluctance by Seán, a man who seemed freshly

surprised by the concept of money. Ivor wrote the check as though he were telling his father-in-law to go fuck himself. After which he was five hundred quid the poorer, but, for one long minute, rich in hatred and in satisfaction.

The little house with the disputed boundary burned down in the spring, and no one said a thing about it until June, when Emer drove to Garrenboy because Melia had taken a fall. A gorse fire, Triona said. The oul' bachelor up the hill, though the police could prove nothing and didn't seem bothered trying. The place was practically a shack, these many years.

"He probably did it himself," Orla said. "Out of spite."

There was a lot to be said for ignoring Orla's large statements these days, but there were times when Ivor saw in her a future woman more interesting, more perceptive, than many of the people he knew.

"You think?" he said.

With Emer gone, the girls were feeding their father and they were all living on cheese on toast. Orla had a new variation involving brown sauce, and as she bent to retrieve it from under the grill her eldest sister lifted the hem of her skirt up high.

"You little hoor," she crowed, and Orla hit out, screaming. The toast landed cheese down on the floor, and she pounced and lifted it up, aghast, holding it out like an actress with a bloodied dagger.

"Look what you did," she said. "Look what you've done."

"No harm," said Ivor, who was, actually, fussy about such things. "No harm. Give it here."

And he ate the spoiled toast just as it was.

Later, when he sat reading in the comfy chair, Orla climbed in beside him, even though she was far too big to fit anymore. She wriggled in, all elbows and knees, and was quiet.

"Don't talk to me," she said. "There's no point."

“Fair enough,” Ivor said.

And they stayed awhile without moving, almost like old times. ♦

*Anne Enright* is the author of novels including “[The Green Road](#),” “[The Forgotten Waltz](#),” and “[The Wren, the Wren](#). ”

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[\*\*A Critic at Large\*\*](#)

# Was the Renaissance Real?

We celebrate the period as a golden age of cultural rebirth. But two new books argue that the Renaissance, as we imagine it, is little more than myth.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

July 28, 2025



*The things we admire about fifteenth-century Florence might actually reflect the values of mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Photo illustration by Jack Smyth; Source photographs from Alamy*

With minimal ingenuity, any historical period can be made to dissolve into the ones around it. Take the rock revolution—that great shift which, emerging in the mid-nineteen-fifties and established by the mid-sixties, definitively separated the Broadway-and-jazz-based tunes that had previously dominated popular music from the new sound. The break ravaged record companies and derailed careers. In the fifties, the wonderful jazz-and-standards singer Beverly Kenney performed a song she'd written called “I Hate Rock ‘n’ Roll,” and then—perhaps for other reasons, but surely for that one, too—took her own life.

But listen closely and you hear continuities stronger than any rupture. The second song that the Beatles sang to the American public was a Broadway ballad from “The Music Man.” Chuck Berry, their hero, worshipped Nat King Cole, with Berry’s great rock songs of the fifties being variants on Cole’s witty hipster jazz songs from a decade before. (Berry also took most of his guitar licks from the sophisticated jazz guitarist Carl Hogan, of Louis

Jordan's band.) And the elements of Leonard Bernstein's or Richard Rodgers's music within the best work of a Paul Simon or a Paul McCartney are as obvious as is the intertwining of Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix. It was in the record business's interest to convince the teen-agers to whom it was selling music that their music was nothing like their parents' music. But the rock revolution can easily look more artifactual than authentic.

To anyone who grew up in the period, this is a bit absurd. *Of course* the rock revolution was real; *of course* the rock era was an era, with signatures and styles all its own. The first song that the Beatles sang was self-composed, in itself a huge change. By 1967, when "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" and Bob Dylan's "Visions of Johanna" were wildly popular, the musical world had become completely different from what it had been a few years earlier. Still, attempts to dissolve a period, however unpersuasive, can be instructive, because they make you think hard about what a period style *is*. Your common sense goes to war with your critical theory—as it should, since the point of critical theory is to puncture what we call common sense, while the point of common sense is to see past theory to things as they are.

### **What We're Reading**

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As with rock music, so with the Renaissance. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, many educated Europeans and Americans shifted their model of a great-good-place-back-then from ancient Greece and Rome to Renaissance Italy. This reëvaluation coincided with nineteenth-century

aestheticism—the idea that art could rival faith as a reason for living—and with a revived appreciation of material progress. Renaissance people didn’t just think things; they made things. And so celebrating the Renaissance became a way to pay respect to prosperity and materialism. When Walter Pater published “The Renaissance,” in 1873, he was implicitly aligning Botticelli with William Morris and the craft revival. Two decades later, when the art historian Bernard Berenson praised the “tactile values” of Italian painting, he was linking Giotto to the pragmatism of William James.

Yet doubts, of the kind that halo the rock revolution, have always hovered around the idea of the Renaissance. If it was really a rebirth of a classical past, why are its greatest monuments all Catholic affirmations of faith? If it marked a break with medievalism—well, *what* medievalism? Dante and Petrarch’s clear vernacular preceded what we now call the Renaissance. As the art historian Erwin Panofsky long ago observed, Europe saw many “renaissances” in classical form long before the fifteenth century—the rounded arches of Romanesque architecture in the twelfth century, for instance. Perhaps the Renaissance appeals to the modern imagination because it was an invention of the modern imagination.

Two new books from university presses take up this debate for the twenty-first century. Bernd Roeck’s “The World at First Light” (Princeton), translated, from the German, by Patrick Baker, runs to almost a thousand pages and, despite its title, actually offers a kind of macro-dissolution of the Renaissance. Seen from Roeck’s vast aerial perspective, the period vanishes into the whole of history—much as Manhattan shrinks to just another island in a satellite view. The Renaissance, in his telling, fades into the medieval world that spawned it and the Enlightenment that followed it.

Meanwhile, Ada Palmer’s “Inventing the Renaissance” (Chicago), at a mere six hundred and fifty pages, announces its thesis in its title. Hers is less macro-dissolution than a series of micro-disillusions: she goes deep into the minutiae of the lives of Renaissance luminaries to show that, far from being idealists reaching for the rebirth of a better world, they were the usual human mixture of self-promotion, self-delusion, and fakery. The Renaissance cities, far from being principalities of prosperity and

enlightened rule, were desperately poor, violent, and anarchic. They turned to antiquity more for consolation than for confident renewal.

The Renaissance, in Palmer's view, was a series of idiosyncratic local arrangements. It was given a shine later by those who needed something shining. Pater's "The Renaissance" has about as much of a relationship to actual fifteenth-century Florence as Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado" does to nineteenth-century Japan. Where Roeck sees the Renaissance as a broad spectrum of activities (rock is just one episode in the long history of pop music), Palmer argues that, under close scrutiny, the whole idea collapses into contradictions (rock is not an actual thing but a series of retrospective reflections around different things). For Palmer, then, the Renaissance is not so much a golden age as a glittering illusion—assembled, reassembled, and ultimately undone by the longings of those who came after.

Roeck's Renaissance begins in the twelfth century—the high Middle Ages, in our usual accounting—and carries the story through the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and the Baroque. A professor emeritus of history at the University of Zurich, Roeck has written a book with an almost comically wide reach, in the spirit more of Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel" than of a conventional cultural history. In a Diamond-like manner, Roeck even devotes many speculative pages to the Little Ice Age as it was experienced in the sixteenth century; he credits it for the surge in witch hunts as failed harvests set off mass panic. (That's surely overdrawn; after all, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was written in the chill of it.)

The book's scope is partly academic mission creep. Roeck seems to know of every human being and social movement in Europe through those six centuries, and he wants to write about them all. (He also adds in Asia and Africa throughout.) This dots the book with delightful and animating cameos. We meet the first man since antiquity known to have celebrated his birthday—as sure a sign of individualism as Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man—and learn that the library in the great ducal court of Urbino took manuscript books off the chains that had traditionally held them in place, allowing the reader to move them back and forth within the room. Even a longtime lover of Carpaccio's 1502 picture of St. Augustine in his study—

the greatest image of a humanist at work—might not have noticed that, for all the serenity of the study, the expensive books are actually strewn across the floor and under the desk, spines every which way, just as in a modern scholar’s study. It’s a tiny but telling sign that a new idea of reading and thinking was taking hold.

Inevitably, a net this large hauls in a lot of sardines along with tuna. In Roeck, everything comes in for scrutiny—and “everything” is not really a subject. Many pages go by that seem scarcely pointed toward a point. But a thesis does in time emerge, and it is that the Renaissance was neither the last effusion of the antique past nor a beautiful preliminary to modernity; it was modernity itself. The key ideas, social practices, and convictions that made the scientific revolution began here. The version of the Renaissance beloved of Pater or John Ruskin—a lyrical overture to beauty and communal order, refined by classical aestheticism—is, on this view, sentimental. Instead, the period marks a permanent alteration in what earlier scholars would have called “European man,” forged through a new union of artisanal craft and intellectual ambition, and shaped by the competitive worlds its makers inhabited.

It is impossible to imagine Thomas Aquinas actually building a Gothic cathedral, but Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo were profound neoclassical (and proto-scientific) souls and also guys who could engineer cannons and bridges and churches. Filippo Brunelleschi knew how to think buildings and how to build buildings. Galileo ground lenses as much as he theorized the movement of the planets. These pursuits were necessarily communal—it takes a guild to make a telescope—and helped develop “horizontal” social structures that shaped egalitarian, even democratic, habits, which then helped reshape the world. What marks a “Renaissance man” is not multifariousness of pursuits but, rather, an intensity of purpose so great that it has an appetite for all sides of a single activity.

This combination of practical skill and intellectual ambition inspired the scientific revolution. The marriage of the tenaciously artisanal and the wildly speculative eventually produced, among other things, Charles Darwin’s painstaking pigeon breeding—the groundwork for his theory of evolution. And, though democratic states were still a distant prospect,

democratic habits flourished within guilds, faculties, and even monasteries. Renaissance people weren't conscious egalitarians, but they were accustomed to open contests and competitions, one of the hallmarks of modernity.

Roeck goes on to address the great question of why Europe became the center of prosperity and innovation on the planet. Colonialism and imperialism can't explain it; they're as old as time. Roeck believes, surprisingly, that the Renaissance, and so the breakaway of Europe, happened not in spite of the era's religious warfare but, in part, because of it. By fusing spiritual and temporal power, the period's absurd-seeming battles over mystical doctrine—was the blood truly present in the chalice, or merely indicated in it?—were inseparable from struggles for worldly authority. The result was an enduring instability, which, however brutal, prevented the dead calm of enforced harmony. Roeck contrasts this, in a grand Spenglerian manner, with the East Asian spiritualities that, he insists, tended to make a neater division between what was owed to the divine and what belonged to the state. Necessity may be invention's mother, but Chaos is its father—as he was the begetter of the Olympian gods. In Roeck's picture, competitive, rather than imitative, habits of mind rose from religious warfare, establishing a cutthroat system of cultural and economic innovation which lasts to this day. We expect to fight for our lives even as we are living them. The Renaissance began this remaking.

Palmer, a historian at the University of Chicago, has no such Spenglerian horizons but instead drills down into the lives of her favorite subjects—which include herself. Palmer, who also writes science-fiction and fantasy novels, becomes a recurring character in her book, sharing personal anecdotes and memories of favorite professors. Her tone aims for chatty irreverence: she refers to the Florentine rulers as the “Nine Dudes in the Tower,” and at one point writes of a letter from the Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino to Bernardo Rucellai “advising him not to respond to ~~internet trolls~~ detractors.” The crossing out is, as the scholars say, hers.

Palmer's personal voice is part of an academic trend toward making scholarship more confessional and transparent. “Now you understand my biases,” she tells us, after recounting her own history as a student. Still, the

key to first-person address, as that great Renaissance master Michel de Montaigne understood, is not to subtract complication but to supply it, registering doubt, hesitation, and irony even while developing an argument. Palmer manages this at times, but too often the self-presentation feels obstructive, like a friend sending selfies from Florence, positioning himself cheerfully in front of all the things he's been gazing at. You're glad to share his delight, but you'd quite like to see the Duomo.

Yet many are the charms of Palmer's book. She argues, in contradiction to Roeck, against what she sees as the nineteenth-century idea that each age has a defining spirit, and that the Renaissance was "one great movement growing toward its mature form (modernity), reducing other modes of thought to remnants." The Renaissance, she insists, was, in fact, plural, and "our modern age is just as plural." Or perhaps the pluralism of Renaissance civilization is exactly what makes us see it as having begun the modernity we share.

Palmer's demonstrations of this pluralism are mostly compelling. She re-centers the Renaissance within the double natures of its various principals. Lorenzo the Magnificent emerges as an unmagnificent, ambivalent figure. Palmer also knows how to make a minute story matter—as in her explication of the needlessly and ostentatiously ornate Latin of the era's scholars. Far from shedding the scholasticism of the medieval mind, they were, she shows, actually aggressively obscure; where Dante and Petrarch wrote in the vernacular, their Florentine successors ran away to unreadable language. Palmer's purpose throughout is to take the humanism out of the *umanisti*, as those who taught the Greek and Latin classics were called. There was, she explains, no particular humanism to them, in our sense; the later meaning is a pin-back by those nostalgic nineteenth-century admirers.

On certain subjects, though, Palmer seems weirdly off base. She insists, for instance, that "the Renaissance hierarchy of evidence put authority foremost, logic second, and observation at the bottom." But Leonardo's notebooks, which are surely as Renaissance as it gets, are nothing but observation. His drawings, however stylized, strive to capture what whorls of water actually look like—so much so that the art historian Irving Lavin found that they matched with uncanny precision our contemporary

understanding of hydrodynamics. Leonardo was really looking. Palmer also claims that the Renaissance had no idea of progress—but the first modern art historian, Giorgio Vasari, whom she scarcely mentions, was preoccupied with progress above all else. As the art historian E. H. Gombrich reminded us long ago, Vasari's whole project was to chart the technical advances in representation which culminated in Michelangelo.

It soon becomes evident that these blind spots are a consequence of how historians of ideas, like Roeck and Palmer, relegate the visual arts to the background—treating them as illustrations of intellectual change rather than as engines of it. Yet, as Gombrich and his students (Michael Baxandall first among them) made clear, painting was where the action was. The steady addition of new techniques—linear perspective, for space; aerial perspective, for distance; anatomical precision—meant that, even if philosophy and medicine remained static, painting was energized by a powerful sense of technological progress. The shift in what was possible for a Florentine artist between 1410, when Fra Angelico was painting his toylike and schematic landscapes, and 1510, when Michelangelo was painting “The Creation of Adam,” was without precedent in European history, in any domain.

This, surely, is the true originality of the Renaissance: for the first—and perhaps the only—time, the arts, especially painting, eclipsed science and philosophy as the main site of intellectual energy and advancement. The pictures tell us more about the age than the age can tell us about the pictures. You might have to labor over the *umanisti*'s Latin, but Botticelli requires no translation; the magnetic force of “The Birth of Venus” and “Primavera” has been evident since they were painted. Enigmatic they may be, but that’s their purpose, not their problem. The energy of a world remade—where spirituality and sensuality are mystically entwined—radiates from them. In the realm of the visual, the Renaissance *umanisti* became humanists in our sense, almost by accident: what the painters learned from the past gave them license to enliven their work with faces, bodies, and desires. The writers might have been trapped in the old tongues, but the painters had eyes left free to imagine.

Though painting and sculpture were the primary movers, they were not the only arts that counted. Galileo's father, a lutenist, took part in heated debates with fellow-musicians and argued through experiments, like hanging weights from lute strings to test their tension. Even in music theory, the idea of progress burned brightly, well before physics had caught up. We sense in the father the son's later irreverence: a willingness to challenge received wisdom—to pull the strings and see what sounds got made.

There is a constant paradox of art-making: as an art form accelerates its pace of change, its content grows more nostalgic. This is evident in the work of the other great warp-speed era, French avant-garde painting between 1870 to 1914. As painting raced from sunlit Impressionism to Cubist abstraction in a single generation, its subjects looked backward: to Gothic cathedrals, to a bohemian café-table culture already passing away. It is the speed of transformation, as much as anything transformed, that makes some periods of human civilization permanently compelling.

New things come from old things newly seen. If the Enlightenment aimed to grasp the world as it is, the Renaissance balanced the world as it once was with the world it was becoming. That double consciousness is what gives the pictures, and their period, their grace. Botticelli's people have "the wistfulness of exiles," in Pater's beautiful phrase. Their melancholia was the uncertainty inherent in a time of enormous change. That spirit, to return to our original tune, wasn't unlike the spirit of those disruptive rock records, which in retrospect were about longing for a lost England, or for a vanishing America of trains and outlaws. Renaissance painting occupies a similar space between the magical and the material, or, if you prefer, between the medieval and the modern—the same space that Shakespeare occupies and that makes him the last of the Renaissance masters. It's this double consciousness which remains so lucid to us today. They knew that nothing was solid beneath their feet, even as the stars shifted above their heads. "Doubt as a form of sociability," as another Renaissance scholar calls this feeling, brought people together to share their uncertainty, and moves us still.

“It fades into this and fades into that,” Chuck Berry wisely said, when he was mapping the innovations of his music. “Most people’s impressions overlap other people’s impressions, and music is like that, too,” he added, shrugging off the charge of being either an absolute innovator or a mere conservator. Sometimes the speed of art simply accelerates. One might prefer—sophisticated modern taste often does prefer—the simpler things, liking the Pre-Raphaelites more than Raphael, as much as we prefer vinyl to Spotify. But the painterly resources available to Raphael were vastly larger than those available to an artist a scant half century before, as the musical and lyrical resources available to a pop musician in 1970 were incommensurable with those available to a pop musician in 1960. Style is necessarily hybrid, but there are times when cultural speed really does get supercharged, in ways that draw on the past to create something new. If we’re trying to come up with a word for such times, it isn’t crazy to call the world they make reborn. ♦



[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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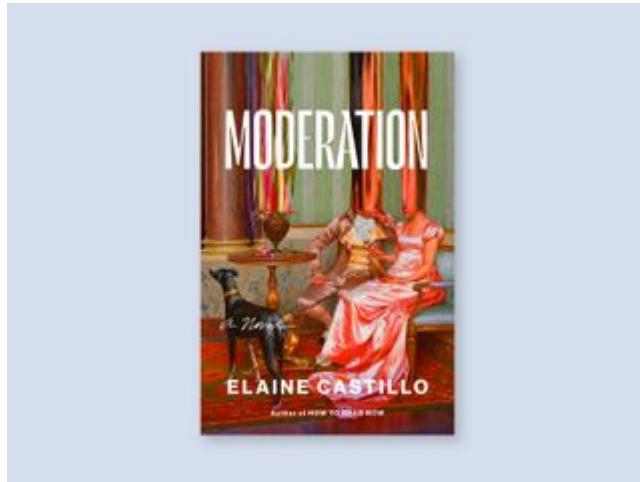
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**Books**

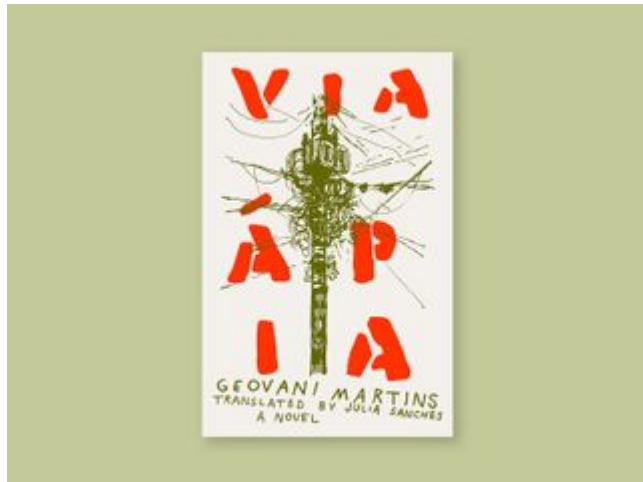
# Briefly Noted

“*Moderation*,” “*Via Ápia*,” “*Misbehaving at the Crossroads*,” and “*The Key to Everything*.”

*July 28, 2025*



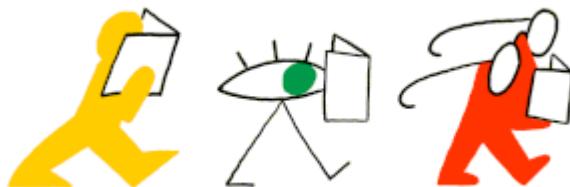
**Moderation**, by *Elaine Castillo* (*Viking*). In this biting novel, a fiercely independent young woman named Girlie works as a content moderator for a virtual-reality platform, Playground, that is at once a game-like diversion and an immersive therapeutic tool. Its inventor imagined that people would one day be prescribed alternate realities to help them recover from P.T.S.D. and depression—but, before he could see this vision to fruition, he died, possibly by suicide. As Girlie learns more about the inventor through the platform’s co-founder, she finds herself falling in love at the same time as she becomes ensnared in a corporate conflict over Playground’s future. Castillo explores the wonders and limitations of technology while skewering its stewards’ appetite for power.



**Via Ápia**, by *Geovani Martins*, translated from the Portuguese by *Julia Sanches* (FSG Originals). This début novel is a chronicle of Rocinha, a favela in Rio de Janeiro, and follows the efforts of a group of male friends to score drugs, make a few dollars, and inch toward a better life. They work as caterers, party entertainers, and dealers; one dreams of becoming a tattoo artist, another just wants to get out of the army. Set in the tumultuous early twenty-tens, as Brazil prepared for the World Cup and the Olympics, the novel tracks how Rocinha changes as military police push into the neighborhood, attempting to wrest control from powerful local gangs.

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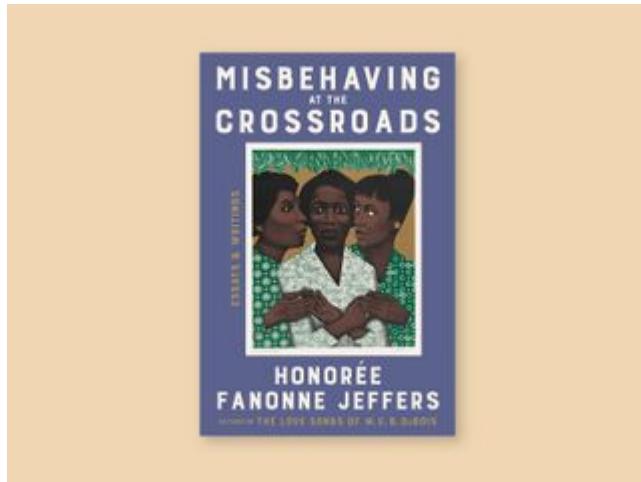
## What We're Reading



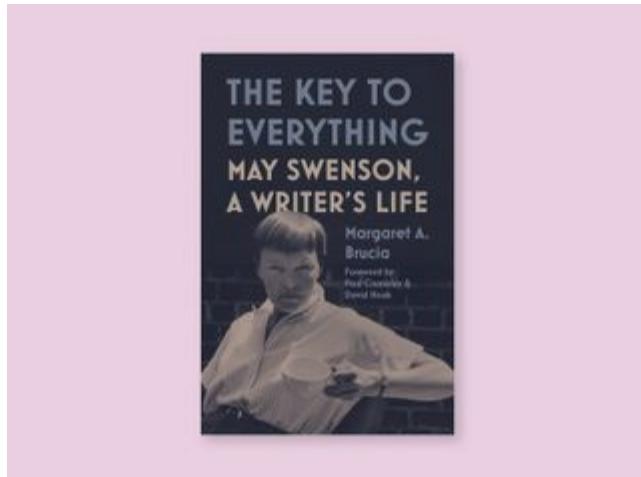
*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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**Misbehaving at the Crossroads**, by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers (Harper). In this genre-blurring collection, which shifts between memoir, history, and poetry, Jeffers charts her place in a line of women whose lives have been shaped by slavery, racism, and resistance. Organized by the concept of the “crossroads,” a place of “difficulty *and* possibility,” Jeffers’s essays recall a range of formative experiences, from her first encounters with Alice Walker’s writing to a searing meeting with James Baldwin. Her disappointments with political figures, including Barack Obama and Kamala Harris, are tempered by insight into the challenges they faced; Harris, for instance, was “expected not only to be perfect but to transcend perfection.”



**The Key to Everything**, by Margaret A. Bracia (Princeton). The pioneering poet May Swenson arrived in New York in 1936, when she was twenty-three, anticipating a personal and creative flowering. She came from

Utah, where she was born to Swedish immigrant parents, devout Mormons who raised their children in kind. Imaginative and ambitious, May left the church and her beloved family to pursue an artistically, politically, and sexually liberated life, eventually establishing herself as a unique figure in modern poetry. Brucia's vibrant portrait, set against the mercurial backdrop of mid-century Manhattan, draws on Swenson's diaries and her extensive correspondence with her fellow-poet Elizabeth Bishop to examine Swenson's work with the Federal Writers' Project; her romantic relationships, most of which involved women; and her cultivation of the playful, experimental literary style that would define her career.

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**[Books](#)**

# What We Miss When We Talk About the Racial Wealth Gap

Six decades of civil-rights efforts haven't budged it, and the usual prescriptions—including reparations—offer no lasting solutions. Have we been focussing on the wrong things?

By [Idrees Kahloon](#)

July 28, 2025



*A group of economic researchers have modelled the effects of a direct redistribution. Their conclusion: "Equalizing wealth without changing the earnings gap has no long-term effect on the wealth gap." Illustration by Jamie Law*

In mathematics, you often have to deal with the problem of division by zero—an undefined gesture toward infinity. Charting the wealth gap between white and Black Americans over time poses a similar problem. It's not that African Americans arrived with almost no property; it's that they arrived as property themselves. The whole calculation is a category error. For two centuries—first under British rule, then under an American flag that proclaimed liberty and justice for all—Black people in the United States were enslaved. The Revolution's soaring promises of inalienable rights and universal equality were never meant to include them. It took a civil war before African Americans were finally recognized as citizens.

Only after the abolition of slavery does it become possible to begin a meaningful statistical series—and what it reveals is a yawning chasm. Legal equality was written into the Constitution in 1868, in what historians sometimes call the nation's Second Founding, but the reality was more elusive. Reconstruction stumbled after Abraham Lincoln's assassination and soon collapsed altogether. "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back toward slavery," W. E. B. Du Bois wrote. This new form of subjugation was less overt, but no less deliberate. Poll taxes and literacy tests stripped away suffrage. Sharecropping turned freedom into a kind of feudalism. Jim Crow laws imposed rigid segregation, and lynching enforced it with terror. Even those who headed north as part of the Great Migration, in search of opportunity and relief, found themselves corralled into ghettos.

And yet, during this long and harrowing period of state-sanctioned exclusion, the chasm began to narrow. Ellora Derenoncourt, an economist at Princeton, has documented this slow convergence. In 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, white Americans held fifty-six times the per-capita wealth of Black Americans. Within a decade, that ratio had been reduced to twenty-three to one. By 1920, it was ten to one. By mid-century, it was seven to one. The crowning legislative victories of the civil-rights era—the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act—came in the mid-nineteen-sixties, a full century after Emancipation. By then, the gap stood at roughly six to one.

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At the apex of the civil-rights movement—after the assassination of John F. Kennedy but before that of Martin Luther King, Jr.—it was clear that legal equality, though hard-won, would not be enough. Cities remained rigidly segregated; the ghettos, now synonymous with concentrated poverty, simmered with unrest. In a 1965 article for *Commentary*, Bayard Rustin, the chief architect of the 1963 March on Washington, observed that the civil-rights struggle was evolving “into a full-fledged social movement . . . concerned not merely with removing the barriers to full opportunity but with achieving the fact of equality.” The trials that lay ahead, he warned, would be “of far greater magnitude than the legal barriers” that had just been torn down. The problems to surmount were structural: deindustrialization, entrenched segregation, economic marginalization—conditions shaped by Jim Crow, but not undone by its eclipse.

To meet that challenge, Rustin, King, and A. Philip Randolph—the longtime leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—drafted a bold proposal called “A ‘Freedom Budget’ for All Americans.” It was not a demand for reparations, nor was it framed explicitly in racial terms. Instead, it outlined a universalist expansion of the welfare state, grounded in the idea that economic justice could reinforce democratic citizenship. The budget’s principles called for increased investment in health care and education, the elimination of slums and ghettos, and, most ambitiously, a federal jobs guarantee. There would be, the men emphasized, “no doles,” no interference with private enterprise—the aim was only to give “the poor a chance to become dignified wage earners.”

The Freedom Budget never became reality. What took shape instead were President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty and the broader suite of Great Society programs—a sweeping expansion of the American welfare state, though one that stopped short of the jobs guarantee that Rustin, King, and Randolph had deemed essential. Still, for a moment, there was the potential for a national effort at economic redistribution—an effort that, unlike the New Deal, extended its benefits across racial lines. Franklin D. Roosevelt's legacy had left Black Americans behind. Social Security was designed to exclude domestic and agricultural workers—the majority of the Black labor force at the time. The newly formed Federal Housing Administration underwrote home loans that went overwhelmingly to white families. The G.I. Bill, heralded as a ladder to the middle class, was locally administered, allowing Southern officials to deny Black veterans the benefits that their white counterparts received.

Johnson's programs, by contrast, were meant to desegregate not just schools and lunch counters but government assistance itself. In 1965, speaking at Howard University, the President laid out what he called "the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights"—a fight for "not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result." The metaphor that he used has since become canonical: "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." He didn't use the term "affirmative action," but the policy began there, in élite universities and in companies with federal contracts, and would persist, in one form or another, for decades.

Sixty years on—after the expansion of the welfare state, after affirmative action, after the decline of legal segregation and the slow erosion of overt discrimination—you might expect the convergence to have continued. You might expect real economic parity to have come within reach. But the numbers tell a stranger story. The racial wealth gap today remains where it was in the nineteen-sixties: around six to one. The ratio hasn't budged. What went wrong?

Theories abound. One of the most persistent—and, to many, persuasive—is that racism never truly receded; it simply changed form. This is the core argument of “The Plunder of Black America: How the Racial Wealth Gap Was Made” (Yale), by the historian Calvin Schermerhorn. The book traces the fortunes of seven Black families across generations, excavating genealogies and tabulating, with forensic care, the labor extracted and the property lost. The result is a long historical arc of dispossession that culminates in a bracing indictment: “A nation founded, in large part, on ransacking African Americans’ work product . . . never gave up stealing. The last hundred years have been a nimble shift in that theft and wealth stripping. Intentional racism became an institutional reflex.”

In this account, every apparent step forward is matched by a quiet reversion—each gain followed by a new, more elusive form of loss. Redlining gives way to “predatory inclusion” through subprime loans. School desegregation in the cities sparks white flight to the suburbs. The election of Barack Obama is answered by the rise of Donald Trump. Again and again, advancement is met by backlash, recognition by retrenchment. The diagnosis echoes the dark realism of early critical race theorists. “Black people will never gain full equality in this country,” the legal scholar Derrick Bell wrote in his classic “Faces at the Bottom of the Well,” from 1992. “Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress,’ short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance.”

The permanent-racism hypothesis offers a compelling account for all the progress we haven’t seen. What it can’t readily explain is the progress we *have* seen. Since 1970, the share of Black children living in poverty has fallen from fifty-six per cent to sixteen per cent, according to researchers at Columbia University’s Center on Poverty and Social Policy—an improvement attributable largely to the welfare architecture begun during the Johnson era. Residential segregation, too, has declined. The sociologists John Logan and Brian J. Stults, analyzing every decennial census from 1980 to 2020, found significant drops in Black-white segregation across American cities. (Notably, the five most segregated metro areas today—Newark, Milwaukee, Detroit, New York, and Chicago—are all north of the Mason-Dixon Line.)

Not all the data are encouraging. The economists Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren, mining income-tax records to track twenty million children into adulthood, have shown that Black children face much higher rates of downward mobility than white children born at the same income level. Yet even here the pattern is not monolithic: the gap is almost entirely driven by Black boys. Black girls and white girls raised in similar economic circumstances show no meaningful difference in mobility.

These complexities pose problems for the permanent-racism thesis. If the racial wealth gap is a straightforward product of systemic racism, how did it narrow during the height of Jim Crow, when racism was overt and institutionalized, and stall out after those structures were formally dismantled? Why is the mobility story for Black women so different from that for Black men? And why have other marginalized groups—Asian Americans and Hispanics among them—managed to accumulate wealth at a faster rate, despite their own histories of exclusion and discrimination? History paints a vivid picture, but without economic rigor it risks missing the frame.

One might have hoped for a more searching explanation in “Black Power Scorecard: Measuring the Racial Gap and What We Can Do to Close It” (Metropolitan), a recent book by the Brookings scholar Andre M. Perry. There is at least some nod here to underlying causes of the racial wealth gap—differences in family formation and educational attainment—but the analysis is often hasty and uneven. Perry repeatedly asserts that “the thinking that education predicts wealth is misguided” because “wealth predicts education.” There is, no doubt, a strong correlation between family wealth and educational attainment. But one of the most consistently replicated findings in economics is that, even accounting for wealth, higher education itself leads to higher earnings. College graduates now earn, on average, at least eighty per cent more than those without degrees. To claim, as Perry does, that “education is not the great equalizer,” at a time when a significant racial gap in college completion persists, risks doing real harm.

His reluctance to treat family structure as a causal factor is similarly puzzling. He notes that married Black households have an average wealth of two hundred and thirty thousand dollars—more than three times that of

their unmarried peers—but resists drawing the obvious conclusion. The gap is not merely about differences in saving habits. Perry acknowledges that fifty-seven per cent of Black children do not live with their fathers, but hurries past the long-term consequences of that fact. A growing body of research in child psychology and economics links adverse childhood experiences—violence, instability, parental absence—to poorer performance in school, reduced emotional well-being, and lower lifetime earnings. In a paper titled “The Trouble with Boys,” the economists Marianne Bertrand and Jessica Pan find that boys in particular suffer most acutely: they are more likely to act out, fall behind, and fail to recover.

Perry concedes that “there are economic benefits to marriage,” but cautions that focussing on it “diverts attention from eliminating the discrimination that extracts wealth and makes marriage less likely.” As with education, he treats wealth not as an outcome but as a precondition. Having decided that wealth disparity is the foundational cause of all others, Perry presents a remedy that’s scaled accordingly: a reparations program that could cost as much as fourteen trillion dollars. The proposal comes with a handful of other guarantees to Black Americans. “What is owed,” he writes, includes lower energy bills (facilitated in part by “the installation of programmable thermostats”) and “a single-payer system that provides universal care without significant cost sharing.”



*“I hate how pretty the end of the world is.”*  
Cartoon by Patrick McKelvie

There are, to be sure, books on the subject that offer more rigor and depth. “The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap” (2017), by Mehrsa Baradaran, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine, is

a sharp, historically grounded critique of the idea that segregated institutions—Black banks, in particular—ever meaningfully closed the racial wealth gap. “Black economic power and autonomy had a natural appeal in the face of segregation and racism,” she writes, but the strategy has been “an anemic response to racial inequality” and has yielded “virtually nothing” in terms of long-term convergence. Economic power, she argues, cannot thrive in isolation. Bank of America, she notes, began as the Bank of Italy, serving working-class Italian immigrants in San Francisco—its eventual success made possible by integration into the broader financial system. “Full racial integration will eventually remove pockets of blight, crime, and deprivation across the country,” Baradaran writes. “We must shed the destructive myths that separate can be equal, that a segregated economy will reach prosperity on its own.”

Baradaran, like many others, ultimately endorses reparations, including in the form of direct cash payments. A similar line of reasoning appears in the legal scholar Bernadette Atuahene’s new book, “Plundered: How Racist Policies Undermine Black Homeownership in America” (Little, Brown). Drawing on legal analysis and deep ethnographic work, Atuahene investigates a quietly devastating episode in Detroit: the city’s illegal overassessment of property taxes in the years following the 2008 financial crisis. Thousands of poor Black homeowners—many living in the only properties that they had ever owned or stood to pass down—were driven into foreclosure. The result was a deepening of the already stark wealth divide between Black residents of the city and white residents of the surrounding suburbs. Atuahene adopts a definition of racism in the mold of Ibram X. Kendi’s: any policy or practice that sustains racial inequality. Though her study focusses on a single city, she insists that “predatory governance is an American problem”—one that operates quietly, bureaucratically, and often legally, across jurisdictions. Unless these policies are exposed and eradicated, she warns, the wealth gap will continue to fester, unnoticed but widening all the same.

If you take these diagnoses seriously, reading them from the vantage of our current political moment is enough to invite despondency. Reparations, long proposed as the only measure proportionate to the scale of racial plunder, look increasingly like a political, economic, and legal non-starter. Donald

Trump, now returned to the Presidency, would never sign such a bill. Republicans in Congress would never pass one. Even California, a wealthy blue state with a Democratic supermajority in the legislature, is balking at the anticipated cost of state-level reparations. The conservative majority on the Supreme Court, for its part, regards the Constitution as color-blind—an understanding that leaves little room for policies explicitly tied to race.

Even a groundswell of political will seems unlikely to sweep these obstacles aside. In 2020, America underwent what many called a racial reckoning, sparked by the mass protests organized under the Black Lives Matter banner. But the effects, in retrospect, feel ephemeral. Many police departments that saw their budgets slashed have had those funds hastily restored amid a rise in violent crime. Corporate pledges to meet diversity targets and back D.E.I. initiatives have, in many cases, been quietly shelved—or publicly reversed—in deference to shifting political winds. Joe Biden, elected in 2020 on a platform that stressed racial equity, made little progress on that front. Trump was not merely reelected in 2024; he won the popular vote outright, and doubled his support among Black voters, winning sixteen per cent. One begins to understand why pessimism has always been the shadow companion of critical race theory.

Other perspectives from the social sciences offer more room for hope. William Julius Wilson, an eminent sociologist at Harvard, has long argued that the persistence of Black economic disadvantage is not solely a function of present-day racism but also the result of large-scale economic transformations that, while not racially motivated, have had racially disparate effects. The decline of American manufacturing, the rise of globalization, and the shift toward a service-based economy that disproportionately rewards college graduates have all contributed to the stratification we now see. To ignore these structural forces, Wilson suggests, is to misdiagnose the problem—and to risk prescribing the wrong solutions.

Ellora Derenoncourt, the economist whose work traces the racial wealth gap back to 1860, has also studied why progress stalled in the past sixty years. Along with colleagues, she identifies three key reasons. First, income convergence between Black and white Americans largely halted. Second,

Black wealth is held disproportionately in housing rather than in financial assets or businesses, meaning that stock-market booms—which have become a hallmark of the post-Reagan economy—widen, rather than shrink, the gap. Third, a persistent savings gap between Black and white households compounds over time. According to their models, unless these underlying conditions are addressed, even reparations on a vast scale would offer only temporary relief. “Within the next 30 years,” they write, “this gap would increase by 30%, and divergence would continue over time.” A separate study, published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, reaches a similar conclusion. Analyzing returns on capital, intergenerational transfers, and wage trajectories, the study’s authors find that “equalizing earnings is by far the most important mechanism for permanently closing the racial wealth gap.” They also test the effects of a direct redistribution—basically, a helicopter-drop of wealth. The result? “Equalizing wealth without changing the earnings gap has no long-term effect on the wealth gap.”

These findings complicate the dominant narrative that has taken shape in the past decade: that the Black-white wealth gap, built on a foundation of historical injustice, serves as a kind of permanent sentence. This view—widely circulated in works like Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations,” published in *The Atlantic*, in 2014; Richard Rothstein’s best-selling book “The Color of Law,” from 2017; and the *Times Magazine*’s 1619 Project, launched in 2019—holds that past policies of exclusion and dispossession, especially in housing, created a self-perpetuating cycle of inequality which can be broken only through proportionate intervention. The taproot of this story is often identified with the infamous redlining maps created by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, or *HOLC*, a New Deal agency established in 1933. According to this account, *HOLC* maps codified residential segregation, denying African Americans access to home loans and, in turn, the chance to accumulate generational wealth through property ownership. The solution, in this framework, is remedial state action commensurate with the original harm.

But the historical record isn’t so clear-cut. The *HOLC* maps were not widely disseminated at the time, and the agency itself was relatively equitable in its lending. It was the Federal Housing Administration—

established a year later—that proved more systematically discriminatory, encouraging lenders to use racial covenants and steering loans toward white-only suburbs. Still, during the thirty-three years between the founding of *HOLC* and the passage of the Fair Housing Act, in 1968, the Black-white wealth gap continued to diminish. Moreover, redlining was not uniquely applied to Black neighborhoods. Many of the areas assigned the worst rating—D, for “hazardous”—were filled with recent immigrants of Italian, Slavic, or Jewish origin. In a review of *HOLC* maps across seven cities, the urbanologist Alan Mallach found that, at the time they were drawn, the vast majority of residents of redlined areas were white ethnics. These communities faced discrimination and hardship, yet many of their children outpaced their parents economically. Recent work by the economists Leah Boustan and Ran Abramitzky shows that this pattern of upward mobility continues among the children of immigrants today, including those from poor countries like Guatemala and El Salvador. The contrast is telling. In 2007, Black and Hispanic families had roughly the same levels of median wealth. Fifteen years later, Hispanic wealth had doubled; Black wealth had risen by only half.

A rejoinder to the project of decomposing the racial wealth gap into its constituent parts—the marriage gap, the business-ownership gap, the education gap, the income gap—is that each of these, too, is a reflection of racism, both past and present. To search for color-blind remedies is, therefore, a fool’s errand. As a theory of history, this is powerful; as a guide to policy, however, it’s frustratingly limited. Take education, one of the most powerful predictors of income. There is no question that separate and unequal schooling created vast disparities in educational attainment. But when today’s racial achievement gaps are attributed to more nebulous forms of discrimination—like implicit bias in standardized testing—the explanatory force begins to wane. The solutions that many voices for racial justice have espoused tend to be moral or psychological in nature: decolonizing curricula, reeducating teachers, raising public awareness of structural inequity. These measures are often abstract, and resistant to scale, let alone rigorous evaluation.

Consider, instead, the possibility that many of the racial achievement gaps we observe today reflect not only race but class—the reality that American

society is increasingly divided into islands of affluence and disadvantage. The evidence for this is growing. Childhood exposure to concentrated poverty has lasting effects, across time and across racial categories. It hinders cognitive development, educational attainment, and long-term earnings. These forces shape the lives of children on the South Side of Chicago and in Appalachian hollows, in Native reservations and in borderland colonias alike. And if concentrated poverty damages all children, then deconcentrating and reducing it should benefit all children.

The means for doing so are already known. Expanding direct cash supports, such as child tax credits, has demonstrable effects (and even figures like Vice-President J. D. Vance have endorsed this). So does integrating neighborhoods, something that's within the grasp of the politicians who run big American cities. But doing so would require loosening the zoning restrictions that choke new housing construction, and untangling the web of air rights, environmental reviews, noise ordinances, and traffic studies which keeps poor families penned in place. It would require something far less poetic than a moral awakening—just a shift in what kinds of barriers we choose to take down.

It might seem almost too obvious to say that the wealth gap is, at bottom, an income gap. But that simple reframing clarifies a great deal. Wealth is a terminal indicator. It reflects not only the inheritance one starts with but the sum of a lifetime's earnings, net of taxes and consumption. Yearly income differences, when compounded over decades, become chasms of accumulated capital. The well-off don't just save more; they save differently. They move beyond housing into equities, retirement accounts, and business ownership—forms of wealth that, on average, grow faster than a home can appreciate. For families with lower incomes, that leap is rarely possible.

It is also more plausible, practically and politically, to break the chain of intergenerational poverty—an absence of income which necessarily leads to an absence of wealth—than it is to forcibly level wealth itself. And we know more than ever about how to do this. Chetty, the economist, along with his collaborators, has identified features of neighborhoods that give poor children the best shot at upward mobility. Five stand out: low levels of

residential segregation, low levels of income inequality, good schools, strong social capital, and high levels of family stability.

Of course, there is little reason to expect the current Administration to turn its attention toward the elimination of child poverty or the narrowing of racial income gaps. But it does at least profess concern for the fortunes of working-class Americans. There is a faint rhyme between the newly created “Trump accounts,” which will provide newborns in the U.S. with a thousand dollars, and the progressive idea of baby bonds—investment accounts designed to grow over time into modest stores of capital.

The reality, though, is that explicitly race-conscious strategies for economic convergence are off the table. Affirmative action has been thrown out in college admissions and hiring. Civil-rights law, for the foreseeable future, will be interpreted through the lens of constitutional color blindness. The equity-oriented initiatives of the Biden Administration are already being reversed. Even on the left, the appetite for social-justice rhetoric has cooled. There was political wisdom in the design of the Freedom Budget that A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr., proposed a half century ago: its benefits were meant to reach all Americans. Today, that wisdom is no longer optional. It is the only path left. ♦

*[Idrees Kahloon](#), the Washington bureau chief for The Economist, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2020.*

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[\*\*On and Off the Menu\*\*](#)

# L.A.'s Food Culture, Transformed by Immigration Raids

The city is defined by street carts and family-run restaurants. ICE's vicious campaign has prompted many venders and patrons to stay home.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

July 28, 2025



*Business has slowed across the city, including at the beloved palettería Los Alpes. Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin*

In early July, while shopping at a farmers' market on the east side of Los Angeles, where I live, I bought a few packages of raw chicken thighs from Jose David Ruelas, of Garcia Ruelas Farms. As Ruelas, who is known for telling customers to "have an eggcellent day," bagged my purchase, he asked, "Would you like some frozen water with that?" I stared at him blankly until he gave me a conspiratorial wink, and I realized what he was refusing to say.

Barely a month had passed since ICE had launched its vicious campaign against L.A.'s immigrants, particularly those from Latin America, with masked agents snatching unsuspecting people from Home Depot parking lots, hotels, and local farms. Nowhere seemed out of bounds: one day as I

was leaving my daughter's preschool, a van presumed to be dispatched by *ICE* (its occupants identified themselves as law enforcement but didn't specify their division) pulled up to the entrance. Later, one of the school's administrators, who had turned them away without incident, theorized that they'd been broadly targeting caretakers.

The terror felt existential in the city's food industry, which depends almost entirely on immigrant labor. In heavily Latino areas, many business owners, and their employees and patrons, were afraid to leave their homes, turning some commercial corridors into ghost towns. Perhaps no one seemed so vulnerable as the city's many street-food venders: on June 12th, a popular truck in East L.A., Jason's Tacos, was abandoned, slivers of carne asada still smoking on the grill, after *ICE* detained several of its workers and customers, according to the owner.

On a recent afternoon, I met a friend for lunch at a makeshift market on a street corner not far from a freeway overpass. Beneath a cluster of tents, a pair of women worked a flattop grill and pulled craggy, battered chicken legs and bronzed wedges of potato from a deep fryer. As we approached, a man with a wide smile handed us glossy postcards advertising *comida chapina*, Guatemalan food. Perched on low plastic stools, we ordered sweet plantains—shiny, starchy golden cross-sections branded with their own burnt sugars, served steaming in a cardboard container with soupy black beans and a thick, tangy crema—and *garnachas*, fried corn tortillas topped with crispy bits of tender, perfectly seasoned steak, chopped scallion, and crumbly cheese. From enormous plastic cups, we drank *agua de jamaica* (iced hibiscus tea) and *fresco de crema*, which had the flavor and consistency of a melted vanilla milkshake.

My friend, a fluent Spanish speaker, asked the man who'd handed us the postcards, and who spoke little English, how business had been recently. Things were slow, he told us. A few days prior, an S.U.V. suspected to be *ICE*'s had circled the block, sending venders and customers scrambling for cover. Although no raid had occurred, everyone was on edge, expecting the car to return. But the man had a plan now, he said almost cheerfully. He pointed across the street, to a steep, tree-lined embankment. "I'll run up that hill," he said.

The late Jonathan Gold, a Los Angeles native who won a Pulitzer for writing brilliantly and obsessively about his home town's culinary culture, observed that much of the city's best food was produced in service of self-contained immigrant communities. The kinds of places he championed, he noted in "City of Gold," the 2015 documentary about his life and career, "are not cooking for tourists and they're not cooking for the newspaper critic and they're not cooking for the glory of it—they're cooking because they're fulfilling a specific need that their community has."

As Gold well understood, the fact that L.A.'s Korean dumpling shops, Armenian grocery stores, Thai lunch counters, and Salvadoran *pupuserías* are open to curious outsiders is one of the great privileges of living here. A year into my life in L.A., I can chart my infatuation with the city in meals: a simple but spectacular banh mi from My Dung, a bare-bones shop in Chinatown; a royal Manchu spread, including exquisite fried shrimp and sautéed chayote leaves, at the elegant Bistro Na's, next door to a Planet Fitness in the San Gabriel Valley; a steaming bowl of *higaditos*—a Oaxacan chicken-and-egg soup—at Comedor Tenchita, a collection of folding tables in the back yard of a bungalow on a sleepy residential block in Mid-City.

On a recent Saturday, I joined a group of fellow food obsessives on a crawl to sample regional Mexican and Central American dishes, with a focus on beans, led by Bill Esparza, a Mexican American food writer and scholar. From late morning into afternoon, we caravanned in a rough loop, driving from Pico-Union to South Gate, then north to Huntington Park and Westlake. Business seemed to have contracted dramatically at each place we visited. At Casa Gish Bac, where we shared a plate of Oaxacan *enfrijoladas*, tortillas topped with black beans and *tasajo*—salt-cured beef, thinly sliced and grilled—we were the only patrons, which Esparza said was extremely unusual. Just a few other tables were occupied at Sinaloa Express, where we ate *machaca*, a revelatory dish of dried shredded beef that was served with refried beans, made creamy and yellow with lard.

In Huntington Park, we stopped at Los Alpes, a forty-six-year-old ice-cream parlor, for a palate cleanser of *paletas* in a wide range of tropical flavors, including *nance*, a golden-hued, cherry-size fruit that grows in the Caribbean and in Central and South America. The shop was nearly empty,

to the dismay of the owner, Roxana Gaeta, who grew up nearby and bought the place a decade ago from the family that opened it. “Normally, on a summer Saturday there’s a line out the door,” she said, fighting back tears.

The operators of many food trucks and street stalls had retreated. Some, like the owner of El Russo, an award-winning taco truck usually parked in Silver Lake, were offering catering for private events only; others had American-born children willing to take their place on the street or were getting by on funds raised by advocacy groups to buy out their inventories. Still, there were plenty who decided to carry on as usual. The final stop on our tour was the Guatemalan Night Market, at an intersection near MacArthur Park. At tidy, efficient food stands, skilled cooks churned out beautiful plates of food. Esparza led us to a pair of women who were serving thick, eggy fritters encasing *pacaya*, bracingly bitter palm flowers, harvested from the tree’s fleshy spikes and served with beans and rice. We ate standing, revelling in our movable feast.

A week or so later, I drove to Long Beach to meet Javier Cabral, the editor-in-chief of the website *L.A. Taco*, which has lately become an indispensable source of local immigration news. It began, in 2006, as a blog covering the local taco scene. In 2017, after the sale and disbandment of *L.A. Weekly*, the free alternative paper where Gold got his start, *L.A. Taco*’s co-founders decided to try to use the site to fill the local-news void. They hired a veteran journalist named Daniel Fernandez to run it. In 2019, when Fernandez left for the *L.A. Times*, they replaced him with Cabral, a son of Mexican immigrants and an East L.A. native who had been a West Coast food editor for *Vice*. In high school, Cabral had his own blog called “Teenage Glutster”; after that, he worked for many years as a scout for Gold, finding and vetting restaurants for him to review.

Over lattes and sourdough conchas at Gusto Bread, a Mexican bakery that riffs on traditional pan dulce, Cabral, who is thirty-six, tall, and skinny, with the bearing of a former punk—his dark mop of hair is punctuated by a bleached shock on one side—described how he attracted a new audience in the early days of his tenure. “I would pluck out those neighborhood voices that have Instagram accounts, that document things the best that they could, and I started to actually hire them, even though they weren’t writers,”

converting their followers into loyal readers, he said. In 2024, when revenue slumped to the point that Cabral was forced to furlough his staff, a grassroots fund-raising campaign swiftly revived operations. When the raids began, *L.A. Taco* was uniquely poised to cover what quickly became a story of international interest, as an outlet respected by the communities that were being targeted.

When Cabral heard about the first high-profile *ICE* raid of the summer, at Ambiance Apparel, a clothing manufacturer in the city's fashion district, he struggled to get hold of his investigative reporter, Lexis-Olivier Ray. "He wasn't responding. I got really upset. I said, Dude, where the hell is this guy?" Cabral recalled. "It turns out that he was already there. And we got footage that I think broke us out of the norm and earned us a lot of street cred in a time when no one trusts the media, especially Latinos."

Cabral predicts that the repercussions of the raids will be dire for L.A.'s food ecosystem, "something along the lines of the pandemic and the fires." When we met, a federal judge had issued a temporary order blocking *ICE* agents from detaining individuals without reasonable suspicion that they'd violated immigration law. Still, it was hard to imagine that the Administration wouldn't resume its crusade. A single conversation with Cabral left me with a vivid sense of what the city stood to lose. When I asked him where to eat after our coffee, his answer verged on encyclopedic. Long Beach is known for Cambodian food, he explained, launching into a primer on the difference between Vietnamese and Cambodian fish sauce before offering several recommendations nearby. His ideas drifted further and further afield; after all, we were just a few miles from Orange County. I could get summer rolls at Brodard, in Fountain Valley, his go-to for impressing high-end chefs visiting from Mexico City, or stop by Mercado González, in Costa Mesa, an upscale Disneyland of a Mexican food hall. I could do it all and, even in traffic, be home by five o'clock. ♦



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

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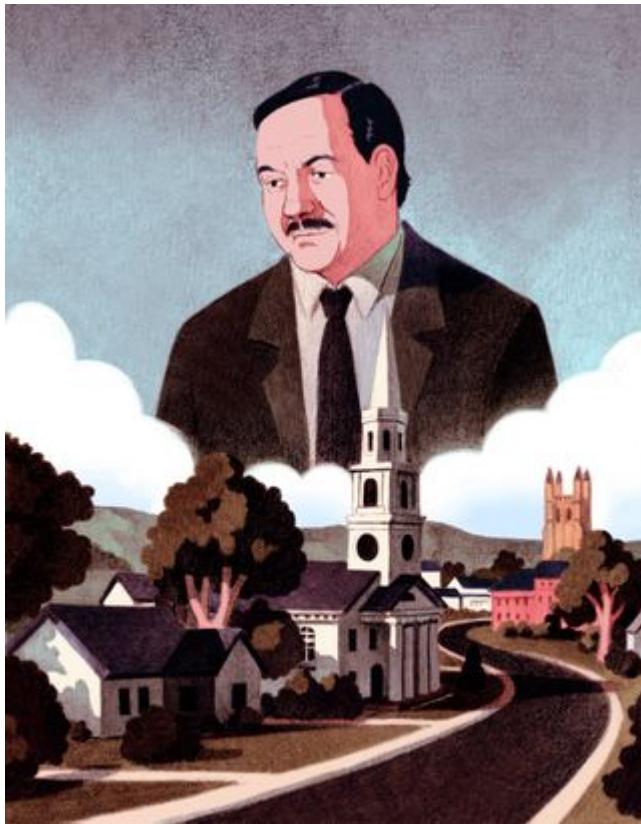
**The Theatre**

# Williams in Williamstown

Jeremy O. Harris, at his first Williamstown Theatre Festival as creative director, turns up the heat under rare works by the great Southern playwright.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

July 25, 2025



*The productions on view in the Berkshires include “Camino Real” and “Not About Nightingales.” Illustration by Antoine Maillard*

On the last day of the first weekend of the Williamstown Theatre Festival, a brief storm struck. We had gone into the '62 Center for Theatre and Dance, on Williams College's campus, for a matinée of “Camino Real”—a rare revival of Tennessee Williams's oddest play, from 1953—under a lid of hot gray clouds; we emerged into a fresh, cool summer's day. We might never

have known there had been a violent deluge if various phones in the theatre hadn't set off their *awooga awooga* klaxons at once.

But even sirens can't disrupt the bizarre logic of "Camino Real," which is itself a sustained series of alarms. Williams's title is deliberately confusing; we are at the "end of the Camino Real and the beginning of the *Camino Real*," a character says while reading a map, punningly carrying us away from the Spanish for "royal road" and into the uncharted mysteries of dream. The setting is a dusty town square, bordered on one side by the posh Siete Mares Hotel and on the other by the city's worst quarter, fronted by the Ritz Men Only, a dangerous flophouse. Heat-dazed tourists—are we in Mexico? Morocco? Spain?—are drawn to the seductive locals, who pick pockets and give the wrong change. When a visitor can't pay his keep, military police take aim with their pistols, and cackling street-sweepers whisk the body away.

This sort of exoticized nightmare plot might remind you of other works by Williams, such as his gothic thriller "Suddenly Last Summer," from 1958, in which a mob of Spanish children kill and partially consume an American sexual predator. The mood in "Camino Real," though, is far lighter—you can feel the playwright subsiding into the heat in a kind of feverish lassitude. The director Dustin Wills has co-designed a surreal set, full of shabby, sentimental sweetness, with the designer Kate Noll. At the play's outset, a painter sits on a bosun's chair high in the air, brushing clouds onto a mural of a pretty blue sky. The tourists are not real, either, but icons out of time: the lover Casanova, the ubiquitous Kilroy, Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. These characters' unifying quality is exhaustion. Pamela Anderson, a cultural icon herself, plays Alexandre Dumas's Marguerite, also known as la Dame aux Camélias, in a wilting stupor; Ato Blankson-Wood plays Lord Byron, who worries that he's lost his inspiration. Making art, *being* art—it all feels like too much to bear.

W71—the seventy-first season of the summer festival, which was founded a year after "Camino Real" premiered—is trying to assure us that the enterprise is anything but exhausted, even after enduring such troubles as the pandemic shutdown and a campaign against the use of intern labor. Now the "Slave Play" playwright Jeremy O. Harris has been named creative

director, and the event has adopted some of his glamour and bustle. In a curtain speech before “Spirit of the People,” Harris’s own hallucinatory play about tourists and locals in Mexico, he spoke about having difficulty writing after the success of “Slave Play” and credited the Berkshires for helping him finally complete a new work. “For me personally, this is a place to experiment and clarify,” he said, before thanking the festival for the opportunity to show a play that was still raw. He explained, with a catch in his voice, that it was not open for review—actors had been getting new text just days before we arrived. Harris’s programming also features a production of “Not About Nightingales,” directed by Robert O’Hara, and, improbably, an ice-dancing work, performed at a nearby rink, called “The Gig: After Moise and the World of Reason,” created by the director Will Davis and based on a Williams novel. The decision to focus on Williams at Williamstown stems, Harris has said, from their shared queer Southern sensibility, but in his speech before “Spirit of the People” he indicated another kinship, that of two playwrights locked in a kind of existential struggle with their own writing.

Harris has chosen from the wilder blooms in Williams’s garden: “Camino Real” is certainly unpruned, both thuddingly symbolic—Nicholas Alexander Chavez plays a boxer who literally has a heart of gold—and nakedly self-regarding. Byron complains to his host that he cannot compose, sounding much like a playwright who has been disoriented by his own success. “The luxuries of this place have made me soft. The metal point’s gone from my pen, there’s nothing left but the feather,” Byron says, before he walks through a portal, either to exaltation or to death.

Dream plays are difficult to execute—whimsy is easily crushed by clumsy handling. “Camino Real” looks like a million well-spent bucks, and, when Blankson-Wood or Chavez is speaking, it briefly sounds that way, too. As a creator of images, Wills gets sharper and more inventive as more people flood the stage. As a manager of actors, though, Wills does not always help his performers with humor (which requires precise timing) or, crucially, with volume. Anderson’s Marguerite, in particular, who carries much of the defeated romance of the play, often sounds like she’s whispering her lines to herself. Plenty of “Camino Real” is deliberately obscure, but its secrets still deserve to be heard.

“Not About Nightingales,” an early and long-unproduced work, from 1938, might well be the Williams play for the moment—it seems certain that we will see it again soon. Set inside an island prison, where the power-drunk Warden Whalen (Chris Messina) torments inmates with bad food and deranged punishments, “Nightingales” follows the story of Eva (Elizabeth Lail), his new secretary, who grows fascinated by the prison’s “model” inmate, Jim (William Jackson Harper). Jim has begun to liberate himself through deep reading, and everyone—even his nemesis in the cellblock, Butch (Brian Geraghty)—can feel the way his mind makes the prison walls bow and flex.

Whalen complains that his prisoners are ungrateful, even as he sends them to a torture chamber, a radiator-lined sweatbox that becomes the central metaphor in Williams’s play. Heat of all kinds is just turned up and up, to the point that Eva’s hysterical sexual appetite—she swoons for Whalen, and falls into an erotic clinch with Jim during a full-blown prison riot—can sometimes seem a little silly. Instead of turning the temperature down, O’Hara amplifies Williams’s homoerotic elements: Butch’s friendship with another prisoner now includes graphic onstage seduction, and nearly every male character reaches for another at some point, which, with only a few exceptions, makes the play seem both oddly horny and strangely honest.

As in “Camino Real,” the sheer size of the cast has left the festival in an awkward position; the calibre of the performances can be uneven. Geraghty is strong, and Harper is searing, but Messina, though he’s dutifully put on a mustache and a Southern accent, doesn’t summon the menace required for Whalen, which leaves the rather long play running on two wheels. Messina seems particularly hampered by Diggle’s set design, which consists of cell bunks against a kind of glittering black curtain, pierced by a single doorway that leads into a pulsing red light. The choice of abstraction isn’t always successful—“Kiss of the Spider Woman” done with garbage bags, I thought briefly—and Messina isn’t the only actor who seems most at ease when he can be confined by something real, like a desk, or a bed.

Indeed, Williams himself seems freer here than he does in “Camino Real,” hemmed in by such real things as the lives of these men, the clanking radiators they hear, the list of foods they eat. The prison is hell, but it’s also

a good container for the particular lyrical shapes that Williams loves. At one point, Jim tears a page out of a book of Keats and throws it across the room—he hates the poem “Ode to a Nightingale,” he says to Eva, because if *he* had the freedom to write he wouldn’t waste it. Jim knows there are better things to describe than birds. ♦



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

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# Poems

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By Kwame Dawes | “In Kingston after the storm, the yard / cools, the grass slippery underfoot,  
/ leaves dripping—the air heavy with fatigue.”

- **“Preservation”**

By Sylvie Baumgartel | “The Dissected Graces in Florence.”

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[Poems](#)

# Bob Marley, Live, 1980

By [Kwame Dawes](#)

July 28, 2025

In Kingston after the storm, the yard  
cools, the grass slippery underfoot,  
leaves dripping—the air heavy with fatigue.  
I move to the low branch of the coolie plum tree,  
straddle it and wait for the wind to clear  
the growing anticipation of gloom.  
And there he is, sculpted pale wood  
gleaming with cold sweat, stern prophecy  
in each inflection, the dark root tendrils  
mangrove growing out and into soil  
you know now, what death looks like,  
the economy of movement, the soul giving  
as if straining against some terror lurking  
the voice turning his syntax into a final plea,  
*I remember, I remember, I remember when.*  
They could not have known, they who rolled  
under the incense of his sound, could not  
have known what even he did not truly know  
every strained word a holy benediction.  
Tonight, I watch again and again, the garish  
light, the stoic faces of the three women  
their voices his buoy, his craft across the unsteady  
waters—even they did not know themselves  
to be women at the tomb, or, later,  
ancestresses in the open field, looking back,  
and in this we understand the impossibility  
of grace—the squalor, the decay

the body's rot, and still the light, the light.  
I say here that it is not music, not so ordinary;  
it is a sacrament, it remains a sacrament  
and this is all that must be said.

*Kwame Dawes*, a 2019 Windham-Campbell Prize winner, teaches English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His latest book, co-authored with John Kinsella, is “unHistory.”

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[Poems](#)

# Preservation

By [Sylvie Baumgartel](#)

July 28, 2025

The Dissected Graces in Florence.  
Their torsos are sliced open  
Revealing their livers &  
Hearts & kidneys.  
Intestines spill out of their perfectly  
Made glowing wax skin.

Their faces are peaceful;  
They wear pearls;  
They lie on beds of silk.

They made these wax girls to  
Teach us about God.  
The eighteenth-century  
Scientists declared that  
*The body is the mind of God.*  
The insides of the women show the  
Divine power of healing.  
*Guts are holy.*

In Antonello da Messina's Crucifixion  
Painting, I am the one on the right.  
I am hanging like that,  
My back is arched like that,  
I am facing the real God,  
I am unknown and will be forgotten,  
But I am there, too, and my body is  
Open to all the pain of life.

He ties me to the bed

& leaves me there.

I am revealed.

This is my preservation.

*Sylvie Baumgartel* is the author of two collections of poetry, “[Pink](#)” and “[Song of Songs](#).”

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

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

Drawings from the August 4, 2025 magazine.

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# Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Monday, July 28, 2025](#)**

By Kameron Austin Collins | A challenging puzzle.

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[\*\*Crossword\*\*](#)

# The Crossword: Monday, July 28, 2025

*A challenging puzzle.*



By [\*\*Kameron Austin Collins\*\*](#)

July 28, 2025



[\*\*Kameron Austin Collins\*\*](#) is a film critic who has written for Rolling Stone and Vanity Fair. His puzzles have appeared in the New York Times and the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.

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