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- **The Best-Selling Novelist Kaveh Akbar Leans Into His Poetic Roots**

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[Goings On](#)

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January 31, 2025

[Richard Brody](#)

Staff writer

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

Frederick Wiseman has redefined the art of nonfiction filmmaking in a directorial career, begun in 1967, that includes forty-six documentaries to date. Forty of them (thirty-three in new restorations) are featured in “**Frederick Wiseman: An American Institution**,” a retrospective of his work that runs Jan. 31–March 5 at Film at Lincoln Center. What’s amazing about Wiseman’s movies, with their rigorous cinematic analyses of complex environments, is that anyone ever let him in to make them. Almost all of his films are centered not on individuals or groups but on institutions, ranging from the ultra-local (“Hospital,” “High School”) and the large-scale (“Canal Zone,” “Aspen”) to the abstract (“Welfare,” “Public Housing”). They involve filming behind closed doors, in sensitive situations, to witness the intricate negotiations and bitter confrontations of civic life; yet Wiseman does get in, and his method (usually involving a crew of three that includes a cinematographer and an assistant) is so immersive that the participants appear to work and speak as if they weren’t being recorded.



“Missile,” from 1987.

Photograph courtesy Zipporah Films

Wiseman’s overarching subject is power. A former law-school professor, Wiseman discerns the force of law—which is to say, the implicit or explicit threat of violence—at work in daily life. That’s why an unofficial trilogy of life-and-death stories, featuring “Law and Order” (1969), “Missile” (1987), and “Near Death” (1989), has a special place in his œuvre: in the face of his subjects’ ultimate stakes, his own sense of concentration is at its peak. In “Law and Order,” Wiseman embeds with the police department in Kansas City, Missouri, and has extraordinary access to discussions and interrogations in the station house; travelling in police cars, he follows officers to crime scenes. The movie’s shocking centerpiece involves two white plainclothesmen who capture a Black woman who’s suspected of prostitution. Though she offers no resistance, an officer puts her in a chokehold, threatens to kill her, and then denies he was choking her at all. The horrifying brutality is amplified by the impunity with which the officer flaunts it—and denies it—on camera.

In “Missile,” Wiseman films at an Air Force base in California where officers are trained to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles—in other words, to fire nuclear weapons in a likely apocalyptic act of war. The training is as much psychological as technical, as much moral as practical; the trainees are made aware of the grave implications of their work, yet life on the base is eerily chipper, complete with picnics and sports. The heart of the movie is its view of the immensely complicated systems, with codes and keys and a repertory of precise gestures, that a launch requires—a chillingly abstract and impersonal vision of the end of the world.

“Near Death” may well be Wiseman’s supreme masterwork; running nearly six monumental hours, it’s set in the intensive-care unit of Boston’s Beth Israel Hospital, where patients and their families confront end-of-life decisions under great pressure. Wiseman films doctors and nurses delivering both care and counsel, and speaking candidly among themselves, in virtuosically extended sequences, about their cases’ scientific and emotional demands and the elaborate protocols, both legal and medical, for unforgiving quandaries.



About Town

Dance

Urban Bush Women’s “Scat!... The Complex Lives of Al & Dot, Dot & Al Zollar,” a valedictory work by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, who in 2019 stepped down as artistic director of the company she founded decades ago, treats the lives and unfulfilled dreams of her parents as myth. Shaped like the revues of her childhood, it jumps around in time, sampling Black vernacular steps to a live period-inspired jazz score by Craig Harris.—[Brian Seibert](#) (PAC NYC; Feb. 5-8.)

Classical

Lunar New Year officially fell on Jan. 29, and the **New York Philharmonic** rings in the Year of the Snake in its usual festive manner, with a vibrant gala and a concert. Conducted by Tianyi Lu, the program features Li Huanzhi’s “Spring Festival Overture,” inspired by music from the Shanbei region of China; a selection from Alfredo Casella’s “La donna serpente,” a hypnotic work drawing from the same fantastical fable that brought about Wagner’s “Die Feen”; Chen Yi’s “Chinese Folk Dance Suite,” a work in three movements, each of which emulates a different traditional dance; and the prologue from the opera “Alice in Wonderland” ’s “A Mad Tea-Party,”

composed by Unsuk Chin. The concert ends with the crowd-pleasing, yet eyebrow-raising choice of “Carmen”—one can only hope that the year ahead is not so tragic.—[Jane Bua](#) (*David Geffen Hall; Feb. 11.*)

Art



“*Low Tide*,” 2023.

Photograph by Mary Mattingly / Courtesy Robert Mann Gallery

Mary Mattingly’s photographs of moonlit gardens turn the Robert Mann gallery into a hallucinatory hothouse. Vivid and wild with masses of real, handmade, and computer-generated flowers, Mattingly’s compact landscapes are at once otherworldly—sci-fi at its most seductive—and as familiar as natural-history dioramas. But they’re not just pretty pictures. The artist has long been known for work (including site-specific sculpture) that takes on environmental issues with engaging subtlety. Here, the gardens often appear to be sinking or submerged as rising seas threaten to turn earthly Edens into swampland. In one image, translucent, jewel-like jellyfish caps float like a squadron of U.F.O.s above a darkened field of flowers, invaders from our own mutating planet.—[Vince Aletti](#) (*Robert Mann; through Feb. 22.*)

Neo Soul

The multihyphenate **Dua Saleh**, a Sudanese American nonbinary Muslim artist raised in Minnesota, navigates the nuances of intersectionality as an avant-pop musician, actor, activist, and poet. Fittingly, Saleh's shapeshifting, spellbinding music unpacks the range of all of those descriptors. Since meeting Psymun, the producer at the center of a progressive local scene bending hip-hop and R. & B., Saleh's songs have grown looser and more unbound. After releasing three EPs—the spooky neo soul of “Nūr” (2019), the distorted, electronic “ROSETTA” (2020), and the confident, pulsing, and diasporic breakthrough “Crossover” (2021)—that successfully mapped out the breadth of their sound, Saleh's début album, “I SHOULD CALL THEM,” takes an even more ambitious, conceptual turn, imagining romantic dissolution on the fringes of an apocalypse.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#)* (Bowery Ballroom; Feb. 7.)

Dance



Camille A. Brown.

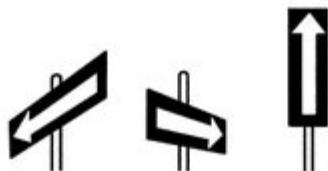
Photograph by Whitney Browne

“I Am,” performed by **Camille A. Brown & Dancers**, takes its title from an episode of HBO’s “Lovecraft Country,” in which a character travels through multiple dimensions to find herself. In Brown’s work, the dancers—who include the choreographer, queen of Broadway and opera—already know

who they are. To a live score that incorporates nineties-era hip-hop and R. & B., gospel jams, and original compositions, they don't perform so much as just be themselves, in glorious dance.—B.S. (*Joyce Theatre*; Feb. 5-9.)

Movies

In a career that began in 1988, Rob Tregenza has made only five features and—devising an original style based on extended takes and intricate camera movements—won major acclaim, albeit below the industry's radar. His latest film, “**The Fishing Place**,” opens new dimensions in his work and in the modern cinema. It’s set in a Norwegian village under German occupation during the Second World War. There, a recently arrived priest comes under an S.S. officer’s suspicion; a housekeeper, secretly meeting with the officer, is sent to spy on the clergyman. Sketching the townspeople’s high-stakes personal and political relationships, Tregenza reveals a wide and troubling web of conflicting principles and ambiguous loyalties; in a spectacular concluding flourish that’s too good to spoil, he thrusts historical drama into the present tense.—Richard Brody (MOMA; opens Feb. 6.)



Pick Three

The staff writer [Michael Schulman](#) on new works of cultural archeology.



Illustration by Rozalina Burkova

1. The documentary-theatre troupe the Civilians does inventive things with found material. Its latest show is **“Radio Downtown: Radical ’70s Artists Live on Air”** (at 59E59, through Feb. 9). Conceived and directed by Steve Cosson, the piece draws from archival WNYC interviews with Kenneth Anger, Yvonne Rainer, and other avant-garde luminaries, reënacted by a cast of five. (The original audio is piped into their ears as they speak.) It’s a kooky, loving tribute to a bygone age of New York intellectualism, and to the joys of pretentiousness.
2. Ira Madison III co-hosts (with Louis Virtel) the waggish pop-culture podcast “Keep It,” one of my weekly appointment listens. Madison has a new book of essays, **“Pure Innocent Fun”**: part memoir of growing up Black, gay, and TV-obsessed in Milwaukee, in the nineteen-nineties and two-thousands; part deconstruction of such elder-millennial preoccupations as “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air,” “Daria,” “Survivor,” and Oprah Winfrey’s public weight-loss saga.
3. The Criterion Channel’s new series **“Cast Against Type: Heroes as Villains”** features Golden Age stars in roles that subvert their sunny personae. Selections include “Don’t Bother to Knock” (1952), starring Marilyn Monroe as a troubled babysitter who causes havoc when she’s left

to look after a little girl; “The Boston Strangler” (1968), with Tony Curtis as the serial killer; and the eerily timely Elia Kazan film “A Face in the Crowd” (1957), starring Andy Griffith as a charming Everyman whose overnight radio fame turns him into a mad demagogue.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [The headlines that matter](#)
 - [Physicist-perfected cacio e pepe](#)
 - [Larry Fink’s new photograph collection](#)
-

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[Book Currents](#)

The Best-Selling Novelist Kaveh Akbar Leans Into His Poetic Roots

With the dawn of a ceasefire in Gaza, the writer reflects on collections by Palestinian poets that don't lose sight of love and wonder in the face of exile and destruction.

January 29, 2025

Illustration by Chantal Jahchan

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

Kaveh Akbar may be best known for his [début novel](#), “[Martyr!](#)” (a finalist for the National Book Award), but he began his career as a poet. Recently, he joined us to recommend four collections by Palestinian writers, each of which grapples with the status of being Palestinian in the world—but also with timeless themes such as love, sex, motherhood, and nature. His remarks have been edited and condensed.

Something About Living

by Lena Khalaf Tuffaha

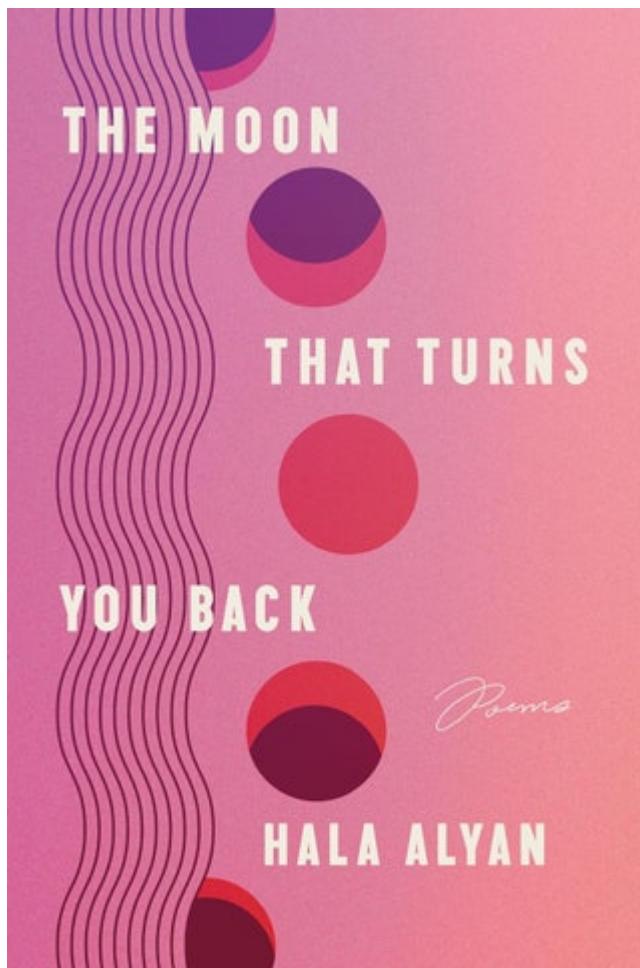


[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

This might be my most gifted book of 2024. I think that a lot of writing by writers who belong to marginalized communities is read first for its social utility, and only secondly for its formal vision, but this is such a remarkable book for its relationship to received forms and its syntactical agility. Khalaf Tuffaha writes about her children and her husband and her love. There's a moment in it where she says, "I have no idea what hope is, but our people have taught me a million ways to love," and that love feels like the center of the atom here.

The Moon That Turns You Back

by Hala Alyan

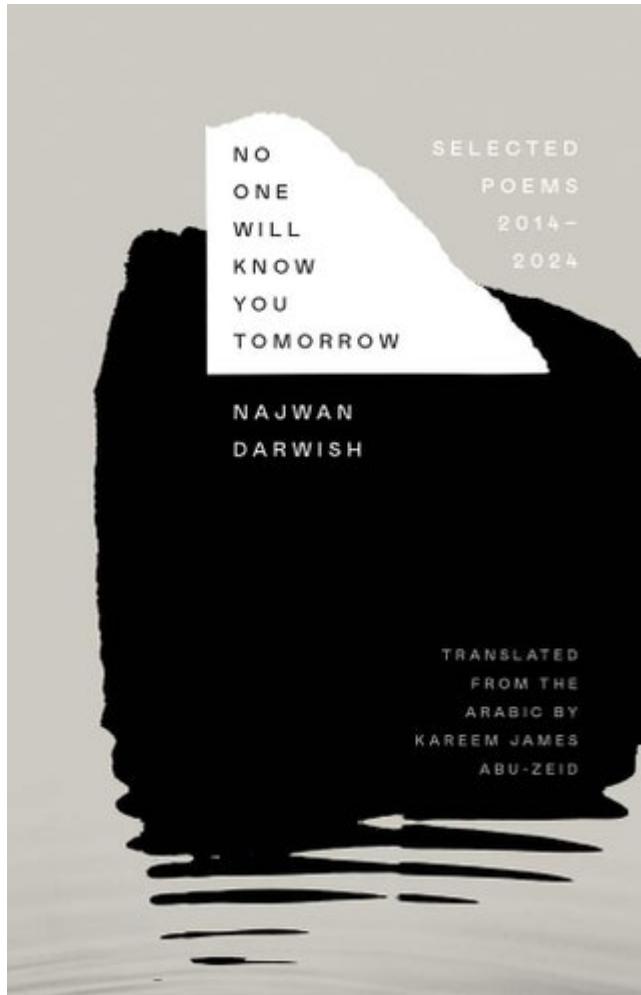


[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

Hala is a clinical psychologist—honestly, I always find it obnoxious when people are good at more than one thing. [Laughs.] Hala is a Palestinian American writer, and the book addresses that, but it also orbits many other places and ideas. This is a book that deals with fertility treatments and the feelings associated with desiring a child but not being able to conceive one. It's a book about addiction—there's a beautiful poem that I love, called "[Relapse Dream Ending with My Grandmother's Hands](#)," which is just extraordinary. The book feels various in the way that living feels various—it's really faithful to the convergence of different things in your brain in a way that I find very moving.

No One Will Know You Tomorrow

by Najwan Darwish



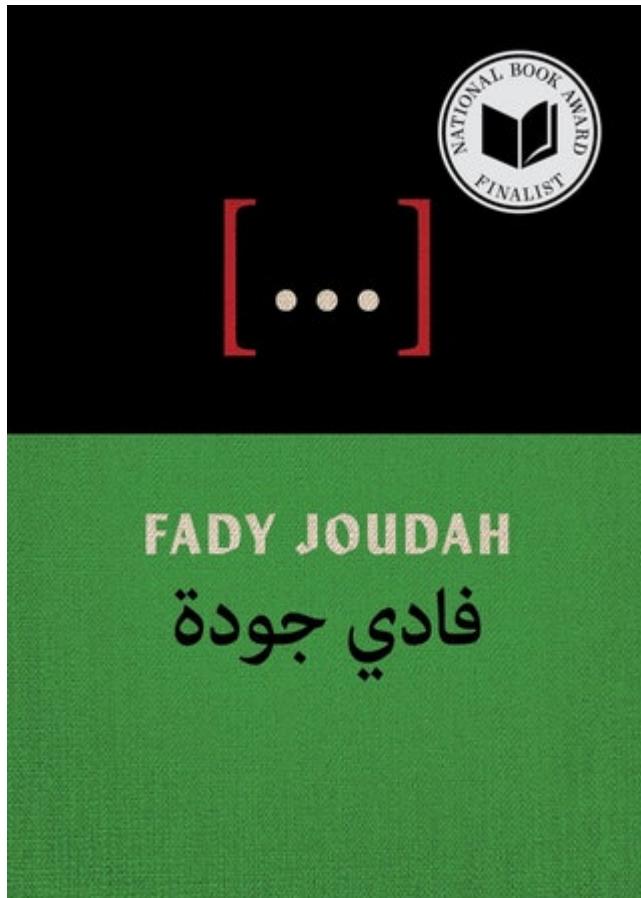
[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

Darwish is a really important Palestinian poet, editor, and journalist, and this book is a selection of the past decade of his poetry. That means that it travels the gamut. There are storytelling poems, where he creates myths and little miniature fables, almost like snow globes that you can shake and hold up to the light. There are dream visions about a homeland from which he has long been exiled. There are also love poems.

The translator, Kareem James Abu-Zeid, has done an incredible job. The lines feel idiomatic—sometimes in translations there's a kind of starchiness or stiffness to the language, but this feels utterly natural. One of my favorite moments in it reads, “this earth: the remains of strangers naturalized by death.” That idea, “naturalized by death”—it just feels crystalline and irreducible, and I’m also struck by how it implies the existence of a nationhood to which we can all belong, where the only border is mortality.

[...]

by Fady Joudah



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

A lot can be said about the title of this book, which, I think, points to the ongoing quality of the occupation of Palestine and the world's ambivalence about it. As I was reading about the ceasefire, I remembered a long poem of his called "Dedication," which comes toward the end of the book. And it runs, in part:

To those who will be killed on the last day of the war. To those who will be killed on the first day after the war ends. To those who succumb in the humanitarian window of horror. An hour before the pause, a minute after.

One of the things that I love about “[...]” is its rage, which feels like it’s born of seeing harm clearly. Fady is a physician who has done a lot of work with Doctors Without Borders, both in Palestine and elsewhere, and has witnessed the direct and indirect damage of war up close. The fact that his book doesn’t forget the body also means that the poet himself is embodied, experiencing desire, experiencing sensuality. I find that really affecting, too, because it’s a way of saying there are stakes. The people you read about become more than abstract casualty statistics. These are people like me, whose hearts could fit in my chest, whose eyes could fit in my eye sockets, who were desirous of a lover’s touch.

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By Benjamin Wallace-Wells | Was Trump just “weaving” when he ranted about diversity initiatives after a horrific plane crash, or getting back on message after a week of executive overreach?

- **George Hamilton Is Palm Beach’s It Boy, Again**

By Bob Morris | Having starred opposite Lana Turner and Olivia de Havilland and done a stint as Colonel Sanders, the ultra-tan movie idol returns to the land of Mar-a-Lago.

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[Comment](#)

Donald Trump's Anti-Woke Wrecking Ball

Was Trump just “weaving” when he ranted about diversity initiatives after a horrific plane crash, or getting back on message after a week of executive overreach?

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)

February 2, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

On the Wednesday evening of a Washington week defined by a blitzkrieg of executive orders, vituperative confirmation hearings for [Robert F. Kennedy](#),

[Jr.](#), [Kash Patel](#), and [Tulsi Gabbard](#), and an effort by the new President to suspend much of the federal budget, an American Airlines jet approaching Washington, D.C., from Wichita [collided](#) with an Army Black Hawk helicopter near Reagan National Airport. Everyone on board both aircraft was killed, sixty-seven people in total, some of them young ice-skaters. The next day, [President Trump](#) called a press conference. He began by expressing his condolences and described the “icy, icy Potomac—it was a cold, cold night, cold water.” He then said, “We do not know what led to this crash,” but, he added, “we have very strong opinions and ideas, and I think we’ll probably state those opinions now.”

That statement could be a motto for this Administration, but what Trump meant in this case was that diversity initiatives at the Federal Aviation Administration had somehow caused the calamity. It is essential, Trump said, that air-traffic controllers be hired for their “intellect, talent—the word ‘talent,’ ” but, instead, the Democrats “came out with a directive: too white.” (He also complained about [Pete Buttigieg](#)—Joe Biden’s Transportation Secretary and an occasional liberal antagonist on Fox News, who is reportedly considering a run for the U.S. Senate in Michigan—claiming, “He’s just got a good line of bullshit.”) Apparently quoting old reports in the *New York Post* and from Fox News, Trump listed conditions that he implied the F.A.A. had been giving preference to in its hiring practices—including “severe intellectual disability,” “psychiatric disability,” and “dwarfism.”

Trump offered no evidence that [diversity](#) had anything to do with the crash and, at other points, seemed to place the blame for it on the pilot of the Black Hawk. (Helicopters have “the ability to go up or down,” Trump noted.) When a reporter asked him if he had any proof that diversity hiring was responsible for the deaths, the President of the United States pursed his lips and said, “It just could have been.”

As recognizably Trump as these crude ramblings were—in their sheer self-absorption in the midst of a tragedy, and in their reflexive racial insinuations—they matched the spirit of the moment. Throughout the government, new appointees have been touting their reversals of diversity standards—the signal feature of what has been a rapid two-week effort to

remake the preëxisting bureaucracy with an America First agenda. Sometimes the appointees have simply swapped in preferences for their favored groups: an order issued by Sean Duffy, the new Secretary of Transportation—who is a former congressman and reality-TV star and the father of nine—requires his agency to give preference in the awarding of contracts to communities with high marriage and birth rates; an order banning D.E.I. initiatives in the military requires the service academies to “teach that America and its founding documents remain the most powerful force for good in human history.”

In other instances, there has been a more general anti-idealism: a stop-work order issued by the Administration suspended the *pepfar* program, which supplies H.I.V. medication, largely in sub-Saharan Africa, and has saved an estimated twenty-six million lives. Foreign aid, the order argues, is “not aligned with American interests and in many cases antithetical to American values.”

The new Administration has been moving fast and operating almost exclusively by executive order—Trump seems largely uninterested in Congress, and his Inaugural Address offered barely any legislative agenda. (Congressional Republicans, of course, remain highly invested in Trump; they held a retreat last week at his golf club in Doral, Florida, where the President’s name had been scorched onto the hamburger buns.) When, on Monday, Trump’s Office of Management and Budget published a memo ordering federal agencies to “identify and review all Federal financial assistance programs and supporting activities” to be sure that they reflected “administration priorities” and not “wokeness,” it fell to the Democrats to point out that a President has no authority to suspend legally authorized congressional spending. Senator Jeff Merkley, of Oregon, called the suspension a “constitutional crisis,” and, if it wasn’t obviously that, it also wasn’t obviously not that.

By the O.M.B.’s own accounting, some three trillion dollars of the government’s ten-trillion-dollar annual expenditures was subject to the freeze—seemingly affecting programs such as Meals on Wheels and Head Start and even scientific research—and the White House appeared a little fuzzy as to where the list stopped. Trump’s new press secretary, Karoline

Leavitt, was asked whether the seventy-two million Americans who rely on [Medicaid](#) were guaranteed their health insurance. Across the country, portals were down. “I’ll check back on that and get back to you,” she said. Perhaps that was a step too far. A federal judge issued an order pausing the freeze, and the next day the O.M.B. put out a very brief update rescinding the memo—but, Leavitt insisted, not the policy.

Was Trump just “weaving” when he used a press conference following a horrific plane crash to rant about diversity initiatives, or was he getting his Administration back on an anti-woke message, after overreaching in withholding federal funds? The smart money is on the latter. For all the glee and the diligence with which its staffers have tried to upend the liberal regime, they haven’t bothered to replace it with anything beyond a sour anti-principle. An agenda that casts doubt even momentarily on a basic social program like Medicaid can’t honestly be said to be either populist or “America First”; and Trump’s vows to install a government based on merit were undermined by his roster of clearly unqualified nominees. The operating credo at the outset of the Trump Administration has a transactional, Tammany Hall logic: there is no rule except power.

At Thursday’s press conference, after musing about the “high standard” he’d maintained when hiring air-traffic controllers in his first term, Trump said, “There are things where you have to go by brainpower, you have to go by psychological quality, and psychological quality is a very important element of it.” For air-traffic controllers and Presidents both. ♦



[Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#) began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2015. He writes about American politics and society.

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[Palm Beach Postcard](#)

George Hamilton Is Palm Beach's It Boy, Again

Having starred opposite Lana Turner and Olivia de Havilland and done a stint as Colonel Sanders, the ultra-tan movie idol returns to the land of Mar-a-Lago.

By [Bob Morris](#)

February 3, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

When George Hamilton moved back to Palm Beach, last year, friends in high places suggested that he run for mayor. They thought that the suave,

impeccably dressed actor, who had spent his teen-age years learning to tan, wear loafers without socks, and act in plays at Palm Beach High School, embodied the city. “I’d be happy to be mayor if I didn’t have to get up and do anything,” Hamilton said the other day, over lunch at Swifty’s, the restaurant in the historic (and very pink) Colony Hotel. “Maybe I should ask if I can be honorary mayor instead.”

Or at least a mediator. In recent months, tensions have been running high on this multibillion-dollar sandbar, which is once again the off-site headquarters of the President. Residents are contending, again, with the noise of surveillance helicopters and with the regular closing of South Ocean Boulevard, the artery that passes Mar-a-Lago. “The security is beyond, and the people who own near him are being driven crazy,” Hamilton said, from behind a plate of salmon. “But he loves having his own personal army. It’s human nature.”

A natural diplomat, Hamilton, who is eighty-five, sees no point in talking politics. “Just don’t get into it,” he said. “Why pull on Superman’s cape?” But he did mention that the portrait of Donald Trump that hangs in Mar-a-Lago—the one of him in a white tennis sweater—is by the same artist who painted a portrait of Hamilton that used to hang in his mansion in Beverly Hills. He sold the place, all thirty-nine rooms of it, in 1987, when his career was waning and his marriage to Alana Stewart was long over. “My portrait was bigger than his,” Hamilton said with a smile, his white teeth and white hair gleaming against his ascot and deep tan.

He was calling Palm Beach a stage “for old money, new money, and no money” when two women of a certain age approached and apologized for interrupting. One, wearing a bejewelled cardigan, said, “My goodness—you are so handsome, you have beautiful hair, and your facial structure is still gorgeous!”

“Keep doing whatever you’re doing,” her friend, who was wrapped in a leopard-print scarf, added.

Hamilton was welcoming; he appreciates the adulation. He knows that he never had a career like Jack Nicholson’s or Robert De Niro’s. He made a few big movies, one, “Home from the Hill” (1960), directed by Vincente

Minnelli; another, “Light in the Piazza” (1962), with Yvette Mimieux and Olivia de Havilland. “Where the Boys Are” (also 1960), in which he played opposite Dolores Hart, who left the business to become a nun (“Not my fault”), made him a heartthrob. But the studio actor and It Boy (he dated Lynda Bird Johnson and recorded a song by Burt Bacharach for a fangirl audience) had to scramble to stay relevant. He pushed to play Hank Williams and Evel Knievel, and then self-produced two camp comedies, playing Zorro and a disco Dracula in Manhattan. He also played Colonel Sanders in Kentucky Fried Chicken ads and danced with the stars.

But he’d rather talk about Palm Beach. “I know the underlying story here,” he said. “I saw the end of an era when the old-money lockjawed gentry dealt with new money like quicksand under them.” His mother, Anne (Teeny) Stevens Potter Hamilton Hunt Spalding, was a reigning socialite, and his half brother, William, a prominent decorator. They taught young George how to behave, and how to dress so as to be invited everywhere, including to the Bath & Tennis Club, whose cabanas, he said, are “far more modest than Mar-a-Lago’s, next door.”

On his way out of Swifty’s, Hamilton admired a photograph of Wallis Simpson and the Duke of Windsor (Colony regulars) and said that nobody dressed better, except Fred Astaire. Clothes, the more bespoke the better, are another favorite topic. (He was in a marine-blue hopsack double-breasted blazer by Paolo Martorano, of New York.) “The problem is that people don’t give me a discount, because they think I’m rich and to the manor born,” he said. “So they charge me more.” A shop he likes, Trillion, on Worth Avenue, is stocked with Italian blazers and crew-neck sweaters in go-to-hell colors.

On a quick tour of town, he gazed up at the old Paramount marquee (the theatre later became a church) where “Light in the Piazza” had a glitzy première in 1962. He stopped at Green’s Pharmacy, to look at the lunch counter where he’d hung out in his youth. He noted the display of Trump mints that promised to “Make Your Breath Great Again” near the register, and remembered the President telling Larry King, on TV, that his breath was bad. He asked Siri for the address of the old Kennedy estate, and recalled swimming in a pool there with a date one night, and catching a

young J.F.K. doing the same. “Years later, when he saw me at events or at the White House, he would make a zip-your-lip signal,” Hamilton said. “That’s better than a breath mint.”

He had to get home to dress for a dinner at Wilbur Ross’s house. Fortunately, it was Inauguration week, and South Ocean Boulevard was open. Outside Mar-a-Lago, a supersized American flag flapped at full mast —its former height of eighty feet (almost twice as tall as city regulations allow) had been the cause of a lawsuit, now settled. “Betsy Ross would have been working overtime on steroids to make it,” he said. ♦

Bob Morris first contributed to the magazine in 1995. His books include “[Assisted Loving: True Tales of Double Dating with My Dad](#)” and “[Bobby Wonderful](#).”

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Dept. of Reality

The Best Fake Books—Made Real

At the Grolier Club, in midtown, a collection of imaginary volumes—the play within “Hamlet,” Hemingway’s lost first novel—are bound, scuffed, and shelved.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

February 3, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

Many books exist, but many more don’t. Why does a book come about? There’s ego, politics, the human condition, man’s yearning for understanding. Books fail to exist for the same reasons. Authors destroy books because of ego. Emperors destroy them because of politics. Books

get lost because of misunderstandings: Hemingway's partially completed first novel vanished after he asked his wife to meet him in Lausanne with the manuscript. She assumed that he wanted the carbon copies, too, and threw everything in a suitcase, which got stolen from a train. Unwritten books also result from the human condition, specifically from its tendency toward inertia: no one ever got around to writing them. Sometimes books go extinct because of the short shelf life of papyrus.

For fifteen years, Reid Byers, a former systems designer at I.B.M., has been collecting books that don't exist. Byers used to amuse himself by coming up with fake books to put on fake shelves that disguised a hidden door in his home library. (This pastime is not as unusual as you might think; Dickens's library contained "On the Horse," by Lady Godiva, and "Cats' Lives (Vol IX).") Byers explained, "The first one I picked was Aristotle's Poetics—Volume II," which dealt with comedy, and once actually existed. He made a book cover as an homage, or a parody. "I thought it was really funny," he said. "I just couldn't stop."

Byers's collection, comprising a hundred and fourteen (fake) books, is currently on display at the Grolier Club, in midtown, along with an accompanying (real) book, written by Byers. Both are called "Imaginary Books." It's an impressive collection—Sappho, Shakespeare, Woolf, Poe, Le Guin. Byers was in town, from Portland, Maine. He sat in an armchair in the club's library, wearing a brown tweed blazer over a green sweater, and offered a tour.

The collection consists of physical copies designed by Byers. "I have what I call the five-second rule," he said. "They have to fool an expert for five seconds and a civilian indefinitely." He didn't invent any books. All formerly existed, were never finished, or were found within other works, such as the play in "Hamlet," which Byers has in his collection. First stop: Homer's third epic, the Margites. "It's about this bonehead who keeps getting in trouble," Byers said. "He's Lucille Ball." Byers's version had a paper dust jacket, torn at the corners. In a vitrine on the opposite wall was a comedy by Karl Marx ("Not Groucho!"), who is believed to have later burned it. Byers paused in front of another book. "This is one of my favorites: 'Shakespeare in Baby Talk,'" he said—envisioned, but never

completed, by Raymond Chandler. “The best play in it is ‘As Ums Wikes It.’ ” In another room was a copy of the play “The Lady Who Loved Lightning,” by Clare Quilty, a dramatist character in the memoirs of Humbert Humbert, which itself makes up most of “Lolita”—a play within a book within a book. “But, because Humbert is an unreliable narrator, Quilty may not exist at all,” Byers said. “And if that is true, then this is, I think, the unique occurrence of an imaginary book written by a character who does not exist even in the book of origin, and so is doubly imaginary.” (In Stanley Kubrick’s “Lolita”—a film of the book about the book that contains the play—Quilty does exist, and is played by Peter Sellers.)

Byers created his fake books by modifying actual ones. He enlisted helpers, including two bookbinders, a letterpresser, and a specialty calligrapher. “Some of it’s just, you know, careful Photoshopping,” he said. To impart a weathered look, he continued, “we just kicked them around on the floor.”



“The real crime is not using coasters on that mid-century credenza.”
Cartoon by Juan Astasio

He sourced several old specimens, secondhand, from the library of a nunnery. He used one for “On the Usefulness of Long Codpieces,” from Rabelais’s “Gargantua and Pantagruel.” He also procured a codpiece for display from a maker in California. “That’s her full-time job,” Byers said. “She’d never made a fourteen-inch one before.”

The tour continued: Sylvia Plath's last novel, unfinished when she died. Byron's memoirs, burned after his death. What exists of Coleridge's masterpiece "Kubla Kahn," which came to him all at once—"He was completely stoned," Byers said—and was written in a trance that was ruined when someone knocked on his door.

Byers, who is seventy-seven, owns many real books, too. He wrote a book on private libraries. Before that, he spent time as a Presbyterian minister, a choir director, a TV announcer, and a welder. "Everything I've done had something to do with books," he said. "Except welding." For a while, he lived across the street from Toni Morrison, in Princeton. His memoir, which does not exist, might have described his time with the Navy in Vietnam, where he wrote his first book. "It was about life on a ship," he said. "It was not a great book." Which imaginary work does he most want to read? "Sappho," he said. "Some things just break your heart because they aren't real."

Byers's collection used to include a first edition of "Ghost Book," by the underground Misty Poets of China. "Now, that's an interesting book," Byers said. To avoid censorship, the poets published it using a mimeograph machine and wallpaper paste. "They went out one night and wallpapered Beijing with the book. The first edition was destroyed by the rain or the authorities and doesn't exist . . . I thought. And then I found that one of the poets had kept a mimeographed copy." What did Byers do with his own? "I destroyed it," he said. ♦

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

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[Crystal Ball Dept.](#)

Trend Alert! Raw Milk, Luxe Travel, and Knitting

A consultant, an artist, a model, and a former staffer to the Surgeon General walk into a wine bar to decide what's in and what's out.

By [André Wheeler](#)

February 3, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

On a recent Thursday afternoon, some core personnel of the Office of Applied Strategy, a newish consulting firm, met at Casetta, a wine bar on the Lower East Side, to do some trend forecasting. In attendance were Tony Wang, a former McKinsey analyst; Chris Gayomali, a former *GQ* editor; Joyce Matos, who is undertaking a Ph.D. in media at Brown; Chloé

Desaulles, a computational artist; Helen Yin Chen, a former staffer in the office of Biden’s Surgeon General; and Victoria Massey, a fashion model. Coats were shed, and summaries of holiday travels and bits of media gossip were shared as the group placed orders for herbal teas, double cappuccinos, and affogatos. Matos, who knitted throughout the meeting, worried aloud that her handshake was too stiff. Chen agreed: “A little bit like a politician’s.”

They jumped right in. Raw milk and luxury fashion: out. Luxury travel and Ozempic: in. Wang, the founder of the firm, was all in black. (He used to live in Berlin.) He tapped his iPhone, pulling up his notes. “I was telling Joyce that I had a crazy, unhinged epiphany,” he said. The firm issues white papers, which it calls Dossiers, and he said that he wanted the next one—its second—to focus on wellness and work: “I was, like, ‘Oh, it would be cool if we did a global survey, and we understood what people’s supplementation, self-enhancement, and wellness protocols are.’ ” He went on, “What if we made a version of *feng you jing*”—a traditional Chinese medicinal oil—“and we just called it a ‘productivity popper’? Because it’s basically a popper.” They would market it to office workers.

“Oh, ‘popper’ is smart,” Gayomali, who had on a chain necklace and baggy clothes, and now works for the fashion Web site Ssense, said.

Chen, who wore a chunky sweater, mused on an effect of the Ozempic craze. “A lot of people are looking toward very toned bodies,” she said. “Because it’s a sign that you actually have the *time* to work out.”

The conversation veered to live-stream sellers hawking products online. Gayomali said, “There’s going to be so much shit that’s, like, red-light-slash-sauna-blanket-slash-moving-it-like-a-treadmill-thing at the same time. Even the drinks. The new stuff is like Celsius”—a popular energy drink.

“Multipurpose, multifunction,” Wang said, nodding.

“Plus protein,” Gayomali added. Last year, the firm advised a big-box retailer to make its own multipurpose drink. It is currently in development.

Another prediction: luxury wellness treatments combined with travel. “It’s going to be all about treatments now,” Gayomali said. “Like, going to Turkey for the—” he gestured at his hairline, which was hidden under a bandanna.

“When I go to Peru, I get, like, *everything* done,” Matos, in a fuzzy pink turtleneck, said. She pointed at her mouth. “I had my wisdom teeth taken out. It was ‘Buy one, get one free.’ ” Matos expressed interest in writing about men who venture to Peru to try kambo, a poisonous substance derived from frogs. “It heightens your senses,” she said. “But all these tech bros try it because they think it makes them more productive.”

Other trends under discussion: Gene editing. Protein sodas. N.F.T.s. Ozempic. Live-streamers. Fight clubs. “Girl math.” Ozempic, again. Luigi Mangione. Elon Musk. Creepypasta. Blind Box toys. Alternative investments. The Chinese app RedNote (a TikTok alternative). R.F.K., Jr. Corporate dress codes. Fan fiction.

Desaulles, who wore a denim top, spilled some water on her computer. She tilted it and dabbed at the keyboard with a napkin. Verdict: all good. Trend talk segued into action plans. “I think we all need to *try* raw milk at some point,” Wang said. “We need to go to a farm to drink it.”

“It’s worth trying,” Desaulles said.

“It’s good,” Gayomali agreed.

The group moved on to deciding what the chapters in the second Dossier should be. Clients such as Cash App and Mercedes-Benz pay the company for strategy consulting, but hard copies of the Dossiers are free for friends of the firm. The working title, they decided, would be “The New Pantheon.” Wang explained, “In an age where unlocking artificial general intelligence and human-lifespan extension seems entirely plausible within the next several decades, we feel it’s highly timely to reexamine our relationship to timeless concepts underpinning the human condition.”

For now, most readers of the firm’s Dossiers are creative types. But Wang has set his sights higher. “I would love if Fortune 100 C-suite people

actually read it and thought about it seriously,” he said.

Wrapping up the session, Wang addressed the issue of whether he’d be able to pay his researchers, who, so far, had been volunteering their time. He said that he still wasn’t sure the company had the cash flow.

Gayomali had a suggestion: “A trip to Peru.”

Wang cocked his head. “I would say totally,” he said. “Because it’s tax deductible.” ♦

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

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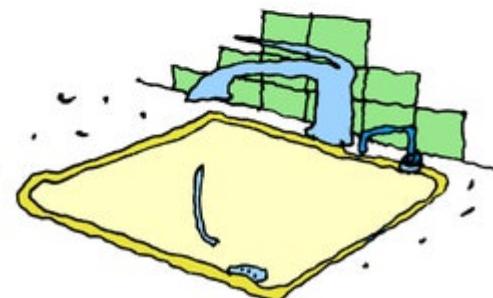
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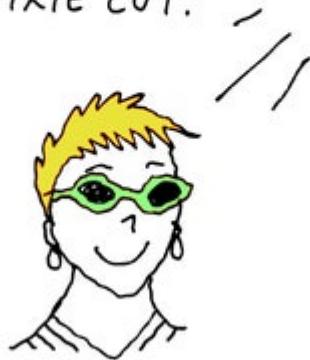
By [Liana Finck](#)

February 3, 2025

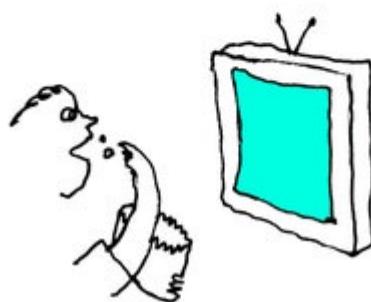
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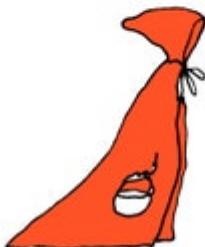
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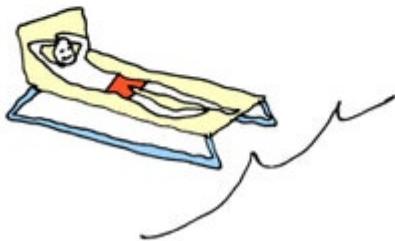
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THAT THE NEXT PANDEMIC
IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER?
THINK OF IT THIS WAY: YOU
WON'T HAVE STOCKPILED ALL
THOSE LYSOL WIPES FOR
NOTHING.



⑤ DISMAYED BY RECENT SUPREME
COURT RULINGS (WHICH I WON'T
NAME, FOR FEAR OF RETRIBUTION)?
WELL, YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO
LIVE IN A NOVEL, AND A MARGARET
ATWOOD NOVEL IS A NOVEL.



⑥ CONCERNED ABOUT
RISING SEA LEVELS?
CONFRONT THOSE
CONCERNS HEAD ON—
AT THE BEACH!



[Liana Finck](#) is a cartoonist and an illustrator who has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2015. She was a 2023 Guggenheim Fellow and is the author of “[How to Baby](#)” and “[Mixed Feelings](#).”

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The Leaning Tower of New York

How a luxury condo building in Manhattan went sideways.

By [Eric Lach](#)

February 3, 2025



“Your Honor,” an attorney involved in a 1 Seaport lawsuit explained to a judge, “it’s shaped like a banana right now.” Illustration by Vincent Mahé

At the end of the fifth season of “Million Dollar Listing New York,” which aired in 2016, Fredrik Eklund, a Swedish adult-film actor turned real-estate broker, was in the grips of a professional crisis. He was desperate to become the listing agent for a new condominium project called 1 Seaport, and had spent weeks fanatically courting its developers at the Fortis Property Group. “I can’t sleep without this building,” Eklund said. “I’m obsessed.” 1 Seaport was to be the first all-glass residential skyscraper ever built on the lower-

Manhattan waterfront—sixty stories of upscale urban living, at the edge of the financial district.

A Fortis executive made Eklund a deal. If he could sell twenty of the eighty planned units before construction began—if he could sell them in just eight weeks—Eklund would get the exclusive on the building. Net sales were projected to reach some three hundred million dollars, and the broker’s cut would be hefty. “My whole life has been leading up to this very moment,” Eklund told the executive. “I’m getting loosey-goosey just talking to you about it.”

Since the financial crisis, luxury residential skyscrapers have gone up in New York higher and faster than ever before. In Manhattan, many of these structures are clustered in a corridor of midtown called Billionaires’ Row, where hedge-fund managers, foreign plutocrats, and celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez and Sting have reportedly bought units. Though 1 Seaport’s common amenities would include a private porte cochère, a hydrotherapy spa, and, on the thirtieth floor, the practically de-rigueur infinity pool, it was aimed at buyers perhaps a few rungs down the ladder. “Thirty million dollars or more—those are the people we want to get,” Eklund told his sales team, back at the office. He considered travelling to South Africa, Monaco, Hong Kong, and Singapore to woo buyers, and ultimately settled on London. Armed with little more than a few artist’s renderings, he quickly sold the twenty units.

1 Seaport appealed to American buyers, too, including the Miu family, of Holmdel, New Jersey. Louis Miu, who had come to New York in 1970 and put himself through college working at a Chinese restaurant in Bensonhurst, had founded an accounting firm, and was prominent in the city’s Chinese American business community. He, his wife, Carolyn, and their daughter, Erin, who was in her twenties, were drawn to Unit 15-A, a one-bedroom with ten-foot ceilings, three little closets, a terrace overlooking the East River, and an asking price of nearly two million dollars. The Mius signed a purchase agreement with Fortis in March, 2017, and put down a deposit of nearly four hundred thousand dollars. The company said that units in the tower would be ready to close as early as New Year’s Day. “No closings occurred that year,” a lawyer for the Mius would later write.

Still, the family was willing to wait. In the fall of 2018, Erin got married, and a few months later the Mius altered their contract to acquire two units, which would be combined into one larger apartment. Though the building was more than a year behind schedule, they doubled their deposit.

It wasn't until the following summer that the developers admitted that there was a small problem. On June 26, 2019, the Fortis Property Group issued an amendment to the building's offering plan, the contract between the developer and the buyers. The building's contractors had recently completed the tower's superstructure. The imposing gray mass was at that point among the hundred tallest structures on the city's skyline, six feet taller than Trump Tower. "The slab edges on the north side of the building are misaligned by up to 8 inches," the developer disclosed. 1 Seaport was six hundred and seventy feet tall, and leaning.

For as long as humans have made towers, some have leaned. The Tower of Pisa started settling unevenly on its shallow foundation not long after its third floor was added, in 1178. Despite the increasingly obvious problem, five more floors were built over the next two centuries; the ornate bell chamber was finished in 1372. In 1990, when the angle passed five degrees, and the top of the tower was fifteen feet out of plumb, the structure was said to be finally in danger of collapsing. Crews siphoned earth from underneath the building to mitigate the problem, though by then it was unthinkable to eliminate the lean entirely. Millions of tourists came to see the flawed structure every year. A complete fix would have devastated the local economy.

The allure of a tilted building knows no cultural boundary. In the fourteenth century, when the medieval traveller Ibn Battuta visited the Great Mosque of al-Nuri, in Mosul, he wrote that its curving minaret was "splendid," and affectionately referred to it as al-Hadba, or "the hunchback." The mosque was destroyed in 2017, during the Battle of Mosul. UNESCO later surveyed locals about restoring it, and ninety-four per cent of respondents said that they wanted the minaret rebuilt "exactly as it was." The Leaning Temple of Huma, in India, has drawn pilgrims for centuries. The complex's tall central tower tilts visibly one way. Arrayed around it are several smaller towers that tilt visibly the other way. No one knows why this is.

In recent years, architects around the world have embraced the slant. The Altair twin skyscrapers, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, are seven hundred and eighty-seven feet tall, with one standing at attention and the other leaning companionably against it. The Capital Gate, in Abu Dhabi, inclines eighteen degrees to the west, and looks like a “Dune” sandworm mid-leap. But these bold diagonals lack the fundamental humanity of those which are accidentally off-kilter. The headquarters of China’s state television service, in Beijing, consists of two angled towers conjoined at the top, and was meant to subvert clichés of skyscraper design. Locals refer to it as Big Pants.

The Fortis Property Group, destined to put up one of the tallest leaning towers in the history of mankind, was founded in 2005 by Louis and Joel Kestenbaum and some partners. The Kestenbaums, a father and son who are members of the Satmar Hasidic community in Williamsburg, made their reputations in city real-estate circles during the redevelopment of the Brooklyn waterfront, which went from a sagging industrial district to an international life-style capital. They were known as risktakers, willing to outbid bigger companies on projects that they believed in. In 2013, Fortis paid sixty-four million dollars for one of the last undeveloped parcels in lower Manhattan, a small parking lot at the end of Maiden Lane. This was where 1 Seaport would stand.

An ideal site for a skyscraper is above strong, flat bedrock that is relatively close to the surface, about fifty feet underground. The bedrock below much of midtown is at that depth. 161 Maiden Lane is not such a site. The Dutch, who laid out Maiden Lane in the seventeenth century, were the first to use “infill”—sand, stones, trash, whatever was handy—to expand the contours of Manhattan. Later, local officials sold “water lots,” or parcels of land submerged below the East River or the Hudson River, on which developers could dump infill themselves. When geotechnical consultants hired by Fortis took soundings of the earth underneath the parking lot, they found a mishmash. First, twenty-four feet of Colonial-era infill, composed of gravel, silt, concrete, steel, bricks, and chunks of old shipwrecks and docks. Below that, pancaked former marshland. Below that, sandy deposits left by glaciers thousands of years ago, and a layer of decomposed rock. The

bedrock under 161 Maiden Lane was way down there, about a hundred and fifty-five feet below ground level.

It's not impossible to build a skyscraper on a lot like this, but it usually involves more work. "Begin by descending," St. Augustine wrote, more than a millennium ago. "You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility." Structural engineers in New York City are still giving this kind of advice to their clients. "I always tell them, pay the foundation person more money than you'd ever imagine paying them, because you will never fix a foundation," Nat Oppenheimer, a senior vice-president at the engineering firm TYLin, told me.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, skyscrapers in the financial district have been built using "pile" foundations, formed by drilling steel pylons through the ground until they reach bedrock. The Fortis Property Group, for reasons that remain the subject of multiple overlapping and complex civil litigations, opted for a different kind of foundation, less often used in Manhattan high-rise construction, called "soil improvement," which involves injecting concrete into the ground to firm it up. The process promised to save the company six million dollars, but it came with some risks. An engineering consultant named Robert Alperstein produced a nearly hundred-page report that warned Fortis that the method could lead to "differential settlements." In other words, the structure might lean. All other nearby buildings, the report said, were anchored to the earth by piles.

Construction was under way when, in the fall of 2016, the Kestenbaums invited real-estate big shots, brokers, and reporters to a party to toast 1 Seaport. A Hinckley yacht ferried the guests to dinner at the River Café, in Brooklyn, where they were served individual mousse cakes topped with chocolate in the shape of the Brooklyn Bridge. Soon, potential buyers were being taken on "hard hat" tours of the building as it crept up into the sky. One prospective buyer, who asked not to be named, recalled riding a rickety lift to one of the middle floors of the tower, to look at a slab of fresh concrete where blueprints called for a two-bedroom unit. "There was construction debris, and safety fencing at the edges," the buyer said. The wind was whipping in off the East River. "Still," she added, "I could tell it wouldn't work from a closet-space perspective."

To build 1 Seaport, Fortis hired Pizzarotti, a renowned Italian construction firm that was trying to break into the New York City high-rise market, as the construction manager. Pizzarotti in turn hired a local company called SSC High Rise to build the tower's concrete superstructure. The job site was troubled from the start. "Workers were operating equipment in darkness, without light, and there was debris in the work area," an attorney on one of the many lawsuits involving the project told me. The Department of Buildings slapped more than a dozen stop-work orders on the property, several for safety violations. It was the kind of nonunion job site that inspired Local 157, the Manhattan carpenters' union, to bring out one of its large inflatable rats. James Makin, a former organizer with the union, who spent many days leafletting outside 1 Seaport, told me recently that SSC High Rise was notorious. "Another contractor cutting corners to get things done," he said.

Among the workers on the project was a forty-four-year-old carpenter from Ecuador named Juan Chonillo. He had moved to Queens in 2006 with his older sister, Angela, and joined some cousins working in high-rise construction. Angela marvelled at how quickly her brother had picked up English on the job sites. He was sending money home to his five kids. He was happy in New York.

On the morning of September 21, 2017, Chonillo and several of his cousins were standing on a movable construction platform attached to 1 Seaport's recently poured twenty-ninth floor. Around 9:15 a.m., a foreman working for SSC High Rise ordered that a crane operator move the platform. It got snagged, and Chonillo made for the edge, to try to wrench it free. The platform wobbled. Chonillo fell through the air for about five seconds, and landed on the sidewalk scaffolding running along Maiden Lane. He was pronounced dead at the scene. The crane operator "came outside from the building and he was crying," an employee at the job site later said in a sworn statement. "He told me that he asked at least five times if all the workers were off the platform and he was told that there were no workers on the platform."



“More gravy?”

Cartoon by Matthew Diffee

Construction in Manhattan is a small world. Makin, the union organizer, received numerous texts and images from Chonillo’s colleagues almost immediately after he hit the scaffolding. Makin rushed downtown. The site was ringed with yellow police tape. Angela Chonillo was there, wailing. The lawyers Gail and Robert Kelner, who later represented Angela in a wrongful-death suit filed against 1 Seaport’s builders, said that Chonillo’s fall was one of the most egregious construction-site cases they’d seen in decades of workplace-injury lawsuits. “There never should have been workers on the platform,” Gail Kelner said. “It was extremely shoddy, sloppy, frightening workmanship.”

Eventually, SSC High Rise pleaded guilty to second-degree manslaughter. The fine was ten thousand dollars, which even the Manhattan District Attorney, Cyrus Vance, acknowledged was “pennies on the dollar compared to the potential profits on a high-rise construction job in a booming real-estate market.” But his investigators had been stymied. SSC High Rise employees, including Chonillo’s cousins, had refused to talk to them. “No one wanted to jeopardize their jobs by speaking up,” an investigator for the D.A.’s office who worked on the case told me. The D.A. never even got the name of the foreman who gave the order to move the platform.

Angela Chonillo put three thousand dollars on her credit card to pay for her brother's funeral. She said that she never again spoke to the cousins who were with Juan the day he fell. Two of them, including the one who had got Chonillo the job at 1 Seaport, later died from COVID-19. "He didn't want to testify, out of fear, maybe," she told me recently, sitting in the Kelners' office, in the financial district, just a few blocks from where Juan died.

After Chonillo's death, the city paused construction on 1 Seaport for about three months. When work resumed, SSC High Rise disappeared. One morning in March, 2018, the company's employees simply didn't show up for work. They were never seen on the job site again, and the firm later went out of business. ("I don't recall," Timothy Mahoney, the C.E.O. of SSC High Rise, would later say in a deposition, when asked to supply a date for his company's closure.)

The project fell further behind, and soon the relationship between Pizzarotti and Fortis soured, too. "Maiden lane . . . the gift that keeps giving," one of the project's lenders wrote to a colleague. The Italian contractors seem to have been perplexed by the cutthroat nature of New York City construction. The New Yorkers, meanwhile, were at times baffled by the Italians' genteel airs. "Often I personally ask myself what I should do more to be more effective in my action and I do not always find the answer," Stefano Soncini, a Pizzarotti executive, wrote to a Fortis executive in a rambling e-mail. "I hope you can find in my words the serenity necessary to make you soon return to work with us with the enthusiasm necessary to win this challenge." By the end of the note, Soncini was embarrassed at his verbosity. "I wrote a poem and I apologize for the time that I made you lose," he signed off. There was a lot of that going around 1 Seaport.

In an attempt to resolve the growing tensions between their two firms, Louis Kestenbaum and Paolo Pizzarotti traded e-mails, corporate patriarch to corporate patriarch. "Dear Paolo," Kestenbaum wrote. "As we mentioned to you previously, completion by the end of the year is too late. It would be devastating to us. It would result in many purchaser contract cancellations, leading to a complete financial disaster."

Pizzarotti, the grandson of his firm's founder and a *cavaliere del lavoro*, or knight of Italy's Order of Merit for Labor, was magnanimous. "Dear Luis,"

he wrote, misspelling his client's name. "I hope you're well." He suggested several ways that the project might move faster—including having the job site open seven days a week. Kestenbaum was apoplectic. "I have *never* worked with anyone on a Saturday and will *never* work on a Saturday," he wrote. "It is a matter of religious principles which are not negotiable."

After SSC High Rise ghosted the project, Pizzarotti brought in a replacement concrete contractor to finish the superstructure. The new firm did a review of the tower and noticed something amiss. On April 17, 2018, Pizzarotti received a fateful memo: "There are structural issues, unusual settlement. . . . The building is leaning 3 inches to the north."

But, as with Pisa, work on the tower did not stop. It only got more frenzied. "There is a lot of organizational disorder and many uncertainties in decision-making," Soncini, the Pizzarotti poet, wrote to his muse at the Fortis Property Group. "The situation of One Seaport project is of great frustration for everyone, including myself." Rather than pausing to fix what had already been done, an attempt was made to straighten the thing out in midair. To compensate for the lean, higher floors were intentionally poured out of alignment, in the opposite direction. This compounded the problem. "What happened was, as the building went up, the parties tried to pull it back and it kind of counterweighted," a lawyer representing Pizzarotti later explained to a judge. "Your Honor," the lawyer said, "it's shaped like a banana right now."

Measurements taken in the winter of 2019 indicated that the building was as much as ten inches out of alignment on some floors. Pizzarotti had had enough. On March 22nd, the company filed a lawsuit, seeking to break its contract. In a complaint, Pizzarotti's lawyers claimed that Fortis had withheld crucial information about 1 Seaport's foundation. They also said that the building was "still moving," and that they didn't know how much further it might lean if it was simply left standing. Many participants and observers in the 1 Seaport saga suggested to me that a local contractor may have had more incentive to deal with the tower's problems. Pizzarotti, a foreign firm, had leeway to bail. "They had to get the fuck out," someone involved in 1 Seaport's development told me.

Fortis countersued, and the company blamed Pizzarotti for the issues that arose during the tower's construction, including Chonillo's death, which happened the second day of Rosh Hashanah. "The accident took place on a Jewish holiday, a day during which Pizzarotti was contractually prohibited from working," a Fortis executive said in an affidavit. "This terrible incident . . . could have been avoided had Pizzarotti followed the rules." The ensuing web of 1 Seaport lawsuits—there are now more than two dozen—continue to wind through Manhattan's civil courts. Even the lawyers can't seem to believe how many lawyers are involved. One exasperated judge castigated all parties for waging "an endless war of attrition."

Work on 1 Seaport stopped in July, 2020, and it has not resumed. In 2021, the building was put into the custody of Richard Cohn, a kind of real-estate foster parent who tends to neglected and litigation-scarred properties throughout the city. The tower has continued to sulk over the waterfront, more a ruin than a construction site, its grim façade visible from the Brooklyn Bridge, the Wall Street heliport, and even from the N.Y.P.D.'s headquarters, nearly a mile away. The barren structure, half wrapped in glass, is particularly noticeable at night, when strings of bright construction lights illuminate every floor. Despite Cohn's efforts to secure the building, it was vandalized in late 2023. Three graffiti artists used ropes to scale up the side of 1 Seaport, and tagged the northern face with a stack of giant bubble letters—"XSM RAMS NOTE"—spanning the top three stories. "There was no guard," one of the artists told me. "We could have gone through the front door."

The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, in his 1978 manifesto, "Delirious New York," wrote that a skyscraper "cannot avoid being a symbol—an empty one, available for meaning as a billboard is for advertisement." People look at a thwarted building and see what they want to see. In the fifteen-fifties, when Pieter Bruegel the Elder set out to depict the Tower of Babel, he painted a structure that was visibly crooked, though no lean is mentioned in Scripture. In recent years, several of the slender towers on Billionaires' Row have been afflicted with excessive swaying and creaking, problems that are gleefully treated in the press as morality plays about rising inequality. ("High Anxiety: Super-rich Find Supertall Skyscraper an

Uncomfortable Perch,” read one headline in the *Guardian*.) A decade ago, the Millennium Tower, a new residential skyscraper in San Francisco, was found to be several inches out of plumb and tilting further every month. Managers at Fortis and Pizzarotti, unaware of what was in store for them, exchanged gaga e-mails about the situation. “What a mess that is, I wouldn’t feel safe in that building at all!” one Pizzarotti employee wrote.

Structural engineers have determined repeatedly over the years that the structure at 161 Maiden Lane is unlikely to topple over. But the project known as 1 Seaport collapsed long ago. No broker in the world can sell a leaning tower at twenty-four hundred dollars per square foot, even if the lean is imperceptible to the naked eye, and even though the flaw is not so anomalous. Ronald Hamburger, the structural engineer who devised the nine-figure repair job for the Millennium Tower, told me that he and his colleagues canvassed the Bay Area and discovered that tilted buildings were quite common. “But because they weren’t high-end residential condominiums, no one cared,” he said.

Representatives for the Fortis Property Group, Pizzarotti, SSC High Rise, and more than a dozen other firms and individuals involved in 1 Seaport declined to comment for this story. Several of the Fortis Property Group’s lawyers have quit working for the company, and one firm has sued for unpaid bills. Buyers, including the Mius, have sued to recover their deposits. (The Mius, too, declined to comment.) At least a quarter of a billion dollars has been collectively spent on 1 Seaport, and yet everyone claims to be out of pocket.

The Fortis Property Group still hopes to finish 1 Seaport, someday. Perhaps there would be people willing to live in it. Prices are still high on Billionaires’ Row, despite the swaying. (Engineers have found ingenious ways to install bespoke dampers, some involving giant sloshing tanks of water, to minimize residents’ feelings of nausea.) And stalled towers are rarely abandoned for good. Construction on the Jeddah Tower, in Saudi Arabia, which is slated to be the world’s first kilometre-high skyscraper, has resumed after a six-year pause that followed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s arrest of the project’s primary backer, Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal. The Ryugyong Hotel, a thousand-foot concrete pyramid intended to awe the

world, loomed partially built over Pyongyang, North Korea, for more than a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union. Today, an enormous L.E.D. screen has been fitted on one side, and at night it displays propaganda.

Hoping to get a closer look at 1 Seaport, I sent e-mails to some of the companies with offices in 180 Maiden Lane, a forty-one-story skyscraper right across the street. An executive with a direct view of the busted tower invited me to take a peek. “I was excited when I got this office, because I like having construction outside my window—something to look at while I daydream,” he told me. “But then I started to notice that nothing was happening.”

When the sun sets, the tower takes on a menacing quality, with its concrete terraces jutting out like spikes on a club. Later at night, when the construction lights are on, it’s possible to imagine that the building is inhabited—that people are up there drinking wine, slipping into the infinity pool, looking down on the city at their feet. Before it started leaning, 1 Seaport was designed to withstand hundreds of years of wind off the harbor. Until someone figures out what to do with it, it’ll hang there, the tallest eyesore on the skyline. ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled the nickname of a mosque in Mosul.



Eric Lach, a staff writer, has contributed to the magazine since 2008. He writes regularly about New York City politics, people, and more.

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The Aesthetic Empire of Alma Mahler-Werfel

Notorious for her marriages and affairs, the widow of genius is gaining new attention for her music.

By [Alex Ross](#)

February 3, 2025



The pugnaciously intelligent wife of Gustav Mahler, who later married Walter Gropius and then Franz Werfel, was described by one friend as a “catalyst of unbelievable intensity.” Photograph from Austrian National Library

The first challenge is deciding what to call her. She is encircled by famous surnames—men jousting over her identity. A lustrous scion of fin-de-siècle Vienna, she was born Alma Maria Schindler, the daughter of the operetta

singer Anna Bergen and the landscape painter Emil Schindler. She hoped to make her way as a composer, but that dream ended when, in 1902, at the age of twenty-two, she married the musical titan Gustav Mahler. After Mahler's death, in 1911, she had an affair with the artist Oskar Kokoschka, then was briefly married to the Bauhaus architect [Walter Gropius](#). Her final husband was the writer Franz Werfel, whom she followed into exile, first in France and then in the United States, where she settled in Los Angeles. She lived until 1964, the most legendary widow of the twentieth century. Those who write about her—there have been eight biographies and half a dozen novels—tend to refer to her as Alma. This has the unfortunate effect of making her sound like a young girl in the company of grown men. Better to call her by the name under which she is buried: Mahler-Werfel.

She was, and remains, smolderingly controversial. The German writer Oliver Hilmes begins his 2004 biography, "[Malevolent Muse](#)" (originally published as "Witwe im Wahn," or "Wacky Widow"), with a damning sampling of the epithets that have been hurled at her: a "dissolute female" (Richard Strauss), a "monster" (Theodor W. Adorno), an "oversized Valkyrie" who "drank like a drainpipe" (Claire Goll), "the worst human being I ever knew" (Gina Kaus). Mahler-Werfel was described as an incorrigible antisemite who enslaved Jewish men and drove them to early graves. According to one Mahler enthusiast, she was a "vain, repulsive, brazen creature." Hilmes quotes a few ostensibly positive comments as well, although the praise is faint: Erich Maria Remarque dubs her a "wild, blond wench, violent, boozing." In the end, the biographer categorizes his subject as a "classic hysterical woman."

In recent years, Mahler-Werfel has received more sympathetic attention. The late British writer Cate Haste, in her 2019 biography, "[Passionate Spirit](#)," tries to dispel the image of a "devouring maenad," her title implicitly challenging Hilmes's. Haste emphasizes the tribulations that Mahler-Werfel suffered as a wife and a mother; she had four children, only one of whom lived past the age of eighteen. Susanne Rode-Breymann's "[Alma Mahler-Werfel](#)," published in German in 2014, focusses on Mahler-Werfel's composing, her artistic passions, and her dynamic friendships with dozens of major artists. In the music world, amid ongoing efforts to honor female composers, Mahler-Werfel's songs have come to the fore. [Gustavo](#)

[Dudamel](#) and the L.A. Philharmonic will perform five of them alongside Mahler’s Fifth Symphony next month. There is even an opera—Ella Milch-Sheriff’s “Alma,” which had its première last year, at the Vienna Volksoper.

Rehabilitation can go only so far. Casting Mahler-Werfel purely as a victim minimizes the power she wielded, particularly in her relations with Jews. At various points in her life, she was both oppressed and oppressor. We are confronted by a personality of maddening complexity—no less complex than that of any of the august men around her. At the age of eighteen, she wrote of her desire to accomplish a “great deed,” in the form of a “really good opera, which no woman has yet done.” Although that goal eluded her, she found another kind of greatness, by overseeing, from the fortress of her taste, a cultural empire. She was, her friend Friedrich Torberg wrote, a “catalyst of unbelievable intensity.” Once, in conversation with the Austrian journalist Bertha Zuckerkandl, Mahler-Werfel spoke of having to handle the moods of a genius like Mahler. Zuckerkandl quoted the adage about no man being a hero to his butler, adding, “Is there a genius for us genius women?”

Mahler-Werfel’s papers reside at the Van Pelt Library, at the University of Pennsylvania. Browsing through them is like attending a red-carpet gala for the chief artistic luminaries of the early twentieth century. Beyond the husbands and the lovers, you find letters from personalities as varied as [Thomas Mann](#), [Wassily Kandinsky](#), Luise Rainer, and [Thornton Wilder](#). Benjamin Britten asks Mahler-Werfel to accept the dedication of his song cycle “Nocturne”; Erich Wolfgang Korngold does the same for his Violin Concerto. Igor Stravinsky sends what appears to be a handmade Christmas card. Lotte Lenya tells her to write a memoir. Marlene Dietrich supplies a reading of Franz Werfel’s astrological chart. Leonard Bernstein asks, in German, to see the score of Mahler’s Tenth Symphony. One scrap of paper contains a guest list for a dinner party that she hosted in Los Angeles: Arnold Schoenberg, Darius Milhaud, Ernst Lubitsch, Jean Renoir.

At the core of the collection are Mahler-Werfel’s diaries, which offer a chronicle as indispensable as it is problematic. The most detailed entries cover the years 1898 to 1902, when she was coming of age in Vienna. Turning the pages of the journals, which have been published complete in German and abridged in English, you see items typical of a vivacious young

person: holidays are celebrated, faces sketched, vacation postcards pasted in, crushes confessed. (Her first kiss was with Gustav Klimt.) There are also signs of intellectual ambition. The first volume is emblazoned with a paraphrase of Kant's categorical imperative: "Always act as if the maxims of your will could become the principle of a universal law." Several pages are given over to excerpts from Nietzsche's "[On the Genealogy of Morals](#)." Wagner performances elicit ecstatic responses. Leading musicians are briskly assessed: Mahler is "a genius through and through," Strauss a "genius pig." Such pronouncements were to be expected from young men, less so from young women. She asks a teacher, "Why are boys *taught* to think and girls not?"

Mahler-Werfel enjoys describing the lavish circles in which her family moves, yet she keeps a certain distance. Her father, whom she worshipped, died when she was twelve; her mother went on to marry the painter Carl Moll, with whom she had already been having an affair. The young Alma took a cynical view of her mother's displays of grief and developed a lifelong aversion to funerals. It was not a particularly warm or happy family, as its subsequent history attests. In the nineteen-thirties, Moll embraced Nazism; his daughter Maria, Alma's half sister, was married to a judge who became a Nazi official. All three killed themselves in 1945, as the Red Army approached Vienna. Margarethe, another half sister, was institutionalized at an early age and died in a German psychiatric facility in 1942. A researcher who has studied Margarethe's case told me that she should be considered a victim of the Nazi euthanasia program.

Mahler-Werfel took refuge in music. An excellent pianist, she could sight-read her way through difficult scores, including entire Wagner operas. Decades later, she would while away the hours playing Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," though she would stop when she became aware of someone else's presence. In composition, her principal teacher was Alexander Zemlinsky, one of the finest musical minds in Vienna. Zemlinsky, who also mentored Schoenberg, discerned real promise in Mahler-Werfel but chided her for getting distracted by the social whirl. Unfortunately, he himself created a major distraction by falling in love with her.

Mahler-Werfel composed dozens of pieces in various forms. Only seventeen songs are known to survive. They are imaginatively crafted, showing particular invention in their harmonic writing. “Die Stille Stadt,” or “The Quiet Town,” a setting of a poem by Richard Dehmel, begins with an ambiguous assemblage of chords of the kind you often find in Zemlinsky or early Schoenberg: a D-major triad; Wagner’s “Tristan” chord, a half-diminished seventh; and a dominant seventh on D-flat. In the following measure, we land in D minor, but ambiguity persists. Before the middle of the second measure, Mahler-Werfel has run through all twelve tones of the chromatic scale. An especially fine touch is the way the initial vocal descent is echoed by the piano, but with a B-flat raised to B-natural. In the third bar, the harmony veers into B major, adding to the unmoored, free-floating atmosphere—matching Dehmel’s image of a town wrapped in nocturnal fog.

Do these songs indicate a major composer in the making? Mahler-Werfel’s sterner critics scoff at the idea. The Mahler biographer Jens Malte Fischer grumbles that only an “embittered feminist dogma” would place her music on the level of Mahler’s. But no one is claiming that. Instead, the case of Mahler-Werfel dramatizes how opportunity, environment, and other contingencies shape artistic careers. Rode-Breymann draws a useful comparison to Alban Berg, whose sensuous, amorphous early work resembles Mahler-Werfel’s. Berg’s youthful songs offer few hints of “Wozzeck,” “Lulu,” and the Violin Concerto. But he had the chance to develop, with Schoenberg as his domineering guide. Zemlinsky contemplated sending Mahler-Werfel to study with Schoenberg, who possibly could have molded her as he molded Berg. When Schoenberg later studied her songs, he wrote to her, “You really have a great deal of talent.”

HOW TO FIND YOUR KEYS



Cartoon by Tom Chitty

The question of Mahler-Werfel's musical future was made moot by the advent of Mahler, whom she met in Vienna in 1901, at a party at Bertha Zuckerkandl's. A colossally driven child of the Austrian provinces, Mahler had been directing the Vienna Court Opera for four years and was surrounded by a somewhat sycophantic circle of admirers. Mahler-Werfel, by contrast, promptly picked a fight with him by defending a Zemlinsky ballet that he had deemed incomprehensible. When, at another gathering, she was asked what she thought of Mahler's music, she said, "I know little of it, but what I do know doesn't appeal to me." Mahler's friends were aghast, but the man himself laughed. He seemed ready to share his life with a woman of pugnacious intelligence—one whose artistic tastes were, as Rode-Breymann points out, in many ways more progressive than her future husband's. He had an old-fashioned attachment to Goethe and Schiller; she was abreast of Ibsen, Zola, Wilde, and the glittering artists of the Secession, of whom her stepfather was one.

The relationship moved quickly toward an engagement. In her diary, Mahler-Werfel expressed adoration for Mahler but wondered whether he would support her creative ambition, as Zemlinsky had done. She received her answer in a letter written on December 19, 1901—a twenty-page diatribe triggered by a casual comment that she had made about getting back to writing music. Mahler delivers an ultimatum: she must cease composing or the marriage is off. The essential problem, as Mahler sees it, is a practical one: if his wife finds herself in the mood to compose, she will be unable to attend to his needs. He writes, "From now on, you have only one profession: _to make me happy!_" Further, Mahler mocks the idea that a young woman could claim to possess a creative identity: "What do you imagine individuality to consist of? Do you consider yourself an individual?" Long after the point has been made, Mahler thunders on:

You must "discard" (your word) everything *superficial, all convention*, all vanity and delusion (with regard to individuality and work)—you must surrender yourself to me *unconditionally*, you must make the design of your future life completely dependent on my needs in every detail, and in return you must wish for nothing but my *love!*

Milch-Sheriff adapts this text in her “Alma” opera and juxtaposes an allusion to the funereal drumbeat of Mahler’s Third Symphony.

The musicologist Nancy Newman, in a 2022 article titled “#AlmaToo: The Art of Being Believed,” dissects Mahler’s letter in light of the #MeToo movement. Newman identifies signs of what has come to be known as gaslighting: in this instance, a man’s effort to distort a woman’s sense of reality, leading her to “doubt herself and subordinate her ambition to his.” Emblematic of that strategy is Mahler’s offhand obliteration of his future wife’s compositional ambitions. When they first met, Mahler showed interest in her work; in the letter, though, he dismisses that work as trivial, while admitting that he has not examined any of it. In another devious move, he disavows being the sort of husband who expects his wife to be a mere housekeeper, even as he demands just that role of her. Especially cruel is his assertion that men praise her music only because she is beautiful. “Just imagine the situation if you were ugly,” he writes. As Newman notes, the entire performance was gratuitous, since the customary domestic duties would have curtailed Mahler-Werfel’s composing anyway.

Mahler’s defenders insist that he didn’t ban his wife from composing; rather, he simply offered her a choice. Rode-Breymann counters that freedom of choice was illusory for young women of the period: until they married, they usually had to remain with their families. Mahler-Werfel, moreover, had just moved into a house overseen by a stepfather whom she distrusted. (In her diary, she compared her situation to Napoleon’s exile on St. Helena.) Yet Rode-Breymann acknowledges that Mahler-Werfel already felt uncertainty over her composing—she wrote in 1900, “What can a pathetic little woman like me achieve? Nothing!”—and that Mahler should not bear sole blame for her subsequent musical silence. She retained a degree of agency, however circumscribed. One other power differential bears mentioning: Mahler, as a Jew, encountered prejudices that his wife never had to face. “He was a Jewish Christian and had it hard,” Mahler-Werfel once wrote. “I was a heathen Christian and had it easy.”

The marriage was charged, combustible, and by no means one-sided. At first, Mahler-Werfel found herself trapped in the monastic world of a man who was always “striving in the infinite.” She wrote in her diary, “I feel as

if my wings have been clipped.” She executed not only domestic tasks but also professional ones: copying out her husband’s scores, managing his finances, mitigating noise disturbances. Still, she asserted herself and began to influence the trajectory of Mahler’s career. It was through her that Mahler encountered the Secessionist painter Alfred Roller, who, in 1903, created a duskily evocative staging of Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde” at the Court Opera—a landmark in operatic history. She introduced Mahler to Schoenberg and other radical youths. And she responded avidly to the abstract, proto-modernistic language of Mahler’s Sixth and Seventh Symphonies, which remained her favorites. It might be argued that she counterbalanced her husband’s tendency toward bombastic naïveté.

A period of crisis began in 1907, when Maria Mahler, the couple’s first child, died of diphtheria, at the age of four. (Anna, the second child, lived until 1988.) The same year, Mahler was given a diagnosis of heart disease. Seeking a less stressful routine, he and the family moved to New York, where he took a post at the Metropolitan Opera; in 1909, he took over the New York Philharmonic. Mahler-Werfel had a miscarriage and suffered from depression. Relations grew strained. Finally, in 1910, came a fabled explosion that has been dramatized in several Gustav-and-Alma movies. At an Austrian spa, Mahler-Werfel embarked on an affair with Gropius, who had yet to win renown as an architect. After she left the spa to join her husband at his summer composing retreat, Gropius bombarded her with letters, addressing one of them not to an agreed-upon intermediary but to Mahler himself. Gropius then decided to confront Mahler in person, essentially demanding the release of his wife. Mahler handled this melodrama with remarkable composure; apparently, the two men digressed into a discussion of the brokenness of modern art. Mahler-Werfel was left to choose the man she wanted. She decided to have it both ways, remaining at Mahler’s side while secretly continuing the affair with Gropius.

Late that summer, Mahler-Werfel was out for a walk when she heard strange music emanating from Mahler’s studio: not the agonized Tenth Symphony, which was then being sketched, but her own songs, which Mahler had found among her papers. “There is genius in you,” he said to her. Mahler arranged for five of the songs to be published. Mahler-Werfel was gratified by the gesture, although it came too late to revive her

compositional drive; she wrote a little more, but the spark had left her. The couple reconciled during Mahler's final New York season, in 1910-11. Their closeness deepened when Mahler fell mortally ill. He died on May 18, 1911, in Vienna. Whatever difficulties they had experienced, Mahler-Werfel knew that she had shared her life with an immense musical force, and she propagated Mahler's cause ever after, living long enough to witness his reputation soar posthumously. But she later wrote, of that 1901 letter, "Somewhere in me burned a wound that has never entirely healed."

The funeral meats were not yet cold when Mahler-Werfel began to be besieged by men who wished to take charge of her. The British composer Cyril Scott sent a condolence card with a brooding photographic portrait attached. Gropius was first in line, but he pushed too hard for a commitment, failing to understand the depth of Mahler-Werfel's grief. After an encounter in the summer of 1911, he drafted a letter to Mahler-Werfel with a fatuous metaphor: "These days were one big symphony of love, from the most extreme adagio to a roaring furioso." Later that year, Mahler-Werfel had a fling with the biologist Paul Kammerer, for whom she briefly worked as a lab assistant, overseeing a colony of praying mantises. When the relationship didn't pan out, Kammerer threatened to shoot himself at Mahler's grave. Hysteria was in the air, and it did not emanate from Mahler-Werfel.

The most extreme case was Kokoschka, whose affair with Mahler-Werfel began in 1912, three years after he won notoriety for his garish stage piece "Murderer, Hope of Women." Kokoschka's Alma obsession went deep enough that it constitutes an entire phase of his career. In the celebrated 1913 painting "The Bride of the Wind," the lovers embrace in a Wagnerian welter of color. A portrait from the same period casts Mahler-Werfel in a Mona Lisa pose, though with the famous smile distorted into something like a smirk or a grimace. Among other Alma-themed images, the most spectacular shows Kokoschka having his intestines unwound from his body, with Mahler-Werfel operating a spinning wheel.

In her autobiography, Mahler-Werfel wrote that she had dreaded the idea of bearing Kokoschka's child, because he struck her as "virtually murderous." Indeed, she got an abortion early in the relationship. Kokoschka's behavior

justified her fears. He lurked outside her house and monitored her visitors. In a letter, he imagined “scraping from your brain with a knife every single one of those alien ideas that run counter to me.” Like Gropius, he resented her loyalty to Mahler, accusing her of performing a “dance of death” with a “man who was alien to you.” He tried to overcome her resistance to marrying him by prematurely publishing a wedding announcement. When, after a succession of such incidents, Mahler-Werfel backed away, Kokoschka’s mania only escalated. Notoriously, he commissioned a life-size doll of his love, which he paraded about, mutilated, and left in his garden, supposedly attracting the attention of the police. He further ventilated his frustration in his play “Orpheus and Eurydice,” in which Orpheus goes to the underworld, retrieves Eurydice from Hades (Mahler), and then stabs her to death. None of this stopped Mahler-Werfel from hailing Kokoschka as a genius. The Mona Lisa picture hung in her study to the end.

Amid the Kokoschka chaos, Mahler-Werfel returned to the relatively stable Gropius, marrying him in 1915. Because Gropius was fighting in the First World War, the couple saw little of each other, although they did produce a daughter, Manon. Mahler-Werfel admired Gropius’s architectural talent but had little sympathy for the hyper-objectivity of the emergent Bauhaus movement. Furthermore, Gropius turned out to be, in Mahler-Werfel’s eyes, a *Spiessbürger*, a provincial philistine. Her daughter Anna acidly commented, “She was married to an Aryan once. She was so bored.” In 1917, Mahler-Werfel met a man who interested her a great deal more: the twenty-seven-year-old Franz Werfel, noted for poems of flamboyant Expressionist character. Two years earlier, Mahler-Werfel had set one of them to music: “Der Erkennende,” or “The Recognizing One,” which speaks of the inevitability of loneliness. (“How we push it away, what we love.”) The song is one of Mahler-Werfel’s last compositions, and perhaps her finest. The music is stark, declamatory, and ironic in its use of gentler major-key harmonies for some of the darkest lines.

By 1918, Mahler-Werfel was pregnant again. Gropius assumed at first that he was the father, but it turned out to be Werfel. The labor nearly killed her; Martin, the child, lived less than a year. Gropius eventually agreed to a divorce, though not without an ugly burst of bitterness. He wrote to Mahler-

Werfel, “Your noble being has been degraded by the Jewish spirit.” Kokoschka’s comment about Mahler being “alien” to Mahler-Werfel was probably uttered in the same vein.

Within a decade of Mahler’s death, Mahler-Werfel had acquired a reputation as a femme fatale, a sort of intellectual dominatrix. In 1915, the Viennese satirist Peter Altenberg published a vicious sketch, titled “Alma,” in which Mahler-Werfel is depicted flirting with a lover—presumably Kokoschka—at a performance of her late husband’s “Kindertotenlieder.” The scene is almost certainly fictional—Mahler-Werfel denied attending the event in question, and Kokoschka was in Italy at the time—but it gained traction all the same. What might be called the slut-shaming of Mahler-Werfel reached its peak after her death, when the songwriter Tom Lehrer wrote a sniggering ballad called “Alma”: “Her lovers were many and varied / From the day she began her beguine / There were three famous ones whom she married / And God knows how many between.” There was, in fact, nothing particularly outré about her love life, other than the fact that she allowed herself the same freedom as the men with whom she consortied.

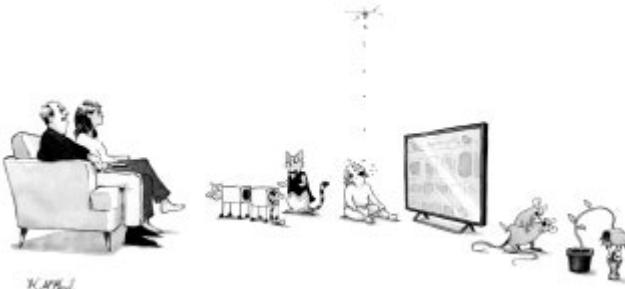
Werfel, a Prague-born, German-speaking Jew who had won praise from Kafka in his youth, was a different sort of man: convivial, buoyant, only moderately vain, lacking in extreme ambition. “He does not hound me to death like the others,” Mahler-Werfel wrote in her diary. In contrast to Gropius and Kokoschka, Werfel unreservedly loved Mahler’s music and felt no jealousy of the dead. The new suitor earned extra points for reciting aloud the text of Schoenberg’s unfinished oratorio “Jacob’s Ladder.” At the time, Werfel adhered to bohemian ways, pontificating in cafés and shouting slogans at leftist demonstrations. Mahler-Werfel set about reforming him. In place of billowy poems and mystical dramas, he began producing hefty middlebrow novels, many of which proved wildly successful.

Some of Werfel’s friends thought that this metamorphosis had ruined his literary gift. Werfel said, “I don’t know whether Alma is my greatest fortune or my greatest disaster.” Yet the novels include several formidable achievements: “Class Reunion,” a tale of high-school sadism; “Embezzled Heaven,” which touches on the misery of exile; the eerie sci-fi novel “Star of the Unborn”; and, above all, “The Forty Days of Musa Dagh,” a 1933

chronicle of the Armenian genocide which doubles as a prophecy of the Holocaust. Mahler-Werfel was intimately involved in these projects and in some instances proposed their subject matter. In the case of “Musa Dagh,” she recognized the book’s resonance. In October, 1933, she wrote in her diary, “It is a gigantic achievement for a Jew to write *such* a work at *such* a time.”

Less salubrious was Mahler-Werfel’s own political evolution in the twenties and thirties. Enthralled by Mussolini, she gravitated toward Fascism and supported such like-minded Austrian politicians as Engelbert Dollfuss and Kurt Schuschnigg. (So did Werfel, who wrote propaganda on behalf of the Austrofascist regime that came to power in 1933.) Hitler impressed her less. “NO DUCE,” she writes in her diary, after seeing him speak in Breslau in 1932. Six years later, after Britain and France had capitulated at Munich, she seems to have warmed to the Führer, calling him a “genius” who deserves the “greatest admiration.” Hilmes, in his prosecutorial biography, quotes this passage in an effort to portray Mahler-Werfel as an outright Nazi. But he omits a subsequent passage in which she retracts that praise, or, more precisely, thinks past it: “When I see the nastiness that the Nazis carry out—do I belong there? Absolutely never!” Ultimately, she is a reactionary of the Never Hitler camp. She accepts her strange fate: “I must now wander to the end of the world with a people who are strange to me.”

The people in question are, of course, the Jews. Anti-Jewish slurs appear in Mahler-Werfel’s diary from the beginning, but they proliferate during and after the First World War, when antisemitism intensified in German-speaking lands. Some of her vilest comments fell on those closest to her: she would tell Werfel not to “act like a Jew,” and describe her daughter Anna as a *Mischling*—the Nazi term for a person of mixed race. Yet her rhetoric was too confused to qualify as racialized hatred. Even as she ranted that Jews were infecting politics with Communism, she celebrated Jewish artists. “The Jews are at once the most unheard-of danger and the greatest fortune for humanity,” she wrote in 1919, echoing her youthful hero Nietzsche. The fact that she inhabited a mostly Jewish milieu adds to the irrationality of her position. It went beyond the proverbial “best friends” situation: some of her best husbands were Jews.



"I can never decide what to watch."
Cartoon by Will McPhail

Catastrophically, Mahler-Werfel kept up her bigoted outbursts after she and Werfel went into exile. At a gathering in Los Angeles, she announced that Hitler had done some good things and that stories of Nazi concentration-camp horrors were “fabrications put out by the refugees.” The writer Albrecht Joseph recalled the scene in a memoir:

For a moment we all just sat there, paralyzed. Then Werfel jumped up, screaming, his face a deep purple, his eyes bulging. I would have hardly believed before this that the humorous, slightly cynical, wise man could ever be aroused to such a pitch of fury. I do not remember verbatim what he said but it was like the thunder of one of the Old Testament prophets. . . . Alma appeared unmoved and retracted nothing.

Joseph, who later married Anna Mahler, felt that Mahler-Werfel was playing a “cat and mouse game” at such moments—pressing buttons, testing limits, exercising a “craving for power.” Her heavy consumption of alcohol didn’t help matters.

Werfel concocted a more tortuous explanation for his wife’s grotesque behavior. In a letter to his sister Marianne Rieser, he wrote, “The inner and outer life of Alma proves that she could not exist without Jewish spirit and Jewish soul.” The fact that she sometimes sounded antisemitic was, in Werfel’s view, a result of an elemental cussedness: “In her feelings of independence she is the wildest anarchist, in her fanaticism for beauty a monarchist. She is human in daily practice, but she hates humanity-loving phrases.” Werfel argued that his wife “suffered not under Jewishness but from Jewishness, as only certain very proud and sincere Jews can suffer it.”

In other words, she exhibited the same kind of internal conflict that affected so many Jews of the fin de siècle, Mahler and Werfel included.

Mahler-Werfel's actions tell a less dismal story than her words do. In February, 1938, on the eve of the Anschluss, she and Werfel were staying in Capri. Mahler-Werfel, sensing what was coming, ordered her husband to stay put and went home to Vienna, where she emptied bank accounts, secured jewelry, and arranged for the extraction of precious documents. The couple settled in the South of France, where Mahler-Werfel worked furiously to raise funds and organize a new life. Her most improbable scheme was to sell a Bruckner manuscript—the first three movements of the Third Symphony, which had been in Mahler's possession—to none other than Hitler, a Bruckner fanatic. Her Nazi brother-in-law, Richard Eberstaller, unsuccessfully tried to mediate the deal. Mahler-Werfel was carrying the Bruckner score when, in September, 1940, she escaped from Nazi-occupied France to Spain through the foothills of the Pyrenees, in the company of Werfel and three members of the Mann family. "She was always ahead of us," Golo Mann later recalled of the trek. "She did it like a goat."

That same year, Mahler-Werfel had published "Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters," a candid, ambivalent, yet fundamentally adulatory memoir of her first marriage. In the foreword, she notes that the Nazis had recently removed Rodin's bust of Mahler from the foyer of the Vienna State Opera. The book is a counter-monument in prose, depicting an artist who upheld the highest ideals of German art. At the same time, it fires darts at artists who remained in Nazi Germany, notably Richard Strauss. Felix Salten, the author of "Bambi," grasped what Mahler-Werfel was doing: "It was so masterly of you to have this book published right now." Despite some inevitable inaccuracies and omissions, the memoir remains the best portrait of Mahler in print—an act of complex, intense devotion.

Amid the swirl of affairs, scandals, and imbroglios that make up this astonishing life, one element remains fixed: Mahler-Werfel's inexhaustible passion for music and the arts. For all her grandiose blather, she was an extraordinarily attentive reader, spectator, and, above all, listener. Her radar for talent was nearly infallible, and she used Mahler's royalties and other

sources of income to support artists in need. She functioned as a kind of freelance curator, exulting vicariously in the triumphs of her favorites.

Looking through the University of Pennsylvania archives, I was struck by the procession of illustrious conductors—Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer, Willem Mengelberg, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Eugene Ormandy—who sought her advice and approval. To some extent, the conductors saw her as a stand-in for Mahler, yet she also counted as a potentate in her own right. In a 1948 letter, Dimitri Mitropoulos is dismayed because he has heard that Mahler-Werfel disliked his rendition of Mahler’s Seventh. She reassures him that she was merely unhappy about a seating issue and that the performance itself was “*wunderschön*,” even if the first movement was too slow. She is conspicuously friendly to Bernstein, addressing him in one postcard as “My young genius.” The fact that Bernstein was both a composer and a conductor counted heavily in his favor: in her Mahler memoir, she wrote that reproduction is ephemeral but production is eternal.

Mahler-Werfel’s contacts with composers overrode national and stylistic boundaries. Her friendship with Schoenberg lasted five decades and was remarkably free of discord. She may have once written in her diary, “Schoenberg is too Jewish for me,” but Nuria Schoenberg-Nono, the composer’s eldest surviving child, remembers her as a stalwart friend of the family. Mahler-Werfel also opened herself to modern French and Russian styles, befriending Milhaud, Ravel, and Stravinsky. Later, she detected greatness in the young Benjamin Britten. Her youngest beneficiary was Christian Wolff, the son of the émigré publishers Kurt and Helen Wolff, who as a teen-ager had joined the avant-garde circle around John Cage. Wolff, now ninety, treasures a copy of Webern’s Six Orchestral Pieces that Mahler-Werfel gave him seventy years ago—a score signed to her by the composer.

Berg, Mahler-Werfel’s quasi-doppelgänger, won her deepest allegiance. When, in the early twenties, Berg was struggling to complete “Wozzeck,” Mahler-Werfel offered him financial aid. Later, she underwrote the publication of the opera’s vocal score, which enabled Berg’s breakthrough as a composer. In 1923, two years before the première, she was playing through “Wozzeck” every day at the piano—an exceptional feat. In a letter

to Berg, she said of the score, “My impression is ever greater, ever more significant, everlasting.” Perhaps she recognized in the work’s Mahlerian modernism the outlines of the masterpiece she had once yearned to write. Fittingly, the published score of “Wozzeck” bears the handwritten legend “Dedicated to Alma Maria Mahler.” Berg’s Violin Concerto, his final completed composition, is written in memory of Manon Gropius, who died, of polio, in 1935. The concerto is an image of a beautiful world disintegrating.

Mahler-Werfel’s final years were taxing, for herself and for others. Her health declined; she lost most of her hearing; she struggled to keep up the façade of the *grande veuve*, or “great widow,” as Thomas Mann called her. “Sometimes she was magnificent, and sometimes she was absolutely abominable,” Anna Mahler later said. The daughter achieved what had eluded the mother: she made her way as an artist, finding success as a sculptor.

Marina Mahler, Anna’s daughter, lives between France and Italy, running the Mahler Foundation and overseeing the Mahler Conducting Competition. She was twenty-one when her grandmother died. “Alma was luminous,” Marina recently told me. “I was in love with her, which made my mother upset. She was statuesque, powerful. She had this incredibly fragile, papery, but very beautiful skin. And these eyes, which were a certain kind of blue I don’t remember anyone else having. They were so clear and piercing. She didn’t talk about the past, even though it was all around her—the books, the photographs, the Kokoschkas. The love of life was still there. Which made her end rather terrible. I was there in the apartment with my mother. Alma had been in a coma, and she awoke with a scream, or an attempt at a scream. My mother went in. Alma clutched her arm and didn’t let go—a death grip. She was not ready to leave.” ♦



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

The U.S. Military's Recruiting Crisis

The ranks of the American armed forces are depleted. Is the problem the military or the country?

By [**Dexter Filkins**](#)

February 3, 2025



In the Future Soldiers course, trainees who could not pass the armed forces' physical or aptitude tests go through three months of remedial training, in the hope of preparing them for boot camp. Photographs by Rebecca Kiger for The New Yorker

At Fort Jackson, in South Carolina, the U.S. Army comes face to face with America's youth. One recent morning, at the Future Soldiers training course, hundreds of overweight young men and women hoping to join the service lined up to run and perform calisthenics before a cordon of drill sergeants. Some were participating in organized workouts for the first time. Many heaved for breath when asked to run a half mile; others gave up and walked. A number hobbled around on crutches. At a weekly weigh-in, dozens of young men stood shirtless, revealing just how far they had to go.

When prospective recruits were asked to drop and do five pushups, many groaned and struggled, unable to complete the task. Some, their faces crimson, could barely hold themselves up.

“You thought you’d join the Army without being able to do a single pushup?” Staff Sergeant Kennedy Robinson barked at a recruit whose arms were twitching in agony.

“Yes, ma’am!” he said. To an extent that would have been hard to imagine a few years ago, he may have been right.

The Future Soldiers program was created, in 2022, to help marginal but willing recruits find their way into the military. Its efforts include not just prodding kids to slim down but also helping them pass the armed forces’ aptitude test—even if that means lowering long-established standards. The course is part of a series of extraordinary adaptations that America’s military is making amid one of its greatest recruiting shortfalls since the draft was abolished, more than fifty years ago.

In 2022 and 2023, the Army missed its recruitment goal by nearly twenty-five per cent—about fifteen thousand troops a year. It hit the mark last year, but only by reducing the target by more than ten thousand. The Navy has also fared badly: it failed to reach its goals in 2023, then met them in 2024 by filling out the ranks with recruits of a lower standard; nearly half measured below average on an aptitude exam. The Army Reserve hasn’t met its benchmark since 2016, and the ranks are so depleted that active-duty officers have been put in charge of reserve units. Some experts worry that, if the country went to war, many reserve units might be unable to deploy. A U.S. official who works on these issues put it simply: “We can’t get enough people.”

At the end of the Second World War, the American military had twelve million active-duty members. It now has 1.3 million—even though the population has more than doubled, and women are now eligible for armed service. “The U.S. military has been shrinking for thirty years,” Lawrence Wilkerson, a former senior State Department official who leads a task force on the challenges facing the armed services, said. “But its global commitments haven’t changed.” The military operates out of bases in more than fifty countries, and routinely deploys Special Operations forces to about eighty. Now, Wilkerson said, “it’s not clear that the military is large enough anymore for America to uphold its promises.”

For decades, the armed forces based their requirements on a defensive doctrine called “win and hold”: the capacity to win one war while fighting a second to a standstill. Today, with the U.S. confronting perhaps its starker global-security challenges since the Cold War, many analysts fear that even one war would be too taxing. A conflict with China over the disputed island of Taiwan could leave thousands of Americans dead in a matter of weeks—amounting to nearly half the losses the country sustained in twenty years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. But legislators tend to dismiss the possibility of reinstating conscription. “We are not going to need a draft anytime soon,” Senator Roger Wicker, of Mississippi, told CNN last year.

President Trump insists that the decline in recruitment has a single cause: the Biden Administration’s efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion programs chased away potential recruits. During last year’s campaign, he accused “woke generals” of being more concerned with advancing D.E.I. than with fighting wars. His Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, a former member of the National Guard, has made similar accusations in dozens of appearances on Fox News. Hegseth’s book “The War on Warriors” is a protracted rant against what he describes as a progressive campaign to neuter the armed forces. “We are led by small generals and feeble officers without the courage to realize that, in the name of woke buzzwords, they are destroying our military,” he writes.

On the first day of his second term, Trump signed an executive order banning D.E.I. initiatives in the federal government. He also fired the head of the Coast Guard, Admiral Linda Lee Fagan, in part because she supported such programs. But many of the people charged with filling out the ranks of the U.S. military suggest that these moves will not reverse a trend decades in the making. Recruiters are contending with a population that’s not just unenthusiastic but incapable. According to a Pentagon study, more than three-quarters of Americans between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four are ineligible, because they are overweight, unable to pass the aptitude test, afflicted by physical or mental-health issues, or disqualified by such factors as a criminal record. While the political argument festers, military leaders are left to contemplate a broader problem: Can a country defend itself if not enough people are willing or able to fight?

At the peak of the Vietnam War, when the draft was still in effect, there were some three and a half million men and women in uniform. Despite the size of the force, it did not represent a true cross-section of the country. For much of the war, students in college or graduate school were exempt from service, a policy that generally favored whiter and wealthier draftees. As a result, those killed and wounded tended to come from less educated and less affluent communities.

On the ground, soldiers bridled at having to fight an impossible, unpopular war, and turmoil spread through the ranks. In the last years of the conflict, soldiers deserted, units refused to fight, and officers were “fragged”—attacked by their own troops. Racial tensions were acute, and heroin addiction was rampant. In 1971, Colonel Robert Heinl, Jr., wrote in the *Armed Forces Journal*, “By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse.”

As the draft became more politically difficult to sustain, President Nixon impanelled a commission, led by the former Defense Secretary Thomas Gates, to consider whether the country could defend itself without imposing a draft. The commission concluded that it could, writing, “A volunteer force will not jeopardize national security, and we believe it will have a beneficial effect on the military as well as the rest of our society.”



“And then she realized—the entire aesthetic she’d picked out for middle school was totally cringe.”
Cartoon by Emily Flake

In certain respects, the experiment has largely worked. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, desertions and courts-martial were rare, even after years of stalemate. As William A. Taylor, a professor at Angelo State University, in Texas, put it, “Soldiers were in the military because they wanted to be.” Troops were ordered to fight in areas where the enemy often disappeared into local populations, and war-crimes scandals, including the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the massacres in Haditha and Kandahar, weighed heavily on the public perception of the military. And yet, in the many times I accompanied Army and Marine units in both wars, I found morale consistently high.

But there have been costs, too. Some of those who testified in front of the Gates Commission were worried that an all-volunteer force would weaken the traditional belief that each citizen has a moral responsibility to serve the country. “There was a concern at the time that the military would become cut off from American life,” Taylor said. Although the military remains one of the few institutions that still command widespread public respect—in a Pew Research Center poll last year, sixty per cent of respondents said that the military had a positive effect on society—people are less and less likely to join. In 2021, the Pentagon found that only about nine per cent of young Americans expressed a propensity to serve, the lowest in more than a decade. “You wouldn’t believe the questions I get,” a Marine officer who served three years as a recruiter told me. “A lot of young people don’t even know what the Marines are. They think we’re some kind of police force.”

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a groundswell of patriotic feeling encouraged young people to volunteer for the military. The sentiment held as the U.S. attacked the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and then as it launched an invasion of Iraq, which quickly toppled Saddam Hussein’s regime. But, as those wars dragged on, the public mood soured. The troops deployed there were unprepared and ill-equipped, sent to pursue objectives that could be bafflingly opaque.

The burdens of fighting those wars were shared in a profoundly unequal way. Fewer than three million Americans—less than one per cent of the population—served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Soldiers and marines were deployed again and again, while the rest of the country could safely tune the

wars out. The poorest areas in America had markedly higher numbers of fighters killed in action than the wealthiest ones did, according to research by Douglas Kriner, a professor of government at Cornell University. “People were much more likely to die in communities where there weren’t as many opportunities,” Kriner told me. In the Second World War, this disparity did not exist.

Some observers argue that maintaining a military served by a tiny percentage of the population, combined with the practice of financing wars by borrowing, enabled political leaders to carry on with foreign interventions far longer than the public would otherwise have tolerated. When I visited American towns near military bases during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I was struck by a prevailing sense of community involvement, with placards welcoming soldiers home and others mourning the dead. Outside those areas, though, the conflicts barely registered. In 2018, seventeen years after the invasion of Afghanistan, a nationwide Rasmussen poll showed that forty-two per cent of likely U.S. voters were unaware that the country was still at war there.

Last summer, the members of Bravo Company of the 1st Battalion, Eighth Marines, gathered at a resort outside Houston for their first reunion since leaving Iraq. In 2004, Bravo Company led the assault on Fallujah, in what became the war’s bloodiest battle, and the unit suffered horrific casualties. One of the members, Christian Dominguez, told me that the survivors at the reunion felt a pervasive anguish. “Everyone I went to Fallujah with has a deep sense of guilt,” he said. “No one is close anymore. It’s the guilt. So many good guys died.” Many of his fellow-marines experienced significant trauma, Dominguez said. Since coming home, the most troubled of them had turned to painkillers, alcohol, and even meth.

The feeling among many veterans is that both wars were futile, and that the country essentially forgot them once they were over. Thousands of servicemen and women suffered grave wounds or traumatic brain injuries. Matthew Alan Livesberger, the Special Forces soldier who blew up a Tesla Cybertruck in Las Vegas on New Year’s Day, was apparently among them. “Fellow Servicemembers, Veterans and All Americans. *TIME TO WAKE*

UP!" he wrote in a note on a phone recovered at the scene. "We are being led by weak and feckless leadership who only serve to enrich themselves."



Trainees exercise three times a day. "I'm so excited to be in the Army," one trainee said. "I want the discipline."

Vice-President J. D. Vance was deployed to Iraq to work in public affairs, and says that it profoundly shaped his views about foreign policy. "I served my country honorably, and I saw when I went to Iraq that I had been lied to," he said on the Senate floor last year. Legislators had convened for a debate over sending military aid to Ukraine—an idea that Vance rejects. "I don't really care what happens to Ukraine one way or another," he has said. He and Trump campaigned on a promise to scale back America's foreign entanglements. The message suited the public mood: after the bitter experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan, few Americans seem to have the appetite to send tens of thousands of troops overseas.

Yet Trump's actual conduct in office is anyone's guess. In his recent Inaugural Address, he said, "We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end—and perhaps most importantly the wars we never get into." At the same time, he suggested that the United States might forcibly annex Greenland and the Panama Canal, and he has promised to make the U.S. military bigger and more lethal. Hegseth, who was confirmed by the narrowest margin of any Secretary of Defense in the country's history, has promised to "address the recruiting, retention, and readiness crisis in our ranks." Neither he nor Trump has offered a plan for how to do it.

The U.S. Army's recruiting station in Duluth, Georgia, north of Atlanta, has nine recruiters, and each aims to sign up one new recruit a month. It's a modest goal, but they've met it each month for the past four years. "We try to seek out every eligible man and woman in the area—every single one," the station's leader, Sergeant First Class Stephen Supersad, told me.

The station has the advantage of a good location. Georgia lies within what the military sometimes calls the Southern Smile, a region, stretching from Arizona to Virginia, that supplies a disproportionate share of recruits. Duluth is also in an area with a large population of Korean Americans, many of them new arrivals or first-generation immigrants. The U.S. can expedite citizenship for green-card holders. The station sits next to a Korean restaurant, and has two Korean-speaking recruiters on staff.

During the day, potential recruits stream in, most of them from working- and middle-class families. When Misty Sanchez arrived, she didn't immediately strike recruiters as a prime candidate; at eighteen years old, she wore braces and stood less than five feet tall. "Looking at me, you wouldn't think I wanted to be a soldier," she told me. But she had aced the entrance exam—and, like many other recruits, she had an older sibling in the service. Her sister Hilda had wanted to become a nurse, but their parents, who emigrated from Mexico, couldn't afford to pay for college. She joined the Army, trained as a combat medic, and ultimately enrolled in nursing school at the military's expense. Misty said that the experience had changed Hilda: "She used to be reserved and insecure. Now she's confident. She takes pride in herself—her appearance even changed." Misty hoped to make the same transformation. "I want the discipline," she said. "I want to be tested physically and intellectually."

The next day, at the nearby Norcross High School, Sergeant First Class Mackenson Joseph stood before a group of students who had joined the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps, an Army program for high schoolers. Joseph reminded the kids, all in uniform, that they would be graduating in a few months and entering the world as adults. "You're not going to have your parents to take care of you anymore," he said. "So you're going to have to get serious."

Last year, Joseph was named one of the Army's top recruiters. Part of what makes him effective is his own story: his mother, born in Haiti, took a raft to Florida in 1994, worked to become a citizen, and then brought her son to Miami. Joseph told the students that he'd joined the Army because he didn't have the money to pay for college. "My mother pushed me very hard —'This is why we came to America. You can't bring shame to the family name.' " Fifteen years later, Joseph has two master's degrees and owns two homes.

One of the students in Joseph's class, whom I'll call Rosa, arrived in the U.S. from Guatemala in 2022, after leaving her grandparents to join her long-estranged mother in Atlanta. Rosa travelled north some twelve hundred miles, on foot and by bus, paying smugglers and eluding predators. At the Texas border, she waded across the Rio Grande. When she arrived at Norcross High School, she spoke no English. Frank Cook, a retired lieutenant colonel who oversees J.R.O.T.C. programs in the area, told me that Rosa is his most impressive cadet. "She's a star—her character, her intelligence, her leadership," he said.

As an undocumented immigrant, Rosa is ineligible to join the armed forces, but she was clear about her aspirations. "I'm hoping to change my circumstances," she told me.

The military has long prided itself on being a meritocratic institution, whose members are judged solely by their performance. In many ways, it has served as a proving ground for racial integration in America, and, though the upper ranks remain disproportionately white, the armed forces have grappled for decades with questions of diversity. There have been initiatives to fight discrimination in the military at least since the Vietnam War. President Obama instituted diversity-and-inclusion programs across the federal government. In 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, Defense Secretary Mark Esper ordered a stepped-up effort to combat racism—but was quickly overruled by President Trump.

In 2021, after President Biden was inaugurated, military leaders took up D.E.I. efforts with renewed vigor. "I want to understand white rage," General Mark Milley, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced, "Diversity, equity,

and inclusion is important to this military now, and it will be important in the future.” He ordered mandatory education programs in the armed services and at academies like West Point, and arranged a multimillion-dollar bureaucracy to implement them. Austin also ordered a department-wide effort to address extremism in the military, prompted by the presence of active-duty and former service members at the January 6th riots. (In the end, Austin’s search identified about a hundred service members, out of some three and a half million uniformed and civilian personnel, who had engaged in extremist activity that year.)

The new D.E.I. trainings varied widely, but most required little commitment. The military spent an average of less than an hour per person on such programs in 2021. A typical airman in the Air Force was obliged to attend between one and four hours of classes during a four-year period. The demands were even less stringent elsewhere. A Navy official told me that the closest thing to a D.E.I. course he knew of was a brief discussion of equal-opportunity issues in boot camp. “We’re too busy,” he said.



Cartoon by Brendan Loper

Still, some of the new initiatives strayed into controversial areas. In 2022, the Air Force established demographic targets for candidates for its officer corps, with specific percentages for each ethnic and racial group. West Point began teaching courses that included discussions of critical race theory, and

created a minor in diversity-and-inclusion studies. For a time, the Pentagon encouraged gender-neutral pronouns in some award citations, then stopped after a wave of public ridicule. A Navy recruiting ad featured Yeoman Second Class Joshua Kelly, who identified as a queer, nonbinary drag queen. “Girls, come on!” Kelly, who appears both in uniform and in drag, says. “Leave the saving the world to men?”

The Pentagon’s *Covid*-vaccine mandate, which Austin ordered shortly after taking office, was particularly controversial. Over ninety per cent of active-duty service members were vaccinated, but more than eight thousand who refused were ultimately discharged. I spoke to one of them, a cadet in the Coast Guard Academy, in New London, Connecticut, who went by Jane. Jane, whose father was an immigrant from Central America, told me that, as a girl, she had suffered from complex regional pain syndrome, which her family believed was aggravated by a typhoid vaccine. When the *Covid* mandate was announced, she was terrified of similar complications. “I didn’t want to take that risk again,” she said. She declined to follow the order, so, for a full academic year, the school’s administrators ordered her to stand behind a plexiglass shield during class. Finally, they ejected her and six others. A year later, Congress eliminated the mandate, and she was readmitted. But Jane told me that she and many of her colleagues saw both the mandate and the D.E.I. training they received as evidence of overbearing political leadership. Of the seven cadets who were expelled, Jane said, five were minorities. “We were all abiding by their crazy D.E.I. narrative,” she said. “And we were basically the people they were preaching about.” Still, she remained in the force. “I fell in love with the Coast Guard,” she said.

The backlash against these policies has been especially pronounced among veterans, whose families have historically provided the largest share of recruits—and who tend to be more politically conservative. A YouGov survey conducted for Owen West, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Ken Wallsten, a professor at California State University, found that the proportion of veterans who would recommend enlisting dropped from eighty per cent to sixty-two per cent in five years. Many cited a “mistrust of political leadership” and “the military’s D.E.I. and other social policies” as major concerns; nearly all opposed racial quotas in the officer corps.

Retired officers accused the Biden Administration of injecting politics into an institution that is designed to be apolitical. “There is no officer or leader or commander in the military that isn’t for diversity and inclusion,” said Rod Bishop, a retired Air Force general who co-founded a group called STARRS, dedicated to countering the military’s D.E.I. programs. “They’re just another reason not to join.”

Other military officials disputed the idea that these initiatives hurt recruiting. JoAnne Bass, then the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, told a congressional panel, “I think the *narrative* that we are focussed on that, more than war-fighting, is what is perhaps hurting us.” When the Pentagon surveys young people about why they don’t want to enlist, only about five per cent list “wokeness”; far more are concerned about discrimination. The biggest reason that they give for not joining up is fear of death or injury, followed by worries about post-traumatic stress. Many recruiters mention the obstacle of the *COVID* pandemic, which shut down access to high schools. Others note that a growing economy has made it easier to get private-sector jobs.

But it is clear that recent criticism of the military, by Trump and others, has coincided with a marked decrease in its prestige. As recently as 2018, the armed services enjoyed a seventy-four-per-cent approval rating, according to a Gallup poll. That dropped sharply during the upheavals of Trump’s disputed election and the protests following George Floyd’s death, when Trump pushed to deploy troops to quell rioting. At the height of those disturbances, Trump invited Mark Milley to walk with him from the White House to St. John’s Church and pose with a Bible. Milley later apologized for participating in such an explicitly political stunt.

Some veterans I spoke to chafed at D.E.I. trainings, but regarded them as just more orders to follow. Gabrielle Bryen joined the Army thirty years ago, after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania. She signed up mostly to get help with her student debt, but she found that she liked it. She served two tours in Iraq, counselling traumatized soldiers, and retired as a lieutenant colonel in 2014. Bryen told me that, during her years of service, higher-ups often delivered lectures about racism and homophobia, which most of her comrades regarded as unnecessary. “If you look at the military

over time, it's always been inclusive," Bryen said. "No one cares about what you look like, or whether you're gay. When the bullets are flying, you don't have time to worry about pronouns." Still, she is pushing her sons and daughters to join when they are old enough. "The Army is a good opportunity for a young person," she said. When she talks with them about D.E.I. requirements, she sounds like a parent preparing her kids for any exigency of the working world: "Be ready for it and just ignore it."

The U.S. military's recruiting troubles came just as it was attempting a fundamental shift in its mission. For decades, the focus was on fighting off terrorists and insurgents. But since 2018, as one Pentagon document put it, the imperative has been "confronting revisionist powers—primarily Russia and China."

The Russian Army has suffered grievous losses in its invasion of Ukraine, but it is still roughly the same size as the U.S. military. Russian soldiers stand face to face with American troops in places like Lithuania—a *NATO* ally that the United States is legally obliged to protect, despite Trump's threats to let the Russians "do whatever the hell they want" to member states that don't pay enough for defense.

But the greater concern is China, whose economic and military growth threaten to make it a "peer competitor" of a kind that the United States hasn't had since the Cold War. China's military is far larger than America's, with more than two million members. And, as the U.S. hollowed out its industrial capacity, China expanded; its steel industry is the largest in the world. In war games simulating a conflict between the two nations, the United States usually loses. According to the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, an American research firm, the Air Force would run out of advanced long-range munitions in less than two weeks.

The most probable trigger for a war is Taiwan, a thriving democracy that China's leaders consider a de-facto part of their country. Since 1950, the United States has supplied Taiwan with military aid but has kept security guarantees studiously ambiguous. In recent years, the calculus changed: in 2022, Biden pledged explicitly to defend Taiwan from attack. Last year, China launched a new type of amphibious troop carrier, which appears designed for a military assault of the island.

It's hard to know what Trump would do if the Chinese made a move on Taiwan. One of his top officials, Under-Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby, is known for hawkish views on China. But the island sits some seven thousand miles from the U.S. mainland, which sharply limits America's options. As a senior official in the Biden White House told me, "It's the tyranny of distance."

Most observers believe that an invasion is not imminent; the risk of an all-out war with the U.S., potentially killing hundreds of thousands of people, is too great. The more likely scenario is that China strangles Taiwan with a blockade, a possibility that it has recently underscored with large-scale naval and air exercises. In such an event, the U.S. Navy could aid Taiwan by escorting commercial vessels in and out—but only for about a year, Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, told me: "After that, the Navy would run out of ships."

The Navy is perhaps the most undermanned branch of the American military. Since the Cold War, its force has shrunk from about five hundred and fifty surface ships to roughly half that. In 2020, Trump declared that he wanted to boost the number to three hundred and fifty. "We couldn't do it," Bryan Clark, a Navy veteran who leads the Hudson Institute's Center for Defense Concepts and Technology, said. "We don't have enough sailors."

In March, the Navy announced that seventeen vessels from the Merchant Marine, which provides fuel and cargo to warships, were being taken out of service for prolonged maintenance. Almost forty per cent of America's attack submarines, among the country's most formidable weapons, are unable to sail, because the Navy cannot service them quickly enough. The problem, at least in part, is a lack of sailors; ships routinely go to sea without a full crew, and the tasks of maintenance and repairs often go undone. Pilots are also scarce; the shortfall is estimated at seven hundred in the Navy and as many as two thousand in the Air Force. Those they do have work furiously. "We are either deployed or preparing to deploy all the time," Lieutenant Commander Briana Plohocky, a Navy F-18 pilot, told me.



“... And for dessert we’ll have slippers.”

Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

China has a modestly larger Navy than the U.S. does, with about three hundred and seventy vessels. But its shipbuilding capacity is more than two hundred times greater—making it far more able to replace vessels lost in combat. In the U.S., just seven private shipbuilders make the Navy’s submarines, destroyers, and aircraft carriers. As recently as 1990, there were seventeen. One of those that remain is Huntington Ingalls Industries, which maintains enormous shipyards in Virginia and Mississippi. The yards require some thirty-six thousand people to keep up production, but, at wages negotiated with the Navy during the pandemic, it is difficult to find skilled employees who will stay for the long term, despite offers of free training. “We’re competing with Chick-fil-A for workers,” Jennifer Boykin, the president of one of H.I.I.’s shipyards, told me.

Even in the absence of conflict, Navy officers say that they are unable to adequately protect sea lanes, the essential arteries of international trade. The Navy aims to keep seventy-five surface ships “mission ready” at all times, but it has consistently fallen short. In the Red Sea, the Yemeni rebels known as the Houthis have disrupted trade for months with attacks on commercial vessels. In the South China Sea, Chinese ships have repeatedly harassed foreign vessels; in a bid to control international waters, the government has built a series of militarized artificial islands.

China has problems of its own in a potential war. Its forces have not been tested in battle for decades, and, though it has a vast arsenal of planes, ships, missiles, and submarines, they are believed to be less sophisticated than the United States'. The U.S. Navy's forty-seven nuclear-powered attack submarines, which carry cruise missiles and other long-range precision weapons, are virtually undetectable underwater. China has six such submarines; last year, a seventh sank in the harbor while under construction.

But China might not be America's only adversary. Experts increasingly worry that a bloc of authoritarian states—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—are coöperating on military and strategic matters. In recent months, Iran has begun exporting drones to Russia for use in Ukraine, and North Korea has sent in thousands of troops; China has been buying large quantities of Iranian oil, in violation of American sanctions; and Russia has been providing military assistance to the Houthis for their attacks against Western shipping. O'Hanlon offered a potential scenario: a Chinese assault on Taiwan coöordinated with Iranian missile strikes against Israel. At the height of U.S. military strength, this would have been a clear application for the “win and hold” doctrine. “We don't even claim that as a goal anymore,” O'Hanlon said. “We couldn't build a two-war capacity even if we wanted to, unless we had a draft.”

To attract recruits, the Pentagon has loosened dozens of strictures. The maximum age has been raised—to as high as forty-one, in the Navy—and pilot programs have been instituted to make it easier for people with a history of asthma or A.D.H.D. to join up. The Army has eased its policies on soldiers' appearances and struck down rules that forbade tattoos on the neck and hands; tattoos associated with gangs or extremist groups are still prohibited. (Hegseth has tattoos of a Jerusalem cross and the motto “*Deus Vult*,” both of which are associated with white-supremacist organizations. Though he claims that they are merely Christian symbols, he was barred from joining the security detail at Biden's Inauguration after another soldier reported them to superior officers.) Pentagon officials are also considering allowing in recruits who have tested positive for marijuana.

Still, these are marginal changes; the real problems are physical and intellectual fitness. That's why the Future Soldiers training course was created. "We were turning away a large number of kids who had what we most needed—a desire to join," Christine Wormuth, the Secretary of the Army at the time of the program's founding, told me. Prospective recruits have three months to achieve the necessary score on the aptitude test or to lose enough weight to meet requirements. Graduates go directly to boot camp; those who fail are sent home.

When I arrived at Fort Jackson, about nine hundred trainees were enrolled in the course. Some of its elements were rudimentary, in a way that revealed the divides in American society: instructors spoke about healthy eating, and a motivational speaker gave a talk on how to project confidence. Some former officers expressed skepticism about the lasting value of Future Soldiers. "If you give a colonel an order to graduate a bunch of students, he's going to find a way to do it," Dennis Laich, a retired major general, told me. "And everyone knows that if you go on a crash diet and lose a bunch of weight you're going to gain it all back very quickly."

On the ground at Fort Jackson, though, the situation seemed more encouraging. One would-be recruit was Savannah Thorn, from Ringgold, Georgia. Two years ago, Thorn, then seventeen, visited an Army recruiting station weighing three hundred and five pounds. Thorn told me she was raised by her grandmother. Her father, a meth addict, was in prison for armed robbery, and her mother, who gave birth to her at the age of twenty, was unable to care for her. Thorn told me that she had struggled with weight her whole life. "I ate chips and played Call of Duty all day long," she said. Then her best friend joined the Navy, and Thorn saw a way to escape. "I didn't want the life that was in store for me, living paycheck to paycheck, stuck in the small-town life," she said. When she arrived at the recruiting station, she said, she could barely climb a flight of stairs, and she was prediabetic. The recruiter told her to come back after she'd lost a hundred pounds. "He thought he'd never see me again," she said. A year later, Thorn returned, having lost the weight—still too heavy by the Army's standards but close enough to get into the class at Fort Jackson.

The weight regulations vary with age, gender, height, and waistline, but they are not especially onerous. Thorn told me she needed to get down to about thirty-two per cent body fat, which would put her at about a hundred and seventy pounds. (For men, who generally carry less fat, the allowable percentages are lower.) Prospective recruits in the Future Soldiers course may be no more than ten per cent above the limit; at the end of three months, they are required to be within two per cent, which they have to lose within a year of starting boot camp—and keep off through their careers.

The fitness course seemed mostly a matter of common sense. The recruits ate healthy meals, with no snacks in between, and exercised three times a day. For most, the weight came off quickly. “A lot of the people who arrive have never eaten healthy foods, or exercised regularly, in their lives—that’s just the reality of the America that we’re dealing with,” Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Pfeiffer, who helps oversee the program, told me. (About forty per cent of U.S. adults are obese.) At the camp, recruits can use a cell phone once or twice a week but have no access to the Internet or television or their own food. “It’s a controlled environment,” Pfeiffer said. “They can’t call out for pizza, and they can’t go to the gas station to get random snacks.”

When I met Thorn, she still had a pound to lose and only a few more days to lose it. She was nervous but confident. “I’m so excited to be in the Army—I want the discipline,” she said. “I’ve only been here for three months, and I’m a changed person.”

For the Army, the appeal of a recruit like Thorn seemed obvious: she was smart, curious, and motivated. The only evidence of her previous weight was excess folds of skin. “I plan to spend my career in the Army, defending this country,” she said. Three days later, she passed the test and headed off to boot camp.

At Fort Jackson, Army teachers stood in classrooms trying to impart basic skills: reading comprehension, word problems, and algebra. The course for the military’s aptitude test consisted of math and verbal questions at a junior-high level. Many of the recruits were immigrants or the children of immigrants, suggesting that the obstacle was not intellectual capacity but language. “If the military also administered its test in Spanish and French, we’d have a lot more people passing,” the government official who works

on military issues told me. In any case, it seemed clear that the Army was working to minimize the chances of failure: the questions and problems used in the course appeared to be almost identical to those on previous tests.

The aspiring recruits I observed were focussed and alert, traits that some told me they had lacked in high school. Bryant Wehmeyer, from the farming town of Jamaica, Iowa, described his childhood as austere and unforgiving. His mother juggled low-paying jobs—waitress, bookkeeper—and his father, a heavy drinker, was mostly absent. It fell to Wehmeyer to look after his brother, who has autism. “He needs constant care,” Wehmeyer told me.

Still, he was a slacker, often smoking marijuana and downing jello shots before school. “I was never much of a student,” he said. Then, when Wehmeyer was fifteen, his mother suffered a heart attack, and his father walked out. Wehmeyer saw the Army as a way to secure a more stable future for himself and his mother. “I’ve already given her access to my bank account,” he told me.

But, when Wehmeyer took the entrance exam, he scored far below what he needed. Then he entered the Future Soldiers course. On his third and final try, he passed. He said that he was looking forward to graduating from boot camp. “I can’t wait for my mom to see me,” he said.

To the extent that the Army has staved off its recruitment crisis, it is because of the Future Soldiers initiative. Last year, the program provided about one in four of the Army’s recruits. The Navy has started a similar course—and has also allowed in more recruits who scored in the lowest admissible category of the aptitude test. Previously, these candidates could make up no more than four per cent of the Navy’s recruitment pool; since 2022, they have accounted for as much as twenty per cent.

The military tried once before to accept recruits of below-average intelligence. In 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara instituted Project 100,000, in which recruits whose aptitude had been determined to be too low to serve in the military would be admitted and sent to fight. McNamara declared that he could use video training to make the soldiers more competent; critics contended that he created the program to avoid doing away with draft deferments for

college students, which were popular among affluent families. Some three hundred and fifty thousand men were recruited under McNamara's initiative, and they were killed at disproportionate rates. "They were cannon fodder," Myra MacPherson, a journalist who studied the program, told me.

Of course, most people who join the armed forces, through the Future Soldiers program or otherwise, will never see combat. For every "trigger puller," the military needs several supporting players—the vast array of truck drivers, cooks, supply officers, and, increasingly, tech workers who keep the machinery of operations working. The ratio of combatants to support staff is captured with a metric called "tooth to tail." These days, the Army's ratio is about three to one; in a service of about four hundred and fifty thousand, there are roughly a hundred thousand close-combat forces. Both teeth and tail are deployed to contested places around the world: securing the border with North Korea, patrolling the seas around Japan, monitoring flare-ups in the Middle East, providing a firewall in Eastern Europe. Even in those places, most will never experience combat, let alone need to pass another aptitude test. Deterrence rests on the idea that, if you have enough bodies in uniform, your adversaries won't try anything rash.

Michael O'Hanlon, the Brookings fellow, argues that the Army could get by with its current numbers if it managed deployments differently. The military prefers to cycle forces in and out of the places where deterrence is most crucial, which requires maintaining several soldiers at home for each one overseas. In theory, O'Hanlon said, "You could just home-base them in a place where you know they're going to be needed." But the military regards these deployments as essential to keeping forces trained and ready. And, as O'Hanlon acknowledges, the prospect of a foreign posting helps entice recruits to sign up in the first place. "Most people who join the military don't just want to stay at some base in remote Texas," he said. "They want to see the world."

The Marines, with just over two hundred thousand members, are the smallest of the armed services (aside from the tiny Space Force). And, like the Army and the Navy, they have fewer troops than they used to. But the Marines routinely meet their recruiting goals, even with an ethos of exclusivity ("the few, the proud") predicated on pushing potential entrants

away. The Marines' boot camp is considerably longer than those of the other services and notoriously brutal. Recruiters boast about it.

Sam Williams, a former sergeant who worked as a recruiter during the Iraq War, told me, "My approach was 'I don't know if you're tough enough to be a marine.' " Williams would show up at a high school in his dress uniform and pick out the most charismatic student. "I'd find the top dog and walk right up to him and look him in the eye and tell him I didn't think he was good enough," he said. "Once I got him, his friends usually joined as well." Major General William Bowers, the head of Marine Corps recruiting, told me that this approach is designed to attract dedicated people. "It's human nature—value is determined by its difficulty to attain," he said.

For the rest of the services, the process of recruiting new members has become increasingly transactional. "I try to lay out a plan for them that's tailored to what they want to do," Mackenson Joseph, the Army recruiter, told me. "You want to open your own business six years from now? I can help you do that. You want to be a nurse? We can train you to be a nurse. And I can put money in your pocket right now."

In the days of the draft, a typical recruit's salary amounted to a tiny fraction of what an equivalent private-sector worker would earn. But years of congressionally mandated pay increases have nearly closed the gap. And the military offers benefits that are rarely seen in the private sector: sailors and soldiers can often have their housing and health care paid for, and can retire at half pay after twenty years, with continued medical care for them and their families. The military typically helps cover college tuition for soldiers, a benefit that, if unused, can be passed to a spouse. Those who live on base have access to affordable child care. Those who live off base can qualify for subsidized mortgages. In the weeks that I spent talking to prospective recruits, most mentioned the economic benefits, especially college tuition, as their principal motivation. "People don't want to serve the country anymore," Joseph told me. "It's 'What's the military offering me?'"

Many first-time Army recruits, some of them as young as seventeen, can receive a signing bonus of fifty thousand dollars. In other branches, rarer skills command larger bonuses. Naval recruits with certain kinds of technical expertise can get a hundred thousand dollars in bonuses and loan

forgiveness. Navy Captain Ken Roman—the commander of a squadron of nuclear-powered Ohio-class submarines, which patrol the world’s oceans for months at a stretch—re-upped in 2024, and expects to make two hundred thousand dollars in bonuses in the next four years. But he says that the money isn’t what kept him in. At forty-six, Roman could have long since retired and followed many of his former colleagues into the private sector. At sea, though, “I get to work with some of the smartest people in the country, and the work is dynamic and important. Plus, I’m not a cubicle guy.”

To keep the numbers steady, the military needs a minimum of about a hundred and fifty thousand recruits a year. As the Pentagon scrambles to attract and retain people, its costs have soared; personnel now accounts for as much as a third of the defense budget. Barring a major war, that budget is unlikely to grow markedly. In the last years of the Cold War, military spending represented about six per cent of the nation’s G.D.P.; last year, it amounted to about half that. “There really isn’t any chance that the services are going to get larger,” Bryan Clark said. “They need to figure out ways to make do with fewer people.”

The military is rapidly adopting drones, robotics, and other technologies to replace humans. For decades, Nimitz-class aircraft carriers maintained crews of more than five thousand; newer carriers just setting sail require about seven hundred fewer people. The Pentagon’s Replicator initiative seeks to deploy thousands of unmanned air- and seaborne vehicles. “A swarm of drones will not need a swarm of drone operators,” Mark Montgomery, a retired rear admiral and a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, told me.

The rapid automation of warfare—airborne and undersea drones, unmanned ships and planes, and weapons operated by artificial intelligence—suggests that the battlefield of the future may contain far fewer soldiers. But the systems that run this equipment will require highly trained specialists. So will the demands of what Montgomery calls “offensive cyber war”—that is, hacking enemies. “We need Python coders,” Montgomery told me. “Fat kids welcome!” Officials in the Navy recruit heavily at a handful of tech schools, including M.I.T., Georgia Tech, and Carnegie Mellon, to find

students with the knowledge and the aptitude to carry out such demanding tasks as operating nuclear reactors on aircraft carriers. “No dumb kids in those jobs,” Montgomery said. “They need to be really smart, which means they will have a lot of other opportunities.”

One provocative plan to fix military recruitment comes from Senator Tammy Duckworth, of Illinois. Duckworth served in the Army National Guard and retired as a lieutenant colonel (outranking Hegseth, a major). Like many people who join the armed forces, she came from a military family; her ancestors, she told me recently, have served during every major conflict since the French and Indian War. In 2004, a Blackhawk helicopter that she was piloting over Iraq was knocked out of the air by a rocket-propelled grenade. Duckworth lost both of her legs, but she served ten more years.

Like others, Duckworth worries that the military is being asked to do too much with too few recruits, a situation that risks making it even less attractive to enlist. “My fear is a death spiral,” she said. “If you can’t man every position, then you have to extend deployments and the time people stay at sea. The jobs become overwhelming.”

To expand the pool of potential recruits, Duckworth has proposed legislation that would allow certain classes of immigrants—including *DACA* recipients and Ukrainians and Afghans who have been granted temporary residence in the U.S.—the right to legal residence if they join the military. “If you are qualified and willing to wear the uniform to serve the nation honorably, you ought to be able to earn citizenship,” Duckworth told me.

It is difficult to imagine the bill passing in the current climate. In the early days of Trump’s second term, he has seemed more intent on changing the complexion of the military than on boosting its numbers. He issued an order declaring that trans identity is “incompatible with active duty.” Hegseth has called for women to be kept out of combat roles. To replace them, Trump has ordered thousands of soldiers who were expelled for refusing a *COVID* vaccine to be restored to service, with back pay. His first task for the military was to help deport undocumented immigrants across the southern border.

Trump's trans ban contains a phrase that seems unusual in his rhetoric. It refers to "the humility and selflessness required of a service member." These qualities seem scarce in Trump's Washington, but they're easier to find among the young recruits I talked to. At West Point, I met Jillian Pennell, a twenty-one-year-old cadet from Huntsville, Alabama. West Point, like all the country's élite service academies, is difficult to get into; six out of seven applicants are rejected. Tuition is free, but cadets submit to a rigorous program that strictly limits their personal freedom and takes up almost every minute of their days. Summers are spent in training and internships, and everyone is expected to play a sport. West Point's mission is to train leaders who inspire by moral, intellectual, and physical example.

I talked to Pennell in a vaulted room at Taylor Hall, where she was taking a break between classes. She told me she was raised in a Christian household, one that put less stress on church and doctrine than on ethics. "I felt called to service in whatever capacity it was—I felt that from a young age," Pennell said. She aspires to be an Army helicopter pilot; last summer, she completed Air Assault School, in which she rappelled down from hovering choppers. As a pilot, Pennell will be required to give the Army twelve years of service, without the option of leaving. "It's very hard here sometimes, but it's rewarding," she said. She told me that she looked forward to serving the country. "Most of the cadets here feel that way," she said. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the use to which demographic targets have been applied to the Air Force.

Dexter Filkins is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of "*The Forever War*," which won a National Book Critics Circle Award.

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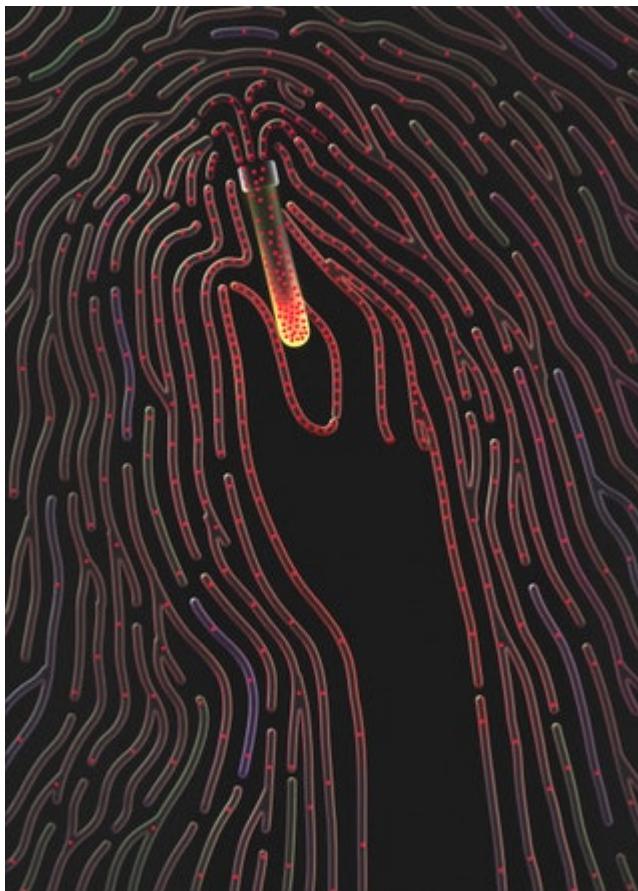
[**Annals of Medicine**](#)

The Long Quest for Artificial Blood

One of the most valuable substances in the world has never been replicated.
Are we close?

By [Nicola Twilley](#)

February 3, 2025



Blood is in high demand almost everywhere, but its seemingly endless complexity has confounded scientists for decades. Illustration by Ibrahim Rayintakath

In a pair of fluorescent-lit rooms on both sides of the Atlantic, the guinea pigs awaited their fate. They were not literally guinea pigs. Two were lightly sedated, extremely fluffy white rabbits resting on pee pads; the other was Nick Green, a sixty-four-year-old part-time administrator at the University of Cambridge who reclined, hands clasped atop his patterned

sweater, on the starched sheets of a hospital bed. All three were hooked up to machines that provided a readout of their vital signs, and all three were prepared to have a syringe of manufactured blood injected into their veins.

There were, of course, some differences. In their metal cages in Baltimore, the rabbits were pampered with fleece blankets and fresh hay, water, and pellets, which were served in front of a screen that streamed a ten-hour YouTube video titled “Instantly Soothe Anxious Rabbits (Tested).” The video showed an endless sequence of bunnies hopping through meadows and being gently tickled behind the ears. Meanwhile, Green made do with a slightly depressing cafeteria lunch—a cheese-and-pickle sandwich and a shiny red apple—and some chitchat about the weather.

Perhaps more significantly, the rabbits were not in the best of shape. Their pink eyes blinked laboriously; they panted and shivered. Half their blood had been drained from their bodies, sending them into hemorrhagic shock—a disastrous multi-organ shortage of oxygen that, even with prompt resuscitation, frequently proves fatal. Green, on the other hand, was fit and well. A keen cyclist, he’d pedalled that morning into a research facility on the outskirts of Cambridge, and planned to ride into work later that afternoon. “Yes, I am a *MAMIL*,” he confessed, using the popular British acronym for middle-aged men in Lycra, perched on their expensive bikes.

A few steps down the hallway from Green’s bed, Cedric Ghevaert, a hematologist with National Health Service Blood and Transplant, was wading through the binder’s worth of paperwork that was required to authorize the syringe, which contained a couple of teaspoons of a mysterious dark-red fluid. Manufactured blood is not classified as blood by U.K. regulators, Ghevaert told me. “It’s a drug substance, therefore it has to be prescribed.”

The liquid had its origins in a pint of blood that had been donated at the Cambridge clinic a few weeks earlier; it had since taken a tour of the country, spending time in Bristol, where N.H.S.B.T. maintains one of the world’s largest blood-processing facilities, and then in London, where it had been laced with radioactive chromium-51. There was a deliberate uncertainty about what had happened to it in Bristol. Green couldn’t know whether the stuff in the syringe was simply the donated blood or—more

intriguingly—an entirely fabricated substitute, produced using stem cells found in that original pint.

The reason for this secrecy was that Green was one of thirteen participants in the first clinical trial to transfuse lab-grown red blood cells into humans. *RESTORE*, as the N.H.S.B.T.-funded trial is known, is designed to measure the survival and circulation of these cells, compared with normal donated ones. (The radioactive labelling would allow the team to count the infused cells for several months post-injection.) “There are companies and academic outfits that are looking to do this across the world,” Ghevaert, a boyish fiftysomething with an endearing French accent, said. But he and his co-lead, Rebecca Cardigan, are “the first ones reaching the point where we are truly comparing the gold standard of donor cells with the manufactured red cells.”

In Baltimore, the rabbits were receiving a somewhat different concoction. They belonged to the lab of Allan Doctor, the director of the Center for Blood Oxygen Transport and Hemostasis, at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, and the co-inventor of ErythroMer, a synthetic nanoparticle that mimics the oxygen-carrying role of red blood cells. If the *RESTORE* trial aims to create the lab-grown burger of blood, Doctor is leading an initiative to create its Impossible equivalent: an artificial substitute that bleeds—or at least operates in the body—almost exactly like the real thing.

But, as even the most ardent alt-meat advocate will admit, plants or lab-grown cells dressed up as steak are hardly one-for-one substitutes in terms of flavor, nutrition, or cost. Meanwhile, scientists don’t yet understand everything that blood does, or how it does it. Somehow, the various components of blood—red and white cells, platelets, and plasma—manage to perform an entire spectrum of life-promoting functions. In addition to picking up oxygen in the lungs and releasing it throughout the body, blood delivers nutrients; transports hormones; carts away toxic waste products such as carbon dioxide, urea, and lactic acid; regulates body temperature, pH, and over-all chemical and fluid balance; monitors for and raises the alarm about organ damage; recalls, detects, and defends against immune-

system threats; and is even responsible for the hydraulics behind tissue engorgement, as the more prudish textbooks might put it.

“You know, it’s hard to compete with millennia of evolutionary pressure,” John Holcomb, a renowned trauma surgeon who honed his skills during two decades in the military, told me. “I’m not sure we’re that smart.” As Green and the rabbits awaited their syringes, I couldn’t help but wonder: Can we really hope to imitate this magical fluid—and what might it mean if we do?

On a sunny afternoon in Pasadena, California, I went for a swim at my local pool, showered, then strolled over to a bloodmobile stationed in the parking lot. After filling out several forms, I was invited to put my feet up on a plastic-covered recliner and given a rubber ball to squeeze. As I pondered what to make for dinner, a nurse slid a needle into my arm and siphoned off one of the nine pints of O-positive blood coursing through my body. Fifteen minutes and a complimentary granola bar later, I was on my way.

A follow-up e-mail arrived almost immediately. “Share your lifeline, share your love,” a blood-donation coördinator wrote, encouraging me to book my next appointment. Blood is “the priceless gift of hope,” according to the American Red Cross, which collects, processes, and sells forty per cent of the U.S. donor-blood supply. Indeed, for something that is by far the most common component of the human body—of the roughly thirty-six trillion cells that make up an average adult male, about thirty-two trillion are blood—it is “among the world’s most precious liquids,” the journalist Douglas Starr writes in his book on the subject, noting that a barrel of blood would retail for more than a thousand times its equivalent in crude oil.

But blood’s elevated status long predates our fossil-fuel era. It is the stuff of the most solemn oaths and the deepest bonds—the essence of not only life but, as Virgil writes in his *Aeneid*, the “purple soul” itself. My donation might have been appreciated, but it pales in comparison with the blood sacrificed to appease ancient gods or shed by Jesus to cleanse humanity of its sins. Even the Devil, via his agent Mephistopheles, recognized blood’s value: it is, he tells Goethe’s Faust, “a very special juice.”



"The only time I feel optimistic anymore is when I know a sandwich is on its way."
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

For centuries, blood was described and imagined in these mythical terms. It wasn't until the sixteen-hundreds, after the Catholic Church relaxed its prohibition on dissecting the human body, that the English physician William Harvey discovered the truth: the purple soul was nothing more than a liquid that was pumped through the body, like water through plumbing. Harvey's insights raised the thrilling possibility of introducing other substances directly into the blood, in order to infuse their qualities into the body's essence. Christopher Wren, better known as the architect of St. Paul's Cathedral, was a member of Harvey's intellectual circle, and he conducted some of the very earliest transfusion experiments, injecting wine, ale, opium, antimony, and "other things" into the bloodstream of dogs and observing the results. (They variously vomited, passed out, and became "extremely drunk.")

Hot on Wren's heels came a pair of scientists—Richard Lower, a medical student from Cornwall, and Jean-Baptiste Denis, the physician to the King of France—who wondered whether moving blood from one creature's veins into another's might change an animal's very nature. Perhaps a ferocious dog could be made gentle "by being . . . stocked with the blood of a *cowardly Dog*," Robert Boyle, another scientist in Harvey's circle, suggested. The diarist Samuel Pepys described an attempt to replicate one

of Lower's early canine trials, in which he stitched the artery of a donor dog and the jugular vein of the recipient to opposite ends of a hollow reed, so that the blood flowed from one to the other. "This did give occasion to many pretty wishes, as of the blood of a Quaker to be let into an Archbishop, and such like," Pepys wrote. Doctors speculated that the elderly might be rejuvenated with the blood of children; that melancholics could be cheered up using the blood of happy souls; and that clashing couples might resolve their differences by exchanging blood.

All this excitement came to an abrupt end when, during the winter of 1667, Denis began transfusing the blood of a calf into a thirty-four-year-old manservant named Antoine Mauroy, who was subject to "phrenses" during which he would beat his wife, take off all his clothes, and run around Paris setting homes on fire. Denis hoped that blood from the gentle calf might serve as a kind of tranquilizer, calming the troubled Mauroy. After the first couple of infusions, Mauroy sweated, vomited, complained of lower-back pain, and pissed charcoal-black fluid—all, we now know, symptoms of a severe transfusion reaction in which the recipient's antibodies attempt to destroy the newly introduced foreign substance. Nonetheless, he soon not only recovered but seemed to be a changed man, speaking lucidly, whistling merrily, and treating his wife with unprecedented tenderness. Unfortunately, a couple of months later, just as the third transfusion was about to get under way, he died. Suspicion fell on his wife, who had, it was alleged, put arsenic in Mauroy's soup, but the damage had been done: before long, the French authorities had officially banned blood transfusion in humans, with the British government and the Pope following suit shortly thereafter.

It took more than a century for medicine to return to the technique, this time as a means to replace blood lost during childbirth. Gradually, blood transfusions came to be seen as a potentially lifesaving—sometimes near-miraculous—treatment in otherwise dire cases of traumatic injury and hemorrhage. It "raised hopes where formerly there had not been any," as Geoffrey Keynes, the surgeon brother of the economist John Maynard, put it in his memoir, recalling how, during the First World War, he would "steal into the moribund ward," conduct a transfusion on one of the patients, and pull "many men back from the jaws of death."

Yet death was still a frequent result of transfusion, and it was only in the early decades of the twentieth century that some of the procedure's most significant problems were ironed out. The Nobel Prize-winning discovery of blood types, in 1900, ultimately improved the odds of survival; no longer was the avoidance of dangerous transfusion reactions a matter of luck. Still, blood's habit of coagulating, so useful in the body, proved a challenge outside of it: within a few minutes of beginning a transfusion, clots would gum up the needles and tubes, seriously limiting the quantity of blood that could be moved from person to person. In the nineteen-tens, a doctor at Mount Sinai Hospital, in New York, discovered that adding a tiny amount of sodium citrate to donor blood would keep it flowing without poisoning the recipient, an advance so transformative that, according to one of his colleagues, it "was almost as if the sun had been made to stand still." Then, there was the storage issue.

"People forget that blood is alive," Allan Doctor told me. "They think it's like urine or something. It is a bodily fluid—but it's living cells." Keeping those cells alive outside the body requires very particular conditions, and, through the nineteen-twenties, blood transfusion required the presence of a live donor. In London, Geoffrey Keynes relied on a directory of on-call volunteers; in a time when many people didn't have a telephone, policemen and priests were often enlisted to track down donors at any hour of the day. It wasn't until the Spanish Civil War in 1936 that a Canadian surgeon figured out how to keep blood intact for up to a week, refrigerated in glass milk bottles, and the modern era of blood transfusion finally began.

In Filton, a suburb on Bristol's northern edge, Britain's National Health Service operates a blood factory that can receive and process up to three thousand units a day. Inside the vast, white manufacturing hall, bags and bags of blood dangle overhead, suspended from a steel rail like macabre baubles. "They'll usually come in warm," Naomi Jones, the center's then deputy head, who was clad in a hairnet and blue coveralls, told me. The fresh blood separates slightly as it hangs: the dark-red cells, heavy owing to their iron content, sink to the bottom, and the plasma, which makes up more than half of blood's volume, sits on top. Each bag looked different in ways that, Jones told me, can reflect its donor's health—some had more or fewer red cells, while the plasma ranged in shade from lemonade to Coca-Cola.

“If you’re on the pill or anything like that, the hormones will make it green,” she said. “And people who have lots of fats in their blood, it’s like a banana milkshake.”

During the blood’s sojourn on the rack, white blood cells are filtered out. Then, in dedicated pods staffed by one or two people, the bags are broken down into the rest of their component parts, which are weighed, labelled, and put on conveyor belts that transport them into storage. Red blood cells are stacked in plastic crates in a refrigerator, separated by blood type; plasma is blast-frozen; and platelets, which must be kept in gentle motion, are extracted from the thin beige layers in between, pooled together, and placed on metal shelves inside an incubator that jiggles from side to side.

Modern on-demand blood, it turns out, is a logistical miracle: rubber tubing and milk bottles have been replaced by an engineered process that gathers the liquid, tests it, and then stores each of its elements for maximum shelf life, before getting it to the patients who need it. But not to all of them. Despite the high throughput of the N.H.S.B.T. blood factory, and despite the fact that a unit of blood is transfused every two seconds in the United States, there just isn’t enough.

Part of the problem is that a lot of people need it. An astonishing number of civilians die of injury each year—upward of a hundred and fifty thousand in the U.S., and more than five million globally. “Every! Year!” John Holcomb, the trauma surgeon, said. “It’s the leading cause of life years lost.” Accidental injury is the primary cause of death for anyone forty-four or younger, and blood loss is the most common cause of potentially preventable trauma deaths. Holcomb and his colleagues estimate that in the U.S. alone there are likely thirty thousand preventable deaths each year, owing to hemorrhage. In one paper, they combed through the 2014 mortality data for the county encompassing Houston, Texas: even in a major metropolitan area with a well-resourced trauma-care network, more than one in three people who died from bleeding could have possibly been saved.

“If you go into hemorrhagic shock, you need blood products,” Holcomb said. “And the data are clear that, the earlier you get blood products, the better your survival.” Every minute matters; ideally, injured individuals

would receive blood on the street or in an ambulance, before they even reach a hospital. Many of them don't, for reasons that are demographic, biological, and economic. "No. 1, there's not enough blood," Holcomb said. "You probably need another sixty to a hundred thousand units of blood available nationwide." In the U.K., N.H.S.B.T. aims to have five to seven days' supply on hand; in the U.S., the goal is similar. The reality is that, at times, blood isn't available. Ghevaert told me that, on a recent trip to the U.S., he'd been informed that, on that particular day, there were no platelets left at 11 A.M. in the New Orleans area. Platelets are what allow blood to clot—they're lifesaving for patients who are hemorrhaging after surgery, traumatic injury, or childbirth.

This shortage is caused by the fact that too few people give blood. Of the thirty-eight per cent of Americans who are eligible to donate, less than three per cent regularly do. (Some trauma experts suggest that reintroducing payment for blood donations, which are currently voluntary, would boost supply, though the U.S. has a sordid history of such arrangements leading to the exploitation of the poor.) "In addition to that bad stuff, our population is aging," Philip Spinella, an expert in transfusion medicine at the University of Pittsburgh and a co-founder of KaloCyte, the company developing ErythroMer, explained. "In the next ten years, there'll be twenty million more people above the age of sixty-five." Across the developed world, societies are increasingly elderly, which squeezes the blood supply from two directions. "Baby boomers and the Greatest Generation—they were the blood donors," Mark Gladwin, the dean of the University of Maryland School of Medicine, told me. "Our young generation is not donating blood." Meanwhile, the people over sixty-five "get cancer and have heart surgery—they need platelets and red cells," Spinella went on. "Where's it going to come from? Right now, our donor base can't support today's needs. What about 2030?"

Blood's innate fragility exacerbates this crisis. It has a remarkably short shelf life: five days for platelets, and forty-two for red blood cells. If you add a cryoprotectant, red blood cells can be successfully frozen—but then they have to be defrosted, and the antifreeze has to be washed out with extreme care, so as not to damage the cells. This can delay the process by hours, during which time most hemorrhaging patients will be long gone.

What's more, even meticulously stored blood is gradually dying. "When you put fish in the refrigerator and leave it for five days, it's less good," Holcomb said. "Blood is the same." Doctor showed me research that measured how much oxygen cold-stored red blood cells were capable of moving. "It's down to forty per cent of normal before it's even outdated," he said.

The rapid turnover rate of fresh blood, combined with the equipment required to slow its decline, means that its use tends to be restricted to large trauma centers in major urban areas—which means that people who get injured far from such resources, whether they are an hour outside Houston or almost anywhere in the developing world, have a much higher chance of dying from trauma. There are ways around this: in Rwanda, blood is often delivered by drone; in the United States, it could be carried in an ice chest on every ambulance or medevac helicopter. The fact that it is not is almost purely economic.

"The problem here is that there's practically no reimbursement for prehospital blood by insurance and agencies," Holcomb said. "There's nothing that has a bigger impact on survival than prehospital blood. *Nothing.* And yet the major impediment is not logistics—we've worked through that. It's not how to store the blood. It's reimbursement. And, in our system, if you don't get reimbursed you don't do it." Spinella, who told me about a trial in Pittsburgh demonstrating that prehospital plasma greatly improves survival rates, is also outraged. "We had to stop it after the trial was over because our E.M.S. system can't afford to put blood on the ambulances," he said. "So we proved it, and now we can't do it, because it's unaffordable. It's criminal."

Similarly, although there is now evidence to show that giving whole, never-separated blood is more effective than red blood cells alone—or even recombined red cells, plasma, and platelets—blood banks on both sides of the Atlantic continue to break blood down into its components. The practice was pioneered during the Second World War, partly to stretch limited resources, and became common in the sixties, when the rise of chemotherapy led to an increased demand for platelet and plasma transfusions for immunosuppressed patients.



"I get that the Emperor is 'wearing new clothes,' but what's the deal with Dennis?"
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

The theory makes sense: by splitting blood, a single unit can treat multiple people, as doctors deliver just the part of it that their patients need. In practice, though, bleeding patients certainly need red blood cells to get oxygen to their brains, but they also need platelets to help stop the bleeding, and plasma to help restore lost blood pressure and thus circulation. “The way blood banks have made products that are inventory-based and not patient-based is also criminal,” Spinella said. He recalled conversations with a former executive at the American Red Cross who told him, “ ‘Philip, whole blood is not in our business plan.’ And I would say, ‘That’s bullshit. It’s my patient’s *life* plan.’ ”

For all these reasons, developing a substitute for blood that could be produced at will, stored for eternity, and given to anyone, avoiding the drag of blood-type matching, has been high on scientists’ wish list for decades. And yet, when the first substitutes arrived, they, too, tended to be siloed, picking just one of blood’s myriad functions to mimic. Volume seemed simplest: when there’s not enough fluid in the circulatory system, there’s not enough pressure to pump oxygen around the body. Water with some dissolved salts and sugars—a solution medics call crystalloid—seemed as though it would do the trick.

Unfortunately, in response to the disastrous lack of fluid after blood loss, the lining of the vessel walls becomes porous. “They were smart people back then, and they thought they were doing good, but crystalloid does not

heal those porous holes,” Holcomb said. “So now the fluid goes into the vessel and out into the tissue, and you get edema, and edema makes everything not work—the brain, lungs, kidneys, muscle, everything.” Nonetheless, to this day, saline infusions are the standard of care in situations where blood is not yet available. (This upsets Spinella so much that he made T-shirts that read “Blood is for bleeding. Saltwater is for cooking pasta.”)

Next, scientists focussed on the oxygen carriers themselves: red blood cells, arguably blood’s most important component. Early bets were placed on a class of synthetic organic chemicals called perfluorocarbons (PFCs), initially employed in the separation of uranium as part of the Manhattan Project. The leading contender, Fluosol-DA, was developed by Ryoichi Naito, the head of Japan’s biggest blood bank. (Naito’s interest in blood dated back to the Second World War, when he served in Japan’s Unit 731, notorious for conducting almost unimaginably inhumane experiments on prisoners.) PFCs were chemically inert and could carry large amounts of dissolved oxygen; however, they typically required frozen storage, were frequently accompanied by toxic side effects, and worked only if the patient was also breathing enriched oxygen, all of which limited their utility. Fluosol-DA was approved for use by the F.D.A. in 1989, before being withdrawn five years later, as evidence emerged that its risks outweighed any benefits.

Other scientists decided to copy nature more faithfully. The molecule responsible for carrying oxygen in red cells is hemoglobin, an iron-rich protein with a sophisticated structure that allows it to pick up the gas, ferry it safely around the body, and release it according to availability and need. “What the hell, we’ll just get that out of the cell, purify it, and inject it into the bloodstream,” Doctor said, paraphrasing the thought process of an earlier generation of researchers. “What people didn’t completely consider is, there’s a reason it’s inside cells.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to try it, too?” I asked Doctor, as he used a pipette to add some water to a Barbie-pink powder. This was ErythroMer, his freeze-dried artificial red blood cells, which, when hydrated, turned into what looked like a shot of raspberry milk. “I never have,” Doctor admitted.

“I guess I can’t not?” Together, we clinked plastic test tubes, sniffed, then slurped. The initial flavor note was salt, followed by a fatty finish. “It has a little bit of a creamy feel,” Doctor said. “I don’t think we’re going to be able to market it for taste.” When I complained that I could detect none of the metallic sucking-on-a-penny note of real blood, he told me that was precisely the point. “There’s no contact between the iron and your tongue,” he said. “Because it’s hidden inside the membrane.”

In the nineties, several major pharmaceutical companies, including Baxter International, were confident enough in their hemoglobin-based oxygen carriers (*HBOCs*) that they had progressed all the way to Phase III clinical trials, the final hurdle before F.D.A. approval. A 1994 report in the *New York Times* titled “Race for Artificial Blood Heats Up” noted in passing that the companies had observed “an unexpected tendency of their products to cause blood vessels to constrict,” but that they were not concerned—indeed, the article continued, “Baxter says such vasoconstriction may be a benefit,” because it would “raise blood pressure in victims of acute blood loss.”

This optimism turned out to be misplaced. “The original *HBOC* trial by Baxter is one of the most lethal trials in critical-care history,” Gladwin, the dean of the University of Maryland School of Medicine, told me. “That’s how toxic the stuff was.” Of the fifty-two patients infused with Baxter’s product, twenty-four died, compared with only eight of the forty-six control patients, who were given a standard saline solution. The trials cast a pall over the entire project of engineering blood. “They shut everything down, and the field kind of went dark,” Doctor said. “People thought it couldn’t be done—the human body is too complicated, we don’t really understand it, so screw it.” But ErythroMer, which Doctor and I had just chugged, is, technically, an *HBOC*—although, I was assured, a next-generation, probably nontoxic, version. “This is not your grandfather’s *HBOC*,” Spinella, who is also the chief medical officer at KaloCyte, said. “I mean, yes, it carries oxygen and it is hemoglobin-based, but it’s not that. All people do is hear that and go, ‘Oh, failure.’ ”

Doctor never had any intention of devoting his energies to this ill-starred field. Back in 2012, he was a professor working in pediatric intensive care at Washington University in St. Louis. “The problem that we were dealing

with at the time, and still often deal with, is losing control of the circulatory system,” he said. “We would fix infections and other things, and the kids would still die, and nobody really understood what was happening.” Part of the problem was well known—in response to severe inflammation, blood vessels dilate, causing blood pressure to drop precipitously—but Doctor wondered whether the root cause was red-cell injury. His lab began trying to tease out the subtle cues that governed a red blood cell’s ability to manage blood flow.

Doctor was, as he put it, “minding my own business doing that” when he received a call from Dipanjan Pan, a chemist and bioengineer who was also based at Washington University, and who specialized in creating nanoparticles for medical use. “I call it serendipity at its best,” Pan, ErythroMer’s co-inventor, told me. One day, he was looking at a nanoparticle under a microscope and noticed that its doughnut shape resembled a red blood cell. Though he knew of the long, inglorious history of blood substitutes, he couldn’t help but ponder whether hemoglobin could be placed inside one of the doughnuts. “But I’m a materials scientist, not an expert in red-blood physiology,” Pan said.

“So he called me up,” Doctor told me. “He said, ‘I made this thing. I don’t really know how to tell if it works or not. Are you interested?’ ”

By this point, scientists had concluded that the major issue with *HBOCs* was tied to the vasoconstriction that Baxter had reportedly hoped might be a feature, not a bug. It turns out that our capillaries have evolved to inflate and deflate on demand—a system optimized for both conserving energy and running away from predators. “You’re just sitting there,” Doctor said, pointing at me. “So only about ten to fifteen per cent of your capillaries are being used.” If I were to suddenly sprint, he told me, my body would pop open thousands more, to insure adequate oxygen distribution. One of the molecules that causes those capillaries to open up is called nitric oxide; the discovery of its role in circulation was rewarded with a Nobel Prize, in 1998, and led to, among other things, the development of Viagra. “It’s like the WD-40 of blood vessels,” Gladwin told me. His own research has helped show that even tiny amounts of hemoglobin outside a red cell can cause immense damage by scavenging nitric oxide. The less nitric oxide in

a blood vessel, the tighter it is—meaning that the hemoglobin Baxter put in severely injured patients went around shutting down circulation at the very moment it was most needed.

Doctor immediately realized that, if the hemoglobin could be safely sheathed inside the membrane of Pan's nanoparticle, these issues might be avoided. He and Pan also equipped the membrane with a substance they call KC1003. "That's the secret sauce," Doctor told me. On its own, hemoglobin is very good at grabbing oxygen, but less good at letting it go—a process that, in real red blood cells, is triggered by ambient pH and CO₂ levels, so that the cells can pick up oxygen in the lungs and then release it into the tissues that need it. KC1003 performs the same trick, which allows ErythroMer to get the most oxygen-delivery bang for its nanoparticulate buck. "If you're in Denver and you exercise," Doctor told me, your red blood cells produce a molecule that insures more oxygen is released into tissue. ErythroMer is stuffed full of that molecule, which is switched on by KC1003 in tissues but shut off in the lungs, where oxygen uptake is the priority. "It's, like, I'm in Denver, I'm in St. Louis, I'm in Denver, I'm in St. Louis," Doctor explained. "But it thinks it's in Denver only when it's in your muscle, and it thinks it's in St. Louis only when it's in your lung." (Would this neat little trick also make ErythroMer an ideal supplement for aspiring marathoners? "Oh, yeah," Doctor said. "Totally.")

Thus far, ErythroMer has shown promising results. "He has some really nice data in animal models that suggest it's improving oxygen delivery and it's safe," Gladwin said. (Another hemoglobin nanoparticle, hbV, has been developed by researchers in Japan, and small amounts have been safely injected into healthy humans, though its circulatory half-life seems to be shorter than ErythroMer's, and it isn't capable of performing the same altitude trick.) One of the other big advances of Doctor's substitute is its ease of storage. Unlike first-generation HBOCs, ErythroMer is a lightweight, shelf-stable powder that can be rehydrated in minutes. The possibility of a cold-chain-free blood substitute has drawn the attention of the U.S. military, specifically the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA, which recently awarded Doctor's team forty-six million dollars to combine ErythroMer with synthetic platelets and freeze-dried human plasma, creating a "field-deployable whole-blood equivalent."

“I hate to say it, but a lot of this is driven by what they think the next war is going to be,” Doctor said. “It’s expected to be a near-peer conflict with Russia or China.” Jean-Paul Chretien, a former *DARPA* program manager, was more circumspect, but confirmed that, without air superiority, the U.S. might not be able to evacuate injured soldiers to a medical facility capable of storing and being regularly resupplied with cold blood. “That means you have to be able to take care of people on the battlefield, and, if you’re dealing with battle wounds, you need blood,” Doctor said. “That’s why *DARPA*’s decided to make this big investment.”

Doctor’s team received the *DARPA* award in early 2023. As their second year of funding came to an end, he told me, they’d successfully created a nifty packaging prototype, which will allow medics to rehydrate and heat the blood powder by opening a folded plastic pack and massaging it gently. Doctor had met or exceeded enough of the second-year *DARPA* benchmarks to graduate into the next phase of the project, but he wasn’t celebrating. He had yet to test the combination of his artificial red blood cell with a synthetic platelet—a tiny spherical liposome decorated with strings of amino acids, developed by researchers at Case Western Reserve University—and freeze-dried plasma. “The thing I’m most worried about are the interactions between the particles producing unanticipated safety problems,” he said. “It would be naïve to think that everything’s just going to work like we expect.”

For all the ambition of *DARPA*’s whole-blood substitute program, the best-case scenario is just that: a substitute, without several of the downsides—or all of the magic—of the real thing. But the alternative—growing real red blood cells outside the body—has proved even more challenging. In a small laboratory at the N.H.S.B.T. campus in Filton, steps away from the gallons of fresh donor-derived blood being processed in the manufacturing hall, I was initiated into the much more artisanal craft of culturing red blood cells.

For something that the body makes roughly two million of every single second, red cells are astonishingly difficult to grow outside of it. Attempts began in the late nineties, following the isolation of human embryonic stem cells. These are pluripotent, meaning that they can be nudged to become any one of the body’s estimated two hundred different cell types, given the

appropriate conditions. Determining those conditions for red blood cells took a lot of trial and error. After a decade, the team at Filton “could only really make a little dusting of red cells,” Sabine Taylor, who joined the lab in 2009, said. “It was just a little spot of red at the bottom of a tube.”

Instead, they started taking their building blocks from donor blood—specifically, from the thin beige layer, known as a buffy coat, that’s sandwiched between the red cells and the plasma. Pipette in hand, I followed Taylor’s instructions, carefully vacuuming up and dumping out as much plasma as I could without disturbing the buffy coat, before trying, and failing, to suck it up with one graceful plunger release. “It does take a bit of practice,” she said, sympathetically. She gently washed off the red residue stuck to my buffy coat before we tackled the next challenge: finding our starter cells.

The Creation of Dust



“They tidy and they neaten and they straighten and they walk away all proud of themselves. And then, when they get back—BAM!—this crap is all over the place.”

Cartoon by David Ostow

Taylor’s team looks for hematopoietic stem cells, which already know that their destiny is to become a blood cell, though they haven’t determined which kind. “We’re cheating a little bit by starting with something that’s preprogrammed to go in the right direction,” Taylor said. Only one in a thousand of the cells in my buffy coat would be a hematopoietic stem cell; fortunately, its surface chemistry is quite distinctive. By equipping a protein that binds exclusively to that surface with tiny magnetic beads, Taylor and

her colleagues can pull the needle they’re looking for out of the bloody haystack.

At this point, hours had passed. Several more rounds of washing and filtration had yet to take place before lunch, which was a priority for the hematopoietic cells: they have to be fed exactly the right nutrients, at the right times, to commit to becoming red blood. (Taylor told me that she and her colleagues come in on weekends for feeds.) As I admitted defeat, she showed me some she’d made earlier: a flask full of cranberry-juice-colored liquid sitting in an incubator. Under a microscope, we compared them with real red blood cells; ironically, the natural ones were so identically perfect that they appeared to have been manufactured, whereas the lab-grown cells looked, to put it diplomatically, handmade. In fact, Taylor confessed, they’re not even red cells. “What we’re actually making is the immediate precursor to a red cell,” she said. “The last step of maturing happens in the body, but we’ve not managed to replicate it.”

These are the cells that are being injected into Nick Green, and other volunteers, as part of the *RESTORE* trial. In Cambridge, as Ghevaert weighed a syringe, which held a grand total of eight millilitres of red cells, I asked him whether the Filton team had prepared a backup, just in case. “There’s no backup,” he said. “Mostly because we use all the stuff we culture, and this is the scale we’re culturing at.”

By painstakingly tweaking their processes, Taylor and her colleagues have scaled production from a pinprick to two teaspoonsfuls at a time, at a cost that Ghevaert estimated at roughly seventy-five thousand dollars per syringe. (In contrast, the American Red Cross charges hospitals around two hundred dollars for a pint of donated red blood cells.) The vision of multistory steel bioreactors brewing pure, safe, universally tolerated O-negative blood by the gallon is still a long way off. It will also—according to Ashley Toye, who leads the red-blood-cell-products program at the U.K.’s National Institute for Health and Care Research, which is co-funding the *RESTORE* trial—require *enhancing* artificial blood, in order to make it commercially viable. In 2022, Toye’s startup, Scarlet Therapeutics, was founded to do exactly that.

DARPA, which began funding a “blood pharming” initiative of its own, in 2008, quickly came to a similar realization. “We immediately shifted to genetically modifying the blood,” Dan Wattendorf, the scientist who led the program between 2010 and 2016, said. “If you’re competing with the commodity of everyone’s arm to give a bag of blood, it’s going to be very hard to overcome that cost hurdle. If you add value to the blood by genetically modifying it, then you can get a much higher margin.” To secure the investment required to reach the bioreactor scale, lab-grown red blood cells need to tap into pharmaceutical-industry money, by making a red blood cell that is also a medicine.

There is a precedent for this: researchers have already genetically engineered T cells, part of the white-blood-cell family, to recognize and attack cancer cells. The first such drug, known as CAR-T-cell therapy, received F.D.A. approval in 2017, as a treatment for leukemia. Red blood cells are not killers, like their white counterparts, but they do have certain advantages. For one, the same membrane that so effectively sheathes hemoglobin can also hide novel enzymes from the immune system. A lab-grown red blood cell that contains an enzyme engineered to pump out therapeutic proteins is, essentially, a tiny, stealth drug factory that distributes a steady supply of medicine around the body for up to a hundred and twenty days. “Evolution has given us an incredible tool chest of hematopoietic stem cells,” Wattendorf said. “Once we understand how to do this, it’s a massive, massive opportunity space.”

Synthetic nanoparticles like ErythroMer have the same potential to host beneficial agents. “Whole blood is the marinara, it’s a one-size-fits-all,” Spinella said, deploying another pasta analogy. Right now, he told me, whole blood is still our best bet for all kinds of different situations—obstetric bleeding, traumatic brain injury, heart surgery—but he foresees a future of custom blood blends. “Maybe the pathophysiology of postpartum hemorrhage requires more platelets or more plasma than an oncology patient or a liver-transplant patient,” he suggested. “Once we’ve got the basic recipe figured out, we’re going to get fancy and add eggplant or pork.” Doctor and Pan recently began collaborating on a new proposal for a *DARPA* initiative to develop nanoparticles that can latch on to soldiers’ red blood cells to enhance them in various ways. “The red blood cells can be

loaded with agents that will make the oxygen binding and release capacity of these soldiers much higher than normal human beings' ,” Pan said.

Regardless of whether any of these efforts will actually translate into clinical reality, the quest to synthesize and even improve on blood has taught us volumes about it. “What I cannot create, I do not understand,” the theoretical physicist Richard Feynman famously scribbled on his Caltech blackboard. In the process of trying and failing to mimic the magic that takes place in the human body, researchers have answered questions they wouldn’t otherwise have thought to ask, learning about everything from the role of nitric oxide in the body to the particular choreography of chemical signals that trigger the release of platelets from their mother cells. “The more we figure out about how it works inside our body, the more practical it is to make it outside of the body,” Wattendorf said. “We are truly in a golden era of understanding blood.”

In the course of about ten minutes, an animal-research technician in Doctor’s lab gently injected the first rabbit with sixty millilitres of synthetic red blood cells. Its vital signs were displayed on a nearby screen, and Doctor narrated the action in real time, reeling off statistics like a baseball commentator. The rabbit’s lactate levels—a telltale marker of oxygen-deprived tissue—started falling almost instantly. Doctor scrutinized shifts in its pulse waveform, a clue to how hard its heart was working. “The hump on the bottom is now flattening,” he pointed out. “You can see it’s more comfortable.” Indeed, by the time the procedure was finished, the rabbit was sitting up in its cage, looking around, and panting considerably less. “Half his blood is artificial now,” Doctor said.

Meanwhile, in Cambridge, Ghevaert prepared to inject (potentially) manufactured red blood cells into a prominent vein on the back of Nick Green’s hand. As Green confirmed his name and date of birth, Ghevaert ran some saline through the line, checking that it was clear, and then began the transfusion. “It’s a slow push,” he said. Green reported no sensation. The whole thing took about sixty seconds, followed by a flurry of activity as the nurses extracted samples from Green’s other arm every few minutes, on a strict schedule. “That was very straightforward,” Green said. “I felt quite relaxed.”

Half an hour later, we were talking about cricket as Ghevaert finished his paperwork. The entire thing had concluded with a distinct lack of fanfare, considering the fact that Green was perhaps one of very few humans to have lab-grown red blood cells in his veins. “I’ve got the easy part, you know—I’m just lying here, people are chatting to me,” he said. “I’m quite enjoying this.”

In Baltimore, Rabbit No. 1 was also hopping around its cage like nothing had happened. “Don’t pee on me, buddy,” Doctor said, as he picked it up to stroke its fluffy white fur. “He’s looking pretty good, considering he was almost dead a few hours ago.” Sadly, things had not gone so well for Rabbit No. 2. “Even after resuscitation, twenty per cent of them will die,” Doctor explained. “There’s a very big difference in the individual ability to tolerate shock.”

An eighty-per-cent chance of survival from a potentially lethal injury is, to be honest, pretty good odds—possibly better than the chances that either of these blood substitutes will make it into therapeutic use. Regardless, the quest for artificial blood will continue: for all its wonders, the real stuff is no longer enough. ♦



[Nicola Twilley](#), a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, is a host of the podcast “Gastropod.” Her books include “[Frostbite: How Refrigeration Changed Our Food, Our Planet, and Ourselves](#).”

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **Developmental Milestones of Your Elon Musk**

By Cora Frazier | By this age, your Elon Musk should be able to wave hello and goodbye and point to Cabinet employees he plans to fire.

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

Developmental Milestones of Your Elon Musk

By [Cora Frazier](#)

February 3, 2025



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

The way your Elon Musk plays, moves, and communicates offers important data about his development. Although every child is different, recognizing where your Elon Musk is on the curve can help you identify potential problems early and allow for intervention, under the guidance of your pediatrician and the federal regulatory agency.

Social/Emotional Milestones

By this age, your Elon Musk should be able to wave hello and goodbye and point to Cabinet employees he plans to fire. He should be able to hug stuffed toys, recognize the people who care for him, clap when a judge dismisses an insider-trading lawsuit, and blow kisses. If, at this age, your Elon Musk can show affection only through the social-media platform he owns, consult a pediatrician about whether he may be suffering from an

underlying issue that could have broader emotional or geopolitical implications.

Language/Communication Milestones

Your Elon Musk should be able to say at least three words besides “Mama,” “Dada,” “Earth,” “wow,” and “billion.” If not, speech therapy may be recommended, or else otolaryngological testing, to determine whether your Elon Musk has a hearing impairment that is impeding his ability to form diplomatically appropriate speech. By now, Elon Musk should be able to point to objects when they are identified by others, including the more than ten billion dollars his companies have been given by NASA, and any household pets.

Cognitive/Reasoning Milestones

Ideally, by this age, your Elon Musk can stack two or more blocks in a model of the tunnel that his construction company built beneath the Las Vegas Convention Center. He can play with toys—for instance, pushing a recalled Tesla Cybertruck across the floor or mimicking adults as they drink from cups, brush their hair, or use their phones to post deepfakes.

Physical/Movement Milestones

Your Elon Musk should be able to walk at a domestic political rally in his company-branded shoes without holding on to anything. He should be able to feed himself with his hands and drink from a cup without a lid, although he may spill sometimes. Elon Musk should at least try to listen to shareholders and use a spoon.

When to See a Doctor

As you assess your Elon Musk’s development, consider it holistically. What are some non-downsizing activities that your Elon Musk enjoys? What are some activities that you enjoy doing with your Elon Musk? Ideally, he will have clear likes and dislikes that lie outside his early-school activities and his investment portfolio. Your goal is to raise a happy, healthy, socially conscious Elon Musk who will engage with family and peers. If, instead, your Elon Musk is showing signs of aggressive behavior, such as biting, hitting, spitting, or creating the largest platform for disinformation in the world, this could be a cause for concern. Consult with your day-care provider about whether time-outs involving quiet moon-sand play would

encourage more regulated decision-making. Reinforce prosocial behaviors, such as shrinking his carbon footprint, and ignore his attempts to make fascist hand gestures in his stroller. If time-outs prove ineffective, and your Elon Musk in fact looks poised to take a prominent role in the most powerful anti-democratic regime in the world, you may want to consider a more active intervention, with the help of a licensed professional, such as occupational therapy, in which your Elon Musk can play with tubes and practice sharing balls of varying sizes. Ultimately, it's important to remember that you can only do so much. Elon Musk is his own person with his own will. All you can do is hope that, one day, he will understand that throwing trucks at peers can lead to loneliness, as can rending the social fabric that has held our nation together since the New Deal. If not, you can always try sleep training. ♦

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

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Fiction

- **“My Friend Pinocchio”**

By David Rabe | It was hard not to feel that Kenny and I were making our way together, that with his help I'd arrived at a special place in the hierarchy of worldly things.

[Fiction](#)

My Friend Pinocchio

By [David Rabe](#)

February 2, 2025

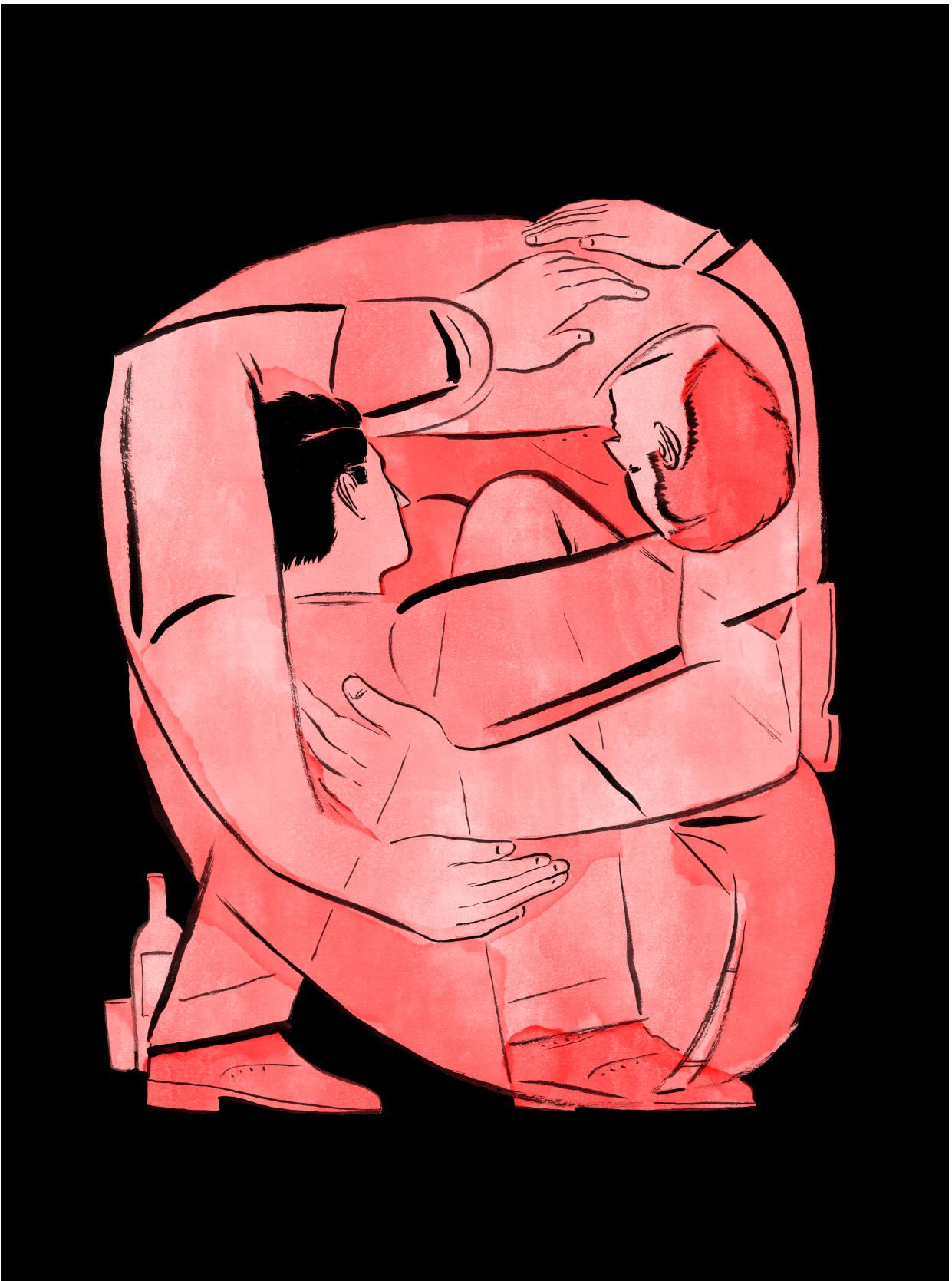


Illustration by Grant Shaffer

When I broke Kenny's bedroom door, I was in the middle of a crazy argument with my girlfriend. Kenny and his wife, Cathy, were away, and, actually, I didn't ruin the door, but I damaged it and hurt my hand. This was the girlfriend I'd run after in a panic-stricken, wild breakout that destroyed my first marriage and led to a nervous breakdown. Time in the breakdown lane. It turned out to be a kind of walking collapse, in the sense that pneumonia is sometimes "walking." So I walked around pretty much like shattered pottery glued back together haphazardly, all the while drinking, with a teeth-gritted determination to hang on to my girlfriend and survive. Not that pottery can drink or walk. But I could and did, and one of the things I did in that time was break Kenny's door.

She was in the bedroom, and I was outside it. We talked through the door, each of us drinking—which was a big mistake, a big miscalculation that went unrecognized at the time. I had some sort of idea or perception of her that manifested as this gigantic, ungovernable feeling that I couldn't live without her. It was like I was midair and only partway down a long fall with no end in sight. If I wanted to be kind to myself, and to her, too, I could say that we were self-medicating. But, no matter what you call it, we knew enough to get away from each other, and I had to get a new door.

A good friend of Cathy's was married to a world-famous rock star. Lots of noise, big drums, and a buried melody. Whenever the rock star and his wife were out of town, their fabulous estate was open for Cathy and Kenny to enjoy. Since my girlfriend and I were still staying with them—this continued for some time—we were invited along. It was hard not to feel that Kenny and I were making our way together, that with his help I'd arrived at a special place in the hierarchy of worldly things. It seemed bizarre when the gate opened in response to the code that Kenny punched in and all that luxury recognized us. We lounged around the pool while gazing over the rolling lawn. Watching my girlfriend swim was a perk. She barely splashed.

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

Another perk, or almost perk, had to do with my messed-up hand.

A film mogul had optioned a novel I'd published after getting out of the Army. The project went nowhere. But the mogul's interest, as perfunctory as

it was, left me with a certain afterglow that attracted others. A movie star of enormous charisma invited me out to his home in Malibu for a meeting. We sat in his living room with his girlfriend, a singer who was maybe even more famous than he was. He explained that he might hire me to look over some screenplays and evaluate their narratives. We talked a little about my novel, but what interested him most was my messed-up hand.

“A woman?” he said, glancing at his girlfriend. They smiled at each other.
“A door?”

I felt exotic. It wasn’t the volatility that interested him but the suggested jealousy. Women fell into his bed. He was curious to study me.

It turned out that Kenny was gay. Not that I knew he was. Or even that he knew it. The possibility had occurred to me at times, but I’d never considered that what occurred to me in passing might be true. That’s a long story, and part of the one I’m telling, but mainly, as I see it, this is about our friendship. Graduate school—that’s where we met. We were roommates, along with two other guys, in a big, spooky, vine-encrusted mansion. The old woman who owned it was spooky, too. She lived in it with a spooky younger woman who was her caretaker. We rarely saw them, but we would hear them, like spirits arguing in the walls. We lived in a kind of ground-floor addendum that had been built as I don’t know what but was then transformed into an apartment with a long enclosed porch sectioned into bedrooms.

Now, in regard to Kenny and whether he was gay or not—and I know this will sound stupid because it will seem obvious that I should have known—but was he gay if he didn’t want to be? If he had sex with women? I didn’t know then how to answer these questions, but I did know that I didn’t want him to be gay if *he* didn’t want to be. This was something like sixty years ago. So a lot was different in people’s thinking. I viewed being gay as sad—not sinful or anything like that but tragic. I think Kenny did, too, but we never talked about it. We had bigger questions, prime among them, thanks to Salinger, was whether we could avoid becoming phony. Another was: Did Lucy Windsor like Kenny or me? I remember, once, the two of us in that creepy old house consulting a Ouija board about her and getting scared out

of our minds when the force moving the widget to answer our questions, with undeniable acuity, identified itself as the Devil.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to David Rabe read “My Friend Pinocchio.”](#)

So we were in graduate school in the theatre department, and one of the things we had to do was design sets for a class. This meant that we picked a play, made a lot of notes, sketched out a set for a possible production, and then built a model. In this case, we were designing sets for plays that we ourselves had written. My model was a mess. I was on the floor struggling to get the paper, glue, and cardboard to fulfill my aims. Kenny was on our living-room couch, his exquisitely fashioned model completed hours earlier.

Kenny, who at times almost sang my name, called out, “Donnyyy.” He explained how I should adjust my model to better accomplish what he could see I wanted. He suggested a backdrop, cut out a quick version, glued it in place, and lay back down on the couch. This was in the early sixties. Peter, Paul and Mary had a hit song called “Puff, the Magic Dragon.” I was so grateful—it was late, and I was end-of-the-semester tired—and I sang, “You are Puff, the magic dragon, who helped poor, clumsy me.”

I don’t know if it was that same night, but I think it was—I know it happened in that apartment. At some point, Kenny went to the refrigerator and took something out and then dropped it. “Kenny, what’s wrong with you, damn it!” he scolded himself, gesturing in this floppy, loose-wristed way. Instantly, he seethed with a rage very different from the one that had come when he’d dropped whatever it was he’d dropped. He looked at me full of desperate, furious petition and said, “Why do my hands do that? Why do they act that way? I hate it. I hate it.”

It was many years later—half a lifetime, really—that he got sick with what killed him. His divorce from Cathy was in the rearview mirror. He’d held a position with more than one Hollywood studio, big jobs that never lasted. He had countless friends in the business—directors, writers, producers who ran their own companies. Whenever feasible, we plotted to get something I’d written into the hands of this one or that one, hoping that it would lead to a project we could work on together, though this never actually happened. A

singular but telling example of the way things went for us involved a director who was coming off a spectacular hit. He befriended Kenny, grew bright with interest, took us to lunch. Meanwhile, he was racing toward a crash even more spectacular than his success. He went to Morocco and never came back. Whatever we'd given him went into oblivion with him.

Kenny was always on the cusp. Opportunity arrived only to be lost. Over the years, my search to understand this seemingly fated pattern took me back to something I'd witnessed when I reconnected with him after getting out of the Army. It was maybe four years since we'd been in grad school together, and it was well before any of the California events. He'd got married and landed a job in insurance in Manhattan, an exec, junior probably, big building, fancy offices, smooth elevator. I don't know how it happened that he took me along to work one day. As if I were his child. A lot of our relationship was predicated on the somewhat fanciful notion that he was an East Coast sophisticate while I was a lug from the Midwest. We had fun with these caricatures, finding intimacy in their exaggeration. I was not exactly a lug, and though Kenny was from Main Line Philadelphia—specifically, Radnor—his father was a fireman, his mom a homemaker.

We were in Kenny's office when a man came in—about our age—very coiffed and tailored, as was Kenny. I was in my one suit, which was cream-colored and looked almost as if it were made out of paper. Kenny and this guy started talking about some pending issue at the firm, and Kenny was not only argumentative but dismissive. He was a tough boss, I thought. And then something happened that I can't specify, but it made the moment like one of those drawings where you see the head of a rabbit until the perspective shifts, and you see something else. Well, whatever it was that happened revealed that the guy was not Kenny's underling but his boss. He was treating his boss like an underling. More than once, I've wondered whether this kind of behavior contributed to his inability to hang on to any of the studio or company positions he landed.

When Kenny started getting sick with the illness that would kill him, he had no idea what it was. He was working as a professor in the theatre department at a college in Maine, I think, or some other Northeastern state. He was pretty much done with "the business," long divorced, and, as he put it, having sex with a man. "A walk on the wild side," he called it. Or, "Stirring

the vegetables.” He said, “Can you imagine, Donny—two men, two egomaniacal men, trying to be decent together?” There were drugs, too. Maybe Ecstasy. Or meth. I think it was meth. Or maybe both. “I’m telling you because I want you to know,” he said to me on the phone. “Because we tell each other everything.” I laughed as best I could. I was surprised and not surprised, and I wanted for him what he wanted for himself. He went on, giddy with a sense of outrageous excitement that competed with his wish to reassure me. “But it’s nothing. He’s a total jerk, and so am I. So you have two jerks, two selfish jerks. It’s impossible. Just wild and for this moment. Can’t wait for it to end. He’s really quite awful. Without the drugs, it wouldn’t be tolerable, believe me. I know you understand. Do you?”

“What? Understand?”

“I know you do.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

I didn’t, though, not really. Had he lost a long struggle? Or won his freedom? I couldn’t figure it out, I guess, partly because he hadn’t figured it out.

But that wasn’t the phone call I intended to talk about when I brought up his teaching job in Maine, if that’s where the school was. This “walk on the wild side” call happened before the one I intended to speak of, but they both came from that New England school and occurred more or less in the same time

period. The call I intended to bring up was about brain fog. He was upset about the brain fog he was having, and he thought I might be able to help. He knew that I'd had a more than fifteen-year struggle with candidiasis after getting Lyme disease twice in the early eighties, almost back to back, which meant continuous heavy doses of antibiotics. The doctor who'd prescribed the antibiotics didn't understand that candidiasis could be caused by antibiotics. Few people did then. Nobody told you to take probiotics. This doctor looked at me like I was nuts. And brain fog was the least of it.

Luckily, I found a nutritionist who told me what I had, but he said in the same breath that he had no idea how to cure it, only how to control it through what I ate. That advice, along with digestive enzymes, got me by for more than a decade, until another nutritionist, a madman of sorts, cured it. He tested every bodily fluid I could produce, then set up a program combining supplements and homeopathy, did more blood work, adjusted the program, adjusted it again, and cured me.

I'd told Kenny about this, and he thought something similar might be going on with him. He wondered if there was a way to lessen his brain fog without all the testing, blood work, and consultations. After I told him about the partial relief I'd achieved using digestive enzymes, I explained where he could order some. A week or so later, he called to tell me that they were helping. He thanked me, and we blabbed for a while about other things. His work, his ex-wife, his kids, my wife, my kids. I was divorced and remarried by this time. He laughed about the silliness of his teaching a class on film history, watching old movies and reading like crazy to keep ahead of the students. But at least his brain fog was lessening, thanks to the enzymes. Unfortunately, that wasn't what was happening. If the brain fog was lessening, it was an anomaly, a coincidental anomaly.

Because what was happening to him wasn't candidiasis but the onset of Lewy body disease. It got going full force not long after that, the brain fog, anxiety, and confusion getting worse and worse. There was an interlude when I didn't see him or even hear from him. There were some intermittent reports, I guess, because I recall him telling me that things were not so good. He panicked about how the digestive enzymes, which he took scrupulously, had stopped helping. He was furious at the way he felt. "What is it? I can't think. It's all shadows."

He scared me a little. Actually, quite a lot. I'll admit it. I wasn't sure what to say to him. He didn't understand what was happening to him, and I didn't, either. One call turned into a rant about his mother. Every name in the book, punctuated by "manipulative." As I listened, I couldn't help but think about a time when he'd stood in the doorway of his son's bedroom, looking in on me lying down to sleep in his son's bed. This was during a visit I'd initiated some years back. Our friendship had lasted for more than thirty years by that point. The visit was impulsive on my part; I cast myself up on his doorstep, seeking refuge. This was well before his brain fog, before his "walk on the wild side." Before a lot of things.

I stayed for a while. Every evening, we'd say good night. I'd go to bed, but he would stay up. I'd hear him pacing around, maybe talking on the phone. Sometimes he'd bang on the drum he'd brought back from one of the poet Robert Bly's men's retreats. I was in awe that he'd actually gone to one of those. That he'd dared to be vulnerable with strangers, talking, playing his drum, maybe dancing.

On most of these nights, he'd knock before it got too late. I'd say, "Hey," and he'd stand, backlit, in the doorway, talking about lawyers or his kids but mostly about the script he was incessantly writing and rewriting. No matter how small the changes, he would reprint the entire script every time, because he wanted the margins perfect. This was in the early days of inkjet, and his office was just down the hall, so I would hear the printer going clackity-clack. And then, in the morning, he would drive the new version down to the Writers Guild to register it.

Anyway, on one particular night, he spoke about how, as a child, he'd believed he was Pinocchio. Or like Pinocchio. Really believed it. It seemed to explain so much, he said. He grew not loud but emphatic, fighting for the precision he needed to make me understand his remembered plight. He'd been around ten years old, he thought, living through days of total desolation because he was Pinocchio and thus wooden and not quite real. He'd walk around the block repeatedly, begging and praying—I don't know to whom, but I think to his mother—that he'd get to become a real boy. A real flesh-and-blood boy. I guess he could have been praying to someone other than his mother—Jesus, or God, or the Virgin Mary. He'd been raised Catholic, as had I, and though we'd both "left the Church" that didn't necessarily mean

that the Church had left us. We'd tried, though. I'd managed enough distance to seek what felt like a hopeful alternative with a guru, living for a while in his ashram. I'm not sure how Kenny got out. Or if he did. If either of us did, really. That doctrine is pythonlike, monitoring your breath, waiting for a fearful gasp. The annexation imposed by the Church on the imaginative children we both were went deeper, I suppose, than we knew, or even could know. The play Kenny designed a set for that night in grad school when his hands betrayed him was called "The Transfiguration of Anthony Royal." It was a little of Tennessee Williams and a lot of Kenny.

"I'll be back in a second," he told me and went off. I waited, puzzling over the implications of his childhood identification with Pinocchio. Ice clinking in a glass announced his return. "Should I have brought you a drink? I didn't think to ask."

I shook my head.

"O.K.," he said. "Good night." But instead of moving he sipped his drink. Then he murmured the name of a wonderfully talented novelist-screenwriter. While Kenny knew the man personally, I knew him only by reputation. "He had AIDS. He killed himself, you know. Sleeping pills."

I said I knew only that he'd died recently.

"Ecstasy, too." The details Kenny shared next made me wonder if he had been present somehow, or on the phone with his friend. "He said he was 'peaking.' It was the last thing. 'Peaking.' " In this second iteration, the word almost strangled him. I didn't understand fully, because I didn't know then that this was Ecstasy jargon. The drug "peaked," or delivered its full effect, about forty-five minutes after being ingested. So, if Kenny's friend's last word was "peaking," he was probably arriving at a state of ecstasy as he died. "Peaking," and it was over. I waited, feeling that Kenny wanted the moment to be set apart, left to float.

That visit, which had begun a few days before the Pinocchio story, was memorable in many ways. As I'd got out of the taxi delivering me to Kenny's doorstep, with a bottle of whiskey and a vat of yogurt, I was also stepping out of a marital dust storm. I'd just spent a difficult week with my

wife, Amy, in Utah, where she was doing hair and makeup for some older movie stars in decline and some younger actresses foaming to replace them. The bright blade of resentment and ambition had been blinding as they shared smiles on the set of a TV movie of the week.

We'd had an argument, my wife and I, the afternoon I arrived at the motel in Utah, one that—with its ready access to easy-to-assemble insults—threatened our stability. Our standoffs, I knew, weren't going to lead to divorce. They were a sort of training in high risk. We were like tightrope walkers dropping our balancing poles in order to feel how much we didn't want to fall.

My departure was nearing when our days of glaring across rooms developed a flaw. Her smile peeked out, or at least there was the promise of one, so I offered my best version in return. When Amy reciprocated, I felt a rush of relief and gratitude. The sex we had was fuelled by the danger we'd escaped, the groaning bed enduring the bundle of confused flesh we'd become. Anger and fear contributed to her teary finish, while I clenched in a kind of wail or groan that indicated survival.

As the taxi's tail-lights shrank in the distance, I looked up at Kenny's house and believed that I saw him in a ground-floor window—a pacing silhouette with a phone to his ear, while his free hand gestured in what I took to be a wave, signalling welcome.

By the time I reached the door, worry that he hadn't actually seen me had me ringing the doorbell. I'd phoned ahead, of course, and though he had told me to "hurry and get here" he'd sounded tentative. Now he raced up, ballooning before me behind the glass panes of the door. He let me in, presenting his bright smile, pointed to an armchair, and mouthed the word "Sit." He talked excitedly on the phone, went into the kitchen, hung up, and came out holding two glasses, shiny with ice, for me to fill from the bottle I carried. He took a sip, ordered a pizza, and told me that he and Cathy were getting a divorce.

"What?" I said, struck by a hollow feeling that was larger than disbelief. He'd suspected for a while that she was involved with somebody, he said. With no idea who the man was or how they'd met, he'd grown watchful. I listened closely. The man was shadowy and seemed poised to enter my life.

With a mischievous grin, Kenny explained that he'd popped a big bowl of popcorn, got out a bolt-action .22-calibre rifle that he had because of coyotes, and sat in the living room, waiting.

"Popcorn?" Cathy said, when she discovered him there, sitting in the dark. Seeing the gun, she added, "You're not serious."

I asked him if there was any hope they might get back together. He said, "No, no, no."

He wanted to talk now about the script he was writing. The ending! The ending! The poor little old man. He was all of us. Everyman. Every man. The script said everything! He wanted me to read it as soon as he'd given it one more pass. I felt sad for him and Cathy and confused in my own right. I was the writer in our duo, Kenny the producer. If he was writing, what would I be? I sat staring at my hands. The news that my good friends, whom I'd known as husband and wife for decades by this point, had crashed and burned alerted me that Amy and I needed to be more careful.

Over a couple more drinks, we joked about the weird adventure of our lives. He directed me to the second-floor bedroom that belonged to his son, Philip, who was with his grandmother, if I remember correctly. The narrow bed was surrounded by shelves of CDs and books, iconic posters of bands on the wall. When I turned my head that first night, I had a view out the window. I couldn't see the moon, but a silver haze curtained the erratically clouded sky.

It was Academy Awards time, and, given our mixed-up histories, et cetera, et cetera, in the business, we were interested.

We watched TV in the master bedroom, because the set there was the best in the house. Kenny pressed the remote, and the TV, disposing of a commercial, landed on Kevin Costner. This was long ago. Even Kevin Costner was young, promoting his film "Dances with Wolves." We watched, mesmerized by the way his hybrid shyness and confidence conveyed his aversion to the kind of self-promotion he was excelling at before our eyes. We envied him for his easy good looks and for his rugged confidence, but mainly for his success.

I railed against the film for what I saw as its manipulation. Costner was credited with exposing our barbarous treatment of Native Americans because he dealt with the slaughter at Wounded Knee. But there were no images of Wounded Knee in the movie. There was only a scroll describing the massacre. The final frames were of our hero with his woman, riding off to safety. I pointed this out to anyone who would listen, which in this case was Kenny. He agreed. If the film was going to be credited with showing Wounded Knee, it should have shown it. But we were not hitmakers. An offscreen voice declared that everyone was certain that “Dances with Wolves” was going to win Best Picture.

As my visit continued, Kenny had consultations with his lawyer about the divorce and meetings at the bank about his mortgage. There was a lunch or two with people he hoped to interest in his script. I was caught in a kind of limbo of worry that I could neither define nor escape. I watched TV and went for short walks. I called Amy regularly to check in. I told her about Kenny’s divorce and surveilled her voice to detect secrets.

One evening, when Kenny was out late, I made the mistake of lighting up a cigar. The whiskey I was drinking and the smoke I inadvertently inhaled and the cigar juices I swallowed combined to rock my equilibrium. I was on the stairs, and I almost fell the last few steps, swooning on the living-room rug. Flat on my belly, I lay gasping for the oxygen I needed to counteract the imbalance. When I heard the front door open, I called out, “I’m fine. Just need a minute.”

He stood looking down. “You don’t look fine.”

“In a minute. Cigar. Smoked one.”

“You’re not going to throw up.”

“Don’t think so. Trying not to.”

“I have to go to the bathroom. Wait there.”

When he came back, I tried to sit up, but nausea collapsed me. I lay there gulping air. “My wife says I’m impossible.”

“I think you’re easy to live with,” he said. He’d settled on a nearby footstool. “I don’t care what anybody says. You don’t complain about the way things are going. You don’t judge anybody. You just go about things. I’m really enjoying your visit, and I’m glad you’re here.”

“I judge Kevin Costner,” I told him.



“Do you think it’s about us?”

Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

“Well, sure.”

A bad feeling swept over me as Kenny sat nearby, thinking kindly of me, smiling down at me. It came not from the cigar or the liquor but from the memory of the worst thing I’d ever done to him. It was long past but in that moment too immediate. It had to do with that novel I’d written, the one the mogul had optioned.

The book had received surprisingly positive reviews that did nothing for the sales. Kenny, who had read an early draft, was still at his insurance job, but his aspirations were to become a theatre and film producer. He asked to option the book, and I agreed, dreaming of our bond actualizing in the world. He hired a lawyer to work up a simple agreement that we signed months before publication. Not long after that, the mogul approached my agent for an option. He was a far more realistic opportunity than Kenny could ever be. This guy could snap his fingers and the next thing you knew the film would be opening. Believing I could convince him to partner with Kenny, I told him about the situation. He looked at me as if I’d insulted him. He seemed to

no longer know me. The moment was excruciating. Ambition chomped at me. I talked to Kenny. I worried. I demanded without demanding.

Ultimately, Kenny tore up our agreement, freeing me to sign with the mogul, who promptly hired a buddy to write the adaptation. From that point on, everything went according to the stock Hollywood-fiasco plan. The stranger produced an inept screenplay, which was accepted as proof that only a fool would try to make a film from my novel.

Later that night, at Kenny's house, I was in bed, mostly recovered from my errant ways, when the clackity-clack of the printer started up and kept going for a long time. When Kenny appeared in the doorway, he held a stack of paper. He flipped on the hall light and his grin confessed his obsessive behavior. "Let me read you just this one thing. Can I read it to you?"

"Sure."

"This is at the very end. The poor guy is on his deathbed. He's in the hospital, and he's dying, and he knows it, and his mother comes to sit with him. 'I don't want you here,' he says. 'Don't be silly,' she tells him. 'Let me comb your hair.' And he says—Arturo is his name—he says, 'No.' 'But it's all messy,' she says. 'Momma, please.' She says, 'You never did know what was good for you.' Arturo, sadly, disconsolately, a distant look in his eye, pulls the covers up over his face the way people do over a dead body. 'I'm gonna die now.' Momma tells him, 'No, you're not.' 'I am.' 'Don't you try and scare me. It ain't gonna work,' she says. Silence. 'I'm just gonna sit here, Arturo. I'm not gonna go away. I don't care how long you stay under there, I'll be here when you look out.' Silence. 'Arturo.' Silence. She sits there beside the sheet covering him, and as she sits she looks at the sheet. Something bothers her. It's crooked, wrinkled, the ends untucked. She stands and tucks the sheet in. She moves from one corner of the bed to another until she has tucked all four corners in and the sheet over her son is neat and smooth." Kenny looked up. I could see him well enough to know that he was earnest and hopeful as he awaited my response. "Wow," I said. "Wow, Kenny." It was easy because I thought the scene was strong. "But who's going to make it? This is Hollywood."

"But it's like this beautiful little foreign movie."

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“I don’t care if anybody makes it. It was so much fun to write it. I’m going down to the Writers Guild first thing tomorrow to register this version,” he said. “Come along if you want.”

“Sure.” I recognized that the consolation we provided each other was the solace of people stuck on the margins of a glittering world they hoped to enter. I saw also that my ambitions had been subverted from the beginning by a deep, ingrained allergy to the dazzle.

“And then I have to go over to my agent’s and replace it there.”

It was raining in the morning, a gentle mist that made the air seem pale. At the Writers Guild, he scurried off, the script in an envelope tucked in a plastic bag cuddled under his shirt. He bent forward as he ran, turning his body into a protective shell. His agent’s office was next, and once that task was completed he asked, “Hungry?,” as we drove off.

“Sounds good.”

“Let’s go in there first.” We were at a red light, and his gaze led me to the display window of a sex shop.

I chuckled as he turned to me with a shrug that seemed to declare that the source of his suggestion was unknown. “Now?” I asked.

“If not now, when?”

The rain had stopped, the sunlight piercing the clouds in shafts. So many people were defying the sexual norms. Swingers. Wife-swapping. Plato’s Retreat. Not that I was inclined toward any of those pursuits, and I didn’t think Amy was, either, but the Zeitgeist with its daily news flash of the illicit becoming licit seemed an opportunity I should look into.

The exterior of the store had predicted a smaller interior than the expanse I found. Shelves of X-rated videotapes, larger-than-life cardboard cutouts of both male and female porn stars, glass cases full of dildos, metal clamps, and restraints surrounded us. Bondage outfits. Whips. I gazed into a rubbery pink

clump that claimed to be an authentic, battery-powered duplicate of Rainy Diamond's vagina.

We wandered around separately but ended up side by side every now and then. We gawked like mischievous schoolboys. But we hadn't been there very long when I experienced something odd about the air. It felt dry, arid, parched, each inhalation scant in qualities essential to breath.

A clerk, whose open shirt exhibited a wedge of curly, black chest hair, had been appraising me. When he stepped toward me, I gestured to Kenny, pointing at the door. "Not just now," I said to the clerk, who sent me a sour smile.

"Weird," I said, when I stood with Kenny on the pavement.

"People," he replied. "What do they want? And what will they do to get it?"

The subject felt beyond me. Fielding an impulse, one that expressed its perfection through the illogic of its appearance, I asked, "How far are we from Santa Monica?"

"Why?"

"The ashram. Let's go there."

"Now?"

Paradox, contradiction, the spontaneous generation of opposites, I thought. "If not now, when?"

It was believed then that sex could be transformative. Spiritually speaking. Or, more precisely, that orgasms could be transformative. Or the more traditional opposite—that stymied orgasms were the way to go. Kenny and I wondered if such a metamorphosis could really happen, and what it would bring. "Tantric" got thrown around with a lot more ambition than understanding. I think people today would find the idea laughable. I also think my impulse that day to go to the ashram may not have been as unprompted as it first seemed. Our visit to that sex shop, with its dead air and machines—its cold assertion that sex was a matter of pumps and

pulleys, devoid not only of spirit but of emotion—may well have called for an antidote.

Snarls of traffic thinned as we drove, and soon the ocean came into view in the glaring sunlight. When I first attended the ashram, it was housed in a circuslike tent covering a motel parking lot. Now it was in a modest building with a pristine walkway between neatly trimmed hedges.

As we passed several statues of saints, among them a sculpture of the guru's big-bellied guru, I faltered, as if that effigy might know of my quiet disillusion. "I haven't been here in a long time," I told Kenny.

"I've never been here," he whispered.

The attendant waiting in the antechamber smiled. "We have no programs this afternoon. But the hall is open."

"Good. Thanks."

We removed our shoes and entered in our stocking feet. I told Kenny that we needed to kneel and touch our heads to the floor, and then we could sit on the chairs lining the back wall. The air startled me with its kinetic, palpable, vibrating density. Kenny knelt and bowed, then stood and slipped away. The wide aisle in front of me led to an elevated platform holding the guru's empty chair. Near it, a woman sat in the lotus position, while a man stretched out on his back across from her. Taking in the familiar scent of the incense, I lowered myself, bowing until my forehead touched the rug. I sank. Warm. Peaceful. It seemed as if an infusion of calm and comfort poured into me or up from within me. I could have raised my head, but I didn't want to disrupt that sense of receiving a kind of nourishment I'd wanted for a long time.

When I finally looked around, it was like waking from a restful sleep. Kenny, wearing a curious expression, watched from his chair.

We exited the hall, and as we put on our shoes he wanted to know what I'd felt kneeling there for so long.

I said I didn't really know. "How long?"



"I say, if they walk that slow—shove 'em."

Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

“Twenty minutes. Maybe half an hour.”

“The air,” I said. “Did you feel it?”

“I know. It hummed. Maybe because it was so different from in that other place.”

“You felt that, too?”

He nodded.

All this happened years before the afternoon that he telephoned me worried about brain fog. A decade at least. His illness concealed its nature and intentions for a while longer, but once it started it advanced swiftly, altering his behavior, shrinking his abilities. Increasingly, the reports I received came from Cathy, who was overseeing Kenny’s care, rather than from him. His moods became unpredictable, his behavior erratic. I contacted him several times, but he sounded suspicious, and I felt intrusive. Unable to maintain his house, he now lived in a small apartment. His driver’s license was revoked, because he could no longer be trusted behind the wheel.

And then, one day, the ringing phone brought Kenny telling me that he was coming East. He sounded stressed, his excitement manufactured and racing out of control. He told me the date and time he would land in Philadelphia.

He would visit his mother, and then he wanted me to meet him for dinner in New York. We could go to a play.

Cathy phoned that evening, alerting me to be careful. His trip might occur, and it might not. He might be O.K., and he might not. I heard nothing more until days after his scheduled arrival, when Cathy called to tell me that the flight had been difficult. He'd caused a disturbance, and when he went to visit his mother he'd flown into a rage, screaming, cursing, erupting with such hatred that he had to be restrained. Pinocchio, I thought. I had a sense of drastic, terrible anguish unfolding beyond everything I knew, or thought I knew, or could know—one that Kenny and Cathy and their children were enduring.

Of course, we didn't have our dinner during that failed visit, and not long after that, back in Los Angeles, Kenny lost his little apartment and relocated to a studio in a community of mostly gay men. He had a caretaker who was gay, a young man from the neighborhood who shopped for him and drove him around. It was impossible for me not to see Kenny as resembling a character in one of the Tennessee Williams plays he loved, a wayward soul living out his days lost in the world. Had he moved into such a community sooner, might he have found a male partner? But it was too late now. Did he wish he had done that? I wanted to ask him, at least to talk to him. I called and discovered that his phone had been disconnected.

When I saw him, finally, it was the last time I would ever see him. We were at Harbor Hills, a treatment center that specialized in the care he needed. When the illness had robbed him of the ability to maintain even the rudiments of independent living, Cathy had organized his admittance there. She was his most frequent visitor and monitored his treatment so that everything that could be done for him was done. She told me that the first days after he was admitted had been tumultuous, his furious abuse of the staff threatening to get him thrown out. But he'd settled some in the subsequent weeks. I was in L.A. and wanted to see him.

I waited at a patio table while Cathy brought him out in a wheelchair. He grinned, but he was crumpled and weak. Our effort at normalcy relied on basic conversation about our kids, old neighborhoods, other friends. I think the three of us had struck a tacit agreement that if he could enact enough of

the person he'd been and we'd known, even the most tattered shreds, we would fill in the rest from our memories and he would be there with us. This worked until his ability to participate in a commonplace exchange existed only in a way that mocked him. It was his failure to come up with a street name that started his fall. A flurry of related frustrations became a flood until he was drowning in panic. He asked and then demanded that Cathy take him away. It may have been embarrassment that swamped him, or disappointment, but I think it was the worst kind of loneliness, as Cathy and I, who sat beside him, became unreachable.

I flew home a day or so later. Our minds are so strange. I was waiting in the security line at the airport, inching forward a body's width at a time, when I thought, Oh, my God, Kenny is going to die. I was surprised. Shocked, even. How was that possible? I knew he wasn't going to get well, but to think that there would be no more phone calls, to think that our once serious, then ironic, and finally playful bond as East Coast sophisticate and Midwestern lumox could end . . . I wanted to remember if he'd forgiven me for the way I'd coerced him to give up the rights to my novel. But in my mind there was only his brave smile as he tore up our agreement.

It was early evening when Cathy called to tell me it was over. "It was merciful," she said. I repeated the phrase. I don't know what I said then, but it prompted her to tell me, "I don't see Kenny as tragic."

I knew only to say, "Do you think I do?"

"Do you?"

I had no answer. We'd begun in folly and innocence, grad school, that Ouija board, me breaking the door, Kenny refusing to admit that he was gay, if that was indeed what he'd done. Looking back is looking back. But now we were here.

I can't say whether a lot or very little time passed before I thought of a message he'd left years earlier on my answering machine.

I don't want to make too much of this. Getting to it now could create the impression that I view it as conclusive in some way, which I don't. On the

other hand, it feels wrong not to include it.

“Donny,” he began. “I was meditating—following this old man who is my guide, and suddenly I see him as very young, very strong. And there’s this beam of blue-white light coming out of him, just this fucking ball of blue-white light, but it’s so fucking powerful, and then he’s Jesus carrying his Cross—he’s beaten and bloody—and he turns to me, and he says, ‘I want you to help me carry my Cross.’ ” Kenny’s voice shivered. “And I said, ‘I can’t do it. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I can’t do it.’ I don’t know why I’m getting all crazy here, Donny, but it’s a very emotional fucking thing. And then he turns around, and he points to me, and he blasts me with this fucking light, and he blasts the shit out of me—it’s so fucking powerful—this white-and-blue thing, which I later realized was, like, his halo or something. And he turns to me, and he says, ‘It’s O.K. You don’t have to. But I will help you carry yours.’ ” Kenny’s voice grew small with what felt to me like disbelief at the possibility of his being loved. “And I don’t know—that was really about it—but it kind of fucking destroys me when I think about it.”

So, anyway, Kenny died. I knew him a long time, and then he died. I have other friends who are still alive. Some of them are older than Kenny was. I’m older, too.

But Kenny’s gone. ♦

David Rabe is the author of numerous plays, screenplays, and works of fiction, including the book “*Listening for Ghosts*.”

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Giorgio Morandi Tried to Fit the World on a Table

His still-lifes are at once transcendent and playful, toying constantly with the laws of physical space.

By [Jackson Arn](#)

February 3, 2025



"Still Life" (1950-51). Art work by Giorgio Morandi / Courtesy Mattia De Luca Gallery; Photograph by Alvise Aspesi

As genres go, Italian still-life painting isn't a ghost town, exactly, but it evokes more than its share of dust and tumbleweeds. It's just a fact that French fruit bowls and Dutch lemon peels get a bigger chunk of the textbook than anything of the kind from the Bel Paese. Even the great art historian Adolfo Venturi had to let down his countrymen when he admitted that the form was "regarded as the exclusive property of painters north of the Alps." That was in 1913, to be fair, before Venturi or anybody else had heard of Giorgio Morandi, colossal exception to the Italian-still-life rule, and to most others.

If you love him, as pretty much anyone who spends long enough with his work does, New York can be a lonely place. In September, however, the Mattia De Luca Gallery brought to the Upper East Side sixty-five of his paintings, drawings, and prints, many from private collections. Another thirty-seven are now hanging at David Zwirner—more Morandis, all told, than have passed through Manhattan since the late Dubya years. That's still not enough, but sort of appropriate, since Morandi travelled even less than his art does: he rarely left Italy, rarely left his home town of Bologna, and, the way some have told it, rarely left the apartment where he lived with his sisters and died in 1964, aged seventy-three. To say that he spent all his time painting would be too glamorous. He spent his time stretching his own canvases, mixing his own paints, arranging cups and bottles to the millimetre, and destroying his own works when they failed to please him. Painting was what he did with the leftover minutes and hours.



"*Still Life*" (1942). Art work by Giorgio Morandi / © ARS / SIAE / Collection of Fondazione Magnani-Rocca / Courtesy David Zwirner

The leftovers were enough for well over a thousand pictures, though, of which the ones of cups, pots, bottles, et cetera—writing about Morandi, you realize how skimpy the English language is on kitchen receptacles—are the best and the biggest portion. He could do flowers or landscapes or, for a while in his twenties, self-portraits, but his forte was giving lifeless stuff a breath and a pulse. (These two exhibitions suggest a stupid pun made sublime: his bottles are cold and inanimate but *still life*.) A certain fluted olive-oil container, like a bottle wearing a frilly white ball gown, shows up

in canvas after canvas—sometimes its ribs curve left-right, as though Morandi’s interrupted it in mid-twirl, and sometimes it’s grand and pale and flanked by humbler cups. In one 1936 still-life, at Zwirner, it seems to irradiate the thin-scraped beige field behind it. Beiges, browns, putties, and grays aren’t neutral in Morandi; there’s always some fire or weightless motion to them. The objects are alive because the space is alive because the grays are alive.

One story that gets told about still-life is that it is fundamentally religious art: the iris symbolizes the Holy Trinity, the walnut shells symbolize the Crucifixion, half-eaten food symbolizes the transience of life, and so on. Things are never just things. Nobody would call Morandi a Christian artist, but you don’t have to strain to hear the spiritual whispers in his work—even in the early one-offs, he’s showing us the material world to suggest something else. One 1914 still-life with a bottle and a jug, displayed at the De Luca show last fall, made me think that Morandi painted some Cubist pictures but was never really a Cubist. The bottle and the jug and most everything else seem to move to the same tuning-fork vibrations—some offstage force keeps them aligned, completely different from the squawky godless fragments you get in Braque or Picasso. The most illuminating work in Zwirner’s show may be “Metaphysical Still Life,” from 1918, when Morandi was still borrowing tricks from the other Giorgio, de Chirico. Here we have the soon to be usual bottle, but also a box, a mannequin head sliced in half, and a proto-Magrittean pipe, all of them demanding to be decoded, not just seen. Whatever the solution is, it cannot be found in (remember the title) stuff alone.



“Still Life” (1960). Art work by Giorgio Morandi / Courtesy Mattia De Luca Gallery; Photograph by Alvise Aspesi

So it makes sense when people talk about Morandi in hushed, cathedral tones. Umberto Eco, speaking at the opening of Bologna’s Morandi Museum, in 1993, took the opportunity to wonder “how so much spirituality could be expressed” so simply. I’m not here to disagree; I’d just add that Morandi is also a comedian. A spiritual comedian, if you insist, but the man has *gags*—not the wet, belly-laugh kind, but gags like those you might find in a Jacques Tati film or a Saul Steinberg cartoon. They don’t develop in the course of Morandi’s career; they pop irregularly in and out, until their game of appearing and disappearing becomes its own metaphysical shtick. Notice, for instance, how often the things in these still-lifes seem to be playing musical chairs. Objects try to claim a seat and assert their full volume, and most of them do, but the loser (there’s always exactly one) is reduced to flat negative space, colored emptiness. In a 1957 still-life in the De Luca show, the loser is a blue vase; in a 1942 one at Zwirner, it’s the tall pitcher sulking in the back.



“Still Life” (1936). Art work by Giorgio Morandi / © ARS / SIAE / Collection of Fondazione Magnani-Rocca / Courtesy David Zwirner

There is never enough space in these pictures. Morandi makes sure of this—it’s the constraint that lets the gags begin. Things poke their heads in from stage left or stage right; a candlestick slightly too big for its rectangle hunches to one side; countless pairs of bottles and cups and pitchers seem to be shoving at each other like two kids in the back of a minivan. When an

artist paints two objects standing side by side on a flat surface, the rules of perspective say that whichever one's bottom is lower is closer to us, end of story, but for Morandi that's just the start. Look at the edge he makes the two objects share, the way it wobbles left-right-left-right as each object seems to push its sibling and squirm closer to us and then immediately get pushed back.

Triple takes follow double takes. In one picture, the top of a cup blends in perfectly with the color of the background and makes the bottle behind it seem to levitate. Elsewhere, the neck of a bottle levitates over its own body. Morandi's titles tend to be prankishly unhelpful—he produced oodles of "Still Life with X Objects," but what *are* the objects? At least a quarter of the time, I'm not sure. I spent a while squinting and muttering in front of "Still Life with Two Objects and a Cloth on a Table" before I gave up and asked the on-hand experts David Leiber, who's curated other Morandi shows for Zwirner, and Alice Ensabella, who curated this one. The thing on the right is apparently some sort of long-handled casserole dish. The one on the left is a wooden carving of the kind you might find at the bottom of a staircase, not that knowing this explains much. Any run-of-the-mill eccentric genius can make an etching of a staircase carving; not every eccentric genius would choose such a distinctive object and then draw it facing *away* from the viewer.

I could keep going. That's the delight of Morandi: his comedy has no rise or fall. Triple and quadruple takes dissolve into a single pleasant haze. There's rarely anything precious or knowing about the way he works on you—around the time that he stopped painting mannequins, he figured out how to mystify gently, without demanding that we solve a mystery. What de Chirico and most of the Surrealists only began to do, and needed whole trunks of melodramatic props to do, he did with space alone.

The other main story about still-life is that it is fundamentally materialistic art, a collector's genre. To possess a seventeenth-century Dutch painting of a lobster and some grapes on a silver dish was a way of possessing the actual dish and fruit and crustacean. Nature is captured with the brush and consumed, endlessly, at the looker's leisure.

It's not that Morandi *isn't* trying to capture the objects he paints; he just refuses to play the part of collector, or to allow you to feel like one. It's possible to collect his pictures, obviously—that's the main reason a hundred of them passing through Manhattan is an event—but I never get a whiff of affection for the objects therein, or a sense that their painter gave much of a damn about them. Van Gogh didn't just paint sunflowers; he loved them. Morandi cracked the tops of his ceramic objects, smeared them in paint, left them out to gather dust. The fluted olive-oil container was his subject but never his muse. I doubt that he felt he understood it well enough to earn the right to love it. It kept slipping away.

All the same, understanding a Morandi still-life is a pesky illusion that may overtake you, the cure for which is looking again, harder. Your reward, in lieu of the usual dainty comfort, is a state of ravishing confusion about the physical world and how its pieces fit together. Be honest: you don't really comprehend the three dimensions you inhabit, you just got tired of trying. The last and biggest gag of these pictures is the thought that people could know any physical object well enough to imagine that it belonged to them. ♦



[Jackson Arn](#), a staff writer, is *The New Yorker's* art critic.

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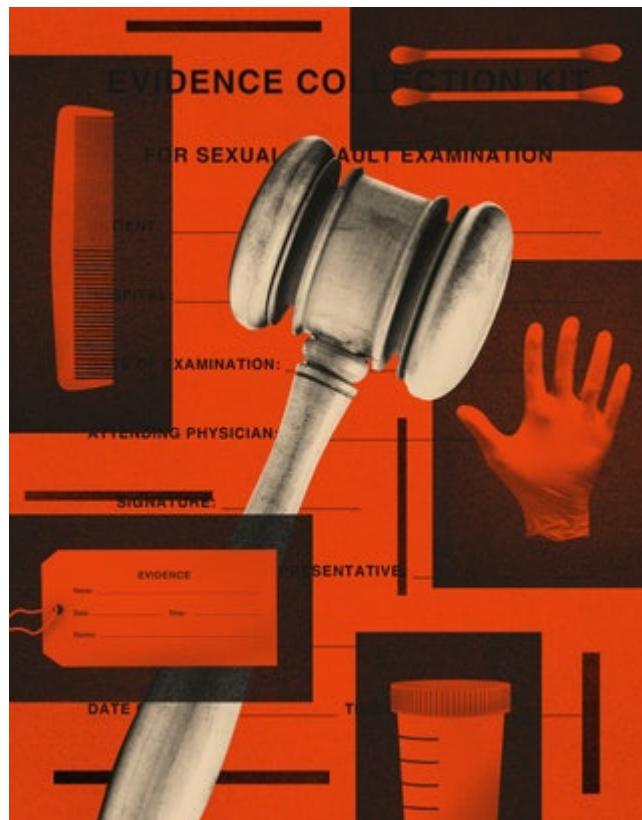
Books

The Frustrated Promise of the Rape Kit

Standardized forensic exams are a useful tool for sexual-violence investigations—or they would be if police departments consistently tested their findings.

By [Jessica Winter](#)

February 3, 2025



Hundreds of thousands of kits sit unprocessed nationwide, and ten states still have no tracking system for them. Photo illustration by Joan Wong; Source photographs from Alamy; Getty

In 1975, a rape victims' advocate named Linda Reinshagen shared a story with a reporter from the Chicago *Tribune*. A man on the South Side had pulled a woman into an alley where he raped and badly beat her. A witness

called the cops; the victim could be heard screaming from the alley when patrolmen arrived at the scene. “The police caught the rapist running down the street with his pants down,” Reinshagen said. “Then they made the victim stand in the rain without her clothes while they argued over which hospital to take her to.” Once the victim did reach a hospital, she was not examined or treated for sexual assault. When an attending physician filled out a police report, next to the blank space for “rape” he entered a series of question marks. Almost a year later, the case was still pending in court.

The specifics of the incident adhered to what law enforcement used to call “bona-fide rape”: the victim was violently attacked by a stranger, with a bystander present, and the assailant was caught in the act. Yet cops and doctors still bungled the follow-up and compounded the survivor’s distress. The prospects of a sympathetic, competent reception from law-enforcement officers and medical professionals were worse for victims who knew their rapist, who had been drinking, who didn’t report the rape right away, or who lacked witnesses or obvious injuries. At a 1974 hearing of the Illinois House of Representatives’ Rape Study Committee, a Chicago-area nurse testified both to her hospital’s lack of protocols for rape exams and to her own experience as a survivor. When she told police that she had been raped, they declined to take her to a hospital, she said, “because I was not bruised, cut, or bleeding.”

In the Chicago metro area of the nineteen-seventies, about two thousand rapes were reported to the police every year—and, unsurprisingly, many thousands more went unreported. As late as 1974, a training manual provided to Chicago police warned, “Past experience has shown that many rape complaints are not legitimate.” The accuser was often either seeking revenge against a boyfriend or feeling regret about consensual sex, and, the manual went on, “the beat officer, by his efficient handling of the preliminary investigation, can do a great deal to help prove or disprove a rape complaint.”

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But this was also a moment of peak visibility for second-wave feminism, and, in its slipstream, a nationwide advocacy movement on behalf of rape victims was accelerating. Chicago got its first rape-crisis hotline in 1972. In 1974, the state's attorney in Illinois responded to pressure from advocacy groups to create a special prosecution team for sexual-assault cases. And, the following year, the Rape Study Committee issued a swath of legislative recommendations for protecting rape victims. These included provisions that any victim who agreed to a rape exam would now receive one, and that hospitals and police departments would be required to preserve evidence from these exams.

Among the city's most effective advocates for victims of sexual assault was Marty Goddard, a nonprofit executive who had been drawn into the movement through her volunteer work with teen-age runaways, many of whom were fleeing sexual abuse. Goddard came up with an idea for a forensic kit that could be used in all rape exams, following a uniform protocol. The kit would include swabs, microscope slides, and envelopes for storing hairs, fibres, semen, blood, and other evidence, as well as a consent form for victims and instructions for administering the exam and maintaining the evidence. Goddard pitched her idea to Louis Vitullo, the sergeant in charge of the microscope unit at the Chicago Police Department's crime lab. He pulled together a prototype, which, when finalized, became known as the Vitullo Evidence Collection Kit for Sexual Assault Examination.

Soon, Chicago became "the first city to widely adopt a standardized sexual-assault forensic kit," the journalist Pagan Kennedy writes in her new book, "*The Secret History of the Rape Kit*" (Vintage). In September, 1978, and largely thanks to Goddard's outreach, the kits were introduced in twenty-six hospitals in Cook County. The number of participating institutions quickly grew; the following year, hospitals sent nearly three thousand rape kits to

the crime lab. A Chicago police commander told the *Tribune*, in 1980, that the new protocol had increased the volume of “usable evidence” by twenty-five per cent. “In addition to the kits being very practical,” he went on, “we find that it impresses the jurors when you have a uniform set of criteria in the collection of evidence.”

Hospitals in New York City and elsewhere followed Chicago’s lead. Within seven years, Goddard had received a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to expand her protocol to fourteen more states. (Goddard was agnostic about her funding streams—she secured early, crucial support for the development of the rape kit from the Playboy Foundation.)

But it was not until the 2005 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act that all states were required to provide forensic exams to sexual-assault victims upon request, regardless of whether local police had authorized one. Even then, hospitals were not necessarily equipped to administer the gruelling exams with expertise or compassion. And law enforcement still had enormous latitude in determining what to do with the evidence collected in the exams. Frequently, police did nothing; once in a while, they did worse than nothing.

For centuries, the legal formulation of rape was shaped by the “hue and cry” rule, derived from English common law, which held that a credible victim reports any crime against her immediately and publicly—“whilst the act is fresh,” the thirteenth-century jurist Henry de Bracton wrote. The victim of rape, whom Bracton assumed to be a virgin, should “repair with hue and cry to the neighboring vills, and there display to honest men the injury done to her, the blood and her dress stained with blood, and the tearing of her dress.” He listed the men to whom she could appeal: “the provost of the hundred and to the searjeant of the lord the King, and to the coroners and to the viscount and make her appeal at the first county court.” (Samuel Alito, in his majority opinion in the decision that overturned Roe v. Wade, in 2022, cited Bracton as one of “the great common-law authorities” whose writings could be viewed as precedent for criminalizing abortion.)

The medieval image of rape—as the act of a violent stranger upon a chaste victim who goes straight to the authorities—persisted undisturbed in American courts through the nineteen-sixties. Defense attorneys frequently

interrogated complainants about their previous relationships, their marital status, or the paternity of their children. When rape convictions were overturned on appeal, courts tended to invoke the actions of the victim: she waited eight hours to go to the police; she left her children at home late at night to buy cigarettes; she let her alleged rapist, who was an acquaintance, into her house.

In the seventies, as the anti-rape movement gained force, the number of rapes reported to police started to climb, with allegations of “acquaintance rape” accounting for much of the rise. More survivors began speaking publicly about their assaults, challenging legally encoded stereotypes about rape. States enacted rape-shield laws, which sharply limited the ability of defense attorneys to badger complainants with irrelevant questions about their sexual history.

The advent of the rape kit, meanwhile, helped to codify a minimum level of response to the pleas of a rape victim and, in theory, to “display to honest men the injury done to her.” Goddard’s innovation led to innumerable arrests, guilty pleas, and convictions. DNA evidence in rape kits has exonerated the innocent—including many Black men who were falsely accused of assaulting white women—and cracked decades-old cold cases. Joseph DeAngelo, known as the Golden State Killer, who committed dozens of rapes and murders beginning in the mid-seventies, was finally apprehended in 2018 using a combination of rape-kit evidence, a family DNA profile, and swabs from his car door and a used tissue.

But, as Kennedy’s book makes painfully clear, the rape kit has also become a paradoxical symbol of systemic indifference toward rape and its victims. Even today, research by criminologists suggests that police will be dubious about a rape allegation if the woman was drinking, was at a party, or, as in cases of “acquaintance rape,” knew her assailant. This reflexive skepticism naturally extends to the victims’ rape kits—which partly explains why, every few years, a scandalous news report emerges about one municipality or another that either hoarded or destroyed its untested kits.

In 2009, more than eleven thousand kits were discovered in a warehouse in Detroit. A police chief in Fayetteville, North Carolina, admitted, in 2015, that his department had thrown away three hundred and thirty-three kits,

about half of which were tied to unresolved cases, to make space in its evidence room. A 2018 CNN investigation found that agencies in fourteen states had destroyed some four hundred kits before the statute of limitations on them ran out. Hundreds of thousands of kits sit untested nationwide, and ten states still have no tracking system for them. The Colorado Bureau of Investigation currently takes more than five hundred days, on average, to process a rape kit.

As Barbara Bradley Hagerty reported in *The Atlantic*, in 2019, a police department’s apathy toward forensic kits associated with “acquaintance rape” (sometimes called “party rape”) may thwart its higher-priority probes of “stranger rape.” In 2013, prosecutors in Cleveland assembled a task force to sort through its rape-kit backlog. When the investigators “uploaded the DNA from the acquaintance-rape kits,” Hagerty wrote, “they were surprised by how often the results also matched DNA from unsolved stranger rapes.” The Cleveland task force, drawing on grant money from a Department of Justice project called the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (*SAKI*), tested some seven thousand rape kits in all, leading to more than eight hundred new indictments. Similarly, when prosecutors in Detroit tested about ten thousand languishing kits using *SAKI* money, they found more than eight hundred suspects with connections to multiple sexual assaults.

Of course, many of the assaults that were found to be committed by serial rapists could have been prevented, if only the rape kits of their earlier victims had been tested with some dispatch. In an ideal world, the findings from Cleveland and Detroit would incentivize law enforcement to pay more serious attention to the allegations of, say, a woman who was raped by a friend at a party after a night of heavy drinking. However imperfect a victim she may seem to cops, the likelihood that her assailant is a serial predator—and not the blameless half of a hazy misunderstanding—is startlingly high.

SAKI eventually granted a total of three hundred and fifty million dollars to ninety jurisdictions in the U.S. to clear their rape-kit backlogs. But Detroit and Cleveland proved to be outliers: of the fifteen hundred convictions that the Department of Justice credits to *SAKI* funding, almost half were won in these two cities alone. Last year, a *USA Today* investigation found that

many grant recipients simply didn't test their kits, or deemed many of them "ineligible for testing," or sent them for processing but didn't reopen any cases. Virtually across the board, police departments consistently neglected to inform victims about the results of their forensic exams. (In Austin, Texas —where a backlog of more than four thousand kits had, as of 2024, led to a single conviction—one survivor had no idea that her kit had been linked to a serial predator until a reporter from *USA Today* happened to tell her.) And this leaves out the state and local authorities who never applied for funding in the first place.

The rape-kit backlog in the U.S. is especially mind-boggling when one considers exactly what a forensic exam demands of a patient. Antya Waegemann, who spent a year as a volunteer advocate in a New York hospital, told Kennedy that a victim typically waits eight hours or more to be seen by a nurse. During that time, she may not shower, eat, or brush her teeth; she must keep her rapist on her. The exam itself can take as long as five hours, and is, even under optimal circumstances, an invasive and upsetting ordeal. The victim undresses while standing on a sheet of paper that is meant to catch hair, fibres, and debris that could be evidence. The examining nurse photographs her, combs through her hair, scrapes under her fingernails, and swabs inside her mouth, genitals, and anus. Perhaps the examiner will penetrate her with a speculum.

There will be many excruciatingly specific questions, too, about where and what and how; Waegemann observed that medical staff sometimes spoke sharply to distraught patients. Recollection can begin to shade into reënactment. A survivor of a gang rape in Fayetteville told a reporter that a nurse had asked her "to describe what the four men did so that her body could be positioned in a way that allowed for more precise examination." Her untested kit was later discarded.

The exhausted, traumatized victim endures this treatment in the hope that the whole nightmare can be made real to those who will sit in judgment of her. But maybe the kit will be abandoned on a shelf or tossed in the trash. Maybe the victim's DNA sample will be used to pin her to a different crime, as in the case of a sexual-assault victim in San Francisco who was arrested on felony property charges using evidence from her rape kit. (The D.A.

dropped the charges on Fourth Amendment grounds.) Maybe she will receive a hospital bill for her rape kit, as more than two hundred women did in New York, per an investigation completed in 2018 by the state attorney general's office. Some of these patients were contacted by debt-collection agencies about their unpaid rape-kit bills.

Of the estimated one in three rapes that is reported to the police, a small fraction end in a conviction—fewer than four per cent in some cities, including Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Dallas, according to a recent NBC News analysis. In a review of twenty-one thousand police reports of sexual assault in Chicago, the birthplace of the rape kit, the local NBC affiliate determined that only 1.5 per cent of them resulted in a conviction with jail time.

If the criminal-justice landscape for rape victims remains objectively terrible, it is somewhat less terrible because of Marty Goddard and her comrades in the anti-rape movement of the seventies and eighties. Goddard, who faded into alcoholism and mental illness toward the end of her life, is the tragic heroine of “The Secret History of the Rape Kit,” which runs on a battery of indignation that she is not more well known, and that a man took credit for a woman’s work. “Eventually, after months of research,” Kennedy declares, “I would uncover evidence that Goddard—and not Louis Vitullo—had been the one who imagined and built the rape kit and, along with it, a new kind of forensics.” Kennedy recounts how, as a child in the seventies, she was sexually assaulted by a family acquaintance. If she had known Goddard then, “she would have been able to hear me and avenge me,” Kennedy writes. Instead, she goes on, “I would avenge her, and I would do that by telling her story. I would put her name in the history books.”

This narrative of gendered injustice and the redemptive power of feminist history has an almost mythical force. Some archival research adds wrinkles to it. The 1980 Chicago *Tribune* story, which led the Metro section and was widely syndicated, gave Goddard and Vitullo shared credit for designing the rape kit. A *Times* story from 1985 stated that Goddard “helped Sgt. Louis Vitullo develop the kit.” A 1988 article in the Evansville *Courier*, which lauded Goddard’s efforts to persuade states to adopt standardized evidence protocols for sexual-assault cases, didn’t mention Vitullo once. In 2003,

when Goddard participated in an oral-history project that was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime, her one-line bio read, "Marty Goddard has been a victim advocate for over 30 years, and is credited with developing the rape kit protocol." When Vitullo died, in 2006, his Chicago *Sun-Times* obituary devoted two paragraphs to Goddard as the rape kit's co-creator and most prominent advocate.

Much of "The Secret History of the Rape Kit," in other words, isn't very secret. And, in the annals of injustices to women, it is difficult to know where to rank the fact that a forensic-evidence kit, created under the aegis of the Chicago Police Department's crime lab, was associated with the name of a police sergeant who worked at the lab. Although Kennedy's allegiance to Goddard as a forgotten feminist avatar can be touching, it leads her to dubious places. "Marty asked questions that may seem obvious to us today," she writes. "In her time, though, these questions would have sounded delusional. What if sexual assault could be investigated, and prosecuted, like a murder or a robbery?" But even the most medievally minded Chicago cop of Goddard's era would not have been shocked by the concept of rape as a prosecutable crime.

Goddard envisioned the rape kit as a chance for the survivor to be recognized on her own terms, and to reassert her inalienable dignity by bringing her assailant to justice—at once avenging the outrage against her and protecting others from suffering as she did. But there is little dignity or justice to be found in spending eight hours shivering in an emergency room, and three more hours being parsed and dusted like a crime-scene tableau vivant, and years anticipating that one's assailant might be charged and convicted, only for the necessary evidence to be lost or thrown away or ignored. The nurse in nineteen-seventies Chicago who was insufficiently injured for her sexual assault to win the attention of law enforcement may have fared no better a generation later, even if she'd submitted to a forensic exam. In some respects, the scenario she faced fifty years ago might have been grimly preferable to what came later. At least nobody wasted her time. ♦



Jessica Winter joined *The New Yorker* as an editor in 2017 and became a staff writer in 2024, covering family and education. She is the author of the novels “[*Break in Case of Emergency*](#)” and “[*The Fourth Child*](#).”

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Books

Briefly Noted

“*In Defense of Partisanship*,” “*Shattered*,” “*Blob: A Love Story*,” and “*The Dissenters*.”

February 3, 2025



In Defense of Partisanship, by Julian E. Zelizer (*Columbia Global Reports*). In this concise treatise, Zelizer argues that the solution to the dysfunction in American politics lies not in third-partyism, bipartisanship, or a strengthened executive branch but, rather, in an improved two-party system. He lays out the case for why such a system still represents “the best way to organize and direct the deep tensions that always exist within the electorate.” Tracing the Democratic and the Republican Parties from their births through the congressional reforms of the nineteen-seventies (which ushered in the era of intense partisanship we know today), Zelizer dissects what has gone wrong and provides a clear and accessible blueprint for further changes—including ending the filibuster and eliminating the debt ceiling.

hanif kureishi.
two weeks ago a
bomb went off in my
life which has also
shattered the lives
of those around me.
at least i haven't lost
the one thing that was
most valuable to me,
which is my ability
to express myself.
a memoir.

Shattered, by Hanif Kureishi (Ecco). On Boxing Day, 2022, Kureishi, a novelist and screenwriter, experienced an accident that left him tetraplegic. The diary entries that constitute this book, dictated from hospital beds in Rome and London, offer an unflinching look at Kureishi's affliction. Interspersed throughout are recollections of his boyhood and his family: he reminisces about his father—a civil servant from Bombay who named his son after a cricket player—and broods about his mother. Amid the monotony of hospital routines and physiotherapy sessions, writing becomes Kureishi's anchor: “I am determined to keep writing, it has never mattered to me more.”

What We're Reading

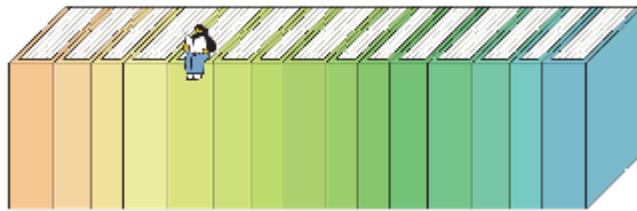
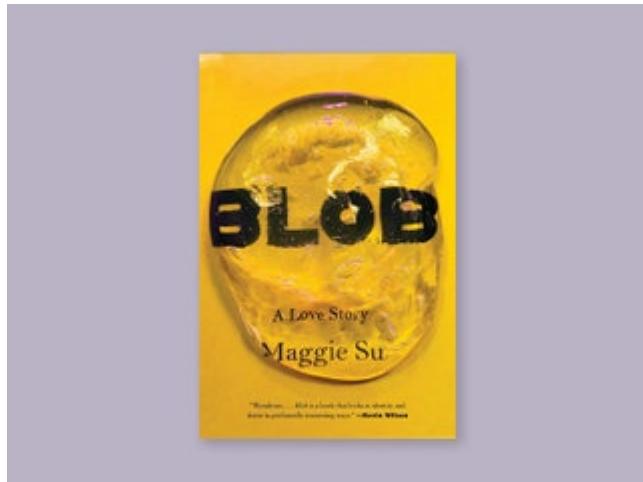
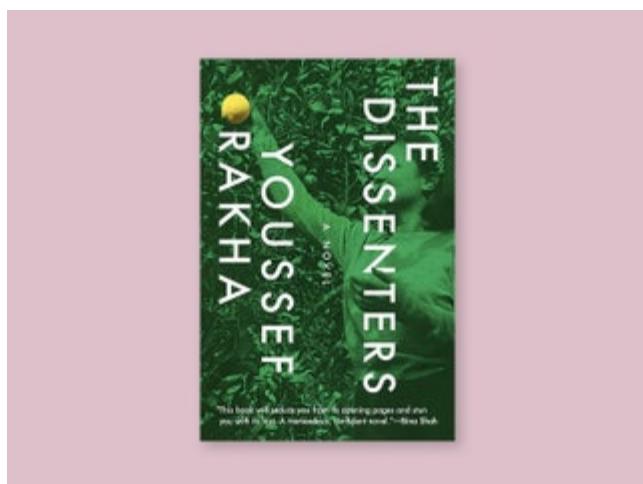


Illustration by Rose Wong

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Blob: A Love Story, by Maggie Su (Harper). In this slyly self-aware and gently comic novel, a twenty-four-year-old college dropout, Vi, who is stuck in a dead-end job and getting over a bad breakup, discovers a blob on the ground outside a dive bar. She takes the blob—which to her recalls “the slime I made as a kid”—back to her apartment and shapes it, golem-like, into her ideal boyfriend, whom she names Bob. Vi is chubby, socially awkward, and uneasy with her own “otherness” (she is the child of an Asian father and a white mother), and she seeks conventional perfection in Bob, who develops washboard abs and movie-star looks. But problems arise when Bob starts to feel desires of his own—a turn that both accelerates the novel’s sharp plot and enriches its examination of the complex relationship between longing and identity.



The Dissenters, by Youssef Rakha (Graywolf). This novel, the first written in English by one of Egypt’s leading authors, takes the form of letters from

a man in Cairo to his sister, who lives in America. In the letters, the man interweaves their mother's story—Involving a failed first marriage, female genital mutilation, an affair, and transformations from secularism to religiosity and back again—with reflections on his own life, his experience of her recent death, and the wider history of his country. Designating himself “a truth-seeker, a lover, a revolutionary,” the man notes that he “could never be any of those things if I didn’t understand that I was an Egyptian woman’s son.”

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Books

The Poet Shane McCrae Goes Back to Hell

McCrae's work obsessively retreads paths through Heaven, history, and eternal torment. What can we learn from his relentless investigation of suffering's labyrinth?

By [Elisa Gonzalez](#)

February 3, 2025



“New and Collected Hell” is at once a meticulous inventory of one person’s anguish and a testament to the emphatic impossibility of capturing the whole. Illustration by Henrik Drescher

Along Interstate 71, in a flat stretch of Ohio, an otherwise modest billboard proclaims that “*hell is real.*” The type, set against a black backdrop, is white, except for the “H,” which is painted a red that in certain lights

flickers orange. The sign is meant to give passing drivers an eschatological jolt, and it has become a much photographed landmark—enough of a fixture that it has its own listing on Google Maps. The simplicity of its message and the vulgarity of its medium make it an exemplar of religious expression in this American moment, as if God (or maybe Satan) placed an ad. Yet its stark certainty feels like a transmission from an earlier, less complicated world.

What is Hell, these days? “[New and Collected Hell](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), a book-length poem by Shane McCrae, is an audacious effort to stage a tour of the underworld in an almost painfully post-millennial context and vernacular. McCrae’s Hell contains a human-resources “bunker,” conducts intake interviews, shows the damned on screens that hang above gray cubicles sprawling endlessly in all directions, and communicates—pure evil—by fax machine only. [The Devil](#) must be reimagined for each age.

McCrae, who teaches at Columbia University, is a celebrated Black poet who has published nine previous collections of poetry and a memoir, “[Pulling the Chariot of the Sun](#). ” His fifth book, “[In the Language of My Captor](#)” (2017), was a finalist for the National Book Award for poetry. His work often explores America’s racial agon and its brutal history of enslavement. He has a long-standing affinity for allegorical settings, and many of his poems take place in skewed versions of a Christian afterworld. (Parts of “New and Collected Hell” appeared in “[The Gilded Auction Block](#),” from 2019, and “[Cain Named the Animal](#),” from 2022.)

[The Best Books of 2024](#)

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Now McCrae follows the journey of a poet and his guide through Hell's landscape, in a clear allusion to [Dante](#) and his Inferno. McCrae's unnamed narrator gets a neo-Virgil of his own, a "robot bird" named Law, a resentful, casually profane employee who makes it clear that being assigned to guide someone through Hell is a punishment in itself: "*Hey fuck you / fucking shithead follow me.*" If the robot, who frequently metamorphoses, gives shape to some form of justice, it's flayed down to a name. Law itself says, "*It's mostly assholes who think Hell's where justice happens Hell / Is sorrow's Heaven where it goes to live forever with / Its god the human body.*"

As in Dante, the metaphysical landscape is taken seriously and is carefully documented, as if the reader might someday go there and need to know the rules. There's the Pit-You-Cannot-See-the-Bottom-Of, which you must find the bottom of, and there's the ditch you can't cross without paying a toll (in this case, just a finger). An orange-bellied, hundred-legged "tyrant beetle" skitters about, boasting in the recognizable idiom of [Donald Trump](#): "*you will not find / A more tremendous group of people / Anywhere.*" And you might not: it's a gaggle of kneeling corpses. If all that McCrae's Hell offered were corporate satire and overt political irony, it would read like a time capsule from the first Trump Administration, when "The Good Place" was airing and the American public was tortured by #Resistance poetry. But the beetle is a sideshow, neither the boss nor the boss's boss here.

If this Hell is anything, it is suffering. Physical, extended, gruesome. When a cord severs the narrator's body at the waist, he holds his legs on until "the halves / Together bled so much / I couldn't see the wound." His femurs snap and shoot out, "each trailing innards streamers // Burst from a party popper." Even healing, here, involves almost unendurable pain: he is "splattered back together by / A hand or force I couldn't see a love // I couldn't see a cruelty re-nerving / My body for more suffering." The near-rhyme of "re-nerving" and "suffering" yokes the two words tightly, to reinforce the sense that suffering is the consequence of having nerves, which is to say, of having a body at all.

Appropriately for a fantasy of perdition suited to this nihilistic century, the logic of eternal punishment remains opaque. Unlike Dante's narrator,

McCrae's never gains any real clarity, and grand explanations are undercut. The reader must pause or double back regularly to make sense of sentences that unfold over many lines:

I fell a whole lifetime of fall
-ing as I fell and as I fell I
Fell through my life I watched my life

Projected on the walls of the hole
I fell through but projected through
No lens no carried by no light

No but projected like a movie
On the walls of the hole I fell through but
Backward like watching was like watching

A movie from behind the screen
In kind of it was in black and white but
In supersaturated whites

And blacks like scraps of carbon paper

This obsessive recalibration, typical of McCrae's work, uses language to explore language's limits, insisting that words can do no more than approximate a place beyond our comprehension: poetry as the pain scale. "I can't write down all / The pain I saw," the narrator admits. The poem's meticulous inventory of one person's anguish stands alongside the equally emphatic impossibility of capturing the whole. Unlike in the Inferno, in which Dante meets many monologuing sinners, each vividly portrayed, McCrae's narrator encounters conspicuously few.

Law claims that the narrator does not understand suffering:

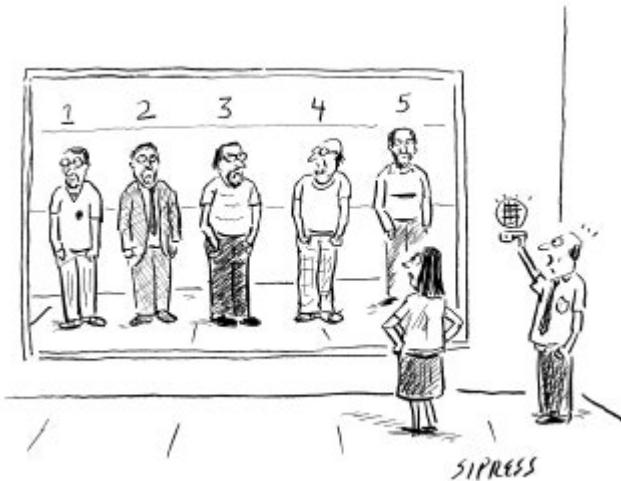
*you asshole if
I asked you what it was
You'd probably try to tell me
That's how I know you don't*

Know shit

Before Dante enters Hell, he is middle-aged, beleaguered, and already lost in the woods at the hellmouth. By the time he begins narrating the Inferno, he has successfully made his way through not only Hell but also Purgatory and Heaven, and the revelations have transformed him. The act of telling yanks him back to—in a translation by the poet Robert Pinsky—that place so “savage that thinking of it now, I feel / The old fear stirring.” He perseveres in the telling so that he can “treat the good” he’s found; both the dark memories and his conviction that they matter blaze with fierce sincerity. The Divine Comedy introduces us to a protagonist whose allegorical journey, even as it features dead diviners with their heads twisted backward, exudes profound realism at the human level. Increasing blessedness tends to anesthetize personality, but, especially in Hell, Dante’s characters are irreducible individuals, vivid and particular. Erich Auerbach, a noted German scholar and critic, could call Dante a “poet of the secular world” because he depicts “man as we know him in his living historical reality, the concrete individual in his unity and wholeness.” That it’s Dante Alighieri—poet *de stil nuovo*, Florentine, exile—who does the afterworld circuit matters. Being a hero does not require forgetting whatever got you lost in the woods in the first place.

The edicts that banished the real Dante from Florence—part of an internecine conflict that divided the city’s populace for decades—dictated that everything he owned was to be “confiscated, dismantled and laid waste.” If caught, he would be burned or beheaded. The woods are very dark indeed, and writers have often turned to Dante during their own crises. [Osip Mandelstam](#) wrote a seminal essay on Dante, which is also an *ars poetica*, around the time that he was sent into internal exile under Stalin, and [Seamus Heaney](#) began a decades-long intimacy with the Comedy in the nineteen-seventies, as sectarian violence in Northern Ireland worsened. Both men were also contending with poetry’s proper relation to political expression. For Heaney, Dante showed that it was possible for a poet to “place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history.” Heaney went on to both translate Dante and write his own Purgatory trip. McCrae, too, approaches Dante’s allegorical

vision with an urgency derived from a struggle that collapses the personal and the social, until the metaphysical realm seems the only possible stage.



"Number three—step forward and say, 'Calm down, you're overreacting.' "
Cartoon by David Sipress

McCrae is the son of a white mother and a Black father. His mother was only eighteen when he was born, and his parents never married. His maternal grandparents were racists, his grandfather violently so: he bragged of beating Black men for fun. Until McCrae was three, he saw his father regularly. Then one day, his grandparents picked him up for what was ostensibly a short trip. Instead, they took him to a different state and raised him as their child, threatening his mother to prevent her from revealing the truth. They also told him that he merely “tanned deeply, easily”; in their telling, he was white. The kidnapping, and subsequent years of physical and verbal abuse, made McCrae an intimate of suffering. Those years were also a protracted education in American racism’s power to deform everything from familial bonds to memory itself.

He has told versions of this story over and over, often through the voices of characters who demonstrate sophisticated self-understanding in a life defined by racial bondage: an African on display in a cage with monkeys; a Black actor nicknamed Banjo Yes, reminiscent of Bill (Bojangles) Robinson and other early cinema stars whose fame stemmed from performing racist caricatures; Jim Limber, a Black child taken and raised, for about a year, in the family of Jefferson Davis, then the President of the Confederacy. Even when he is not explicitly allegorizing by leading us to Heaven or Hell or

history, McCrae is most assured in double exposures. He appears by disappearing.

Limber, the persona that McCrae has returned to more than any other, goes to Heaven again and again in McCrae's multiverse. In one iteration of paradise, he ponders the practicalities of starting over: "First I suppose I got to find some land / To work . . . I suppose I got to find // A man who owns a farm and needs some help." He is free now, after death, but he cannot imagine himself as free as any white person: "I reckon all / White folks got to do is die and wait." Freedom is a labor of the imagination, too, a labor that may outlast death. McCrae is always picking at the warped knot of intimacy and oppression that has shaped America, and his own life. "New and Collected Hell" is the culmination of a years-long investigation of suffering's labyrinth.

I grew up in Ohio, near that billboard on Interstate 71. My family attended an evangelical church that believed in Hell in a way that would have been intelligible, if abhorrent, to the medieval Catholic Dante. Hell, I learned, was real, terrible beyond imagining, and everlasting. For a while, when I was about seven, having gained an awareness of my sinner's soul, I had nightmares about being chased by demons through a dark wood. I believe that was my first true acquaintance with fear.

According to a 2023 Pew survey, about sixty per cent of Americans believe in the existence of Hell. Even for nonbelievers, Hell maintains cultural significance, though the focus is often more on what "Hell" says about "earth." Hell can sometimes seem the only acceptable metaphor. When I read that, earlier this winter, at least six infants in Gaza had died from exposure to cold in just a week's time, it was hard to find another word, even if the causes were entirely human. "We live in Hell," people say, sharing memes: Elmo in flames, captioned "*ME IN HELL*," or a gif of a cartoon dog sitting at a table drinking coffee in a burning house. "This isn't, like, Hell or something?" a character demands in the first episode of "Severance," on AppleTV+. She seems to be seriously entertaining the possibility. The joke is that something, perhaps all of life, is bad enough to be called evil. Pew did not inquire about the nature of Hell, so whether many people truly believe in something like Dante's Hell, or my childhood

one—an eternity of suffering and punishment which, however horrifying, enacts divine justice—we cannot be sure.

In “New and Collected Hell,” McCrae exploits, in a way that few other modern poets have been able to, the power of allegory: it thrives on its ability to sustain contradiction. This journey through Hell is really happening, and could never happen. Law embodies a kind of “strange justice,” and is also just a guy trying to work in the land of the damned. These oppositions demand that we consider the real-world implications of impossibilities. We read about the journey not for its literal meaning, nor for its figurative one. Rather, we read it for the way its multiple meanings, overlaid, invite us to consider the metaphysical heft of our painful lives. Is Hell real? As McCrae knows, sometimes the questions we can’t answer are the ones we most need to ask. ♦

Elisa Gonzalez received the 2024 Whiting Award for poetry. She is the author of the collection “*Grand Tour*.”

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[The Theatre](#)

“Hugh Jackman LIVE” and “Beckett Briefs” Make a Spectacle of Time’s Passage

In two new shows, the Oscar-nominated, Tony Award-winning star and F. Murray Abraham play against their younger selves.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

January 31, 2025



The actor performs a tour of his Broadway and Hollywood career. Illustration by Patrick Leger

In “Hugh Jackman LIVE, from New York with Love,” the Oscar-nominated, multiple Tony Award-winning Marvel mega-super-über-ultrastar can’t seem to get over the fact that he has his own show at Radio City

Music Hall. “Look at us, Gussy!” he called to a childhood friend in the audience the night I saw it. “Who would have thought it?” At some point, as Jackman performs twenty-four shows there in the next ten months, his surprise may fade. Yet this is a key aspect of Jackman’s charisma: a kind of sweet humility that constantly refreshes itself. Though the actor has starred in five Broadway productions, shredded box-office records as the X-Men’s vein-popping Wolverine, performed a whole other autobiographical retrospective (“Hugh Jackman, Back on Broadway,” in 2011), and even hosted four Tony ceremonies at Radio City, his happy-to-be-here, gee-willikers excitement somehow remains intact. “I’ll never forget this,” he told a Saturday crowd, a little catch in his voice.

Jackman, his beard now striped a distinguished gray, wears a slim three-piece suit, tie-less, as if he’s still playing a huckster in “The Music Man,” or maybe a faith healer with great microphone skills. In the course of an energetic hour and forty-five minutes, he, his orchestra, four backup singers, and four dancers offer a tour of his Hollywood and Broadway career. The set list includes several of Benj Pasek and Justin Paul’s sugary anthems from “The Greatest Showman”; a good chunk of the dazzling Australian entertainer Peter Allen’s œuvre, which Jackman interpreted in “The Boy from Oz,” earning a Tony; and, during a sequence in which his twanging timbre sounds most at home, a few Neil Diamond hits. (He’s recently finished shooting a role as a real-life Diamond impersonator, in a film called “Song Sung Blue.”)

The dramatic peak, perhaps predictably, is Jackman’s tearful rendition of “Soliloquy,” from “Les Misérables,” introduced with an excerpt from Tom Hooper’s 2012 film, in which the actor played the rehabilitated thief Jean Valjean. “Here where I stand at the turning of the years!” he cries out, and we can compare his grim intensity with his younger self’s glowering righteousness on the screen behind him. In the course of the show I attended, he also professed his love and thanks to every single person in the room, including Cameron Mackintosh, that film’s producer, who was somewhere in the good seats; an usher Jackman sat on during an ecstatic bit of improv; various collaborators; and, again and again, the Wolverine fans and “Showman”-heads shouting out to him from the audience.

The illusion of intimacy on view should have been hard to create, because Radio City is a barn. (At its tallest point, the theatre is eight stories high.) To bring us close to the action, huge screens hanging on either side of the stage broadcast the live feed of cameras that track Jackman wherever he goes, whether it's into the aisles, for a laying on of high-fives, or downstage center, for a closeup. We're therefore very close—as in Tom Hooper shooting “Soliloquy” close—to any flicker of vulnerability. Vocally, too, Jackman makes a kind of spectacle of his modesty. He cheerfully allows his singing voice to be outstripped by the gorgeous vocalists around him. (The night I went, the backup singer Lauren Blackman had to step in, after a guest performer fell ill, to sing the Pasek-and-Paul song “Never Enough”; her staggering performance received the only mid-show standing ovation of the night.) I do wonder if Jackman keeps his ego in check by placing himself among virtuosos whose artistry he—with his lovely baritone urged toward an effortful tenor—can never quite reach. Other superhero actors might retreat behind a shellacked persona when they’re not punching walls. But Jackman doubles down on his musical-theatre ambitions, and his sense of awe. He’s a luvvie in the skin of a lion.

And, if we’ve missed a moment of vulnerability, he makes sure to point it out. For instance, right before he performs an Alexi Murdoch ballad, “All My Days,” from the soundtrack of his robot-boxing movie, “Real Steel,” he tells the audience that the song was used in the film to underscore a wordless scene, during which his character, an unemployed prizefighter, sits in the cab of a truck, alone. On the day of filming, Jackman had just received bad news about his father’s health; as we watch the clip, he deliberately attunes us to the real grief shading his performance.

Over and over, between the jokes and the frolics, Jackman demonstrates his unguardedness and ready affection, hugging the occasional person returning from the bathroom, or welling up on camera, with sorrow, or overwhelmed gratitude, or both. “Hugh Jackman LIVE, from New York with Love,” despite the goofy double-barrelled title, is therefore as much ministry as show biz. Gussy, Jackman’s best friend in the audience, turns out to be Gus Worland, a mental-health advocate, and Jackman speaks earnestly about Worland’s work in suicide prevention and hidden pain. It’s Jackman’s theme for the night. “*Never worry alone*,” he says.

I do not believe that Samuel Beckett was thinking of a career-retrospective song-and-dance show when he wrote “Krapp’s Last Tape,” in which a grizzled curmudgeon listens to the reel-to-reel diary recordings he made in his younger, more optimistic days, but Beckett’s exquisite monodrama, from 1958, does oddly rhyme with Jackman’s flashier evening. As part of a precisely judged anthology called “Beckett Briefs,” directed by Ciarán O’Reilly, at the Irish Rep, “Krapp,” too, traffics in celebrity and proximity, though at that tiny venue you can’t really help but feel close to the star, F. Murray Abraham. (Given the size of the house, you can’t get much distance from him unless you hide in the lobby.)

Abraham, who won an Oscar as Antonio Salieri in “Amadeus,” from 1984, is a master craftsman of sonorous self-loathing. Here he plays the ragged Krapp, celebrating what might be his last birthday, swigging booze at intervals that he carefully times with a pocket watch. Krapp begins by recording his annual diary entry, but he’s distracted, preferring instead to root through boxes to find the spools of his youth and middle age. (“Spooooool!” he says, happy with the word in his mouth.) We hear about the hard rubber ball he threw for a dog as his mother lay dying in her cottage, and a rowboat drifting through marshy reeds as he and a woman bade each other farewell. His awareness seems focussed then and now on physical sensations at times of great—but diverted—emotion.

The other two Beckett microplays are “Not I,” performed by a hovering, spotlit mouth (Sarah Street), which seems to be disassociating at the moment of what might be death. “What? . . . who? . . . no! . . . *she!*” the lipsticked mouth snaps, whenever its gabble about a suffering woman seems to turn personal. In the equally quick “Play,” Kate Forbes, Roger Dominic Casey, and Street play the members of a tortured love triangle that has continued into the world after this one: three heads perch on top of what look like huge canopic jars, each of them telling its side of a series of nasty betrayals. Purgatorial and punishing, the works are two of Beckett’s “aftermath” dramas, which use their brevity to hint at the long, existential suffering ahead.

Both of these hallucinatory miniatures, crucially, are about *unlistening*: the mouth in “Not I” denies its own body; the jarred trio are tied together

forever (the script contains the instruction “repeat play”) but never hear one another. “Krapp,” though, is nearly *all* listening. Abraham, as his recorded voice speaks, adds to this sense of attention by embracing the tape machine itself, a big object on his desk which is the size of a suitcase. We can feel his grip tighten on its cold metal corners, just as Krapp can still feel the woman’s thigh beneath his hand. Krapp’s old self is a torture to him, full of misplaced bluster and the willingness to throw irreplaceable things away. Looking—or, rather, listening—back, he bows down to the sound of the younger fool, as though he’s presenting himself for judgment. Here, in Abraham’s paralyzed anguish, we feel the universal chill of retrospective thought. Even in Hugh Jackman’s charmed, successful, box-office-busting life, we find the same urge to return to the past, to the younger image, and, perhaps, to the sterner judge. ♦



Helen Shaw, The New Yorker’s theatre critic, joined the magazine in 2022.

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Poems

- **“Barbershop”**

By Clarence Major | “In the barbershop it’s hard to tell an argument / from a discussion.”

- **“The Tribute”**

By Jameson Fitzpatrick | “I was thinking of a daughter, there / in the crush of a summer / what can save her from.”

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Barbershop

By [Clarence Major](#)

February 3, 2025

In the barbershop it's hard to tell an argument
from a discussion. Men in the barber's chair
tend to speak softly—especially if they're
getting a shave. Those sitting in the chairs
along the walls waiting their turn for a cut
or a shave or both tend to speak loudly—
sometimes shouting. I'm in a chair, waiting
my turn for a cut. I'm listening, not talking.

The manicurist doing fingernails is in
conversation with a man getting his nails
trimmed and polished. It's about what a mess
the world is in. The guy in Max's chair says
life is unfair. Death. Destruction. Disease.
Viruses. He says the world is going to hell
in a handbasket. My professor in college said

people have always believed the world was
about to end. Sure, if you like metaphors, it
ends and starts every twenty-four hours again.

Clarence Major is the author of poetry collections including “[*Four Days in Algeria*](#)” and the novel “[*The Glint of Light*](#).”

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The Tribute

By [Jameson Fitzpatrick](#)

February 3, 2025

I was thinking of a daughter, there
in the crush of a summer
what can save her from. You know the one:

that thick season from which she'll feel everything
that follows, follows. She isn't wrong

to get in the car with the older boy;
in a sense she must,
because she wants to. Headlong dive into the backseat.

Headstrong is the word

her father uses before disappearing
back to his office. For him, the one suffices.

Not me: voluble as our girl, as I ever was

though I have made a study of restraint,
and practiced plenty,
posed at the closed piano when no one's home.

Some nights when she's returned to me, I for a second
think: Changeling!

Of course it's her; it's only that
as her resemblance to me—to a version
I can remember and recognize as self—grows,

it gets harder to see her
grow, at once, ever more distinct from me.
Further and clearer.

Even as she repeats my errors:
the selection of boy, my old white jacket with the fringe.
And wears her seatbelt

always, because her mother made her.

It's not for her I wait up.
In fact, she never comes.

Still someone has to fill the loud freedom
that someone who must have been me
must have chosen.

Jameson Fitzpatrick is the author of the poetry collection “[Pricks in the Tapestry](#).” She teaches at New York University.

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By Patrick Berry | A moderately challenging puzzle.

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The Crossword: Tuesday, January 28, 2025

A moderately challenging puzzle.



By [Patrick Berry](#)

January 28, 2025



[Patrick Berry](#) has been publishing puzzles since 1993 and lives in Athens, Georgia.

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