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- Reporting
- The Critics
- The Talk of the Town
- Shouts & Murmurs
- Fiction
- Puzzles & Games Dept.
- Poems
- Goings On About Town
- Mail

Reporting

- [A Trans Teen in an Anti-Trans State](#)
- [Under the Carpetbag](#)
- [Jake Sullivan's Trial by Combat](#)
- [The Crimes Behind the Seafood You Eat](#)

American Chronicles

A Trans Teen in an Anti-Trans State

One family's move to find gender-affirming care.

By [Emily Witt](#)



Willow and her mother, Kristen Chapman, left Tennessee after the state banned gender-transition treatment for minors. Photograph by Tonje Thilesen for The New Yorker

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On the last morning of July, Kristen Chapman was getting ready to leave Nashville. Chapman, who is in her early fifties and wears her silver hair short, sat on a camp chair next to a fire pit outside the rental duplex where her family had lived for twelve years. She was smoking an American Spirit and swatting at the mosquitoes that kept emerging from the dense green brush behind her. Her husband, Paul, who was wearing a T-shirt with the Guinness logo, carried boxes out to the front lawn. Their daughters, Saoirse and Willow, who were seventeen and fifteen, were inside, still asleep. Chapman looked down at the family's beagle mix, Obi-Wan Kenobi, who was drinking rainwater out of a plastic bucket. "We got him when we moved in here for the kids," she said. "He's never lived anywhere else."

Paul was planning to stay in town; Chapman was heading to Richmond, Virginia, with Saoirse and Willow. Chapman and Paul's marriage was ending, but the decision to split their family apart had happened abruptly. Willow is trans, and had been on puberty blockers since 2021. In March, Tennessee's governor, Bill Lee, had signed a bill that banned gender-transition treatment for minors across the state.

On paper, the law, which went into effect in early July, would allow trans teens like Willow to continue their medical care until March of 2024. But Chapman wasn't sure they could count on that. Willow was determined to begin taking estrogen when she turned sixteen, in December of 2023, which would allow her to grow into adulthood with feminine characteristics. If she couldn't continue taking puberty blockers until then, she would begin to go through male puberty, which could mean more surgeries and other procedures later in life.

At first, the family had hoped that the courts would declare the new law unconstitutional. Federal courts had already done so in at least four other states in 2023, finding that such bans violated the First Amendment and the equal-protection and due-process clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. But that spring the Pediatric Transgender Clinic at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, where Willow had been receiving care, informed its patients that it was ceasing operations. Seeing this as a bad sign, Chapman set up a GoFundMe page in early May and began planning their departure.

Inside, the apartment was filled with abandoned objects—an old Wi-Fi router, trash bags of unwanted clothes. A Homer Simpson doll in a hula skirt lay forgotten on a windowsill. Chapman, an artist who supplements her income with social work, had recently quit her job as a caseworker. She would need their landlord as a reference to get an apartment, especially because she had bad credit, but the family still owed him back rent. She checked Venmo, waiting on a loan from a friend.

At six-thirty that morning, Chapman had gone out to her white Dodge S.U.V. and found her younger daughter asleep in the back seat. Willow had gone over to a friend's house and stayed out late. When she got home, she realized that she had locked herself out. The Dodge's window had been

stuck open for months, so she got in. “Any other human being would have handled this totally differently,” Chapman said, shaking her head.

Willow had gone back to sleep in her room, which she once shared with her brother. (He was a sophomore in college and had already moved out.) The colorful scarves and lights that used to decorate the space had been taken down. When she woke up, she began sifting through what was left. “I feel like I’m ready to say goodbye to it,” she said, looking around. There were drawings scrawled on the wall, a desk spattered in paint. “Most of the stuff in here I’ve trashed.”

“It’s like getting a new haircut,” Chapman said. “A fresh palette.”

Chapman had chosen Virginia for their new life, she said, because it was still in the South, but there would be “multiple avenues of escape.” Paul worked nights for a large grocery-store chain; Richmond was among the northernmost cities where it had branches, and Chapman thought that at some point he might be able to transfer there. Earlier in the summer, she and Willow had driven to Richmond to see the city, and Chapman had lined up a marketing job. It didn’t pay well, but she knew she wouldn’t get a lease without a job. Willow, who had received her last puberty-blocker shot at the Vanderbilt clinic in late May, was supposed to receive her next one in late August. They didn’t have a lot of time.

Despite having taken puberty blockers for two years, Willow looks her age. She is tall and long-limbed and meticulous about her appearance. That morning, she had on Y2K-revival clothes: wide-legged jeans worn low on the hips with a belt, a patterned tank top, and furry pink Juicy Couture boots. Her blond hair was glossy and straight, her bangs held back with a barrette. She is committed to living her adolescence as a girl regardless of what medical treatment she is allowed to receive. At times she has used silicone prosthetic breasts; attaching them is an onerous process involving spray-on adhesive.

From a very young age, Willow wore dresses and gravitated toward friendships with girls. Her parents thought that she would likely grow up to be a gay man. As Chapman put it, “We knew she was in the fam.” When a homophobic shooter killed forty-nine people at Pulse, the gay night club in

Orlando, in 2016, Willow, who was eight at the time, accompanied her mother to a vigil in Nashville. Willow wrote a long message on a banner in solidarity with the survivors. Chapman took a photo of her there. “It was like she was transfixed,” Chapman remembered. In the sixth grade, Willow went to an all-girl sleepover. A parent overheard the kids discussing gender and sexuality, and told Chapman. Willow says that it was around then that she began to think about her identity. “Pretty much as soon as I knew about, like, conceptualized gender, I knew I wanted to be a girl,” she said. She had been an A student, but her grades started going down. Looking back, Willow struggled to articulate what had happened. “It just got complicated, like with all my stuff physically, it just felt like a mess,” she said.

She came out to her friends first; then one day, in the spring of 2020, while she was upstairs on her laptop and Chapman was downstairs working, Willow sent her mother a three-word e-mail that said, “I am trans.” Willow told me, “I realized I have to do this sometime if I want to advocate for myself and get what I need to get.” She left it to her mother to inform the rest of the family. Chapman was accepting; Paul was more skeptical. “That’s him, you know—a man of science,” Chapman said. “It wasn’t overly positive or negative.”

Willow had already decided on her new name before coming out, and began using it with friends. She was again reluctant to tell her family. “I was, like, I’ll keep that secret,” she said—she had been named at birth for a brother of her father’s who had died, and knew the name was important to him. Her mother found out when another mom referred to Willow by her chosen name. Chapman started using it right away; it took Paul another year.



"He thinks that every discussion about the disposal of a body is about him."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

To figure out their next steps, Chapman took Willow, who was then twelve, to her regular pediatrician at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. She was referred to the center’s Pediatric Transgender Clinic. The clinic, which opened in 2018, was part of a broader expansion of gender-affirming care at flagship medical schools in the South that occurred around that time. (Clinics also opened at Duke University, the University of Mississippi, and Emory University, among other schools.) These places “attracted the kind of people who build very trusting relationships with patients and are able to establish not just the clinical competencies but also an inclusive environment,” Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, the executive director of the Campaign for Southern Equality, an advocacy group for L.G.B.T.Q. rights, told me. “All those things are nothing you can take for granted when seeking medical care in the South.” (Federal funding for health care is often funnelled through state governments, some of which have a history of withholding money from providers that offer abortion and other politicized health services.)

Care for patients who are experiencing gender dysphoria is highly individualized: some trans kids opt for a purely social transition, changing their names or pronouns; others, like Willow, seek a medical transition, which can be started at the onset of puberty. In Willow’s case, a diagnosis of

gender dysphoria had to be verified before pharmaceutical treatment could begin. A course of psychotherapy was accompanied by a physical assessment at Vanderbilt, which included ultrasounds, X-rays, and blood tests. The clinic was following a protocol supported by the Endocrine Society and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, whereby patients take puberty blockers—which have been used to treat children experiencing early-onset puberty since the nineteen-eighties—to delay the onset of secondary sex characteristics until they are ready to begin taking estrogen or testosterone.

“I’d always explain it to the families as a pause on puberty, allowing the youth to take a deep breath,” Kimberly Herrmann, a pediatrician and internist at Whitman-Walker Health, a provider in the Washington, D.C., area that offers gender-affirming care to patients aged thirteen and over, told me. (Some patients choose to go through their natal puberty.) “All of the data suggests that it is the correct thing to do for a patient with a clear diagnosis,” Izzy Lowell, a doctor who started a telehealth practice for gender-affirming care called QueerMed, said, of taking puberty blockers. “If they are going to develop the body of a grown man, it becomes difficult to undo those changes.”

Paul was worried about the blockers’ long-term effects on Willow’s health. (Studies have shown that they can affect bone density when used long term, and the protocol for hormone therapy advises doctors to discuss potential risks to fertility and options for fertility preservation.) Chapman thought the risks to Willow’s well-being would be worse if she developed male secondary sex characteristics. In one testimony against the Tennessee ban, an adult trans woman described her adolescence, in which she attempted to present as male, as “a disastrous and torturous experience.”

“Paul and I talked about it and came to the belief that we wanted her on them as quickly as possible for safety reasons,” Chapman said. “I hate that that’s true, but we know that’s the world that we live in, and that she is going to be a safer person for the rest of her life if she does not look male.” (A recent analysis of crime statistics from 2017 and 2018 found that transgender people are more than four times as likely as cisgender people to be the victims of a violent crime.)

The evaluation and diagnosis took almost a year. For Willow, the talk therapy was the most taxing part. Willow was insured through the state's Medicaid program, TennCare, which meant that there were only a limited number of therapists she could see, none of whom were trans, or even queer. She went through three in a year. "We were in the lowest tier of care," Chapman said, adding that at least one therapist dropped their health insurance. Willow told her mother that she wished she could just be left alone to be a "sad trans girl."

At the age of thirteen, she was finally able to start puberty blockers. "You have an end goal," Willow said of the experience. "And all the in-between doesn't matter."

In September, 2022, the conservative commentator and anti-trans activist Matt Walsh, who moved to Nashville in 2020 (along with his employer, the conservative news company the Daily Wire), posted a thread on Twitter. "Vanderbilt drugs, chemically castrates, and performs double mastectomies on minors," it began. "But it gets worse." Walsh—who is the author of books including "Church of Cowards: A Wake-Up Call to Complacent Christians" and "What Is a Woman?," a polemic arguing that gender roles are biologically determined—worked in conservative talk radio before being hired by the Daily Wire as a writer, in 2017. Last year, the left-wing watchdog group Media Matters for America mapped Walsh's origins as an aspiring radio shock jock in the early twenty-tens who once said, "We probably lost our republic after Reconstruction." In 2022, he was one of several right-wing social-media pundits who began broadcasting misinformation about hospitals that provided gender-transition treatment for minors, which were then overwhelmed with phone and e-mail threats and online harassment. One study found that more than fifteen hospitals modified or took down Web sites about pediatric gender care after being named in these campaigns.

Walsh included in his thread about Vanderbilt a video clip of Shayne Taylor, the medical director of its Transgender Clinic, speaking of top and bottom surgeries as a potential "money-maker" for the hospital. Walsh did not specify that Taylor was mostly speaking about adults. (Vanderbilt never performed genital surgery on underage patients and did an average of five top surgeries a year on minors, with a minimum age of sixteen.) More than

sixty Republican state legislators signed a letter to Vanderbilt describing the clinic's practices "as nothing less than abuse." In a statement calling for an investigation, Governor Lee, who was up for reelection, said that "we should not allow permanent, life-altering decisions that hurt children." Within days, Vanderbilt announced that it would put a pause on surgeries for minors. Jonathan Skrmetti, Tennessee's Republican attorney general, began an inquiry into whether Vanderbilt had manipulated billing codes to avoid limitations on insurance coverage.

In October, Walsh and other anti-trans advocates held a "Rally to End Child Mutilation" in Nashville's War Memorial Plaza. The speakers included the Tennessee senator Marsha Blackburn, the former Democratic Presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard, and Chloe Cole, a nineteen-year-old self-described "former trans kid." After identifying as male from the age of twelve, receiving testosterone, and getting top surgery, Cole de-transitioned to female at sixteen and is now one of the country's foremost youth advocates of bans on gender-transition treatment for minors. "I was allowed to make an adult decision as a traumatized fifteen-year-old," she said at the rally.

For the past four years, the number of anti-trans bills proposed throughout the United States has dramatically risen. The A.C.L.U. has counted some four hundred and ninety-six proposals in state legislatures in 2023, eighty-four of which have been signed into law. The first state ban on gender-transition treatment for minors was passed in Arkansas in 2021. It was permanently blocked by a federal judge this year, but more than twenty states have passed similar laws since then. As lawsuits filed by the A.C.L.U., Lambda Legal, and other organizations make their way through the courts, trans people are left to navigate a shifting legal landscape that activists say has affected clinical and pharmaceutical access. Lowell told me that she consults with six lawyers (including one she keeps on retainer) to best advise patients, who must frequently drive across state borders to receive care. "It's literally a daily task to figure out what's legal where," she said.

In Tennessee, the Human Rights Campaign has counted the passage of at least nineteen anti-L.G.B.T.Q. laws since 2015, among the most in the nation. Some of these laws have been found unconstitutional, such as a ban on drag shows in public spaces and a law that would have required any business to post a warning if it let transgender people use their preferred rest

room. But many others have gone into effect, such as laws that censor school curricula and ban transgender youth from playing on the sports teams that align with their identity.

Proposals to ban gender-transition treatment for minors were the first bills introduced in the opening legislative sessions of the Tennessee House and Senate in November, 2022. “It was Matt Walsh who lit a fire under the ultraconservative wing of the Republican Party this year,” Chris Sanders, the director of a Nashville-based L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy group called Tennessee Equality Project, told me. “It was lightning speed the way it all unfolded.” At hearings throughout the winter, parents of trans kids, trans adults, trans youth, and a Memphis pediatrician who provides gender-affirming care testified against the ban. Those who spoke in support of it included Walsh, Cole (who is from California), and a right-wing Tennessee physician named Omar Hamada, who compared such treatment to letting a minor who wanted to become a pirate get a limb and one eye removed.

L.G.B.T.Q. activists who attended described feeling disregarded by the Republican majority. Molly Quinn, the executive director of OUTMemphis, a nonprofit that helps trans youth navigate their health care, likened the experience to “being the only queer kid at a frat party.”

Three months after Governor Lee signed the ban, Vanderbilt University Medical Center informed patients that the previous November, at the attorney general’s request, it had shared non-anonymized patient records from the Pediatric Transgender Clinic, including photographic documentation and mental-health assessments. “I immediately started hearing from parents,” Sanders said. Their fear stemmed in part from attempts in states like Texas to have the parents of trans kids investigated by child-protective services. (The attorney general’s office said in a statement that it is “legally bound to maintain the medical records in the strictest confidence, which it does.”) Former patients have sued Vanderbilt, and a federal investigation by the Department of Health and Human Services is also under way. (A spokesperson for Vanderbilt declined to comment for this article.)

In July, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals became the first federal court in the country to allow a ban on gender-transition treatment for minors to take

effect, with a final ruling planned for September. Chapman, who had spoken out for trans rights through local media outlets, and had been targeted with online threats and menacing phone calls in return, understood that Tennessee, where she had lived for most of the past thirty-five years, had become a hostile environment for her family. “I genuinely feel we are being run out of town on a rail,” she said. “I am not being dramatic. It is not my imagination.”

It was dusk by the time Paul had loaded the last of the boxes into three storage pods. Everything was ready, but the family was having trouble leaving. Someone would walk out of the house and get into the car, only to go back into the house five minutes later. Chapman suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to buy padlocks for the storage pods, which were scheduled to be picked up by U-Haul the next day. As she drove off to get them, Paul sat on the back steps and stared out at the lawn. Fireflies were winking on and off over the grass.

“Bollocks,” he said to himself, then stood up and went inside.

Although comprehensive demographic data on transgender youth are scarce, the American Academy of Pediatrics has reported that “research increasingly suggests that familial acceptance or rejection ultimately has little influence on the gender identity of youth.” But without parental consent most kids in America who wish to transition medically are legally unable to do so until they turn eighteen. Having a supportive parent or guardian as a trans child is more than a legal or practical advantage, though. A study of eighty-four youth in Ontario, aged sixteen to twenty-four, who identified as trans and had come out to their parents found that the rate of attempted suicide was four per cent among those whose parents were strongly supportive but that nearly sixty per cent of respondents who described their parents as not supportive had attempted suicide in the previous year.

Chapman’s decision to support her daughter grew in part out of her own experience as a black sheep in a deeply religious family. She was born in East Tennessee to a Baptist minister and his wife and had an itinerant upbringing, moving around the South. The last words her grandfather, who

was also a Baptist minister, said to her were “I’m so sorry I’m not gonna see you in Heaven.”

Paul was raised in Dublin, Ireland, as the youngest of twelve children in a Catholic family. “We both came from communities that were super fundamentalist,” Chapman said. They agreed that they would raise their children outside of any religious tradition. If they had a doctrine, Chapman said, it was “critical thinking.” They brought their kids to Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and took them to hear the Georgia congressman and civil-rights activist John Lewis speak. But Paul and Kristen would also listen to the far-right radio host Rush Limbaugh, to know what the other side was saying. As the children got older, Paul and Kristen started to have different visions of the future—Kristen wanted to buy an R.V. and travel the country, and Paul wanted to buy a house. In 2019, they decided to separate, but they couldn’t afford to split their family into two households.

Paul at first had trouble understanding how Willow could decide about her gender so young. Kristen would argue, “If a person presents and says, ‘This is who I am,’ it is not your job to unpack that.” In the end, it was by talking to two trans women—a co-worker in her fifties and a twentysomething bartender at the pub he frequented—that Paul came to understand his daughter better. “Reading online was too much right-wing or left-wing,” he said. “I needed something more grounded.” The bartender told him that her father had rejected her, and that she had scars on her arms from self-harm. “I said, no matter what, I wasn’t doing that,” Paul recalled.

Willow had told me that one of the hardest parts of leaving town was doing so while her relationship to her father was still evolving. “I feel like my biggest unfinished business is that relationship,” she said the day before the move, over boba tea in a strip mall called Plaza Mariachi. “I think I’ve dealt with it. We’ll talk on the phone. Even if we don’t have an in-person connection, I think we’ll be O.K.”

Once they all managed to leave the house for the last time, Paul gave Chapman and each daughter a hundred dollars in cash as a parting gift. The family had dinner at Panera Bread, then sat for a while at a nearby park. Paul cancelled two Lyfts before finally getting in one and heading to the pub,

where he would try to process the day. Chapman and the girls got in the white Dodge and took I-24 out of Nashville.

L.G.B.T.Q.-rights activists around the country have seen the sudden uptick in bills targeting transgender identity as a strategy to rally conservative voters after the legalization of gay marriage and the criminalization of abortion. “There was an inordinate amount of money and attention and huge far-right groups, many of which have been deemed hate groups, focussed on keeping us as L.G.B.T.Q. people from getting married, right?” Simone Chriss, a Florida-based lawyer, told me. Chriss is representing trans people in several lawsuits against the state over its restrictions on gender-affirming care. She observed that, after the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage, in 2015, “all of the people singularly focussed on that needed something else to focus on.”

She recalled watching as model legislation propagated by groups such as the Alliance Defending Freedom and the Family Research Council targeted trans people’s freedom to use bathrooms of their choice, and to play on their preferred sports teams. Health care came next. “All of a sudden, you see this surge in gender-affirming-care bills,” Chriss said. “And what’s bananas is there was not a single bill introduced in a single state legislature prior to 2018.”

The anti-trans rhetoric about protecting children mirrored that of the anti-gay-marriage movement, she continued, and new rules mandating waiting periods, for example, were familiar from the anti-abortion movement. “It’s like dipping a toe in by making it about trans children,” she said. “I think the goal is the erasure of trans people, in part by erasing the health care that allows them to live authentically.”



Jay Martel
&
asher

"Of course, the greatest betrayal comes from James, who came up with this ridiculous seating arrangement."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman and Jay Martel

Beach-Ferrara, of the Campaign for Southern Equality, said her organization estimates that more than ninety per cent of transgender youth in the South live in states where bans have passed or will soon be in effect, and that between three and five thousand young people in the South will have ongoing medical care disrupted by the bans. (The Williams Institute at U.C.L.A. estimates that there are more than a hundred thousand thirteen-to-seventeen-year-olds who identify as trans living in the South, more than in any other region in the country.) Already, university hospitals such as the University of Mississippi Medical Center and the Medical University of South Carolina have discontinued their pediatric gender services before being legally required to do so.

Had Chapman stayed in Tennessee, Willow's closest option for getting puberty-blocker shots would likely have required a four-hundred-and-fifty-mile trip to Peoria, Illinois. Willow's TennCare insurance would not easily travel, and a single shot can cost twelve hundred dollars out of pocket. Paul had told Chapman not to be ashamed if the move didn't work out and she changed her mind, but she already knew she would never go back to Nashville.

On their way east, the family stopped for a few days in Seneca, South Carolina, where Chapman has relatives. Back on the road, she tried not to

focus on the uncertainty that awaited her and her daughters, but she had to pull over at least twice to breathe her way through anxiety attacks. There was a heat wave, and by the time they arrived in Richmond the back speakers of the S.U.V. were blown out, and everyone was in a bad mood. Willow had snapped at her mother and Saoirse for trying to sing along to the Cranberries; she had even yelled at the dog. “It was difficult?” Willow told me afterward, when I asked how the trip had been; then she added, “I’m still excited.” (Saoirse declined to be interviewed.)

Chapman had booked an Airbnb, a dusty-blue bungalow outside Richmond. It had good air-conditioning and a small back yard for the dog. She could afford only a week there before they would have to move to a motel. That night, Willow zoned out to old episodes of “RuPaul’s Drag Race” in the living room, while Chapman scrolled through real-estate listings on her phone. She asked for advice on the social-media feeds of local L.G.B.T.Q. groups, and the responses were heartening. She decided that, if she was able to find a place to live by the end of the week, she would not take the marketing job she had lined up. School wouldn’t start for a few weeks, and it was not the right moment to leave her daughters alone all day.

At eight the next morning, Chapman was sitting in an otherwise empty waiting room at the Southside Community Services Center, filling out forms to get the family food stamps and health insurance. She had put on makeup for the first time in days and was wearing wide-legged leopard-print pants and a black shirt. She had forgotten her reading glasses, however. “Do you have a spouse who does not live at home?” she read out loud, squinting her way through the questions. “Yes,” she answered to herself, checking a box. (She and Paul are not yet divorced.)

Chapman kept mistakenly writing “Willow” on the government forms—she had never officially changed her daughter’s name. (A 1977 Tennessee state law that prohibits amending one’s gender on a birth certificate will apply to Willow no matter where she moves; another Tennessee law, which went into effect this past July, bans people from changing the gender on their driver’s license.) Chapman picked up the next batch of forms, for Medicaid. “One down, one to go,” she said.

Later in the day, Chapman and her daughters went to see a house that was advertised on Craigslist, an affordable three-bedroom in the suburbs of Richmond. As they were driving, the owner texted Chapman that he had a flat tire and couldn't meet them. But the place looked ideal from the outside, so she filled out an application and sent the landlord a thousand-dollar deposit. At five the next morning, she woke up and saw a text from the owner claiming that the money transfer had not gone through. She quickly realized she'd been scammed.

Chapman became weepy. She posted on social media about the con, then drove Saoirse to a thrift store she wanted to visit. At first, only one shopper noticed the woman crying uncontrollably in the furniture section. Then someone went to find some tissues, and someone else brought water. Soon, Chapman recalled, she was surrounded by women murmuring words of sympathy.

That evening at the Airbnb, Chapman and Willow sat at the kitchen table. "The emotional impact of the scam hit me way more than the money," Chapman said, still tearing up at the thought of it. Willow nodded in sympathy. But for Chapman the experience was also a reminder of the advantages of talking about their situation—the women had told her that the schools near the house were not very good, anyway. "Thrift-store people will help you when you're down and out. They're used to broken shit," she said, shaking her head. "If I had broke down in a Macy's? Think how different the reaction would be."

The next morning, Chapman was feeling a little less pessimistic. The humidity had broken, and the weather was good. People had responded to the news of the scam by donating money to replace what she had lost, and a local Facebook group had led her to a property-management company that was flexible toward tenants with bad credit.

She drove to see a three-bedroom apartment in a centrally situated part of Richmond. Though one of the bedrooms was windowless, the place was newly painted, and it had a wooden landing out back that could serve as a deck. It was also in a school district that people had recommended. "I can see this working," Chapman said tentatively. Most of the utilities were

included in the sixteen-hundred-and-fifty-dollar rent. Chapman didn't have time to overthink it. She wrote the real-estate agent saying she would apply.

That afternoon, Chapman drove Willow to see the apartment. The door was locked, but Willow climbed through a window and opened the door so they could consider the space together. "We were, like, 'Oh, this is nice,'" Willow said. She loved the neighborhood, which had vintage stores and coffee shops. "You can walk anywhere, you don't need transportation—that's really cool."

The next day, Willow was sitting on a couch in the Airbnb watching a slasher film called "Terrifier." Chapman was next to her, getting ready for a Zoom call with someone from a local trans-rights organization called He She Ze and We.

In the weeks leading up to the move, Chapman had taken time to research which schools were friendly to trans people. Willow estimated that maybe half the students in her middle school in Nashville were transphobic, and twenty per cent were explicit about it. She was bullied, but she says that it didn't bother her. Her teachers were more supportive, such as the one who gave her an entire Lilith Fair-era wardrobe. "She was, like, 'Do you want some of my old clothes? Because you're so fashion,'" Willow said. "I had that black little bob."

"She had Siouxsie Sioux hair for a while," Chapman said, looking at her fondly.

The two of them agree that Willow's personality shifted after transitioning. Once withdrawn and nonconfrontational, she began to develop a defiant attitude. "It was kind of fun to just mess with them," she recalled of the bullies, who she said were not vicious but more into trying to get a laugh—"like, childish, immature stuff." She would be coy; she would tell them to give her a kiss. "My only weapon, I guess, was how I chose to respond," she said.

"She's not a shrinking violet," her mother added.

“I just don’t like the traditional way that you’re taught to stand up for yourself,” Willow said. “I think absurdism is the best way.” If she lets someone misgender her, she said, “it’s not because I don’t want to be the annoying trans person, it’s more like . . . you’re not gonna get to those people.”

In her freshman year, she attended a public arts high school, and began skipping class and smoking. She says there were at least ten other students who identified as trans, but she remained something of an outsider. When she was in school, she says, she almost thought of herself as a kind of character expected to perform.

Chapman is not a disciplinarian—she had enough of that growing up. But she had a conversation with her daughter after watching a video of an incident in which Willow was voguing in a school hallway, attempted to do a death drop, and ended up with a concussion. The students around Willow were clapping and egging her on even after she fell. “It’s great that you’re the kind of person who will do crazy things,” Chapman remembered saying, “but you need people around you who are not like that.” Both Chapman and Paul worry about Willow’s safety, in part because she is not easily scared herself.

“Will you turn that off?” Chapman said now about the horror film, as she logged on to Zoom. Willow took that as a cue to leave the room.

“You’re going to want to be on this thing,” Chapman said, calling her back.

Willow, who wore blue eyeshadow, a purple baby tee with a peace sign and the word “Smile!” on it, and magenta-pink shorts, plopped back down on the couch, then got up to retrieve supplies to disinfect her belly-button piercing, which she began to do with studiousness.

On Zoom, Chapman introduced herself to Shannon McKay, the co-founder of He She Ze and We, and gave a summary of their situation.

“Have you gotten connected with the medical piece yet?” McKay asked. She explained that, in Virginia, Willow might not have to wait until she turned

sixteen to start estrogen. At this news, Willow looked up and made eye contact with her mother, who nodded back.

The conversation turned to politics. Earlier in the week, Glenn Youngkin, the Republican governor of Virginia, had held a town hall on parents' rights at a school in Henrico County. A parent there had urged Youngkin to introduce a ban on gender-transition treatment for minors.

"Our governor, just to let you know, has not taken a stance," McKay, who also has a trans daughter, explained to Chapman. "And I think he's not conservative enough for the folks that wish he would be."



Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

In July, Youngkin had issued a series of rules that direct trans kids to use pronouns and bathrooms that accord with the gender they were assigned at birth, unless they have parental permission to do otherwise. Chapman asked McKay if that gave her some control over how Willow would be treated at school.

"The clincher here is, even if all parents involved do fill out the form and say, 'We're all on board,' school personnel can still say, 'I don't believe in that. I'm not going to do it,'" McKay said. She did have some good news,

however: if Willow learned to drive, she could determine the name and gender on her identification card.

“I’m not ready for it,” Chapman said, referring to the driving.

“Well, before this governor messes it up, I encourage people to go ahead and get these documents lined up,” McKay said.

Chapman got the apartment she and Willow had visited, and a few days later the family moved in. Willow started at her new school on Tuesday, August 22nd. She made friends with another trans girl in the first week. But, despite a letter from Chapman specifying Willow’s name and pronouns, school administrators told her they had to use the name on her registration. She was also told she should use the nurse’s bathroom instead of the girls’ bathroom, even though it was on a different floor and might cause her to be late to class. Willow ignored that rule, and asked her mother not to intervene on her behalf.

Before the school year had begun, Chapman told me that if school didn’t work out she would be fine with her daughter getting a G.E.D. When I asked Willow about the future, she said that she wants to move to New York City. She wants to go to the balls, “maybe be a model, I don’t know,” she continued. “I like doing art. I like meeting people. I don’t know how to connect all of those things and get paid.”

“You care more about personal freedom than hitting a milestone,” Chapman said. “You care less about the traditional high-school things, the traditional college things.”

“I feel like I *should* care about them,” Willow said.

“Oh!” Chapman said, looking surprised. “I like hearing that.”

“I’m open—like, I could potentially care about them, but if it’s not welcoming me then I won’t,” Willow said.

The day in August when Willow needed her puberty-blocker shot came and went. The family’s insurance still had not come through, and the earliest appointment Chapman could get at a clinic with tiered pricing was in mid-

September. An administrator at the clinic assured her that there was a window with puberty blockers, and that Willow's voice would not drop overnight.

I talked to Chapman the evening after the appointment. "We thought we were just going in for an intake, but they started Willow on estrogen today," Chapman told me over the phone. "The doctor was in shock that Willow had been on puberty blockers for two years and that she was almost sixteen." ("It's really hard for cis people to fully appreciate the deep destabilizing physical betrayal that these kids are navigating on a day-to-day basis," the doctor, Stephanie Arnold, told me. "It's a period where you should be establishing confidence in yourself and your ability to interact with the outside world.") Willow, Chapman added, "is over the moon." They called Paul to let him know. "After every fucking thing . . . it just happened," she said.

The following Monday, Chapman started a new job, counselling people on signing up for Medicaid. She was earning less than she had in Nashville, but hoped to rebuild her career as an artist and a community organizer.

The family was getting to know Richmond, with its restored Victorian row houses and stately parks. Using the hundred dollars from her father, Willow had bought herself a skateboard to get around town. Paul was planning a visit for October. "This city is just dang cute, let's be honest," Chapman said. They had found a leftist bookstore where she had bought Willow a book of poetry by trans writers. When I asked Willow how she felt on estrogen, she said that it was too early to discern any changes with clarity; what she felt, she said, was more vulnerable. A little more than a month in, Willow said that she was liking her new school and had even attended the homecoming dance. "And my grades are O.K.," she added. "So that's something."

On September 28th, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the ban on gender-transition treatment for minors in Tennessee. The court found, among other things, that state legislatures can determine whether the risks of gender dysphoria are less significant than the risks of treating it before a patient turns eighteen. A dissenting opinion stated, "The statutes we consider today discriminate based on sex and gender conformity and intrude on the well-

established province of parents to make medical decisions for their minor children.” Because the federal appeals courts have split in their findings, with other circuits finding such bans unconstitutional, the issue has the potential to proceed to the Supreme Court.

“I know what’s going on,” Willow had said, when I asked her about politics. She doesn’t see herself as an activist, though; she prefers to let the news filter through her mother rather than to consume it herself: “She’s my person on the inside.” ♦

By Sarah Kempa

By Jay Katsir

By Will Nediger

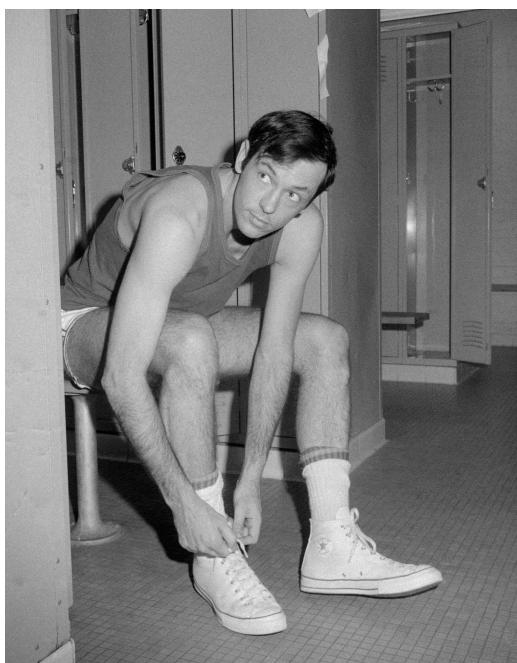
By Matt Jackson

Personal History

Under the Carpetbag

A sixty-year friendship.

By [John McPhee](#)

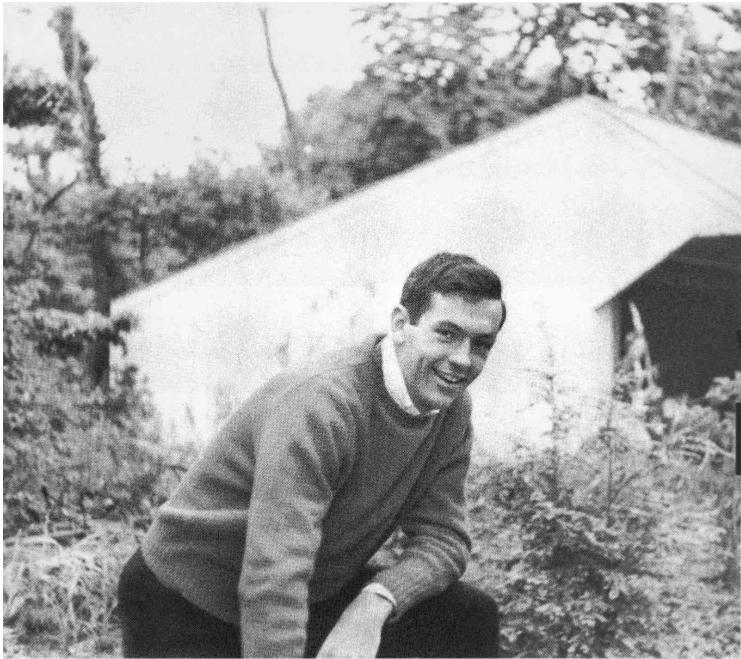


Bill Bradley as a member of the New York Knicks, in 1970. Photograph from Bettmann / Getty

On March 8, 1965, I went to Philadelphia to watch Princeton play Penn State in the opening round of the N.C.A.A. basketball tournament. As the two teams were warming up, a contact lens fell to the court from the eye of a Princeton player. He bent over to pick it up but couldn't see it. Teammates stopped their drills and came to help. They got down on their hands and knees and grovelled, crawled like bugs. Some went completely prone and squinted down along the floorboards. No one saw the lens. Princeton's Bill Bradley, who happened to be on the sideline talking to his coach, watched with a curiosity that evolved toward impatience as five minutes went by. People in the stands were clapping in unison. Bradley had enough. Leaving the sideline, he walked to mid-court, stopped, bent forward, and pointed at the lens.

Focus like that is an obvious asset in the central vision of a basketball player, and so is peripheral vision, which adds so much to court sense. When Bill was in high school, in Crystal City, Missouri, he would walk down the streets with blinders on his eyes to see if he could read the signs in shopwindows on either side. Nonsense? Court sense. In early December of his senior year at Princeton, I persuaded him to go with me to an ophthalmologist, who plotted his peripheral vision within circles on a graph, and we found that Bill could see as much as twenty-three degrees more than most people. Bill could practically see out the back of his head, let alone a bit of plastic on a floor.

I described these optical scenes in a *New Yorker* Profile in January, 1965. Princeton went to the Final Four that season, an extracurricular distraction that left Bradley with an intensified deadline for his senior thesis. He was a history major, and his subject—for which he had completed all interviews and other research—was Harry Truman’s second senatorial campaign. Back in Princeton from the Final Four, where he had scored fifty-eight points in his last college game, he was getting so much press attention that he needed a place to hide, a place to write. He hid for a couple of weeks in my house. My wife and I had gone to Florida to begin the research for a piece on oranges, and our children went off with grandparents. We lived in a rural setting. Bill, alone, spooked in the night, heard ghosts. Goblins. Ghouls. Writing day and night about Harry Truman, he sat at my typing table. There was a rug of great value beneath the table. Wearing shoes with sharp leather heels, as nervous as a professional writer, he fidgeted with his feet, scuffing as he wrote, and destroyed the rug, leaving behind a bundle of Persian shreds.



Outside the author's garage, in 1965. Photograph by John McPhee

I had not met him until 1964, although I had watched him since he was a freshman, when he set some sort of record by making fifty-seven consecutive free throws. As a junior, he agreed to the *New Yorker* piece, although he wondered why I wasn't doing it for *Time*, where I was employed. He spent a large part of that summer in Princeton, reading for his thesis, and he was also in the gym a lot, often just with me feeding basketballs to him, as he kept his edge for the upcoming Tokyo Olympic Games. When he went home to Crystal City, I went with him. His mother put me in a bedroom that looked out on Taylor Avenue and Grace Presbyterian Church, their church. We ran a couple of miles each day on a high-school track. And one day we went to Don Bosco, a basketball camp ten miles west, where Bill introduced me to Ed Macauley.

Macauley ran the camp and Bradley was a featured guest. Macauley had also worked for the St. Louis Hawks, as their star center, and had been an All-American at Saint Louis University. He was known as Easy Ed, for the time it took him to come up the floor. While his teammates ran a fast break, he trailed them almost at a walk. Easy Ed was six feet eight, Bill six-five. Nineteen years later, I accompanied Bill on a campaign visit to the boardwalk in Seaside Heights, New Jersey, where he bucked the currents of a human river behind a sign that read "MEET SENATOR BRADLEY." One

potential voter he met said, “Man, are you tall. You looked small when you played for the Knicks.”

“I was small when I played for the Knicks,” the Senator said. Right enough. He was the small forward. And now, in 1964, at Camp Don Bosco, in Missouri, I was walking up a dirt road with Bill Bradley and Ed Macauley. The road consisted of deep parallel ruts with a grassy hump in the middle. Bradley was in one rut, Macauley in the other, and I was up on the hump between them. I am smaller than most people—about as small as Andrew Carnegie, James Madison, Vladimir Putin, Joseph Stalin, and Napoleon Bonaparte. Actually, I was five feet seven at my zenith and have lately condensed. The hump was a good foot higher than the ruts. Nonetheless, the three of us in outline formed the letter M.

Bill spent the early days of his senior year in Tokyo, winning a gold medal. Other Princeton people were there, too—Lesley Bush, a platform diver, who was in her fourth year at Princeton High School; Jed Graef, a backstroker, who had just graduated from the university; and my father, the head physician for the U.S. team. All three athletes were gold medallists. There was withal a matter of yen. If athletes wanted to watch competition in a sport other than their own, they had to pay to get in. Jed wanted to watch the basketball. Bill found a spare equipment bag, added some costume touches, and marched Jed into the arena as a member of the American team. At this point in this narrative, I cannot resist flashing forward to 2003, when Jed’s daughter Dana was a sophomore in my Princeton writing class. One of her essays was about her childhood in western New York. Her mother is a Buddhist priest. Dana said in the essay:

I played in the snow, cut tulips from our neighbors’ yard, and stole cookies year round. I ate crepes for Easter, latkes for Channukah, and chocolate almost every day. I hid our guests’ keys when I wanted them to stay, and rode home from preschool on my father’s shoulders. I wore a white lace dress for my mother’s ordination, a gray satin dress for her sanctioning, and a green dress for my father’s inauguration into the Swimming Hall of Fame.

When Bill Bradley was young, his mother signed him up for enough swimming lessons to improve a bluefin tuna. She was an athlete, a golf-club

champion. Bill never took to golf. Tennis lessons produced neither an overhead nor a backhand down the line. But he was somewhat impressed by his competence as a swimmer. For seven years in the nineteen-seventies, my family spent July at a house beside a lake in northern New Hampshire. Actually, we were two merged families, with lots of kids, but we had enough canoes and Rangeley boats to go around. When Bill and his wife, Ernestine, first visited us there, Bill stepped off the dock and into a canoe. He chose a place quite close to one end of the canoe. The other end shot up into the air, pointed at the sky, while Bill's end penetrated the lake with him in it. I had never heard him mention canoeing lessons. This was in the middle of his ten years as a Knick. The next summer, he announced on arrival that ABC, for its program "The Superstars," had invited him to Florida with other professional athletes to compete in various sports other than their own. Bill would be competing as a swimmer. So he wanted to take advantage of our lake to prepare to race on television. I had competed in swimming only as a boy at summer camp, but I didn't lose a race in ten years. For what else it may be worth, I had also been an American Red Cross water-safety instructor during summers in my college years.

I gestured toward a diving raft that was forty or fifty yards from the dock. I said I would be pleased to help him train for television and would race him from the dock to the raft. The look on his face was not exactly contemptuous; it would be interpretive to call it a smirk. There was some of that, but mainly he was concealing amusement, and doing his best not to be insulting, not even to seem indulgent. It was clear, though, that he thought my offer absurd.

Three, two, one, go! When Bill reached the raft, I was waiting for him there. We had a telephone on the porch of the lakeside house. Bill swam back to the dock, climbed out, went to the telephone dripping, touched a bunch of buttons, got ABC on the phone, and cancelled his trip to Florida.

In fact, he was acting, pantomiming, faking a phone call to Florida. He was connected to no one at ABC or anywhere else. There is more clown in him than most people have had a chance to discern. He went to Florida, he was on the show, and he won something.

The swimming race was unimagined and ten years in the future when *The New Yorker* published my Profile of Bill Bradley. My participation in the process occurred in William Shawn's office, where he had checking proofs, copy-editor proofs, and every other kind of proof, including his own, none of which he showed to me as he brought up point after point and discussed them with me. *The New Yorker's* criterion was that the writer be satisfied, and in that criterion I was immersed for the first time.

As I wrote in 2017 in my book "Draft No. 4":

Shawn edited the piece himself, as he routinely did with new writers of long fact, breaking them in, so to speak, but not exactly like a horse, more like a baseball mitt. For a week or so before the press date, we met each day and went through galleys from comma to comma, with an extra beat for a semicolon. . . . Now and again, Mr. Shawn said things that were most encouraging to a fretful, not to say neurotic, unconfident writer. He had had a lot of practice.

He made me feel entirely comfortable in his presence, so comfortable that when the *Daily Princetonian* published its annual Joke Issue two days after *The New Yorker* published the Bradley Profile, I took a copy of the Joke Issue to West Forty-third Street to show to Mr. Shawn. A big, bold, wall-to-wall headline said:

BRADLEY BOOTED-OUT!
Olympian Took Dope,
Threw Cornell Game

A front-page sidebar contained the reaction of Harry Truman, a quote begun by chaste symbols—?!*%#—meant to suggest unprintable words. "I never did trust that boy," Harry said. Elsewhere on the front page was a photograph of Grant Wood's "American Gothic," under the words "Parents Receive News Stoically." Without explanation, I handed the Joke Issue to Shawn, thinking that he would get it immediately and laugh. He didn't get it, and he didn't laugh. His face reddened. He looked stricken. I spluttered explanation. I wasn't ninety-two then, as I am at this writing. I was thirty-three going on thirteen. I desperately hoped to join the *New Yorker* staff. This, in a crowded field, is the dumbest thing I ever did.

When Bill was at Oxford, studying P.P.E. (Politics, Philosophy, and Economics) as a Rhodes Scholar, he not only played basketball for the university but also flew to Italy to play professionally for a Milanese meatpacker called Simmenthal. In his second Oxford year, he wrote to me asking that I go to Trenton and buy from the state government a book titled “New Jersey Civil Practice Laws and Rules.” I sent it to Oxford. Widely predicted to be a future governor of Missouri, Bill was weaving the first threads of a carpetbag.

The Knicks had drafted him, and after he returned from Oxford, in 1967, he had his first tryout with the team, at the Knicks’ training center, in Farmingdale, on Long Island. Red Holzman, the coach, studied Bill in the company of the team’s best players, among them Dick Barnett, Walt Frazier, and Willis Reed. Willis, six-ten, was the Knickerbockers’ franchise player, the team captain, its leading scorer. Like planets, the others orbited around him. And off they went in full-court scrimmage in Farmingdale. Bill was an exceptional passer, a pinpoint passer, but his first pass to Willis connected with nothing and bounced away, hitting the base of the empty stands. A minute or two later, after Willis set a pick, as he had before, Bill ran his defender into the pick, again expecting Willis to roll suddenly away from his defender, coming open for a bounce pass, in this classic set piece of basketball. Again, the pass went bouncing off on its own. Holzman blew his whistle and stepped onto the court to tell Bill, “Willis doesn’t roll.”

This flat statement made a deep entry into the comic wit of Robert Bingham, the *New Yorker* fact editor to whom Mr. Shawn assigned me after my first two Profiles. Bingham was my editor for sixteen years, before he died, in his fifties. He dragged my confidence past numerous barriers, and he treated my manuscripts as if they were mine, looking up now and again from some hot-dog line I’d written and saying, “Willis doesn’t roll.”

Bill, meanwhile, got off to a slow, discouraging start with the Knicks, not getting much game time, and even being booed in Madison Square Garden because of irrationally high expectations, not to mention a widespread skepticism prompted by the size of his signing bonus, for which he had been given the nickname Dollar Bill. I had admired him and what I heard about him since he was a freshman in college, and he would become a friend forever, but there would be no era in which I thought more highly of him

than when he was struggling to make it with the Knicks, playing three minutes a game, or something of the kind, and surely feeling the threat of a depression the like of which he'd never experienced.

After basketball games in the Garden, he would go to dinner and the basketball did not go with him. His best asset, I had long thought, was his ability to compartmentalize the factors in his life, and never let his concentration on one thing spill over into others. When he went to dinner, with a variety of people, he dwelt on subjects that had nothing to do with his job. He was like that then, and he is like that now.

By February, 1969, he was faring better. When the Knicks showed up in Milwaukee to play the Bucks, I happened to be nearby, spending a week as a writer-in-residence at Lake Forest Academy, in Illinois. I went to the game. The Knicks won. Bill had a standout game, and was confronted afterward by a man with a microphone asking for his pithiest analysis of the contest. Stepping into this cliché encounter, Bill took the microphone and analyzed the action, then reanalyzed the action, and gave a third and a fourth analysis, and was not about to give back the microphone. Changing the subject, he talked on, and on, and on, until the TV control room threw a switch.

On Christmas Eve that year, in a New York movie theatre where continuous screenings ran far into the night, Bill stayed up late with me, watching Robert Redford in "Downhill Racer." Since early summer, my wife and I had been separated, and therefore came Christmas without my daughters. Apart from a family death, if there is a lower moment in a physically healthy life I can't imagine it.

The Knicks' season was in full flow. They beat the Detroit Pistons 112–111 that Christmas Day and lost to the Lakers the following night. They would see more of the Lakers and the Lakers would see more of them. The Lakers were Wilt Chamberlain. The Knicks were Dave DeBusschere, Bradley, Barnett, Frazier, and Captain Willis Reed. They were on a roll (but not that one). In May, they beat the Lakers in the N.B.A. finals. It was the Knicks' first championship. They won their second, also against the Lakers, in 1973, and at this writing the Knicks have yet to win another.

His political ruminations notwithstanding, Bill thought about other futures, other professions, and one of these was photography. He bought a Nikon with multiple lenses and went at the challenge with the same dedication he had given to no-look passes and peripheral vision. One of his first artistic themes was life on the road, life on the run, the quotidian experience of a professional athlete, forever in airplanes, in unfamiliar cities, checking into and out of hotels. One example of this genre is on display in a fishing cabin owned by me and my family on the upper Delaware River. Made in Los Angeles, the picture is a point-blank view of a hotel under construction, shot from a room in a neighboring hotel so close that the picture shows no roofline or other defining edges, just twenty half-finished hotel rooms, full of building materials, and looking like a grotesque checkerboard, the itinerant athlete's total view. DeBusschere, Bill's roommate on the road, slept through most of that.

Fifty-eight years ago, I took an outdoor picture of Bill with our garage in the background. He was twenty-two. In more recent years, he has used that photograph in two of his books and in a long video he describes as "a performative autobiography." In professional compensation, I have yet to see one red cent, let alone a dollar bill.

Bill had been a Knick for seven years when West Germany and the Netherlands reached the finals of the World Cup, in Munich. Bill was married now, and his wife—as smart a person as I have ever met, apart from nuclear scientists and geophysicists—had grown up Ernestine Misslbeck, in Ingolstadt, Bavaria, fifty miles from Munich. The Misslbecks wanted to attend the Cup final, a tough ticket if ever there was one. The match would occur on the seventh of July. Could Bill do something for his in-laws? He called the Milanese meatpacker he had played for when he was at Oxford. The company said it would obtain the tickets if Bill would fly to Italy and play one exhibition game for the meatpacker. He went.

He was elected a U.S. senator from New Jersey in 1978. His home was in Denville then, in Morris County. Earlier, when he had first planned to run for office in the state, I had sought and found a carpetbag, filled it up with New Jersey road maps, and given it to him. It hung on a peg high inside his front door for twenty years. It is now in the possession of Ernestine and Bill's daughter, Theresa Anne. She is my goddaughter. When Bill was in his early

Senate days and had not yet bought a house in Washington, he borrowed the apartment of Carl Bernstein and Nora Ephron, who were somewhere else at the time. For a week or so, I was in Washington working on my geology project at the Smithsonian and at the U.S. Geological Survey, nearby in Virginia. I stayed with Bill. Coming through the door, you faced a curvilinear wall with an Italian bicycle hanging on it like a work of art, which it was. It was worth more than a car. And it was not the most arresting sight there. The apartment was filled with Pat and Dick Nixon figurines, a Pat salt shaker with a Dick pepper shaker, Pat and Dick ceramics of every ilk, five years after Deep Throat and Woodward and Bernstein's reportage on Watergate.

Bill's new presence in the Senate gave rise to a trivia question that lasted for eighteen years around Princeton. People with nothing better to do entertained one another with this question: What Princeton basketball player became a Rhodes Scholar and later a United States senator? Answer: Paul Sarbanes, Princeton 1954. Sarbanes, from Maryland, served in the U.S. Senate for thirty years, which included Bill Bradley's eighteen.

In 1970, on vacation in Maine, Bill began writing a book he called "Life on the Run." His ten-year career in pro basketball was still not far from its beginning, but his theme was clear to him and was in part the theme expressed in the photograph he made in the Los Angeles hotel. Since my own first book had been about Bill, it was assumed by some that I had had a hand in Bill's first book. If you want to know the truth, he sent me the manuscript, asking me to vet it. I did, and wrote to him, saying, among other things, "Abandon the project, you'll embarrass yourself." He still has the letter. He claims that—twenty years after "Life on the Run"—I suggested that he abandon the manuscript of his third book, "Time Present, Time Past." He has also stored in his memory, and conceivably his alone, some magazine's list of "The 10 Best Sports Books of All Time." "Life on the Run" was No. 4. "A Sense of Where You Are," my book about him, No. 6. Not that it is relevant, but my book about him says, "He is everything his parents think he is." Anybody with enough angst to destroy a rug while trying to write is a writer.

When I was preparing this piece, Bill's daughter surprised me with a letter I had written to Bill fifty-eight years ago—a few days before he graduated

from Princeton:

We've spent so much time talking together that I'm going to miss it quite a bit. . . . There was always some sort of purpose, something to be accomplished . . . but the thing I learned that impressed me most was that, although your discipline is justly celebrated, you know how to waste time every bit as much as I do, which means that you're a champion at it. For every hour in which something got done, two went out the window. The best two went out the window.

At Drake's Corner Road, you will be missed by Laura, Sarah, and Jenny. . . . Martha will have to live down the disappointment of not having been old enough when you were here. Even the older children have no standards by which to judge you except what you're like when you're dealing with them, and all of them start acting as if Ringling Brothers is in town whenever you come up the driveway.

. . . I hope that you will be coming up the driveway for years and years. Come to think of it, that is what we're all going to miss most: the explosive sound of the tires biting into the red gravel; the after-burner cutting in when you reached the big poplar; and, as the car came into view, the impressionistic blur against the green of the trees; then, finally, the relieving sight of the arresting parachute opening out to the rear.

When Yolanda Whitman and I were married, fifty-plus years ago now, the mayor of Princeton officiated on the Princeton campus. We were five in all, and the two others—the witnesses—were my mother and Bill. He is the younger brother I never had, and I am the brother he never had. “Bro” is how he has signed his e-mails to me since soon after e-mail was introduced. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the month in which the New York Knicks won the 1970 N.B.A. finals.

[Letter from Washington](#)

Jake Sullivan's Trial by Combat

Inside the White House's battle to keep Ukraine in the fight.

By [Susan B. Glasser](#)



In the Biden Administration, Jake Sullivan is “the quartermaster of the war—and everything else,” a former U.S. official said. Photo illustration by David Plunkert; Source photographs from Getty

On a Monday afternoon in August, when President Joe Biden was on vacation and the West Wing felt like a ghost town, his national-security adviser, Jake Sullivan, sat down to discuss America’s involvement in the war in Ukraine. Sullivan had agreed to an interview “with trepidation,” as he had told me, but now, in the White House’s Roosevelt Room, steps from the Oval Office, he seemed surprisingly relaxed for a congenital worrier. (“It’s my job to worry,” he once told an interviewer. “So I worry about literally everything.”) When I asked about reports that, at a recent *NATO* summit, he had been furious during negotiations over whether to issue Ukraine a formal “invitation” to join the Western alliance, he said, only half jokingly, “First of all, I’m, like, the most rational human being on the planet.”

But, when it came to the subject of the war itself, and why Biden has staked so much on helping Ukraine fight it, Sullivan struck an unusually

impassioned note. “As a child of the eighties and ‘Rocky’ and ‘Red Dawn,’ I believe in freedom fighters and I believe in righteous causes, and I believe the Ukrainians have one,” he said. “There are very few conflicts that I have seen—maybe none—in the post-Cold War era . . . where there’s such a clear good guy and bad guy. And we’re on the side of the good guy, and we have to do a lot for that person.”

There’s no question that the United States has done a lot: American assistance to Ukraine, totalling seventy-six billion dollars, with more than forty-three billion for security aid, is the largest such effort since the Second World War. In the aftermath of the February 24, 2022, Russian invasion, the U.S. has delivered more than two thousand Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, more than ten thousand Javelin antitank weapons, and more than two million 155-millimetre artillery rounds. It has sent Patriot missiles for air defense and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems—known as *HIMARS*—to give Ukraine longer-range strike capability; sophisticated Ghost drones and small hand-launched Puma drones; Stryker armored personnel carriers, Bradley fighting vehicles, and M1A1 Abrams tanks.

Biden has framed the conflict in sweeping, nearly civilizational terms, vowing to stick with Ukraine for “as long as it takes” to defeat the invaders, who—despite an estimated hundred and twenty thousand dead and a hundred and eighty thousand injured—still hold nearly twenty per cent of the country’s territory. But at nearly every stage the Administration has faced sharp questions about the nature and the durability of the U.S. commitment. Beyond the inevitable tensions with Ukraine’s President, Volodymyr Zelensky, there are jostling Washington bureaucracies, restive European allies, and a growing Trumpist faction in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, which is opposed to the bipartisan congressional bills that have, up until now, funded the war. A vocal peace camp, meanwhile, is demanding negotiations with Vladimir Putin to end the conflict, even as Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said there is currently little prospect for “meaningful diplomacy.”

The task of leading the White House through such treacherous politics has fallen to Sullivan, who, when he was appointed, at the age of forty-four, was the youngest national-security adviser since McGeorge Bundy held the job, during the Vietnam War. “It’s really Jake,” Ivo Daalder, a former U.S.

Ambassador to *NATO*, who has consulted regularly with the National Security Council since the Russian invasion, told me. “He’s the quartermaster of the war—and everything else.”

Sullivan is lean, with wispy blond hair, a tendency to blush bright red, and a workaholic intensity unusual even by Washington’s standards. (One night a few months ago, Sullivan discovered an intruder who had broken into his home at around 3 a.m., because he was still up working.) In his office, there is a chart—updated frequently—showing countries’ current stocks of ammunition that might go to Ukraine. This spring, during the battle of Bakhmut, he knew the status of the fighting down to the city block. He often speaks with his counterpart in Kyiv, Zelensky’s chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, two or three times a week, and has taken charge of everything from lobbying South Korea for artillery shells to running an emergency operation to get Ukraine additional power generators. Earlier this year, when Germany balked at sending Leopard tanks to Ukraine, Sullivan spent days in intensive talks with the German national-security adviser to secure them; in exchange, the U.S. agreed to provide M1A1 Abrams tanks, a move that the Pentagon had long opposed. The N.S.C., in other words, has gone operational, with Sullivan personally overseeing the effort while also doing the rest of his job, which, in recent months, has taken him to secret meetings with a top Chinese official in Vienna and Malta and to complicated negotiations in the Middle East.

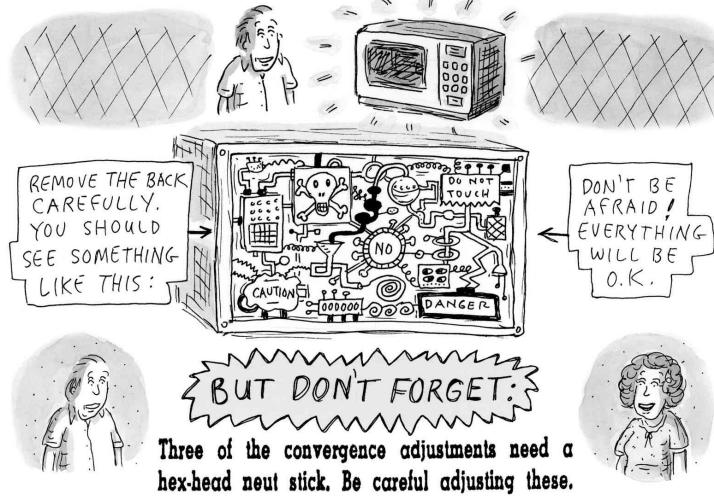
In contrast to the epic feuds between George W. Bush’s Pentagon and the State Department over Iraq, or the vicious infighting in Donald Trump’s turnover-ridden national-security team, the Biden White House’s approach to the war has been notably drama-free. Disagreements among advisers, while at times robust and protracted, have barely surfaced in the press. Blinken, a confidant of Biden for more than two decades, has been perhaps the most visible salesman for the Administration’s strategy and a key conduit to European allies. Lloyd Austin, the congenial and low-profile Secretary of Defense, has overseen the military relationship with Kyiv. Sullivan is more of an inside player, the relentless wonk at Biden’s side. In an interview, Blinken called him “the hub,” an “honest broker” who has refereed the team’s differences, which the Secretary acknowledged to me but described as largely “tactical, rarely fundamental in nature.” The fact that they have “a friendship, partnership, and real complicity in working together

for many years,” he added, has also made for an unusually consensus-minded group.

At the same time, the Administration’s policy hasn’t always been clear. “A pledge to support Ukraine ‘for as long as it takes’ is not a strategy,” the top Republicans on the House and Senate foreign-affairs committees wrote in a letter this month to the White House. A major complaint from Ukraine supporters in both parties is that the White House delayed too long in providing urgently needed weapons. The term “self-deterrance” is popular among those who subscribe to this view. So is “incrementalism.” John Herbst, a former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, called it “world-class ad-hocery.”

In some sense, the President’s instructions have been clear from the beginning: No U.S. boots on the ground; no supplying weapons for the purpose of attacking Russian territory; and avoid giving Putin grounds for nuclear escalation. In practice, however, it’s fallen to Sullivan and Biden’s other advisers to oversee a series of one-off decisions about which weapons systems to provide to keep Ukraine in the fight. “I don’t necessarily think that they went in thinking, Oh, we’re going to boil this frog slowly, because that’s the best way to avoid escalation,” Andrea Kendall-Taylor, a former national-intelligence officer who worked on the Biden transition team for the N.S.C., said. “They stumbled into it.”

WELCOME TO THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF AT-HOME MICROWAVE REPAIR!



Cartoon by Roz Chast

In the Roosevelt Room, when I mentioned the term “proxy war” as a possible description for America’s considerable role in the conflict, Sullivan reacted with an almost visceral recoil. “Ukraine is not fighting on behalf of the United States of America to further our objectives,” he said. “They are fighting for their land and their freedom.” He went on, “The analogy to me is much closer to the way the United States supported the U.K. in the early years of World War Two—that basically you’ve got an authoritarian aggressor trying to destroy the sovereignty of a free nation, and the U.S. didn’t directly enter the war, but we provided a massive amount of material to them.”

But as we now know, despite the flood of aid to Britain, a war with Nazi Germany was all but inevitable for the U.S. Today, a direct war with Putin’s Russia remains unthinkable—and yet the status quo also seems unsustainable.

I first met Sullivan when he was a top aide to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, serving as both her closest travelling adviser and the head of the State Department’s policy-planning office, a position created after the Second World War by George F. Kennan, the Kremlinologist and the architect of containment. Sullivan, in his early thirties, was already a Washington prodigy, with a dazzling résumé and a reputation as a

Midwestern nice guy. When Biden named him national-security adviser, he called him a “once-in-a-generation intellect.” Clinton has referred to him as a “once-in-a-generation talent.”

Sullivan grew up in a large Irish Catholic family in Minneapolis, one of five children of a high-school guidance counsellor and a college journalism professor who once studied to become a Jesuit priest. At Yale, Sullivan was the editor-in-chief of the *Yale Daily News* and a nationally ranked college debater; once a week, he commuted to New York to intern at the Council on Foreign Relations. During his senior year, he scored a rare trifecta—“the academic equivalent of horse racing’s Triple Crown,” as the *Yale Bulletin* put it—winning all three of the most prestigious fellowships available to American undergraduates: the Rhodes, the Marshall, and the Truman. Sullivan opted for the Rhodes, earned a master’s in international relations at Oxford, and took time out to compete in the world collegiate debate championships in Sydney, finishing second. He then went to Yale Law School and, after graduating, secured a Supreme Court clerkship with Justice Stephen Breyer.

Sullivan began his political career as an aide to another bright Minnesotan with a Yale degree: the Democratic senator Amy Klobuchar, who connected him with Clinton to run debate prep for her 2008 primary against Barack Obama. Sullivan quickly proved indispensable to the former First Lady, and, when Clinton became Obama’s Secretary of State, Sullivan went with her. “Jake did everything for her,” one of Obama’s senior aides told the authors Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes. “Whatever was the front-burner issue of the day, you could go to Jake.” Eventually, Clinton and Sullivan travelled to a hundred and twelve countries.

Biden and his national-security team have often been portrayed, with some justification, as a sort of second coming of the Obama Administration, a reunion of the old gang, albeit with younger aides, such as Blinken and Sullivan, moving into principal positions. When Sullivan got married, in 2015, to Maggie Goodlander, who would go on to serve as counsel to Attorney General Merrick Garland, attendees at the wedding, which was held on Yale’s campus, included not only Clinton, who read a Bible verse in the ceremony, but also Blinken and William Burns, Biden’s future C.I.A. director. (During Obama’s Presidency, Sullivan and Burns, at that time the

Deputy Secretary of State, were secretly dispatched to Oman to begin talks with Iran, which ultimately produced the Iran nuclear deal.) Tom Sullivan, the groom’s younger brother, is now Blinken’s deputy chief of staff.

Many of the figures who are ascendant in the Biden Administration—including Biden himself—had also been occasional critics of Obama’s policy toward Russia. In 2009, when Obama sought to repair relations with Russia despite its recent invasion of Georgia, Clinton gamely handed Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, an oversized “reset” button—incorrectly translated into Russian, as it turned out—to symbolize the new policy. But internally she was skeptical. When she left the Obama Administration, in 2013, one of her last acts was to submit a harshly worded memo warning the President about Putin. “Don’t appear too eager to work together,” she told Obama, according to her memoir. “Don’t flatter Putin with high-level attention. Decline his invitation for a presidential-level summit.” The first draft of the memo was written by Sullivan. “It was significantly darker” than the final product, he told me—so much so that “some of the Russia hands in the State Department” had said, “That’s over the top, that’s too far.”

After Clinton’s departure, Sullivan succeeded Blinken as Biden’s Vice-Presidential national-security adviser. The following year, Putin launched a surprise takeover of the Crimean Peninsula and backed a separatist war in eastern Ukraine. In response, Biden and others in the White House urged Obama to provide lethal assistance to Kyiv, such as Javelin antitank weapons, but Obama refused. Blinken and Sullivan disagreed with the decision. “Biden was generally the one that was much more forward-leaning in wanting to take more steps,” one of their N.S.C. colleagues at the time recalled. The same was true of his advisers—“the people,” as the colleague put it, “who are now in the driver’s seat.” Another colleague from the Obama years added, “These are the people from the Obama Administration who thought there were real mistakes.”

Sullivan left the White House to serve as the chief policy adviser for Clinton’s 2016 campaign. The morning after her loss, when Clinton stoically spoke of the need to accept Trump’s win—in a speech that Sullivan had stayed up all night writing—he sat in the front row and cried. “There’s nothing I don’t second-guess about 2016,” he told me.

The experience convinced Sullivan that liberal internationalists like himself were an endangered species unless they could reorient their thinking. During the Trump years, he launched a think-tank project with the self-appointed mission of developing a “foreign policy for the middle class.” He emerged notably more skeptical about the benefits of unfettered globalization and free trade, a new position that he stressed as Biden’s top policy adviser during the 2020 campaign.

Biden won the 2020 election not wanting to talk so much about Russia. America’s growing rivalry with China, Blinken said, in an early speech as Secretary of State, now looked to be “the biggest geopolitical test” that the U.S. would face this century. As for Russia, another reset was impossible after Putin’s meddling in the 2016 Presidential election and four years of Trump’s open sycophancy. Instead, Biden’s team settled on a new formula, pinning their hopes on a “stable and predictable” relationship. The word “guardrails” came up often in their planning, according to a former official who was involved in the talks.

In the spring of 2021, when Russia began an ominous military buildup along its border with Ukraine, Biden invited Putin to meet in Geneva. But, by the time of the summit, in June, the threat to Ukraine seemed to have ebbed and Biden focussed on warning Putin against launching further cyberattacks on the U.S. After the meeting, Biden insisted that there was a “genuine prospect” for better relations.

By then, a more pressing problem was unfolding. In April, Biden had announced the end of the two-decade-long U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, setting a September deadline for all remaining U.S. troops to exit the country. In August, however, the U.S.-backed government in Kabul collapsed. The Biden Administration, believing that such a possibility was months away, had failed to evacuate Afghans who had assisted the U.S. during the conflict. Thousands descended upon the Kabul airport, where the U.S. military organized an emergency airlift. The operation ultimately rescued some hundred and twenty-five thousand people, but only after horrific scenes of chaos and a terrorist attack at the airport’s Abbey Gate, in which thirteen U.S. service members and at least a hundred and seventy Afghans died.

Sullivan came under criticism for the botched withdrawal, with some people calling for him to be fired. Brett Bruen, the director of global engagement for the Obama White House, argued in an op-ed that Sullivan and others were responsible for “the most unnecessarily embarrassing day in the history of the National Security Council.” Sullivan kept his job, but colleagues told me that he had taken this “trial by fire,” as one put it, deeply personally. An after-action report by the State Department chided the Administration for succumbing to groupthink and for its failure to plan adequately for “worst-case scenarios.” “This definitely weighed on Jake very heavily,” Ron Klain, Biden’s first White House chief of staff, told the author Chris Whipple. “Did he give the right advice? Did he push back on the military enough?”

The first secret U.S. intelligence reports about Russia’s plans to invade Ukraine came only a few weeks after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, in early October, 2021. A month later, in a speech to an Australian think tank, Sullivan again spoke about “striving for a more stable, more predictable relationship” with Russia.

In fact, the stable-and-predictable policy was already dead. A week before the speech, Biden had dispatched Burns, his C.I.A. director, on a secret mission to Moscow. Burns notified the Kremlin that the United States was aware of its intentions and warned of serious consequences if Putin followed through. He returned to Washington convinced that the invasion was going to happen.

Biden’s N.S.C. team was haunted by both the recent catastrophe in Afghanistan and the recollection of Putin’s 2014 takeover of Crimea. “In Crimea, [Russia] created a *fait accompli* before the world had really fully woken up to what they had done,” Sullivan recalled, in an oral history for Politico. “We wanted to make sure the world was wide awake.” He compared the situation to a scene from the first “Austin Powers” movie, in which “there’s a steamroller on the far side of the room, and a guy standing there, holding up his hand, and shouting, ‘No!’ Then they zoom out, and the steamroller is moving incredibly slowly and is really far away.” He added, “I was determined that we were not going to be that guy—just waiting for the steamroller to roll over Ukraine. We were going to act.”

Prewar estimates suggested that Ukraine's military could hold out against the Russians for no more than a few days. A "tiger team" assembled by Sullivan and his deputy national-security adviser, Jon Finer, met to game out possibilities. "A lot of our planning was worst-case scenario planning," Sullivan told Politico, "which always psychologically puts one in a tough space."



"As you go through life, son, you'll find that you'll be angry at all the major airlines."
Cartoon by Anne Fizzard

Instead, Ukraine defied expectations and held off Russia's assault on Kyiv. The White House was suddenly improvising a strategy for a long war. But Putin's increasingly explicit nuclear sabre-rattling meant that the early months of the conflict were spent in arguments over what might or might not cross Russia's red line. In the spring of 2022, a debate raged in Washington over whether to give Ukraine the precision medium-range missile system known as *HIMARS*. When Nancy Pelosi, the House Speaker, led a congressional delegation to Kyiv to meet with Zelensky, the Ukrainian President's "main ask" was for the *HIMARS*, according to Jason Crow, a House Democrat and a military veteran. Eventually, Biden approved the delivery, with the proviso that the *HIMARS* not be used to hit targets inside Russia. "I felt like we dragged our feet," a Democratic senator told me. Ukraine, meanwhile, moved on to the next items on its list. Arguments

ensued over tanks, F-16 fighter jets, and longer-range missiles known as *ATACMS*.

Sullivan, characteristically, knew every side of each issue. “Jake’s a master debater,” one of his former N.S.C. colleagues said. “He constantly wants to test his own propositions.” Advocates of talks with Russia have had an open line to Sullivan and his staff, as have former officials who believe that such talks are akin to selling out Ukraine. “One of the things I genuinely admire about Jake is his willingness to take criticism and input, his willingness to double-check and to ask,” Senator Chris Coons, a Biden confidant from Delaware and a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, told me.

Even officials in the Administration who have, at times, been frustrated with Sullivan told me that they appreciated his openness. “He’s a really good listener, and it can be a strength,” a senior official said. “He wants a real debate, and he fosters that. But the weakness of that is that sometimes he can blow in the wind, and you just get these shocks to the system, like, ‘Wait, what? We’re doing what now?’ ”

Sullivan also studiously avoids any daylight between himself and Biden. “He is very careful not to contradict him,” a former official who worked with Sullivan during the Obama Administration said. “He can guide him, but he can’t contradict him. That’s what a national-security adviser has to do, and Jake has always been very conscious, like frankly any good Washington staffer, of never getting afoul of his principal, and he never does.”

Sullivan’s methodical, hyperanalytical style fits with Biden’s career-long tendency to hold on to a decision, to wait and test the angles and find a way to the political center of gravity. But the downside of that approach is evident, too. “There’s a real tendency to paralysis by analysis,” Eric Edelman, a former Under-Secretary of Defense in the Bush Administration, said. “Jake likes to look at every facet of a problem and wants to understand everything. That’s the tragedy of government—you have to make decisions behind a veil of irreducible ignorance.”

By February of this year, it was clear that the war would not be ending anytime soon. Biden decided to travel to Kyiv, in a risky and secret trip, to commemorate the first anniversary of the invasion. During an overnight

train ride from the Polish border town of Przemyśl to the Ukrainian capital, Biden and Sullivan sat alone together in a wood-panelled car, with the curtains drawn for security, working on the contours of a longer-term strategy to discuss with Zelensky. Since the previous fall, when Ukraine took back key cities such as Kherson and Kharkiv, the question was not so much whether the Administration had failed to anticipate disaster, as in Afghanistan, but what more it could do to make winning possible. Biden and Sullivan were focussed on two converging challenges—how best to supply Ukraine for a planned spring counter-offensive and how to prepare for the *NATO* summit in July, in Vilnius, Lithuania, where Zelensky would push for a definitive answer to when Ukraine would be allowed to join the alliance.

Biden was immovable in his opposition to granting *NATO* membership to Ukraine while the war was ongoing. But, during the ten-hour trip into the war zone, he and Sullivan discussed what they planned to offer Zelensky instead: long-term security guarantees and military assistance akin to what the U.S. has provided to Israel since the nineteen-eighties. Sullivan told me, “We had a long conversation about this in which the President said he wanted to use the meeting in Kyiv to lay out for Zelensky his view that there is a pathway to *NATO*—it’s not for now, it’s for later—and the bridge to *NATO* is the Israel model.”

The idea had been germinating in the N.S.C. since mid-January. The arrangement with Israel has been codified and sustained going back to the Reagan Administration by a series of formal memorandums of understanding, which commit the U.S. to providing a certain amount of military aid and weapons over a ten-year period in order to give Israel a “qualitative military edge” in the region. Unlike *NATO*’s Article 5 commitment, which states that an attack on any one member is an attack on all, there has been no explicit pledge obliging the U.S. to fight on Israel’s behalf if it is attacked.

Such an arrangement would nevertheless send a message to Putin—and to everybody else—that the United States would not abandon Ukraine. The next morning, in a meeting with Zelensky, Biden proposed the “Israel model” for the first time. Later, when he and the Ukrainian President met with the press, Biden framed the trip as a rebuke to Putin. “Putin thought Ukraine was weak and the West was divided,” Biden said. “He thought he

could outlast us. I don't think he's thinking that right now." Then he and Zelensky took a stroll through Kyiv, as air-raid sirens blared.



Cartoon by Will Santino

By late spring, the White House was continuing to push ahead with the Israel model. In May, when Biden travelled to a G-7 summit in Japan, Sullivan pitched Yermak and other national-security advisers on a joint statement of principles outlining a long-term security commitment to Ukraine. The idea was that each country, including the U.S., would then negotiate its own bilateral memorandum of understanding with Ukraine. (Blinken told me that the U.S. ultimately enlisted twenty-eight other countries.) "We negotiated the hell out of that document," a senior Administration official said. The White House and some allies, such as Germany, wanted to insure that the statement came from the G-7, and not *NATO*, "because *NATO*, we continue to feel, should be kept out of this conflict," a senior European official told me.

Zelensky, however, continued to lobby for full *NATO* membership. Otherwise, he believed, even if Ukraine won the war it would exist in a security gray zone, vulnerable to future attack by Russia. A number of *NATO* allies, especially among the former Soviet-bloc countries, agreed. "The bigger issue is he wanted to make clear throughout that this was not one hundred per cent a substitute for *NATO*," the senior Administration

official recalled. “Zelensky didn’t want to be told, ‘That’s it, the door is now closed on you. You’re down an entirely different path and you can never get back on this other path.’”

Inside the Administration, there was disagreement about how to handle this brewing problem. Some State Department officials prodded the White House to offer more to Ukraine. During a *NATO* meeting of foreign ministers in early June, in Oslo, Blinken called Biden and Sullivan with the message that the U.S., along with Germany, risked being perceived as an isolated holdout. “The strong majority felt that it was important that the summit take steps forward on advancing the proposition of Ukraine’s membership and that we could not simply sit on the status quo,” Blinken told me. “And so I reported that back.” *NATO*’s Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, floated a proposal for what the alliance might offer Ukraine: not yet membership, but a faster track to getting there, in which Ukraine would not be required to first fulfill an elaborate Membership Action Plan, a condition that *NATO* had imposed on other former Soviet states. When Stoltenberg came to Washington in mid-June, Biden reluctantly agreed to skip the *MAP*.

Privately, the Ukrainians were hardly thrilled with the proposal. Zelensky was still holding out hope for a concrete commitment to let Ukraine join *NATO*. A senior diplomatic source told me that the Americans were disappointed by Ukraine’s reaction to the lifting of the *MAP*: “Like, ‘What, you don’t see that as a win?’ It was so frustrating.”

Ukraine’s long-awaited spring offensive began, in June, with high expectations. Publicly, the Administration emphasized what the Pentagon called the “mountain of steel” it had sent to bolster the Ukrainian Army. But Russia had built three lines of defense in key places along the front. The fighting would hark back to the awful trench warfare of the First World War. The Ukrainians, in fact, were expending artillery shells at an unheard-of rate. In the White House, Sullivan and others worried that a shortage would stall the counter-offensive before it could succeed.

Sullivan had warned about this scenario for months. In January, the Ukrainians had worked with the Pentagon on an extensive war game in Wiesbaden to assess their needs. The conclusion was not good: the counter-

offensive would require more 155-millimetre rounds than the Pentagon had to offer. By February, Sullivan began to speak of this as the war’s “math problem.”

As Sullivan saw it, there were three potential solutions: dramatically ramp up production; look for additional sources of ammunition around the world; or send Ukraine some of the large stocks of phased-out cluster munitions held in storage by the Pentagon. But the White House learned that it would take months to sufficiently increase production of artillery shells—too late for the counter-offensive. And the State Department was opposed to sending cluster munitions, known as *DPICMs*, which are outlawed by more than a hundred countries, including many U.S. allies in Europe, because of the civilian casualties they often leave in their wake. That left the hunt for more munitions. Austin and Sullivan began calling leaders across the globe, including in countries, such as South Korea and Israel, that had not been particularly supportive of the war effort. “The decision was made to make a real run at the South Koreans, because they were the allies that had the biggest stockpile,” a senior Pentagon official recalled. Leaked documents revealed that the N.S.C. proposed various creative ways of getting around South Korea’s prohibition on directly selling arms to fuel the conflict; one of these involved having Poland or the U.S. buy the munitions and then send them on to Ukraine.

But by early summer a secret report from the Pentagon warned that Ukraine risked running out of ammunition sooner than expected and again recommended sending cluster munitions. “We’d reached the end of the road,” the senior Administration official recalled. “Like, if we want to make sure there is not a significant disruption in supply, we have to make this decision right now.” The State Department finally lifted its objections—it was a “very stark choice,” Blinken told me, and the Pentagon’s dire warning was “dispositive”—and the N.S.C. convened a meeting to ratify the decision. “They had to go back to the President and say, Option A is the Ukrainians run out of ammo and the counter-offensive stops, or Option B is you provide *DPICMs*,” the senior Pentagon official said. In early July, Biden announced the move, which he called “difficult.”

In an interview that same day, I asked Sullivan about the Administration’s cycle of “no-no-no-yes” decisions on sending various kinds of military

assistance to Ukraine. By this point, even some inside the Administration found the pattern hard to understand. “It’s like the boy who cried wolf,” a senior official had told me. “I just don’t know what to believe anymore. When they say, ‘No way, we would never look at the *ATACMS*,’ I say, ‘Is that true?’ I do feel I just keep seeing the same movie over and over again.”



“Just imagine this room fully carpeted, with multilevel platforms and cubbies.”
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

It was clear that the question exasperated Sullivan. “I think cluster munitions is in a different category from F-16s,” he told me. “Which itself is in a different category from Abrams tanks. I see the through line you guys are all drawing on the no-no-no-yes thing, but actually each of these has their own distinct logic to them.” To him, the Abrams-tank decision was “about sustaining unity” with Germany. Sometimes the State Department objected, as in the case of the cluster munitions. Sometimes it was the Pentagon or the President personally, as with the *ATACMS*.

The *ATACMs* had become a particular sore point. In 2022, Biden had rejected sending them, arguing that, to Putin, they would constitute an unacceptable escalation, since their range, up to a hundred and ninety miles, meant that they could hit targets inside Russia. “Another key goal is to insure that we do not end up in a circumstance where we are heading down the road towards a Third World War,” Sullivan said that summer. But once the British began providing similar missiles, in the spring of 2023, the

argument no longer seemed to apply. “What has held us back,” the senior Pentagon official told me this summer, was that doing so would “deplete our stocks at a time when we require those missiles for our own contingencies, whether that be Iran or North Korea or China.”

Members of Congress in both parties objected to that reasoning. In June, the House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a bipartisan resolution saying that *ATACMS* should “immediately” be offered. When officials had told Crow, the Democratic congressman, that sending the *ATACMS* would affect the Pentagon’s Operations Plan, his response, he said, was “Well, for what future war? The war in Europe is now, and it is being fought by the Ukrainians. So change the goddam *OPLAN*.”

More broadly, some of Ukraine’s supporters feared that the protracted deliberations had negatively affected the counter-offensive, which, by midsummer, had failed to produce the hoped-for breaches in the Russian lines. “Think about where we might be if things like *HIMARS*, Stingers, F-16s, *ATACMs* were over there a year ago,” Dan Sullivan, a senior Republican senator on the Armed Services Committee, told me. “That’s the really big flaw in the execution of their strategy, and it does start to undermine support when people don’t think they’re in it to win it.”

For his part, the national-security adviser seemed to chafe at the view, circulating widely in Washington, that he was the holdup and that others, including Blinken, were more “forward-leaning.” In recent months, Sullivan had taken to saying that, despite all the attention paid to high-tech weapons and fighter jets, there were only two things that Ukraine could not do without: artillery and air defense. This, he said, was why he had been among the loudest voices pushing to approve the cluster munitions, which, he told colleagues, were the most important single assistance the U.S. could give. “He’s frustrated with this perception that he’s the problem,” a former senior U.S. official told me. “It’s completely wrong.”

Blinken told me that the criticism stemmed from a misunderstanding of Sullivan’s role. “I’ve been forward-leaning in advocating to get the Ukrainians different things at different times, but it’s imperative that that be part of a rigorous process,” the Secretary said. “It’s never been, at all, Jake is a brake on this—it’s Jake doing the job the way it’s supposed to be done.”

The former official said that, by December of 2022, Sullivan was trying to get the President to use the threat of sending *atacms* as leverage with the Russians. “He was pushing Biden: Why don’t we at least say we will send *ATACMS* unless you stop firing on cities?” the former official told me. “So he’s been making that argument for at least six months now, and the President was not willing to do it. At some point, the President is the President.”

Another former senior U.S. official recalled a conversation with Sullivan about whether the U.S. would agree to send F-16s to Ukraine. Sullivan indicated that he was supportive. But, in early 2023, Biden publicly ruled out doing so, at least in the short term. Months later, several European allies agreed, with Biden’s approval, to supply F-16s to Ukraine. It wasn’t until the summer, however, that the U.S. signed off on a plan to train Ukrainian pilots on the fighter jets. The former official told me he had concluded, “The biggest drag on the speed of responding to Ukrainian requests has been the President, not Lloyd Austin, not Tony, not Jake—not the Administration, but the President. Jake is trying to play the role of honest broker, because he’s with the President every day.”

Martin Indyk, who served as Obama’s chief Mideast peace negotiator, argued that Biden’s equivocation had real consequences. “They made a big mistake,” he told me. “They self-deterring. That affected every move—that cautious incrementalism which we can now see with the benefit of hindsight was unnecessary.” Indyk, who wrote a book about Henry Kissinger’s Mideast diplomacy, recalled a key moment in the Yom Kippur War, in 1973, when Kissinger, the national-security adviser, was hesitating to send more than three C-5a transport aircraft to Israel. “Nixon famously said, ‘You know, Henry, we’re going to get blamed and criticized if we send thirty or if we send three,’ ” Indyk told me. “So he said, ‘Send everything that flies. And get on with it.’ ” The problem today is that Biden has been more Kissinger than Nixon, Indyk said: “We need him to tell Jake, ‘Send everything that flies, goddammit, and get on with it.’ I think it would have changed the course of the war.”

NATO summits are usually staid affairs, with almost everything haggled over and approved in advance. But two things happened in the weeks leading up to the Vilnius summit which disrupted hopes for a smooth rollout.

First, in late June, came explosive news from inside Russia: Putin’s mercenary Yevgeny Prigozhin had launched a mutiny. Sullivan cancelled a trip to Denmark to monitor the situation from Washington; he and Biden had just helicoptered to Camp David and arrived at their cabins when word came that Prigozhin had been persuaded to stand down.

Then, a few days later, a phone call between Biden and the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, threatened to derail negotiations over the summit’s final communiqué, which would show where *NATO* stood on the divisive matter of Ukraine’s quest for membership. Scholz, according to four sources with whom I spoke, made clear that he was adamantly opposed to a statement that included a specific “invitation” for Ukraine to join *NATO*. He also told Biden that he was skeptical of letting Ukraine out of the Membership Action Plan requirement. On that point, Biden refused—he had already agreed to it.

Biden, who prizes his closeness to Scholz—the senior European official described the “extremely warm, brothers-in-arms feeling” between them—agreed to present a joint front with the Germans on the idea of extending a formal invitation to Ukraine. As Scholz saw it, lifting the *MAP* would be a significant enough show of progress for Ukraine. The senior Administration official recalled, “Biden basically said to Scholz, ‘Look, I will make sure that, as we go through these negotiations, we aren’t on a kind of a pure slippery slope.’”

The issue had still not been resolved by the weekend before the summit. That Monday, Sullivan and Blinken signed off on a compromise—an awkward, American-drafted sentence offering an unspecified future “invitation” but nothing to explain how or when Ukraine could obtain it. Another breakthrough came that night, when Turkey’s leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, agreed to drop his objections to Sweden’s *NATO* membership, which he had been stalling almost single-handedly for more than a year.

But on the morning of Tuesday, July 11th, when leaders were to formally gather in Vilnius, Sullivan sensed trouble during a phone call with Yermak, the Ukrainian chief of staff. Sullivan turned beet red as Yermak told him that the hard-fought language in the communiqué was not enough. After Yermak informed Sullivan that he and Zelensky would soon land in Vilnius and

hoped to negotiate final wording, Sullivan responded sharply: this was *NATO*'s communiqué, he said, not Ukraine's.

Things soon got worse. Zelensky sent out a tweet blasting the draft for placing "unprecedented and absurd" conditions on Ukraine. He also suggested that the allies were holding out to use Ukraine's *NATO* status as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with Russia. Sullivan, who was stunned by the tone of the tweet, left a meeting that Biden was holding with a bipartisan group of senators to call Yermak again. "We literally did this sentence to make them happy," a senior U.S. official recalled of the moment. Maybe, Sullivan said to Biden, they should remove or replace the carefully negotiated wording. What was the point if the Ukrainians didn't like it? "I was, like, this whole summit's going to come crashing down," the senior diplomatic source said. "I don't think I've ever seen Jake that angry."

By that evening, after hours of talks, both Biden and Emmanuel Macron, the French President, among others, objected to making any revisions, and the statement was finalized exactly as it had been before the hours of embarrassingly public discord. For a summit meant to project "unity and zeal" on Ukraine's behalf, as Sullivan had put it days earlier, it was a mess. The senior European official said the dustup was consistent with the "track record of President Zelensky asking for things which he knows he cannot get," thus "creating his own disappointment."

The Americans, the senior Administration official told me, went back to the Ukrainians with one last pitch: "Guys, the play's the same, and it's a good one for you," with a promise of *NATO* membership in the future and bilateral security commitments in the meantime. Zelensky got the message. The next day, he appeared alongside Biden and praised the summit as a "success" for Ukraine. Their meeting, he tweeted, was "meaningful" and "powerful."



"If you're looking for a great fall read to prop up your laptop, this is it."
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

Relieved, Sullivan decided to make an appearance at a public forum on the sidelines of the *NATO* event. Daria Kaleniuk, one of Ukraine's best-known anti-corruption activists, rose to ask him a question. Wearing a dusty-pink blazer over a black T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "#Ukraine *NATO* now," she confronted Sullivan in starkly personal terms. She had left her eleven-year-old son behind in Kyiv, "sleeping in the corridor because of the air raids," she said. "Jake, please advise me, what should I tell my son?" Was Biden refusing to allow Ukraine to join *NATO* "because he is afraid of Russia"? Or because he was engaged in "back-channel communications with the Kremlin," preparing to sell out Ukraine to Putin?

Sullivan, looking exhausted, began by talking about the "bravery and courage" of the Ukrainians and how the United States would be there for them "as long as it takes." But his tone sharpened as he responded to Kaleniuk's speculation about Biden's motives, which he called "unfounded and unjustified" and "a lot of conspiracy theorizing that simply is not based on any reality whatsoever." What's more, he added, "I think the American people do deserve a degree of gratitude" for their support of Ukraine.

An audience member told me that there were audible gasps in the room—you don't tell a mother who's left her child sheltering from Russian bombs to express more gratitude. Hours later, Sullivan ran into Oleksiy

Goncharenko, a member of Ukraine's parliament, and heatedly complained about the "unfair and unfounded" question.

Kaleniuk, for her part, had no regrets. Sullivan had been described to her as the most important Biden adviser on the war—and also as a "very, very cautious" brake on the advanced weapons, assistance, and *NATO* membership that Ukraine needed. "It's just important for Jake to understand it's not the craziest thing, that actually there are thousands of Ukrainians who have the same perception of how America treats us," she told me when I reached her in Kyiv. Her biggest fear, she added, was that Washington, despite its support, has no plan for how to insure that Ukraine wins. The *NATO* summit had only reinforced this concern. "The White House doesn't have a clear end-game scenario and end-game strategy for this war," she said.

Early on, the Biden team had settled on a response to the inevitable question of how and when there might be a negotiated end to the war: "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine." There would be no separate deal with Russia, they promised. But many Ukrainians, like Kaleniuk, continue to worry that that is exactly where things will end up, with the two nuclear superpowers at the table, settling their country's fate once again.

Shortly before the Vilnius summit, NBC News reported that Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, had held a secret meeting in New York with former U.S. officials, including Richard Haass, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations. At the time, Sullivan and the Americans were trying to ease Ukraine's disappointment about *NATO* membership, and they denied having anything to do with the meeting or with any other secret negotiations with Russia.

Still, a former U.S. official who has met with the Russians during the war told me that the N.S.C. was "fully briefed" both before and after the conversation. I was also told, in June, of an intermediary who was going to the White House with a message from the Kremlin. "The White House wants to see these people," a former official who has participated in unofficial discussions with the Russians told me. "They want to understand what the Russians are thinking."

There is little doubt that the Biden Administration has actively considered ways to get Russia to the negotiating table. Last fall, Mark Milley, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, publicly expressed his view that the war would likely not be ended on the battlefield. Privately, Sullivan has had extensive discussions about what a peace deal might look like. “My conversations with him all the way through have been about what can you do to eventually bring this war to an end,” an informal adviser of Sullivan’s told me. “There are massive risks that are attendant with continuing to fight a hot war via proxy with the Russians. And the risks aren’t going down. They’re probably going up. So they want to find a way to eventually get to a freeze, to eventually get to a negotiated settlement. But it has to be something that keeps *NATO* together. It has to be something that doesn’t isolate the Ukrainians or have them go off and undermine everything that’s been done. That’s a hard square to circle.”

Talks, if they do occur, are likely to raise tensions further between the U.S. and Ukraine. “The Administration’s policy up to now has been close to unconditional support for Ukraine and essentially a real reluctance to be seen to be at cross-purposes with Ukraine,” Haass told me. “But that policy endures only if there is identity of interests between the United States and Ukraine, and if that were to be the case that would be without historical precedent. If you look at the history—whether the U.S. with South Vietnam, or the U.S. with Israel, or the U.S. with Britain and France during Suez—history is about how you manage disagreement with your allies.”

In September, shortly before Zelensky made his second visit to Washington since the invasion, Biden approved sending *ATACMS* to Ukraine, after nearly a year of resisting the idea. American officials, meanwhile, have held two rounds of formal negotiations with Ukraine over the terms of a memorandum of understanding—Sullivan’s “Israel model.” With Trump barrelling toward the Republican nomination, however, the political support that had once seemed so strong and bipartisan for Ukraine in Washington has been quickly eroding.

On September 30th, the House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, facing a rebellion from a group of hard-right Trumpists, stripped Ukraine funding from a resolution to temporarily keep the government open. A few days later, Biden asked European leaders, on a call, “not to read too much into it,” Blinken

told me, but, within hours, McCarthy was ousted as Speaker by the anti-Ukraine rebels. Now the fate of Ukraine aid, including a White House request for another twenty-four billion dollars, is entirely up in the air. Zelensky, during his recent visit, warned members of the U.S. Senate about the consequences of a cutoff: “If we don’t get the aid, we will lose the war.”

Sullivan clearly has profound worries about how this will all play out. Months into the counter-offensive, Ukraine has yet to reclaim much more of its territory; the Administration has been telling members of Congress that the conflict could last three to five years. A grinding war of attrition would be a disaster for both Ukraine and its allies, but a negotiated settlement does not seem possible as long as Putin remains in power. Putin, of course, has every incentive to keep fighting through next year’s U.S. election, with its possibility of a Trump return. And it’s hard to imagine Zelensky going for a deal with Putin, either, given all that Ukraine has sacrificed. Even a Ukrainian victory would present challenges for American foreign policy, since it would “threaten the integrity of the Russian state and the Russian regime and create instability throughout Eurasia,” as one of the former U.S. officials put it to me. Ukraine’s desire to take back occupied Crimea has been a particular concern for Sullivan, who has privately noted the Administration’s assessment that this scenario carries the highest risk of Putin following through on his nuclear threats. In other words, there are few good options.

“The reason they’ve been so hesitant about escalation is not exactly because they see Russian reprisal as a likely problem,” the former official said. “It’s not like they think, Oh, we’re going to give them *ATACMS* and then Russia is going to launch an attack against *NATO*. It’s because they recognize that it’s not going anywhere—that they are fighting a war they can’t afford either to win or lose.”

I read this quote to Sullivan during our interview in the Roosevelt Room. “That’s kind of the rap on us,” he acknowledged. “I don’t think it’s a fair one. We’re not fighting for a draw here.”

Then he proceeded, once again, to raise and attempt to demolish all the by now familiar arguments. “To be paralyzed by escalation would be terrible, and we have not been paralyzed—we have provided tens of billions of

dollars of advanced weapons, intelligence, training, capacity, that has had enormous lethal effect,” he said. “But to be completely cavalier about escalation, to say that to even raise the question makes you a coward, that’s easy to do from the outside, but when you sit in this seat you can’t do that. You have an obligation to the American people to consider worst-case scenarios. That’s our job.” ♦

By Dhruv Khullar

By Anthony Lane

By Hannah Zeavin

By Bill McKibben

The Critics

- [The Meaning of Madonna](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [Michael Lewis's Big Contrarian Bet](#)
- [Teju Cole's New Novel Is Haunted by the Trespasses of Art](#)
- [The Melting Pot of "Jaja's African Hair Braiding"](#)
- ["Reservation Dogs" Redefines the Coming-of-Age Story](#)
- ["Anatomy of a Fall" Is a Magnificently Slippery Thriller](#)

[A Critic at Large](#)

The Meaning of Madonna

For forty years, her quest for freedom through reinvention has resembled our own.

By [Michelle Orange](#)



In 1982, Madonna did one of her first P.R. photo sessions, in New York City. She brought her own clothes and did her own makeup. Photographs by Peter Cunningham

It was a more physical world, though we thought it quite advanced. There seemed nothing “terrestrial” about twisting a radio knob to some eccentric decimal point, dialling static into song. In the summer of 1985, we all knew someone, usually an older sibling, who owned a portable, cassette-playing stereo. The rest of us remained stuck catching Top Forty countdowns on AM radio, or playing, on our parents’ imperial turntables, the one or two LPs in our possession. Increasingly, we listened to music by watching it on TV, our dance parties often overseen by a strutting, tattered sprite who wore bangles like opera gloves and held the camera’s gaze with her entire being, as though locked in a dare she was not going to lose.

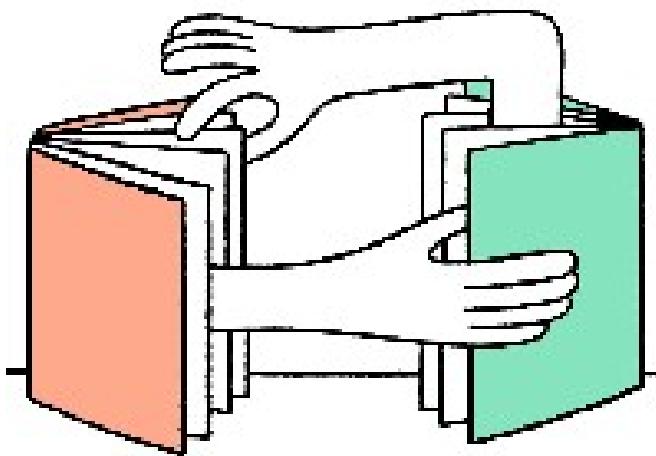
I liked her best in motion: the jut of her chin as she spun to a stop, the drag of her foot through a grapevine step. Something important seemed bound up

in this vision, beaconlike but elusive, forever disappearing around a corner up ahead. I prized the “Like a Virgin” LP I received for my birthday, the adults involved having apparently thought little of giving the record to a Catholic girl who was, if anything, overfamiliar with talk of virgins and of being like at least one of them. In regular living-room sessions, I twirled and stretched before the hi-fi altar, arching toward God knew what, flashing on how doing my best Madonna might resemble discovering a radical style of my own, the curious fission of moving in time.

That year, I delivered the “Madonna: Why She’s Hot” issue of *Time* to my father with the same air of triumph that swirled about him an hour later, as he quoted its comparison of her voice to “Minnie Mouse on helium,” a line he liked so much that he repeated it for decades. It was my own budding sensibilities, I understood then, that would require defending; Madonna could take care of herself.

The Best Books We Read This Week

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



By the end of the eighties, Madonna was innovating the form she had invented: the female mainstream avant-pop performance-artist superstar. In

1990, Pope John Paul II described her Blond Ambition World Tour as “one of the most satanic shows in the history of humanity.” Soon after that, in an essay for *The New Republic*, the critic Lucy Sante observed how unbearably hard Madonna was working—and for what? Not to make good music, according to Sante, or even for the money, but “to conquer the unconscious, to become indelible . . . a mutable being, a container for a multiplicity of images.” The thought of this talentless “dynamo of hard work and ferocious ambition” making “yet another attempt to expand her horizons” wearied Sante, as did Madonna’s fan base, those “consumers,” mostly teen-age girls, “who may not think she’s a genius but admire her as a workhorse and career strategist.”

Indeed, we were aware of being lassoed into the narratives surrounding Madonna: the media fixation on how long this whole “mutable being” racket could last (“Madonna cannot afford to sleep,” Sante warned); the debates over her scandalous videos and queer-forward live shows, with their female-masturbation vignettes and men in floppy bullet bras. But, where the press took sidelong note of each album’s and each video’s shrewd “reinvention,” we thrilled to Madonna’s refusal to be defined, to her expression of the ambiguities that any alert citizen of the late twentieth century knew to be an essential condition of the time. In exchange for this bounty, we chose to ignore her lame accents, puerile antics, and strangely inert movie turns. Bound up in the music was a burlesque of female stardom, irresistible for its mergings and inversions, for its unlikely marriage of a powerful woman’s desire to “make it” and her will to create. The wish to become indelible in an image-mad age required that Madonna commit to a premise as shaky as it was central to her appeal: the act of looking and being seen as a form of voluptuous play, a process to be messed with freely, and with freedom—release, for all, into something fluid and new—as its end.

As a girl, I watched Madonna explore this possibility to its outer limits. At fifteen, I could dance every step of the Blond Ambition tour; I knew the contours of her body better than I knew my own. That sublime body, impossibly whittled, spring-loaded with muscle, pale to the point of phosphorescence, a monument to the wedding of her famous will to the forces beyond her control. Her message of self-determination and brute vitality needed a physical, transmissible form, and we agreed to believe that the camera only appeared to be feasting on her—that she would emerge

from each feat of aesthetic derring-do intact and primed for the next. That we feared for her, and for the terms of our fascination, was inscribed into that bargain's back pages. A reckoning for another day.

If not a reckoning, “[Madonna: A Rebel Life](#)” (Little, Brown), by Mary Gabriel, suggests something comprehensive: it is eight hundred and eighty pages, and is being published in rough conjunction with its subject’s sixty-fifth birthday, this past summer. Gabriel, the author of four other nonfiction books, most recently “[Ninth Street Women: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art](#),” has brought her cultural historian’s eye to a project of apparent reclamation. Light on author interviews and other new source material, the biography is a towering work of assemblage, a guided tour through the origins and the creative life of “the enigma called Madonna,” with a view to solidifying her status as a leading artist of her time. That there exists some doubt about this forms a subtext of the book, which, like any biography, proposes a fragile patchwork of contracts with the reader in the name of mastering its subject and fulfilling its brief.

Gabriel, a former Reuters editor, organizes the chapters by dateline, taking an almanac-like approach, the idea being, more or less, that a thorough record of Madonna’s accomplishments will speak for itself. The result succeeds on the strength of that record and on the fine-toothed diligence with which Gabriel, who has claimed that she set out with no particular knowledge of or attachment to Madonna, combs through it. The tone is one of admiring dispassion, the approach at times discreet to the point of inertia. Readers hungry for original takes, fresh intel, or freewheeling analysis will remain so. Gabriel avoids risk and complication as fervently as Madonna has sought them out, spinning modest threads of historical, political, and cultural context that are never less than perfectly apt and rarely anything more.

In this telling, as in all others, Madonna Louise Ciccone’s bottomless hunger for love and recognition derives from the early loss of her mother, who died of breast cancer in 1963, when Madonna was five. Trapped in Pontiac, Michigan, in a chaotic, über-Catholic household choked by grief and teeming with children—after remarrying, Madonna’s disciplinarian father, Tony, added two kids to the six he already had—Madonna tried to find outlets for the fury building inside her. The whiter, more well-to-do Rochester Hills, where the family moved, in 1969, in the wake of the riots in

Detroit, proved easy to loathe. Gabriel writes that Madonna, unable to fit in with her wealthier peers, “called junior high the start of the angriest period of her life.” It also marked the beginning of her performing career. At her school’s annual talent show, in her last year, Madonna and a friend performed an exultant hippie dance to the Who’s “Baba O’Riley,” their bodies painted with fluorescent pink and green hearts and flowers. Though she was clothed in shorts and a T-shirt, the spectacle horrified Tony Ciccone, who sat in the audience with his camera in his lap, failing posterity as his daughter had failed him.

Gabriel charts the ebb and flow of various cultural tides in the late seventies, when Madonna washed into Manhattan, a nineteen-year-old dance-school dropout with a ruling interest in the business of being somebody. Punk had ratified a new hierarchy, whereby with the right poses and “a strong physical presence,” as Patti Smith once said, “you can get away with anything.” Disco, a mirror-ball fantasia born of Black, Latin, and L.G.B.T.Q. night life, mixed genres in search of the most glamorous, danceable grooves; New Wave kept punk’s D.I.Y. spirit and its reliance on irony but divested it of its sneer. And then there was the dance music coming out of clubs like the Roxy and Danceteria, where Madonna spent her nights. With rap and hip-hop ascendant, d.j.s like Afrika Bambaataa wanted to create a sound that would merge uptown and downtown—“the black market and the punk rock market,” Bambaataa said. Gabriel credits his electro-funk track “Planet Rock,” from 1982, with jump-starting a more unified era in the city’s dance underground.

Unsure of much beyond her self-assurance, Madonna convinced various people of various things: that she could be the drummer in a rock band; that she could submit to the machinations of a Euro-pop factory; that she could be a rock goddess in the mold of Pat Benatar. The overseer of this last venture, a manager armed with lacklustre demos, quickly learned that bringing her client to record-label meetings was a must. According to Gabriel, the secret of selling Madonna was Madonna herself. But none of it felt right: by 1981, alienated from her own vision not just of success but of creative endeavor, Madonna had turned back to the dance floor, where the right song could forge an almost tribal affinity between people. “I think it’s in our nature . . . to want to join together and move to a beat,” she has said. “I wanted to make music that I would want to dance to.”



"Roger feels we're not truly self-sufficient until we make our own mezcal."
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

In the early eighties, making danceable music, for Madonna, meant finding the right combination of synth-driven buoyancy and bass-and-drum churn. She didn't write "Holiday," an early dance hit, but its looping energy and exhortative lyrics are characteristic of her self-titled début, from 1983, which includes "Everybody," "Burning Up," and "Lucky Star," her first Top Five single—all of which she wrote. In her vocal performance, Madonna projects what the producer of "Holiday," Jellybean Benitez, called "a kind of innocence." That playful, almost teasing quality—a refusal to go too deep—would become a hallmark of the early Madonna banger, each one a lipsticked invitation for listeners to take mischief and pleasure as seriously as she did. It was an attitude shared by the "art kid" crowd that Madonna ran with then, which included Keith Haring and [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#). Her affair with the latter ended when Basquiat's drug use began to overtake his focus, exuberance, and ability to find the joke, if not the joy, in a world of pain and ugliness.

In time, the right people bore witness to Madonna's power to shift the axis of whichever room she entered. "I had never seen a more physical human being in my life," Freddy DeMann, who worked with Michael Jackson before signing on as Madonna's manager, in 1983, said. Some of Madonna's earliest collaborators in the visual translation of that magnetism were

women, including Mary Lambert, who directed the video for “Like a Virgin,” in 1984, and Susan Seidelman, the director of the feminist identity caper “Desperately Seeking Susan,” from 1985. With the exception of “Susan,” which taps directly into the early Madonna mystique, the force of her persona is largely absent in her film roles—though she was charming in a supporting role in “A League of Their Own,” also directed by a woman. In the wake of a miserable experience shooting Abel Ferrara’s “Dangerous Game,” which was released in 1993, Madonna said that her time in Hollywood kept bringing her “to the same conclusion: that I have to be a director. I feel like I’m constantly being double-crossed.” She went on to direct two movies, “Filth and Wisdom” and “W.E.,” but neither found much of an audience.

The songs endure: a layered, sonic eclecticism often powers a Madonna hit. In “Like a Prayer,” her mini revival meeting for the faithless, from 1989, gospel-choir harmonies and a church organ lay a hushed foundation for Madonna’s plangent vocals; the incantatory chorus shifts tempo into a silvery guitar riff, an urgent drum beat, and some absurdly funky bass; and the bridge rises alongside a steady build of Afro-Cuban percussion before the song spills open and down its own aisles, the chorus reprising as the song fades out. Though her strongest recordings stand alone, the Madonna experience always existed in combination: music and movement, image and sound. Where one element is absent, the whole project tends to falter. “Sex,” Madonna’s experiment in coffee-table-book erotica, from 1992, suffers for ignoring this principle. I gave a copy to a fellow-Madonnaphile on her birthday, a furtive transaction conducted in the parking lot of our Catholic high school, but didn’t buy one for myself. No amount of nudity or artfully deployed nipple clamps, I felt, could transcend the book’s constraints; her phenomenon had limits, and they would not budge.

Rebellion and submission can bear a strange resemblance; in this cross-fade, outsider artists who court the mainstream often get lost. From the start, Madonna has filed claims of misunderstanding, frustrated by the wider public’s inability to grasp either the winking ironies of “Material Girl” or the dead earnestness of her video for “Like a Prayer,” a memorable but incoherent visual stew of racism, cleavage, and stigmata. In a 2015 interview, Howard Stern described one of her recent songs, “Holy Water,” as being “about your vagina. You reference your vagina.” Madonna demurred:

“Well, I say ‘pussy.’ But it’s a joke. It’s tongue in cheek.” “Well, listen, pussy is pussy,” Stern replied. “That’s it.”

And that is it: the problem of nuanced provocation, especially where female sexuality is concerned, in a patriarchal marketplace. Compared with a contemporary like [Sinéad O’Connor](#)—whom Madonna mocked after O’Connor’s famous indictment of the Catholic Church, despite being vilified by the Church herself—Madonna’s rebellions appear modest, even compromised. But they may make up in effect what they lack in magnitude. Gabriel adds necessary context and dimension to Madonna’s role in raising awareness of the *AIDS* epidemic, and to her choice to foreground a diverse and vibrant array of gay men—notably in the music video for “Vogue” (1990) and in “Madonna: Truth or Dare” (1991), a backstage chronicle of her *Blond Ambition* tour—at a moment when even the tolerant public associated gayness with a gruesome plague.

Somewhat perversely, Gabriel has Norman Mailer pose one of this story’s key questions: To what end does Madonna subvert, create, and persist as she does? Speaking with Mailer for an *Esquire* profile, in 1994, Madonna claimed that her revolution was “in the name of human beings relating to human beings.” Indeed, though often diminished as a fame-monger and a raging individualist, Madonna, in Gabriel’s view, pursues an autonomy that is always relational, that finds its highest, most generative expression in convergence. Her greatest loyalties are the most primal: Christopher Ciccone emerges as the book’s shadow hero, constant and long-suffering in his sister’s torrential wake. Gabriel interviewed Christopher, who was valued by Madonna for his exacting taste and style, and she also draws liberally from his 2008 memoir, “Life with My Sister Madonna.” For the first twenty years of her performing life, Christopher played a multipurpose role, decorating her homes and eventually directing her *Girlie Show* World Tour, in 1993. Though the bond frayed in time, its nature and longevity are characteristic of an artist who throughout her career has sought in acts of creative collaboration a more controlled version of the family she was desperate to escape.

Madonna’s personal life—including her two marriages, to the actor Sean Penn, in the eighties, and the director Guy Ritchie, in the two-thousands—figures into Gabriel’s account largely insofar as it affects her creative output.

And though Gabriel emphasizes the relationships that have helped midwife Madonna's work, she fails to make them intelligible: we get no sense of the artist's grind, her habits and challenges as a songwriter, singer, producer, dancer, or director; or of how her vision and her ear have prevailed, in a decades-long evolution, through countless co-productions and genre dalliances. Old press-tour quotes on this subject are as illuminating as you might expect.

Stunned but not chastened by the media bonfire sparked by her "Sex" book, Madonna gravitated back to the dance floor, which, in 1994, meant dabbling in rave culture's less sweaty, more ethereal side. Her album "Bedtime Stories" yielded the sublime "Human Nature," a taunt addressed to her schoolmarm haters. The birth of her first child, Lourdes, in the fall of 1996, and a starring role in "Evita," released that December, for which she won a Golden Globe, found Madonna on a restored, more respectable public footing. By 1997, when she recorded "Ray of Light," an album she described as "drug music without drugs," she was ready to reëmerge, at nearly forty: a yoga-loving, Kabbalah-devotee mom with new thoughts on the ego (it's bad) but the same excellent nose for what's next. Her work with the British producer William Orbit, particularly on the new album's dazzling title song, proved revelatory, evidence of a talent more supple and abiding than her doubters had acknowledged.

In the past quarter century, Madonna has toured and recorded steadily, setting records into her fifties and redefining the scope of a female pop star's career. Gabriel's chapters on this period are clotted with reporterly descriptions of Madonna's videos and road-show spectaculars, all of which, with the exception of the Madame X Tour, are available to view on [YouTube](#). The Internet is the vast, unruly sea on which the latter half of this story is tossed, yet Gabriel describes it as one might a series of guideposts viewed from a passing ship deck. She notes Madonna's decision, in 2007, to forgo a new record-label contract in favor of a hundred-and-twenty-million-dollar deal with the multi-platform entertainment conglomerate Live Nation; the online leaks of unfinished tracks from her album "Rebel Heart," in 2015; and the replacement of serious criticism with the apelike opinionating of social-media discourse. Gabriel's summary of the online response to a 2019 Madonna performance: "I love it. I hate it. She's too old."

In footage from rehearsals for her Confessions Tour, in 2006, a French-speaking dancer tells Madonna that as an artist he is visual, he likes to see. “You like to look at the art,” Madonna replies. “I like to be the art.” She smiles. *“Je suis l’art.”* The Internet and social-media culture could be said to have out-Madonna-ed Madonna: that billions of people now toil on various content paddies, fuelling great economic engines with the art of self-retail, is not disconnected from the golden age of pop celebrity that preceded it, or from the intricate bargains struck by that age’s brightest female star, who today competes for engagement alongside fans and detractors alike. Madonna’s ongoing commitment to making new things and making things new—and her organic way of going about it—now appears almost antiquated. The tension between her artistry and her status as an O.G. personality merchant only grows—for us, it seems, and for her. Madonna is hardly the first public figure, or older woman, to undergo plastic surgery, but her most recent transformation surprises for the way it has made her look not simply unlike herself but trapped, unfree.

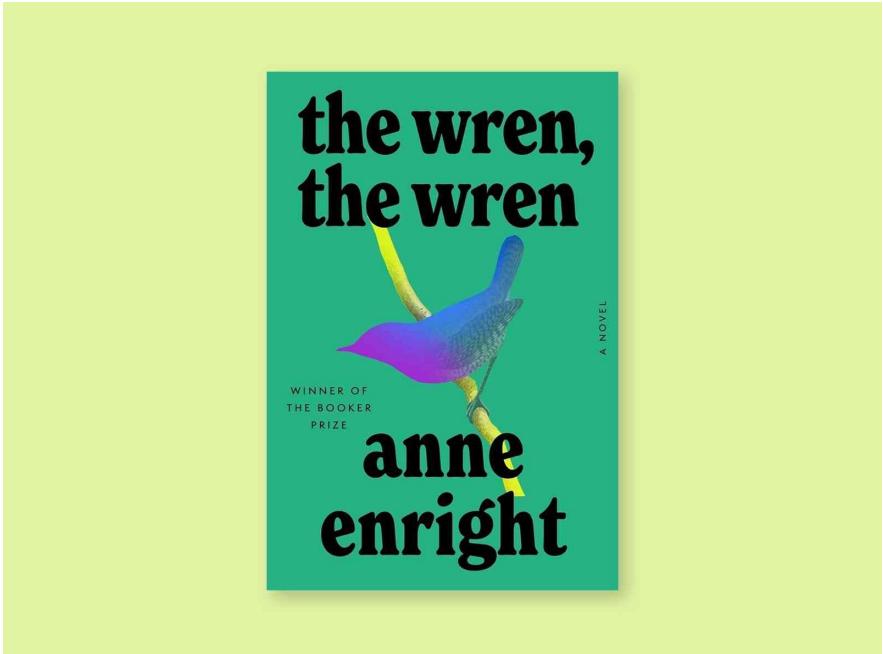
On the upside, the best of Madonna is just a few clicks away. The clips tell their own tale, one that proposes, across four decades of feminist backlash, capitalist fervor, and techno-media glut, a politics of physicality, display, defiance, and pleasure. Madonna’s explicit forays into political statement (chief among them the album “American Life,” from 2003) have an awkward, redundant quality, like covering a block of Cheddar with spray cheese and calling it an improvement. Her true authority is innate, rooted in what those early fortune-makers could see from across the room: a woman’s determination, above all, to be free. As she has navigated certain meta-aspects of that liberty—what it means to succeed, to choose well, to live out one’s values—Madonna’s confusion has often resembled our own. What stands apart has something to do with her lifelong equation of freedom with movement and strength, and the mettle with which she has pursued all three. More than her talent or her cunning, Madonna’s success reflects a public’s ambivalence about those freedoms we cherish, even as they frighten, bewilder, and enthrall us. Her story is that of an artist committed to remaking certain old ideals: beauty, sovereignty, connection, grit. It also tells of how starved we were, and still are, for their pure embodiment. ♦

By Ian Buruma

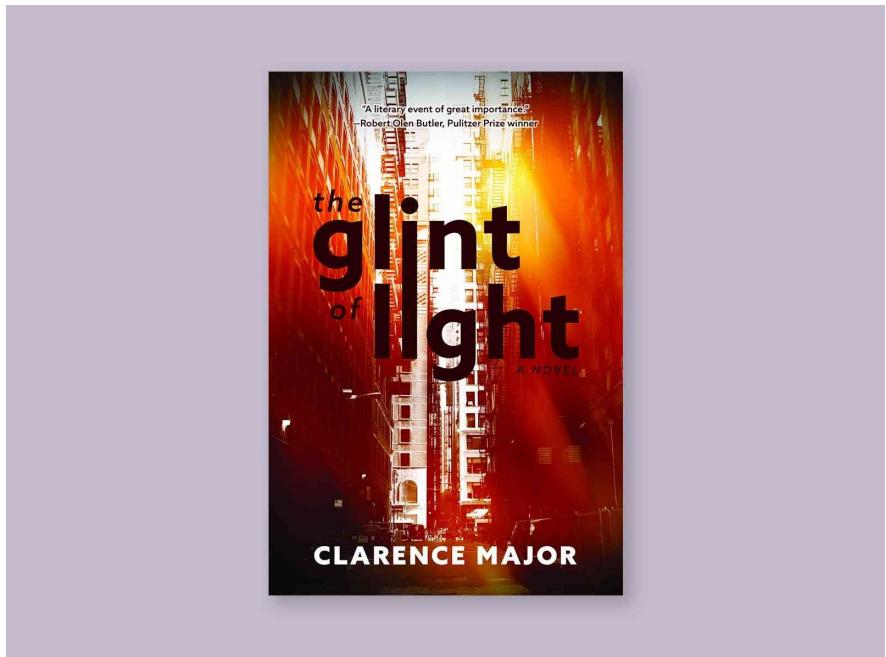
By Andy Kravis

By Will Nediger

By Will Nediger



The Wren, the Wren, by *Anne Enright* (Norton). Three characters from different generations of an Irish family, each of whom possesses a remarkably different voice, are braided together in this lyrical novel. Nell, a young writer, speaks first, her attention flicking between digital flotsam and a consuming, ambiguous relationship. Her protective mother, Carmel, who also had troubled relationships with men, is portrayed in the third person. The legacy of Carmel's father, Phil, a "not terribly famous" poet who abandoned his family when his wife became ill, looms over them both. A brief glimpse of his perspective as a child shows us an earlier Ireland—one of hardship and natural beauty. Scattered with snatches of Phil's verse, and keenly attuned to sensory detail, Enright's narrative of complex family ties brims with life.

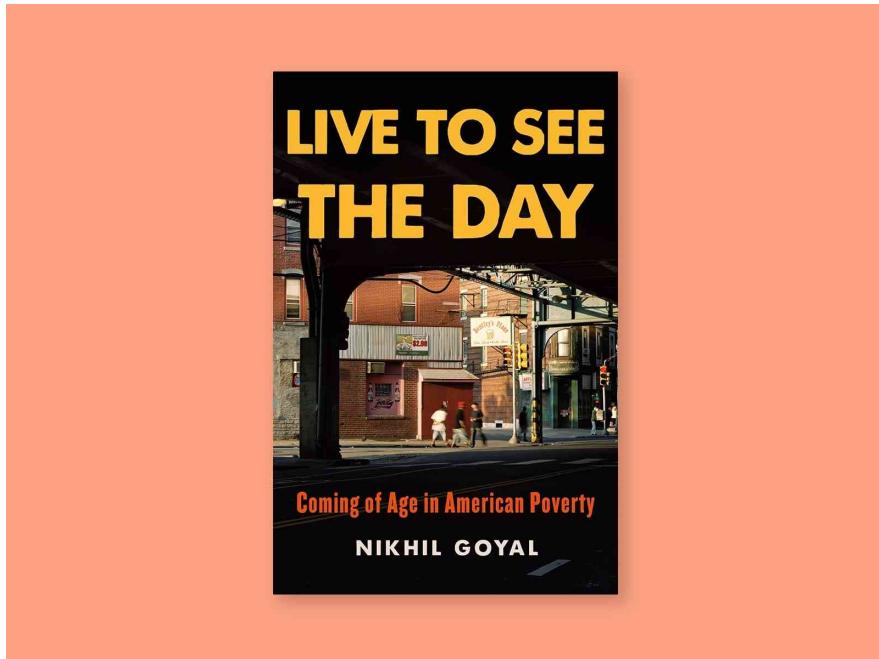


The Glint of Light, by Clarence Major (At Bay Press). This naturalistic novel follows a Black environmental scientist who returns home to Chicago from California for his mother's funeral and, while there, revives a romance with his white high-school girlfriend. The story is shaped by several cataclysmic events, which suit the novel's backdrop, in which the Presidency of Barack Obama—the pride of the scientist's late mother—corresponds with a rise in white nationalism. Though the climate crisis and racially charged incidents routinely oblige the scientist to acknowledge his vulnerability, he is inclined to attribute an impartial agency to death: “Class didn’t matter, age didn’t matter; it came at you with an absolute and indifferent force.”

The Best Books of 2023

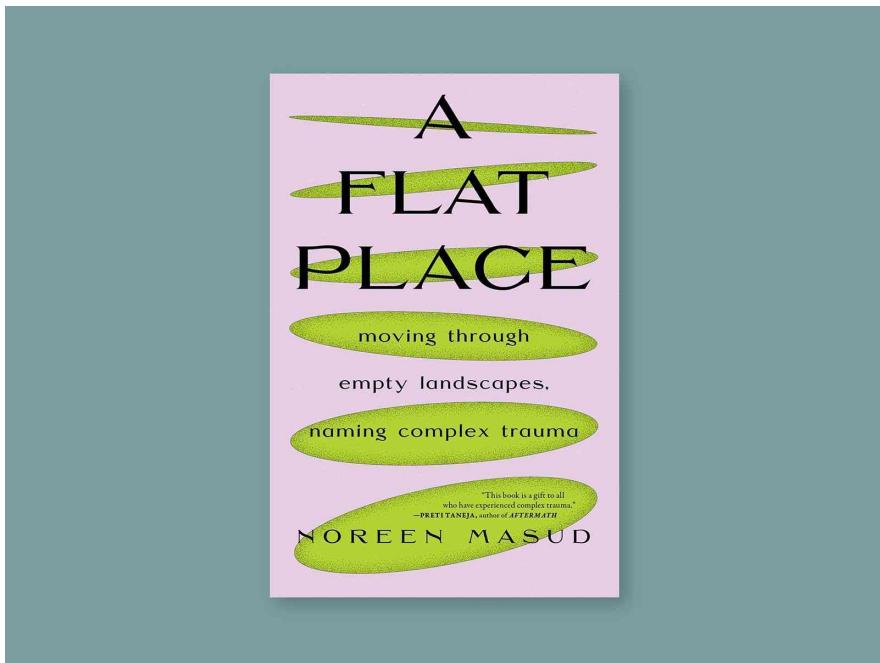


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Live to See the Day, by Nikhil Goyal (*Metropolitan*). At the outset of this sweeping work of reportage about life in the low-income neighborhood of Kensington, in Philadelphia, a twelve-year-old boy and his friends are huddled around a trash can at school, marvelling at a sheet of paper they

have set on fire. This childish stunt leads to the boy’s arrest, jump-starting an adolescence and young adulthood marked by incarceration, teen parenthood, and financial precarity. As Goyal follows the boy, along with two others, through the next decade, he depicts in granular detail the suffocating effects of poverty in a “hypersegregated metropolis,” where “eighteenth-birthday celebrations are not rites of passage but miracles.”



A Flat Place, by Noreen Masud (*Melville House*). In this memoir, a Pakistani British literary scholar reflects on her complex post-traumatic stress disorder—arising from an abusive childhood in Lahore—while visiting flatlands across the U.K., such as the fens of eastern England and man-made wastelands on the coast of Suffolk. Much like these landscapes, complex P.T.S.D., which results from prolonged, repeated trauma, doesn’t “offer a significant landmark” to focus on. Where hills and valleys are more commonly evoked as metaphors of struggle and overcoming, Masud sees the vast, stark flatlands as “the place of grief, but also the place of the real.” Between vivid descriptions of their geographical features, Masud confronts her childhood memories, her relationships with others, and the post-colonial histories of both of her homelands.

By David Remnick

By Mary Norris

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

By Ruth Franklin

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

Almost immediately after [the cryptocurrency exchange FTX](#) imploded last November, an agent e-mailed Hollywood buyers to reveal that the writer Michael Lewis just happened to have spent the previous six months hanging around [Sam Bankman-Fried](#). Lewis, the agent noted, “hadn’t written anything yet,” but the recent developments had provided “a dramatic surprise ending to the story.” Nobody would have argued that point. But Lewis didn’t appear to regard this unexpected climax the way everyone else did. According to the agent, the writer had likened Bankman-Fried’s archrival, Changpeng Zhao—who had helped set in motion the bank run that brought FTX down—to “the Darth Vader of crypto” and Bankman-Fried to Luke Skywalker. This might not have been a particularly weird thing to say a month earlier. But it was a *very* weird thing to say at a moment when Bankman-Fried’s alleged misdeeds had made him not simply the “main character” on Twitter but in much of the actual world. Bankman-Fried stood accused of having defrauded his exchange’s customers of something like eight billion dollars, which he had apparently used to prop up his flailing crypto-trading firm, Alameda Research. Furthermore, he had funnelled, or attempted to funnel, his illicit gains into all sorts of nonsense: naming rights to stadiums, Bahamian luxury real estate, a Pacific island where his confederates might ride out one minor apocalypse or another.

Bankman-Fried, the son of [two Stanford Law School professors](#), seemed to have walked out of a cave one day and become one of the richest people in the world: according to Forbes, which at one point conservatively estimated his fortune at about twenty-six billion dollars, he was second only to Mark Zuckerberg in the speed of his wealth accumulation. His overnight fame was due in part to the candor and alacrity with which he conceded that crypto was mostly a scam; as an advocate for clear government regulations, he positioned himself as an unlikely grownup in the industry. And it was due in part to his charitable donations—as [an effective altruist](#), he planned to give all his money away. In November of last year, the trade publication CoinDesk published a leaked balance sheet that indicated all was not well inside the house of Bankman-Fried. After Zhao, the head of the crypto exchange Binance, tweeted his readiness to dump his financial stake in FTX, customers rushed to withdraw whatever remained of their funds. In about a week, Bankman-Fried was forced to declare bankruptcy. A month later, he

was extradited from the Bahamas, where he was indicted on multiple counts of fraud. He has consistently maintained that the whole thing was more or less an accounting mishap, and has pleaded not guilty. During his trial, Bankman-Fried's lawyer told the court, "It's not a crime to run a business in good faith that ends up going through a storm." If convicted, he could face more than a century in prison.

Until the collapse of the Bankman-Fried empire, he seemed like an archetypal character for Lewis—the good kind of barbarian at the gate. Then all of a sudden he appeared less of a Jim Clark, the founder of Netscape and an early figure in the Lewis pantheon, and more of a Michael Milken, who made a dubious fortune on junk bonds. Lewis, however, has never seemed particularly invested in villains, and, over the past eleven months or so, speculation about his new book, "[Going Infinite](#)," has become a parlor game among journalists. The representative Lewis subject—Billy Beane in "[Moneyball](#)," Michael Burry in "[The Big Short](#)"—is a winning contrarian, someone with the brilliance and confidence to see something no one else could, and to wager on it. This might have seemed an apt description of Bankman-Fried when Lewis began following him, in the spring of 2022; in Zeke Faux's new book about the crypto frolic, "[Number Go Up](#)," he witnesses Lewis interview Bankman-Fried at a conference in the Bahamas, where "the author's questions were so fawning they seemed inappropriate for a journalist." The consensus, six months later, was that Bankman-Fried was less of an unkempt prophet than an oafish charlatan. Was Lewis prepared to pivot from an admiring account to a skeptical one? Was he interested in telling this kind of story, or even capable of it?

In the run-up to the book's publication, which was set to coincide with the first day of Bankman-Fried's trial, it started to look as though Lewis had not pivoted at all. On Sunday night, when Lewis appeared on "60 Minutes" to discuss the book, he came out as willing to entertain the possibility that Bankman-Fried had genuinely just lost track of the customer money—that, although he was obviously guilty of egregious mismanagement, it was not clear to Lewis that he had knowingly committed fraud. CoinDesk wrote an editorial called "[Is Michael Lewis Throwing Out His Reputation to Defend Sam Bankman-Fried?](#)," arguing that the interview "all but solidified the idea that 'Going Infinite' (Lewis' 21st book), will be a hagiography of Sam Bankman-Fried." The book is not, as it turns out, a hagiography. Bankman-

Fried is not portrayed as a hero. But he isn't portrayed as an antihero, either. The book's tone is one of tender beguilement, with the occasional flash of remonstrance; Lewis isn't sympathetic, exactly, but he is defiantly open to evidence of Bankman-Fried's innocence. Bankman-Fried does come off as a recognizable contrarian. But perhaps the most relevant contrarian subject in this magnificently ambiguous book is Lewis himself. Lewis likes to write about figures who survey the informational landscape, weigh the probabilities, and, under conditions of uncertainty, take expensive gambles—which is exactly what Lewis himself has done.

Lewis's affections have never been limited to iconoclasts. He also puts a premium on the category of “people who do their job well”—as in “[The Fifth Risk](#),” the best of his recent books, about the uncredited foot soldiers of the civil service—and the category of “children.” Some of his child subjects don't behave like children: in a famous piece from the early dot-com era, he profiled a teen-ager who became one of the most sought-after advisers on a forum for legal consultations. He wrote a sentimental book about fatherhood. Sometimes the children he's written about are children only in a metaphorical sense: a running thread of “The Big Short” is that the financial crisis happened because there weren't enough adults in the room. What he admires in a child is a useful kind of naïveté, which allows them to see through an adult world of pretense and convention.

Bankman-Fried is, in Lewis's account, someone who both never had a real childhood to speak of—his parents began to talk to him as an adult at the age of eight, and he is nearly incapable of producing any character witnesses from before the age of eighteen—and who remains a child. Bankman-Fried is bored by a certain kind of adult stupidity; he has no patience for academia, which he describes as “one long canned talk, created mainly for narrow career purposes.” He is scornful of what he sees as inherited truisms: Shakespeare, it seemed to him by high school, “relies on, simultaneously, one-dimensional and unrealistic characters, illogical plots and obvious endings.” People who believed otherwise just weren't thinking logically—which, for Bankman-Fried, meant focussing on the underlying statistics. As he asked in a blog post as a college sophomore, “What are the odds that the greatest writer would have been born in 1564?” Even once he is no longer technically a child, he still acts like one. Lewis often seems conflicted about Bankman-Fried's disregard for the statutes of manhood. On the one hand,

why should Bankman-Fried wear anything other than rumpled cargo shorts to fancy Hollywood parties? On the other hand, people who testify before Congress should bother to tie their shoes.

When it comes to the kind of adulthood Lewis respects, Bankman-Fried acquits himself poorly. Lewis is committed to professional standards, and emphasizes that Bankman-Fried seems exceptionally bad at the aspects of his job that involve scruples or responsibility. As an aspiring corporate mogul in his late twenties, he steadfastly refuses anything like orderly supervision—no org chart, no compliance, no human resources, no oversight at all. Lewis's best-selling début, “[Liar's Poker](#),” introduced him as something of a Pharisee—the antics of eighties bond traders struck him as vulgar. But that life had its crude satisfactions as well, and one way to read the arc of his career is to suggest that Lewis has spent the past two decades wondering whether success should be measured by principle or by consequence. Michael Burry made a lot of money by betting on an outcome that would cause a lot of human misery, but he was also right about subprime mortgages. Lewis is, in other words, a moralist who has dedicated his career to an exploration of pragmatism.

The first part of “Going Infinite” is dedicated to an examination of what Bankman-Fried is not. He doesn't much care about people one way or the other, and he admits to feeling no emotion. Perpetually bored, he requires constant entertainment—most often in the form of complex games, like “Magic: The Gathering,” in which the players are routinely wrong-footed by shifting rules. He makes commitments not out of any sense of emotional conviction but on the basis of mathematics and logic: his veganism, for example, has nothing to do with an affection for animals, about which he couldn't care less, but with a detached ability to compute the sum of their suffering. His acceptance of effective altruism, a movement devoted to the rational improvement of our lives, as an “intellectually coherent sense of purpose” is similarly bloodless. He feels permanently misunderstood but lacks most if not all the things the rest of us might call desires.

He does, however, like to win. It's not until the end of his time at M.I.T., where he half-heartedly studied physics and served as the “Commander” of his nerd frat, that he at last comes to ascertain what makes him special. In an interview for a job at Jane Street, a trading firm, he's put through a day of

slantwise games. What he discovers, in Lewis's telling, is that he's preternaturally well suited to pressurized environments where high-stakes decisions must be made in haste and with limited or occluded information. He also learns that an adversary who proposes a bet is providing you with information encoded in the bet itself. When one interviewer asks him what the odds are that the interviewer himself has a relative who plays professional baseball, Bankman-Fried does the relevant math—how many professional baseball players exist, how many relatives most people tend to have—and figures that the answer is about one in one thousand. But then he stops himself—was the question chosen at random, or was it chosen because the interviewer had some personal connection to it? Bankman-Fried dramatically increases his proposed odds. He gets a job, and thrives as a trader.

Bankman-Fried's greatest talent, Lewis believes, is his ability to appraise the expected value of a bet on the basis of a roughly grasped probability distribution. This isn't just about money—although Bankman-Fried goes on to make an ungodly amount of it in a very short time. He leaves Jane Street to found his own proprietary crypto trading firm, Alameda Research, with lavish (and, hypocritically, usurious) funding from wealthy effective altruists. The firm makes big gains on complex arbitrage trades, but at one point it's also losing half a million dollars a day. Within a few months, Alameda falls apart, and half of the senior staff leaves. A hazy picture of what became known as "the schism" has circulated in the effective-altruist community since then, but Lewis for the first time provides a detailed version of the story: with only a shoddy system to track the firm's assets, about four million dollars of cryptocurrency went missing. Bankman-Fried didn't worry too much about it, but his colleagues did; some of them thought that he'd perhaps stolen it, and they told other members of the community that Bankman-Fried was ethically bankrupt. If he could blithely lose track of four million dollars—money that was in theory earmarked to save thousands of lives—how could he possibly position himself as a movement steward? Lewis writes, "At least some of his fellow effective altruists aimed to bankrupt Sam, almost as a service to humanity, so that he might never be allowed to trade again." Lewis writes, of this internecine struggle, that you might have reasonably assumed that the putative owner of money slated for donations wouldn't matter: "You would be wrong: in their financial dealings with each other, the effective altruists were more ruthless than Russian

oligarchs.” Many people, [myself included](#), felt that even the sketchy lineaments of this story should have forced the E.A. movement to reckon with Bankman-Fried’s slipperiness sooner. And Bankman-Fried, in his relationships with his erstwhile colleagues, could be monstrous. In this as in basically all other instances, Lewis makes it clear that he acted like an asshole.

Lewis spends considerable time on this episode insofar as it prefigures, perhaps needless to say, the much more consequential disappearance of significantly more money a few years later. By way of analysis, Lewis describes a thought experiment that means a lot to Bankman-Fried. He tells Lewis to imagine that he has a close friend called Bob: “He’s great. You love him. Bob is at a house party where someone gets murdered. No one knows who the murderer is. There are twenty people there. None are criminals. But Bob is less likely in your mind than anyone else to have killed someone. But you can’t say that there is zero chance Bob killed someone. Someone got killed, no one knows who did it. You now think there’s like a one percent chance Bob did it. How do you see Bob now? What is Bob to you?” As Lewis glosses the thought experiment, “One answer was that you should never go near Bob again. There might be a 99 percent chance that Bob is the saint you always thought him to be, but if you’re wrong, you’re dead. Treating Bob’s character as a matter of probability felt problematic. Bob was either a cold-blooded killer or he wasn’t. Whatever probability you assigned before you found out the truth about Bob would appear, after the fact, unfair and absurd.” But where Lewis, like most people, reaches by instinct to make some judgment, Bankman-Fried is content to keep Bob’s entire probability distribution in his head. “There is no way to deal with Bob right now that is just,” Bankman-Fried says. It’s not entirely clear what this means—would Bankman-Fried hang out with Bob or not?—but Bankman-Fried seems to be endorsing a wait-and-see approach. He extends the analogy to the missing funds: “We’d either get it back or not.” The money, for its part, ultimately showed up, trapped in the netherworld of a Korean cryptocurrency exchange. There’s no question that Alameda would have been better served by a more conventional, or even any, approach to accounting. Bankman-Fried, however, was right that the missing funds were probably going to show up sooner or later. The post-schism company, Lewis writes, was “no longer a random assortment of effective altruists. They were a small team

who had endured an alarming drama and now trusted Sam. He'd been right all along!"

For what it's worth, "Going Infinite" is a stupefyingly pleasurable book to read. It's perfectly paced, extremely funny, and fills in many gaps in a story that has been subjected to an unholy amount of reporting. In the first chapter, Bankman-Fried stands up Anna Wintour at the Met Ball. Later, Caroline Ellison, Bankman-Fried's on-and-off girlfriend—one can't really call her a "romantic interest," given that Bankman-Fried by his own account has no real concept of "romance" or "interests"—sends him bullet-point memos about her hopes for a real relationship; as Lewis puts it, "She clearly wanted to be heard, and equally clearly sensed that her intended audience was likely to be playing a video game as he half listened." Apparently unable to deal with this memo, Bankman-Fried decides not to return from a trip to Hong Kong, and abruptly moves the whole operation there. The financial atmosphere there seemed to suit Bankman-Fried's affinity for total instability; Lewis compares it to "a chessboard with a voice embedded in it to shout rule changes in the middle of every game." A few years later, when Ellison tries her hand at another memo, practically begging that he acknowledge their relationship, he gets a one-way ticket to the Bahamas. ("Sam wanted to do whatever at any given moment offered the highest expected value, and his estimate of her expected value seemed to peak right before they had sex and plummet immediately after.")

He spends huge amounts of money on unbelievably stupid things, like a fifteen-million-dollar endorsement deal with a third-tier *Shark Tank* influencer that required virtually nothing in return aside from a few autographs. Some of Bankman-Fried's political donations seem not only corrupt but dopey. He wants to pay Donald Trump to not run for reelection, and that's one of his better ideas. The campaign allegedly requested five billion dollars, a little steep for even Bankman-Fried. (When contacted by *The New Yorker* about this claim, a spokesperson for the Trump campaign responded, "Isn't Sam Bankman-Fried a liar who has been outed as a fraudster and someone that can't be trusted? Sounds like Sam Bankman-Fried is back to his conning ways and trying to deceive people.") Almost all the ways Bankman-Fried spends money are inane, especially for a purported effective altruist: he puts a quarter of a million dollars into a fourteen-inch, two-thousand-pound tungsten cube for no reason. He lives in a penthouse

with a private beach where he never sets foot. Bankman-Fried isn't a true believer in anything, really, but he definitely wasn't a true believer in crypto or its apostles: after he meets Zhao, at a conference, he observes, "CZ sort of just says things. They aren't dumb. They aren't smart." Bankman-Fried seems interested in crypto primarily because it's a market of dummies with hundred-dollar bills lying all over the ground. But, Lewis writes, "Sam shared an important trait with the crypto religionists: a dissatisfaction with the world as he found it. He did not have any particular hostility toward governments or banks. He just thought grown-ups were pointless." The main requirement for his board members—the other two of whom he was unable to name—was that "they don't mind DocuSigning at three a.m. DocuSigning is the main job." At various points, Lewis describes Bankman-Fried's relationship to pedestrian reality as that of a Martian to earthlings.

In any Michael Lewis book, the immense satisfactions of narrative and detail are the table stakes. What differentiates this one—which may one day be regarded as either the pinnacle or the nadir of his career—is his personal exposure in the reputational market. Pretty much every sentient being aside from Bankman-Fried's parents and his lawyers is convinced that he is guilty of one of the greatest financial frauds of all time. As Lewis notes, the odds of an acquittal in federal court are about half of one per cent. Three of his top lieutenants, two of whom fled the Bahamas in panic for the safety of their parents' houses, have turned government's witness. In a speech Ellison gave to the Hong Kong office in the wake of the bank run, she seemed to have admitted that Alameda had deliberately siphoned customer funds from FTX. The government has more than six million pages of documents in evidence.

Lewis doesn't fully give Bankman-Fried the benefit of the doubt. He reports two conversations that Bankman-Fried took part in, at a despoiled Bahamas penthouse, that seem to support the charge of malfeasance. He implies that Bankman-Fried's effective-altruist pledges were largely notional, a convenient vehicle for his will to power. He does ignore some of the most persuasive evidence—he leaves out, for example, the allegation, which Bankman-Fried denies, that he exploited a back door in the code that allowed him and his confederates to move customer funds out of FTX—and in general seems to rely on the idea that, as an author, he might skip lightly over a government case that ought to be largely familiar to his readers. But

he concludes that there is still an outside chance that Bankman-Fried did not move customer funds. Bankman-Fried's version of the story is that other people, especially Ellison, messed up while he wasn't paying attention. Of the missing funds, Lewis writes, "The \$8.8 billion that should not have been inside Alameda Research was not exactly a rounding error. But it was, possibly, not enough to worry about. As Sam put it: 'I didn't ask, like, 'How many dollars do we have?'" It felt to us that Alameda had infinity dollars.' "

The final chapters of the book are dedicated to an evaluation of Bankman-Fried's story that stops just short of credulity. The fact that FTX's famous liquidation engine, which allowed the exchange to close out leveraged positions once the trader ran out of collateral, did not apply to Alameda Research's trades? It makes sense, Lewis writes, that the exchange's primary market maker had been allowed, at least early on, to lose some money. The obscure "fiat@" account with almost nine billion dollars of customer funds? Lewis finds it not wholly implausible that this was, in fact, a gigantic accounting error explained by FTX's difficulties securing bank accounts. As Lewis concludes, "His story, implausible as it sounded, remained irritatingly difficult to disprove." And Lewis very gently insinuates that Ellison, in over her head, might have made some very bad decisions. Lewis's trademark is an easygoing, wry serenity, but he reserves an unusual contempt for John Ray, the expert brought in to oversee the bankruptcy, for a variety of purported forensic errors. And he concludes the book with the suspicion that the mystery of the missing funds might not be a mystery at all—it seems possible, he writes, that the bankruptcy proceedings thus far have in fact accounted for all of it. Bankman-Fried's insistence that the whole thing was a series of accounting and management errors seems, to most people who have been following this for the last year, ridiculous on its face. But Lewis's "Bayesian prior," a term Bankman-Fried and his ilk use loosely to describe one's best estimate of an event's likelihood before further evidence emerges, is informed by the fact that the four million dollars that inspired "the schism" had been, in the end, simply misplaced.

In a thoughtful *Guardian* [profile](#) that appeared on Tuesday, Lewis addressed the criticism that he'd become too involved with his subject to price him fairly. Lewis said, "I do hear it in the air—around [Walter Isaacson's book](#) [on Elon Musk] and probably around mine—this kind of suspicion-slash-hostility towards the journalist who really gets to know their subject, that it's

access journalism, or you got too close or whatever.” But this was the cost, Lewis told the reporter, of “immersive reporting”—which he had always associated with a “pure joy” he feared had deserted him after his daughter Dixie died in a car accident in 2021. (The book is dedicated to her.) I think that he’s underselling his project, which is marked in this book by a willingness not only to get close to a bewildering and often unpleasant subject but to take something from him. What he began with “Moneyball” has come into full flower with “Going Infinite.” Lewis has surveyed a landscape taken by convention as settled and found it destabilized, at least here and there, by uneven and unreliable information. As Lewis writes, of the aftermath of the implosion, “All these people inside FTX suddenly wanted to seem to know less than they did, and all these people outside FTX thought that they knew more than they actually did. On Twitter, in the blink of an eye, a rumor became a fact, the fact became a story, and the story became an explanation.” Lewis can’t bring himself to grasp at any easy certainty beyond the fact that Bankman-Fried had no business running a vast network of companies as if it were his private fiefdom, even if the public narrative seems overwhelmingly warranted. He has accepted, as Bankman-Fried would put it, that we aren’t merely the average of our behavior but our own probability distributions. He has assessed the expected values, and, like Bankman-Fried, has elected the option of highest risk and highest reward. He’s taking a highly contrarian position on the margin, and he hasn’t done all that much to hedge the trade. The trial will make him look like a fool or it will make him look like a genius. But if there’s even a minimal chance that Bob committed not murder but merely negligent homicide, Lewis will not bring himself to write off his friend. Perhaps Lewis’s book should encourage an update, however minuscule, in our own priors. New information is imminent. We will all wait and see. ♦

By Ariella Elovic

By Hannah Zeavin

By Richard Brody

By Michael Schulman

Books

Teju Cole's New Novel Is Haunted by the Trespasses of Art

In “Tremor,” Cole and his narrator grapple with a dilemma: Is there a way to represent the world without betraying it?

By [Julian Lucas](#)



For the author, renouncing the conventions of plot and portraiture is akin to an ethical principle. Photograph by Donavon Smallwood for The New Yorker

In the autumn of 2020, while stargazing on his balcony in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Teju Cole was inspired to start taking photos of his kitchen counter. He decided that the daily migrations of his pots, pans, spoons, and graters paralleled the revolutions of celestial bodies, and began to track them in a “counter history.” A year later, he published the results as “[Golden Apple of the Sun](#)” (2021), a book-length photo essay that magnifies his solitary domestic experiment until it seems to encompass the world. Cole writes about the hunger he suffered as a boarding-school student in Nigeria, Dutch Golden Age still-lifes, slavery and the sugary recipes in an eighteenth-century cookbook, and why “the later a photograph is in a given sequence, the heavier it is.” Somehow, from this kitchen sink of memoir, art

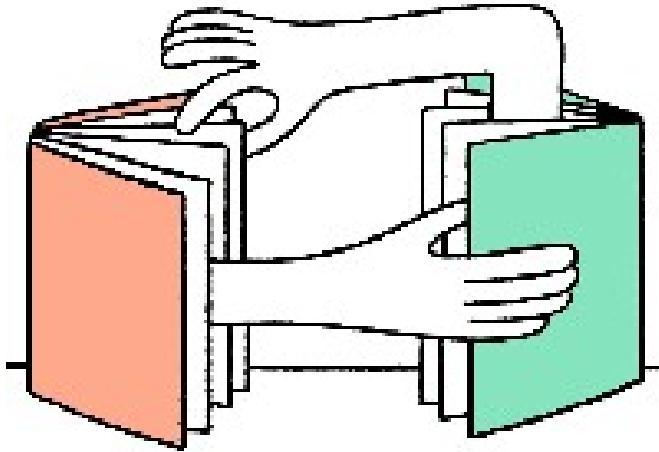
history, and observant boredom emerges a spectral portrait of the pandemic’s collective solitude, “this year of feeling buried in the dark earth like bulbs.”

Cole’s work makes an art—and a necessary virtue—of close looking. Across his fiction, photography, and criticism, he combines forensic rigor with a flâneur’s faith in style and sensibility, aligning aestheticism and ethical vigilance. “[Open City](#)” (2011), his début novel, won acclaim for its portrayal of post-9/11 New York, whose buried histories of violence and displacement resurface in the course of a medical student’s wanderings. In Cole’s essays, tranquil [Vermeers](#) reveal traces of empire—silver from the hellish mines of Bolivia, pearls from Dutch-ruled Ceylon—and stormy Caravaggios prefigure the precarious journeys of twenty-first-century migrants. “Looking at paintings this way doesn’t spoil them,” Cole insists. “On the contrary, it opens them up, and what used to be mere surface becomes a portal.”

His great theme is the limits of vision, and the way that these limits, when imaginatively confronted, can serve as the basis for a kind of second sight. “Among the human rights is the right to remain obscure, unseen, and dark,” he writes in “[Black Paper](#)” (2021), a recent essay collection, which investigates subjects such as colonialism’s weaponization of the camera and the depiction of nuclear disaster. In his own pictures, people seldom appear directly, but their presence is everywhere implied. “[Blind Spot](#)” (2017), an experimental photo book chronicling his travels, gathers images of hotel rooms, border fences, ships, and cemeteries into an ethereal atlas. Cole shuttles between sinister systems—forced migration, the arms trade—and chance moments when beauty, briefly, slips from the shadows. “Darkness is not empty,” he writes. “It is information at rest.”

The Best Books We Read This Week

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



“[Tremor](#)” (Random House), Cole’s first novel in twelve years, also wrestles with what falls beyond the frame—and it begins, aptly enough, with a photograph deferred. Tunde, a Nigerian artist who teaches at Harvard, is out walking in Cambridge when he decides to set up his tripod in front of a blossoming honeysuckle hedge. The first sentence finds him in mid-rapture: “The leaves are glossy and dark and from the dying blooms rises a fragrance that might be jasmine.” But the spell is broken by an aggressive voice warning him away from the property. It could be racism, or at least the fortress mentality of American homeowners. Whatever the reason, Tunde packs up his tripod, and, with it, any expectation of innocent reverie. What follows, instead, is an elegant and unsettling prose still-life, which reflects on art’s relationship to theft and violence, to privacy and togetherness, and to the way we mark time.

The novel spans the autumn just before the pandemic. Tunde, internationally recognized for his “portraits of unpeopled scenarios”—which, like Cole’s, are “suggestive of human presence, charged with human absence”—is selecting photographs for a new exhibition. We follow him to Bamako, for the photography biennial, and to Lagos, his home town, but mostly remain in Cambridge, where he teaches a weekly seminar and enjoys a cozy domestic life. Tunde is married to a woman named Sadako, a Massachusetts native who works in pharmaceuticals. Childless, they spend their free time

buying antiques and cooking for their circle of noteworthy friends, which includes an astronomer, a scholar working to revive spoken Wampanoag, and a Pulitzer finalist. Even their toiletries are pedigreed: Tunde bathes with natural black soap made by an artist for Documenta 14, and its swirling suds elicit visions of nebulae, along with the “paradoxical thought of a blackness that wicks filth away.”

Amid this tranquillity, inner troubles reverberate. Sadako abruptly leaves home to stay with her sister. Tunde grieves a dead confidant, who is hauntingly addressed as “you.” Older agitations loom at a distance: the dissolution of a gay relationship in Tunde’s twenties, his precipitous departure from Lagos at seventeen. Cole, who grew up there, left at the same age; he also lends Tunde his celebrity, his intellectual interests, his ophthalmological problems—papillophlebitis, which causes temporary episodes of blindness—and his university post. (Cole teaches creative writing at Harvard.) If “Open City” was a bellwether of the last decade’s autofictional turn, “Tremor” occasionally sounds like a defense of the now-beleaguered genre. “Firsthand experience is what matters,” Cole writes. “It is by being grounded in what we know and what we have experienced that we can move out into greater complexities.”

At least half of the novel, which hews rather closely to its protagonist’s consciousness, consists of ideas about how to live, listen, think, and see well. Tunde never crosses Harvard Yard without remembering those enslaved by the university. His marital problems—“complacency,” “fear of abandonment”—are unpacked in cruelty-free sessions of couples counselling. So keen is his conscience that even the sight of preschoolers led via a walking rope reminds him of “prisoners being transferred . . . a forced march to the unending tune of ‘The Wheels on the Bus.’ ” It’s tempting to characterize the novel as what the critic Becca Rothfeld calls “[sanctimony literature](#),” a mode of fiction designed to showcase the author’s ethical awareness. But there’s more going on than virtue signalling. Tunde’s worries over various moral problems—art restitution, the portrayal of the dead, artificial intelligence—converge on a dilemma that bedevils both him and his creator: Is there a way to represent the world and not “cannibalize the lives of others”?

“Tremor” begins to read like a renunciation of the soul-stealing that’s latent in fiction and photography. “I fear the demands that portraits of people make,” Tunde confesses. “For portraiture not to be a theft I would have to be even more patient and intent than I am now.” Yet the novel’s subtle shifts in perspective—including a section that leaves Tunde behind for the streets of Lagos—also strive to reconcile this humility with the world beyond the “I.” Cole hints at his ambition through his protagonist’s reverence for the Micronesian navigator Pius Mau Piailug, who crossed from Hawaii to Tahiti without maps or instruments, in 1976:

He sailed alone . . . guided only by the knowledge he carried in his head and by what nature presented of itself to him: the movements of the stars by night, the position of the sun by day, the behavior of oceangoing birds, the color of the water and of the undersides of clouds, the taste of fish, the swelling of the waves. Who is to say the universe is hostile? All this information gathered up by the alert navigator and subtly interpreted made the ocean a friendly and readable book.

Cole moved into fiction “sideways” from art history. He was studying early Netherlandish painting in a doctoral program at Columbia when he began his first book—almost by accident, during a trip to Lagos in 2005. Cole hadn’t been in the Nigerian metropolis since he left to study in the United States, in 1992. He was so struck by the city’s deeply familiar but swiftly changing face that he wrote daily vignettes about it for the next month, adopting the persona of a young man who, like him, had returned to Nigeria after years in America. Cole paired each installment with a photograph online, where the series attracted enough interest that a newly founded Nigerian publisher, Cassava Republic, persuaded him to publish it as a novella, [“Every Day Is for the Thief.”](#) Cole’s narrator wanders through the streets of a city as varied and surprising as a Bruegel tableau. Corruption is everywhere, from the national museum, where derelict exhibits airbrush the legacies of dictators, to lawless markets where crowds film the lynching of suspected thieves. (Cole has described the novella as “a guidebook in the negative.”) But it isn’t crime that draws the young man’s attention. He seeks out the city’s deeper rhythms on side streets and in the faces of strangers, caught between the aspiration to exploit its “wealth of stories” in writing and a discretion that restrains him. “I want to take the little camera out of my

pocket and capture the scene,” he muses while watching coffin-makers at work on a quiet lane. “But I am afraid. Afraid that the carpenters, rapt in their meditative task, will look up at me; afraid that I will bind to film what is intended only for the memory.”

Most readers came to know Cole from “Open City” (2011), which turned his talent for psychoanalyzing cities on a wounded Manhattan. Julius, its cultured and evasive Nigerian narrator, takes refuge from stressful shifts as a fellow in psychiatry at New York-Presbyterian Hospital by wandering the streets. His mind is as restlessly crowded as his personal life is desolate; estranged from his mother, and recently separated from a girlfriend, he fills his free time with books, classical music, and people-watching. The city that emerges from his perambulations is haunted by its previous incarnations: a Levantine neighborhood bulldozed to make way for the World Trade Center, a Haitian shoeshine man who speaks like a refugee from nineteenth-century wars. “What Lenape paths lay buried beneath the rubble?” Julius wonders. “The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten. . . . Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway.”

With its cool voice, slashing erudition, and existentially vexed outlook, “Open City” quickly entered the contemporary canon of New York novels. Critics favorably compared Julius, Cole’s Afropolitan Gen X Hamlet, to the narrators of [W. G. Sebald](#), and identified his opacity as a rejection of the self-revelation expected from immigrant narratives. More controversial was the novel’s twist ending, which dramatically undermined the idea that imaginative sympathy is any proof of integrity. Julius is revealed to have likely raped a girl in his youth; his lingering over violent neighborhood histories and Mahler’s late style is suddenly recast as an evasion of his submerged conscience. The novel’s title, too, has a shadow side, alluding to the wartime strategy of giving enemy troops free access to a city in exchange for a promise to leave it intact. The flâneur, coolly assessing a world that doesn’t look back, might be the occupier’s twin.

“Tremor” is even more haunted by the idea that the artist’s work is a kind of trespass. Tunde recalls the fury of a vender in Paris whose merchandise he photographed without offering compensation. A Maine shopkeeper sells him a possibly “authentic” Malian *ci wara* figure—not made for the tourist trade,

in other words—and he wonders why Western collectors of African art prefer “alienated” works, “so that only what has been extracted from its context becomes real.” Later, at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, he delivers a stirring chapter-length lecture on plundered art—an homage to J. M. Coetzee’s “[Elizabeth Costello](#)”—which decries the hypocrisy of institutions that for too long have “loved other people’s objects with a death grip.” At home, he watches interviews with Samuel Little, a prolific strangler who sketched his victims “with an unnerving softness.” Those drawings become the first item in a triptych about the perversions of portraiture, joined by forensic photos of unidentified corpses and A.I.-generated images of unreal individuals: “the remembered dead, the remembered undead, the imaginary never-liveds.”

We begin to understand why there aren’t people in Tunde’s pictures, or fully realized characters in “Tremor” besides him. Yet his wariness about representation is countered by an equally strong desire for connection—a yearning, in his words, “to be integral and to be peopled in balance.” Tunde broods over his distance from Sadako, the inexorably fading memory of his late friend, and the “paradoxical” emptiness of his forthcoming exhibition on urban life. Are there only two paths for photography—vampirism and solipsism? Or can Tunde find a way to make the lives of others manifest in his portraits of “planks, tires, culverts, basins, stones, ships, plants”? In the studio, he struggles to create a sequence of images greater than the sum of its parts. “The slowness of the accretion itself guarantees nothing,” he reflects. “Most of these photographs will fail.”

His gambit is also Cole’s. “Tremor” is a work of autofiction with the ambition of a systems novel, aspiring to illustrate the world’s interconnectedness without recourse to the fictional conventions of plot and psychological portraiture. Instead, it moves like an essay, interweaving slices of life with musings on Malian guitar virtuosos, astronomical phenomena, films by Ingmar Bergman and Abbas Kiarostami. Cole’s mind is so agile that it’s easy to follow him anywhere. But—as with Olga Tokarczuk’s “[Flights](#)” or László Krasznahorkai’s “[Seiobo There Below](#)”—there is a method to the meandering. Cole uses the resonance between fragments to imply a dimly apprehended totality, like a seismologist integrating measurements from different sites to map an earthquake.

“Tremor” returns again and again to motifs of doubling and coincidence—duets, twins, binary stars. A flute-playing soldier from a Bruegel painting reappears in a contemporaneous Benin plaque: “In such mysterious ways do synchronicities occur across vast distances,” Tunde observes, “as though one person’s two hands were simultaneously drawing two images from a single model.” Cole suggests that being sensitive to such invisible intimacies is a form of solidarity that doesn’t require interpersonal connection. In “Golden Apple of the Sun,” he quotes the poet and cultural theorist Édouard Glissant, who believed that respect for opacity was the foundation of ethics: “Although you are alone in this suffering you share in the unknown with those you have yet to know.”

The climax of “Tremor” arrives following a moment when Tunde briefly loses sight in one eye during his museum lecture. Soon after, in lieu of an account of his trip to Lagos, Cole presents twenty-four vignettes of life in the city, one for each hour in the day. The ex-principal of a private school recounts outwitting a troublesome parent—her state’s martinet governor, Brigadier (Hitler) Okon. A wealthy man lies in a casket during an annual party to rehearse his own funeral; someone else tells of the exhumation of a long-dead relative for the construction of a new road. “I’m not a doctor or therapist or priest, but I think people are consoled by the mere fact of being able to call a stranger in the night,” a radio host who lets listeners vent on the air reflects. “My show is a space for softness in a city that doesn’t have too much of it.”

Here are the missing crowds of Tunde’s “depopulated” photographs; a book about one solitude opens to encompass many. In a parallel section, which pays homage to the allegorical style of Italo Calvino’s [Invisible Cities](#), Cole describes “a city of doubles, a pluripotential city of echoing selves and settings,” whose choreography “would be amazing could it be seen in a single encompassing moment.” His evocation of Lagos is all the more powerful for arriving as an interruption of Tunde’s narrative—which resumes in the first person, as if the cascade of anonymous voices had restored his own. “Epiphany,” Cole said in a lecture on the dense city writing of [Joyce](#), Woolf, Pamuk, and others, is “not only revelation or insight, it is also the reassembly of the self through the senses.”

Fiction takes the transparency of other minds so much for granted that it can obscure the rarity of true communion—which doesn’t always require explanation, or even the exchange of words. “Tremor,” with its vision of separateness and synchronicity, is obliquely about the pandemic, much in the way that “Open City” revolved around 9/11. In January, 2020, Tunde and Sadako throw a dinner party that reads like a still-life—a tableau of abundance shadowed by the losses to come. “The pleasure of having the house full of people is exceeded perhaps only by the pleasure of seeing the last few leave,” Tunde muses. It’s once they’re gone that he remembers to return to the hedge, where—in the frost and the silence, no blossoms to be seen—he takes a photograph that is now much heavier than the one we imagined before. ♦

The Theatre

The Melting Pot of “Jaja’s African Hair Braiding”

In Jocelyn Bioh’s new Broadway comedy, West African immigrants navigate a Harlem salon fraught with cultural dissonance.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)



Undocumented West African immigrants try to forge their future in Harlem. Illustration by Xia Gordon

Jaja (Somi Kakoma), the title character of Jocelyn Bioh’s new play, “Jaja’s African Hair Braiding,” doesn’t show up onstage until the show’s nearly over. But, before we ever see her, a portrait emerges. She’s described by her employees in the course of a long day in 2019 at the Harlem shop over which she lovingly lords. To Bea (Zenzi Williams) and Aminata (Nana Mensah), she’s a demanding boss with a proud streak. They take turns affectionately mocking how she says her fiancé Steven’s name—a bit froggy in the throat, the “v” tending toward an “f,” both vowel sounds braggadociously distended. Jaja and Steven are getting married on this day; he’s a well-off-sounding white man, and she’s an undocumented immigrant from Senegal.

To Jaja's daughter, Marie (Dominique Thorn), who minds the shop and tends to its administrative business, Jaja is a mother with high standards. Marie went to a private school, where she got great grades and ran circles around her more stably situated peers. She was the valedictorian of her class, but now that she's graduated she might not be able to go to college—she uses the name and the I.D. of a cousin she's never met. Born in Senegal but an American in every way except in the eyes of the law since she was four years old, Marie is walking a tightrope that's been thrown across the Atlantic and feeling the sharp winds to either side. Her future—at least as far as she can perceive it—depends on the marriage between her mother and Steven, but some small, nagging thought tells her she can't trust that it's all going to work out. Jaja wants Marie to be a doctor, or, as a backup, an engineer. But—like so many young people in so many plays—Marie wants to be a writer. She writes short stories in notebooks, and shares them with Miriam (Brittany Adebumola), a braider from Sierra Leone.

"Jaja's African Hair Braiding"—on Broadway at the Samuel J. Friedman, produced by Manhattan Theatre Club, and directed with velocity and ease by the very talented Whitney White—skips through the hours at Jaja's salon. At one point, Bea—the shop's most insistent gossip, with the most unpredictable attitude—is venting her anger at a younger braider, Ndidi (Maechi Aharanwa), who she suspects is intentionally stealing her customers:

BEA: You must really have a death wish, eh? How many of my customers are you going to steal?!

NDIDI: What are you talking about?

BEA: Everyone in here knows that Michelle has been coming to me for YEARS!

NDIDI: And I'm supposed to know that how?

Later, Miriam—outwardly shy but inwardly determined—tells her customer Jennifer (Rachel Christopher) all about her florid dramas back home:

And you know, my husband—he's not a good husband. He didn't do anything. No job. He's lazy. I have to do everything in the house. So I was not happy, you know? And then one day, I was at the market and I run into my friends from secondary school. And we are talking and laughing and I'm having a good time and they say "Miriam! You need to come with us tonight. This new singer is having a show on the beach. You have to come!" And I know my husband no want to go because he don't like anything fun. So I lie to him and tell him I'm going to my sister's house and I go to the show.

The story turns into one of those fascinating narratives—quick love, poignant loss, uncertain paternity, distant voyages—which only someone like Miriam, with a big, if unheralded, life, lived across continents, can tell. Jennifer, a budding journalist who's in the shop to get microbraids—a day-spanning, finger-busting experience—is a happily captive audience for Miriam's one-woman show.

Kalyne Coleman and Lakisha May zoom in and out of the shop, playing several clients. One's incredibly rude; one's a school friend of Marie's; one's the aforementioned Michelle, who ignites the fire of battle between Bea and Ndidi. Both performers are versatile and funny, but, even more important for Bioh's project, they're also sociologically knowledgeable—you can't play (or, for that matter, write) all of these types unless you've spent time in real neighborhoods, walking around with your antennae up, soaking up faces and gestures and sensibilities as they promenade past.

With each role, Bioh's gifts are on display. She can make a real character appear—the kind that rests on archetype but always achieves the spark of individuality—in just a few seconds of talk or motion. She brings people into contact precisely at the places where they're most vulnerable, or wounded, or willing to crack just the right joke to reveal an uncomfortable truth. Sometimes she clears out space and simply lets her people dance, or gawk at the television. She allows life to happen onstage.

Bioh does this all so smoothly and expertly that her dialogue seems televisual—there are several moments in "Jaja's" that made me wonder if it would work as a streaming binge instead of a fleet ninety-minute play. But her emphasis on bodies and music and sound and sight gags keeps her work

stubbornly theatrical. And, paradoxically, her interest in screen-based media and its effects on the heart is probably best explored in a live medium.

Bioh's previous play, "Nollywood Dreams," was about the movie industry in Nigeria—and, in a hilarious side plot, how it's digested on daytime TV. Here, in Jaja's shop, we see how the cultural products forged so harrowingly in "Nollywood" are transmitted across oceans and throughout diasporas, salving homesickness as they go. At one point, Ndidi acts out a long passage of dialogue from a show that's playing on the shop's small TV, a glowing locus of constant attention. It's a funny moment, perfect as a showcase for Aharanwa's charismatic, joyful energy—but it also demonstrates, in a way that TV would be hard pressed to do on its own, how the mimetic impulse that soaps and other shows encourage in their viewers is a way of retreating into the self and wishing one's way back home.

Still, you can easily imagine what "Jaja's African Hair Braiding: The Miniseries" would be like. One thing it might address is only hinted at, really in a single line, in Bioh's play: the subtle strains, invisible to outsiders, that often wring the relationships between West African immigrants and Black Americans. After one particularly tough customer's tirades, Bea says simply, in a mode of lament, "These people." These people, *who*? A whole world, fraught with cultural dissonance and regrettable zero-sum economic competition, might spring from that tossed-off phrase. Knowing Bioh, she'll get there soon.

The run of this play is well timed in New York, where our local politics have suddenly become consumed with the question of whether or not it's right to welcome migrants when—for whatever reason, by whichever means—they show up in the city. Mayor Eric Adams, who's still fixated on fun but increasingly pestered by the annoyances of his actually quite important job, keeps saying that the current waves of asylum seekers, largely from Latin America, arriving on buses from red states along our country's southern border, will "destroy" New York.

When Jaja finally arrives, sparkling in white, ready to storm City Hall and party down, she delivers a speech that refutes the paranoia of nativists like Adams:

What kind of perfect immigrant are they looking for, eh? When it comes to us, the rules are alllllways changing! . . . This country is fine with TAKING. They are even fine with us GIVING, but the moment we ASK for something? Hey! That's it. Who are you? Dirty Africans! Get out of our country! Go back to your . . . "shat-holes." . . . Okay, so you want me to go? Fine, I will go. But when do you want me to leave? Before or after I raise your children? Or clean your house? Or cook your food? Or braid your hair so you look nice-nice before you go on your beach vacation?! . . . So now that's it. Today, I will be on THEIR level.

The ending of Bioh's play is a bit hastily resolved, which is especially jarring after the loose, languid, refreshingly episodic rhythm of the rest of the show. But it does reveal, like so much else here, a defiant spirit, a bit of flair amid disaster. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Nathan Heller

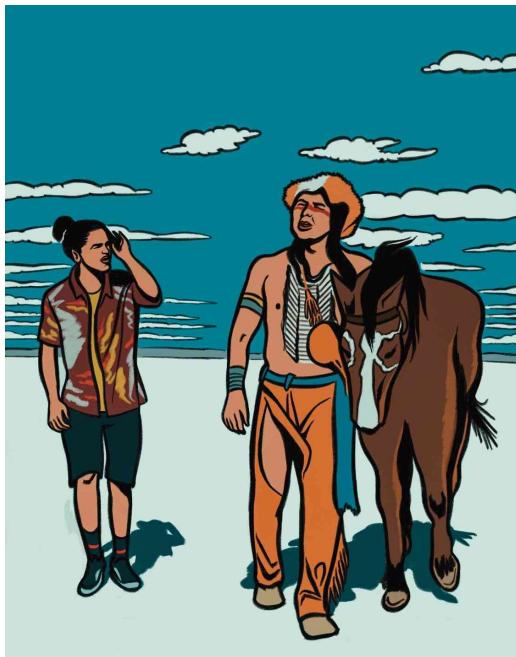
By Margaret Talbot

On Television

“Reservation Dogs” Redefines the Coming-of-Age Story

The FX series is a singular portrait of the Native community that shaped its teen protagonists—but their surroundings can feel more real than they do.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)



The teen protagonists' community extends beyond living friends and family—one of them, Bear, has regular run-ins with a nineteenth-century warrior spirit. Illustration by Tracy Chahwan

In American pop culture, coming of age tends to be a solo endeavor. Adolescence is when we start to define ourselves against our parents, our peers, and the forces that structure our worlds; Hollywood often distills that grappling for identity into a lone hero's journey. But, for the teen-age quartet at the heart of the FX series “Reservation Dogs,” which just concluded its three-season run on Hulu, it’s an inherently communal experience. Early on, the foursome—Bear (D’Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai), Elora (Devery Jacobs), Cheese (Lane Factor), and Willie Jack (Paulina Alexis)—resist that revelation, convinced that their home town of Okern, Oklahoma, killed the fifth member of their group, Daniel (Dalton Cramer), who had dreamed of ditching their Muscogee rez for California beaches. Grieving for their friend

a year after his suicide, the teens couldn't see what the audience could: that dusty Okern was alive with oddballs, artists, helpers, and ways to heal. The showrunner, Sterlin Harjo, who created the series with Taika Waititi, continued expanding this mosaic for the next two seasons, in a mode spearheaded by Louis C.K.'s "Louie" and brought to its apex by Donald Glover's "Atlanta": the formally and tonally mercurial, auteur-driven, detour-prone, impressionistic half-hour dramedy. (Call it "the FX mood piece.") The result can be easier to admire than to get lost in.

If Harjo owes a debt to predecessors like Glover, he's also made the form his own through his emphasis on the collective. (The dialogue, peppered with Native slang and its own all-purpose curse word, "shitass," is just as distinctive.) By the third season, Okern has come to encompass the spiritual, the folkloric, and the historical, effectively redefining what community can be. Alongside the single moms, aunties, and grandmothers anchoring the protagonists are a nineteenth-century warrior spirit (Dallas Goldtooth) who pushes Bear to soul-search; Elora's dead mother, the forever-twenty Cookie (JaNae Collins); and the vengeance-fuelled Deer Lady (Kaniehtio Horn), an ageless wanderer with hooves hidden under her disco-era denim jumpsuit.

Harjo's project—a foulmouthed, art-house-inspired tribute to the endurance of Native communities, as well as an earnest call to insure their persistence—had no analogue on television. His mission is reflected in the special attention the show pays to rez elders, many of them played by celebrated Indigenous character actors. "Reservation Dogs" displays a reverence for the cultural wealth these figures stand to offer the next generation—but also insists, crucially, on their fallibility and humanity. Every member of this wizened circle has his quirks: the artist Bucky (Wes Studi) attempts to ward off disease with his mysterious figurines; the medicine man Fixico (Richard Ray Whitman) peddles "real medicine" outside the Indian health clinic; and the tribal cop Big (Zahn McClarnon) would rather chase down Bigfoot than go after juvenile delinquents. Though they're eager to pass on traditional knowledge, they're less forthcoming about the personal traumas that have shaped them. The most pivotal installment of the new season, "House Made of Bongs," shows the elders as high schoolers during the Ford Administration. Like the modern-day Rez Dogs, they were a rude, tight-knit crew on the cusp of political consciousness, more interested in getting high than in attending class. While coming down from an acid trip, the teen-age

Bucky mutters what may well be the thesis of the series: “How beautiful to never search for who you are. Everything you need is here in the millenniums of certainty living in your mirror.” Then Maximus—the Daniel of their group, an orphan who’s visited for the first time that night by either extraterrestrial kin or schizophrenic hallucinations—complicates this assertion of cosmic cohesion by slipping out of his friends’ grasp. When Bear encounters a grizzled Maximus (Graham Greene) by chance, decades later, the older man’s exile from Okern functions as a cautionary tale.

Harjo’s intense, even anxious focus on intergenerational bonds gradually exposes some of the series’ shortcomings. The writing has become more didactic, and, by continuing to zoom out further and further, “Reservation Dogs” cedes some of its more visceral pleasures: namely, hang time with the gang. Their low-key jaunts about town—to their catfish joint, the health center, or the homes of various elders—give way to sometimes meandering one-on-one scenes that lend several episodes the musty air of a chamber play.

The finale sends Bear, Elora, Cheese, and Willie Jack into adulthood with a newfound appreciation for their cultural inheritance, bringing a sense of closure to a series that many have argued is departing too soon. But where the idiosyncrasies of life in Okern have been rendered in loving detail, the teens themselves remain archetypes, and not wholly persuasive ones—partly because of how divorced they are from the rest of their cohort. (The core group only interacts with other kids after literally being ambushed by them.) The Rez Dogs seem to pay little heed to conventional milestones like birthdays, dances, or graduation—their most meaningful social gatherings are the funerals of elders. And though we know that Bear and Elora are the children of teen moms, the crew treats sex like a foreign concept; even crushes are rare. The absence of these “all-American” goalposts of adolescence, which are less universal than Hollywood would have us believe, can be refreshing. And yet there’s something unconvincingly childlike—perhaps defensively wholesome—about this depiction, too. After all this time, the gang’s ties to one another are still montage-level deep. Apart from reminiscing about Daniel, I can’t say I know what they would talk about in the quiet moments that make up life.

Toward the end of the show, we see what “Reservation Dogs” can accomplish when it decenters the teens from their own story. In a superb episode titled “Wahoo!,” Bear’s mom, Rita (Sarah Podemski), receives a visit from her deceased friend Cookie, just as the soon-to-be empty-nester is contemplating the possibilities that might open up once she no longer has to put her son first. Cookie asks Rita to check in on Elora, and the arc concludes with a moving ceremony that lets the spirit know that she no longer has to keep such close tabs on her daughter; the aunties vow to do so in her stead, allowing Cookie to rest in peace.

But the final season also features underdeveloped story lines and characters who suffer for Harjo’s preoccupation with the big picture. The deliberate obfuscation of the conflict between the estranged cousins Maximus and Fixico, for example, makes their long-awaited reunion less poignant than expected. The revelation of Deer Lady’s childhood in an Indian boarding school feels thinly sketched, as does Elora’s encounter with her white father (Ethan Hawke), a man she’d assumed died years ago. “I didn’t want to take you away from all that. . . . From your family, from your people,” he tells her, explaining why he had stayed away when she was younger. He knows her world well enough—he invokes her grandmother, her basketball coach, even the Okern epithet “shitass.” But he realizes, painfully, that he knows precious little about *her*. Even after three years in Elora’s company, some viewers might feel the same. ♦

By The New Yorker

By The New Yorker

By The New Yorker

By Adrienne Celt

By [Anthony Lane](#)

The first question that is asked in “Anatomy of a Fall,” a new film from the French director Justine Triet, is a simple one: “What do you want to know?” The line, which could stand as a motto for the whole movie, is spoken by a writer, Sandra Voyter (Sandra Hüller), in a chalet in the Alps. She is being interviewed by a graduate student, Zoé (Camille Rutherford), although their conversation is soon drowned out by a rumpus from above—specifically, an instrumental version of “P.I.M.P.,” by 50 Cent, played with a thunderous boom by Sandra’s husband, Samuel Maleski (Samuel Theis), who is also a writer. Either he’s deliberately sabotaging the interview or he wants to trigger an avalanche.

Of Samuel himself we see no sign, for the moment, and that matters. It foreshadows how the story will unfold. So much in “Anatomy of a Fall” is overheard, heard but not seen, seen but misunderstood, misremembered, conjured out of conjecture, or unwisely taken on trust. When we *do* catch sight of Samuel, he’s dead—sprawled in the snow beside the chalet, with a deep cranial wound and a trail of blood. So, did he tumble over a balcony or was he shoved? Did he hit his head on the edge of the shed below, or had the blow already been struck? Did he perish by his own hand, or at Sandra’s? Is 50 Cent a suspect? The puzzles proliferate. Warning: Do not expect them all to be solved.

Sandra and Samuel have a son, Daniel, aged eleven, who is played by Milo Machado Graner with a fine blend of frailty and determination. Daniel’s border collie, Snoop, is played—in an equally striking performance—by Messi, whose skill would be the envy of his namesake. Snoop is not just Daniel’s companion but his helpmate, because Daniel was hurt in an accident, when he was four, and left with severe visual impairment. (Typically, the details of that event, and its long aftermath, take a while to emerge. Triet is a specialist in the slow leak.) It’s he who returns from a walk with Snoop, discovers his father’s body, and cries out to Sandra. The music is still blasting forth, but she hears the cry. How come?

We have yet to reach the opening credits, and Triet has got us where she wants us. This is not a sleuthing movie; there are cops, but they mill around the fringes of the plot, and there’s no Poirot to slalom in from a nearby valley, brush the snow from his mustache, and address the case. Instead, we

become the detectives—reading every rune, probing for holes, and testing the evidence as if we were treading on ice. “I have to understand,” Daniel says, and his compulsion is infectious. What demands clarification is not only the crime, if crime it was, but the state of his parents’ marriage, which has been cracking and melting for some time. According to Sandra, it was based on “intellectual stimulation.” So much for love.

There is almost no aspect of this tale that doesn’t feel slippery to the touch. Sandra is German but came to live here in France, where Samuel grew up, and is clearly unsettled on what she calls his turf. Speaking largely in English, the language in which—as a compromise, or in search of common ground—they raised Daniel, she is a mother with no use for her mother tongue. She admits to sleeping with other people while she was married, and now, to add to the tangle, she acquires the services of a louche lawyer, Vincent Renzi (Swann Arlaud), with whom she was once involved. He’s badly needed, too, because Sandra is charged with Samuel’s murder. “I did not kill him!” she exclaims to Vincent, urgently answering a question that he hasn’t even asked—maybe the most startling irruption in the film. Regardless of what Vincent privately believes, however, his plan, for the defense, is to claim that Samuel committed suicide. And so to trial.

“Anatomy of a Fall,” which won the Palme d’Or at this year’s Cannes Film Festival, has been widely referred to as a courtroom drama. Yes, much of the second half is set in court, in Grenoble, but you seldom get the impression that Triet—who wrote the screenplay with her partner, Arthur Harari—is enmeshed in the machinery of the law. Indeed, fans of legal shows, on TV, or of Otto Preminger’s crisply organized “Anatomy of a Murder” (1959) will be taken aback by the free-form nature of the proceedings in Triet’s movie. Lawyers, witnesses, and a “spatter analyst” or two seem to interrupt one another at will, or at random, often from a seated position. The prosecutor (Antoine Reinartz), a shaven-headed smirker, roams around snapping and snarling, and I, for one, would toss him out of a high window without a second’s hesitation. What the setting most resembles is a brasserie full of squabbling law students, and you half expect the clerk of the court to arrive with bowls of onion soup.

The most telling sequence focusses on Daniel, as he stands there being quizzed, by both the defense and the prosecution, on his testimony. The

camera swivels from side to side, hardening the sense of his being under siege, and the movement prompts two thoughts. One, can a child be cross-questioned, whatever the jurisdiction, in this hostile manner, and, if so, why should the evidence be ruled admissible? Two, has Triet worked on us to such mischievous effect that we no longer care about what is plausible, and crave only the tussle of wills at the movie's heart? This is less of a courtroom drama, I reckon, and more of a discordant, highly strung character clash with legal bells and whistles tacked on. Notice how we finally get wind of the verdict: not in court, in a formal announcement, but via a television reporter outside who hears an excited hubbub swelling behind her. Truth is not crystalline and clear. It lies in pieces, and you have to pick them up as best you can.

A practical tip: “Anatomy of a Fall” is formidable stuff, and you should arrange to watch it at the cinema with your most captious friends, preferably at six o’clock, so that you can thrash things out over dinner—fondue, I’d suggest, for that handy whiff of bubbling Alpine chaos. Notwithstanding the verdict that is delivered in Grenoble, it’s perfectly possible that you will remain uncertain as to whether Sandra is guilty, and here’s the kicker: even the person playing her doesn’t know for sure. Hüller has revealed that, during the making of the film, she repeatedly asked Triet if Sandra did or did not do the deed. Triet refused to squeal.

The miracle is that such uncertainty renders Hüller’s performance sharper rather than vaguer. It is as though Sandra, reportedly described by her husband—an enfeebled soul, and a less successful writer—as “quite castrating,” had armed herself against all eventualities and foes. With her flustered froideur, she needs no cross-examination to make her bristle, and our response is to marvel at the depths of her discomfort, and perhaps her guile. When she stands outside on a frosty night, drinking and flirting with her lawyer, is she grabbing a rare chance to relax, or subtly swaying him yet further to her cause? How much we like or dislike Sandra is of no consequence. What’s unnerving is that we can’t decide, from one scene to the next, how secure we are in wanting to root for her.

Hüller was in an earlier and less coherent film by Triet, “Sibyl” (2019), which, weirdly, features a guy named Maleski, like Samuel, and a vulnerable boy named Daniel. In both films, moreover, conversations are

surreptitiously recorded. In “Sibyl,” a shrink tapes the outpourings of a patient; now, in “Anatomy of a Fall,” we learn that Samuel taped a tempestuous argument that he had with Sandra, not long before his demise. The result is played aloud in court, and, along the way, Triet transforms it into a flashback, meaning that we see as well as hear the marital storm—a privilege denied to the judge and the jurors. (The irony is that the sparseness of the audio version makes a greater impact.) Is that a smooth creative sleight of hand, or is the movie cheating on us? Might it be that Triet is following the crafty lead of her own heroine?

The fact that such doubts and reservations encircle this film is not a mark against it. On the contrary, they honor its capacity to provoke. That is why Daniel carries such moral weight. When he confesses, “I got mixed up,” he is being honest—more so than any of the adults—about the nature of confusion. Looking at the veiled gaze of his troubled eyes, which both see and fail to see, we can’t help wondering: when, and under what emotional pressure, does a memory shift from being a reliable account of something to a story that we tell ourselves about what we wish had occurred? It’s no surprise that Daniel should be prey to that slippage; after all, he’s the son of two writers, and he listens as the prosecutor reads out menacing passages from one of Sandra’s books in a bid to incriminate her. (Nice try, *Maître*. Pursue that line and you’d have prisons crawling with novelists.) Forget the clever tricks, though. If you really want to find out what happened that fateful day at the chalet, there’s only one course of action. Ask Snoop. ♦

By Richard Brody

By Richard Brody

By Anthony Lane

The Talk of the Town

- [The Land of Trump and Gaetz](#)
- [A Stay at Lin Wood's MAGA-Friendly Bed-and-Breakfast](#)
- [The B-52's Back on the Boardwalk](#)
- [Fourteen Thousand Feet Over the Gulf of St. Lawrence.
And Then Not](#)
- [Raking Dirt for Art's Sake](#)

[Comment](#)

The Land of Trump and Gaetz

Last week, both men tested whether the *MAGA* movement can operate simply as an ongoing insurrection against whatever it is that its principals don't like.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

Has there been a politician both as broadly despised, including in his own party, and yet as improbably effective as Matt Gaetz? When the Florida congressman—previously best known for his unflinching support of Donald Trump's election denialism and for being investigated over allegations of sex trafficking (he denied them, and the Department of Justice declined to bring charges)—engineered the removal of Kevin McCarthy as Speaker of the House, last week, he had the support of exactly seven other House Republicans, out of two hundred and twenty-one. McCarthy's supporters denounced Gaetz's faction on the floor as "chaos" agents "running with scissors." Even Newt Gingrich, a spiritual grandfather of Gaetz's intraparty Molotovism, later called for him to be ejected from the Republican caucus. In a sense, Gaetz was doing what Trump has been doing this month as he

contests a court case: testing whether the *MAGA* movement can operate simply as an ongoing insurrection against whatever it is that its principals don't like.

And yet, in the decisive hour-long debate over vacating the Speakership on Tuesday afternoon, Gaetz also demonstrated a keen eye for political weakness. McCarthy's supporters rose in waves, protesting that it wasn't fair to fire a Speaker who had made such progress in passing bills and in oversight. Gaetz kept asking, What progress? Many of the bills that the McCarthy faction was bragging about (some proposing steep cuts to social spending and unwinding the Biden Administration's energy policies), having been dead on arrival in the Democratic-controlled Senate, "are not law," Gaetz said. "It is difficult to champion oversight when House Republicans haven't even sent a subpoena to Hunter Biden," he added. "It sort of looks like failure theatre." As the chamber braced for the final vote, Gaetz, standing in front of a bank of Democrats who were regarding him skeptically but would nonetheless be voting with him, laid down his notes and stopped speaking, almost totally friendless and yet the central figure in Washington.

In the moment, McCarthy's faction appeared more naturally sympathetic. They seemed genuinely pained; after the vote, when every Democrat had joined the eight insurgents to end McCarthy's time as Speaker, some Republicans reportedly huddled in prayer on the floor. McCarthy's allies had seen Gaetz's opportunism clearly: Garret Graves, of Louisiana, said that the Florida congressman's campaign was using his challenge to McCarthy to send out texts asking for donations while Gaetz was speaking on the House floor, which even by the standards of Congress was undeniably gross. But the speeches from McCarthy's allies defending the Speaker gave too much to Gaetz's radicals. They denounced Biden's Administration as "lawless," and declared McCarthy's majority "the only firewall" against "a dark and scary reality." The more they insisted that the national situation was desperate, the more they made Gaetz's case for him.

The salient thing to say about Gaetz's rebellion is that it has been a long time coming. The Harvard political scientist Theda Skocpol, interviewed by Politico, identified a pattern of "bottom-up radicalization" that has consumed the Republican grass roots since the time of George W. Bush's

Administration. Conservative voters have grown ever more angry about immigration and social transformation and dissatisfied with the Republican politicians who pledged to reverse these changes and couldn't.

But the slow radicalization of the G.O.P. depended at least as much on the capitulation of the establishment to these forces. McCarthy survived in the Party longer than Paul Ryan or Eric Cantor because he conceded more. He flew to Mar-a-Lago to welcome Trump back into the Party after January 6th; he aligned himself with Marjorie Taylor Greene; and he ordered the sprawling impeachment inquiry into President Biden that the base wanted. Had McCarthy's theory of political exchange worked, and these favors done for the *MAGA* faction earned favors in return, then the only person in the Party powerful enough to save him might have done so. But last week, when a reporter at a downtown Manhattan courthouse asked Trump whether he supported McCarthy, the former President simply brushed past.

Right now, of course, Trump has his own problems. He was in court to defend himself against civil charges brought against him, his businesses, his two oldest sons, and other Trump Organization executives by the New York attorney general, Letitia James. The lawsuit alleges that they have fraudulently inflated the value of Trump's holdings—a case in which he stands to lose two hundred and fifty million dollars and also the right to run a business in New York, something that has constituted a substantial part of his brand. The trial so far has not been going well for him: he had the bad luck to draw a judge, Arthur Engoron, who has shown little patience with Trump's defense ("This is ridiculous," the judge complained during an extensive line of questioning by one of the ex-President's lawyers), and who will decide the outcome in part because Trump's lawyers, inexplicably, failed to request a jury trial. Even in the context of a court case, Trump, who denies any wrongdoing, has now apparently abandoned all social (not to mention post-Presidential) norms, denouncing the trial as "corrupt," Engoron as "rogue," James as a "political animal," and Engoron's law clerk as the "girlfriend" of the Senate Majority Leader, Chuck Schumer.

The *MAGA* movement is often described as a far-right faction, but its current incarnation, in which cults of personality loom large, is politically a little cloudier than that. Gaetz and most of his seven rebels have been associated with the extremist Freedom Caucus. But they also included Nancy Mace, of

South Carolina, a relative moderate whose gripe with McCarthy was that he'd broken his promises, she said, including one to expand access to birth control. (Most of the Freedom Caucus supported McCarthy.) The exasperation that so many Republicans expressed about Gaetz suggests that they are getting fed up with a *MAGA* logic in which the outsiders are always right and the Party is never doing enough. But McCarthy will likely be succeeded by an even more conservative Speaker (Steve Scalise, of Louisiana, and Jim Jordan, the Freedom Caucus's talisman from Ohio, have both announced that they are running, and Trump has endorsed Jordan), and, on the campaign trail, the Party is contesting Trump's candidacy only meekly, even in the midst of his several trials.

This Speaker election will likely also function as a test of *MAGA*—whether it eventually drifts away whenever Trump finally does, or becomes a permanent feature of politics. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Emily Nussbaum

By Ronan Farrow

By Clare Malone

Second Acts

A Stay at Lin Wood’s MAGA-Friendly Bed-and-Breakfast

After the 2020 election, Trump’s former lawyer opened an inn frequented by conservatives. Mike Flynn was so disruptive during his stay that he has been banned.

By [Charles Bethea](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

“No. I have not ‘flipped’ on President Trump,” Lin Wood recently assured his nearly three hundred and fifty thousand followers on Telegram. Fani Willis, the D.A. in Fulton County, Georgia, had just named Wood, a former lawyer allied with Trump, as a witness for the prosecution in a court filing. “I have no idea why,” Wood wrote. He also posted, not for the first time, a Photoshopped image of his dog, Allie, in a prison guard’s uniform. Caption: “Warden Allie guarding LINMATE #777 at Tomotley Prison.”

After the 2020 election, Wood moved from Atlanta to Tomotley, a thousand-acre plantation in Yemassee, South Carolina, which he’d bought for about eight million dollars. A broker called it “the most significant property that

has sold in years in South Carolina” and mentioned its excellent duck and quail hunting. Tomotley seemed an odd choice for Wood. “I don’t hunt,” he said recently, by phone. “I don’t fish. I don’t farm.” He went on, “But I obeyed what I felt like God wanted me to do.” The Lord wanted him to open a bed-and-breakfast, where rooms cost up to six hundred and fifty dollars a night. Wood set up the B. and B. on an adjacent plantation, which he’d also bought, and called it the Inn at Cotton Hall.

“A lot of them follow me on Telegram,” Wood said, of his paying guests. “I’ll spend three, or four, or five hours with them. We talk about the state of the nation and the world. We talk about President Trump. And we talk primarily about Jesus Christ.” Wood doesn’t prepare breakfast, but that hasn’t hurt reviews. “When it was time to check out, I got teary-eyed,” one Yelper wrote. “Special thanks to Mr. Wood for spending so much time talking with us,” wrote another.

Before formally getting into the B.-and-B. business, Wood hosted the indicted former Trump attorney Sidney Powell; the former national-security adviser and unindicted co-conspirator Mike Flynn; and Doug Logan, of Cyber Ninjas, the now defunct firm hired by Arizona Republicans to look for voter fraud. Wood insists that the *MAGA* contingent crashed his place, uninvited, in November of 2020, soon after the election. Powell arrived and told him that Mike Flynn was coming, too. “So Flynn showed up, and four or five other people were with him,” Wood said. They commandeered a living room and a sunroom, and set up a whiteboard and computers. “I knew Sidney was working on filing election lawsuits,” Wood continued. “I told her I wasn’t interested in being involved in any fraud cases, because fraud cases take a long time.” The Georgia Bureau of Investigation has since described Wood’s plantation as “the central hub for the voter fraud information processing.”

Wood said that Flynn, who stayed through Thanksgiving (he carved the turkey), is no longer welcome. Flynn has a “love for lucifer,” Wood wrote on Telegram. He added, by phone, “When somebody invites themselves to your property, don’t let them come.”

A curious local recently decided to check in at Cotton Hall, to see Wood’s hospitality business in action. He drove down an oak-lined driveway and

arrived at a white-columned house built a century ago. A white Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow II was parked out front. The visitor was shown to his room, named Huspa Isle, where he found a four-poster bed with a too-soft mattress, a gas fireplace, and plantation-core antiques. Television, no. Bibles, yes (two). There was also a 1941 book titled “White Pillars,” which, according to its foreword, is “a survey of the habitations of man of the Caucasian race—genus, North American; species, Deep Southern; variety, planter.”

Outside, the visitor met two middle-aged guests, a couple from North Carolina. “We follow Lin on Telegram,” the man said. They disappeared down a path, in search of alligators. Squirrels collected acorns under the moss-draped oaks. But Wood was nowhere to be found.

Eventually, the guest retired. Sinking into bed, he checked Wood’s Telegram, using the spotty Internet. Wherever Wood was, he was reposting Trump items and musing about Freemasonry. (“Freemasons can kiss my Southern grits.”)

At breakfast the next morning—Rice Krispies, muffins, fruit—guests griped about liberal cities and wondered whether Wood might make an appearance that day. The man from North Carolina, struggling with a Keurig coffee maker, wore a “*Don’t Blame Me, I Voted For Trump*,” shirt. His partner said, “When I was making reservations, I asked, ‘Is Lin gonna be there?’ ” She was told that Cotton Hall couldn’t say, for security reasons. The local visitor checked Telegram. Wood had posted a video of a cow: “Morgan’s Morning Motley Moo Report.” The visitor checked the pasture—no Wood. That night, back at home, he opened Telegram again: there was a photograph of Wood, thumbs up, posing with the North Carolinians. ♦

[Down the Shore](#)

The B-52's Back on the Boardwalk

At a Jersey Shore pinball museum, members of the iconic New Wave band talk about Bat Boy, “The Blob,” and their new Vegas residency.

By [Mina Tavakoli](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

One day this summer, Fred Schneider and Kate Pierson, two of the original members of the B-52's, strolled into the Silverball Retro Arcade, a pinball parlor on the Asbury Park boardwalk. The band was playing a show that evening a few blocks away, at the Stone Pony Summer Stage. Fans wearing wigs and glittery underwear were already loitering on the boardwalk, taking pictures. Schneider, the band's front man, who wore sunglasses and a jacket with a marijuana-leaf print, sighed theatrically. “Next thing you know, I'll end up on someone's Christmas card,” he said.

Schneider has a sly, deadpan drawl that is sometimes mistaken for Southern—he was born and raised on the Jersey Shore. “These are my old stomping grounds,” he said. He was greeted by Patty Barber, Silverball's senior vice-president. They wandered over to the arcade's wall of fame and found a

photograph of Schneider staring, slack-jawed, at a pinball machine, beside framed pictures of Ivanka Trump and Wendy Williams in similar poses. “I used to come to Asbury Park in high school,” Schneider said. “My friend Ricky was a pinball repairman. He’s a hoot. When we were young, we’d play pinball and make movies at his house. I’d write the scripts and he’d shoot. We did one, like a sequel to ‘Night of the Living Dead,’ but in our version the dead end up biting my sister. Mostly our movies were about pie fights, though.”

Nearby, Pierson, one of the band’s singer-songwriters, was working the flippers on a machine called Scared Stiff, whose back box flashed a grinning pinup girl. (A placard nearby read “The factory installed a family version of the game with a cover for the large breasts.”) Pierson’s hair was the color of a maraschino cherry. She’s a local, too, from Bergen County. In 1976, she and Schneider were living in Athens, Georgia, and they fell in with the musicians Cindy Wilson, Ricky Wilson, and Keith Strickland. “We shared a big, flaming volcano drink at a Hunan Chinese restaurant, then we jammed that night, and the B-52’s were basically born,” Pierson said.

The B-52’s became known for their tacky, punky iconography—interstellar girlfriends, atomic beehives, dyed-green poodles—which Dave Grohl has credited as a major influence, and which John Lennon said inspired him to return to songwriting. Where had all this stuff come from? “We share a lot,” Pierson said. “We both love slapstick, we both love crawling eyeballs, slime, dolls, Bergman.” They traded touchstones: Soupy Sales, “The Blob,” “Attack of the Crab Monsters.” Pierson’s machine squawked: *Game over.* “Oh, what was that big, flying monster called?” she said.

“Rodan!,” Schneider said, referring to “Rodan! The Flying Monster!,” a Japanese film from 1956.

“Bad sci-fi, New Jersey, particularly sicko stuff from the old TV days—all that was a perfect storm,” Pierson said.

The pair had hoped to meet up at the arcade with Wilson, who had a new album out, called “Realms.” (“It’s heavy on trip-hop and more than a little disco!” Wilson said.) But she was nursing a sore back and decided instead to meet them at the show. “I’ll tell you what, though, the pre-show adrenaline

rush is one hell of a drug," she reported later, by phone. Of the band's early influences, she said, "Sometimes I watch that old stuff and think, God, that's as ancient as the pyramids."

Like many boomer bands, the B-52's have found a second act in Las Vegas. They've had a residency at the Venetian this past year, part of what Pierson has called their "Cher-well tour," a farewell tour that never ends. "Everyone's there," Schneider said. "It's a flea circus. Carrot Top's got the silliest show—it's fabulous. We're gonna milk the gig. Though we've all got our own plans." Schneider has been doing a regular online newscast for the Weekly World News, the former supermarket tabloid. Wearing a faux-snakeskin sports coat and shades, he reports such bulletins as "Happy news from Bat Boy and his wife, Batsy. Their son, Batrick, is flying off to college!"

"And we're all collaborating with chimps now!" Pierson said. "We went down to the Save the Chimps sanctuary, in Florida, and just did this whole thing where they had the chimps do our old album artwork, so that we could bring it all down to Miami and auction it off."

Did they worry that the chimps' re-creations would be better than the originals? Pierson and Schneider pretended to faint. "I think that would be the most beautiful thing that could happen," Pierson said. ♦

By Louisa Thomas

By Ben McGrath

By Jay Caspian Kang

By Michael Schulman

[Up, Up, and Away](#)

Fourteen Thousand Feet Over the Gulf of St. Lawrence. And Then Not

A husband-and-wife duo who attempted a historic transatlantic hot-air-balloon flight recount what happened after a mid-flight disaster.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

One day in November, 1783, two Frenchmen took flight in a wicker basket tied to a big silk-and-paper bag—the first people to ascend in a hot-air balloon. A hundred years later, a group attempted to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a gas-filled balloon, but there would be no successful crossing for *another* hundred years: in 1978, a balloon carried three men from Presque Isle, Maine, to a small town near Paris. This past summer, in New Brunswick, Canada, a middle-aged British couple gave it a shot. Deborah and Mike Scholes climbed into a ninety-foot Rozière balloon, and drifted into the clouds toward the Atlantic, vaguely toward home. Deborah, who is the pilot, tossed flower petals from the basket; Mike munched a marmalade sandwich.

Airborne, Deborah, who runs a hair salon back home, reviewed equipment: aviation- and marine-band radios (“So we can talk to ships”), eighty litres of drinking water, several electronic altimeters, a sleeping bag and two Arctic-expedition parkas (“It gets nippy up there”), dehydrated “macaroni gunge,” a life raft, tea, coffee, multiple aircraft-collision warning systems, a polystyrene bench to lie on, and a polystyrene box to sit on, “so one can sit while the other sleeps,” she explained. The balloon was filled with about forty-six thousand cubic feet of helium; thirteen tanks of liquid propane—which fuelled a small double burner—were strapped to the outside of the basket.

Liftoff, carefully planned and considered, had been more than eight years in the making. Delays included finding a sponsor, helium shortages, the pandemic, bad weather, bowel cancer, more bad weather, and an unexpected French missile test: “Balloons and missiles don’t mix,” Deborah said. She added that a successful trip would make her the first woman to command a transatlantic balloon voyage, and Mike the first blind man to crew one. Their expected flight time was roughly a week.

In 2007, Mike, who once piloted airplanes and helicopters for the U.K.’s Royal Navy, began losing his sight. “The left eye went first,” he said. One evening a few months later, at a train station, he suddenly lost the right: “I got home, had a pint at the pub, and thought, What do I do next?” A friend mentioned the charity Blind Veterans UK. “They try to get people back into life,” Mike said. “Plenty of people say, ‘Don’t do that,’ whereas *they* say, ‘Oh, you *can* do that!’ ” Mike held a skydiving fund-raiser for the organization. Later, he ran the London Marathon and trekked to the North Pole. (“I was bumping into blocks of ice,” he said.) One day, when training for his polar expedition, he met Deborah at his local track, in West Sussex. They have since ballooned together over the Alps, and across the English Channel.

Back home in the U.K., Deborah mused about the transatlantic voyage, which had raised money for blind veterans. “At fourteen thousand feet, the noise just drifted straight up, and it was like angels singing,” she recalled. “I heard the whales!” The balloon had flown above the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where a pod of humpbacks had gathered; small, fair-weather clouds had

wafted overhead. “It was just this magical sound. At first I thought it was birdsong.”



“And that’s where hot dogs come from.”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

Mike said, “It was very tranquil.” On their voyage, Deborah would drink a cup of Earl Grey tea, and Mike would listen as she described what he couldn’t see: instrument readings (height, speed, direction), clouds (“Like big, fluffy cushions, pillows, little cotton-ball explosions!”), the water below (“Medium-denim color, a line of ripples”), the glow of sunset fading into darkness.

“Everything seemed hunky-dory,” Mike said. “Then, all of a sudden: *Who-o-omf!* This big ball of flame!” A column of fire burned through the valve-control line—a part of their landing system—and scorched the balloon’s fire-resistant fabric.

“Mike asked, ‘What on earth is going on?’ ” Deborah recalled. The pilot lights went out; the burners malfunctioned. “It could have caught fire to the whole balloon, and that would have been it,” she said. They eyed their helmets, put on their dry suits, buckled their orange life vests, and decided to abandon the voyage. Mike asked, “Can we get to Newfoundland?” Deborah said, “Just.”

Somehow, the balloon survived the night. Deborah navigated with the aid of her flight instruments. “It was darker than dark,” she said. “Pitch, pitch black.” At sunrise, the balloon emerged from the clouds. “The terrain was huge lakes and little ponds and big rocks—not a landing area,” she said. Then she spotted a bog. “We got down to about ten feet, and there were two very large moose. And then we landed.” A search-and-rescue helicopter retrieved them from the bog, unharmed but disappointed. (One casualty: Mike’s shoes.) “We’re very keen to do it again,” Mike said.

Deborah added, “Successfully!” ♦

By Ben McGrath

By A. E. Stallings

By Rachel Deutsch

By Ziwe

[Dept. of Soil](#)

Raking Dirt for Art's Sake

Bill Dilworth has spent thirty-four years minding the soil for “The New York Earth Room,” a Walter De Maria installation, which is part of the Dia Art Foundation, in SoHo.

By [Samantha Henig](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

A line snaked along Wooster Street the other day, for a designer sample sale. A few doors down and one floor up, Bill Dilworth stood in a large room filled with two hundred and eighty thousand pounds of dirt, wondering how the two days of watering that he'd just finished had affected the soil.

“Just to get it back to this moist state is gratifying to me, because this is the state that I relate to, that I maintained for decades,” Dilworth, who had the knee-high rubber boots of a farmer, the trim-cut jeans of an urbanite, and the eyebrows of a mad scientist, said. He has spent the past thirty-four years caring for “The New York Earth Room,” an installation by the artist Walter De Maria which is part of the Dia Art Foundation’s permanent collection. His chief duties are watering and raking the soil, to keep its color consistent.

Dilworth and his wife moved to New York from Detroit in 1979, and one of his odd jobs was sweeping the basement stairs in a Dia building. When he took over the Earth Room, in 1989, all he was given by way of instruction was a photograph of what it looked like when it was installed, in 1977, for an intended three-month run. (Photographs are not permitted; that image is the only sanctioned one.) The room is thirty-six hundred square feet, filled with dirt twenty-two inches deep. Visitors view it from behind a knee-high glass barrier.

Last year, Dia replenished the soil, which had fallen below the height that the artist wanted—owing to a combination, Dilworth said, of natural causes (“the weight of me walking on it”) and visitors sneaking out with handfuls. The new soil was too dry, so, in January, Dilworth gave it a thorough watering with a hose. The humidity inside interacted with the cold air outside, making the windows stream with condensation. After that, he let the soil dry out for a spell, then watered it again.

Now he was ready to see what the color looked like beneath the surface. He started in with a clawlike tool called a cultivator. “Oh, my God, it really saturated,” he said, delighted. The earth he was turning over had a uniform dark-chocolate hue. Next, he would try a rake with broad, short tines. (Both tools were on site when he started.) For his first three decades, he had mostly used the cultivator. (“I thought it looked a bit like a rug, so I tried to make it look more like earth.”) Last year, he switched to the rake after Heiner Friedrich, a Dia founder, suggested that he “smooth it out.”

Visitors often ask Dilworth what the Earth Room means, and he usually gives them the same answer: “Walter didn’t speak about it, so, whatever your impressions are, that’s valid. Don’t worry about what it’s about. There is no explanation.” He adds that on a return visit “you might have a different take.” In the winter, the dirt is likely to be drier and lighter. In the summer, after watering, it can be “black and loamy.” He likes “the idea that it’s not static.”

If a visitor keeps pushing for an interpretation, Dilworth will say, “It’s about earth, art, and quiet.” It is also about time: “People look at it, and they think nothing’s growing, and I say, ‘Look at it again, time is growing out there.’”

This is Dilworth's last season with the Earth Room; he plans to retire next spring. (His wife, Patti, recently retired, after decades of caring for another De Maria installation, "The Broken Kilometer," a couple of blocks away.) In addition to overseeing the dirt, Dilworth buzzes in visitors and supplies Dia with a tally. For years, he kept track using a handheld metal clicker. When there were no visitors, he would retreat to a back room and work on his own art. (One reason he took the job was the free studio space it offered.)

Over the years, the number of visitors increased. Dilworth needed to find a way to pursue his art while sitting at the front desk. In 2003, he made the process of tallying his new project, creating a visual map of the day, each person marked by a curling black stroke. At one point, he experimented with color: red and green in December; a brief stint of pink for women and blue for men.

He might try color again for his final season. But first he had to decide how to rake the newly moistened dirt. He eyed two patches he had already raked: a smoother area, from the flat rake, and a textured one, from the cultivator. He opted for the cultivator.

"It's meant to be unchanging," he said. "But it's always been changing." For years, he had raked from right to left. "Then it occurred to me—why don't I just rake it the other way." Years later, another idea: front to back. "Instead of lengthwise, I would go widthwise. I always loved it widthwise, I always felt it was special that way."

"The nice thing about duration and time," he said, "is that you eventually get to things." ♦

By Sarah Larson

By Ben McGrath

By Adam Iscoe

By Hua Hsu

Shouts & Murmurs

- I Came, I Saw, I Thought About Rome

By [Dan Amira](#)

“How often do men think about ancient Rome?”

—*Headline in the Washington Post.*

Each week, Man Magazine asks an ordinary man to keep a diary of a typical day. Here is our latest installment.

October 9, 2023

7:30 A.M.—My alarm sounds. I grab my phone and glance at the news. Congress is debating the Pentagon’s budget today, and I am reminded that spending on costly military ventures contributed to the Roman Empire’s economic collapse.

8:30 A.M.—I hop on the L train for my commute to work.

8:32 A.M.—It occurs to me that if the L were a subway in the Roman Empire it would be called the 50 train. I chuckle.

9:14 A.M.—I arrive at the office. Everyone is in the kitchen, where Greg’s birthday doughnuts have largely been devoured. Surveying the remains, I quip, “Geez, this place looks like it was sacked by the Visigoths.” No one responds.

10:30 A.M.—My boss comes by my office to discuss a proposal I submitted. He tells me it’s too vague and that he needs something more concrete, which makes me think about the Roman Empire’s revolutionary use of concrete in its infrastructure.

12:45 P.M.—I eat lunch with my co-workers. Linda, who is seven months pregnant, says she can’t decide what to name her baby. I suggest Vespasian or Caligula, but she doesn’t seem to hear me. “*Vespasian or Caligula,*” I repeat, loudly. Linda says she’ll think about it.

2:30 P.M.—Big meeting with the C.E.O. We’re on the cusp of acquiring a lucrative new account, and everyone is discussing our strategy for how to close the deal. The C.E.O. asks me for my opinion, but I’ve been

daydreaming about gladiators and have no idea what we're even talking about. In my defense, in my daydream the gladiators were fighting each other with fire swords.

2:54 P.M.—The meeting is over. My boss pulls me aside and tells me that my performance has been suffering. I explain to him about the fire swords, but that makes him even more upset. He tells me I'm fired, which has me once again thinking about the fire swords.

6 P.M.—I'm out to dinner with my girlfriend. She says we need to talk. It quickly becomes apparent that she's breaking up with me. I ask her what I did wrong, and she says I talk about the Roman Empire too much. I ask her how often she thinks about it and she says never, which is obviously a lie. We argue for hours. My tears flow like water through an aqueduct.

10:17 P.M.—I leave the restaurant. Dejected and alone, I aimlessly wander the streets—a vast network of roads, much like those which traversed the Roman Empire, in that they were also roads. I am deep in thought about Roman roads when I am suddenly struck by a pickup truck. Bystanders rush to my side. I touch my torso and my hands are covered in blood. “*Et tu, Brute?*” I say, nonsensically. “No, my name is Doug,” says a bystander named Doug. I die.

10:23 P.M.—I am welcomed at the pearly gates of Heaven. Figures from throughout human history are there, and I immediately spot Galba, the sixth emperor of the Roman Empire. I introduce myself as a big fan and he responds, “Shit, one of these guys again.” He gets up and says something to a nearby angel, who glances over in my direction. They shake hands. The ground suddenly disappears beneath me and I plummet through the clouds.

10:48 P.M.—I find myself lying on the ground in a dark cavern. My arms and legs are bound. A demonic figure approaches and tells me that for the rest of eternity I will be scalded with irons hotter than the sun every time I think about the Roman Empire. As soon as he says the words, I immediately picture the Pantheon. Unimaginable pain courses through my body. I think, This must be what the Emperor Elagabalus felt like when his body was mutilated by the Praetorian Guard, and am immediately scalded again.

2:45 A.M.—I've been in Hell for about four hours and haven't been able to stop thinking about the Roman Empire for more than ten seconds. The demon has become exhausted from torturing me. He grabs a towel and a Powerade and sits down in a folding chair. I no longer have the ability to speak or move. I have nothing to do except think about the Roman Empire. I am in Heaven. ♦

By Alison Myers

By Xinran Maria Xiang

By Hua Hsu

By Adrienne Celt

Fiction

- “The Choc-Ice Woman,” by Mary Costello

[Fiction](#)

The Choc-Ice Woman

By [Mary Costello](#)



Illustration by Anna Morrison

[Listen to this story](#)

Mary Costello reads.

Frances had never been in a hearse before. Mr. O'Shea, the undertaker, pulled out into traffic and set off down North Circular Road, past the women's wing of Mountjoy Prison and the library at Eglinton Terrace, where she had been a librarian for twelve years before her retirement. She was grateful for the hum of the engine, the city outside. She kept herself apart, mentally, from Mr. O'Shea. She forgot, briefly, about the coffin with the remains of her brother Denis behind her until the hearse braked going downhill and she had a vision of it crashing through the glass partition and slamming into them.

"Are you all right there?" Mr. O'Shea asked at the traffic light.

"I am, thanks," she replied.

“Is it warm enough? Would you like me to turn up the heat?”

[Mary Costello on betrayal and forgiveness.](#)

“I’m fine, thanks,” she said. “I’m sorry about this,” she added. “I’m sure you’d much prefer to be on your own for the journey.”

There had been a moment of confusion outside the hospital morgue when she announced her intention to travel in the hearse. The coffin had already been loaded and the paperwork completed when she and Frank arrived.

“We can head off so, if ye’re ready?” Mr. O’Shea had said.

“I’ll go in the hearse with you,” she’d said suddenly. It had come out of nowhere.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Mary Costello read “The Choc-Ice Woman.”](#)

Mr. O’Shea had looked at her and then at Frank, a little alarmed. Without another word, she’d gone around to the passenger side and got in.

They were crossing the Liffey at Islandbridge now.

“I know it’s usually a man from the family that travels in the hearse,” she continued. “Or at least that used to be the tradition. But I don’t drive, you see, so if Frank went with you there’d be no one to drive the car home.”

“That’s no problem at all,” Mr. O’Shea said. “And, as for traditions, aren’t they changing all the time?”

He checked the rearview mirror. “Frank is close enough behind us, anyway. We’ll probably get separated along the way but what harm—aren’t we all going to the same place?”

They were passing Inchicore. An old woman, pulling a wheelie shopper, stopped at a letter box. “We should be in Kerry by five o’clock, all going well,” Mr. O’Shea said.

The woman was trying to push a brown package into the letter box, her white hair tossing wildly in the wind.

“Is that all right?” Mr. O’Shea asked.

“Yes, yes.”

The more he talked, the harder it would be to keep herself separate.

“The woman who does the embalming,” he said, a little tentatively, “will be coming in at half past six. How would ye be fixed . . . would ye be able to get his clothes in to us then? If I’m not there myself, Anne, my wife, will take them in.”

Denis’s suit had hung in his wardrobe for decades. He had last worn it to the funerals of their parents. He had not attended their brother Patrick’s funeral.

“That’s no problem. Frank will drop them in.”

A strange occupation for a woman, embalming, she thought. She wondered if Mr. O’Shea’s wife assisted. The two women packing cotton wool into orifices.

“Are all corpses embalmed? Is it absolutely necessary?” she asked.

“Well . . . I suppose it’s not *absolutely* necessary,” Mr. O’Shea said. “Some cultures don’t do it, but then they tend to bury their dead very quickly. It’s the done thing nowadays. It makes things a lot easier for the family—it removes a lot of the difficulties, the . . . unpleasantness. It’s best for the deceased, too.”

Stitching up his tongue? I don’t think so, Frances wanted to say.

“Will I send in his socks and . . . everything?” she asked.

“Yes, everything . . . except the shoes. We don’t usually put shoes on.”

For two weeks she had been at Denis’s bedside in the Mater hospital, leaving only after 10 p.m. to return to her B. and B. on Drumcondra Road. In the

past two days he had not spoken or opened his eyes, and his breathing had grown shallower and shallower. She'd had an inkling last night, and felt that she should stay longer, but the nurse had assured her that he could last for several more days. Before she reached the B. and B., her phone rang. When she got back to the hospital, it was over and he had been moved to a private room with tea lights, a crucifix, and a leaflet for bereaved relatives placed on a side table. They had stretched a flesh-colored band, like an elastic stocking, around his head to keep his mouth closed. She kissed the top of his head and touched his cold hands, his nose, expecting to feel something. She thought of him as no longer alive but not yet dead. She whispered his name, but in the silence of the room it sounded contrived. She tried to summon the past. Denis and Patrick were twelve years older than Frances. Denis had been a fleeting presence in her early childhood. Home from Dublin one Christmas when she was eight or nine, he brought her a red plastic tea set, six Jaffa oranges wrapped individually in tissue paper, and a box of cornflakes, because cornflakes were a rare treat then. Not long afterward, he'd come home for good, and seldom left his room.

Already he was changing before her eyes. His face was collapsing inward, leaving his nose looking pointed, like a bird's beak. The body was dissolving, every cell disintegrating. His soul had probably left his body by now, she thought. Where had she been—running down Drumcondra Road or along Dorset Street—when that happened, when his blood ebbed to a halt and his consciousness slowly shut down? It is easier to track the body's exit, she thought, than the exit of the mind. There is no knowing what the mind suffers in the final hours and minutes. In the moments before her mother took her last breath, she opened her eyes wide with a petrified look, as if she were seeing something terrible, but twenty-four hours later her face was serene, as if all the pain of existence had left her.

A nurse arrived to say they would soon need to take Denis to the morgue. Frances went down to the foyer and called Frank. "Denis is gone," she said. She did not wait for his response. "Will you ring O'Shea to come up and bring him home tomorrow."

Frank was silent for a few moments. "I'm sorry, Frances."

"And ring the priest as well."

“Will I come up tonight?” he asked.

“No, wait till the morning.”

Every morning for years she had walked down Drumcondra Road—past the open gates of St. Patrick’s College, where Denis had trained as a teacher decades before—on her way to work at the library in Phibsborough. The walk took forty-five minutes. She arrived an hour before opening time and put out the newspapers and the latest magazines, and logged returns and worked at her computer, checking orders and book-club requests. She had worked alongside first one, then another assistant librarian, but never developed a close friendship with either. At lunchtime during the summer months, she sat on the grass in the little park behind the library and read her book and ate her sandwich. The afternoons, when the schoolchildren arrived, were busiest in the library. She did not mind the older, studious ones, but the truth was she barely tolerated children in her library. She abhorred the way libraries had changed, the way some of the bigger city libraries resembled community centers or crèches, such was the level of noise and activity. Since when can toddlers read? she wanted to know. After work, she locked up and took the 16A bus home.

One day four years ago, on the eve of Frances’s sixtieth birthday, Patrick had come in from the fields, sat at the kitchen table, and slumped over. Denis had gone to the hall, picked up the phone, and called Frances at the library. “I think Patrick is gone,” he said.

For a while after Patrick’s death, a neighbor had checked on Denis every day, but he could not be left alone, and so, after thirty-nine years’ service with Dublin City Libraries, Frances retired from her job and moved back home to Kerry. Within months, Frank, too, retired and they sold the house in Whitehall and the move became permanent. Still reeling from the loss of Patrick, she’d leased out the farm to a neighbor and tried to restore the routine Denis had always known. She knew the shape of his days, his preference for plain food, his need for solitude, and these she could provide. But she could not replace Patrick, and though Denis never mentioned him, Frances was certain that he was pining for his twin brother’s presence in the house. Frank drove Denis to the library in town every fortnight and did his

best to help. Frances never asked what, if anything, they talked about on these journeys.

They were on the motorway through Kildare, then Laois. Farmhouses appeared on hills, sheds and outbuildings nestled in behind them, the fields bare of livestock now in the dead of winter. Denis was behind her in the coffin, his head inches from hers. She suspected that this was a workhorse coffin used only for transport purposes. Denis might be in a body bag, dressed in his stained pajamas, zipped up by a stranger from his bony white feet to the top of his head. The odors of a decomposing body would still leak out, leaving a scent in the coffin for the next incumbent. She remembered reading that dogs often go crazy when they're muzzled at the vet's surgery—the scents of other dogs thrust on their faces is overwhelming, sending them into a frenzy of fear and panic.

Mr. O'Shea's mobile phone, propped on the dashboard, vibrated, startling her. He tapped it quickly. "Sorry about that," he said.

A few moments later, it vibrated again, and again he apologized. "That's my daughter. Young people . . . it's always urgent with them, isn't it?" He switched the phone off.

"How old is your daughter?" Frances asked.

"Sally. She's nineteen. She's actually on her way home now for the weekend. She's in college in Dublin."

It struck her that Mr. O'Shea might have planned to take his daughter home in the hearse, that it might be a regular arrangement whenever he was tasked with bringing the dead of Castleisland home from Dublin. With a contingency in place: If you can't reach me, it means I have a family member with me, so take the train.

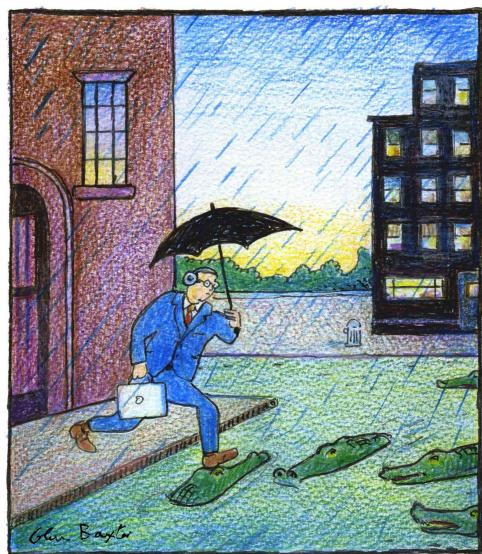
Mr. O'Shea adjusted the rearview mirror, then checked his wing mirror. "I think we've lost Frank," he said.

Not far out of the city, before hitting the motorway, Frank would have pulled over at a service station, filled up with fuel, bought a newspaper, tea, a

breakfast roll, and a bar of chocolate. On a day like this, he couldn't very well linger on the forecourt. Service stations—along with shopping centers and suburban housing estates—were, Frances used to imagine, one of his pickup spots for women. She'd pictured him parking off to the side, near the service area, with his tea and breakfast roll, the racing page open on the steering wheel, keeping an eye out for a lone woman emerging from the shop, then tracking her, until she—game, like him, for a motorway fling—met his eye. There might be nothing said, just a look. The woman would pull over to check her tires, and Frank would, naturally, offer his help. Or he might simply tail the woman out of the service station, drive steadily in the lane alongside her until she turned her head and a look was exchanged. They were all the same, these women, it didn't matter where he found them; they were all like Frank.

Frank had started out as her lodger more than thirty years ago. Soon after she bought the house off Collins Avenue, she'd advertised the two spare bedrooms to rent, to help with the mortgage. When he walked through the door—tall, broad, handsome, with dark curly hair—and she heard his country accent and saw his shy, polite manner, her heart flipped. And then there was the coincidence of his name. He worked with the gas board installing, servicing, and repairing gas boilers. A young teacher from Clare took the other room. Frances split the bills three ways, set the house rules, and stuck a cleaning rota on the fridge. Frank had a light footprint. He parked his van out on the road, and was gone every morning before eight. He was clean and tidy and quiet; he hoovered his room every Saturday, was discreet with his laundry, paid his rent on time, and was never drunk. He avoided conversation and eye contact, and in those rare times when he did speak Frances detected an endearing uncertainty in him. After a year, the young teacher moved out and Frank and Frances fell to cooking together in the evenings. She began to look forward to their meals, and their time alone. She told him about Kerry, her twin brothers, her widowed mother. For months Frank offered nothing, but, little by little, over the winter evenings, she learned the outline of his life. He had been placed in an orphanage very early on and, at the age of six, was fostered out to a farmer and his wife in County Kilkenny. At fifteen he started an apprenticeship with a local plumber, and he came to Dublin at seventeen. He knew nothing about his birth mother, other than the name on his birth certificate, and when Frances gently inquired if he was not curious about her or his father he shook his

head. She had the impression of a man who did not want to delve into the past, a man who easily forgave and forgot the failings of others. He voiced no strong opinions, held no political allegiance, and was visibly uncomfortable with gossip. One Saturday evening after they had washed up the dishes, he folded the tea towel and stood behind a chair and asked her if she'd like to go down to the Viscount for a drink.



THE 40-MINUTE DAILY COMMUTE
TO THE OFFICE RESUMED AS IF
NOTHJNG HAD EVER CHANGED

Cartoon by Glen Baxter

She had not expected to love a man so completely different from her father and her brothers, a man without family: she for whom family was foremost in her life; a man without any obvious origins, as if he had simply materialized on the earth when he crossed her threshold. She used to imagine scenes from his childhood, scenes she had watched in films: eager, obedient children in orphanages lined up for visitors; watching as the pretty ones were chosen and driven away to new lives with the childless. Whenever Frances tried to nudge Frank into investigating his origins, he shook his head. He said that, as a young man going to dances, whenever he'd told a girl about his background the girl had wanted nothing more to do with him. There were times when this absence of a past had bothered Frances, but then she would remember the little boy he once was, and she would be ambushed by a wave of love that flowed from her spine down into her arms and her hands, weakening her.

She was thirty-four and Frank thirty-two when they married. She knew she was no beauty—tall, thin, and angular, with little in the way of hips or bosom, but neither this nor the plainness of her dress (she favored dark trousers, cream or white blouses, navy or wine cardigans) had seemed to matter to Frank. She was convinced that Frank's lineage must be notable; how else but genetics to explain his good looks, his manners, his work ethic—and had he not made something of himself despite his beginnings? And even when she was troubled by little doubts or signs of his deprivation she would remember an incident from their honeymoon. They were on a street in Edinburgh when Frank went to buy a lottery ticket. "Get me a Bounty bar, if they have them," she said. When he came out of the shop and handed her the Bounty bar he said, "I don't know how you eat those things. I *hate* coconut." Such a strong word for Frank to use. They sat in a park and he told her that Kelly, the farmer who had fostered him as a boy, had always had sweets, which he never shared with Frank. One day Frank saw a sweet—an Emerald—on the floor of the tractor. He crept out that night and retrieved the sweet and hid behind the cowshed and sucked it very slowly, to make it last.

That first year was the heyday of their marriage. She added his name to the deeds of the house. Together they painted the house, built raised beds in the back garden. That September they took a holiday in Greece, because Frances had always wanted to visit the oracle at Delphi. Frank rarely expressed needs or wants or wishes of his own, a trait, Frances assumed, that had developed early in his life. They bought a car and went regularly to Kerry. Her mother liked Frank and jokingly conspired against Frances, complaining about her dress sense or her regimental life style. "Why are you covering yourself up?" her mother would ask. "And you so slim you can wear anything!" Then she'd turn to Frank: "I have only the one daughter, Frank, and she dresses like a nun. Maybe you can get her to change."

Frances expected they would have children quickly and easily. After two years, tests revealed blocked Fallopian tubes, and though she couldn't remember having had symptoms, the condition was attributed to suspected peritonitis as a result of an appendix operation when she was twenty-one. She underwent surgery to unblock the tubes and a year later suffered an ectopic pregnancy, followed in subsequent years by two miscarriages, the latter of which occurred in the sixth month. That was many years ago now,

and though Frank had shown little emotion at the time, she'd believed then that his outer display of stoicism was his way of supporting her, and that, inside, he was as bereft as she was.

Now she is no longer sure that Frank experiences grief—or any emotion, for that matter—in the manner that she and, she assumes, others experience it. Still, even now and after everything that has happened, she has to admit that, with the exception of Denis, she has never known anyone as peaceable as Frank. In all their years together, he had never raised his voice or spoken harshly to her or displayed the least flicker of irritation. She had always considered herself a kind person, if a little sharp at times, but there were moments when Frank's passivity tested the limits of her patience. He avoided looking at her during an argument and said almost nothing. She'd goad him, accuse him of stubbornness, of stonewalling her, until he'd shake his head and put a hand out to her and plead with her not to be cross. "This isn't normal," she'd cry. "Why don't you ever get angry? Where do you put your anger?" One evening, three or four years into the marriage, Frank told her of an incident at work where his boss had been rude, and dismissive of him.

"Why didn't you stand up for yourself?" she demanded. "Why do you always let people walk all over you? Don't just sit there like some . . . dumb animal."

He was sitting at the kitchen table. "I'm sorry if I'm not the man you want me to be," he said.

He had never spoken like this. She waited, her heart pounding with fear.

"I saw what anger did in the Kellys' house. Tom Kelly was a brute. And worse when he got into a rage." He shook his head. "There's nothing to be gained from anger, Frances."

"What happened? Was he a brute to you?"

"He was a brute to everyone and everything. The wife, the dog, me. I slept and ate in the back kitchen—I had a little bed that I folded away every morning. I got the leftover scraps—myself and the dog got the same food.

She'd give me nice things when he was gone to the mart or somewhere. Homemade bread and jam, a bit of meat. He wouldn't allow the dog inside, but I used to sneak him into the back kitchen at night and he'd lie beside me. Captain. The loveliest dog you ever saw. And the brute shot him."

"Jesus, Frank . . . Why? Why did he shoot him?"

"Because Captain knocked over a bucket of milk, that's why. That's what anger does."

Mr. O'Shea cleared his throat. His pale hands were resting on the steering wheel. Why had it surprised her that he was married, and had children? She doubted whether he had a strong libido. She can tell men like that now; they give off the whiff. She loathes people with big appetites—overeaters and drinkers, loud, gluttonous, noisy people with no self-control and no desire to refine themselves. Bodies swollen, pulsating with lust. Rutting like animals. That is the kind of husband she has. "Base" was the word that occurred to her years ago when his carry on first came to light. Base appetites and instincts. He had kept that side of himself hidden from her, but that is who he is. God knows who he has slept with, whose genitals he has slithered out of.

"I don't think I ever met Denis," Mr. O'Shea said. "Was he long sick?"

"No, just a few months. He didn't go out much. He was always very delicate. The cancer was well advanced when they found it."

"He went fast, Lord have mercy on him."

She liked that he had used Denis's name.

"Very sad, and he a young man," he continued.

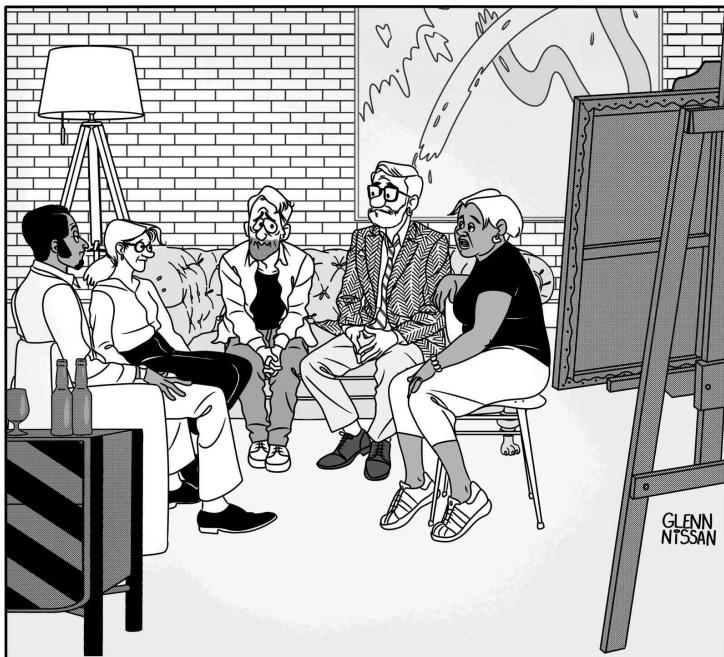
"He was seventy-six."

Mr. O'Shea shot her a look. "Seventy-six?"

She nodded. "Seventy-seven next month. He was Patrick's twin."

Teaching had not suited Denis. Frances was ten when he came back from Dublin for good. He spent his days in his bedroom after that, resting and reading, her mother bringing his meals and his tablets, his laundered clothes, a tonic to build him up. When Frances helped her mother change the bed linen, she read the titles on his bookshelves. “The Complete Works of Shakespeare,” “Paradise Lost,” “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” “The Collected Poems of John Donne.” Whenever she met Denis on the landing, he smiled and touched her head lightly, as a priest might do. No demands were made of him—it was Patrick who worked the farm with their father. Once a fortnight Patrick drove Denis to the library in Castleisland, where he spent an hour or more selecting books from the shelves.

In Frances’s teen-age years, Denis began to leave novels at her bedroom door—“Moby-Dick,” “Pride and Prejudice,” “Silas Marner.” She was an adult before she understood that he’d had some kind of breakdown. She wondered if a girl had broken his heart. Once, about ten years ago, she came upon him sitting on a tree stump looking out over the fields with his back to her. He was very still. A wood pigeon landed on the stone wall to his left, and he turned his head slightly to watch it, and in those moments, in the neutral way he observed the pigeon, she had a sudden realization of his nature: his absolute surrender and acceptance of things as they were. It was the way he observed everything—void of need or memory or rapture.



"Chad, each of us is here because we love you and we need you to stop recommending podcasts to us."
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn and Colin Nissman

Frances had never questioned her mother about Denis's breakdown. In recent years she had considered various possibilities: that he might have been gay, or that something terrible had been visited upon him, or even, on days when all kinds of fears populated her mind, that *he* had visited something terrible on someone else—a child, for instance.

It is Denis she credits with giving her a love of books and a glimpse of the life of the mind. In her first posting, Frances had been taken under the wing of the senior librarian and, in less than two years, learned how to read with an open mind, how to discern good writing from bad and trust her own artistic sensibility. The senior librarian delivered to Frances a literary education that rivalled those offered by most universities, so that by the time she left that post Frances could make a good fist of describing what symbolist poetry was or explaining why James Joyce or Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner mattered.

She read the biographies, too, and would come upon little tidbits that delighted her, like the fact that Joyce had kept two parakeets in his Paris flat, or that Robert Musil had once been a librarian. Over the decades, she continued to watch and learn and discern from the book lovers and aesthetes who frequented her libraries—middle-aged, bluestocking ladies, rakish young men, and intense young women—and took note of the books they

read and the journals they requested. One winter, a Dutch student began to appear in her library on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. He was thin and pale, with fair to reddish hair and high cheekbones. He often requested books that she had to call in from other libraries—titles by Robert Walser or Joseph Roth. She saw him, one evening, hunched against the wind, on the street in Phibsborough. When he returned the books, she took them home, one by one, and read them. Of all these books, Robert Musil's stories made the greatest impression on her, tales of young urban men—students and engineers and geologists—hearing out of the city on work assignments into bleak valleys where they seduced peasant girls. The stories were pervaded with sickness and death and what the young men thought was love. They weighed on Frances and threw a pall over her, but, perhaps because she had been a country girl herself, she kept being drawn back to them. The Dutch student had disappeared by spring, but she associated these stories with him. In her mind, now, she somehow associates them with Frank, with the grim, miserable landscape of his childhood. And the sex: there was always sex in Musil's stories; the sexual act had an almost religious fervor, and the men experienced something like a mystical union with the girls, but had little regard or pity for the girls' feelings or their futures. The poor girls, Frances thought, believing they were truly favored by the men, hoping for love.

They were coming off the motorway. She looked at Mr. O'Shea.

"We'll have to stop," he said, a little agitated. "I'm afraid I might have collected the wrong remains at the morgue. I don't know for certain . . . But when you said your brother was seventy-six I was taken aback. It's a younger man I collected, I'm sure of that. I'm very sorry about this, but I'll have to open the coffin and check. Do you want to call Frank and he can link up with us, and he can check with me?"

She shook her head as the words began to register. "No, it's all right. I can do it."

"This is Roscrea we're coming into," he said. "I know the church here. It's surrounded by trees, so it'll be more private."

The church tower came into view and Mr. O’Shea turned in to a churchyard bordered by cypress and yew trees. He came to a halt at the back of the stone church.

“If you can give me ten—or maybe fifteen—minutes.”

She put on a woollen hat and scarf and walked along the street and into a square with a stone fountain. She sat on a bench. They might have ferried a stranger’s corpse all this way, she thought. A young woman in a puffer coat came and sat on a nearby bench, then lit a cigarette and became engrossed in her phone. The smell of the cigarette gave Frances a sudden longing. She had smoked in her youth—never more than ten a day—and quit when she turned thirty. She started smoking the odd cigarette again after the discovery about Frank, and then quit again four years ago after moving to Kerry. She had hoped that the move would herald a new start for them, that it would remove Frank from temptation. But after six months Frank was back on the road again, working part time with the local heating contractor.

It was on the 16A bus one summer evening as it crawled through Drumcondra that she discovered Frank’s betrayal. A Thursday evening, just before the June bank-holiday weekend. From her seat, she looked across the road at Thunders Bakery, remembering that she had ordered a cake for collection the following afternoon to take to Kerry. As she shifted her gaze, her eyes registered a Bord Gáis van a little ahead in the lane alongside the bus. It was the yellow sticker on the back door—a smiley character giving the thumbs-up sign—that caught her attention. That’s Frank, she thought, happily, and leaned forward, ready to wave when the bus drew level. And in the space of about five seconds and in a distance of about five yards her whole self began to slide sideways. A bare forearm rested on the passenger window. In the passenger seat sat a woman, her profile and short dark hair visible to Frances from her higher perch. The woman was talking, then laughing. She raised a choc ice to her mouth and licked it. Then she stretched out her arm and Frank’s face came into view, and then Frank’s tongue, licking the woman’s choc ice.

Later, when he came in, she never pretended a thing. He went upstairs and showered as usual and at the dinner she asked, as she often did, “Where are ye working these days?”

He chewed and swallowed before answering. “We’re out in Portmarnock since Monday, finishing up that housing estate.”

“Oh. I thought I saw your van in Dorset Street on my way home. That mustn’t have been you, so,” she said.

He shook his head. “No, that wasn’t me,” he said. “I dropped Tony over to Swords on the way home.”

So much of the past now made sense. It was not his first time. There had been patterns: callers who hung up when she answered, flurries of activity involving late-evening jobs, sudden changes to his scheduled hours, weekend jobs to which he went off bright-eyed and happy, followed by months when there was no evening work, no weekend jobs, just evenings in, early nights, and evasiveness. How blind she had been. She took a sip of water. *Liar*, she thought, glaring at him and, for a second, there was panic in his eyes.

When bedtime came, she said, “You can sleep in the front room from now on,” and there was no argument, no opposition, no discussion, ever.

That summer, she would exchange looks with dark-haired women on the bus or walking slowly past her house or loitering near the library, any of whom might have been the choc-ice woman, coming to have a look at Frances. At lunchtime she sat under a tree in the little park behind the library, and felt the world shrink to nothing but the terrible quivering of the birch leaves above her. She wrote letters to Frank that she never gave him. She thought herself a fool, a mug, a female cuckold; she thought the words “unfaithful” and “infidelity”—men’s words—too tame, too benign. Call it what it is: *fornication*. She saw through walls into suburban houses, into the back of his van. She saw him arranging cushions and rugs, talking dirty, laughing, feasting on their bodies, cleaning up. The women would be coarse, sexually daring—devious, even—and Frank would let that side of himself out. He would show them photographs, and they would ridicule her. Yes, nunnish, they’d agree, a dry old stick, a prude. His was a sexless marriage, he’d tell them, and, to top it all, she was barren. The mortification almost annihilated her. In her worst hours, she feared *AIDS*. Or a child. A child who would one day turn up on her doorstep to claim his inheritance. A child who would be

legally entitled to part of her home. She lay awake at night. What if Frank fell in love with one of these women? What if he left her? What if *they* fell in love? What if they wanted to be rid of her? There was a murder case in the news at the time—a doctor and his lover were on trial for killing the woman's husband. Every night when the item came on the nine-o'clock news, Frances could hardly breathe.



"O.K., I'll tell it, but you jump in and correct me every few seconds."
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

There were days when she felt that she was walking through veils of fog, that reality was thin and provisional and at the same time terribly real and material and *fated*. She sensed danger everywhere. She grew obsessive about hygiene, took copious showers and brutally scrubbed her body. She lost her appetite. Certain foods—their textures and odors—repelled her. She saw sexual similes and correlations everywhere—she shunned milk first, and then yogurt, because they reminded her of semen. She grew thin and anxious and watchful, afraid that somehow her shame might be discernible. Late one night, in the middle of a film, the lead actress turned to Frances and addressed her directly through the TV screen. You must wash your tongue every night, she said.

The next day she would regain her equilibrium and tell herself that she had overreacted, that she had exaggerated what she saw from the bus that evening, that there must be other explanations for the choc-ice woman.

Because surely, *surely*, the housewives of Dublin were not so lustful that chance encounters with tradesmen led immediately to attacks of passion and fornication? And Frank was not a cruel or heartless man. He would never ridicule her, or harm her; he was incapable of doing evil. But in the evening, as the light faded, she'd remember the choc-ice woman again, the short dark hair, the bare, tanned arm. She started checking the redial button on the phone late at night. One night she dialled, waited a few seconds after the woman answered. "Listen," she said, her calm voice belying the terror she felt. "You're one of many. You're just one of his many whores." She held her breath until the woman hung up. She did it again the following night. *Whore.*

The coffin was at the mouth of the hearse, resting waist-high on a stand, the lid unscrewed and sitting on top.

Mr. O'Shea slid the lid diagonally.

She nodded and smiled. "That's him, that's definitely Denis."

Mr. O'Shea lowered his head and heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank God."

She touched Denis's face, the band around his head. There was nothing of him left, she thought, nothing she might call a soul still lingering. Just this fast-disintegrating ragtag of an old body, and her memory of it and him. She left her hand on his hair. Denis had been the lucky one. He had not had to navigate ordinary human relationships or contend with the intense emotions and pain they bring. Whatever he had suffered in his youth, he had survived through the shelter of home. He had withdrawn from the world and turned inward. Now she wondered if his youthful suffering had ever awoken in him an awareness of pain *outside* of himself. *She* has had intimations of pain outside of herself, moments when the whole suffering pantheon—the sick, the hungry, the tortured—from time immemorial hits her like a tsunami, so much so that whenever a documentary on orphanages or institutional child abuse comes on the TV she switches channels immediately or gets up and puts on a wash or cleans out a cupboard, something—anything—to turn her own soul toward distraction.

"He doesn't look anywhere near seventy-six," Mr. O'Shea said.

"No, I suppose not. I forgot to say his hair was still dark," she said. "He never went gray. It's no wonder you thought he was younger."

When Mr. O'Shea went to put the lid back on the coffin, she turned away. Suddenly she was alone in the world. Unbidden came the words of a prayer from childhood that she said in times of fear and danger. *Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in Thee.*

After that first summer, she thought the worst was over. Then one evening in late November she was removing the day's newspapers from their station in the library when she spotted a headline in the health pages of the *Irish Times*. "*Chlamydia, the silent destroyer.*" Her insides plummeted. She knew, before she read a word, what was in the article. She locked the library doors, switched off the main lights, and sat at a low table in the children's corner. The complications listed—infertility, blocked Fallopian tubes, ectopic pregnancy, miscarriage—had all been hers. She had always had an inkling, a vague sense of fear and foreboding around sex. She had put it down to the legacy of her upbringing, of being raised in an era when becoming pregnant outside marriage was the worst sentence a girl or a woman could face—worse, maybe, than death. And as if that weren't enough the *aids* epidemic was at its height when Frances met Frank. It had not been easy at the start. Although Frank was gentle and kind, sex had been painful and messy and embarrassing. She had faulted herself, but she persevered, and on those occasions when sex was pleasurable she had felt womanly and worldly and sophisticated, like a character in a film. But the unease and the sense of foreboding were never far off. Now it was almost a relief to know that they had not come from nothing.

Back on the road, Mr. O'Shea was in a grateful, almost buoyant mood.

"You know we always check that we're picking up the right sex—when we're collecting remains, I mean. But Lord God, no way does your brother look his age. He could easily pass for forty with that head of black hair."

She never confronted Frank. Instead, on quiet mornings in the library she went online and read about the bacterium she had unwittingly hosted in her body for years. *Chlamydia trachomatis*, derived from the Greek word for "cloak," may have originated in amphibians, most likely frogs. She pored

over the microscopic images on the screen, magnified into bulging, purple, misshapen globules, and thought of them invading and contaminating the pink flesh of her cervix and womb and tubes. She began to detest Frank's bodily presence, his smell, the sound of his chewing. In the evenings, they ate in silence. When Frank moved to clear the dishes—or do any task in the kitchen—she lifted her hand, “Leave that, I'll do it,” and meekly he acquiesced. He could have left. She could have asked him to leave, she could have screamed, *Go on, get out! Go to one of your fancy women.* But she was not a screamer, any more than he was. Eventually, she summoned the courage to see an S.T.I. consultant in a private clinic and told the woman the whole story. The tests came back positive for chlamydia, negative for everything else. She had been a virgin, a novice on her wedding night. She had assumed that the pain and discomfort and discharge were associated with intercourse. Sitting there in the privacy of the doctor's office, Frances started to cry for the fool of a woman she had been. She went home, started a course of antibiotics, and went to bed for the weekend, full of hatred for Frank and for her own body, befouled with his filthy bacteria.

There was a Robert Musil story that Frances came upon around that time. The protagonist, a student of chemistry and technology, became involved with Tonka, a humble, passive girl who had been hired to care for his grandmother. He believed he'd once caught sight of her in the countryside, standing outside a cottage. His friend told him that hundreds of such girls labored in the fields when the beets were harvested, and that it was said they were as submissive as slaves to their supervisors. The young man saw something noble in this simple creature, in her innocence and helplessness. He thought, If it were not for him, who would understand her? When his grandmother died, he took Tonka with him to a big city. He did not love her, exactly, but he saw her as pure and natural and unspoiled. He believed she rinsed his soul clean. He loved all her little defects, even her deformed fingernail, the result of a work injury. After some years, Tonka became pregnant. The dates revealed that he had been away at the time of conception. But Tonka had no memory of anything having happened, and there was no man that he could suspect. He began to wonder if it could have been an immaculate conception. Then Tonka became ill with a horrible, “insidious” infection—syphilis. His doctors found no trace of the disease in him, and his mother hinted that Tonka was a prostitute. He grew suspicious and superstitious, but Tonka was steadfast in her denials. Send me away if

you won't believe me, she said calmly. He sought several doctors' opinions, hoping for a rational explanation that would prove her innocence. He wrestled with philosophical questions, like the idea that one must believe in a thing—a chair, a door—before the thing can exist in front of one's eyes. His private ordeal revolved around this question of belief—could he force himself to believe in Tonka's innocence? The disease progressed and Tonka grew sick and gaunt and ugly, but he continued to care for her, all the while wavering between hope and despair. He believed that Tonka was inwardly pure, despite her outward ugliness, and that her goodness was mysterious, like a dog's goodness. And then one day Tonka's old calendar lay open, and the young man saw, among other domestic entries, a little red exclamation mark recording the incident that Tonka denied. Frances remembers the young man's mental anguish, how demented he was with dreams and visions and feelings that were constantly oscillating. He did not believe Tonka, but he believed in Tonka.

They were on the ring road around Limerick city. Mr. O'Shea was tapping lightly on the steering wheel.

"We'll be home in good time, after all," he said. "Frank won't have too long to wait."

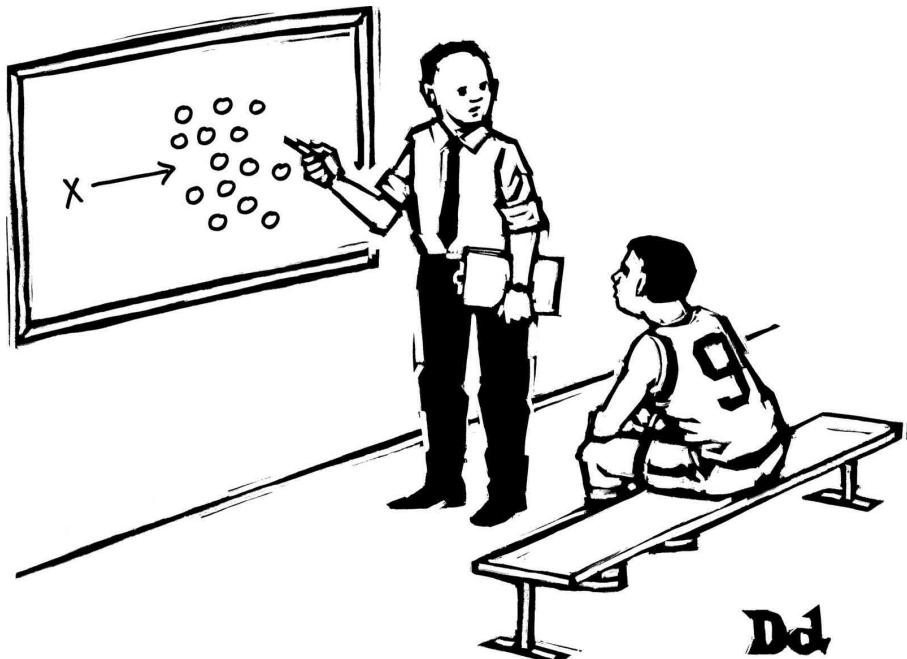
"No," she said.

After a few moments, he gave her an inquisitive look. "Frank isn't a Kerry man, is he?"

"No. Kilkenny."

Over the years, much of the pain had abated. Little things had helped. The habit of passing the women's prison every morning and imagining the lives behind the walls—women who'd been driven to kill their men after years of being kicked and beaten, of losing their minds and their pregnancies. There were worse fates than hers, she knew. Frank had not a violent bone in his body; as he aged, he had put on weight, and walked with a slow, lumbering gait. She would catch sight of him bending down to tie a shoelace or putting on his jacket in the hall, and something about the lonely slope of his

shoulders would soften her and remind her of the boy he had been. Then she would catch herself: *Beware of pity, Frances.*



"And then you address the media."
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

She glanced at her watch. By now, Frank would be parked outside the funeral home waiting for them, worried by their delay. She had lied to the S.T.I. doctor. When the doctor said that Frank would have to be told, and treated, Frances had nodded. But she had no intention of telling him. Let him go on infecting them, she thought. Let them rot.

She turned to Mr. O'Shea.

"My husband is a serial adulterer," she announced. She had been rehearsing those words in her head for years.

Mr. O'Shea looked at her in panic. Then he gave a little cough, and cleared his throat. "I'm very sorry," he said. "That's terrible. I don't know what to say."

He looked at her softly, kindly, and for an instant she was afraid that he might put his hand on hers. She looked out her window. Maybe he's one, too, she thought. If I were a different woman, younger, more attractive—or maybe not even attractive, but capable of giving off a certain signal—would

he be game, too? He might at any minute exit the motorway, drive along a country road and down a forest track, and there might be some talk or laughter and maybe even a little awkwardness as he unbuckled, and then he would do it and I would let him, with my dead brother lying there, inches from our heads.

Dusk was falling as they crossed the county boundary into Kerry. The last of the evening light appeared between the clouds, signalling, she thought, winter's end. She wondered what angle she would have on her life, her whole existence, when the end came. And what angle would Frank have on his life, if he ever pondered such things? It was difficult to know what, if anything, had meaning for Frank. If she had meaning for him. She knew precisely what meaning Frank had for her—he was a weight that would never leave her. They would be bound together for infinity, under one roof. She would be exiled with him within the walls of her childhood home, and this exile would start tomorrow or the next day. They would grow old and infirm together. She would tend to his body, or he to hers. In time, memory would fade or alter. The small boy creeping out at night to retrieve a sweet from the floor of a tractor would fade. Standing behind a cowshed then would be Frank as a grown man, sucking the sweet slowly and carefully until the chocolate was all gone and the desiccated coconut formed a hard, tight little ball in his mouth.

The street lights were on when they arrived in Castleisland. They turned off Main Street. Frank was parked across from the funeral home. In their life together, she had made all the decisions. She had brought them to Kerry without consideration for him. He had objected to nothing, and she had taken his silence as acquiescence. And what of his suffering? Where had he put the lost mother, the abandoned child, and all the sad days that followed? Had he reined it all in, sublimated everything? Everything except the sex.

Mr. O'Shea drove around the back of his premises and parked the hearse and turned off the engine. For a moment, all was darkness. Then a light came on and a door opened. And from around the side of the building Frank's outline appeared. She squinted. Any moment now, she thought, I will be able to make out his face, his eyes. As she waited, a question rose: Who is the choc-ice woman? The choc-ice woman is nobody. Then Tonka came to mind. Tonka, gaunt and ugly on her deathbed, with her secret locked inside her.

And the young man, who had loved her deformed fingernail, crying out her name and understanding, for an instant, all he had never understood, and feeling her, from the ground under his feet to the top of his head, feeling the whole of her life, in him. ♦

This is drawn from “[Barcelona](#).”

By Cressida Leyshon

By Margaret Talbot

By Andre Dubus III

By Ted Geltner

Puzzles & Games Dept.

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, October 4, 2023](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

By Erik Agard

By Natan Last

Poems

- “Springfield”
- “Childhood”

By [Andrea Cohen](#)

Read by the author.

Get a room, the dude in the blue Camaro yells.
He's made of rage and tinted glass, and we're
made of desire and what if and what I want
to say is, Dude, we have a room, but we
got hungry. Every three days we have to eat
or get mimosas or get yelled at by you. Get
a room, he yells again, maybe because he thinks
we're hard of hearing, or because it pains
him to see our affection. Maybe he thinks:
what a waste—two women who could have
loved him instead. Instead, we get sandwiches to
go and go back to the room we call our room, which
could be in any motel near any off-ramp in any
Springfield, with its anonymous white walls and towels,
with the empty drawers you love, and the flat-screen
TV that seems to keep getting bigger and flatter.
And since we're taking inventory, let's don't
forget the bedside Bible and the red pen
tucked inside, as if we might be inspired to
make corrections. And come to think of it, I would
like to make some changes in how things turn
out, how they turn on a dime, or over time
crumble. Instead, I listen to you read aloud
from the pamphlets you found in the lobby.
Fun fact: basketball was invented in Springfield, Mass.,
as was vulcanized rubber. The man who wrote
“The Cat in the Hat” was born here, and perhaps
most importantly, this is the birthplace
of interchangeable parts—or at least where
they first caught on. Think assembly
lines, think mass production. I'm thinking
about the fun fact of you, about how
much I love origin myths, about how people
aren't things. We can't be vulcanized, we

can't, like faulty chains, be replaced. And I'm thinking about that guy in the Camaro, how what really drives him is loneliness, how we see iterations of him in all the Springfields we find ourselves in, because that's your fantasy: you and me in every Springfield in America, in Nebraska and Ohio and North Dakota, in townships in Jersey and Michigan, always in a motel bar, pretending we've never met. And after a while, after Idaho and Maine, after that Springfield in Kentucky and the one in East Texas, the myth rings true: it's old hat, old cat in the hat: the white walls and small bars of soap, the falling asleep in the middle of a life, the waking to one place named for another—not a fun fact exactly, just what the Russian novelist not immune to Springfields knew about unhappiness.

By David Baker

By A. E. Stallings

By Forrest Gander

By Pablo Medina

By [David Baker](#)

Read by the author.

I miss the cold, but not the cold breaking,
not the small limbs sheared, nor the icepick cold
white wind working its whole way through you
no matter your coat and gloves, and no matter
the blue scarf someone tied and tucked tight.

The same cold blue all day in the sky. Frozen
blue through limbs of the two standing elms.
Brilliant each blue. Blue the color of new
snow like wafers on the fields. Come in cold then,
and the dark comes with you, kick off your boots

and someone is rubbing your feet so they
sting, then stop stinging. Now the bruised-apple-
red bottle at the foot of your bed, steaming,
and come morning woodsmoke in the kitchen.
I miss the cold then, so cold there is singing.

Goings On About Town

- [Judy Chicago Beyond “The Dinner Party”](#)
- [An Extravagant Filipino-French Menu at Justine’s on Hudson](#)

Rachel Syme

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.](#)

On a recent temperate Tuesday night in New York City, [**Mitski**](#) took the stage at the Town Hall for a stripped-down, acoustic set. The thirty-three-year-old singer-songwriter has toured with a full rock band in the past; her yearning songs of loneliness and displacement take on epic proportions when underscored by a fuzzed-out wall of sound. But for her current slate of shows, to support her seventh studio album, “The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We,” Mitski has gone minimalist, singing straight through the thirty-two-minute record accompanied by only a guitarist and a standing bassist. The result is raw and exposed, but it does not feel fragile; Mitski’s voice, which flips seamlessly between a raspy alto and a bird-sweet soprano, sounds stronger than it has in years. With her pared-back performances, which continue through October across Europe, Mitski places herself in the lineage of iconic folk artists, who need little more than a chorus and a few chords to move listeners to tears. Her vocal tone has shades of Joan Baez, and her lyrical wit echoes that of Joni Mitchell (“Hey, what’s the matter? Lookin’ like your sticker / Is stuck on a floor somewhere,” Mitski sings in the whimsical “Bug Like an Angel”). For her encore at Town Hall, Mitski covered “Coyote, My Little Brother,” by Pete Seeger, citing her admiration for his environmental activism in the Hudson Valley. As she yodelled through the lament about man-made climate tragedies, her upper register vibrated with anger. It was an electric moment, one that made me excited to see what she will do with her voice next.



Mitski. Photograph by Ebru Yildiz

This fall marks a bountiful time for new music and tours by women working at the height of their talents. [**Boygenius**](#), a rock supergroup of Lucy Dacus, Phoebe Bridgers, and Julien Baker, who play the Hollywood Bowl on Halloween, has a new four-song EP, “the rest,” out on Oct. 13, a quick follow-up to the band’s successful début studio album, “the record.” The eclectic English singer [**Corinne Bailey Rae**](#) dropped “Black Rainbows” in September, her first album in seven years, and is touring throughout the fall to promote it. [**Allison Russell**](#), a virtuoso Canadian artist whose lively songwriting draws from disco, alt-country, and Black roots music, recently put out a masterly sophomore record, “The Returner,” and plays the Music Hall of Williamsburg on Nov. 30. [**Margaret Glaspy**](#), an indie rocker who channels the crunchy nineties energy of Alanis Morissette, Shirley Manson, and Shawn Colvin, performs songs from her new album, “Echo the Diamond,” on Oct. 20 at Bowery Ballroom. On Oct. 12-13, you can catch the sardonic Australian singer [**Courtney Barnett**](#) at National Sawdust; Oct. 20-21, the sultry English artist [**Jessie Ware**](#) plays two nights at Terminal 5; and, also on Oct. 21, the irrepressible Héloïse Letissier, who performs as the shape-shifting French pop act [**Christine and the Queens**](#), descends on Hammerstein Ballroom. It is a thrilling time to put together an autumn mixtape, with a cornucopia of fresh songs to soundtrack your walks through falling leaves.

Spotlight



Art work © Judy Chicago / ARS; Photograph © Donald Woodman / ARS

Art

Those who know the artist **Judy Chicago** only by her feminist installation piece “The Dinner Party” (1974-79) may be surprised by the eclecticism of her survey exhibition “Herstory,” opening Oct. 12 at the New Museum. In 1968, a year when police officers were busy tear-gassing peaceful protesters, she covered a Pasadena, California, street in benign white smoke. Similar performance pieces followed, and there’s a strong argument to be made that smoke is the medium in which she has done her finest work. In 1969, she briefly engulfed the façade of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in a yellowish-orange haze (pictured). “I wanted to see if I could make it look like it was burning down,” she explained. “Museums were very inhospitable to women artists’ work.”—*Jackson Arn* (New Museum; through Jan. 14.)



About Town

Alternative Rock

When the Singaporean singer-producer Nat Ćmiel first unveiled their musical project *yeule* on SoundCloud, in 2013, the artist's catalogue consisted primarily of dreamy, vaporish pop. Ćmiel dubbed the sound of their début album, “Serotonin II,” from 2019, cyber goth and post-pop, hinting at the music’s mechanized nature and its subtle, synth gloom. The *yeule* avatar allowed Ćmiel to reckon with gender dysphoria, and the music—glitchy electronica haunted by lithe, wispy vocals—fixated on artificial intelligence. With the wholly synthesized album “Glitch Princess,” from 2022, *yeule* completed an automated musical evolution. But just when it seemed as if the artist had gone full cyborg, a new album, “softscars,” takes a decidedly human approach. Scuzzy and thrashing, it embraces alt-rock in search of a form that can feel.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#) (Webster Hall; Oct. 15.)*

The Theatre

In a dark room, an unnamed technocrat (Steve Mellor) sits at a microphone and grumbles his life story into something called a time encapsulator: How

dare others get credit for his ecocidal inventions? And why won't his co-workers—especially the ones he hasn't personally maimed—support him? The gravel-voiced Mellor, super dry and super droll, is an Olympic-level outraged bristler, and “**Mahinerator**,” Jerry Lieblich’s hilariously gruesome sci-fi monologue, fits him like a hair shirt. Lieblich composes in a discombobulating argot, equal parts religious rhapsody (he invokes “the salami of injustice”) and neologisms (e.g., “broomlicloset”) recalling “A Clockwork Orange.” The resulting brew, co-directed by Lieblich and Meghan Finn, is revolting yet thrilling—it uses language alone to melt your brain.—[Helen Shaw](#) (*The Tank*; through Oct. 22.)

Opera



Photograph by Karen Almond / Courtesy Met Opera

The composer Jake Heggie’s gripping “**Dead Man Walking**,” based on Sister Helen Prejean’s memoir about ministering to murderers on death row, puts off its moral reckoning to the opera’s final twenty minutes. Onstage, a camera crew trails Helen (a trenchant Joyce DiDonato) and the convicted murderer Joseph De Rocher (a rugged Ryan McKinny), bringing into extreme closeup two characters who have trouble seeing themselves amid their self-pity (to say nothing of the hellfire smoke billowing from offstage). In Ivo van Hove’s new production, DiDonato’s pulsating voice cuts through the lush superficiality of the score (vividly conducted by Yannick Nézet-

Séguin) as she and McKinny, his bass-baritone edged in darkness, finally find each other in the long, grim shadow of capital punishment.—[*Oussama Zahr*](#) (*Metropolitan Opera House; select dates Oct. 12-21.*)

Dance

Mythology, magic, the mysteries of nature and of gender—these are all subjects of fascination for the choreographer **Christopher Williams**. His latest project is a rethinking of two works made in the early twentieth century for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes: Vaslav Nijinsky's “Jeux” (or “Games”) and Léonide Massine’s “Contes Russes.” In “Jeux,” Williams offers up alternative scenarios to Nijinsky’s tennis metaphor to tell a story of shifting erotic attraction. In “A Child’s Tale,” the choreographer explores the myth of Baba Yaga, a witchlike character who haunted the Slavic folktales Williams’s Ukrainian great-grandmother told him as a child.—[*Marina Harss*](#) (*Baryshnikov Arts Center; Oct. 12-15.*)

Movies



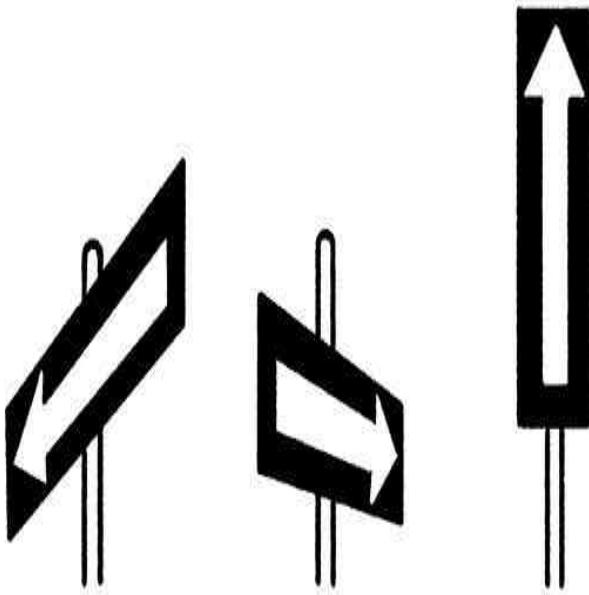
Luchino Visconti's "The Innocent." Photograph courtesy MUBI

Ira Sachs's Paris-set melodrama “[*Passages*](#),” one of the year’s best movies so far, is now streaming on MUBI. To accompany it, he has programmed a series for the site which includes another great romantic drama, “[*The*](#)

Innocent,” the Italian director Luchino Visconti’s final film, from 1976, a sumptuous and seething tale of the Roman aristocracy in the late nineteenth century. It’s centered on a dashing libertine (Giancarlo Giannini) who takes a lover (Jennifer O’Neill) and leaves his neglected wife (Laura Antonelli) free to follow her own romantic pursuits—but after he jealously reconciles with her she turns out to be pregnant by another man, leading to tragic results. The opulence of the settings and the refined manners of the characters mask the brutality that prevails in high society—above all, the ruthlessness of men’s pride and power.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*Streaming on MUBI.*)

Art

Isamu Noguchi was one of the last century’s greatest sculptors, and the Noguchi Museum is one of New York’s loveliest places. Now is a particularly good time to visit, thanks to the filmmaker Marie Menken’s avant-garde short “Visual Variations on Noguchi” (1945-46), the subject of the compact but essential exhibition **“A Glorious Bewilderment.”** Menken knew how to handle a Bolex camera, and in this film she zips around sculpture after sculpture of Noguchi’s, delighting in the curves and hidden textures. When you turn to the sculptures themselves (the sea urchin-like “E = MC²” is a standout), they almost seem to vibrate, so infectious is Menken’s energy. She could have called the film “Noguchi: A User’s Manual.”—*Jackson Arn* (*The Noguchi Museum; through Feb. 4.*)



Pick Three

The staff writer Rachel Syme shares her current obsessions.

1. Fall is, to me, the most glamorous season, and not just because of the preponderance of tweed; it's a time for sharpening up after the melted insouciance of summer. Everyone is, for a glorious moment, *trying*—before the winter doldrums send us slinking to the sofa. You can clearly spot the effort at the Metropolitan Opera, where, to quote a widely circulated meme, dressing up is *so back*. My current favorite Instagram account, **@lastnightatthemet**, documents the peacocking at Lincoln Center. To experience New York's best people-watching for yourself, buy a Family Circle seat for under fifty dollars and bring opera glasses.

2. I always choose a new scent for fall, and this year I'm leaning into Dior's **L'Or de J'adore**. In 2021, Dior named Francis Kurkdjian—the fragrance savant behind the very popular Baccarat Rouge 540—its creative director for perfume, and L'Or is his much anticipated first release. It lives up to the hype, twisting jasmine and orange blossom into a surprisingly complex composition. An elegant, grownup, full-fat perfume, it smells like pulling yourself together.



Illustration by Sunny Wu

3. There's no better time to throw a dinner party than October, when friends are still willing to brave the chill and make a journey for pot roast. Parties demand a soundtrack, and you cannot go wrong with "Bewitched," the new album from the Chinese Icelandic chanteuse **Laufey**, whose delicate, warbly vocals and bossa-nova ditties have gone viral on TikTok. She's been called the Norah Jones of Gen Z, but I hear a cross between Snow White and Astrud Gilberto—ideal background music for lingering into the night.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Dwight Garner keeps muffuletta in the freezer](#)
- [Jeremy Strong at the Jets game](#)
- [The trailer for Sofia Coppola's "Priscilla"](#)

By The New Yorker

By Dahlia Gallin Ramirez

By Françoise Mouly

By Adrienne Celt

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

Think of Justine's on Hudson as the kind of West Village bistro where Emily (of Paris) and Carrie (of the post-pandemic City) might meet for a bottle of Sauternes on a Saturday evening. Outside are white-tablecloth four-tops convenient for surveying the expensively heeled clacking down the leafy street. Inside are gray leather banquettees, glistening brass, and a brilliant chandelier of upside-down tulip petals which would not look out of place on Carrie or Emily, as a bag—or a hat.

In a way, Justine's—named for its proprietor, the daughter of the famous Upper East Side wine importer Neal Rosenthal—harks to a different era, when the economy was a little more flush and overt extravagance a touch less gauche. But, then again, in 2023 even an upscale bistro where bottles average around a hundred and fifty dollars feels, well, very 2023. On a recent evening, a genial if slightly harried-looking waiter apologized that there's no longer a sommelier on staff and that the cheapest wine by the glass (a fifteen-dollar rosé) had just run out.

Items on the Filipino-French menu rotate seasonally. Of the seven appetizers the other night, the least glamorous turned out to be the most winning. A cucumber carpaccio, mixed with caramelized pumpkin seeds and basil, was the perfectly calibrated, autumnally inflected farewell to summer my palate didn't know it needed. Ubiquitous heirloom tomatoes were given new, luminous life with herb-salted slices of plum and tossed with ginseng vinegar. "When I was little, my mother was obsessed with everything ginseng in the Chinese grocery stores in New Jersey," Jeanne Jordan, the restaurant's thirty-four-year-old Filipino American chef, told me with a grin. "So I guess the ginseng vinegar drizzled down to me."



Shrimp toast is bathed in butter, Gruyère, and bacon.

Occasionally, the commendable jeu d'esprit gets away from Jordan. The shrimp toast, delightful on the first bite, became edgeless too fast with its opulent bath of butter, Gruyère, and bacon. Similarly, the flavorful pork chop—probably the most traditionally Filipino item on the menu—slathered in a creamy Billi Bi sauce, liberally spangled with mussels, and showered in trout roe, could have removed at least one piece of jewelry before departing the kitchen.

Jordan's finest creation is the spicy crab spaghetti, inspired by the crab fried rice she ate growing up. "It's the one item we don't take off the menu," she said with pride. The light, bouncy noodles, coupled with silky crab meat, are almost slurpable, and the sauce, an elusive mélange of red-pepper pistou, garlic purée, aged Parmesan, and crushed pepper flakes, brings a seductive, flickering heat. "If you like this, you should have tried it when we used crab roe. It was very, very good," Jordan remarked. "But it was also very, very expensive." (*Dishes \$23-\$46.*) ♦

By Dahlia Gallin Ramirez

By The New Yorker

By Françoise Mouly

By The New Yorker

Mail

- [Letters from our Readers](#)

Subsidies for Elon

Jill Lepore's review of Walter Isaacson's biography of Elon Musk might have mentioned that both SpaceX and Tesla received large amounts of funding from the Obama Administration (Books, September 18th). In 2010, when Tesla was losing money and making commercial lenders wary, the Department of Energy lent the company more than four hundred million dollars to build its first real factory. And SpaceX started getting *NASA* contracts only after Obama-era officials defied the Republican senator Richard Shelby, who wanted the government to continue giving no-bid contracts to the Marshall Space Flight Center and its suppliers. Government money contributed enormously to the success of many high-tech businesses; ultimately, it also helped to create billionaires who, like Musk, spread the myth that they did everything on their own.

*Victor Yodaiken
Austin, Texas*

Finding a Home

I appreciated Jennifer Egan's article about a new supportive-housing building in Dumbo ("Off the Street," September 18th). Her portraits of its residents were candid and beautiful. I wish, however, that she had discussed in greater detail the plight of domestic-violence victims. Because eligibility requirements for affordable housing in New York City are narrow, this group faces unique challenges when looking for a place to live. At present, domestic-violence victims can spend approximately six months in specialized shelters, but after that they must seek other options. Those with children have more choices than those without, but in both cases victims can end up in general shelters, where, as Egan's reporting attests, people who have already experienced traumas might be especially vulnerable. Supportive housing is an option only for people who have been diagnosed with mental illness or a substance-abuse disorder. But the special circumstances that apply to survivors, along with the limited options they have, amount to a strong case that access should be expanded to include them.

*Rebecca Chun
New York, N.Y.*

Betty Friedan's Past

Moira Donegan, in her review of new books about Betty Friedan, describes the feminist pioneer as finding “her first political identity,” as a Communist, in her college years (Books, September 18th). As the author of a biography of Friedan that was published by the University of Massachusetts Press in 1998, I would argue that Friedan already had a left-wing political identity before that time. It would be more precise to describe her during college as belonging to the American Popular Front, and committed to a range of issues, including antifascism, unions, and equality for women.

The notion that Friedan later gave up a prestigious fellowship “so as not to emasculate” her boyfriend is also dubious. Friedan wrote something to this effect in “The Feminine Mystique,” twenty years after the period in question. But the claim is difficult to verify. At one point, Friedan dated David Bohm, a theoretical physicist who studied under J. Robert Oppenheimer; she also dated Robert Loevinger, another of his students. (Oppenheimer wanted Bohm to join him at Los Alamos, but Bohm’s appointment was blocked for political reasons. Loevinger did go to Los Alamos.) Ultimately, historians do not know much with certainty about Friedan’s relationships at this time, so we cannot establish that a fear of emasculation played a role in any of them.

*Daniel Horowitz
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Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2023.10.16](#)

[Reporting](#)

- [A Trans Teen in an Anti-Trans State](#)
- [Under the Carpetbag](#)
- [Jake Sullivan's Trial by Combat](#)
- [The Crimes Behind the Seafood You Eat](#)

[The Critics](#)

- [The Meaning of Madonna](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [Michael Lewis's Big Contrarian Bet](#)
- [Teju Cole's New Novel Is Haunted by the Trespasses of Art](#)
- [The Melting Pot of "Jaja's African Hair Braiding"](#)
- ["Reservation Dogs" Redefines the Coming-of-Age Story](#)
- ["Anatomy of a Fall" Is a Magnificently Slippery Thriller](#)

[The Talk of the Town](#)

- [The Land of Trump and Gaetz](#)
- [A Stay at Lin Wood's MAGA-Friendly Bed-and-Breakfast](#)
- [The B-52's Back on the Boardwalk](#)
- [Fourteen Thousand Feet Over the Gulf of St. Lawrence. And Then Not](#)
- [Raking Dirt for Art's Sake](#)

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

- [I Came, I Saw, I Thought About Rome](#)

[Fiction](#)

- ["The Choc-Ice Woman," by Mary Costello](#)

[Puzzles & Games Dept.](#)

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, October 4, 2023](#)

[Poems](#)

- ["Springfield"](#)
- ["Childhood"](#)

[Goings On About Town](#)

- [Judy Chicago Beyond "The Dinner Party"](#)
- [An Extravagant Filipino-French Menu at Justine's on Hudson](#)

[Mail](#)

Letters from our Readers