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THE DEC. 29, 2025 & JAN. 5, 2026

# NEW YORKER





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Four Windows (Paris), 2025, 44 x 32 inches, oil on canvas. © 2025 Mitchell Johnson.

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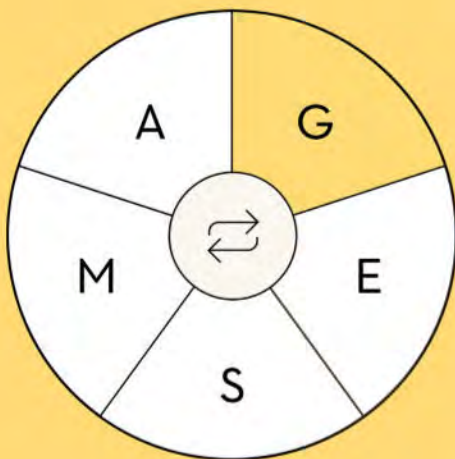
**DRAWINGS** Anne Fizzard, Lynn Hsu, Tom Toro, Edward Steed, Enrico Pinto, Victoria Roberts, Tom Chitty, Hartley Lin, Sofia Warren, Joseph Dottino and Alex Pearson, Sara Lautman, Patrick McKelvie, Michael Maslin, Harriet Burbeck, Mick Stevens **SPOTS** Allan Sanders



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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Alex Abramovich** (*"Last Highway,"* p. 28), a journalism professor at N.Y.U., is the author of "Bullies: A Friendship."

**David Owen** (*"Alphabet Soup,"* p. 14) has been a staff writer since 1991. He is the author of "Volume Control: Hearing in a Deafening World."

**Nell Zink** (*Fiction*, p. 54) is a 2025 Guggenheim Fellow. Her most recent book, the novel "Sister Europe," was published in March.

**Lawrence Wright** (*Takes*, p. 37) has been a staff writer since 1992. His books include the novel "The Human Scale," which was published last spring.

**Bianca Stone** (*Poem*, p. 46) is the author of the poetry collections "The Near and Distant World," "The Möbius Strip Club of Grief," and "What Is Otherwise Infinite."

**Helen Rosner** (*Tables for Two*, p. 6), a staff writer, has received multiple James Beard Awards, including one in 2025 for her Profile of Padma Lakshmi.

**Ian Parker** (*"Yes, Boss,"* p. 40) first contributed to *The New Yorker* in 1992 and became a staff writer in 2000. He received the National Magazine Award for Profile Writing in 2005.

**Jennifer Wilson** (*"For Richer or Poorer,"* p. 22), a staff writer, received a Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism in 2024. Previously, she was a critic at the *Times Book Review*.

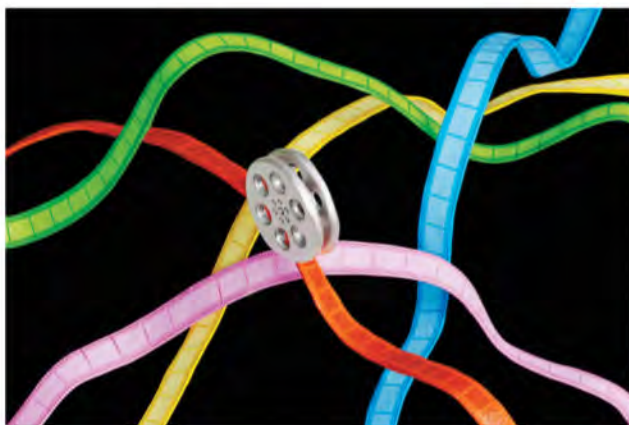
**Mary Jo Bang** (*Poem*, p. 57) is a poet and a translator. She is the author of the poetry collection "A Film in Which I Play Everyone," among other books.

**Leslie Jamison** (*Books*, p. 65) is the author of five books, including, most recently, "Splinters: Another Kind of Love Story." She teaches at Columbia.

**Lorenzo Mattotti** (*Cover*), an illustrator, a director, and a novelist, first contributed to the magazine in 1993.

**Bruce Handy** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 11), a contributor since 1998, published the book "Hollywood High" in May.

## 2025 IN REVIEW



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TV shows, music, podcasts, and more.

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# THE MAIL

## DARK WEB

I was, at first, astounded that *The New Yorker* would devote so much space to Laura Loomer; then I understood that, at its core, Antonia Hitchens's piece is about where the hearts and minds of so many people in this country have gone ("Under the Influence," November 17th). The same is true of all the recent attention that has been lavished on Nick Fuentes. Likewise with President Trump; I do not blame him primarily for our current crisis—he is the same egregious creature that he has always been—I blame those who somehow came to the conclusion that such a radically damaged person was worthy of our highest office.

Until recently, many Americans who harbored racist and other troubling sentiments hid themselves beneath a proverbial rock. What's changed? That rock, as Hitchens's article shows, is now the internet; while the names and faces of many of those people remain hidden in the dark, their beliefs leak into the light.

Larry Duberstein  
Hancock, N.H.

## GIVE ME LIBERTY, OR...

Jill Lepore, in her article about the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Revolutionary War, explains, "Americans fought for the freedom to rule themselves," and that what "the Trump Administration cannot bear for Americans to know" is that women, Black Americans, and Native peoples were "denied the equality, liberty, and sovereignty the Revolution promised" ("Revolutionary Whiplash," November 17th). Not so fast. In 1776, Americans were terribly divided among those who favored revolution, those loyal to King George, and many others who were indifferent or who sided with whichever army was in the area.

Perhaps this, too, is an element of the Revolution that many are "determined to ignore." An understanding of Americans less as truly freedom-loving than as acquiescent helps explain how in this century they could elect as President a

convicted felon who tried to dismiss the results of the previous election, someone who deliberately divided an anxious people in the midst of a raging epidemic and paid obeisance to a murderous Russian dictator. Lepore is certainly right that "history matters," but figuring out what it means is easier said than done.

James Wunsch

*Emeritus Professor of Historical Studies  
Empire State University (SUNY)  
New York City*

## ONCE IN A LIFETIME

Amanda Petrusich's Profile of David Byrne reminded me of the time I spent living on East Third Street, in the seventies ("Going Through the Motions," November 17th). CBGB was three blocks away from my apartment, and I'd often stop in after getting off my night shift driving a cab—it rarely had a cover charge. There was also a jazz club in the area, but it was too expensive for me to get into. One night, I was standing outside that club, looking in through the window, when I noticed the drummer for Talking Heads doing the same. I guess no one had money then. Not long afterward, I walked past all three Talking Heads, looking cool in matching tan trenchcoats.

I was at the group's first gig at CBGB, and I remember being struck by Byrne's strange performance, but also sensing that there was something weirdly sincere about him. Though it was the only time I saw the band perform, it still *feels* like I've watched them more than once, because Byrne left such an outsized impression. I know now, after fifty years of observing his artistic output, that what I had witnessed that June night was an otherworldly genius.

Lee Stockdale  
Fairview, N.C.

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# GOINGS ON

DECEMBER 24, 2025 – JANUARY 6, 2026



*What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.*

Jim Jarmusch, one of the heroes of American independent filmmaking, is a longtime specialist in the tenuous relationships of free agents. With his new film, **"Father Mother Sister Brother"** (opening Dec. 24 at Film Forum and Film at Lincoln Center), he turns his attention to family bonds and finds them to be similarly uncertain, perhaps all the more dubious owing to the pretense of their firmness. He makes his case ambitiously and inventively, showing three families in different locales—rural New Jersey, Dublin, and Paris—facing wildly disparate circumstances while emphasizing their similarities by way of drolly idiosyncratic echoes and recurrences. Amid its melancholy view of disconnection and incomprehension, it offers a hint of ironic optimism about what a family's future depends on—namely, its past.—*Richard Brody*



## ABOUT TOWN

**DANCE** | When the French choreographer Hervé Koubi discovered his hidden heritage, he took the common step of visiting the country of his roots: Algeria. His next move was much less ordinary: creating a piece with street dancers from the area. That 2013 work, *"What the Day Owes to Night,"* is a mesmerizing poetic vision. Bare-chested men in culottes drift, tumble, and spin—on their feet, like dervishes, and on their heads, like b-boys. They hurl one another through the air at trampoline heights. This breakthrough piece introduced a mode that Koubi has repeated in subsequent works with somewhat diminishing returns. Now the original blows back into town, performed by his **Compagnie Hervé Koubi**.—*Brian Seibert* (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 6–11.)

**HIP-HOP** | In the late nineties, the brothers Terrence and Gene Thornton, who rapped as Pusha T and Malice, surfaced from Virginia Beach as the coke-rap auteurs Clipse, under the stewardship of the Neptunes production team. In 2010, the duo separated, going opposite directions; Malice sought repentance through the church while Pusha became a hatchet man for Kanye West. This year, Clipse made its triumphant return after a sixteen-year hiatus with *"Let God Sort Em Out,"* a legacy work now nominated for Album of the Year at the Grammys. The LP is such a milestone that even some of the group's competitors for the honor—Kendrick Lamar, Tyler, the Creator—contribute reverential verses. The album, which is also a reunion with Pharrell, feels as nostalgic as a homecoming, as the siblings

assess a history of drug trafficking with clear eyes.—*Sheldon Pearce* (Brooklyn Paramount; Dec. 30.)

**ART** | **Graciela Iturbide's** tranquil images court the uncanny without fear or shame. It's a daring but understated mirth that leads the photographer to the rough edges of the world. There, she captures—for example—a goat awaiting slaughter, a woman in a bridal gown donning a skeleton mask, a smiling child holding a rooster by its wings. The images in her show *"Serious Play"* are largely focussed on her home country, Mexico. Her camera finds its way through the naked, strange beauty of a masquerade procession in the street; across the desert skies, where she lands on the elegant stillness of a lone cactus; to forgotten corners where all manner of things are left behind—prosthetic legs or severed hooves or the simple flicker of a shadow—and then renewed, turned inside out by the lens.—*Zoë Hopkins* (International Center of Photography; through Jan. 12.)

**BROADWAY** | In Anne Kauffman's pristine Broadway revival of Jordan Harrison's sci-fi drama **"Marjorie Prime,"** from 2014, the increasingly forgetful Marjorie (a luminous, ninety-six-year-old June Squibb) interacts with a so-called Prime, a hyper-realistic re-creation of her long-dead husband, Walter (Christopher Lowell). The Prime helpfully regurgitates Marjorie's own life stories, though her daughter Tess (Cynthia Nixon) and son-in-law Jon (Danny Burstein) don't agree about how truthful this pseudo-Walter should be. Technology has caught up to Harrison's invention—generative-A.I. companies are already selling you a version of your much-missed grandma. Since Harrison uses silences, abbreviated scenes, and long pauses to suggest loss, he leaves us plenty of time to think . . . and to register the crawling horror under the poignant narrative before us.—*Helen Shaw* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/22/25.) (Hayes; through Feb. 15.)

**JAZZ** | A stroke of inspiration led the boundary-pushing vocalist **Dee Dee Bridgewater** to pair up with the impressionist pianist **Bill Charlap**. Though both are distinguished Grammy-winning jazz greats—the former, an N.E.A. Jazz Master, the latter, a renowned trio leader who has played with Barbra Streisand, Cécile McLorin Salvant, and Tony Bennett—they might not seem like a natural match. But Bridgewater saw a potential kinship, and, in June, after a few shows testing its chemistry, the duo released *"Elemental,"* a collaborative album spanning the catalogues of Duke Ellington, Cole Porter, Fats Waller, and more. The music is charming and jaunty, its looseness and zest owed to an alchemical balance between these two performers.—*S.P.* (Birdland; Jan. 6–10.)

**MOVIES** | Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson bring joyful energy to **"Song Sung Blue,"** the director Craig Brewer's perky yet maudlin musical melodrama about the real-life professional and romantic partnership of Mike Sardina and Claire Stengl, who formed a Neil Diamond tribute act, called Lightning and Thunder, in Milwaukee. Mike, a mechanic, and Claire, a hairdresser, struggle in the local musical scene until a chance backstage encounter sparks Claire's inspired recognition of Mike's resemblance to Diamond. Their rehearsals lead to love, and these warm and vigorous scenes are the best in the film. The script, following their career's ups (opening for Pearl Jam) and downs (a gig at a biker bar) is merely methodical; Hudson's stage presence and tangy accent steal the show.—*Richard Brody* (Opening Dec. 25.)



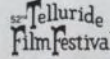
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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Babbo

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It's nearly impossible to eat a meal at Babbo without being pummelled by reminders of its past. For nearly two decades, the West Village trattoria shaped how New Yorkers understood Italian cuisine and modern restaurant dining; more to the point, it was just a marvelous place to be, with *soigné* service set to a soundtrack of roaring classic rock. The flagship restaurant of Mario Batali, Babbo became synonymous with his edgy, expansive celebrity. If you know any of this story, you know the rest of it: In 2017, after allegations of sexual misconduct, Batali stepped back from public life, and most of his restaurants eventually closed. Babbo remained open, but failed to shake off its association with Batali's tarnished name.

Now the mega-restaurateur Stephen Starr has taken over and installed Mark Ladner, a former Batali deputy, at the helm. Together, they're undertaking a feat of selective nostalgia. Can you have Batali minus Batali? An uncanny portion of Ladner's menu is Babbo Revival: warm lamb's tongue, fried sweetbreads, goat-cheese tortelloni dusted with fennel pollen. Other now-gone pillars of the Batali empire are evoked, too: fluke crudo summons the erstwhile Esca; escarole salad was a famous starter at Lupa. Ladner even brings back a version of his own signature from Del Posto: a hun-

dred-layer lasagna, now presented in a hulking slab meant to serve four.

During three recent meals at Babbo, I experienced intermittent moments of culinary magic: tender lamb chops in an ebullient puttanesca sauce, a linguine vongole so briny and winey that I wanted to drink the buttery dregs. But too many beats that ought to have been heavenly instead left me here on earth. Calamarata prepared "Sicilian lifeguard style" lacked zing. A veal chop with foie gras tasted of fat and salt. Most disappointing was Ladner's update of the beef-cheek ravioli, Babbo's most famous dish: the filling was crumbly and dry, the thick chicken-liver ragù broken and greasy.

Why keep Babbo going at all? Starr's revival might be most generously understood as an attempt to surgically separate art from artist, asking us to revel in the restaurant's heyday, while avoiding acknowledgment of the man who created and embodied it. This isn't an outlandish request—we're great at selective sanitization; not too many Great Gatsby-themed parties feature dead bodies in the swimming pool—but in this case it's a futile one. What Babbo needs to be, to both own and transcend its history, is spectacular, but as is it simply doesn't stand out. Sure, it used to be all red sauce and Sinatra in this town, but then some force took hold and shook everything up, making the richness and personality of Italian cuisine come into focus. Thanks to Batali, in all sorts of ways, things will never be the same. (*Dishes \$21–\$140.*)

—Helen Rosner



## ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

*Rachel Syme counts down with nonalcoholic bubbly.*

December, typically, is a month of excess: too much spending, too much eggnog. But, according to a recent study, Americans are drinking less alcohol now than they have in thirty years; weekly drinks per capita have not been this low since 1995. There are many possible reasons for this shift—increased health consciousness, changing socialization patterns among young people, the rise of legal cannabis—but, whatever the cause, the libations market is now exploding with intriguing boozeless beverages. There have never been so many ways to feel festive without risking a hangover (or a holiday-party faux pas). It used to be, if you wanted to pop a bottle of something sparkly and sober-friendly, your only choice was Martinelli's sparkling cider. But now, there are options galore. One corner of the non-alcoholic drink world that is truly booming is that of elegant champagne alternatives. **French Bloom**, a brand of alcohol-free sparkling wine launched in 2019 by friends Maggie Frerejean-Taittinger and Constance Jablonski, received a major investment from LVMH in 2024 and has been steadily growing as the fashion set's favorite imitation brut (a bottle of their signature Le Blanc costs \$39). **Les Marées**, from the South of France, makes its cheery bottles of N.A. Blanc de Blancs (\$22) from organic French Chardonnay grapes, while **Misty Cliffs** sources its de-alcoholized sparkling brut (\$26) from South African vineyards. If you are looking for cans, the Oregon-based brand **Union Wine Co.** recently released its new N.A. Underwood sparkling rosé, which comes in a four-pack for \$28. Don't let this year fizzle without a little fizz.



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT THE NEW GUY

According to the New York City Department of Records and Information Services, Zohran Mamdani will not actually be the city's hundred-and-eleventh mayor, as many people have assumed. A historian named Paul Hortenstine recently came across references to a previously unrecorded mayoral term served in 1674, by one Matthias Nicolls. Consequently, on New Year's Day, after Mamdani places his right hand on the Quran and is sworn in at City Hall, he will become our hundred-and-twelfth mayor—or possibly even our hundred-and-thirty-third, based on the department's best estimates. "The numbering of New York City 'Mayors' has been somewhat arbitrary and inconsistent," a department official disclosed in a blog post this month. "There may even be other missing Mayors."

New York City has already had youthful mayors (John Purroy Mitchel, a.k.a. the Boy Mayor), ideological mayors (Bill de Blasio), celebrity mayors (Jimmy Walker, a.k.a. Beau James), idealistic mayors (John Lindsay), hard-charging mayors (Fiorello LaGuardia), mayors with little to no prior experience in elected office (Michael Bloomberg), immigrant mayors (Abe Beame), and even one who supported the Democratic Socialists of America. (That would be David Dinkins.) Whether Mamdani turns out to be a good or a bad mayor, he will also not be alone in either respect. He will, however, be the city's first Muslim mayor, and the first with family roots in Asia. He is as avowedly of the left as any mayor

in city history. And the velocity of his rise to power is the fastest that anyone in town can recall.

Since his general-election trouncing of the former governor Andrew Cuomo, Mamdani has been preparing for the sober realities of governing—appointments, negotiations, coalition management, policy development. Trying to preserve the movement energy he tapped during the campaign, he has also made an effort to continue the inventive outreach practices that brought him to broad public attention. Just last Sunday, for instance, he sat in a room in the Museum of the Moving Image, in Astoria (a few blocks from the rent-stabilized apartment he's giving up to move into Gracie Mansion), for twelve hours, meeting with New Yorkers for three minutes at a time. It was a gesture to show that he could look his constituents in the eye, and that he could listen to them.



Mamdani ran a disciplined campaign, and he has run a disciplined transition. He didn't take the bait when Mayor Eric Adams criticized him, told Jews to be afraid of him, and pulled other last-minute maneuvers seemingly designed to undermine him. Mamdani met with President Donald Trump in the Oval Office—and they startled everyone by having an outwardly productive meeting. (Trump happily told Mamdani that it was O.K. to call him a "fascist.") Mamdani discouraged a young D.S.A. city-council member, Chi Ossé, from staging a primary challenge next year to the House Minority Leader, Hakeem Jeffries—a magnanimous move, considering Jeffries's ongoing chilliness toward Mamdani. In rooms full of wealthy business leaders and in others filled with donors, he has tried to win over skeptics among New York's élite. ("They are finding themselves, unexpectedly, charmed," the *Times* reported recently.) It was a relief to the city's political establishment when he asked Jessica Tisch, the current police commissioner, whom Adams appointed, to stay in the job. Last week, when a top appointee's old antisemitic tweets surfaced, Mamdani accepted her resignation within hours.

Having rocketed, in a matter of months, from one per cent in the polls to mayor, Mamdani seems comfortable facing his doubters. But what he's up against cannot be overstated. It's been an open question for centuries as to whether New York is "governable" in a top-to-bottom, municipal, positive sense. For a long time, city government here was considered little more than a trough for Tammany Hall. In the past century,

the city proved that it could (more or less) pick up its own garbage, get a handle on crime, and operate large school and hospital systems, even if sometimes just barely. It can do more than that, of course, but can it durably make life in New York better, and not just more tolerable, for the bulk of its residents? In his effort to answer affirmatively, Mamdani will have to navigate problems of management, budget, and bureaucracy inside City Hall, and also Trump (does anyone think their chumminess will last?), ICE raids, intransigent billionaires, public impatience with slips or inconsistencies, and twists of fate and nature. The billionaire exodus that was forecast during his campaign has shown no signs of materializing, but one bad blizzard in January could hamper Mamdani's ambitious agenda for months.

His voters will expect him to make clear and steady progress toward the big-ticket items he promised. Interestingly, universal child care, the most operation-

ally complex of his three core proposals, appears to be the most politically promising. The state's moderate governor, Kathy Hochul, has expressed enthusiasm for it, and a new openness to raising corporate tax rates. Eliminating the fare on city buses, another key policy for Mamdani, is a much easier technical change. (New Yorkers barely pay for the bus right now—fare evasion is rampant.) But, in order to enact free buses as a policy, Mamdani will need the blessing of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's stern chairman, Janno Lieber, who has been making unhappy noises about the idea. ("We're not treating New York like it's Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory," Lieber recently said.) The bleeding heart of Mamdani's campaign was his proposed rent freeze. He may succeed in having the members of the Rent Guidelines Board prohibit rent increases for the tenants of the city's million or so rent-stabilized apartments for the next four years. But, even then, he'll have to

figure out what to do for the millions of other New Yorkers still exposed to the city's historic housing crunch.

Last week, a moving truck was spotted outside City Hall. A treadmill that Adams liked to stroll on while watching "Jeopardy!" was carried out with great solemnity. Adams's corrupt and chaotic four years are a mayoral term that history might well choose to forget, like Matthias Nicolls's stint in 1674. Mamdani will now get his shot at retooling the city government, at trying to bring some democratic socialism to the world capital of capitalism. Few New Yorkers—of any political persuasion—would disagree with his assertion that the city needs a change. During his victory speech, in November, Mamdani vowed that "in this moment of political darkness, New York will be the light." Can the city still blaze its own future, as it has since the days of the Dutch? In the Mamdani era, we will find out.

—Eric Lach

## LONDON POSTCARD NOT YOUR AVERAGE BEAR



Given that the U.K.'s wolves and moose expired long ago, the country's largest land predator today is, somewhat embarrassingly, the European badger. Other aggressive species include the horsefly, a venomous sand-burrowing fish, and the cherubic-looking pine marten, a kind of cute but angry weasel. (Be warned!) Fittingly, perhaps, England has adopted, as unofficial ambassador and strategic diplomatic envoy, a polite, anthropomorphic bear in a red hat and blue duffel coat. North America may have grizzlies; Britain has Paddington.

Paddington first arrived in the U.K. in 1958, in a children's book written by Michael Bond. In the story, an English family finds the bear sitting in Paddington Station, with a note: "Please look after this bear. Thank you." Bond, a BBC cameraman, was inspired by a sad-looking Teddy he once bought for his wife on Christmas Eve, as well as by memories of child evacuees during the

Second World War. "Paddington, in a sense, was a refugee, and I do think that there's no sadder sight than refugees," he told the *Guardian*.

Since then, Paddington's star has risen, with dozens of books, a beloved BBC program, a Netflix show, three feature films, and countless units of merch. In 2022, an animated Paddington met Queen Elizabeth II for tea. When she died, people placed toy Paddingtons at the palace gates. Last month, he opened in a buzzy new West End show, "Paddington the Musical," at the Savoy Theatre. As the premiere approached, speculation mounted: How would the production handle the bear?

A few days before the opening, Tahra Zafar, the costume-and-puppet designer who created Paddington for the stage, arrived at the theatre to give him a final tune-up. The bear was scheduled to appear on "Good Morning America" that afternoon, and Zafar wanted to make sure he was up to scratch. She was wearing a blue sweater vest over a red shirt, chunky purple eyeglasses, and a red bandanna around her neck. She settled into a row of empty seats to wait for the star. "We've all got an idea of Paddington in our minds," she said.

Earlier in her career, Zafar worked

for a decade with Jim Henson's Creature Shop, crafting Hedwig the owl and Scabbers the rat for the first "Harry Potter" film. Later, she designed creatures for "Star Wars," as well as the donkey in "The Banshees of Inisherin." ("Poor Jenny!") In 2012, she was the head of costume, hair, and makeup for the opening ceremony of the Olympics. "Nine hundred million viewers, and it's one live show," she said. "High stakes."

But "Paddington" presented its own challenges. "The producers explored dif-



Tahra Zafar



ferent ways of doing the bear in a sort of scattergun approach,” Zafar said. “Maybe we’ll do it as a child, maybe we’ll do it as a puppet.” They held workshops, but the bear never felt right. “We wanted to see Paddington alone onstage, without being surrounded by puppeteers or anyone, just to show that vulnerability of him, and how lonely he is before he’s found.” The result: an intricate bear suit, created by Zafar, and inhabited by the performer Arti Shah, who is four feet tall. (She played a goblin in “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2” and was the stand-in for the C.G.I.’d Rocket Raccoon in “Guardians of the Galaxy.”) Paddington is voiced by James Hameed, who also controls the bear’s facial expressions remotely. “The two of them are Paddington,” Zafar said. “They’re completely synchronized.”

In her studio, Zafar and her team designed a number of versions of the bear before settling on the final product. (The discarded iterations remain in storage.) The original Paddington book’s illustrations, by Peggy Fortnum, “are quite delicate,” Zafar said. “There’s a lot of things that she doesn’t draw, and certain things left to the imagination.” Zafar wanted to try for a similar lightness. “Looking at the fur, you know, it’s not dense fur. It’s got lots and lots of movement to it. And we didn’t want to go for an uncanny-valley real bear, you know, because he sings!”

An assistant materialized and told Zafar that Paddington was nearly ready. “There’s bits of him that you could say are quite like a bear,” she said. “He does have claws. He has pads on his feet. But he has got a sewn nose, like a toy bear’s nose. Some people might look at the bear and remember the younger members of their family. Some of them might look at him and think about the toys that they loved. We wanted to leave a lot of these thoughts just like a soup in your head, and in your heart, so that you’d feel emotional towards him.”

Paddington sauntered onstage and blinked. He was holding a marmalade sandwich. Zafar looked on, proudly. “Lovely,” she said. And then: “Can I just do one thing?” She stepped forward and smoothed a tuft of fur above the bear’s left eye. “He always has one eyebrow that’s looking slightly anxious.”

—Anna Russell

## MOCKUP DEPT. SHADOW BOXING



On a street in Paris, just off the Place Vendôme and around the corner from the Ritz, sits a small storefront that, the other day, a passing German tourist referred to as a *bordel*—literally, a bordello and, figuratively, a “massive mess.” The comment was overheard, and translated, by Jasper Sharp, a British-born curator and art historian, who is partly responsible for the massive mess in question—the latest installation in one of two galleries that the New York art dealer Larry Gagosian maintains in Paris. Five plate-glass windows offer a view into a re-creation of the cluttered basement studio in which the twentieth-century American assemblage artist Jo-

seph Cornell once cobbled together the “shadow boxes” that he is best known for. The faux studio—part Santa’s workshop, part dank suburban toolshed, part hoarder’s paradise—may have appeared to need tidying up, but, Sharp said, “you have no idea how much work went into making it look like this.”

With the exhibit opening in just a few days, a team of eight workers was beaver away inside the gallery, moving stacks of old magazines, rearranging tchotchkes on shelves, applying a patina of grunge to new jars and boxes to make them look as if they’d been sitting in a cellar since the Eisenhower Administration. The gallery’s normally pristine white walls had been painted to resemble water-stained cinder blocks. A professional set decorator had added fake cobwebs to the corners. (Fine steel wool does the trick.) One could almost smell the mustiness.

Sharp, whose long face looks a bit like Prince William’s, was standing outside on the sidewalk fielding questions



*“Attention, passengers, there is another train directly behind us. There actually really is a train right behind us. Swear to God. We’re not making it up this time. You can stay on the platform with confidence. Honestly, there’s another train directly behind us.”*

from colleagues and a stream of smart-phone missives from his chief collaborator on the project—the movie director Wes Anderson, the installation’s headliner. According to Sharp, Anderson was squirrelled away on the other side of the Seine, writing a new screenplay, but responding to texted queries and photos, and biking over periodically for brief inspections. (Fans of Anderson’s movies and their retro detailing may be disappointed to learn that he rides a perfectly modern high-tech sort of bike, not a vintage Schwinn or an iron-and-wood velocipede.)

One of Anderson’s late-breaking suggestions had been to mount the installation’s fifteen Cornell boxes close to the gallery’s windows, so that viewers can practically press their noses up against them (although a stern Gagosian employee in a black puffer jacket will likely discourage that). It’s hard to describe Cornell’s work, which is playful, allusive, and deeply personal. Some of his boxes look like miniature cabinets of curiosities, others like Surrealist dioramas, windows into dreamlike worlds. Their wit and whimsical theatricality have an obvious echo in the droll, stylized staging of Anderson’s films. Sharp had consulted on Anderson’s most recent film, “The Phoenician Scheme,” wangling real paintings—including a Renoir and a Magritte—to be hung on the set representing the baronial home of a dodgy industrialist played by Benicio del Toro. Knowing that Anderson has an affinity for Cornell (the exterior of the title locale in “The Grand Budapest Hotel” was inspired by a Cornell box), Sharp suggested a collaboration when he pitched a show on the artist to Gagosian. Because Anderson spends most of his time in the French capital, Sharp further suggested that the show be held in Paris if they “wanted to rope Wes in.” Gagosian agreed; so did Anderson. In essence, Sharp said, they were turning the gallery’s shallow first-floor space into a “ginormous Cornell box” of their own.

Cornell’s actual studio was in the basement of a house on Utopia Parkway in Flushing, where the artist lived for most of his adult life, along with his mother and a brother who needed care-taking, owing to cerebral palsy. (Cornell has been misdescribed as a recluse, but he did stay close to home.) The studio’s

contents had been scattered after his death, in 1972, so putting the whole thing back together again, as scrupulously as circumstances permitted, was a feat both curatorial and imaginative. Old photographs and archives were consulted, and, of the thousands of objects on display at Gagosian, more than three hundred belonged to Cornell (including a View-Master and a Smith Corona typewriter); the rest, Sharp said, were either “reverse engineered”—like a wall of boxes labelled by a pair of sign painters Anderson knew, who spent weeks studying Cornell’s handwriting—or sourced from eBay, Etsy, local flea markets, and Sharp’s father-in-law’s workshop, in Salzburg.

Curators are trained to be sticklers for detail, and Sharp seemed mildly embarrassed by what others might view as perfectly understandable compromises—a “question of poetic artifice,” as he put it. Will civilians care that the box of Rinso soap powder on display is not the exact box that used to sit on Cornell’s sink? “There’s a bit of forgiveness baked into the whole thing, maybe, or a request for forgiveness, because we’re not in Queens,” Sharp admitted. The twinkling of elaborate Christmas lights swaddling a nearby Louis Vuitton store underscored the point.

—Bruce Handy

## DEPT. OF AUSTERITY SHAKING



Deep in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, through an old bank façade, is Gallery 734, the Shaker Retiring Room. Inside, there’s an austere bedstead, ladder-back chairs, a cast-iron stove, and a wooden pegboard running along the walls—all sourced from a village near Albany. A retiring room, according to the Shakers’ “Millennial Laws,” was a place to rest and reflect “in silence, for the space of half an hour, and labor for a sense of the gospel.” On a recent visit to the gallery, the filmmaker Mona Fastvold said, “I feel like I’m inside my world now.”

Fastvold’s new film, “The Testament of Ann Lee,” out on Christmas Day, tells

the story of the Shakers’ founder, played with wild-eyed fervor by Amanda Seyfried. In eighteenth-century England, Lee belonged to a sect nicknamed the Shaking Quakers, who expressed their faith through ecstatic singing and dancing. (Fastvold’s film is a quasi-musical.) While in prison for blasphemy, Lee had a risqué vision of Adam and Eve, and concluded that celibacy was the cure for worldly temptation. Her followers, who believed her to be Christ’s female counterpart, called her Mother Ann. In 1774, Lee led her small band to America, where they settled in upstate New York. (Her husband, not thrilled with the no-sex rule, peeled off.) True to their maxim “Hands to work, hearts to God,” the Shakers built furniture of exquisite simplicity—now worldly temptations sought after by collectors. Fastvold, who is Norwegian, noted the overlap with Scandinavian design. “IKEA is heavily influenced by Shakerism,” she said.

Fastvold became interested in the Shakers while directing her previous film, “The World to Come,” also a historical drama set upstate. She had been looking for music—something “that could have been passed down”—and came across a hymn called “Pretty Mother’s Home,” written by a Black Shaker sister named Patsy Roberts Williamson. “I started reading about the various utopian societies that were forming, and it took me down the rabbit hole to Ann Lee,” Fastvold said. “She’s maybe the first American feminist.” Before her jailhouse vision, Lee had birthed and lost four babies. “She somehow takes all that grief and turns it into this kind of power, this active choice of saying, ‘I’m going to mother the entire world.’”

The director was soon joined by Sylvia Yount, the head of the American Wing. “I feel at home in this room,” Fastvold told her, “because I spent so much time at Hancock,” a preserved Shaker village in western Massachusetts. During filming, there were only two practicing Shakers left in America, both in Maine, but a third joined the sect soon after production wrapped. (“Completely unrelated, but interesting,” Fastvold said.) The movie was mostly shot in Hungary. The production designer nabbed an original chair at a market in London, but much of the set dressing was reconstructed. “You can’t make some-



thing out of Styrofoam. It has to be wood, and it has to be beautifully joined together,” Fastvold, who wore all black, said. “We played around with some of their instruments, but that was not their greatest invention, we discovered.”

A glass case nearby displayed various items: bentwood boxes, a spool holder. The Shakers improved many household devices, like apple peelers and washing machines. These tools, Yount said, reduced labor for women: “This was about gender equality.”

“A lot of people don’t know that they invented a vise to make flat brooms,” Fastvold said, looking around. “You *need* a flat broom.”

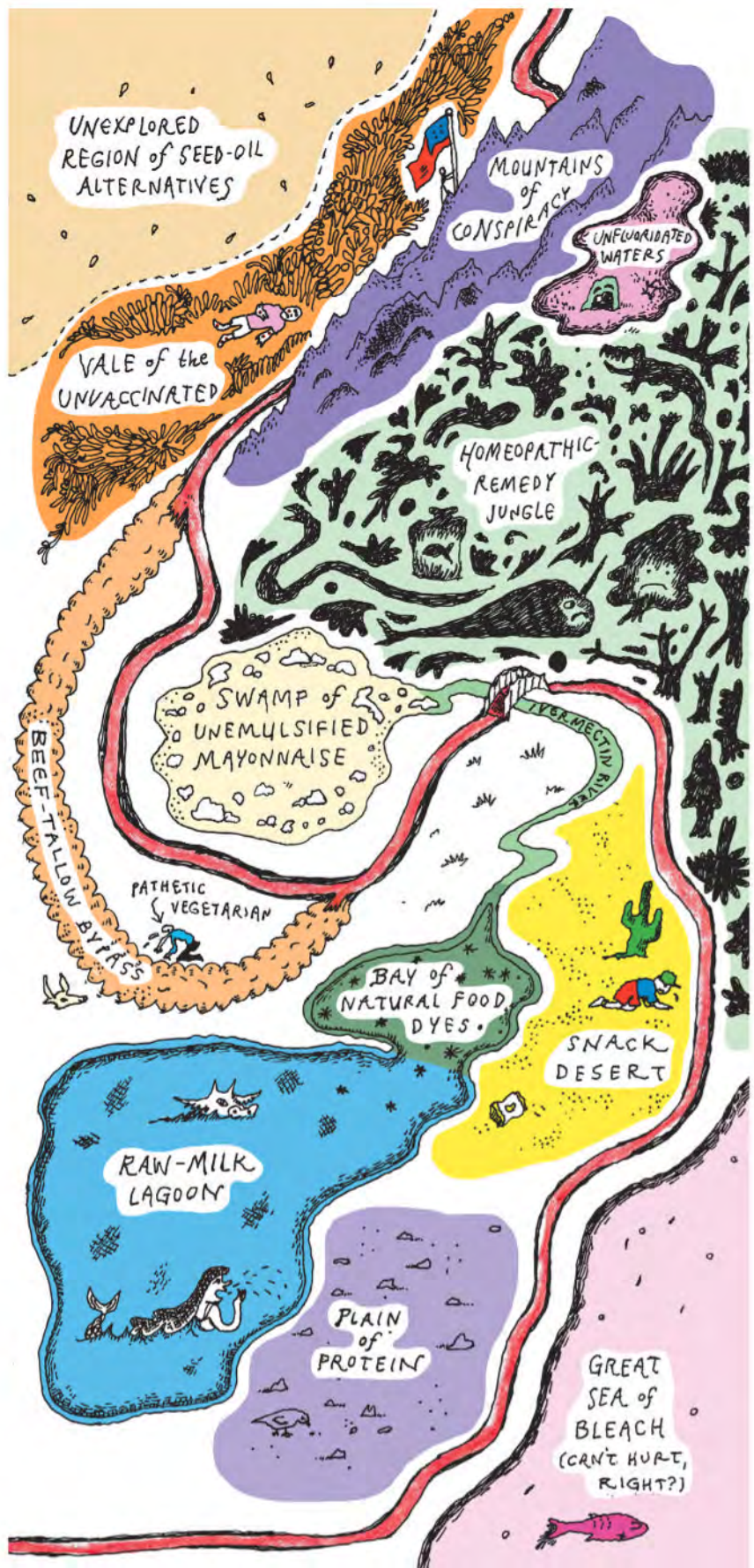
Fastvold, who is forty-four, started out as a child actor and dancer in Norway. “I quickly realized, when I was eighteen or nineteen, that I was done being looked at,” she recalled. She moved to America in 2004 and directed music videos, including for her husband at the time, the musician Sondre Lerche. Brady Corbet, another child actor turned filmmaker, co-wrote and acted in her first feature, “The Sleepwalker,” from 2014, and they soon became partners in art and in life. Fastvold co-wrote Corbet’s 2024 film, “The Brutalist,” about a Bauhaus-trained Hungarian architect who designs a community center in postwar Pennsylvania. “Ann Lee” has some common elements—for one, an interest in chair design.

“I didn’t think about it until I was in the edit,” Fastvold said. “Then, all of a sudden, it struck me: the chairs. You think you’re making something completely different—it’s a musical about the founder of the Shakers, a totally different time period! Actually, no, it’s about an immigrant arriving in America, trying to create an impossible project in a place where that is unwanted, pushing new ideas around design.” Both characters, she observed, are akin to filmmakers, marching their followers toward some quixotic vision. “The films we make are always reflections of us. You can’t help it.”

Back in the retiring room, she eyed a wooden candleholder, like the ones that were re-created for her set, and fantasized about spending the night: “I’d light that candle, bring in a bunch of wildflowers, and then I would be happy.”

—Michael Schulman

## SKETCHPAD BY LIANA FINCK MAHA COUNTRY

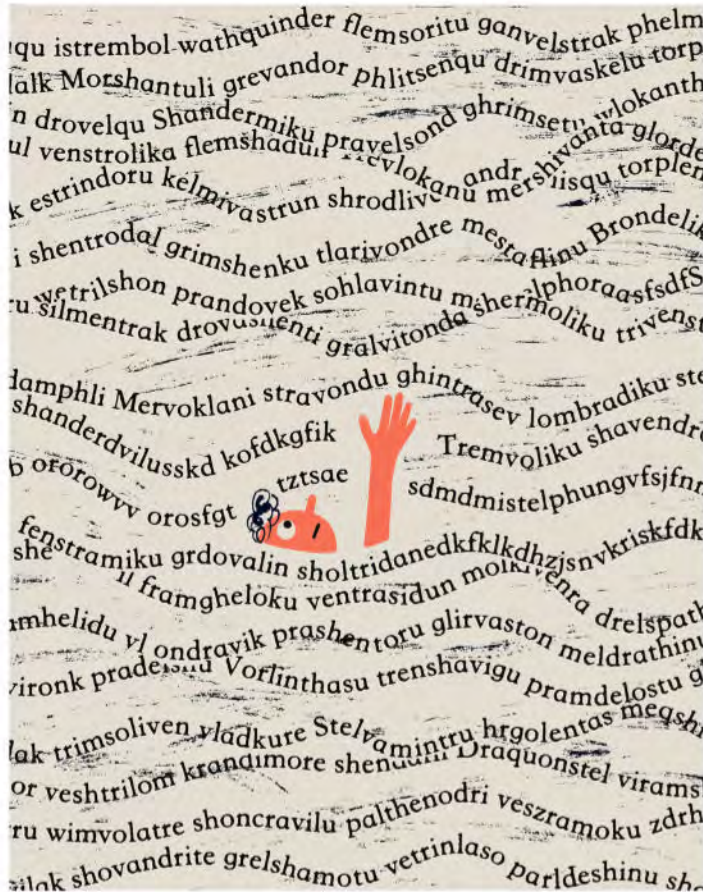




## ALPHABET SOUP

*We know how to help kids with dyslexia, but often fail to. Why?*

BY DAVID OWEN



In 2024, my niece Caroline received a Ph.D. in gravitational-wave physics. Her research interests include “the impact of model inaccuracies on biases in parameters recovered from gravitational wave data” and “Petrov type, principal null directions, and Killing tensors of slowly rotating black holes in quadratic gravity.” I watched a little of her dissertation defense, on Zoom, and was lost as soon as she’d finished introducing herself. She and her husband now live in Italy, where she has a post-doctoral appointment.

Caroline’s academic achievements seem especially impressive if you know that until third grade she could barely read: to her, words on a page looked like

a pulsing mass. She attended a private school in Connecticut, and there was a set time every day when students selected books to read on their own. “I can’t remember how long that lasted, but it felt endless,” she told me. She hid her disability by turning pages when her classmates did, and by volunteering to draw illustrations during group story-writing projects. One day, she told her grandmother that she could sound out individual letters but when she got to “the end of a row” she couldn’t remember what had come before. A psychologist eventually identified her condition as dyslexia.

Fluent readers sometimes think of dyslexia as a tendency to put letters in

the wrong order or facing the wrong direction, but it’s more complicated than that. People with dyslexia have varying degrees of difficulty not only with reading and writing but also with pronouncing new words, recalling known words, recognizing rhymes, dividing words into syllables, and comprehending written material. Dyslexia frequently has a genetic component, and it exists even in speakers of languages that don’t have alphabets, such as Chinese. It often occurs in combination with additional speech and language issues, and with anxiety, depression, attention disorders, and other so-called comorbidities, although dyslexia itself can have such profound psychological and emotional impacts that some of these conditions might be characterized more accurately as side effects.

Estimates of dyslexia’s incidence in the general population vary, from as high as twenty per cent—a figure cited by, among others, Sally Shaywitz, a co-founder of the Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity—to as low as zero, as suggested by Richard Allington, a retired professor of education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, who in 2019 told participants at a literacy conference that legislators who supported remediation for students with reading disabilities should be shot. Nadine Gaab, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, told me that the best current estimates fall between five and ten per cent.

There are reasons for the inconsistency. The condition varies in type, severity, and presentation of symptoms, and early literacy skills have historically been hard to measure. Many children with dyslexia (and their parents) never learn they have it. Because a common strategy for avoiding the embarrassment of reading aloud is to act in a way that results in being sent to the principal’s office, dyslexic students are often treated primarily as discipline problems. At every grade level, they are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or placed in juvenile detention, especially if their families are economically disadvantaged. According to a 2011 study of four thousand high-school students by Donald J. Hernandez, then a sociology professor at Hunter College, more than sixty per cent of those who failed to graduate had

*Despite advances in the science of reading, many schools use discredited methods.*



been found to have reading deficits as early as third grade. More often than not, schools don't intervene effectively, sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes as a result of misguided pedagogy, sometimes for fear of incurring instructional or legal costs.

The personal and societal consequences can be catastrophic, since even to work at many minimum-wage jobs you need to be able to read. The tragedy is compounded by the fact that proven methods for teaching dyslexic students—which enabled Caroline to become an avid reader by middle school—have been known for decades. What's more, the main principles that inform those methods have been shown to underlie successful reading instruction for all students, whether they have dyslexia or not. (An administrator at a school for students with reading disabilities told me, "What works for our students actually works for everyone. It's a matter of dosage.") Many American schools don't use scientifically supported instructional methods, though, and, partly because they don't, dyslexia can be hard to distinguish from what one elementary-school principal described to me as "dystaughtia." If reading were taught better, almost all students would benefit, and students with neurological differences would be easier to identify and treat before their difficulties with reading derailed their lives. "There's a window of opportunity to intervene," Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive neuroscientist, told me. "You don't want to let that go."

Shaywitz, in her book "Overcoming Dyslexia," cites an account, published by a German doctor in 1676, of "an old man of 65 years" who lost the ability to read after suffering a stroke. "He did not know a single letter nor could he distinguish one from another," the doctor wrote. This was perhaps the first published description of what's known today as acquired dyslexia, caused by damage to the brain. Two centuries later, a doctor in England wrote a paper about a case of what he called "congenital word blindness." It involved a fourteen-year-old boy who was unable to read despite years of instruction by teachers and tutors. He could recognize "and," "the," "of," and a few other one-syllable words,

and he knew the letters of the alphabet, but when the doctor dictated vocabulary to him he misspelled nearly everything, writing "sening" for "shilling" and "scojock" for "subject." His disability stood out, the doctor wrote, because his schoolmaster had said that he would be "the smartest lad in the school if the instruction were entirely oral."

Spoken language arose at least fifty thousand years ago, and the brain has evolved with it. As a consequence, most children learn to speak early and easily, without formal instruction. (Deaf children pick up signing readily, too.) Reading and writing are different. They were invented only about five thousand years ago, and natural selection has not configured the brain to facilitate them. "You can't just lock a group of kindergartners in a library and expect them to emerge, a couple of weeks later, as readers," Gaab told me. "It's more like learning a musical instrument. You can listen to Mozart all your life, but if I put you in front of a piano and say, 'Play Mozart,' you will fail."

To become literate, people have to repurpose parts of the brain that evolved to perform other tasks, such as object recognition and sound processing. "What we have to do, over the course of learning to read, is coordinate these areas to communicate with each other and build what we call a reading network," Gaab said. The areas are connected by axon bundles, which she likened to highways. The French neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene, in his book "Reading in the Brain," writes, "Scientists can track a printed word as it progresses from the retina through a chain of processing stages, each of which is marked by an elementary question: Are these letters? What do they look like? Are they a word? What does it sound like? How is it pronounced? What does it mean?"

Sometimes the axon highways almost seem to pave themselves. My daughter, Laura, began to read all of a sudden, the summer before kindergarten. ("It's hard to believe that 'knock' starts with 'k,'" she said, while following along as I read her a bedtime story about Amanda Pig.) But even she didn't become a reader entirely on her own. All children have to learn the relationships between letters and meaningful sounds. For some it's harder than for others. "Maybe instead

of four lanes you have two," Gaab said, "or instead of a smooth surface you have a bumpy one." Caroline had a large vocabulary, and she was read to as often as Laura was, both at home and at school, and there were just as many colorful plastic alphabet magnets stuck to the refrigerator in her kitchen. But she needed teachers who understood that literacy doesn't happen naturally, especially for children with dyslexia.

A decade ago, Emily Hanford, a senior correspondent at American Public Media, was researching a story about college-level remedial-reading classes. She became interested in dyslexia and then in literacy generally, and in 2022 she produced an immensely influential podcast series, "Sold a Story," about reading instruction in American schools. The central argument is that teachers all over the country employ instructional methods and materials that were proved, long ago, to be not just ineffective but counterproductive. Such methods, Hanford demonstrated, are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how children learn to read. They direct beginning readers to look for hints in illustrations and to make deductions based on context, word length, plot, and other cues, with only incidental reliance on the sounds represented by letters. The idea is that, as children become adept at deduction, the mechanical side will, in effect, take care of itself.

Skilled reading has many elements. A popular metaphor is the "reading rope," created by the psychologist Hollis Scarborough in 2001. It depicts eight "strands," which readers weave together as they become proficient. The strands include not just an understanding of the sounds represented by letters and combinations of letters but also such elements of language comprehension as vocabulary, grammar, reasoning, and background knowledge. All the strands are necessary. In Hanford's view, the ones related to word recognition, including phonological awareness and decoding, have often been neglected. That harms many students and is a disaster for children with dyslexia.

Antipathy to phonetic decoding is sometimes traced to the nineteenth-century American educator Horace Mann, who described the letters of the

alphabet as “skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions” and argued in favor of teaching children to recognize words as discrete units. A later, more powerful influence was Marie Clay, a teacher and researcher in New Zealand, who studied schoolchildren learning to read and concluded, in the nineteen-sixties, that understanding the relationships between letters and sounds wasn’t essential. Hanford, in the second episode of “Sold a Story,” says, “Her basic idea was that good readers are good problem solvers. They’re like detectives, searching for clues.” The best clues, Clay reasoned, were things like context and sentence structure. Frank Smith, a British psycholinguist, came to the same conclusion. He argued that, to a good reader, a printed word was like an ideogram. “The worst readers are those who try to sound out unfamiliar words according to the rules of phonics,” he wrote, in 1992.

There have always been opposing voices. In 1955, Rudolf Flesch published “Why Johnny Can’t Read,” a brutal indictment of “whole word” methods. “If they had their way, our teachers would *never* tell the children that there are letters and that each letter represents a sound,” Flesch writes. To illustrate the problem, he recounts a story, told by a literacy researcher, about a boy who could read the word “children” on a flash card but not in a book. (The boy explained that he recognized the flash card because someone had smudged it.) Flesch’s book spent months on best-seller lists, but teaching methods like the ones he had seemingly destroyed remained widely used.

Today, two of the most popular reading-instruction programs are Units of Study, whose principal author is Lucy Calkins, a professor at Columbia University’s Teachers College, and Fountas & Pinnell Classroom, by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. Both are traceable to the work of people like Clay and Smith, and both are sold by the same educational publisher. They have remained entrenched in school systems even though scientific studies have shown that their theoretical foundations are flawed. Technology that allows researchers to track the eye movements of people as they read has demonstrated, for instance, that good readers actually do decode words by

looking closely, if quickly, at letters and combinations of letters. Dehaene writes that “‘eight’ and ‘EIGHT,’ which are composed of distinct visual features, are initially encoded by different neurons in the primary visual area, but are progressively recoded until they become virtually indistinguishable.” If fluent readers are able to read familiar words in a way that makes it seem as though they’re recognizing ideograms, it’s because they analyzed them phonetically during earlier encounters, prompting their brains to create permanent neural pathways linking spelling, sound, and meaning.

Struggling readers, in particular, need instructors who have been trained in what’s now broadly referred to as structured literacy, research-based instruction, or the science of reading. Such methods are rooted in a neuroscientific understanding of the elements of reading, with an emphasis on enabling students to accurately decode written representations of spoken language. Amy Murdoch, the director of the reading-science program at Mount St. Joseph University, in Cincinnati, said that these methods provide the best framework to teach even non-dyslexic people to read; still, at many universities it is possible to earn an advanced degree in early education without learning them. Margaret Goldberg, a co-founder of the Right to Read Project, a California-based nonprofit, told me that one reason for the persistence of discredited methods may be that they seem intuitively correct to the kinds of people who



become elementary-school teachers. “When I train teachers, I ask them how they learned to read,” she said. “And most of them will say they did it very easily, and they’ll have memories of things like sitting at a little table while their teacher pointed out a few things.” With Laura as my sample of one, I would have assumed that teaching a child to read requires nothing more than

taking lots of family trips to the library.

Goldberg told me about a workshop she attended in 2015, when she was working as a literacy coach at a low-performing public school in Oakland. The workshop introduced teachers and others to Units of Study, which the school system had just purchased. Participants were shown pages from a story about a kangaroo, written in an alphabet they didn’t recognize. (It turned out to be Greek.) Goldberg recalled that the presenter told them not to worry about the words: “He said, ‘Just see how much reading you can do without even knowing the alphabet.’” When Goldberg objected that this kind of guessing wasn’t the same thing as reading, the presenter told her she was wrong.

“In normal science, a theory whose assumptions and predictions have been repeatedly contradicted by data will be discarded,” Seidenberg, the cognitive neuroscientist, writes in his book “Language at the Speed of Sight.” “But in education they are theoretical zombies that cannot be stopped by conventional weapons such as empirical disconfirmation, leaving them free to roam the educational landscape.”

Calkins eventually added phonics to Units of Study, partly in response to Hanford’s reporting. Nevertheless, in 2023, New York City began phasing out the curriculum, which it had used for years. The city recently released test results showing that the number of students meeting the bar for proficiency has risen by seven percentage points. (Columbia’s Teachers College moved away from Units of Study, too.)

Anne Wicks, an education and economics specialist at the George W. Bush Presidential Center, told me that Hanford’s podcast helped transform what had been a relatively obscure academic debate into an approachable subject for laypeople. The remote schooling required by COVID also had a significant impact, Wicks said, by showing many parents how their children were actually being taught. Since 2020, more than forty states have passed laws that push schools to emphasize the science of reading. Legislation doesn’t necessarily translate into classroom change, especially if teachers (and teachers’ unions) resist. In places that have fully committed to improved teacher training, though, results



have been impressive. Wicks said that Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee have turned improved curricula into better test results—a change that has been called the “Southern surge.”

Karin Chenoweth, a former columnist for the *Washington Post*, who has written several books about successful schools, told me about a district that she’s studied closely in Steubenville, Ohio. “It’s in Appalachia, and it’s under-resourced, and it has hardly any tax base, and it’s over ninety per cent disadvantaged,” she said. “But in some years one hundred per cent of their kids in grades three and four meet state standards in reading.” In 2000, the district adopted a science-backed program, Success for All, which was developed in the nineteen-eighties by two professors at Johns Hopkins. At least as important as the program, Chenoweth told me, was that the district’s teachers embraced a different way of teaching. “Building a school culture like that isn’t easy,” she said. “But once the teachers saw the effects they fiercely protected it and they wouldn’t go back.”



*“We’re only walking to the other end of the cage.”*

Steven Dykstra is a retired clinical psychologist in Milwaukee. He didn’t think much about dyslexia until his son had trouble reading in first grade. He and his wife arranged a conference with the teacher, who asked whether they read to their son at home. “When we assured her that we had read to him every night since he was only a few months old, she was confused,” he told me. “She asked us, ‘Are you sure?’ as if we had hallucinated all these many hours.” The teacher then asked what they did when their son struggled to read a word. “We told her that we helped him sound it out,” he said. “That was her ‘Aha!’ moment. ‘That’s the problem,’ she said. ‘That’s what’s messing him up. You need to stop doing that. Phonics doesn’t work.’”

Dykstra was employed for thirty-three years by Milwaukee County’s public-health department, and he spent most of that time on a mental-health-crisis team that provided counselling to children and young adults. He told me about a case involving a sixteen-year-old girl who had been engaged in many kinds of self-destructive behavior. “She took drugs, and she would sell herself, and she would wake up after being

drunk with these awful amateur tattoos,” Dykstra said. She eventually agreed to meet with him on the condition that they do so in her parents’ garage and keep the door open so that she could flee if she felt she needed to.

During their conversation, Dykstra said, the girl surprised him by revealing that she was unable to read—something that hadn’t come up during weeks of interviews with people in her life. The girl told him that, in elementary school, she had avoided being called on by doing things like pretending to be sick or walking out of the room, and that she had once hit a teacher with a book. She didn’t mind being punished, she said, because no punishment could be worse than the laughter of her classmates. “Then the conversation shifted to other things,” Dykstra continued. “I said, ‘You know, lots of other people wouldn’t do the things you do, like go to a motel with a stranger for forty dollars, because they would feel such intense shame.’ And she looked at me like I was an idiot. She said, ‘I’ve been ashamed every minute of my life since I started first grade. I’m used to it.’”

Partly because of his experience with that girl and with his son, Dykstra told

me, in counselling sessions with young people he always asked, “When you started school, was there one thing that was harder than anything else?” Often, he said, the answer was reading. For children who can’t read, every school day holds the potential for repeated humiliation, and the severity of the humiliation grows as the gap between them and their classmates widens. Hanford told me, “If you are a kid who is struggling to read, you are experiencing failure really fast, and you are experiencing massive confusion, and it is actually fucking frightening.”

To a school administrator, dyslexia can seem to be a problem that solves itself, since many sufferers drop out before graduation. But for some the harm continues long after school. Kareem Weaver, a co-founder of FULCRUM, a literacy nonprofit based in Oakland, told me that more than forty per cent of all imprisoned adults in the U.S. have dyslexia, and that as many as eight in ten are “functionally illiterate.” The correlation between illiteracy and incarceration has been known for a long time. A 1993 review by the Department of Justice found “ample evidence of the link between academic failure and delinquency.” It also

found that “research-based reading instruction can be used to reduce recidivism and increase employment opportunity for incarcerated juvenile offenders.” Teaching reading to imprisoned adults has a similar effect on both recidivism and employment. Intervening earlier is obviously more effective, as well as more humane. It’s also less expensive. The average cost of maintaining an inmate on Rikers Island is more than half a million dollars a year.

Caroline’s dyslexia was identified in second grade, and afterward she spent three years at Windward, a private day school for children with language-based learning disabilities. During the time she was there, in the early two-thousands, Windward had an elementary and middle school in White Plains. It has since expanded to the Upper East Side. The total enrollment is about nine hundred and fifty. When Caroline was admitted, she was reading at a pre-kindergarten level and suffering from insomnia and intense anxiety. Both ended when she began to read.

The structured-literacy program employed for the youngest Windward students is called P.A.F., which stands for

Preventing Academic Failure. It’s an adaptation of what’s known as the Orton-Gillingham approach to teaching dyslexics and other struggling readers. Samuel Orton was a pathologist and neuropsychiatrist who, in the nineteen-twenties, noticed that people who had suffered left-hemisphere brain injuries had reading difficulties that were similar to those of certain bright children who underperformed in school. He referred to such difficulties as “strophosymbolia,” a coinage whose Greek roots mean “reversed symbols.” Even without modern scanning technologies, he correctly deduced that the condition involved a breakdown in what Seidenberg later called the “leftward shift” in the brain of a developing reader. (Language-related activity occurs in both hemispheres of the brain but becomes concentrated in the left one as we learn to read.) Anna Gillingham was an educator who, with encouragement from Orton, devised teaching methods and materials that rely on explicit, narrowly focussed instruction in the relationship between spoken language and its representation in writing. Students follow a sequence of increasingly complex steps involving things like letter-sound rela-

tionships and syllabication, with lots of repetition. (A literacy expert told me, “A typical learner needs three to five repetitions. A struggling reader might need ten to twenty repetitions. A dyslexic reader might need two hundred repetitions.”) Orton-Gillingham is not the only approach to teaching children with reading disabilities—and some of its techniques, such as tracing letters in the air and whispering words or speaking them aloud, are controversial—but methods based on it are widely used in the U.S. in programs that treat dyslexia.

In early September, I visited Windward’s White Plains elementary-school campus, for grades one through five, and watched from the parking lot as students were dropped off by parents and school buses. Staff members greeted each child on the sidewalk in front of the building while a teacher played music from a boom box. Enthusiasm for school is rare among children with dyslexia, but I saw smiles, laughter, and high fives. For many of the students, Windward is likely the first school they’ve attended where simply showing up in the morning doesn’t fill them with dread.

Later that day, I sat in on a fifth-grade reading class, accompanied by Jamie Williamson, the head of the school. A strip of red tape ran along the left edge of each student’s desktop, as a visual reminder that writing in English moves from left to right. A sign at the front of the room read “THE FIRST THING I DO IS ALWAYS THE SAME . . . I PICK UP MY PENCIL AND WRITE MY NAME!”

“We are going to go on a vowel hunt,” the teacher said. “Let’s put on our vowel-hunting glasses.” From her laptop, she projected vocabulary words, one at a time, onto a whiteboard. The first word was “picnic.”

“Our first job is to underline the vowels,” she said. “Who can raise their hand and tell me what vowels we would need to underline in this word?”

“Both of the ‘i’s,” a girl said.

The next task was to place a dot between any pair of consonants.

“Where would I put a dot? Scarlett?”

“In between the ‘c’ and the ‘n.’”

“Right there. You’ve got it. Nicely done.”

Then a student “scooped” the syllables, by drawing curved lines, on the whiteboard, under “pic” and “nic.” Finally,



*“Switching to a third party doesn’t mean I’ll get back together with you.”*



all the students read the word aloud.

After they had given half a dozen words the same treatment, the teacher said, “I think we’re ready to write some syllables of our own. Please pick up your pencil and put the tip of your pencil on the next clean line. Are we ready?” As the students worked, a teacher-in-training walked from desk to desk, correcting errors immediately.

Windward’s teachers follow highly structured lesson plans. Students memorize rules about letter sounds, letter combinations, and grammar. They also receive instruction in essay organization and composition. Their progress is monitored and evaluated, and reading classes are regularly rearranged so that students are always grouped with others at similar levels of proficiency. After three to five years, almost all Windward students transition to conventional schools. When Caroline left, after fifth grade, she was reading in the ninety-fifth percentile, and she later qualified for her new school’s gifted program. Windward had made her not only an avid reader but also a skilled writer. (Toward the end of her third year, she wrote a poem that ended, “So come and read, so come and read, Come don those literary Wings!”) Still, dyslexia is a lifelong condition. She told me that she reads slowly, especially academic papers, and that when she writes she will sometimes spell the same word different ways in the same paragraph. But without the help she got at Windward her adult career would have been impossible.

Just before my visit, Windward had held orientation sessions for new parents. Williamson said that at one session a mother told him that her daughter had come home from school, during the first week, and asked to order a book so that they could read together on the couch in the evenings. The mother said that she had excused herself to go to the bathroom, then closed the door and cried. She told Williamson that her daughter had never wanted a book before. “And this was day three,” he said.

Every year, Windward’s faculty trains roughly fifteen hundred teachers from other schools, both on site and online, through a program called the Windward Institute. This past summer, the institute worked with teachers for

the Central Brooklyn Literacy Academy, in Crown Heights, a new public elementary school for struggling readers, including those with dyslexia. Most of the teachers were skeptical initially, Williamson told me, largely because they worried that P.A.F. would leave little room for their own creativity. “Before they actually got into a classroom with kids, they were, like, ‘This is going to be the most boring thing ever,’” he said. Once they began working with students, though, they changed their minds. “They knew the kids well, because they were from their own schools,” he said. “So they knew that this kid wouldn’t sit still, and wasn’t successful, and was disruptive. But all of a sudden the same child was front and center, really engaged, working incredibly hard.”

C.B.L.A. is the second public school in the city which is specifically for children with reading disabilities. The first was the South Bronx Literacy Academy, which opened in 2023. Both schools are the product of a multiyear effort by the Literacy Academy Collective, an organization founded by half a dozen women who have children with learning disabilities. The women first met in 2019, drawn together by shared frustration with the city’s failure to teach their children to read. In 2021, with teachers trained by the Windward Institute, L.A.C. ran a six-week summer-school pilot, in Harlem. The organization did the same in the Bronx the following summer, then ran a yearlong pilot program for two classes of students in an existing school, also in the Bronx. The pilot was successful, and before the year was half over the Department of Education began the process of establishing S.B.L.A. By the time the school opened, the women’s own children were too old to benefit from it, but their organization has remained deeply involved, supplementing the budgets of both literacy academies with private fund-raising and providing administrative and classroom support. (Their story is told in the documentary “Left Behind,” which was released in 2025.)

I visited S.B.L.A. in September. The school occupies one floor of a shared

building on a narrow, crowded street half a mile from Yankee Stadium. It was early in the school year, and staff members were dealing with complications resulting from bus routes and other transportation challenges—a significant issue, since the school draws students from beyond the neighborhood. Bethany Poolman, the principal, told me, “All the streets here are one-way, so if you get stuck you might be stuck forever.”

Poolman has the energy of a pep-squad leader, and she operates at close to full speed all day long—filling in for an absent teacher, tracking down missing classroom materials, breaking up a playground fight. She majored in religion at Haverford, then joined Teach for America as a special-education teacher at a middle school in the Bronx. She spent a decade there before moving to administration. “We have two brand-new students who are in the lowest reading group,” she said. “They just joined us, and they’re sweet as pie, both of them, but they cannot name the twenty-six letters.” One had been held back twice. Rather than put him in a class with students two years younger, the school placed him just one grade behind and assigned a reading specialist to help him catch up.

“If you were to have a conversation with him, you’d have no idea,” she said. “But then you put three letters in front of him and he can’t read ‘cat.’”

I said I was amazed that children could make it so far in school without knowing the alphabet.

“Correct,” Poolman said. “But they’re here now.”

She introduced me to three fifth-grade girls, now in their third year at S.B.L.A. I asked them what they remembered about the schools they’d attended previously.

“If we didn’t get the word right, we would have to stay inside for recess,” one said. “We would have to write the word, like, fifteen times, until we got it, and then we would still have to stay inside, because they said there was no point to go to recess because there wasn’t enough time.” No recess is the elementary-school equivalent of solitary confinement. For kids with dyslexia and other reading



challenges, who feel isolated to begin with, not being allowed to play with classmates makes socialization even harder. The girls told me that their old classmates had made fun of them, but no one did that now. They liked school. They liked their teachers. They were about to graduate to chapter books.

In 1975, Congress passed what's now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which entitles disabled children to a "free appropriate public education," and in 1993 the Supreme Court ruled that the act can force school districts to cover private-school tuition if public equivalents fail. Taking advantage of that provision for children with dyslexia has never been easy, however. To qualify, parents must submit an Individualized Education Program, a legal document that details their child's special-education needs (and that has to be updated regularly), plus, in some cases, a neuropsychological examination, which can cost thousands of dollars. They also have to demonstrate that the public system has exhausted its ability to address their needs. Many parents of dyslexic children don't know that this type of aid exists, and, even if they do, can't afford to meet the requirements or hire lawyers to argue their child's case. Windward's tuition is roughly seventy-six thousand dollars a year, and other private dyslexia programs cost about as much. Much of the \$2.3 billion that New York City spends annually on "non-public and contract schools per Special Education mandate" benefits families who have the means to pay private tuition up front and sue the city for reimbursement.

S.B.L.A. and C.B.L.A. use some of the same instructional materials that Windward does, but, because they are public schools on public budgets, they deal with constraints that Windward doesn't. Windward can limit admission to students who have confirmed diagnoses and are all but certain to benefit from its classes. It has a well-funded financial-aid program, which covers almost the entire cost for some students, but the children in the hallways (and the cars I saw at drop-off) wouldn't have seemed out of place on the campus of any super-expensive private school in Westchester.

The literacy academies enroll many

children who have trouble with more than reading: severe emotional issues, little knowledge of English. New teachers at Windward spend two years in training before they take over classes of their own, a long-term apprenticeship that the literacy academies can't match. And the academies have to meet city and state requirements that private schools don't, including standardized testing that preempts instructional time and isn't necessarily meaningful for their students.

Nevertheless, the academies have had the same kind of impact on students and families that Windward has. Ruth Genn, L.A.C.'s executive director and co-founder, told me that she hopes that within a few years there will be a network of five or six literacy academies across the city, but that the organization's ultimate goal is "to learn from these schools and incorporate aspects of what they do throughout the system." L.A.C. has been instrumental in changing the way teachers are trained in New York State. A pivotal moment, Genn said, occurred in 2023, when city education officials announced that they would no longer hire teachers who had not been trained in the science of reading.

At S.B.L.A., the lower grades are more likely than the upper grades to have openings for new students—and the same is true at Windward. The reason is not that dyslexia is less common among younger children but that teachers and parents usually fail to identify reading problems until they've become obvious. "In second grade, no one is freaking out," Poolman said. "When you talk to families, there's less urgency, because the kids' teachers aren't alarming them yet." (She said that when S.B.L.A. opened there were ten thousand second and third graders in the Bronx who would have qualified for it.) One achievement of the city's outgoing mayor, Eric Adams—who has dyslexia and campaigned in part as an education reformer—is that the city has begun screening for risk of dyslexia in all students from kindergarten through ninth grade.

Earlier intervention would make everything easier. Gaab told me that she thinks of reading as beginning in utero, since that's when sound and language perception begins. Seidenberg, in "Language at the Speed of Sight," cites a

longitudinal study, employing electroencephalography, in which measurements of brain activity in newborns in response to speech "were strongly related to the same children's spoken language skills at ages three and five and to reading impairments at age eight." Such findings constitute a powerful argument for identifying children at risk as early as possible, when the differences are smaller and children who have difficulties are less likely to have suffered negative effects of any kind. One of the most telling indicators in young children, Seidenberg told me, is family history. (Caroline has an uncle who struggled all through school with what he suspects is dyslexia.) Gaab and her colleagues have been working with librarians and pediatricians to create a screening protocol.

I went back to S.B.L.A. the week before Thanksgiving and visited several classes with Poolman. In one, five students sat around a U-shaped desk. The teacher sat in the center and could see all the children's papers without moving. "All right, guys. I'm going to say a sentence," she said. "Then I'm going to say it again. You're going to repeat it, and then you're going to write it. Ready? They can swim. They can swim."

"The teachers provide scaffolds, and there's a whole science to that, because you don't want to give students more than is necessary," Poolman said. The teacher dictated another sentence. One boy wrote a "d" backward, like a "b," but the teacher looked at him and then at the word, and he spotted his mistake. Poolman continued, "If he hadn't understood, she would have said something, but she didn't give him more than she had to. Teachers have to learn to do that. It isn't easy."

Music played over the P.A. system to mark the end of the period. Poolman and I stood in the center of the main hallway, and students streamed past on either side. "That girl who just went by is in her third year here," she said. "When she started, she could not read a word. In reading class, she would put her head down on her desk and fall asleep—like, anxiety-induced narcolepsy." Gradually, though, she had come around. "I remember the day she read aloud for the first time," Poolman said. "She was so excited that she was shaking." ♦





## PREMEDITATED

BY ANTHONY LANE

**T**ipped for the Oscars, “Hamnet” was released on November 26th. When the movie showed at film festivals, the director, Chloé Zhao, invited the audience to join her in an act of collective meditation before the screening. Among her instructions: “Close your eyes,” “Feel your own weight,” “Take deep breaths with sound,” “Sigh out loud,” and “Gently say to yourself, ‘This is my heart. These are our hearts.’”

Would this ritual not have improved the viewing experience of many earlier films?

### “Gladiator”

Close your eyes. Breathe in. Know that you are not alone. Three seats to your left, for instance, is a tiger. As you hear it noisily devouring the two moviegoers between you, sense how deeply you are tuned in to the rhythms of the natural world. Now reach beneath your seat. There you will find a helmet, a trident, and a shield. These will protect you, though not for long. Gather your peacefulness, turn to the tiger, and declare, “My name is Maximus Ridiculus Dave, buyer of an overpriced ticket, slurper of an outsized Coke, and I will watch my movie, in this theatre or the next.”

### “The Lord of the Rings”

Close your eyes. Breathe in. Light a pipe. Breathe out. Rejoice in the hair that is growing on your feet. Open your eyes and wonder, in awe, why you are now too short in stature to see the movie screen. Reach down. Your hand will meet a buttery carpet of dropped popcorn, half a hot dog, and what feels like a tiny ring of cold metal lying on the floor. It could be a turning point in your life. Probably best to leave it where it is.

### “Titanic”

Close your eyes. Breathe in. Give yourself up to the waves of togetherness that lap at you and those around you. When the lapping reaches your knees, start to worry. Swiftly remove your clothes so that you can be sketched in pencil by the untrained artist sitting beside you. As the sound of Céline Dion unites the rest of the audience in harmony, their arms flung wide, you may choose to join in with the singing. Alternatively, drown.

### “Ghost”

Close your eyes. Breathe in. Place one leg on either side of the pottery wheel in front of your seat. Take the large

lump of gray clay that you purchased at the concession stand and place it atop the wheel. Lean back and allow yourself to be cradled in the naked arms of the person behind you. Feel enveloped in universal tenderness. Now tread lightly on the pedal. Use the palms of your hands to squeeze the clay inward. Caution: do not pedal too fast. This may cause gobs of wet clay to fly sideways into the hair of other moviegoers. If they’d wanted that kind of action, they would have attended the meditation session for “There’s Something About Mary” instead.

### “Psycho”

Close your eyes. Breathe in. Feel your own weight. Do not feel your mother. Ask yourself whether, all things considered, it was a good idea to bring her along.

### “The Wizard of Oz”

Close your eyes. Breathe in. Seek your heart, and try not to freak out when you discover that it isn’t there. Intone the mantra “I am made of tin, I am made of tin.” Open one eye. Look to your left, where you will see a moviegoer stuffing her ears with straw and batting off crows. Look to your right, where another patron, clad in the skin of a lion, will be cowering under his seat. Sigh out loud and chant, at one with the audience, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” (Note: if you *are* in Kansas, this part of the ritual may be skipped. Customers at the Orpheum Theatre in Wichita will be offered a free bag of Candy Munchkins in compensation.)

### “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre”

Close your eyes. On second thought, don’t. Put on safety glasses. Breathe in. Engage the chain brake. Keep your left arm straight. Depress the decompression valve (if your model has one). Pull the starter cord with your right hand. Repeat until the engine fires. If the engine is hard to start, apply half throttle. Access the half-throttle function by fully activating the choke. Release the chain brake. Gently say to yourself, “This is my saw. These are our saws.” Let ’em rip. Good luck. ♦

# FOR RICHER OR POORER

*Saying yes to the prenup.*

BY JENNIFER WILSON



*More than forty per cent of millennials and Gen Z-ers claim to have signed one.*

Andrea Zevallos declared 2016 her “year of dating.” She was twenty-seven, working at Universal Studios Hollywood, the theme park, and determined to find love. She calculated it would take three dates a week. By December, she was losing hope. “It was exhausting,” she said. Then, while scrolling OkCupid, she noticed a “cute guy” with a “Hamilton” reference in his handle. His name was Alex Switzky, and like her he was a musical-theatre enthusiast and aspiring screenwriter. He was different from the other men she’d met. On their second date, he started planning a third. Zevallos “was used to L.A. guys cagey about any sort of calendar.” One day, Switzky called her. Accustomed to texts, she assumed that he was about to break up with her. “The most millennial response,” she recalled, laughing. At the time,

Switzky was a tow-truck dispatcher. “I like the phone,” he said.

Five years later, Zevallos was enrolled in an M.F.A. program in screenwriting, and Switzky was working at Final Draft, a screenwriting-software company. One night, after watching “Ted Lasso” over a plate of tahini noodles, Switzky proposed. Zevallos said yes without hesitation, especially because they had already agreed to sign a prenuptial agreement if they married. “What if one of us gets lucky and sells a script?” she had pointed out. “Who would retain that I.P.?”

If you hear “newly engaged couple” and picture a movie montage of dress fittings and wrinkled brows over seating charts, you are missing an increasingly key scene—the moment when someone pops the latest question, *Should we get a prenup?* According to a 2023 Harris poll,

twenty-one per cent of Americans say that they have signed one, up from only three per cent in 2010. Millennial and Gen Z respondents account for most of that uptick, at forty-seven and forty-one per cent, respectively. These figures are nearly impossible to verify—prenups are typically filed in court only in the event of a divorce. But a recent survey by YouGov, in the U.K., at least attitudinally confirms the findings: more than half of those under forty-five said that they want their future partner to sign a prenup.

It used to be that the prenup plot existed to threaten the marriage one. On “Sex and the City,” when Charlotte is advised to negotiate after being served a prenup that puts her on a vesting schedule, she grumbles, “Negotiate? I can’t even buy stuff on sale.” Now prenups show up across the cultural landscape as part of basic financial hygiene. Bethenny Frankel, formerly of “The Real Housewives of New York City,” appeared on the podcast “Call Her Daddy” and encouraged listeners to get a prenup, citing her ten-year divorce battle; one online comment read, “Louder for the people in the back,” with a clap emoji. Zola, a wedding-planning site, has a “How to Do a Prenup Party in Style” guide, suggesting you commemorate your prenup in a “leather-bound book engraved with both of your names and the date of signing.” It’s quite the vibe shift from the “Seinfeld” episode in which George asks his fiancée for a prenup in the hope that she’ll be so offended she’ll call off the wedding.

Today’s younger generations tend to favor easy exits. Earlier this year, the *Times* reported that Gen Z is skittish about opening bar tabs. “If we want to move somewhere else, it’s a lot harder to close out and then leave,” one reveller said. If divorce is the ultimate settling up, then it’s fortunate for this cohort that planning to part has never been simpler. The past few years have seen the rise of new apps such as HelloPrenup, Wenup, and Neptune that fast-track the process; the latter has couples discuss their finances with an A.I. chatbot before being matched, by algorithm, with a lawyer. In 2024, Libby Leffler, Sheryl Sandberg’s former chief of staff at Facebook (now Meta), publicly launched an online prenup company called First. There, users could at one point take a quiz with multiple-choice questions, including “When you think of



the future, it looks like . . . ?” One possible answer: “Shared goals, different playlists.”

Zevallos and Switzky opted to use HelloPrenup after seeing it on an episode of “Shark Tank.” With the tagline “Love, Meet Logic,” the app, which charges five hundred and ninety-nine dollars per contract, asks standard questions about alimony and real estate but also offers cutting-edge optional clauses. The Social Image Clause sets a financial penalty for posting “humiliating or disrespectful” content about your ex online. With the Embryo Clause, you can decide how you want to allocate your frozen embryos and who will pay for storage fees. There’s also a clause that reimburses for home renovations—save your Lowe’s receipts. For research purposes, I created an account to draft a prenup ahead of my fake wedding to Harry Styles. There was a helpful tutorial: If we live in California but get married in Hawaii, which state should we write the prenup for? I guessed California. A friendly voice replied, “Correct. Ten points for Gryffindor!”

I’m a millennial, part of the generation that has famously spent our down payments for a house on avocado toast. What, I wondered, are people who don’t have much to begin with so worried about losing? “This generation just doesn’t trust marriage,” Kaylin Dillon, a thirty-eight-year-old financial adviser who calls herself the Prenup Coach, told me. Young couples come to her, she said, because she’s willing to strategize both joint and individual plans to grow wealth. After all, roughly twenty-five per cent of millennials are the children of divorce or separation. (By the mid-eighties, most states had adopted no-fault divorce laws, leading to a spike in divorce rates.) Adam Newell, the creator of a “Bravo-focused” YouTube channel called “Up and Adam!,” told me that his parents have been divorced eleven times between the two of them. “Your whole life is uprooted,” he said of the constant moves. Before marrying his husband, he wanted a prenup stating that he could keep his Palm Beach home. Though premarital assets are separate by law, they can become shared if you start, well, sharing them—in some states, for instance, by moving your spouse into a home you purchased solo and opting to significantly remodel together. (The legal term is “commingling.”)

Millennials and Gen Z-ers also ac-

count for nearly forty per cent and thirty per cent, respectively, of the country’s student-loan borrowers, who collectively hold \$1.8 trillion in debt. Elizabeth Carter, a matrimonial-law professor at Louisiana State University who advises First, told me that if you pay off a pre-marriage student loan with funds earned during the marriage, without a prenup, you could be required to reimburse your spouse for a portion of those funds post-divorce. “I always liked to teach that around Halloween,” she said. “You know, something scary.”

Prenups have also benefitted from a rebrand. In the past, the word conjured visions of a wealthy man trying to sniff out a gold-digger by sealing off his assets. Now prenups are being pitched to young professional women as a way to take charge of their finances and insure better remuneration. Leffler, in an op-ed for *Fortune*, encouraged brides-to-be to lean in: “We would never launch a startup without equity agreements or join a company without understanding our compensation package. Why are any of us willing to say ‘I do’ without a clear financial framework?” The personal-finance influencer Vivian Tu, a.k.a. Your Rich BFF, posted a TikTok for her 2.7 million followers titled “What’s in my prenup (and my purse)!”

Clause by clause, the contemporary prenup offers a window into how money, the nature of work, and what even counts as an asset are in flux. (HelloPrenup has a blog post on crypto and one called “How to Protect Your Labubu.”) But can an online contract made without a lawyer (unless you pay extra) really anticipate all the plot twists of happily ever after? And is there a price to pay for all this frantic accounting, the Splitwise-and-Venmo-ization of marriage?

Switzky and Zevallos eventually decided that any I.P. they create individually would be listed as “separate property,” though they admitted that the divvying up has proved tricky day to day. “If one of us comes up with an idea, one of the first things that we do is ask, ‘O.K., who owns this?’” Switzky told me. “Is this mine? Is this yours? Ours?”

This fall, I went to a recording studio in Chelsea to meet Julia Rodgers, the Boston-based C.E.O. and founder of HelloPrenup, who was in New York taping episodes of “The HelloPrenup

Podcast,” which highlights trends in dating and in divorce law. Lauren Laverder, her C.M.O., greeted me in a light-blue sweatshirt that read “You *had me at hello* prenup.” We sat in a control room and watched Rodgers interview an attorney named Lisa Zeiderman about the impact of A.I. in divorce cases. Rodgers asked whether a relationship with an A.I. companion could violate an infidelity clause. “Yes, and you can absolutely subpoena messages with a chatbot,” Zeiderman replied. “I tell all my clients, ‘Be careful how much you start confiding.’”

The next morning, I met Rodgers for brunch in SoHo at Sadelle’s, one of the last places Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez were photographed together before announcing their divorce. (Reportedly, there was no prenup.) Rodgers, who is thirty-eight, scanned the menu through tortoiseshell glasses before settling on avocado toast.

I had first seen Rodgers in a clip from “Shark Tank.” She and her co-founder, Sarabeth Jaffe, had pitched their startup in 2021 while wearing wedding dresses. Initially, it didn’t look as though they were going to get an “I do.” “People who want prenups are going to a lawyer,” Robert Herjavec, one of the show’s investors, or sharks, argued. Then Rodgers said the magic words: “Sixty trillion dollars.” She was referring to the Great Wealth Transfer, the unprecedented sums that baby boomers have begun passing down to their children—some estimates put the figure at more than a hundred and twenty trillion dollars—and want to protect. Millennials “go online,” she said. “They find HelloPrenup. They satisfy their parents. They create a valid prenuptial agreement, and they’re done.” She made it sound as seamless as Seamless.

Two other sharks, Nirav Tolia, the co-founder of Nextdoor, and Kevin O’Leary, a software tycoon, were convinced. “Marriage is the ultimate startup,” O’Leary told me. “Every startup has a business plan. Why isn’t marriage the same way?” Tolia and O’Leary received a thirty-per-cent stake in HelloPrenup. In exchange, Rodgers and Jaffe got a hundred and fifty thousand dollars and millions of eyeballs. Now, at least according to internal data, one in five couples nationwide who initiate the prenup process do so through HelloPrenup; the company attracts five thousand users

per month and says that it “safeguards” \$26.7 billion in assets.

All founders have an origin story involving some intractable problem that they simply could not accept. For Rodgers, it was paper. Her mother was a matrimonial attorney, and Rodgers, as part of her childhood chores, organized stacks and stacks of financial-disclosure documents, including for couples getting prenups. There had to be a better way, she would later say. While attending Suffolk University Law School, she took a class called Lawyers and Smart Machines, on how to automate certain legal processes. “They taught us coding, which I did not excel in,” she admitted. That’s where Jaffe, an engineer, later came in, though the two eventually had their own split. (Rodgers preferred not to go into detail.)

Rodgers began developing her platform a few years after graduating from law school, just before her own wedding, to another lawyer. “We were the first couple to use HelloPrenup,” she said. “We were the test case.” She and her husband had met on Match.com—“old school,” she noted—and got married in 2019, in Newport, Rhode Island, at the picturesque Castle Hill Inn, overlooking Narragansett Bay. “Oh, my God, I had the best wedding. I had the *best* wedding,” she said.

Surveying the scene at Sadelle’s, we guessed where Affleck and Lopez might have sat. “It’s so crowded,” Rodgers observed. “Maybe in the back somewhere.” We started discussing the end of her own marriage. She and her husband had a baby in 2020, and the onset of the pandemic left them without family help. “He’s a patent litigator. He was very busy. I was working as an attorney, plus trying to build this business,” she said. “It was just, like, pressure on pressure on pressure.” They divorced in 2022.

But the COVID lockdown also primed HelloPrenup for success. No one wanted to visit a lawyer’s office. “Everything was becoming digitized in a really rapid way,” Rodgers said. By early 2021, roughly two and a half million women had left the labor force, in what became known as a she-cession. An article on HelloPrenup’s site sounded off: “Who was expected to stay home, watch the kids, become a pseudo-teacher, take care of household responsibilities and manage to still be at their work-from-home desk eight hours a day? Women.” Amid the ashes of girl-

boss feminism, Rodgers saw opportunity. “Prenups can solve for the motherhood penalty, because you can have an equalization clause,” she told me, explaining that a greater share of assets could compensate for a stay-at-home parent’s lost earning potential.

Rodgers refers to prenups as “the modern vow,” as they can govern finances and other major life decisions *during* marriage. Couples today want those choices to be made in the spirit of equality and backed by a contract. “They ask, ‘Are our in-laws going to move in? Are we going to buy a house or do the FIRE method and travel the world?’” FIRE is a life style popular with millennials and Gen Z marked by extreme saving and aggressive investment; it stands for “Financial Independence, Retire Early.” An elder millennial, I had to look it up.

**I**n February of 1990, it was reported that Donald and Ivana Trump were divorcing, after thirteen years of marriage. The news dominated the headlines. “They ran it before the story out of South Africa,” one outraged New Yorker told a local TV crew, referring to the release of Nelson Mandela from prison that week. People immediately began speculating about the spoils. “It’s not just a marriage on the line. It’s Donald Trump’s reputation as a deal-maker,” the journalist Richard Roth declared on CBS News. The couple had a prenup—and three “postnups”—allegedly granting Ivana around twenty million dollars, a fraction of Trump’s purported five-billion-dollar fortune. “IVANA BETTER DEAL,” read the cover of the *Daily News*. In a skit on “Saturday Night Live,” Jan Hooks, playing Ivana, balks at the prenup: “That contract is invalid. You have a mistress, Donald.” (There were rumors that Trump had been unfaithful with a Southern beauty queen named Marla Maples.) Phil Hartman, playing Trump, flips through the pages of the contract before saying, “According to Section 5, Paragraph 2, I’m allowed to have mistresses provided they are younger than you.”

The prenup largely held. Ivana got a measly fourteen million, a mansion in Greenwich, an apartment in Trump Plaza, and the use of Mar-a-Lago for one month a year. But it was understandable that the public thought that Trump’s entire empire might be at stake. In the eighties, prenups were usually in the news for getting

tossed out. In 1990, *Vanity Fair* reported that Steven Spielberg was ordered to pay his ex-wife, the actress Amy Irving, a hundred million dollars after a judge voided their prenup, which had allegedly been scrawled on a scrap of paper. (Irving conveyed through a representative that “there was no prenup ever even discussed.”)

For much of the twentieth century, judges almost always refused to enforce prenups, fearing that they encouraged divorce and thus violated the public good. They were also concerned that measures to limit spousal support could lead to the financially dependent spouse—usually the woman—becoming reliant on welfare. Nonetheless, in the twenties, as divorce rates increased, potentially pricey payouts became a topic of national debate. As the sociologist Brian Donovan observes in the 2020 book “American Gold Digger: Marriage, Money, and the Law from the Ziegfeld Follies to Anna Nicole Smith,” a veritable “alimony panic” set in. To avoid paying any, men transferred deeds, created shell companies, and, in New York, set up “alimony colonies” in out-of-state locales such as Hoboken, where they wouldn’t be served with papers. Even though courts were equally loath to award alimony—“Judges publicly criticized alimony seekers as ‘parasites,’” Donovan writes—the perception that men were being fleeced persisted. I was reminded of the 1959 film “North by Northwest,” in which the executive Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) gets lured into a dangerous mission and protests by quipping, “I’ve got a job, a secretary, a mother, two ex-wives, and several bartenders dependent upon me.”

Ex-husbands longed for a legal remedy. There had been limited cases since the eighteenth century in which prenuptial contracts were recognized in the U.S., but these typically pertained to the handling of a spouse’s assets after death. The idea of a contract made in anticipation of divorce was considered morally repugnant. In an oft-cited case from 1940, a Michigan judge refused to uphold a prenup, emphasizing that marriage was “not merely a private contract between the parties.” You could not personalize it any more than you could traffic laws.

But by the early seventies there was no stemming the tide of marital dissolution: the divorce rate had doubled from just a decade earlier. In 1970, a land-



mark case, *Posner v. Posner*, was decided in Florida. Victor Posner, a prominent Miami businessman, was divorcing his younger wife, a former salesgirl. He asked the judge to honor the couple's prenup, which granted Mrs. Posner just six hundred dollars a month in alimony. The judge, in his decision, acknowledged the cultural shift: "The concept of the 'sanctity' of a marriage as being practically indissoluble, . . . held by our ancestors only a few generations ago, has been greatly eroded in the last several decades."

As prenups became more regularly enforced, popular culture took note. In a 1976 episode of the sitcom "The Jeffersons"—about a successful African American couple named George and Louise (played by Sherman Hemsley and Isabel Sanford), who own a chain of dry-cleaning shops—a neighbor raises the topic of prenuptial agreements after hearing that the Jeffersons' son is engaged. In 1981, the erotic thriller "Body Heat" updated the plot of "Double Indemnity" for the prenup era. In theory, the femme fatale (Kathleen Turner) could now just get a divorce, under no-fault laws, and live comfortably. "You'll come out all right," her lover (William Hurt) tells her, thinking of alimony. "No, I signed a prenuptial agreement," she corrects him. "What?" he responds, before the movie gives "contract killer" a whole new meaning.

It was in the eighties, though, that prenups truly began to "trend up," as Patricia Hennessey, a divorce attorney who teaches at Columbia Law School, told me. When I visited her office in midtown, I spied a copy of the *DSM-IV* in her bookcase and asked her about it. "Of course I have the *DSM-IV*—for custody cases," she replied. Hennessey started her career as a matrimonial lawyer in 1987, working under the divorce attorney Harriet Newman Cohen, whose clients have included Tom Brady and Andrew Cuomo. It was an exciting time to be a divorce lawyer, depending on what excites you: "All kinds of things were beginning to change then, like property distribution," Hennessey said.

In the early eighties, following protests by women's organizations, New York State had passed a new law that declared that all marital assets would no longer go by default to the titleholder—typically the husband—but would have to be divided according to "equitable distribution." Judges were given a number

of factors to consider in determining what was equitable, including the contributions of a "homemaker" to the other spouse's "career or career potential." "It encapsulated the idea of marriage as an economic partnership," Hennessey said. "The person who stayed home and took care of the kids so that the other person could go out and, as one judge put it, 'slay the dragons of Wall Street' was considered equal to the person bringing in the money. That was a real sea change. Women started getting a lot more of the marital assets." Requests for prenups in New York skyrocketed.

But if equitable distribution has long been on the books, I asked Hennessey, why are prenups being touted now as a method to protect stay-at-home mothers? Wasn't the law already on their side? She explained that the law is one thing; the interpretation of it is another. "I don't think judges can stop themselves from seeing facts through the prism of their own experience," she said. Questions can arise about how often stay-at-home parents—eighty per cent of whom are women—actually cooked or cleaned. In contrast, she observed, "nobody ever says about the husband, 'He didn't make enough money.'"

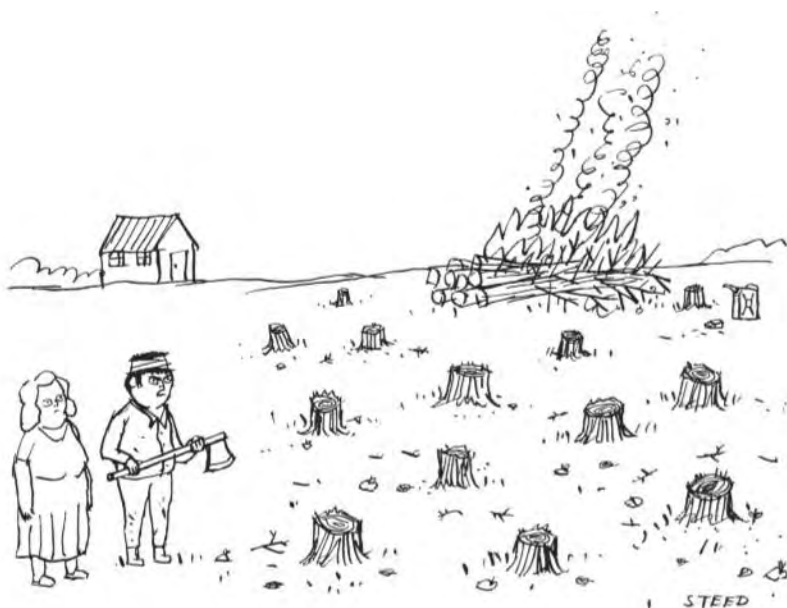
During the next few weeks, I sat in on Hennessey's matrimonial-law class. I learned that in most European countries couples getting a marriage license check a box to choose a separate- or joint-property scheme. Nothing like that exists here. "You want to drive a car in

New York State, they give you a big, big manual and then they test you," Hennessey said. "You want to get married in New York, you pay thirty-five dollars to the clerk and they say, 'Good luck.'"

One student asked whether saying "I won't marry you if you don't sign a prenup" counts as duress, which invalidates the contract. Many have attempted to challenge prenups on those grounds, Hennessey said—*The wedding invitations had already gone out!* But, she explained, "it's only *legal* duress if the person says, 'Sign this now or I will shoot you.' It makes no sense to those of us who live in the world, because emotional duress is just as painful—if not worse."

On a chilly afternoon, I made my way to Enso Cafe, in Park Slope, to meet Sol Lee, the creator of Neptune, the A.I.-assisted prenup app. I found Lee, who is thirty-four, sitting on a leather couch, wearing a beige fleece sweatshirt, straight-leg jeans, and neon-green sneakers—what she calls her "founder uniform." Her brown hair fell just below her shoulders. She told me that her husband cuts it. "He says, 'I'm hooking my talons in so you can't leave me,'" she said. "Because I do prenups, we can kind of joke."

Lee previously worked at Mastercard, Uber, and a V.C. fund, and also launched, then shuttered, a skin-care health-tech startup. She got the idea for Neptune, she said, while weighing whether to do a prenup herself. It occurred to her that



*"I got the idea when an apple fell out of a tree and hit me on the head."*

this was a prime opportunity to explore A.I.'s capacity as "a tool for emotional navigation." Lee said that three thousand users have conversed with the company's chatbot since its soft launch, in 2024.

At the café, Lee wanted to show me a new analog feature—Fight Night, a card game to help couples brainstorm what they might want in a prenup. "It's still in beta," she warned. The cards fell into categories including debt, inheritance, pets. (Although prenups can't legally dictate custody arrangements for human children, they can for the four-legged kind.) Lee read a sample card: "Money earned during the marriage is, one, fully shared; two, fully separate; or, three, a mix of fully shared and separate." I held up three fingers to her one. "We're not aligned!" I exclaimed. I confessed that I didn't want to have to pay for someone's overpriced gym membership. Some couples consider that a shared bill, Lee said. "Because I would benefit from looking at my spouse?" I joked. "Dead-ass," she replied. I noticed Lee's ring, a huge sparkler, and complimented her. "Thanks, it's in the prenup," she said. "It was important to my husband that it stay in his family."

Prenup signers are making decisions on behalf of their future selves—who will get the house we might one day buy with money we don't and might never have—with greater ease than I can decide what I want for dinner. But today's work culture seems to invite a certain amount of projection. More than thirty-five per cent of both millennials and Gen Z-ers identify as entrepreneurs. Neptune features a "startup equity calculator" on its website. Many young people earn part

of their income as content creators on TikTok or Instagram. One law firm in San Francisco has even begun marketing prenups to #tradwives; an ex-husband could, after all, argue that he was integral to the brand.

I often got the sense that prenups were aspirational. Recently, *New York* did an exposé on non-celebrities who require their dates to sign N.D.A.s, to telegraph their own importance. Were prenups a version of that? If you can't have Kanye West's money, you can nonetheless shout, "We want prenup!," a line from "Gold Digger." Lee told me that one couple on Neptune included a clause stating that if the marital pool reached five million they'd both waive spousal support. "I really like that, because it's a positive incentive you're creating in what's a negative document," she said. One of Wenup's clients told me that she was encouraged to consider a prenup, in part, after listening to the audiobook of "I Will Teach You to Be Rich," by Ramit Sethi.

I wasn't unsympathetic. Who wouldn't, amid all the current recession indicators, crave some modicum of control over one's future financials? But there was a thin line, I noticed, between managing and manifesting. I spoke to a New York-based theatre actress in her thirties who works part time at Lululemon. Earlier this year, she married a finance guy. At her suggestion, they signed up for Hello-Prenup. She wanted any property purchased in the marriage to be in the name of the person who paid for it. This surprised me as, by her own admission, that person was likely to be her husband. "He's the breadwinner in his, like, hedge-

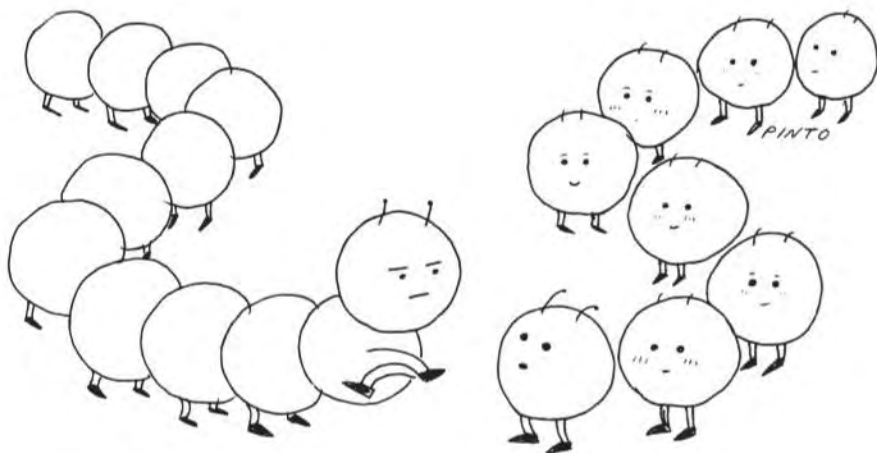
fund job," she conceded. "But I'm an actress, so there's a chance, if I get a movie or show or whatever, I can make a lot of money." She also insisted on an infidelity clause that initially came with a fifty-thousand-dollar penalty per act of cheating. Her then fiancé responded, "You don't even have fifty thousand dollars." That didn't matter, she told me: "I need it to hurt."

**S**haron Thompson, a professor of family law at Cardiff University, in Wales, began researching prenups in 2010, when the Supreme Court first gave them "decisive weight" across England and Wales. That year, the court upheld a prenup between a German paper-company heiress and her ex-husband, an Oxford researcher making thirty thousand pounds a year. Hoping to anticipate what impact the case would have on British culture, Thompson travelled to New York City to interview divorce lawyers, conducting a kind of anthropology of the prenup.

Thompson observed that prenup signers could suffer from "optimism bias." Though most have heard that the divorce rate is fifty per cent, she said, "for themselves, they'll say, 'No, we're never breaking up.'" Optimism bias could lead people to agree to unfavorable terms, as in the case of a woman who signed an especially stingy prenup. When her lawyer, whom Thompson interviewed, asked the groom-to-be what his client was getting out of it, he answered, "Marrying a doctor!"

Similarly, in a 1998 article titled "Bargaining in the Shadow of Love: The Enforcement of Premarital Agreements and How We Think About Marriage," the American legal scholar Brian Bix wrote about the limits of rationality in negotiating prenups: "Society should be skeptical about the ability of the earlier self to judge the interests and preferences of the later self." Bix's prescription for drafting a clear-eyed prenup was, perhaps unsurprisingly, to have each party employ a good lawyer, someone who has seen every way a marriage can fail, who has heard more sad stories than can fit inside the Country Music Hall of Fame.

I flew to Tennessee to meet Rose Palermo, the so-called divorce queen of Nashville, whose clients have included Wynonna Judd and Billy Ray Cyrus. Palermo had recently handled Cyrus's split from an Australian singer-songwriter



*"Sorry we lied about being a centipede, but we all really, really liked you."*



named Firerose. Firerose received no spousal support but was entitled to royalties for the songs that she and Cyrus co-wrote, including “After the Storm,” a ballad about overcoming hard times with the help of the right partner. It was released in March of 2024; come May, Cyrus would file for divorce. Behind Palermo’s desk, I noticed a signed handwritten letter from Tammy Wynette. “But I thought she stood by her man,” I said. “She did,” Palermo replied. “About four times.”

Palermo began practicing law in the seventies. Back then, she specialized in protecting up-and-coming country-music stars from predatory contracts or fraudsters. “People would take their money, promise fame, then leave town,” she recalled. Divorce law wasn’t a big leap; here, too, were people who’d been banking on a fairy tale.

I told Palermo about some of my reporting. Prenups, I kept hearing, were a way to take some of the emotion and vitriol out of divorce. (“I don’t know how I will feel about future Alex,” Zevallos told me. “But I want to look out for him now, because right now I love him.”) Was it true that they helped ease the pain? “No, no, no!” Palermo objected, laughing so hard that I thought she was going to knock a pit-bull paperweight right off her desk. “Someone should tell my clients that,” she said. “They keep writing divorce albums.” She stopped to text Kacey Musgraves, a client whose divorce album, “Star-Crossed,” came out in 2021, to tell her that she was being interviewed by a journalist from New York. Musgraves texted back, “You’re iconic.”

Then Palermo got serious. “You’re hoping when you have this prenup you’re going to eliminate all the arguments.” But, she added, “if you have one person that’s ended up being a bigger star than the other, there’s a lot of hostility. It’s ‘You’re going to have all this, and I’m not going to have anything, and I made you what you are.’” There was no contract that could save you from a broken heart or your own broken dreams. I asked Palermo if she’d heard a song by the country singer Nicolle Galyon called “prenup.” It’s about a couple with nothing who jokingly consider getting one—“You’d get half of my Christian college loans/Half of my first Nokia phone.” I played it for Palermo. After the bridge—“Ain’t gonna

sign no dotted line/What’s mine is yours and yours is mine”—Palermo said, “I love it,” but she didn’t sound convinced.

“Would you get a prenup?” nearly everyone asked when I said I was working on this story. Previously I would have said no, because I’m not a Kardashian. The apps that charge five hundred and ninety-nine dollars a pop aim to bring prenups to the masses, but is that whom they really serve? Prenups essentially exist to override laws that split assets equally, or at least equitably; they generally favor the spouse who has more. (When Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce announced their engagement, one X user joked, “that prenup is about to be longer than any book Travis Kelce has ever read.”) James Sexton, a divorce attorney who founded Trusted Prenup, another app, is a frequent guest of manosphere podcasters such as Andrew Huberman and Andrew Schultz. Sexton accuses his app competitors of being all “girlboss marketing,” and he told me that, despite efforts to democratize prenups, the stereotype remains true: “It’s still more often than not the Goldman Sachs guy marrying a yoga teacher who wants to protect his money.” Did prenups actually have anything to offer the average couple?

I took my questions to Alexia Korberg, the executive director of Her Justice, a nonprofit that provides free legal representation for women and gender minorities living in poverty in New York City, with about six thousand clients annually. Since 2018, it has run the Financial Freedom Project, which supports women facing economic crisis, including as a result of divorce. Korberg told me that those living in poverty are typically splitting not assets but debts. In many cases, it’s “coerced debt”—the result of credit-card applications filled out by a spouse without a partner’s knowledge, for instance.

I expected that Korberg and her colleague Anna Maria Diamanti, Her Justice’s supervising attorney, would regard prenups as a frivolous luxury item. “They’re a privatized solution to a social problem,” I offered, thinking of the motherhood penalty. They didn’t disagree, but they told me that younger generations

might be seeking out prenups because there’s greater awareness now of the cost of litigation, both financial and emotional. Even if a prenup only re-states the law, it can neutralize a vengeful ex. “If my prenup says, you know, My 401(k) coming into the marriage is my own, my house that I inherited from my family is my own, then you’re not going to risk having to litigate it later, or litigating it might be much cheaper,” Diamanti said. And litigation, she observed, can become a form of abuse. She sees some partners “file motion after motion just to wear down their victim, just to force them to try to walk away with less.”

Korberg noted that a prenup is educational. “It compels you to learn what is the law in the state of New York, so you don’t have these expectations that you’re entitled to this or to that.” It’s true that, when I spoke to the Neptune chatbot, I learned that debt taken on by a spouse, in that person’s name, could become my responsibility if I “benefited from the debt.” I asked the chatbot what that meant. It replied that, if my partner took out a car loan but I also drove the vehicle, I was benefitting. I didn’t know this, despite having been both married and divorced in the state of New York.

What was the verdict—were prenups good or bad? I had heard both sides, the prosecution and the defense, and had pored over all the evidence only to conclude, well, it depends. Was I spending too much time with lawyers? Definitely, but can anyone really speak generally about a contract that was created to individualize? We sign prenups in pen, but our lives are written in pencil; plans can easily get erased, vows smudged to the point of illegibility. “That’s why older people cry at weddings,” one divorce attorney told me. “Because we know that young couples don’t know what they’re getting into.” I did see the value of at least considering a prenup. The conversation alone is a kind of personality test. Are you about to marry a person who wants to be reimbursed for the wallpaper you put in the nursery, who doesn’t want to help you pay off your student loans, who wants the ring back? Or does this person look at you and think, I want to give this woman everything. ♦



# LAST HIGHWAY

*How Willie Nelson sees America.*

BY ALEX ABRAMOVICH

When Willie Nelson performs in and around New York, he parks his bus in Weehawken, New Jersey. While the band sleeps at a hotel in midtown Manhattan, he stays on board, playing dominoes, napping. Nelson keeps musician's hours. For exercise, he does sit-ups, arm rolls, and leg lifts. He jogs in place. "I'm in pretty good shape, physically, for ninety-two," he told me recently. "Woke up again this morning, so that's good."

On September 12th, Nelson drove down to the Freedom Mortgage Pavilion, in Camden. His band, a four-piece, was dressed all in black; Nelson wore black boots, black jeans, and a Bobby Bare T-shirt. His hair, which is thicker and darker than it appears under stage lights, hung in two braids to his waist. A scrim masked the front of the stage, and he walked out unseen, holding a straw cowboy hat. Annie, his wife of thirty-four years, rubbed his back and shoulders. A few friends watched from the wings: members of Sheryl Crow's band, which had opened for him, and John Doe, the old punk musician, who had flown in from Austin. (At the next show, in Holmdel, Bruce Springsteen showed up.) Out front, big screens played the video for Nelson's 1986 single "Living in the Promiseland."

"Promiseland" joined Nelson's pre-show in the spring, after ICE ramped up its raids on immigrants. The lyrics speak on behalf of newcomers: "Give us your tired and weak/And we will make them strong/Bring us your foreign songs/And we will sing along." The video cuts between footage of Holocaust survivors arriving on Liberty ships and of Haitian migrants on wooden boats. In Camden—two nights after the assassination of Charlie Kirk, one night after the State Department warned immigrants against "praising"

his murder, hours after bomb threats forced the temporary closure of seven historically Black colleges—the images hit hard. When the video ended, three things happened at once: stagehands yanked the scrim away, Nelson sang the first notes of "Whiskey River," and a giant American flag unfurled behind him.

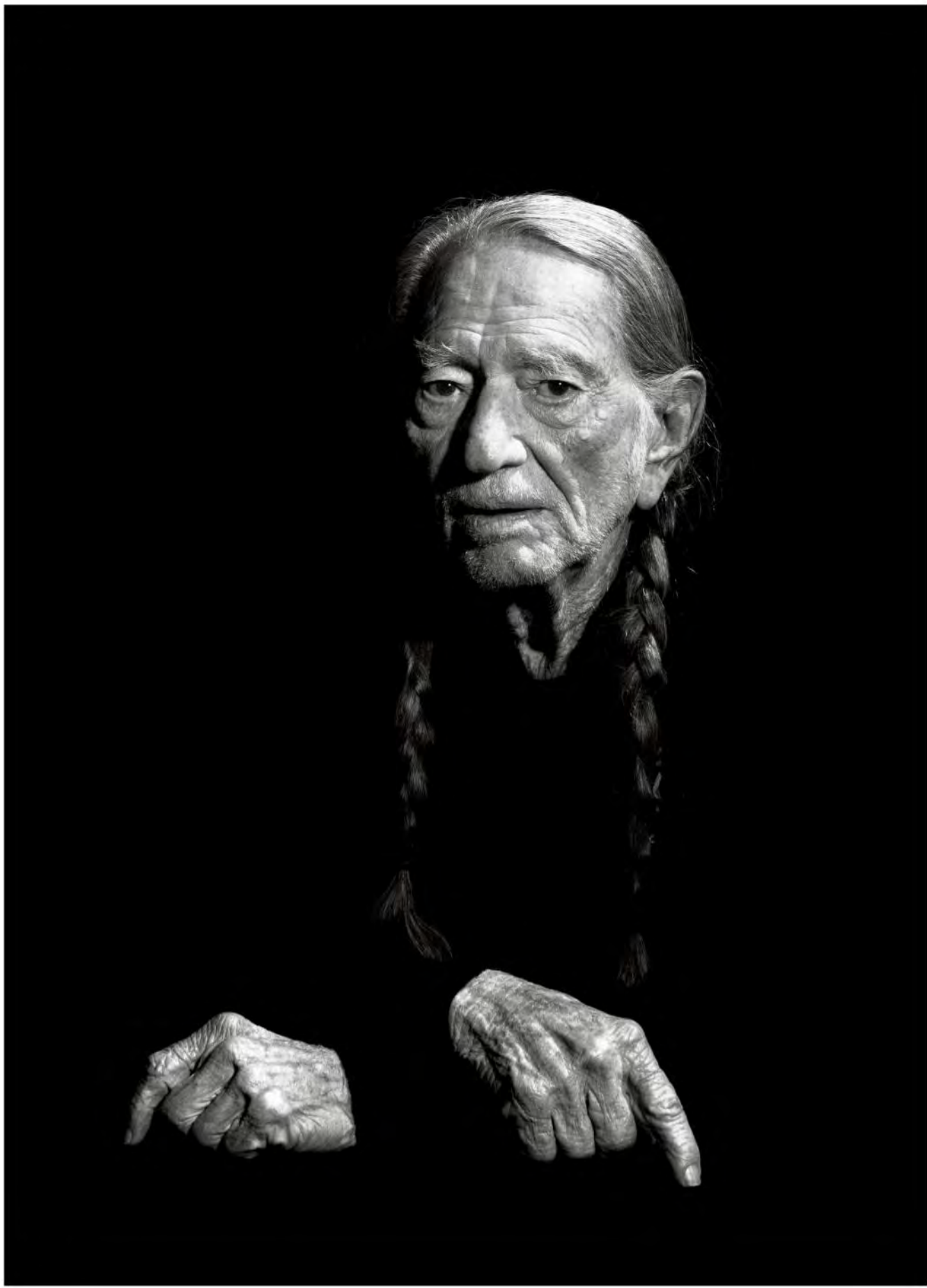
"Whiskey River" has been Nelson's opener for decades. He tends to start it with a loud, ringing G chord, struck nine times, like a bell. On this night, he sat out the beginning and took the first solo instead, strumming forcefully, pushing the tempo. "I don't know what I'm going to do when I pick up a guitar," Nelson said. He plays to find out, discovering new ways into songs he's been singing, in some cases, since he was a child. "Willie loves to play music more than anyone I've ever met," the musician Norah Jones told me. "He can't stop, and he shouldn't." For Nelson, music is medicine—he won't do the lung exercises his doctors prescribe, but "singing for an hour is good for you," he says. His daughter Amy put it more bluntly: "I think it's literally keeping him alive."

Last year, Nelson didn't make it to every performance. On those nights, his older son, Lukas, filled in. At the end of the tour, no one knew if Nelson would go out again; five months later, he did. I started following him in February, in Florida. In Key West, Lukas and Annie flanked Nelson as he sat and rested before going on. Annie had her hand on the small of his back and Lukas on his shoulder; they looked like two cornermen coaxing a boxer back into the ring. Nelson suffers from emphysema. He barely survived COVID-19. (He got so sick he wanted to die; Annie told him if he did she would kill him.) His voice is still inky, he struggles for air, but he stays in charge, or lets go, as the moment requires.

"I'm definitely following Willie," Nelson's harmonica player, Mickey Raphael, told me. "He sets the tempo. He picks the songs." Raphael is tall, with dark, curly hair and the easy swagger of a man who has spent his life onstage. When he started with Nelson, in 1973, there was no set list. Every night was "stream of consciousness," catch-as-catch-can. Now, even with set lists taped to the carpet, Nelson might switch songs or skip ahead, lose his way, or drop verses—things he did as a younger man, too. At the end of a number that's really careened, he'll look over his shoulder and cross his arms in an umpire's safe sign. "We made it," he's telling Raphael on these occasions. "We're home."

Nelson's sense of home is elastic. For a long time, it was wherever work took him. In the fifties, when he was a young husband and father, in Texas, he washed dishes, trimmed trees, pumped gas, tooled saddles; he sold Bibles, Singer sewing machines, and Kirby vacuum cleaners door to door and drifted through a string of small-station radio jobs in Pleasanton, Denton, and Fort Worth. He was working as a d.j. at KVAN in Vancouver, Washington, when Mae Boren Axton, who co-wrote "Heartbreak Hotel," came by the studio. Nelson played her a tape of his songs. She told him to seek his fortune in Nashville or back in Texas, where he ended up teaching guitar out of Mel Bay books, staying one lesson ahead of his students and writing extraordinary songs—"Crazy," "Night Life," "Funny How Time Slips Away"—that he offered to other artists for ten dollars apiece. Nelson's oldest child, Lana, told me that when she found out he'd been peddling his songs she was crushed. "Nobody will ever know that you wrote them," she said, "and how





*Nelson has stripped his sound down to its essence. "Like poetry with a rhythm section," his harmonica player said.*

does that help?” “Look,” Nelson told her. “We got groceries.”

Larry Butler led the Sunset Playboys, a band at the Esquire Ballroom, in Houston. He told Nelson that his songs were worth a lot more, lent him fifty dollars, and hired him to play in the group. Others made similar offers—Nelson never forgot them—but there were songs, including “Night Life,” that he had to sell anyway. Twelve times a year, when the rent was due, the family moved. Lana said it never bothered her: “It’s not like you had developed this huge friendship with anybody over that thirty days.”

The idea of home comes up again and again in the songs Nelson wrote during this period, starting with “Misery Mansion,” recorded in 1960 as a rejoinder to “Heartbreak Hotel.” He followed that with “Where My House Lives,” “Lonely Little Mansion,” and “Home Motel”—a “crumbling last resort . . . on Lost Love Avenue.” In “Hello Walls,” Nelson pushes the metaphor to its limit, greeting not just the walls but the ceiling and the windows: “Is that a teardrop in the corner of your pane? / Now don’t you try to tell me that it’s rain.” The suffering in these songs is almost comical, but the hurt under the wordplay was real. Faron Young’s 1961 recording of “Hello Walls” became Nelson’s first No. 1 hit in Nashville, where he spent the sixties, until he finally grew to suspect that, for him, home might not be any one place at all.

“That’s his living room,” Nelson’s lighting director, Budrock Prewitt, told me on the road to Camden. He meant the stage—specifically, a twelve-by-thirty-two-foot maroon rug that Nelson’s crew rolls out at each venue before putting every instrument, amp, and monitor in the same spot as always. Whenever Nelson needs to replace the bus, a company that he’s been working with for decades re-creates the same interior in the next one, as precisely as possible. And Nelson keeps his buses leased year-round, whether they’re in use or not. “They park up and wait for us to come back,” his production manager, Alex Blagg, told me. “My bunk is my bunk.”

Nelson’s band does not have its own name. On ticket stubs and marquees,

they’re simply Family, as in “Willie Nelson and Family.” For fifty years, Nelson’s sister Bobbie anchored the group from behind a grand piano. She and Willie had a pact: they’d play to the end of the road. When Nelson’s drummer, Paul English, died, he was replaced by his brother, Billy. Jody Payne was Nelson’s longtime guitar player; now his son Waylon plays in the band. Bee Spears started on bass at nineteen and stayed until his death, at sixty-two. Mickey Raphael, who joined the band at twenty-one, is now seventy-four.

Nelson’s road crew is family, too. His tour manager, John Selman, is the son of Wally Selman, who ran the Texas Opry House; he was hired twenty years ago, straight out of college. Prewitt and Larry Gorham, a Hells Angel who handles security, have been with Nelson since the seventies. So has Nelson’s manager, Mark Rothbaum. Rothbaum’s parents fled Poland in 1937; his mother died when he was thirteen. He stopped caring about school. “I was just fucking angry,” Rothbaum told me. He got a job with a business manager in Manhattan. One day, he saw Nelson behind a glass partition at his office, on West Fifty-seventh Street. “He looked like Jesus Christ,” Rothbaum recalled. “He was glowing.” Rothbaum worked his way into the circle. “I adopted them. But I had to do it. I had to become useful.” He and Nelson have never had a contract. “You couldn’t put a piece of paper between us,” he says.

Family members call this Willie World, and it, too, is elastic. When the steel player Jimmy Day drank his way out of it, Nelson didn’t replace him. The steel parts simply disappeared. When Spears went on tour with Guy Clark, Nelson brought in Chris Ethridge, of the Flying Burrito Brothers, to play bass—and, when Spears called and asked to come home, Nelson welcomed him back and kept Ethridge on. For a while, he toured with two bassists and two drummers: a full-tilt-boogie band captured on “Willie and Family Live,” from 1978. At around the same time, Leon Russell joined them on piano, bringing along his saxophone player and the great Nigerian percussionist Ambrose

Campbell. When Grady Martin, the top session player in Nashville, retired from studio recording, he went on the road, too, upping the number of people onstage to eleven. “Willie ran a refugee camp, to some extent,” Steve Earle told me.

Bee Spears died in 2011, Jody Payne in 2013, Paul English in 2020, and Bobbie Nelson in 2022. “The biggest change was Sister Bobbie,” Kevin Smith, who now plays bass, told me. Bobbie outlined the chord structure of every song. After her death, Smith was shocked at how little sound there was onstage. These days, Nelson and Raphael take all the solos. Sets are shorter. Lukas sits in when he’s not out touring on his own; his brother Micah, who plays guitar with Neil Young, joins when he can. But Nelson’s sound has been stripped to its essence. “It’s more like spoken word now,” Raphael said. “Like poetry with a rhythm section.”

Nelson goes from number to number with almost no patter—an approach he learned from the great Texas bandleader Bob Wills, who kept audiences on the dance floor for hours. In Camden, he got through twenty-four songs in sixty-five minutes, pausing only to wipe his brow with a washcloth or to sip from a Willie’s Remedy mug full of warm tea. The set didn’t feel hurried—on “Funny How Time Slips Away,” Nelson gave the song’s ironies and regrets space to sink in—but the crew kept an eye on the clock. After Camden and Holmdel, Nelson was scheduled to play Maryland, Indiana, Wisconsin, and, finally, Farm Aid, at the University of Minnesota: six shows in eight days at the end of eight months on the road. “He just keeps going and going,” Annie said. “He’s Benjamin Buttoning me.”

I ran into Annie in Camden, doing her laundry backstage by the catering station. She and Nelson met in the eighties, on the set of a remake of “Stagecoach.” Annie is two decades younger than Willie. She is sharp, protective, and unflappable, with a wide smile and long, curly hair that she has allowed to go gray. She told me that the build-out for Farm Aid was supposed to have started that day in Minneapolis. CNN was planning a live





*When one of Nelson's tour buses needs to be replaced, he has the interior carefully re-created in the next one.*

telecast. But Teamsters Local 320—made up of custodians, groundskeepers, and food-service workers at the university—had chosen that moment to go on strike. Members of IATSE, the stagehands' union, would not cross the picket line, and neither would Nelson. Cancelling the concert, though, would break faith with the people Farm Aid was meant to serve. "It's not great for us," Annie said. "But who really suffers? The farmers. This year of all years."

Farm Aid was supposed to have been a one-off. Nelson started it with Neil Young and John Mellencamp in 1985, after decades of touring the Farm Belt and watching small farms disappear—in the eighties, they were going under at a rate of one every thirty minutes. Rising interest rates, falling land values, export embargoes, and drought left farmers unable to make payments on loans they'd taken out, often at the urging of the federal government. Farm Aid was meant to send money their way and force the rest of the country to pay attention. The first show, in Champaign, Illinois, raised nine mil-

lion dollars, drew seventy thousand people, and gave family farmers a national stage and an organization that could help as loans came due and the banks moved in. Nelson signed every grant check by hand; he still does. Farm debt is back near its peak in the eighties—higher, by some measures—and rural suicide rates have climbed sharply. "The tariffs are killing farmers," Annie said, "including small family farmers, who get killed the worst." When those farms go under, she said, "the acre traders and hedge funds and J.D. Vance's billionaire buddies" swoop in. "Then we get 'Soylent Green.'"

For Nelson, this is not an adopted cause. His parents and grandparents left Arkansas for Abbott, Texas, in 1929, part of an early-Depression push of Southern farm families into the Blackland Prairie—a stretch of dark, rich soil through the center of the state. Nelson dragged a long sack with a strap across his body through cotton fields when he was small enough to pick bolls from the stalk without bending. "Tried to get as much as you could, because they'd

pay you by the pound," Nelson recalled. "He was literally a child laborer," Amy Nelson told me. Before that, "his grandparents staked him out in the fields so that they could work."

Nelson's grandparents, Alfred and Nancy, took him and Bobbie in after their parents split up. Bobbie was two; Willie was six months old. Willie remembers them studying music together, by correspondence course, in the light of a kerosene lamp. They bought Bobbie a piano—she took to it right away—and, when Willie was six, Alfred ordered a Stella guitar from the Sears catalogue. A few months later, Alfred caught pneumonia and died. County authorities came by after his passing, threatening to put the children into foster care; Willie and Bobbie ran and hid in a ditch until they left. Nancy went out to work in the fields and took a job in a school cafeteria, exhausting herself to hold on to the children. At night, they made a ritual out of braiding her hair.

Nelson went on to join the Future Farmers of America. He planted lettuce and turnips in the family garden,



Victoria Roberts

*"We only go skating because we're too embarrassed to wear our Christmas sweaters on land."*

raised hogs, and borrowed horses to ride. In high school, he pole-vaulted and played baseball, basketball, and football. He didn't talk much—Bobbie was more outgoing—but they were both popular. Poor by conventional standards, but no more than the people around them.

I passed through Abbott a few times during the months I followed Nelson around. The barbershop where he shined shoes and sang for quarters is gone, along with Abbott's drugstores, groceries, banks, and boarding houses. The Methodist church Nelson attended is still there—he pays for its upkeep. So is the Baptist church across the street. The population, roughly three hundred and fifty, is about what it was when Nelson was born. But the town, low and flat under a wide, empty sky, is quieter now. When Nelson was growing up, an interurban train line ran down to Waco. Six miles over, in the town of West, the Czechs had their fraternal-

society halls, where they drank beer and danced waltzes, schottisches, and polkas. A Mexican family lived across the street from the Nelsons—their corridos drifted over—and newly arrived Southern families brought string instruments and shape-note hymnals. In the cotton rows, Willie and Bobbie heard work songs and blues. "I learned a lot of music just being out in the fields," Nelson recalled. A blacksmith named John Rejcek had sixteen children and a family band that played in West; by the age of ten, Willie was sitting in with his guitar, inaudible under the tubas but earning eight dollars a night, several times what the cotton fields paid. He heard Sinatra and the Grand Ole Opry on the family Philco once electricity came in. Sounds filtered in from so many directions, Nelson became a kind of crossroads himself.

"Willie means more to me than the Liberty Bell," Jeff Tweedy told me. Tweedy and his band, Wilco, played a

few dates with Nelson this year, as part of the annual Outlaw Music Festival, which Nelson headlined along with Bob Dylan. (Other performers included Billy Strings and Lucinda Williams.) Tweedy said he admires Nelson's vision of America—"a big tent, and it should be"—and the way Nelson says what he thinks without rancor, always punching up. "He doesn't aim at his fellow-citizens. He aims at corporations. He aims at injustice."

Nelson has a knack for leaning left without losing the room. He stumped for Jimmy Carter, who was a friend, and for the former congressman and Presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich; he co-chairs the advisory board of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws; he has pushed for the use of biofuels, running his tour buses on vegetable oil and soybeans; he opposed the war in Iraq. In 2006, he recorded a Ned Sublette song called "Cowboys Are Frequently, Secretly Fond of Each Other." "I've known straight and gay people all my life," he told *Texas Monthly*. "I can't tell the difference. People are people where I came from." ("Beer for My Horses," a hang-'em-high duet with Toby Keith, has aged less well.)

In 2018, when the government began separating families at the southern border, Nelson said, "Christians everywhere should be up in arms." That fall, he played a new song, "Vote 'Em Out," at a rally for Beto O'Rourke, who was running for Senate. O'Rourke told me the point wasn't only the stand Nelson took; it was the idea of Texas he represented. There was a temptation, O'Rourke said, to accept the caricature of Texas as "extreme, conservative, macho, tough-guy," though for people like him, who'd lived there all their lives, "true Texas is kindness, hospitality, open hearts." Nelson, he said, embodied "the best of Texas: you can be a freak, a weirdo, a cowboy, a rancher, a cello player, whatever. He's the patron saint of that—growing his hair, rejecting corporate music, and just being a good fucking human being."

At Nelson's concerts, all of those types gather. They always have. In the seventies, when Nelson was still playing dance halls, ranch hands and re-



finery workers shared the floor with hippies who'd heard his songs on FM radio. It was a volatile mix. At the Half-Dollar, outside Houston, groups of long-haired kids sat in front of the stage as cowboys two-stepped behind them. The cowboys "would start dancing, do a little spin, and kick somebody in the back," Steve Earle recalled. "Willie caught it out of the corner of his eye." Nelson stopped the band in the middle of a song. "There's room for some to sit and for some to dance," he said, and, as soon as he did so, there was.

"People out there get to clap their hands and sing for a couple hours, and then they go home feeling better," Nelson said. "I get the same enjoyment that they do—it's an equal exchange of energy." As a young man in Texas, Nelson taught Sunday school and considered the ministry. On the bus in Weehawken, I asked if he saw his work as akin to a preacher's. "Oh, I don't know about that," Nelson said. "I don't try to preach to nobody." Annie disagreed: "I think he's a shaman." Musicians like him draw strangers together, she said. "Let's face it, we're being divided intentionally. That's part of the playbook—divide and conquer. It's been around a long time. When somebody's saying hello to somebody without knowing their political ideology, and they're just enjoying music together, that's church. That's healing. That's really important right now. Really, really important."

In June and July, I caught a leg of Nelson's tour that stretched from Franklin, Tennessee, to the Woodlands, in Texas: Nashville to Houston, almost a road map of his working life. Nelson arrived in Nashville at 3 A.M. on June 23rd, four hours after a show in Cincinnati. Later that day, his bus pulled up at East Iris Studios, in Berry Hill, a low-slung village just south of downtown. With his producer, Buddy Cannon, behind the mixing board, Nelson sang ten songs in four hours, most of an album he'll release in the spring. A record of Rodney Crowell songs, "Oh What a Beautiful World," had come out in April; "Workin' Man: Willie Sings Merle" was slated for November. Once, in the eighties, Nelson re-

corded four albums in a single day. But a session like this one still felt like a solid day's work.

Cannon, a soft-spoken seventy-eight-year-old with glasses and a neat white mustache, first saw Nelson in the late sixties, at a small club on Chicago's North Side. He went on to play bass in Mel Tillis's band, then wrote for George Strait and produced for Kenny Chesney. He and Nelson started working together in 2008. At the time, Nelson's albums were leaning toward standards and covers. One day, Cannon woke up to a series of texts—lines of new lyrics, followed by a question: "What do you think?" Cannon sent a few lines in response, and Nelson replied, "Put a melody to it and send it back to me." Proceeding in that fashion, they wrote "Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die," a song that Nelson still plays in concert. In all, they've written more than fifty songs and made more than a dozen albums together, including the so-called mortality trilogy: "God's Problem Child," "Last Man Standing," and "Ride Me Back Home."

Nelson doesn't mind doing two or three takes of a number. He bristles at four. Don Was, who produced Nelson's album "Across the Borderline," in 1992, told me about recording the title track in Dublin, where Nelson had a night off from touring. They spent an hour working out the arrangement—talking, not playing—then went for the first take. Halfway through the second verse, Was thought, *Oh, man, this is unbelievable. Please, nobody fuck up.* "He plays this incredible solo in the middle. Third verse, I'm really freaking out—*please, nobody.* And nobody did." Kris Kristofferson added harmonies; that was the only overdub. Then Nelson rolled a joint and marked it with a Sharpie, about three-quarters of the way down. He told the house engineer, "I'm going to smoke this joint. When it gets burned down to the blue dot, your mix is done." Forty-five minutes later, it was. "That's the mix on the album," Was said.

These days, Cannon cuts backing tracks with musicians who "get Willie and don't look at the clock." Nelson comes in later, as he was doing now, to play and sing. "He has no

pitch issues," Cannon says. "He's allergic to out-of-tune-ness." But Nelson plays odd tricks with rhythm—phrasing behind the beat while his guitar rushes forward. "Willie's timing is so weird," Raphael told me. "It's like a snake slithering across the ground." Nelson is one of the most imitated guitarists in the world, Cannon says, but, without his feel, imitators "sound silly." When Nelson plays, "even the crazy shit sounds beautiful." Cannon tries not to sand down the edges: "I love his music too much to screw it up."

Nelson got to Nashville in 1960 and scrambled until he was hired to write for Pamper Music, a publishing company. Pamper was home to the strongest writers in town; even so, Nelson stood out. His songs were complicated—they had more chords than your average cowboy song—but catchy, with a psychological depth that recalled Method acting as much as traditional country storytelling. "Hello Walls" and "Crazy" took listeners inside minds turned against themselves. "Funny How Time Slips Away" is more conversational—the narrator seems to be catching up with an old flame—until we realize that he's talking to himself. For him, time has not passed at all.

Rodney Crowell sets Nelson's writing next to Hank Williams's. Williams, he told me, "had it all to himself, that simplicity and that straight-ahead English language"—a plainspoken line like "I can't help it if I'm still in love with you." Working with the same tools, Nelson arrived somewhere else: "a different way of painting." Stranger images, more irony, a sensibility that doesn't report feeling so much as worry it. "Let's just say what it is," Crowell says. "He was a poet."

Nelson doesn't love playing these sad, early songs. Writing them took too much out of him, and singing them pulls him back to where he was when they were written. Since the seventies, he's corralled them into a medley, gotten them out of the way all at once. But they were the songs that made him. Billy Walker recorded "Funny How Time Slips Away" in 1961. A few months later, Patsy Cline recorded "Crazy." Ray Price recorded "Night

Life" in 1963—it became his opening number—and hired Nelson to play in his band. Nelson by then was a top-tier songwriter, making six figures in royalties, sometimes flying between tour dates while Price and the rest of his band rode the bus. He divorced his first wife, Martha Matthews—they'd wed as teen-agers—and married the country singer Shirley Collie, then blew that marriage up, too. "I was that cowboy," he told the novelist Bud Shrake. "Going home with somebody different every night," drinking a bottle of whiskey and smoking two or three packs of cigarettes a day. "I thought that was what I had to do. It's the way Hank Williams done it." In that world, he said, "you're supposed to die at the right time."

Nelson kept trying to make it as a performer. His own band, which came to be called the Offenders (later the Record Men), played dance halls and opened for bigger acts. But even in Texas, where he developed a loyal following, Nelson was not a top draw. He gave up on the road at the age of thirty and bought a small farm in Ridgetop, outside Nashville. He raised hogs and kept horses. A sheep named Pamper wandered in and out of the house. A sign on the mailbox read "WILLIE NELSON & MANY OTHERS."

A few days before Christmas, 1970, the house at Ridgetop caught fire. Nelson rushed home and ran inside for his guitar and a case full of weed while the house burned around him. He left Tennessee and settled on a ranch in Texas near Bandera, in the Hill Country. His daughter Lana, who by now had children of her own, recalls flying to Austin to visit Nelson and failing to recognize him until her son shouted, "That's Grandpa!" The last time she'd seen him, in Nashville, he had short hair and wore country-club clothes. Now he had long hair and a beard and wore a T-shirt, a bandanna, and an earring. "He went from jazz musician to hippie," she said.

In Texas, Nelson cut back on the drinking. His face thinned out. His features sharpened. He ran five miles a day through the Hill Country, practiced martial arts, kept smoking weed—it tamped the rage down, he said—and read spiritual tracts and "The

Power of Positive Thinking." People who killed the mood didn't stay in his orbit for long. "Somewhere along the way, I realized that you have to imagine what you want and then get out of the way and let it happen," he told me. The strategy worked. Within a few years, Nelson was famous. Within a few more, he'd become an icon. "I couldn't believe I was sitting there swapping songs with him," Cannon said of their first meeting.

Cannon was back behind the board when Nelson returned to East Iris Studios, on our second day in Nashville. He wore a checkered shirt, a baseball cap, and a KN95 face mask. (The COVID protocols around Nelson are strict; Annie wears masks, too, when they're out in public.) Printouts of songs for an upcoming Christmas album were scattered across the console. Raphael watched from a couch set against the back wall; Mark Rothbaum sat next to him. Nelson sat in a straight-backed chair on the other side of the glass, hair in a ponytail, hands in his lap. A track came in over the speakers. He started to sing. When he wanted to project, he leaned back from the microphone the way singers did before engineers rode the levels. Nelson does not have the buttery baritone of a Ray Price or a Waylon Jennings; in the sixties, he was a woodwind stuck in the brass section. Over time, he developed a richer tone and a warm vibrato, which is now mostly gone. But his voice is still warm and reedy—a deviated septum helps give it that slight nasal edge—and the notes land precisely, if not predictably. "What age takes in speed and strength," Rothbaum said, "he gains in anticipation."

Nelson knocked the album's remaining songs down, one after the other, in one or two takes. After the last—about a town called Uncertain, Texas, where nobody can make up their mind—Cannon hit the talk-back button. "If I'm not mistaken, we're finished," he said. "All right!" Nelson replied. "Let's go get drunk."

Nashville sells itself as the buckle of the Bible Belt. Memphis is a river town, a capital of the Delta. Nelson's bus pulled in on June 27th, a Friday. The air was thicker here, the heat

heavier. I found Mickey Raphael in the catering tent, picking at a plate of barbecue. "We played Memphis the night Elvis died," he said. "Jerry Lee Lewis climbed up onstage, drunk as fuck, and said, 'I'm the King now.'" Lewis tried to sit down next to Bobbie at the piano. His bodyguard flashed a gun. From behind the drum kit, Paul English flashed his, and order was restored. "Paul's reputation was you just didn't fuck with him," Raphael said.

English was Nelson's tour manager, protector, and best friend, as well as his drummer. He was six feet tall and wiry, with sharp cheekbones, a goatee, and long, pointy sideburns; he looked like the Devil and leaned into it, wearing capes lined with red satin, settling with promoters by laying a pistol on the table while keeping another tucked in his boot. "Willie was very trusting," Raphael said. "Paul, not so much." English grew up on the north side of Fort Worth, running with a group called the Peroxide Gang. In his twenties, he pimped girls out of down-and-outs—cheap motels along Jacksboro Highway. Nelson memorialized their friendship in a song, "Me and Paul," a tally of missed flights, shakedowns, and busted shows. "He was used to getting Willie out of any kind of trouble," Raphael said. "He was watching all the time."

The Family was still swapping stories about Paul the next day, when they crossed the state line into Missouri. They played outside St. Louis that night, then headed for Branson, driving past a micro-emporium, "America's #1 Patriotic Superstore"—selling MAGA hats, MAGA socks, MAGA Teddy bears, MAGA magnets—and the Uranus Fudge Factory, which sold air fresheners and "fudge from Uranus." Everyone who'd been with Nelson for a long time had terrible associations with this part of the country, dating back thirty-some years. "Don't ask me about Branson," Raphael said. "I've blocked it out." The trouble began in 1990, when the I.R.S. came after Nelson for more than sixteen million dollars in back taxes. On the day after he'd come home to Texas from a tour, federal agents seized everything: his ranch and recording studio, instruments, sound equipment, gold records. Friends and





*"He went from jazz musician to hippie," Lana Nelson said of her father (with Waylon Jennings, in 1974).*

farmers paid him back for all the favors he'd done. They showed up with cashier's checks at auctions, buying back land and possessions and holding it all for him in trust, even as late-night hosts turned Nelson's woes into a running joke—one about the hill-billy who'd got above his station. At Nelson's shows, audiences threw tens and twenties onstage.

Nelson sued his accounting firm, Price Waterhouse, for pushing bad tax shelters—the company settled—and released a double album to square the rest of the debt. He sold "The I.R.S. Tapes: Who'll Buy My Memories?" through a late-night 1-800 number. The recordings, twenty-four of his best songs in a little more than an hour, were just his voice and guitar, Nelson at his most intimate and unguarded. Most of the proceeds went straight to the U.S. Treasury.

Six months later, on Christmas Day, 1991, Nelson's oldest son, Billy, who was thirty-three, took his life in a cabin at Ridgetop. Nelson buried him next to his own grandparents in

the family plot near Abbott. "It's not something you get over," he's said. "It's something you get through." He stayed off the road for a while, then signed on for a long run in Branson, playing two shows a day, six days a week, for tour groups and convention crowds. It kept the Family working but pinned them in place. In "Me and Paul," Nelson had sung, "I guess Nashville was the roughest." After six months in Missouri, he changed the lyric to "Branson."

Thunder Ridge, the venue Nelson was playing next, sits eleven miles outside Branson, on a limestone bluff above Table Rock Lake. Fans lined up for beer and T-shirts—"Willie for President," "Have a Willie Nice Day!"—and bottles of Willie's Remedy, a THC-infused tonic that promises euphoria without the hangover. From the lawn, you could see clear into Arkansas. In the afternoon, the sky above the amphitheatre darkened. A gray funnel cloud dropped down. The crowd out front took shelter; backstage, everyone ran for the buses,

but the production manager's girlfriend at the time, Lindsey Seidl, who had driven down from Wichita with her father, stayed outside, sitting on the tailgate of a pickup with Kansas plates. One by one, musicians and roadies stepped back off the buses and joined them. "How worried should we be?" someone asked.

Seidl grew up watching storms cross flat country. This, she explained, was a cold-air funnel. The main cell had blown past the ridge. Now warm air trapped in the valley was pulling the cold clouds down into a spiral that looked worse than it was. "That's not the one you need to worry about," she said, then pointed at a darker wall of weather behind it. "That one is." We climbed back on the bus. Larry Gorham leaned over and mentioned that he'd been with Nelson for forty-seven years. "Do you know how many shows we've missed because of the weather?" he said. "Not many."

The first storm passed over. The second one hit—straight-line winds—and passed over us, too. When the

winds died down, Raphael pulled out a black raincoat and walked to the stage. Each band's gear had been set up on dollies and risers, secured under forty-foot-long tents. Nelson's tent was stage left, all the way in the back. It alone had collapsed. A maroon drum lay on its side. Water dripped from the sagging canvas and pooled on the floor. Annie, in her summer uniform—a knee-length skirt, a T-shirt, and Keds—joined the crew, pulling equipment out of the puddles. Raphael snatched his harmonica case and an old Southwestern blanket—“one thing that hasn't gotten lost” along the way, he said.

The Branson show didn't happen. Neither did the next show, outside Oklahoma City. At the convention center there, the crew spread its stuff out to dry. Bobby Lemons, the soundman, bent over a big analog board with a hair dryer, one of a dozen that the crew had bought at a nearby Walmart, along with a leaf blower and tubs of DampRid. Large pieces of fabric—scrims, a banner, and Nelson's American flag—lay flat under fluorescent lights.

Nelson did make the next date, a Fourth of July show in Austin. Heavy rains had come through the night before. Two hours west of the city, in the Hill Country, long stretches of highway vanished under brown water. At a girls' camp in Kerr County, floodwater tore cabins from their foundations and carried them down the Guadalupe River. Austin cancelled its fireworks show. The full scale of the damage wasn't clear yet, but by the time Nelson played Houston, on the sixth, it had come into focus: eighty-two people dead, at least forty-one still missing. Pat Green, a musician who had mentored Waylon Payne, lost four family members in the floods: his younger brother, his brother's wife, and two of the couple's children. Payne got the news backstage—first the numbers, then the names.

The Family had been out on this leg of the tour for seventeen days; after Houston, they'd be off for two weeks. Raphael would be flying home to Nashville. The rest of the band would be staying in Texas. Waylon Payne was already planning the drive down to

his tiny town in the Hill Country, where flooding had cracked the foundation of his house in half. As soon as he got back, he said, he planned to cook fifty pounds of meat and make tacos for the first responders. “If we go out next year,” Raphael said, “we'll need an ark.”

That night in the Woodlands, north of Houston, the “Promiseland” video played, the flag dropped, Nelson cruised through the Nashville medley. Payne sang “Help Me Make It Through the Night,” a Kris Kristofferson ballad that had given Payne's mother, Sammi Smith, a No. 1 country hit and a Grammy in 1971, and also “Workin' Man Blues,” which Jody Payne used to sing with the Family. As the set drew to a close, Raphael picked up a button accordion he plays on “Last Leaf,” Nelson's cover of a song by Tom Waits. “The autumn took the rest/But it won't take me,” Nelson sang.

Since the seventies, Nelson has ended his shows with a gospel medley. At first, it was “Amazing Grace,” followed by “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” “Uncloudy Day,” and “I Saw the Light.” “I'll Fly Away” drifted in during the eighties, with no discussion or planning. Nelson still sings it. In Houston, members of the Avett Brothers and the Mavericks, bands that had opened for Nelson, came out to join him. Raphael handed his accordion to Percy Cardona, who plays with the Mavericks. He was wearing a burgundy vest and mariachi pants, cowboy boots, and a bolo tie. “I'm Mexican American, but I love country music, too,” he told me later. “I try to mix the two.” The band started playing. During “I Saw the Light,” Nelson stood, threw his cowboy hat into the crowd, blew a kiss, and walked off. The band played on for a moment, then followed, and Cardona stayed, accordion strapped to his chest, the last man on the stage.

Guitars dry out as they age, becoming lighter and more resonant. Playing them speeds the process along. Nelson got Trigger, a nylon-stringed Martin, in 1969. Since then, he has hardly played anything else. “When Trigger goes, I'll quit,”

he's said, though musicians who study him closely point to his touch, not the instrument. “You can hear the sound of his voice in what he's playing,” Bill Frisell told me. “If I gave him one of my guitars, it would sound like Willie Nelson. It wouldn't sound like me.”

Jazz musicians have always admired Nelson. He doesn't seem to be afraid of anything, Frisell said. Most players panic when there's space, he explained; they feel they have to fill it. But Willie? “He's cool.” The critic Ben Ratliff describes Nelson's singing as “the kind of fast that's so fast it's laconic,” and notes that, if one tries to sing along, “it's impossible to hit the microsecond that he begins the phrase” or to guess “what he's going to do with the phrase—the weird way he'll scoop a phrase melodically, and then end up not exactly on the note but just a shade under it sometimes.” When I asked Sonny Rollins about Nelson, he spelled the word “freedom” out, letter by letter. “Willie's not doing it,” Rollins said. “He's *doing* it.”

Nelson found that freedom in 1973, when he made “Shotgun Willie” for Atlantic, a New York label that was experimenting with country. He recorded the album—his sixteenth—in Manhattan, with Atlantic's session players, members of the Nashville A-Team, and, for the first time, his road band: Paul English, Bee Spears, and Bobbie. He wrote most of the songs, selected the others—including his first recording of “Whiskey River”—and played Trigger throughout.

“Shotgun Willie” is the first Nelson album I fell in love with. I'd heard some of his stark Nashville demos in college—they'd floored me—but “Shotgun Willie” threw me for a loop. The beat on some songs sat so far back, it sounded like it was calling, long distance, from a Wilson Pickett session. (Nelson's producers, Arif Mardin and Jerry Wexler, had worked with Pickett, too.) Donny Hathaway wrote the string charts; the Memphis Horns played on the title track. Country radio didn't know where to put it, and it didn't sell, but “Shotgun Willie” gave Nelson a sound closer to what he heard in his head, and material that he still plays.

For the follow-up, “Phases and



## Lawrence Wright on A. J. Liebling's "The Great State"

During the 1959 session of the Louisiana state legislature, Governor Earl Long, the less famous younger brother of Senator Huey Long, "went off his rocker," as the tickled writer A. J. Liebling recounted in this magazine, adding, "The papers reported that he had cursed and hollered at the legislators, saying things that so embarrassed his wife, Miz Blanche, and his relatives that they had packed him off to Texas in a National Guard plane to get his brains repaired in an asylum."

Liebling, who joined the staff of *The New Yorker* in 1935, ten years after its founding, quickly made a reputation as a humorous and versatile observer of the human condition. "I am a chronic, incurable, recidivist reporter," he confessed. And Liebling once boasted to a friend, "I write better than anyone who writes faster, and faster than anyone who writes better." Among sportswriters, he was esteemed for his boxing coverage. His unapologetic passion for food, evidenced by his waistline, was one of the great romances in literary journalism. As he saw it, dieting represented an absolute evil: "If there is to be a world cataclysm, it will probably be set off by skim milk, Melba toast, and mineral oil on the salad."

Liebling took over *The Wayward Press*, a column in the magazine, in which he prosecuted the sins and miscues of the Fourth Estate, which he labelled "the weak slat under the bed of democracy." Although he was terribly nearsighted, out of shape, and plagued by gout (his great friend and colleague Joseph Mitchell once observed him using a strip of bacon as a bookmark), his vigorous coverage of D Day and the liberation of Paris led the French government to award him the Cross of the Legion of Honor. Untidy in his personal life, he was on his third wife, the novelist Jean Stafford, when he died, at the age of fifty-nine.

Liebling's foremost talent was bringing memorable characters roaring to life, so it's not surprising that he fell in love with Earl Long. *The New Yorker*

wisely allocated three issues to Liebling's profile of Long, titled "The Great State"; the articles were later collected in a book with a superior title, "The Earl of Louisiana."

Like other reporters who joined in the merriment, Liebling came to Louisiana to scoff at Long. "I had left New York thinking of him as a Peckewood Caligula," he confessed. But, when he watched news coverage of the legislative session, he listened closely to what



May 28, 1960

the ranting governor was saying to the recalcitrant legislators. Long was attacking a law, passed around the time of Reconstruction, that allowed election registrars to disqualify voters on "educational" grounds, a measure designed to push Black people off the voter rolls. "It took me a minute or two to realize that the old 'demagogue' was actually making a civil-rights speech," Liebling wrote. He began to recognize Long as something more important than another Southern political buffoon. Long was a skillful progressive politician operating in a conservative, racist environment. For all the

droll humor in Liebling's coverage, that insight is what made his report a classic.

Liebling's articles about Long caught my eye when they were published, in the spring of 1960. They influenced my decision to attend Tulane University, in New Orleans, the city that Liebling had painted so vibrantly; they also pointed me toward journalism, and they fixed in my mind *The New Yorker* as my ideal professional destination. For my generation, Liebling still loomed as a model of incisive journalism with a personal voice. He was scholarly and highly literate while also at home with hat-check girls and the bookies at the racetrack. He barbecued the reactionary intellectuals of his era, but portrayed ordinary people with warmth. Most of them, that is. Liebling displayed a New York City

chauvinism by mercilessly skewering Chicago, the "second city." In the evening, when the commuters fled, Chicago was a "vast, anonymous pulp," he wrote, "plopped down by the lakeside like a piece of waterlogged fruit. Chicago after nightfall is a small city of the rich who have not yet migrated, visitors, and hoodlums, surrounded by a large expanse of juxtaposed dimnesses."

I have in my office a poster on which Liebling's portrait is accompanied by his cautionary warning: "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." ♦

To celebrate its centenary, *The New Yorker* has invited contributors to revisit notable works from the archive. See the collection at [newyorker.com/takes](http://newyorker.com/takes).

Stages,” Wexler took him to Muscle Shoals, in Alabama, to work with the rhythm section that had backed Pickett and Aretha Franklin. The album, which Nelson recorded in two days, told a divorce story, twice: side one from the wife’s point of view, side two from the husband’s. It sold about as well as the previous record. Atlantic shuttered its Nashville office soon afterward. Bleak as the album is, it has an emotional sophistication that Nelson’s early songs lacked, with narrators working their way through the wreckage rather than wallowing: “After carefully considerin’ the whole situation / I stand with my back to the wall / Walkin’ is better than runnin’ away / And crawlin’ ain’t no good at all.” *Texas Monthly*, which keeps a running list of Nelson’s albums—all hundred and fifty-five of them, ranked—puts “Phases and Stages,” a “perfect record,” at No. 1.

Nelson kept swerving. He recorded his next album, “Red Headed Stranger,” for Columbia, in three days, at a studio outside Dallas. Label executives assumed that they were listening to demos and asked him when it would be finished. He said it was done. If

worse came to worst, he figured, he could always spend six months of the year playing I-35 up into Canada and the next six months playing his way back down. Instead, the album’s first single, “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain,” became Nelson’s first No. 1, and the album sold millions. At forty-two, Nelson became a superstar—then veered again. On “Stardust,” he turned to standards, songs that he’d played at dance halls since he was a kid: “Georgia on My Mind,” “September Song,” “Blue Skies.”

The move wasn’t as odd as it looked. For years, Nelson had been writing thirty-two-bar AABA songs in disguise. “Stardust” made the lineage obvious while slyly sounding more modern than its song list suggests. The title track opens with a contrapuntal figure—rising melody, descending bass—that could almost be “Stairway to Heaven.” “Blue Skies” starts with a disco-like pulse. Nelson and the album’s producer, Booker T. Jones, loved Hoagy Carmichael’s tunes and met on that common ground, with Jones handling the arrangements. Jones pushed the songs into his own harmonic world, putting “Georgia on My Mind” in

D-flat—an unusual key for a guitarist, with five flats. Jones learned the flat keys from studying Russian composers, he told me, and writing for Albert King. “Those are special keys for emotional exercises,” he said. “Deep, deep, serious grooves.”

Jones gave Nelson room to roam, to show off. But there was “big time” pushback on the album, he said. “It wasn’t just new for Columbia. It was new for Nashville. It was new for the time. It was somewhat out of the question.” Inside Columbia’s Nashville operation, he recalled, people could hear how good the material sounded; the question was how it was supposed to work—and how a Black producer was supposed to be standing at the center of a major-label country record. But Nelson’s contract gave him creative control, and Rothbaum made the machinery move. “They had no idea what to do with Willie,” Rothbaum told me. “He fit nothing they had ever encountered.” The album became Nelson’s biggest seller by far, spinning off two No. 1 singles (“Georgia” and “Blue Skies”), with “All of Me” reaching No. 3. Having already proved himself as a great American songwriter, Nelson now revealed himself as a great interpreter of the American Songbook—“a natural when it came to starting in the wrong place and ending up in the right place,” Jones said.

“You never know exactly what he’s going to do,” Micah Nelson told me, describing the concerts he’s played with his dad. He went on, “You’re always present. Nobody’s phoning it in, because you never know where the spirit’s going to take him.” Nelson may sing a verse way ahead of everyone, when they’re “still on the first chord,” and the instinct is to speed up, to catch him, Micah said. “It’s, like, No, no, he’s waiting for us over there, three blocks away.” Nelson lets the band close the gap, then keep going. “He’s singing so outside of the pocket, there is no pocket. He’s obliterating any sort of timing,” Micah continued. Somehow, it works. Any number of times, Micah has thought, *Oh, shit, he’s lost the plot.* He always finds it again. Playing with Nelson is like performing with the Flying Wal-



*“Such wonderful hospitality—we’ll stay another month.”*



lendas, Micah said, or with Neil Young's band. It's the opposite of perfectly choreographed shows with backing tracks that all but play themselves. There's never a safety net. "Obviously, it helps to have great songs," he added. "Now that I say it, the songs are the safety net. You really can't go wrong when you have good songs."

"Willie, Annie, and I are in the position of having to negotiate a labor dispute," Mark Rothbaum told me on September 12th. "It's not really what we do." In Minneapolis, the Teamsters were still out on strike. Governor Tim Walz, who'd attended the second Farm Aid, in Austin, when he was a twenty-two-year-old mortgage clerk, got involved, along with Senator Amy Klobuchar. Walz told me that the concert came "within an hour or two" of being cancelled. "It would have been a shame on so many fronts," he said. But, on September 13th, the university and the union reached a deal. The build-out started that day.

Nelson's crew arrived in Minneapolis a week later. Just outside the stadium, a sprawl of tents and booths called Homegrown Village went up. Concertgoers swapped seeds and shared beekeeping tips while the bands played. Amanda Koehler, who runs an urban farm in St. Paul, described barriers facing young farmers—capital, credit, access to land. She took heart, she said, watching solidarity grow between laborers and farmworkers, citing Farm Aid's refusal to cross the picket line as a small but important example. I ducked back inside just in time to see Lukas Nelson walk out onstage.

Lukas's memories of Farm Aid go back to early childhood. He started on the guitar around age ten, after asking his father what he wanted for his birthday. "You should learn how to play guitar," Nelson told him. "That would make me feel good." He practiced for eight, sometimes ten, hours a day, becoming obsessed, Annie told me, "to the point that I had to take it from him at night." Nelson told Lukas to work on his singing. "There's a lot of great guitar players out there," he said, "but no one has your voice." When Lukas performed one of his

own songs in public for the first time, it was at Farm Aid. By then, an extended family had grown up around the occasion, reconvening every fall. "It's almost like Christmastime," he told me.

This year, Lukas and Micah joined their father for a fifty-minute set that started with "Whiskey River" and ended at 1 A.M. with two dozen people onstage singing Hank Williams's "I Saw the Light." Nelson smiled and dropped his eyes as the song ended, then looked out at the audience. "Thank all y'all," he said before he walked off, heading straight back to his bus while the band squeezed into a shuttle headed for the hotel.

There were songs, like "The Party's Over," that drifted in and out of Nelson's set during the months I spent with him. There were constants, too, like "Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground." The song, from the 1980 film "Honeysuckle Rose," tells the story of a man who's learned to love and let go, years removed from the embittered character who sang "Funny How Time Slips Away." Each time I heard it, I thought of the way he'd rewritten his own narrative—letting the road pull him out of corners that used to close in—and what his travels cost him and those in his slipstream.

Amy recalled a time when she and her sister were trampled by fans trying to get to their father: "My mom said, 'He's not going to really know what that's like, because they stop when they get to him. They will plow through you to get to him.'" Any hard feelings fell away when she thought about the alternative—years her father had spent going nowhere, the life he might have led had he not broken through. "Whatever resentment I had for his fans disappeared when I started looking at it from that perspective."

There were powerful lessons, Lukas told me, in watching Nelson live his life's purpose, rather than manage the expectations of those he was close to. "That's a great way to live," he said. "But it's hard for people to understand, because most people require

consistency, closeness, and physical proximity with their loved ones. I've learned how to not need that, which I'm grateful for."

"Angel" is Lucinda Williams's favorite Nelson song, and Chris Stapleton's. Dylan recorded it during sessions for his album "Infidels," in 1983, and found his own way in, turning the song's rise and fall into a hymn, digging into its rhymes as if they were his own: "*Leave me / If you need to / I will / Still remember / Angel / Flying too close to the ground.*" I played the cover for Raphael, who hadn't heard it. "He makes it sound like it's his song," Raphael said. I asked Dylan about Nelson, and he wrote back with a warning: "It's hard

to talk about Willie without saying something stupid or irrelevant, he is so much of everything." He went on:

How can you make sense of him? How would you define the indefinable or the unfathomable? What is there to say? Ancient Viking Soul? Master Builder of the Impossible? Patron poet of people who never quite fit in and don't much care to? Moonshine Philosopher? Tumbleweed singer with a PhD? Red Bandana troubadour, braids like twin ropes lassoing eternity? What do you say about a guy who plays an old, battered guitar that he treats like it's the last loyal dog in the universe? Cowboy apparition, writes songs with holes that you can crawl through to escape from something. Voice like a warm porchlight left on for wanderers who kissed goodbye too soon or stayed too long. I guess you can say all that. But it really doesn't tell you a lot or explain anything about Willie. Personally speaking I've always known him to be kind, generous, tolerant and understanding of human feebleness, a benefactor, a father and a friend. He's like the invisible air. He's high and low. He's in harmony with nature. And that's what makes him Willie.

In Camden, Nelson played "Angel" midway through his set. The crowd rose to its feet—they would stay that way, swaying and singing along, until the show came to its end. Bathed in reddish light that turned his hair and skin the color of copper, he let Trigger do much of the talking, using fewer notes than he would have ten years ago, or twenty, but saying more. I wondered if, among other things, Nelson was saying goodbye. Then he played "On the Road Again." ♦



## YES, BOSS

*Peter Navarro, a tariff cheerleader, created the template of sycophancy for Trump Administration officials.*

BY IAN PARKER

In March, 2016, Peter Navarro introduced himself to students in Managing Geopolitical Risk in an Age of a Rising China, a new undergraduate course at the University of California, Irvine. Donald Trump was then a month away from becoming the presumptive Republican nominee for President. Navarro, who had tenure at the business school, was an academic oddity: he worked at a research university, but he'd done little serious research since finishing his doctorate in economics, at Harvard, thirty years earlier. And he didn't seem to enjoy contact with students. A former friend of his, an economist, recently said, "I don't think he liked teaching that much—he liked *talking*." Navarro had secured a life of privilege and frustration. He lived in a big house in Laguna Beach with an ocean view and a pool surrounded by statuary. But he plainly yearned to be somewhere, or someone, else.

Professors often develop side hustles. But Navarro had long sought to trade his academic status for a more dazzling form of power—mayor of San Diego, stock guru, Democratic congressman, television host. He'd largely failed in these ambitions, thanks in part to traits he recognized in himself: he was arrogant, abrasive, and disdainful. "The problem was my personality," Navarro wrote, in an account of his struggles as a political candidate. Although he once compared his charisma to Barack Obama's, he knew that many who met him regarded him as an asshole. He was always getting into spats. Shortly before Navarro's new course began, he sent an e-mail to John Graham, another U.C. Irvine professor, asking, "Are you frigging deaf, dumb, and blind?"

Navarro had first pitched his class in a mass e-mail to thirty thousand students. That spring, only seventeen had enrolled. The room could have held a hundred. "He was not a prominent pro-

fessor," one of the students who'd chosen to take the course recently recalled.

She remembers him as skinny and "a little bit on the shorter side." Navarro, who is about five feet seven, was an avid cyclist, bodysurfer, and cold-bath plunger. Then as now, he resembled an agitated basketball coach: rolled-up sleeves, graying hair combed straight back from a tanned and taut face. Long drawn to language aimed at making mundane tasks sound muscular or militaristic, he instructed students to bring "laptop capability."

Navarro had just published "Crouching Tiger," his third book to describe China as an ugly threat to America and the world. The previous two, from 2006 and 2011, had portrayed China as an amoral economic force; the new one emphasized the country's rising military ambitions. It was bluntly polemical—Chinese missiles were "designed to literally ram American satellites out of the sky"; a submarine base was "right out of a James Bond novel"—and it contained no evidence that Navarro could speak Chinese or had even visited China. Footnotes frequently cited op-eds and Wikipedia. The book was largely ignored. A "Crouching Tiger" account on Twitter attracted only a few dozen followers. When Navarro was challenged about his expertise in a testy Ask Me Anything thread on Reddit, he replied, "Many of my experts . . . get much of their source material directly from the Chinese." When comments dried up, Navarro asked, "any body out there????"

Yet, as Navarro's student discovered, the class *was* the book. Each week, students discussed either "Crouching Tiger" or episodes of an accompanying documentary series that Navarro clearly hadn't quite finished assembling. "We would watch these weird videos," the student said. In addition to talking-head interviews, "there would be, like, **INSERT ANIMATION HERE**"; Navarro appeared in front of an unaltered

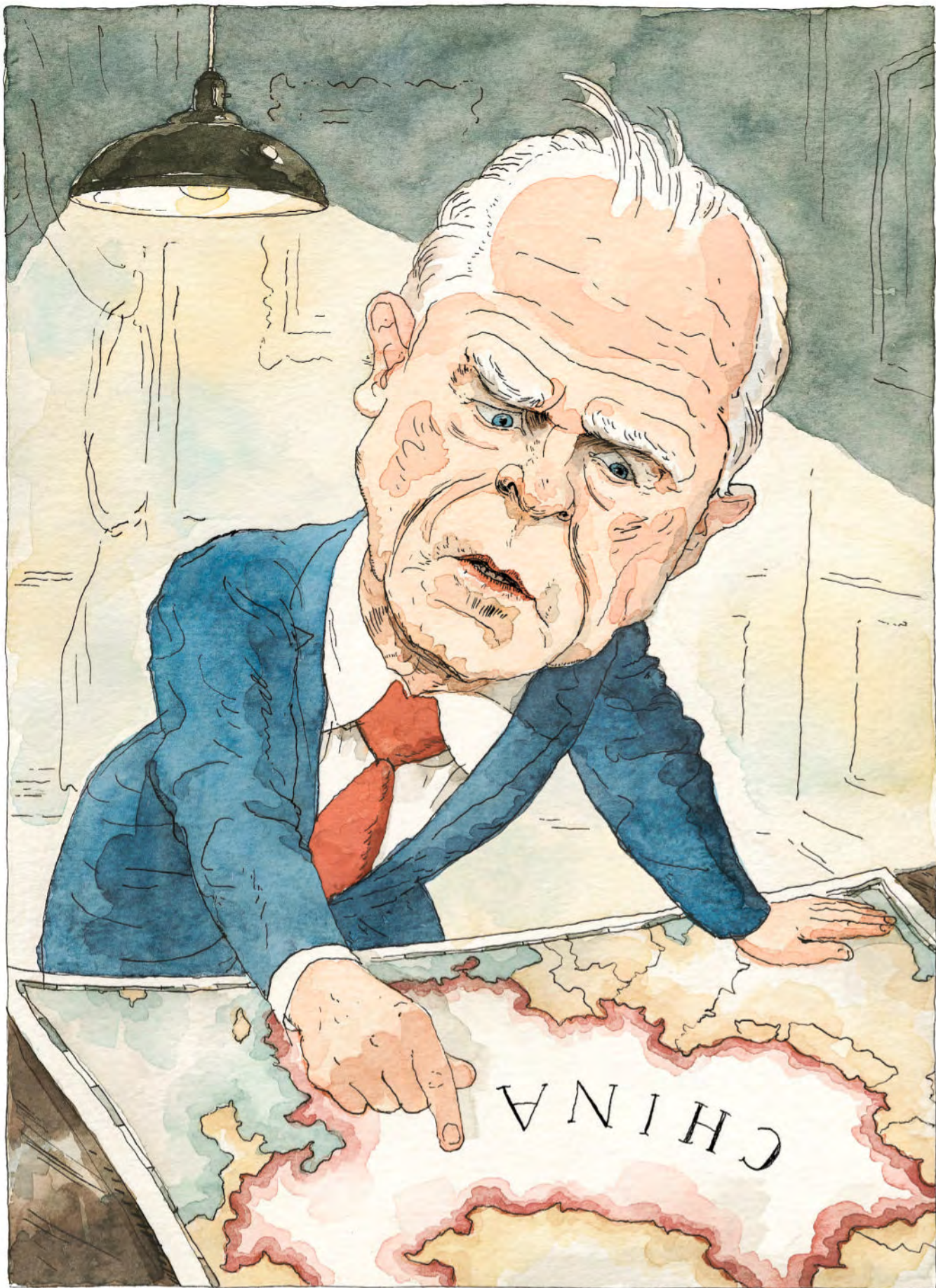
green screen. The student wondered if she was enrolled in a book-marketing focus group. Not long after, the videos began to appear on YouTube.

Navarro's teaching assistant, Ben Leffel, who had lived and worked in China, didn't share Navarro's geopolitical views. (Leffel, who now teaches at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, told me that he always saw Navarro as a charlatan drawn to "performative warmongering.") Leffel tried to be a moderating influence—particularly on the many occasions when Navarro did not come to class—but the course remained yoked to "Crouching Tiger." The student said that the class's message was simple: "We have to be afraid of China."

The final exam was held in early June, around the time that Navarro had what he has called a "surreal" experience. One morning, he has written, he walked down the hill from his home to Victoria Beach—"hallowed ground from where I would launch my paddle board and cruise out among the seals and dolphins." He was expecting a call. Stephen Miller, who was then a thirty-year-old speechwriter for Trump and who now oversees the federal government's effort to terrorize people perceived to be undocumented immigrants, wanted to talk. Navarro wrote, "As I sat down in the sand hoping that my cell phone reception would hold, the key thing that kept popping into my mind was how close I was to power—yet, in tiny Laguna Beach, so far away."

Navarro likes to say that he was one of only three senior advisers to serve Trump from his first campaign to the end of his first term. The others he identifies are Miller and Dan Scavino, who is now a deputy chief of staff. In the taxonomy of political sidekicks, Navarro, who advises on trade, isn't a carrier of darkly destructive principles, like Miller. Nor is he a natural political fixer. And he





*As an economist, Navarro wrote that retaliatory tariffs are how “trade wars are born.” He now backs Trump’s trade wars.*





*"It works because he's a Letterboxd guy, she's a Strava girl, the in-laws will be Facebook people, and we're all living in a nightmare."*

can't be described as a persuasive orator. His frequent TV appearances—where he tends to be uninterruptible, while gesturing with his index and pinkie fingers extended, like Paulie Walnuts on "The Sopranos"—can be off-putting even to allies. His friend Stephen Bannon, the former White House adviser turned broadcaster, once cut off Navarro's microphone to break his flow.

Navarro's role is that of mad-professor hype man: the President's economics mascot. As Navarro, referring to Trump, has put it, "My function, really, as an economist is to try to provide the underlying analytics that confirm his intuition. And his intuition is always right." Navarro's position gives him moments of extraordinary influence on the world economy, even as it has left him ample time to pursue personal projects, includ-

ing a memoir published this fall. Of Navarro's fifty or so posts on X in October, one was about the government shutdown, one was a photograph of the Washington Monument, one referred to the Dodgers, and the rest promoted his new book.

Larry Remer, who worked as a political consultant for Navarro in the nineties, told me that his former client's "transcendent" personality trait was the certainty that he was underappreciated. That feeling is one of the forces holding Trump's coalition together. When Trump's first term began, Navarro had no reason to rethink his posture of resentment: he was given a second-rung title, as the director of a new entity called the National Trade Council, with a "buy American" focus; he was parked in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, which he called an "outhouse"; he worked

on unrequested memos (which he has called "guided missives") that often cited his previous writings. But he survived, becoming the most conspicuous backer of the President's long-held and false belief that the United States is being "ripped off" when it trades internationally. Navarro supported Trump's theories in person, when he was invited to join him—he has claimed that it's "a running joke between me and the President as to who figured out the problems with free trade first." More frequently, he addressed Trump via Twitter, the Sunday news shows, and CNBC.

Before 2016, Navarro was largely unconnected to modern, Fox News-shaped Republican politics. He certainly wasn't a true believer. His most notable political attachment of recent years had been to John Edwards, the former Democratic senator and Presidential candidate. (After Edwards dropped out, in 2008: "We've lost a good one.") Nor was Navarro a lonely single-issue policy enthusiast looking for a political home. His hawkishness on China had been populist and intemperate, but it took the form of showy frustration about that country's unpunished transgressions, not a rigorous proposal for American change. Navarro was open to all kinds of policy ideas. His own could sound silly or circular: make every country abide by free-trade norms; balance the federal budget; elect a President like Winston Churchill.

Navarro hadn't even held a consistent view about the economic risks of imposing tariffs on another country's goods in response to unfair trade practices. In his final years as a professor, a student could open *The Power of Macroeconomics*—a popular digital course that Navarro had recently updated—and read his warning that "trade wars are born" through "such retaliatory measures." The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, Navarro noted, had "helped push the entire global economy into the Great Depression." The same student could read "Death by China" (2011), in which Navarro complained that, ahead of any retaliatory tariff, "the *Wall Street Journal* will really try to scare us by referencing the role of the Smoot-Hawley tariffs in triggering the Great Depression," adding, "It's all so much cow manure." Even "Crouching Tiger," which appeared in 2015, stopped short of full-throated support for tariffs



against China, acknowledging that they would probably be inflationary and affect poorer Americans disproportionately. Navarro also wrote that any effective response to China required “global cooperation and coordination.”

Then Navarro started working for a man who thinks that “trade wars are good, and easy to win,” and that tariffs are “the greatest thing ever invented.” He wholeheartedly backed Trump’s unilateral 2018 tariffs on China, which started a trade war. In time, Navarro learned to say “Democrat” Party, instead of “Democratic,” and to call Anthony Fauci an “absolutely evil” man allied with Chinese “Commies.” And, from a rally stage in North Carolina, Navarro packed disdain and boastfulness into the same two syllables: “When I was at *Hab-vahd*, getting my doctorate . . .”

Long-term service to Trump requires both egomania and its opposite: self-annihilation. The man whom Navarro likes to call the Boss seems to value insincere, or bought, obeisance—the flapping and fussing of a maître d’—more than heartfelt fandom, which lacks the piquancy of humiliation. This work environment has clearly suited Navarro, whose sense of his own worth, though strong, seems to be divorced from allegiance to his own ideas, and who had long craved audiences of more than seventeen people. He was ready to do whatever.

His aggressive sycophancy in Trump’s first term foretold how everyone around the President would behave in the second. Navarro is the template for the Cabinet secretaries who now wait in line to flatter Trump in long, televised White House meetings. The new ubiquity of this stance seems likely to diminish the standing of the man who first perfected it. But, in a recent e-mail exchange, Navarro sounded sanguine about sharing the stage. This time, he told me, “everyone is pulling the oars in the same direction and the Boss has gotten more done in ten months than Presidents typically do in two terms.”

The intensity of Navarro’s obeisance, and his combativeness, has sometimes made him a figure of fun. Conservatives discovered that it was permitted—and surely cathartic—to disparage Navarro publicly, in language that they wouldn’t dream of using to describe the President himself. (Bannon has called criticism of

Navarro “veiled attacks on President Trump.”) Lou Dobbs, interviewing Navarro on the Fox Business Network, once accused him of “peddling pablum.” Jared Kushner, who helped bring Navarro into the White House in 2016, has described him as eccentric and untrustworthy. Senator Rand Paul called him a “walking economic fallacy.” Elon Musk was still in Trump’s inner circle when, several months ago, he referred to Navarro as “dumber than a sack of bricks” for taking shots at Tesla amid his defense of widespread tariffs. Even Trump, whose character assessments tend to be uncomplicated, has reached for irony to evaluate Navarro. “He’s a little different,” Trump said, to laughter, at a signing event at the White House in 2020. “We have all types.”

After Trump lost the 2020 election, Navarro put on what he called his “Big Boy Harvard Researcher Pants” to help reassure the President that he’d actually won. That December, Navarro published the first of three pseudo-scholarly reports, filled with sophistry about voter fraud (drop boxes, mail-in ballots), to argue that Joe Biden’s decisive victory was likely illegitimate. A *Washington Post* analysis called the report possibly the most embarrassing document ever created by a White House staffer. Trump included a link to Navarro’s report in a tweet that ended, “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” Navarro later proudly claimed that his election-denying writings



had underpinned a plan, led by Bannon and nicknamed the Green Bay Sweep, to have Congress block certification of the Electoral College vote, and so allow Republican-dominated state legislatures to cook up new slates of electors. The Green Bay Sweep became, in Navarro’s words, the “last, best chance to snatch a stolen election from the Democrats’ jaws of deceit.”

In 2022, Navarro disregarded a sub-

poena from the congressional committee investigating the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Then, after ignoring a criminal subpoena to appear before a grand jury, Navarro was indicted on charges of contempt of Congress. He was convicted in 2023. The following March, Navarro—at the age of seventy-four—began a four-month sentence in a senior dorm at a federal prison camp in Miami.

This past January, six months after his release, Navarro returned to government, as a senior trade adviser. He wasn’t Vice-President—Bannon had promoted that idea on his podcast—nor was he atop a federal agency, with direct authority to enact policy. And he was back in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, not the White House, and had a staff of just four—or, as he put it to me, “a purposely lean team built for speed and efficiency.”

But he was still, arguably, the world’s most influential economist. He was an architect of the President’s “Liberation Day,” in April, which tore up existing trade agreements and set very high, and widely ridiculed, tariff rates on imports from allies and antagonists alike. Navarro hasn’t disclosed his exact role in those tariff calculations. “What happens in the White House Situation Room, stays in the White House Situation Room,” he told me. The tariff announcements, one part of this Administration’s remodelling of America into a rogue superpower, brought immediate confusion to the world economy, and dramatically raised the likelihood of domestic inflation and recession. “Tariffs are tax cuts,” Navarro told Fox News this spring. (They are not.) “Tariffs are jobs. Tariffs are national security. Tariffs are great for America. Tariffs will make America great again.”

I recently called Alan Lebowitz, who was an English professor at Tufts for nearly forty years, until his retirement, in 2006. In the early seventies, Lebowitz accepted Navarro into his undergraduate fiction-writing class. They became friends, and remained in fond contact into this century. In the acknowledgments in one of Navarro’s many books, he wrote that he was “eternally indebted” to his old teacher.

“I have to say that I am puzzled and

saddened by where Peter is now,” Lebowitz told me. “This is not the Peter I knew. Let me tell you about the Peter I knew.” He described two novels Navarro wrote under his supervision, as an undergraduate. “One of them was called ‘Dope Opera,’” Lebowitz recalled. The books were “on the zany side, very verbally playful and adroit.”

According to Lebowitz, “Peter epitomized what was kind of lovable about the kids of that time. He wore his hair to his shoulders. I remember him in snow, walking barefoot.” (Later, according to a former friend, Navarro liked to joke that “there’s one difference between me and Bill Clinton—I inhaled.”) If Navarro appeared to be fully of his era, he kept a distance from the most pressing campus issue, the Vietnam War. Navarro later recalled, “I didn’t have the anger some people did. But I did have the skepticism.”

Lebowitz remembered once taking his young son, Michael, to Navarro’s apartment. “After dinner, Peter got his guitar out and sang folk songs,” he said. His son “was *just enchanted*.” The next morning, Navarro came by with a guitar for the child, saying that he had an extra one. “I don’t think it was an extra,” Lebowitz said. “You can see why I find it so strange to see where he is now.”

Lebowitz knew that Navarro’s father “had disappeared early.” This, Lebowitz felt, “had surely wounded him.” Albert

Navarro had been a saxophonist and a clarinetist who worked as a music teacher and as a bandleader at resort hotels. Peter, born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1949, was eight when Al Navarro and His Society Orchestra released an album of standards, including “My Heart Belongs to Daddy.” Around this time, Navarro’s parents divorced.

His father remarried, moved to Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and had another family. Peter’s mother, Evelyn, settled in Palm Beach, Florida, with Peter and his older brother—a future commercial pilot—in what Peter has described as a garage apartment near the Kennedy compound. This puts it a few miles north of Mar-a-Lago. His mother was a secretary, and then a department manager, at a Saks Fifth Avenue. A family friend, a former marine with a Purple Heart, became a key paternal influence. The family later moved north; Peter was accepted at Tufts while attending high school in Bethesda, Maryland, where he’d perfected specialist skills as a football placekicker. (A kicker must accept that, thanks to his size difference and solitary training, he may not be embraced as a full member of the team.) In 2022, when Navarro griped that he’d been arrested by F.B.I. agents at a Washington, D.C., airport instead of being allowed to present himself at the Bureau’s headquarters, on Pennsylvania Avenue—in a criminal case about his refusal to keep exactly that

kind of appointment—he noted that he lived so close to the F.B.I. office that he could have hit it with a football kicked from the deck of his apartment.

Lebowitz’s understanding was that Navarro had grown up with little money. He had secured a federally subsidized loan offered to students from lower-income families. In the nineties, when Navarro became a serial political candidate, he didn’t emphasize having risen from modest beginnings, as many such aspirants do. Nor did he invoke Palm Beach to discuss the particular experience of having been not rich in a very rich community—which, decades later, on a different scale, became his experience in Trump Administrations run by billionaires and half billionaires, including Trump, Musk, the Treasury Secretaries Scott Bessent and Steven Mnuchin, and the Commerce Secretaries Howard Lutnick and Wilbur Ross. Navarro’s reticence about his background may have reflected a protectiveness toward his mother, who later remarried and became wealthy enough to give him hundreds of thousands of dollars, which helped fund his political career. Mike Aguirre, a former San Diego city attorney and a onetime friend of Navarro’s, recently described that maternal bond as “the only sincere relationship I knew about” in Navarro’s life.

Soon after Navarro graduated from Tufts, in 1972, with an English degree, he flew to northeastern Thailand, as a Peace Corps teacher. He has described motorcycling through the countryside with “the humid air blowing through my hair while screaming out the lyrics to ‘We’re an American Band.’” Jim Jouppi, a Peace Corps contemporary in Thailand, lived about fifty miles from Navarro, who sometimes visited on weekends. Jouppi said recently, with slight disapproval, “If you wanted to get laid, you came to my province.” (Navarro denied this, saying that he didn’t remember Jouppi; he noted that, during “the height of the sexual revolution in America,” he “didn’t need a passport to find sex.”) In Jouppi’s memory, Navarro was “full of himself” but dashing, with an impressive head of hair. Decades later, as a federal prisoner, Navarro was disappointed to realize that he had to comb his hair without a mirror.

Before returning to the U.S., Navarro

**INCREDIBLY RARE SIGHTING OF BIGFOOT, MY THERAPIST, AND  
MY FIRST-GRADE TEACHER IN THE WILD**





encountered members of the Chinese diaspora in Burma (now Myanmar) and elsewhere. “Many who I met were refugees from the Mao years and Chinese hunger games that killed millions,” he told me. After Navarro began writing about China, in 2006, some U.C. Irvine colleagues, including Ben Leffel, his T.A., doubted that he’d ever been to that country; his books and interviews included no personal recollections. When I asked Navarro about his history of travel to China, he at first deflected, saying that his “more relevant” experience had been in Burma and British Hong Kong. But Navarro later mentioned a “reconnaissance trip” to China, taken in 2006, that involved “leveraging my Peace Corps experience at traveling like a native.” (The same visit could also fairly be described as a vacation, taken with his wife.) After joining the Trump Administration, he visited China again, as a part of a government delegation. According to the *Times*, he and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin got into a “profanity-laced shouting match” in front of their Chinese counterparts.

After the Peace Corps, Navarro returned to Boston. He brought Lebowitz some Thai art works that still hang on his dining-room wall. Navarro worked for a while at an energy-consulting firm in D.C., then began a master’s in public policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School. Lebowitz recalled that Navarro bought and renovated a three-story building in one of Cambridge’s more downscale neighborhoods. “He was very smart that way,” Lebowitz said. (Navarro told me that his work on this “beautiful rundown Victorian” was his “first practical lesson in economics.”) Navarro later bought a house in Falmouth, on Cape Cod, where he became a devoted windsurfer.

Navarro, whose master’s focussed on energy policy, has said that this work got him increasingly “intrigued with economics and economic analysis.” Much of Navarro’s early public writing argues against rigid price controls in the energy market. He made the case for deregulation—later, “radical deregulation.” Soon after Navarro began his Ph.D. studies at Harvard, in 1979, he sought out Jeff Dubin, an economics Ph.D. student at M.I.T. In an academic discipline that often requires a combination of mathematics and storytelling, Navarro’s

clear talent was for the latter; he was a fast, fluent writer. But the former English major “was now in a very rigorous, highly mathematical program,” Dubin recently said. “He didn’t have the facility for that.” Dubin did. As Dubin now puts it, Navarro’s intelligence and entrepreneurial instinct allowed him to see a way to compensate for his deficits: “The solution was, ironically, *gains from trade*.”

That phrase is at the heart of the free-trade lexicon. Free trade in goods or services, unencumbered by tariffs or other barriers, is likely to lead to greater total output than if there had been no trade. Specialization makes economic sense: not every country should grow its own peppers. (Years ago, Navarro described this as “one of the deepest truths in all of economics.” He now refers to “so-called gains from trade.”)

In Cambridge, Navarro needed to produce a dissertation about the economics of corporate charitable giving. Dubin needed to pay his rent. (“I was a poor student, and he was rehabbing a triplex in Central Square.”) Money changed hands. “He told me the direction he wanted to go, and I helped him get there, theoretically and empirically,” Dubin said. “I might have used his data to set up models and get him going. And then he took over at some point and it became his own.” Dubin, speaking half seriously, described this as “one of my first consulting experiences.” He observed that “most people, at that level, would not pay someone else to help them.” But Navarro saw nothing improper in the exchange, and neither did Dubin.

The two men become close friends. “We went to the Cape together,” Dubin said. “We double-dated.” They also co-wrote several papers. Dubin remembers that Navarro, who was “very into his health, into his body,” was an enthusiast of dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO), a gooey, unregulated byproduct of the paper industry that purportedly soothes muscle strains. According to Dubin, Navarro wasn’t immune to the substance’s notorious side effect: “He reeked of garlic because of it.” (Navarro told me that, today, he doesn’t “drink, smoke pot, use any hard drugs or even prescription medicines,” adding,

“Just not my thing. Live clean or die.”)

Navarro’s dissertation, submitted in 1986, doesn’t acknowledge Dubin’s contributions. According to every economist I asked, that omission constitutes an academic violation. Harry Holzer, a public-policy professor at Georgetown, told me that, if someone “is actually developing his models for him, I think it crosses a boundary.” Holzer, who served as the

chief economist at the Department of Labor during the Clinton Administration, is a former Harvard acquaintance of Navarro’s. “At a minimum, a footnote acknowledging a person’s input is appropriate,” Holzer said.

Lawrence Goulder, the sole surviving member of Navarro’s dissertation committee, agrees. If Navarro received substantial help, he told me, then some recognition of that would have been “expected,” and its absence was “inappropriate.” (Goulder, who’s now at Stanford, noted that, at Harvard, Navarro had taught him to windsurf.)

Navarro, asked if he’d engaged in an academic deceit, said, of Dubin, “I don’t recall him providing any substantive assistance on my dissertation.” Navarro also pointed to other publications in which he had thanked Dubin for his help.

Later in life, Peter Navarro introduced readers of his books to a friend named Ron Vara. According to “If It’s Raining in Brazil, Buy Starbucks,” a 2001 book of financial advice that urged retail investors to be alert to world events, Vara had been the captain of a reserve unit at the time of the Gulf War. He now lived on a houseboat in Miami and was known as the Dark Prince of Disaster, for making “macroplays”—trades taking nimble advantage of sudden onsets of human misery. Vara had macroplayed Hurricane Andrew and a Taiwanese earthquake. In 1986, when Vara was a “struggling doctoral student in economics at Harvard,” he’d apparently been clairvoyant: two days before the Chernobyl disaster, he’d shorted companies invested in nuclear energy.

Vara appears in several other Navarro books, including “Death by China,” where he’s quoted as saying, “Only the Chinese can turn a leather sofa into



an acid bath, a baby crib into a lethal weapon, and a cell phone battery into heart-piercing shrapnel." Vara was also credited as the executive producer (and the musical director) of the videos that Navarro showed to his Rising China class at U.C. Irvine.

"Ron Vara" is an anagram of "Navarro." Vara's fictional status was first reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2019. Navarro had previously hidden the fact of Vara's nonexistence, even from Glenn Hubbard, who, in 2010, co-authored a book with Navarro in which Vara was quoted. When the *Chronicle* asked Hubbard, a former dean of Columbia Business School, if he realized that Vara was an invention, and if he was comfortable with that, he replied, "No and no." An economist friend who used to play golf with Navarro told me that, after reading the "Raining" manuscript, he saw what was going on and urged Navarro to reconsider, saying, "It's not appropriate." Navarro ignored him. Today, a note at the start of "Raining" says that Vara is "an alias created by Peter Navarro."

Everyone has regrets. Not everyone smuggles them into print in the form of an imaginary friend. The Ron Vara of "Raining" surely reveals some of Navarro's thoughts about how his own life could have turned out. The Dark Prince of Disaster is a fearless, military-trained man with a godlike ability to see everything coming. He *knows it all*. "Raining," a book about geopolitical acuity, was published eight months before the 9/11 attacks. It doesn't mention terrorism. But, in an interview given in October, 2001, Navarro attempted to fill, with what sounds like shamelessness, the gap between himself and his alter ego. He said, "The recent terrorist attack—I mean, it was a cinch to macroplay."

In the years after Navarro got his Ph.D., a distance started to open between the life he was surely due—as a vigorous Harvard man with catalogue-model good looks—and the one he found himself living. "I always had the idea that Peter wanted to be the next Jack Kennedy," the former golfing friend told me, adding, "If you get right on the threshold of your dream and don't get to step through the door, I can imagine that could be pretty difficult."

In the mid-eighties, while Navarro was finishing his doctorate, he moved to

## MEMORY PALACE

Every memory palace should have a damp basement  
with frozen pipes and mouse bones,  
shreds of pink insulation, you dare not enter.  
Every memory palace should have  
my childhood basement, at the dead end of Elm St.,  
with its soft beams and dirt floor  
where we stored a mannequin named Greta  
who scared us to death every time we went to reset  
the hot-water tank.

Greta, purchased from the Lazarus department-store  
closing sale, 1996. The same store where my feet  
were measured by those amazing people  
who used to kneel in front of you  
to press a big toe against the leather and tell you to  
*walk around a little, see how it feels.*

Everything khaki and ketchup red; frosted glass, pastel floral.  
Santa Claus lived there, at the top of the staircase,  
and I sat on him, suddenly aware of how grubby  
my winter coat was, and my fingernails; how crooked  
my gaze. Greta watched—flawless, in her prime  
in the newest sweater and pantyhose and pencil skirt,  
not knowing she would be purchased by *us*

San Diego. He met Janet Chenier, who was then working in a bookstore, and they married. Former friends of the couple describe Chenier as likable and quiet, certainly when juxtaposed with her husband—a dinner guest who didn't quite get the point of other people talking. The year of his wedding, Navarro turned thirty-seven. Jeff Dubin was by then a professor at Caltech, in Pasadena, and still in his twenties. (He'd get tenure at thirty.) Navarro fiercely desired a professorship at U.C. San Diego, where he'd briefly worked as a lecturer. But, Dubin told me, "he wasn't strong enough academically." Navarro instead took a job at the University of San Diego, a small liberal-arts college with a lower academic standing; he tried to remain "*in the orbit* of the place he really wanted to get to," Dubin said.

Dubin remembers visits to San Diego filled with windsurfing and bike rides. "He was quite rigid in a lot of ways," Dubin said. "Or, one could say, 'disciplined.'" At the same time each morning, Navarro disappeared for an hour to write on his computer, in what Dubin called his "capsule." "I would say, 'What are you going to write about?' 'Well, I don't know. I just write.'"

Navarro published a few research pa-

pers, but most of his writing from this period wasn't academic. His first book, "The Policy Game," published in 1984, before he finished his Ph.D., was the kind of text that might help an aspiring center-right politician build a reputation for seriousness. It argued that "special interests" of the left and the right—but mainly the left—often pulled decision-makers away from ideal public-interest outcomes. Navarro devoted a chapter to the seductive foolishness of protectionist trade policies. Tariffs, he declared, "make everyone a loser."

In 1988, Navarro was hired by U.C. Irvine, whose campus is eighty miles north of downtown San Diego; this was despite his publication record, not because of it. The former golfing friend explained to me that, at the time, the university's business school was young and ambitious, and, "when you're *emergent* program, being able to put a Harvard Ph.D. on your faculty is definitely a consideration." The Navarros bought a house in Del Mar Heights, which is as close as you can be to Irvine without leaving either the ocean or the city of San Diego. The city boundary ran through their yard.

Dubin recalled that U.C. Irvine so-



for \$40. Not knowing she would end up in the muddy basement of a farmhouse, naked, dismembered, her breasts bared for no one but the spiders, the red efts, the plumbers, her arm lying beside her, her hand with three missing fingers that were kicking around somewhere upstairs—

I have no memory palace.  
I have tomato-paste cans bloated  
on a sagging plywood shelf.  
Memory: the botulism exhibit. Lockjaw.  
A declawed cat. Come, and you'll trip over a cement statue  
of a cement bag that got wet before it was even opened,  
all its creases preserved perfectly—

when I look back  
there's an axe in my head, and tarp draped over it.  
There's a white mask hanging on the wall  
and no eyes, just holes with more wall looking out,  
so angry it's frozen in a red smile, guarding  
what can neither see nor hear.

—Bianca Stone

licited his opinion about Navarro's tenure candidacy. "I struggled," he told me. "We were friends, and yet he was not a strong academic." Dubin's evaluation focussed on the impressive reach of Navarro's nonacademic writing. "I was threading a needle," he said. He laughed. "To some degree, he's my fault."

When Navarro ran for mayor of San Diego, in 1992, he already had some local fame. For several years, he'd been arguing that the city had reached its residential capacity. "Growth is a game that has losers and winners," he'd said. "The people who win are the developers and the immigrants. The people who lose are the ones who already live here." He described one local housing proposal as "Appalachia."

Navarro had first offered such commentary as the spokesperson for a group that pressed the city to impose a tight quota on the construction of new housing. (San Diego's population was then growing nearly three times as fast as Los Angeles's.) Navarro subsequently founded his own group, largely financed by his mother, which he called Prevent Los Angelization Now!, or PLAN! The champion of deregulation here embraced

radical regulation, in a way that served his interests as a homeowner but was also politically astute. Navarro was a self-declared "conservative Republican," in a Republican town, but his confrontational stance toward the real-estate industry garnered him allies to his left. And local reporters working on almost any topic—traffic, sewage, immigration—would be glad for a comment from someone who could be described as a "slow-growth" guru.

Peter Andersen, a local academic and a green activist, supported Navarro's agenda, and still remembers him as an environmentalist "comrade-in-arms"—even if Navarro's desire to become a "mover and shaker" was intense. But Scott Flexo, another of Navarro's friends, who was then a political-science graduate student, told me that he long ago decided that PLAN! had been merely "an organization that allowed Peter to run for office." Flexo added, "He didn't like teaching at U.C.I.—he felt that he was better than the faculty, I think."

In 1991, Navarro changed his voter registration to independent. When he joined the nonpartisan primary for the 1992 mayoral election, Susan Golding, the front-runner, was a Republican with

some real-estate backing. Navarro could position himself to her left. (Just two years later, he announced that he was a Democrat—a member of "the party of the people and not the power brokers.") He was an energetic candidate, adept at scathing sound bites, but the San Diego *Union Tribune* raised an eyebrow at his "chameleon-like tendencies," and noted that "when he meets with African Americans he speaks with what can only be termed a black street dialect."

The top two candidates in that primary would remain on the ballot for the general election. Navarro came in first, Golding second. This was a remarkable upset, although Andersen and Flexo, who both worked on the campaign, found it hard to celebrate: on the night of this victory, Navarro didn't even thank his volunteers. (Andersen recalled Flexo muttering, "What an asshole.") Andersen told me of another occasion when a hardworking volunteer, a doctor, ran into Navarro at a restaurant. According to Andersen, "This doctor said, 'Peter, can I join you?' And Peter said, 'Not really. I'm trying to focus.'"

Someone who knows Navarro well recently described him to me as an introvert. If that's accurate, the trait clearly coexists with exhibitionism and pugnaciousness. During the mayoral race, Navarro got into a small physical fight with Golding's press secretary, Nikki Symington—he also called her a "pig"—and another with a sixty-five-year-old man at La Jolla Cove. ("If he wasn't so old, I would have kicked his ass," Navarro reportedly said at the time.) After his primary success, Navarro was newly exposed to scrutiny; he was challenged on his funding, and on his principles. According to Flexo, such pushback "made him lose his mind." Andersen told me, "I would use a technique with him called systematic desensitization, a relaxation therapy. I'd get him kind of cooled down." Navarro arrived shivering at one radio debate in La Jolla wearing nothing but a Speedo, after swimming a mile to get there.

Golding's ex-husband was in prison for money laundering, a fact that Navarro highlighted in attack ads released shortly before the election. At a televised debate, Golding objected, tearfully, to having had her family dragged

into the race. Navarro scoffed that her crying was rehearsed.

He was probably right. Tom Sheppard, then a Golding consultant, told me, dryly, that “the issue came up in debate preparation.” But, he went on, “a male candidate discounting the heartfelt protestations of a woman live on camera was really powerful.” It was immediately clear, to Navarro and to others, that he’d made a mistake.

Navarro lost by four points. In 1993, he ran for office again—this time for city council—and was defeated again. The following year, he failed in a bid for county supervisor. In 1996, he ran for a Southern California congressional seat, as a Democrat. This race drew national attention: he had a photo op with Vice-President Al Gore, shared a stage with Hillary Clinton, and spoke briefly at the Democratic National Convention. But Navarro once more fell short, this time by more than ten points.

Lisa Ross, a family friend of the Navarros, worked as his communications director during his congressional run. (She had previously volunteered on a public-access show, “News Behind the News,” that Navarro hosted.) Although she’d seen him gradually become “more and more brittle” in the face of electoral disappointments, she was still shocked by his peevishness during that campaign. On a visit to the editorial board of a local paper, for example, Navarro began by slamming a tape recorder onto the table. (Ross, recalling the moment: “Oh, God, just shoot me.”) She and Navarro never recovered their friendship. According to Mike Aguirre, the former San Diego city attorney, the congressional defeat threw Navarro “into a Grand Canyon of failure.” His marriage also ended, although he soon began a relationship with Leslie LeBon, an architect and one of his recent M.B.A. students. They later married.

In 1998, Navarro published a score-settling political memoir, “San Diego Confidential,” in which he recalled having learned, via focus groups and polling, that many voters saw him as “overbearing and obnoxious” and “an opportunist.” This data “revealed to me

a frightening part of my personality,” he wrote, adding that most people “would rather vote for a nice person they sometimes disagree with than for an asshole who perfectly represents their views.” That insight didn’t lead him to modulate his tone. The memoir describes a San Diego city-council member as a “bespectacled lesbian with the thick, amorphous body of a bull dyke gone to seed.”



In 2001, Navarro ran in his fifth and final race, for city council, and received less than eight per cent of the vote. That year, he launched a new career as a get-rich investment adviser, citing Ron Vara as his model of success. This work came to include several books, numerous CNBC appearances, and a blog about investing. In August, 2008, a month before Lehman Brothers collapsed, Navarro advised his readers to buy U.S. stocks, arguing, “This is not a good time to be short.”

In 2010, Michael Addis thought of himself as a comedy director; his best-known work was a documentary about hecklers at standup shows. When Navarro asked him to direct a film derived from “Death by China,” which he’d written with Greg Autry, a Ph.D. candidate at U.C. Irvine, Addis’s reaction was “That sounds like a *terrible* title.” But Addis had just divorced, and he needed the money. “I was desperate,” he recalled. He and Navarro agreed on a weekly rate.

Addis isn’t particularly proud of the resulting film. But he likes some parts, and, despite having leftish leanings, he has vestigial respect for Navarro. He was “a guy who just would get up early, study like crazy,” Addis said. “He wasn’t a bad guy. He cared about this concept that America could be stronger if we didn’t outsource so many jobs. I think his heart was in the right place.”

Addis and Navarro filmed interviews with figures sympathetic to Navarro’s cause, including the Democratic congressman Tim Ryan, of Ohio, and Tom Danjczek, of the Steel Manufacturers Association. This was a bare-bones operation. Addis sometimes operated a camera and also asked a question or two.

Navarro explained to Addis that he

planned to link these interviews with animated sequences providing editorial commentary. The “Death by China” book, and, before that, “The Coming China Wars,” from 2006, catalogued acts of Chinese-government delinquency, derived from both reliable secondary sources (the *Financial Times*) and questionable ones (Ron Vara). Navarro presented these sins—including currency manipulation, intellectual-property theft, and environmental degradation—as significant drivers of China’s extraordinary economic transformation. If one set aside the most powerful mechanisms behind China’s growth, such as low labor costs and industrial planning—although it wasn’t clear why one would set those aside—then it was easy to see that the country had scammed its way to success. Western sunniness about coexistence with China, of the Tom Friedman kind, should be scorned. America hadn’t been outpaced by a flawed rival; it had been mugged. Navarro dedicated “The Coming China Wars” to “our children,” for whom the “catastrophe” of a dominant China was a greater threat than nuclear or biological war.

Addis recalled making a teasing suggestion. “I was, like, ‘We need to have a knife, and it says, “Made in China,” and it stabs the U.S., and blood pours out.’” According to Addis, Navarro replied, “That’s a great idea!” Addis told him, “I’m kidding.” Navarro ran with it anyway. The resulting sequence resembles a Halloween Week sofa promotion advertised on local TV.

Addis sometimes worked with Navarro at a house that Navarro and LeBon had recently bought and renovated in Laguna Beach, south of U.C. Irvine. The view from the deck “was *insane*,” Addis said. Navarro was extraordinarily focused; from the moment he opened the door for Addis, they were at work. Navarro might continue a discussion while taking a cold-water plunge in a specialized indoor tub. (Navarro described these dips to me as “good for the body and soul.”) In a collaboration that lasted two years, on and off, Addis could remember only one purely social interaction, when Navarro asked if he wanted to take a break and watch “The Big Bang Theory.” (Addis declined.)

According to Addis, Navarro was certain that HBO would acquire their



film. Addis told him he was wrong. They were assembling seventy-five minutes of talking-head interviews, followed by onscreen text instructing viewers to call their representatives to demand “a strong manufacturing base.” The film has no real narrative or wit, unless you count the dagger puncturing the Midwest, or the Bruce Springsteen pastiche, written by Navarro, that plays over the end credits. (“I used to work in a factory/ Right now, I’d work for anything . . . They sent our jobs away/ And in China, they’re not workers, they’re just slaves.”)

Navarro ended up taking the director’s credit for himself. Addis was a little relieved to give it up; he became a producer. Navarro had by then accepted that the film was not going to be a mainstream hit, and he seemed deflated. After a preview screening, Addis recalled, Navarro conceded that the stabbing sequence was “maybe a bit much.” Navarro doesn’t remember saying that; he now regards this animation as the “signature image” of the film. “Wouldn’t change it for the world,” he told me.

Like the acknowledgments in Navarro’s Ph.D. dissertation, the end credits of “Death by China” omit an important detail. They don’t acknowledge that Nucor—a Charlotte-based steel company facing competition from rising Chinese steel production—gave Navarro a million dollars to make it.

Navarro has sometimes been asked why he became fixated on lambasting China in the mid two-thousands. He has consistently responded that, in the early years of the century, he noticed that his M.B.A. students and ex-students were struggling to find good jobs. In his effort to understand this, Navarro concluded that “all roads” led to China’s lawless rise.

This makes little sense. In 2005, the U.S. unemployment rate for college graduates was about two and a half per cent, the same as it had been ten years earlier. In the same period, real G.D.P., adjusted for inflation, increased by forty per cent. For decades, the American economy had been losing manufacturing jobs—more to automation than to overseas competition—but gaining other jobs. This was no comfort to a discarded factory worker, but it didn’t leave a would-be entrepreneur or executive particularly exposed.

But decrying China’s misdeeds surely looked like an opportunity—a self-positioning macroplay. As Navarro’s former friend Scott Flexo put it, “He’s always looking for something to blame.” This cause, nominally bipartisan, could help him build powerful alliances. And, as with the topic of San Diego real estate, any counter-argument had to meet him partway: property developers can indeed be snakes; the Chinese economy is not a model of free trade. Without great risk to his social status, Navarro could deploy the hyperbolic and xenophobic rhetoric that he clearly enjoyed. He could ask, “Why are so many Chinese black hearts so willing to poison the world’s food and drug supply for profit?”

Navarro’s romance with Nucor was first evident in 2009. In his book “Always a Winner: Finding Your Competitive Advantage in an Up-and-Down Economy,” he gushed that Nucor was “the safest, highest-quality, lowest-cost, most productive, and most profitable steel company in the world.” He praised Nucor’s “uncanny ability to profitably navigate through the up-and-down movements of the business cycle.” (In fact, Nucor had lost half of its value in

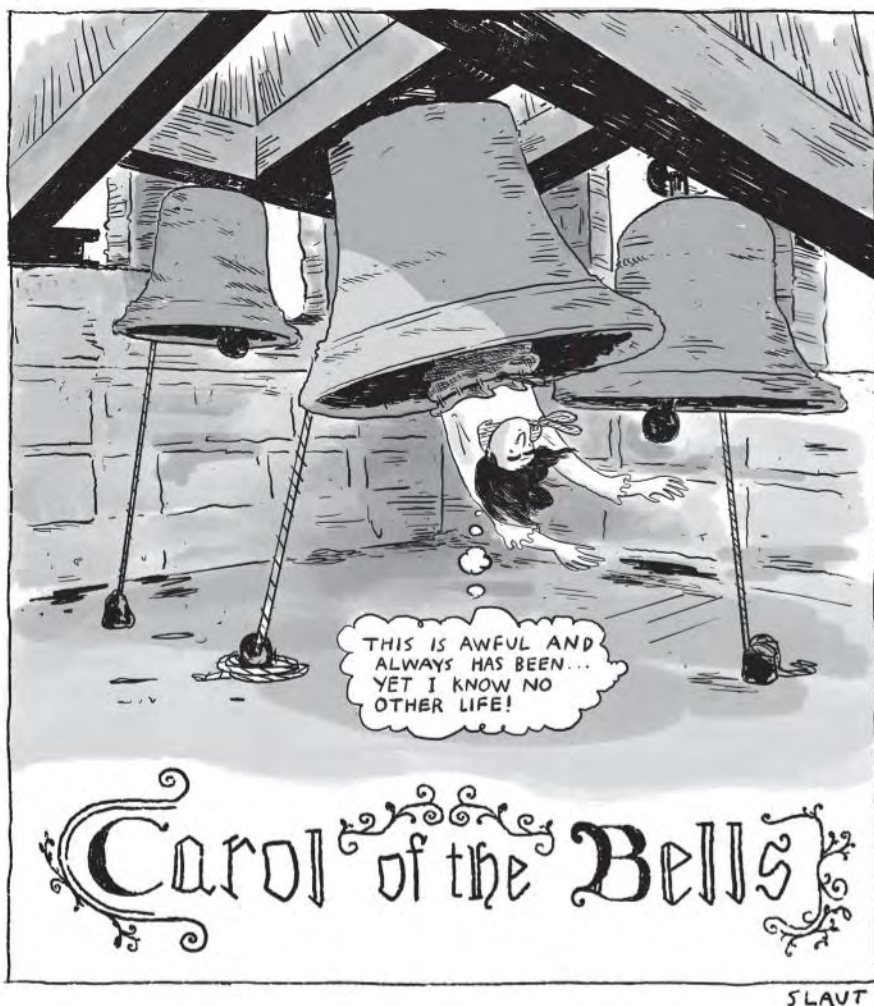
the fifteen months before the book’s publication.) Navarro’s mother gave the book four stars, but not five, on Amazon.

Navarro and Dan DiMicco, then Nucor’s chairman and C.E.O., subsequently co-wrote an essay for *Barron’s* which argued that the U.S. should “get tough with China.” In 2011, in the book version of “Death by China,” Navarro included a section titled “Be Like Nucor Steel’s Dan DiMicco—Not G.E.’s Jeffrey Immelt.”

The Nucor alliance anticipated the ideologically flexible spirit in which Navarro entered the White House. Even the most slapdash, “black hearts”-infused critique of Chinese-government practices will tend to draw an author into passing appreciation of political transparency, pollution controls, a free press, the rule of law, worker protections, religious tolerance, the freedom to protest, and other values that used to carry weight in both of America’s main political parties. (“Crouching Tiger” contrasts American democracy to Chinese “corruption and plundering.” The book version of “Death by China” quotes Camus: “It is the job of thinking people not to be on the side of the executioners.”) But anyone



*“And, up next, eight hours of white noise, going out to Susan and her husband, Tom.”*



being paid by Nucor in 2010 was being pulled hard in another direction. Nucor was anti-union; it had paid huge fines for disregarding environmental regulations; it had a record of mistreating minority workers. DiMicco stepped down in 2012. After a spell as a Trump-campaign adviser, in 2016, he became visible as a QAnon-curious Twitter presence with opinions about George Soros.

DiMicco and Navarro never announced that their mutual regard had a cash component. That fact became known only because of the peculiar efforts made to hide it. In March, 2011, Nucor sent a million dollars, in two checks, to Michael Shames, an old friend of Navarro's who ran a nonprofit, the Utility Consumers' Action Network (UCAN), whose stated mission was to protect the interests of California energy customers. A few days later, Shames signed a contract in which Navarro—acting as a “consultant” for UCAN—agreed to make the

“Death by China” documentary for a million dollars. In return, UCAN would receive five DVDs of the film.

That spring, David Pepper, a lawyer at UCAN, began a whistle-blowing campaign that alerted the organization's board to various odd accounting actions taken by Shames, including this deal. A steel company had paid for a film that clearly served its interests through a consumer nonprofit that had nothing to do with China or steel. When the *San Diego Reader* first reported on this funding triangle, a Nucor representative told the paper that routing the cash through UCAN had been Navarro's idea. (Navarro has said that the arrangement was “completely transparent.”) Pepper recently told me that he could see no reason for UCAN's involvement, unless it was to “muddy the waters” in a way that likely broke laws related to taxes and the regulation of nonprofits. Shames, explaining the deal, told me, “When-

ever a company gives any kind of money to a nonprofit, they can write that off.”

The F.B.I. opened an investigation. In 2012, UCAN hired a new executive director, Kim Malcolm, in a belated attempt to clean house. Malcolm told me that she spent much of her tenure responding to law-enforcement queries and subpoenas. She also heard from Navarro, a lot. At that stage, he had received only six hundred thousand dollars of his “consultancy” fee. “He was calling, like, three or four times a week, begging me for the rest of the money,” she recalled. “I said, ‘Well, I can't just write a check for four hundred thousand dollars . . . with an F.B.I. investigation going on *that includes this*.’” Finally, she agreed to meet for lunch in San Diego. “He showed up to our meeting about a million-dollar transaction in surfer shorts,” she said. “He had long hair—he looked like a hippie. I'm, like, ‘Are you kidding me?’”

Malcolm eventually had to respect Navarro's contract: she co-signed a four-hundred-thousand-dollar check to him. In a subsequent legal filing, Malcolm wrote, “I do not know whether the Death by China transaction was lawful.” No charges were ever brought against Navarro, Shames, or Nucor.

Michael Addis noted that the film surely cost much less than a million dollars. He said, of Navarro, “He was a good economist, in terms of making money for himself.” Navarro told me that he never “took a dime” from “Death by China”; he acknowledged that there had been money left over, but he said he spent it on the “Crouching Tiger” documentary series he'd assigned to his students in 2016.

When Stephen Miller called Navarro on Victoria Beach, in June, 2016, Trump had just become his party's presumptive Presidential nominee. In Navarro's giddy memory of that day, Miller was asking for input on a major speech about trade that Trump would soon be delivering. As Navarro wrote, “I now found myself sitting in the warm sand on Victoria Beach talking to Candidate Trump's one and only speechwriter about what would become arguably the best speech—at least on economics and trade—of the president's career.”

That speech began with steel. “The



legacy of Pennsylvania steelworkers lives in the bridges, railways, and skyscrapers that make up our great American landscape,” Trump said, in Monessen, Pennsylvania, on June 28th. “But our workers’ loyalty was repaid—you know it better than anybody—with total betrayal.” He went on, “When subsidized foreign steel is dumped into our markets, threatening our factories, the politicians . . . do nothing.” Trump addressed familiar Navarro themes: China’s entrance into the World Trade Organization, in 2001, had enabled “the greatest job theft in the history of our country”; China unfairly subsidizes its domestic industries; China is “a currency manipulator.” Navarro, whose well-founded fear is that if he doesn’t praise himself nobody will, has described this speech as “sheer political and policy poetry,” and compared it to the Gettysburg Address.

After the talk on the beach, Navarro became an acknowledged part of the Trump campaign, and began giving media interviews. For the previous few months, Navarro had been a hidden, informal campaign adviser. Jared Kushner has taken credit for first reaching out to him. *Vanity Fair* has reported that, after Trump had given his son-in-law the task of finding someone sympathetic to his views on international trade—oddly consistent over the years—Kushner Googled his way to “Death by China,” then made a cold call. Countering this, Navarro has claimed a long-standing correspondence with someone in Trump’s office, although he can’t get that person’s name straight. He also seems to believe in an absurd myth, rashly repeated by a writer at the *Los Angeles Times* in 2011, that Trump had read “hundreds of books about China over the decades,” including one of Navarro’s. A Trump blurb for the film version of “Death by China”—“I urge you to see it”—apparently dates from after the start of his 2016 campaign. Someone well acquainted with Navarro told me that, before Navarro heard from Kushner, he had been trying hard to attract the attention of both Presidential campaigns; he never heard back from Hillary Clinton’s.

Navarro, long rejected and unelected, made no attempt to set professorial boundaries in his new advisory role. He threw himself into every campaign argument. Trump hadn’t hired a kooky,

maverick academic who happened to agree with him on tariffs, as has often been suggested. Rather, he’d found someone with no compunctions about performing agreement. Navarro, in his ethnic scapegoating, quickness to anger, and difficulty with noncompliant women, may have been temperamentally aligned with the MAGA movement he was joining. But, aside from the topic of Chinese black hearts, almost nothing that Navarro has said or written in support of Trump reflects views that he’d consistently articulated beforehand.

Unlike many people in the Administration, Navarro was prepared to take Trump’s words literally—when the President said he wanted to tear up NAFTA overnight, say, or to overturn the 2020 election. And Navarro has had the agility to follow, in a synchronized swerve, Trump’s changing message on any issue, from the value of the COVID vaccine to the finality of the Liberation Day tariff rates. (Navarro: “This is not a negotiation.” Trump: “The tariffs give us great power to negotiate.” Navarro: “The Boss is going to be chief negotiator.”) Navarro came to define himself against those around Trump who—lacking the rigor of his unsqueamish servitude—sometimes pursued strategies of delay and diplomacy. Navarro, using language from military aviation, told me that in the first Administration “there were simply too many bogies inside the perimeter” to “swiftly move the Trump agenda.” He has identified these obstacles as a “confederacy of globalists, Never Trump Republicans, wild-eyed Freedom Caucus nut jobs, and self-absorbed Wall Street transactionalists,” and he has taken the time to insult many of them individually, including John Bolton, Gary Cohn, Stephanie Grisham, John Kelly, Jared Kushner, Mark Meadows, Don McGahn, H. R. McMaster, Steve Mnuchin, Mick Mulvaney, Brad Parscale, Mike Pence, Rob Porter, Wilbur Ross, and Rex Tillerson. (He speaks warmly of Miller and Bannon, and had a soft spot for Anthony Scaramucci, because he also went to Tufts.)

Navarro’s transformation from professor to courtier was immediate. Even before Trump won in 2016, Navarro wrote in support of banning Muslims from entering the U.S., and declared that deporting eleven million migrants would

do no harm to the economy. He also co-wrote a policy paper proposing that any measures taken to reduce the U.S. trade deficit would—inevitably, mathematically—increase growth. This is false. The Cato Institute called the idea “a logical prank.” Harry Holzer, the Georgetown economist, told me, “The things he says now violate the most elementary principles of macroeconomics—stuff you learn in the first semester.”

Navarro’s former golfing friend defined an opportunist as someone “willing to trade out conditions that you or I would consider important simply to be in a place. I think that describes Peter.” He went on, “I don’t think that he doesn’t *care* what people say about him. I think he recognizes that it’s the price of him being able to be where he is.”

In September, 2016, Navarro flew to New York. He met Bannon and Miller, and was given a corner to work in on the fourteenth floor of Trump Tower. He has described his first encounter with Trump: “I get into the back of a black SUV and sit behind the Boss,” he wrote. “It will be my first face-to-face meeting with him—but I don’t quite see his face yet. He’s talking on his cell phone first to Rupert Murdoch. ‘How we doing Rupert? How are we doing? What are you hearing?’” When Trump at last acknowledged Navarro, it was with a look that Navarro chose to interpret this way: “Welcome to the Big Apple you Laguna Beach rube. And welcome to the big time.”

On July 17, 2024, just after midnight, Navarro was released from the prison camp in Miami. Later that day, he flew to Milwaukee, to make his second-ever speech at a political party’s national convention.

A woman named Bonnie Brenner flew with him. They were newly engaged. Brenner, who is in her early sixties, worked for decades as an assistant to senior banking executives. She and Navarro had met in the corridor of their apartment building, in Washington, D.C., not long after the January 6th riot. Navarro had then just finalized his divorce from Leslie LeBon, who had added a note to her website: “For all emails received regarding the Trump Administration, we will forward your email address to a politician of our choice and make a

donation to them in your name.” In the divorce settlement, Navarro, who had orchestrated the Administration’s “buy American” rhetoric, got the Lexus.

Navarro no longer had a relationship with U.C. Irvine. Around the time he left the White House, carrying a framed photograph of a 2018 meeting between Trump and President Xi Jinping that he’d attended in Buenos Aires, the university removed Navarro’s online courses, and his biography, from its website. Navarro told me that he missed nothing about U.C. Irvine but its Olympic-size swimming pool: the campus was “a woke bastion of Blue State dogma.”

In June, 2022, Navarro was arrested as he and Brenner were about to board a plane to Nashville, where he was scheduled to appear on Mike Huckabee’s TV talk show. Navarro recently wrote that he can still feel “the cold steel” of the handcuffs. According to an F.B.I. report, agents adjusted his handcuffs three times, in response to his complaints. (The report also notes that he called them “kind Nazis.”) He was taken to the U.S. District Court building on Constitution Avenue. Despite being a former White House official, he wrote, he was treated with no more deference than the system’s usual “parade of rapists, thieves, murderers, drug addicts, burglars, pimps, and hookers.”

Dozens of other Trump loyalists had found ways to be unhelpful to the January 6th committee without risking arrest. Navarro could have turned up for his hearing and said next to nothing. Instead, he repeatedly proposed that executive privilege excused him altogether. This was showboating. Navarro could offer no evidence that Trump had invoked this privilege. And executive privilege, even if invoked, would likely not apply to electoral conspiracies. Besides, Navarro had already happily discussed the Green Bay Sweep plot in a book and in interviews with MSNBC’s Ari Melber, among others. (Melber: “You do realize these investigators can hear you when you talk on TV?”)

In 2023, Navarro was convicted of two counts of contempt of Congress. At his sentencing, Navarro experimented, after two years of cocky public obstruction, with a bespoke form of humility. Referring to his experience with the Department of Justice, he told

the judge, “I’m a Harvard-educated gentleman, right? But the learning curve when they come at you with the biggest law firm in the world is very, very, very steep.”

During Navarro’s incarceration, Brenner talked with Steve Bannon on his “War Room” podcast, and showed off a new diamond ring. On prison visits, she said, “my heart breaks inside.” Bannon congratulated her on her engagement. Navarro was “not the easiest day at the beach,” he said, and needed “a steady hand.” On Navarro’s birthday, Brenner wrote on his Substack, urging his supporters to “go dance with your loved ones, go sing, go laugh, go find joy for me and him today.”

Navarro had been sleeping in a bunkbed dormitory that held about fifty older inmates. The facility’s security regime is at the lowest level in the federal system, but his account of prison life foregrounds razor wire and the prospect of rape. “Nobody hands you a rulebook when you enter prison,” he has written. “You learn fast: some rules are written on paper, the rest are carved into the culture. Who you sit with, who you avoid, when to talk, when to shut up—the wrong move can cost you more than privileges.” In fact, a well-compensated prison consultant can provide something close to a rulebook; Navarro had hired one, Sam Mangel, who’d served a term in the same camp. Navarro also had access to weekend visits that lasted hours, five hundred minutes of phone time a month, and a recreational area set up for basketball,



racquetball, pickleball, softball, and bocce. Brenner described Navarro exercising in a “huge field,” and quoted him saying “Motion is the potion.”

When Donald Trump, Jr., visited the camp, he told Navarro that he looked like Robert De Niro in “Cape Fear.” “Peter had the slicked-back hair,” Don, Jr., later said, and he was “jacked.” At the time of his release, Navarro had just turned

seventy-five. He had contended with a COVID infection. Previously “145 pounds soaking wet,” in his own description, he had lost ten pounds. He was also tanned, and hadn’t had a chance to fix a missing lower tooth. When he put on a suit and tie, he resembled a Depression-era drifter spruced up for court.

Someone posted a video of his arrival in Milwaukee, where the Republican National Convention was under way. In the clip, he is wheeling luggage that looks very much like a model made by Showkoo, a Chinese manufacturer. He was repeatedly stopped in the hallways. People called him “sir.” He told me, “It was tremendously heartwarming and uplifting but also confirmed my belief that the Democrat weaponization of our justice system would be a salient issue in the campaign.”

Don, Jr., hugged him, and didn’t flinch when Navarro portrayed himself as part of a trinity of martyrs, along with Steve Bannon (who’d also gone to prison for contempt of Congress) and Don, Jr.’s, father, who’d just survived an assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania. Navarro also told Don, Jr., that, when he had glanced at live coverage of the start of the Butler rally on a prison TV, he had known, Ron Vara-like, that a shooting was likely. “First rule—secure the rooftops,” he said.

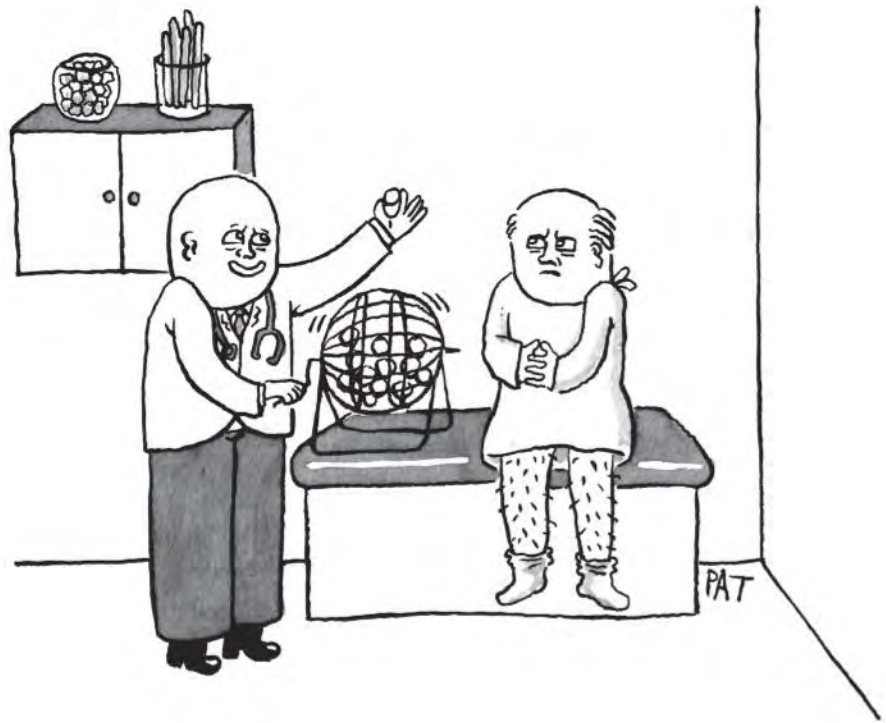
During the first Trump term, Navarro had sometimes felt nostalgia for the campaign. “The beauty of working in Trump Tower was that I had no boss,” he has written. Between 2017 and 2021, he’d had influence, on and off, but it clearly didn’t feel quite like real power. Bannon has quoted Trump asking, “Where’s my Peter?,” which seems to sum things up: the President valued Navarro, but didn’t keep him at his side. He’d been invited in, then shut out. Navarro was disappointed with what he called his “nosebleed” seats at the first Trump Inauguration, and he hated that his status in the White House was lower than that of, say, Miller or Bannon. (At the time, however, Navarro told *Bloomberg* that he thought of his single-person staff as a “SWAT team.”) Things got worse: the National Trade Council was folded into Gary Cohn’s National Economic Council, and Navarro had to copy Cohn on his outgoing communications, even though Navarro regarded him as a



“treacherous misfit.” After Cohn left the White House, in 2018, Navarro became more prominent. He was able to encourage and defend Trump’s trade war against China. “The Trump China tariffs were one of the few things Biden left alone,” he told me with pride. He added, “America has a long way to go before it fully reclaims its manufacturing base both from China and the rest of the world.” And, during the COVID crisis, Navarro had a high-profile role as a supply-chain coordinator. (A House subcommittee later found that Navarro had likely overpaid for ventilators by half a billion dollars.)

But many accounts, Navarro’s among them, tell of years of large and small humiliations. He was kept out of key meetings, including during the pandemic, when he wasn’t put on the main government task force; his calls weren’t returned; nobody wanted his memos, including one in which he misidentified which Administration official had written a hostile and anonymous *Times* op-ed. Olivia Troye, an adviser to Vice-President Mike Pence, has said that she had standing orders to take such memos out of Navarro’s hands, shred them, “and make sure he never stepped foot” in the Vice-President’s office. Navarro once grabbed Troye’s wrist to try to wrestle back some of his documents. (Navarro told me that Troye’s story was “utter bullshit.”) He became known as a West Wing lurker, and as someone likely to make a scene in a corridor—by, say, yelling at the head of the F.D.A. about the virtues of hydroxychloroquine as a COVID treatment. Navarro has recalled, “I’d be sitting in the Oval or the Roosevelt Room fighting just about everybody else. And it was uncanny.”

Last July, in Milwaukee, he had a few hours of simple, happy fawning. It didn’t last. A few months later, as Navarro was upending the world economy, Musk called him “truly a moron.” And, as reported by the *Wall Street Journal*, Scott Bessent and Howard Lutnick once sneaked into the Oval Office, at a time when Navarro was known to have an appointment elsewhere, to persuade the President to put a ninety-day pause on most tariffs, and to type out a Truth Social announcement of the pause while they waited. (Navarro, by keeping to his schedule that day, added more than four



*“B... twelve! You have a B-twelve deficiency.”*

trillion dollars to the S. & P. 500’s total market capitalization.)

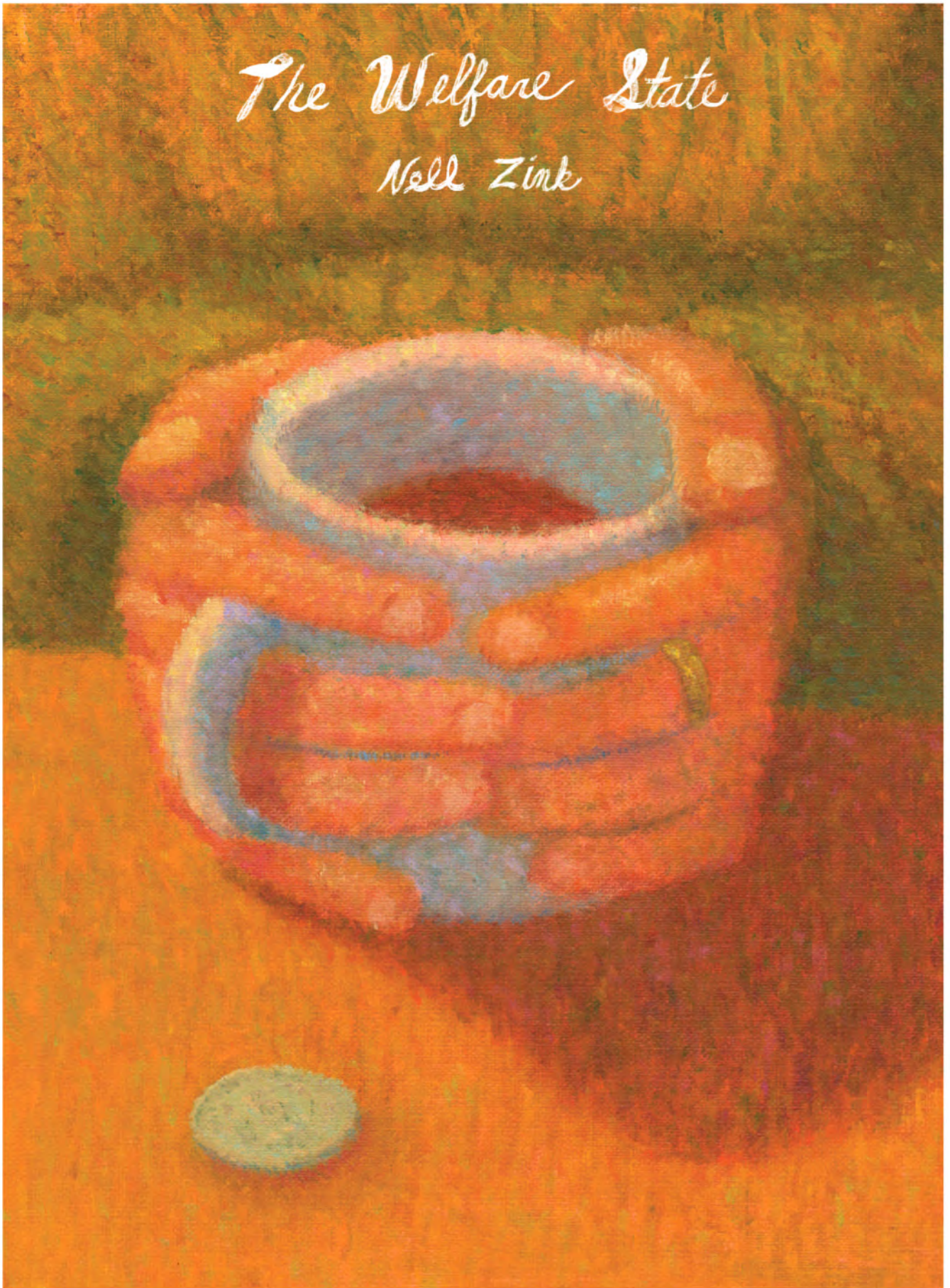
Navarro told me that he, Bessent, Lutnick, and Jamieson Greer, the U.S. Trade Representative, “work beautifully together.” He proposed that “any disagreements are over at the margin, not about direction. One band, one sound.” He said that his new office—his “SEAL team”—had contributed to Administration work on such issues as fisheries, shipbuilding, fraud detection, and the elimination of the de-minimis rule, which had exempted low-value imports from tariffs. But a source in the Trump Administration described Navarro as having become “completely irrelevant,” and added, “I don’t know why he still goes to work, or if he even knows how boxed out he is. His life is a fiction. He’s not a player at all. He takes meetings about steel, that’s pretty much it. The President blames Peter for the Liberation Day rollout.” Navarro dismissed this, telling me that anonymous sources “have always sought to marginalize my role.” (A White House spokesperson called Navarro “an integral asset for President Trump’s trade and economic team.”)

But in Milwaukee, as Navarro headed

toward the convention stage, he was a hero. During his previous national-convention speech, in 1996, Navarro had extracted modest applause from a late-afternoon audience by exhorting, “Let’s win one for hope—for the man from Hope! Bill Clinton!” This time, his appearance began with a long ovation, to which he responded with a broader smile than he’d ever before shown in public. (Navarro told me that he “never expected the beautifully warm welcome.”) He joked with his audience about showing them where he’d put a prison tattoo. He then added, to renewed applause, “Indeed, this morning I did walk out of a federal prison.” He went on, “If they can come for me, if they can come for Donald Trump, be careful—they will come for you.” Then, after Navarro accused the Biden Administration of opening America’s borders “to murderers and rapists, drug cartels, human traffickers, terrorists, Chinese spies, and a whole army of illiterate illegal aliens,” Brenner joined him onstage. He introduced her as “my beautiful girl”—no name—and they kissed. Then he looked out into the hall, grimly raised his fist, and said, “I love you.” ♦



*The Welfare State*  
Nell Zink





The world beyond the ridgetop was a wall of gray cloud. One could look down to the left or the right at a forty-five-degree angle and see only gray. From the mist came loud moos and the clatter of cowbells. The American was too frightened to move.

She had felt cheerful on the sheltered concrete of the viewing platform, relaxed on the broad stairway with its sturdy bannister, and well enough on the road-like path that looped behind the reassuring mass of the restaurant. The narrowing, roughening, and horizon-lowering that had turned that path into this trail had been gradual. Now its quality of teetering in space made her want to get on her knees and crawl.

The ground, composed of loose grit and softball-size rocks, was visibly wet. Her German friend Vroni was already twenty yards ahead.

Crouching to lower her center of gravity, Julia took three short steps and halted. She cocked her wrists to catch herself if she fell, and stood up half straight. Time to decelerate and deepen her breathing. "Slow down!" she called out.

Vroni turned on a dime and came back, bounding like a chamois. She stood before Julia, casually shifting her weight around, her beanie pushed back over her hazelnut hair, her questioning eyes an opaque brown. For all the exertion and the cold, her skin tone was even and yellowish, like a chain-smoker's, although she wasn't one. She rolled her own cigarettes to save money; this took time, and couldn't be done non-stop, so the spots on her teeth did not entirely match her eyes.

The pink, patrician Julia, with her irreproachably healthy life style, swayed stiffly in an awkward squat, red-cheeked and trembling. She flattered herself that she liked to leap and romp, but that was only on even surfaces such as lawns and sandy beaches, where the appropriate animal comparison would be to a clumsy calf. For reasons of her own (osteopenia), she romped where it was safe to fall down. There being no courage without fear, she preferred activities that entailed neither. She routinely wore a helmet and gloves when riding a bicycle, and she had recently refused a ride in a glamorous classic car because it lacked shoulder belts and head-

rests. Just the other day, she had given her cowardice a workout on a Ferris wheel in Thun. When the gondola commenced to rise, she had slid to the floor and hugged its central pillar. By the third revolution, however, she was back on her seat, reassured that the bolt attaching her gondola to the wheel (there were countless bolts in the wheel to allow it to be dismantled for transport, but only the one above the gondola seemed to hold her life in its hands) was an inch and a half in diameter and smooth, without visible rust.

The ridge that she and Vroni were on now was literally the ground—a well-trodden promenade through a pasture, thick with footprints. She made a vain attempt to justify her poor attitude toward the perfect safety of (here she looked around, mentally checking her notes) the vertiginously inclined planes at whose apex she perched, flanked by a surging, abyssal void. "In the mountains one time with Wolfgang—" she began.

Immediately Vroni's expression turned skeptical. She, of course, knew Wolfgang, a man from a verdant river valley among low hills, where elderly people took long strolls with their wheeled walkers and tiny children rode bicycles. "Wolfgang!" she scoffed.

Each could contextualize nearly anything the other said, because they had lived for many years in the same small town in Bavaria. They knew dozens, if not hundreds, of people in common; they knew each other's professors, exes, friends, and favored bartenders. Vroni's husband, a provincial snob and devoted reader of Casanova, had been known as such to Julia—and liable to flirt with her, despite his friendship with Wolfgang—long before Vroni came on the scene.

"I tried to get him to walk a trail like this," Julia insisted, "and he was, like, No way! Because on a steep hill where it's grass instead of rocks, when you trip, there's nothing to break your fall. You just keep sliding all the way to the bottom!"

"That's not true," Vroni said. "A person who's rolling is conical and top-heavy. I could fling myself down this mountain right now, and I'd just roll in a little circle and stop with my head pointing downhill. Want me to show

you?" She stood at the edge of the trail, looking eagerly downward.

Julia said no, firmly.

But the claim was plausible enough, and Vroni's faith in it seemed based in experience. The peak they were on, the Niesen, was famous for resembling a pyramid when viewed from Lake Thun, and Julia had assumed that if she slipped she would slide five thousand feet down its slick ramps, to be impaled by spiky larch branches. Accepting now that she would come to rest near the trail and be helped to her feet by Vroni, she stood up straight.

She rotated a hundred and eighty degrees on her axis to admire the restaurant behind her. A gust of wind rudely shoved a shred of cloud in front of it, so she turned back to Vroni. It was mid-July, eight o'clock in the morning, and the temperature on the summit was slightly above freezing. Mountains of jagged stone and permafrost lay to the south behind a vast shroud of droplets, obscuring the still rising sun.

The women were ill-prepared for the cold—Julia because she hadn't expected it, and Vroni because she'd known it wouldn't last. Thus Julia was conspicuous in a brand-new, radiantly cerulean zippered hoodie bearing the mountain's logo, a bargain in the gift shop at thirty francs, about half what she would have imagined paying for a sweatshirt in Switzerland. Vroni wore a flimsy cotton cardigan over a silk shirt of indeterminate color. It might have been off-white once, or a dim yellow, stained by washing in rusty water. The rotting silk gaped open at the seams. Julia assumed that Vroni had found it in the trash after a flea market. Her little backpack had been inherited from her children—brand-name hiking gear adorably miniaturized, with many zippers—because the German government helped her pay for school supplies. There was nothing in it now but smoking equipment and a canteen.

It occurred to Julia that she had a small blanket with her. It was a castoff from her parents, decades old, a membership premium from the American Legion in navy-blue fleece with the embroidered slogan "Freedom Is Not Free." It was a prized possession, among the most useful items she'd ever owned, like the towel that galactic hitchhikers

are advised to take along by “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.” Since she always kept it in the bottom of her day pack, she had forgotten all about it. She handed it to Vroni, who wrapped it around her shoulders like a shawl.

Vroni was poor. Her drab, conservative home village in the plains southeast of Regensburg had lost its train station before she was born. Its surroundings were, by Bavarian standards, exceptionally flat. She had migrated at the age of eighteen to their picturesque and desirable university town the way an American runaway might fetch up in an R.V. encampment in the desert. She had studied ethnography, consciously broadening her horizons. Her field studies had taken her to Central Asia.

Julia was better off, a freelance translator of internal communications for suppliers to the automotive industry, who did occasional literary translation projects in her spare time. She had not saved up to come to the Niesen; she had qualified for a literary-translating conference in Thun and, when she realized that the organizers had booked her a double room, had invited Vroni to join her. The closest Julia had ever come to field work in the East was an excursion to Prague, where she’d gotten into a stilted conversation about work with some cleaners.

Their minds were very different. Julia read fiction and talked about the news, while Vroni read classics of societal analysis (a favorite was Marilyn Strathern’s “The Gender of the Gift”) and talked about her own life. Vroni seemed to Julia never to have consumed a mass medium of any kind. She had no internet at home, for the sake of the children. When she needed to look something up, she went to her office.

Julia had longed to be an educated mother like Vroni, but there was never a serviceable father in view, so she had limited herself to being educated, first as an autodidact—via unsystematic reading of primary material, the classic works of fiction and philosophy—and then by moving to Germany, where knowledge could be acquired tuition-free. She began too late. She’d misapprehended the nature of ivory-tower research, choosing secondary sources that had been disregarded in their own fields for decades.

She would never be taken seriously as an academic. But she had been cautious around her inadequate boyfriends and had never once had a pregnancy scare, so that was something.

“Pregnancy scare” was a term impossible to connect with Vroni, who had carelessly gotten pregnant at age twenty-two and married the Casanova expert. She easily obtained scholarships for her interesting and useful research. The family received hundreds of euros per child per month from the state, no strings attached, and it was much more than they needed. They shared a small apartment heated with firewood stolen from the municipal forest. When the heap of cash in the cigar box on the kitchen table had attained a value of forty thousand euros, they’d given it to Julia, who had deposited it in her bank account as though it were an interest-free private loan. Then Vroni and the louche aficionado of Enlightenment sexual mores found a large house so historic that the state would pay them to renovate it, and Julia returned the money to them for use as a down payment.

Through three more pregnancies and her husband’s impregnation of three other women with five additional children, Vroni remained happily married, and she was married to him to this day. Of course, people would tell her to leave that libertinage-loving slob, and she’d stop talking to them, regarding them henceforth as ignorant bigots. He might be off getting some random person pregnant after a night out, but meanwhile



she was avidly seducing a hot exchange student or banging the next-door neighbor. They were an attentive, caring team, kind to every child that arose. The other moms were nothing special, Vroni said, but it was so much fun, having babies around that weren’t her responsibility, like having grandchildren. Her own children had stopped being pliant angels long ago, but the darling babies

kept pouring in, tirelessly fed and diapered by the vain dandy.

Julia’s opinion of Vroni’s husband was checkered, to say the least. She rather hated him and felt sure that he would one day leave Vroni—the only parent involved who had a job—and demand alimony.

Vroni maintained that her form of marriage had been accepted in many times and places, and that her husband was not as unusual as one might think. All the children were brilliant and beautiful, and soon enough they were independent, cooking for themselves and making their own arrangements, although they could not be prevailed upon to clean anything, ever. But they were such good children, peacefully playing amid the disorder while she opened a bottle of wine, rolled cigarettes, and reviewed the events of the day with the willfully unemployed lover of all things Venetian.

How different Vroni would have been as a penniless rebel with brains who was born American, Julia thought. The penniless American rebels she knew were undereducated and desperate, turning to irrational notions after their meagre baccalaureates, and the stress of their lives made them sick, no matter how little they smoked and drank. The Germans were like Vroni, rebelling by failing to finish their job training (in Vroni’s case, a doctorate), so that they had to learn new trades. Vroni had become a packaging designer. Every morning she commuted twenty minutes by train to a cosmetics factory, where she came up with new ways of folding cardboard, but only until noon; the job was part time.

Julia walked with her head high, at a normal pace, confident now that the slope beside her would serve as a safety net like the one that enfolded Vroni—the German welfare state. Vroni pulled the blanket close, trapping her warmth in its one-person free world.

The day grew brighter, and Julia began to take stock of the flower situation, which was hard-core. The pastures were scattered with gentians. Their vivid, indelible blue (a person had to be careful not to sit on them) reminded her of something a famous war reporter she knew had told her—that deep in Afghanistan, guarded by difficult terrain



## IT'S GETTING LIGHTER

Snug inside the design that is my self—there  
the disappearing birds, stained-glass bits  
hurled against the sky, pierce the smoke  
that waits for night to pry the window open  
and allow every past absence to enter.  
O Holy Mother of Moths, brighten the light  
that fills the scene where I fall. Let me be  
caught by any who stay standing by watching.

—Mary Jo Bang

and hostile clans, there are mountains so rich in lapis lazuli that they sparkle blue in sunlight. Walking the rugged, uneven trail, she told Vroni this story. It was one she especially liked because no one she told it to had ever believed it. The faithful consisted only of her and the reporter.

But why wouldn't it be true? A diamond mine in South Africa a hundred years ago was a bunch of guys finding diamonds like Easter eggs on the ground. The hawksbill sea turtles with their valuable, beautiful shells used to come ashore in crowds of forty thousand. Rivers back then sometimes held more delicious salmon than they held water. Why shouldn't there be semiprecious mountains hidden in remote and inaccessible tribal lands? Why were people so adamant about the superiority of today's world? She sketched her views on the subject while Vroni walked ahead.

Vroni agreed that the world was a two-edged sword. She didn't believe in the blue mountains, either. She showed Julia some anemones that had gone to seed, pointing out that the flower in bloom is just like a pretty poppy, but once the petals fall it becomes an alien-looking gray pompom. This was why sea anemones were called anemones! It made sense! They crouched to admire the mute flowers that had given their name to animals in the ocean. The clouds ascending skyward on waves of thermals suddenly parted like a curtain. A majestic rocky peak appeared, outlined in blazing snow.

They stood to watch. The curtain closed again. Continuing along the ridge, which was no longer crowned by the trail in an unnerving way but rose

next to it, they saw that a certain pair of flattish, dry rocks would be good for sitting on. Julia unpacked their picnic, turning around again and again to scan the enormous display of clouds, mountains, wildflowers, and sun. The light of day arrived on the ridge. All was transfigured, silver and gold. Droplets lay on the leaves like jewels. A thousand hues of green quivered in the breeze, the tiny leaves of meadow plants dappling one another with their shade. Vroni rolled a cigarette and, more than half an hour later, rolled a second one, stowing her leavings in an antique portable ashtray made of metal and leather. And so they passed the time while the earth turned and the sun climbed, warming the air.

Once, years earlier, Vroni had related—while painting her high-walled kitchen with the aid of a stepladder on a table—an anecdote so magnificent that Julia still retailed its highlights to other friends, as though summarizing the plot of a movie. In essence, as Julia remembered it, Vroni had been walking decorously, part of a group of ethnographers headed to a remote Kazakh archeological site, when a venomous snake flung itself out of the underbrush and bit her in the shin. Everyone agreed that this was a freakish event and not her fault. At first, her colleagues assumed that she could walk back to town, but soon they were carrying her. When she passed out, they began to run. She awoke in the hospital, near death. The professor who had been leading the excursion sat by her bed, drenched in tears, holding her cold hand. She asked Vroni for contact information for her parents.

"No!" Vroni cried, adrenaline cours-

ing through her. "They're the last people on earth I want to see!" She had gone to university to get away from their narrow-minded world of religious prejudice, which she regarded as incipiently fascist, like all systems that consign the living to damnation. She indicated that, rather than entertain her professor while she was dying, much less her parents, husband, or children, she would like to be alone with Aslan, a local shepherd, whose voice could be heard clearly through the door. The professor was visibly perturbed. Vroni could read her mind, which was thinking, *We've been here for all of what, four days, and already you want to die in the arms of your unethical relationship with the subject of my field work?* Vroni traced the end of her serious chance at an academic career to that moment when she hurt the sad professor's feelings. Her very vitality—surviving the lethal snake bite; having Aslan lock the door behind him while they got it on; refusing the amputation of her leg, which recovered fully—suggested to her colleagues that she might be an indestructible subhuman, or at least sub-academic.

On the mountain, Vroni and Julia told stories about washed-out bridges, snow bridges, snowstorms, rainstorms, walking on highways, hiking at night, man-eating stray dogs in Greece, a dog named Gelert who passed as a saint, and the Irish monk St. Gall, who returned Christianity to Europe from its western fringes, where it had been driven by invading Central Asians, a topic that died on the vine, having been gravely misrecalled by Julia. Vroni was visibly bored. She talked about the resurgence of bride kidnapping after the fall of the Soviet Union. Nowadays the practice took the form of orchestrated rape, she said, but, before seventy years of Communism, it had been a relatively benign tradition. A man who couldn't afford to buy his girlfriend would steal her, and everyone was happy except her parents, who had fed her for fifteen years for nothing.

The herd of hungry young polled beef cattle that had greeted them through the mist was moving closer, munching audibly amid the din of bells. Vroni suggested that they continue walking along the ridge and take the trail down the

mountain, instead of riding the funicular.

Julia had her doubts, partly because she was wearing sneakers, and partly because she had bought them both round-trip funicular tickets. She was not as poor as Vroni, but she was not rich enough to waste expensive tickets.

They agreed to wait and see if some hikers coming the other way might be prepared to report on conditions down below.

When a pair finally arrived, clad in bright rain gear with walking sticks, their boots told the whole story: the mud on the trail was ankle deep and slippery. The men soon moved on toward the restaurant, intent on eating lunch and then putting miles behind them, with the long descent ahead.

Julia and Vroni strolled back along the ridge, through frequent flashes of sunshine. They came around an outcropping to find the cattle herd loudly blocking the trail. *Clang, ding, thump, munch, moo*, a dense throng of lunks.

"I bet you know how to make them move," Julia optimistically assured Vroni. There was no question that Vroni, a child of a rural area filled with similar animals, had more expertise in the livestock realm. She dispatched herself to clear a path.

To Julia's surprise, she walked right up to a brawny steer's shoulder and attempted to push it off the trail as though it were a pygmy goat. It pushed back with its nose, knocking her off her feet. She landed softly on her rear and elbows and immediately stood up again, laughing. But the beast was half wild. Vroni was too small to play its pushing game. It would win.

Instead the women moved uphill from the blocked trail, sidling along just below the ridgeline, well away from the massive cattle, which they hoped would stay put.

They stood on tiptoe to peer over the top, which was adorned with tufts of grass like a fringe. Just beyond their noses was a sheer drop of thousands of feet. Two shining lakes and three big cities nestled in broad valleys below. They watched as cloud curtains opened and closed.

Julia said, "This is so pretty." She thought, *This is life at its best. To be touched by fear, but not afraid in the least. This is what Americans are looking for when they obsessively watch horror movies and war videos: the sublime! Compulsively walking*

*the valley of the shadow of death, when fear can dwell amid clouds and flowers.*

Vroni was racing toward the restaurant like a snow leopard to get them a table before the lunch rush. Julia envied her. She would have felt so much smarter if she'd stayed in America, without highly educated friends who intimidated her. By rights she should have gotten an associate's degree in hospitality management in Cincinnati, and taken up bloviating about NIMBYS, kinbaku, and "socialism" (the American name for progressive taxation), after meals of CBD gummies that she needed for her pain. But she loved her life. She wondered why she hadn't shared her insight about the sublime with Vroni. Because it was dumb and naïve? How could feelings be dumb? Where was this sneaking sense of doom and nullity coming from? From the clouds? The cold? The eerie view over the ridge, seeing the land of counterpane through a screen of flowers, inches from death? That had to be it. The fear hormones were still acting on her, but she wasn't looking at beauty anymore. She was alone on the trail, watching her step, imagining how bored Vroni would have been by her revelation.

She had read somewhere that it's impossible to feel fear when your hands are holding something warm. Freedom may not be free, but hot chocolate in a vortex of terror is five francs, tops. She bought herself a hot chocolate at the restaurant. Vroni said she didn't want anything.

"There's something I want to say," Vroni said, after they sat down. "I'm sick and tired of you." She unwrapped the blanket from her shoulders and wadded it up, like worthless trash, to hand it back to Julia.

Julia gulped, coughed, and said, "What?"

"I feel as if I know nothing about you, but you keep wanting to get closer, demanding more. You're possessive and judgmental, but you act like I'm in charge, like with those cattle just now. Our conversations are so superficial. I want to have real friends. I've tried with you. I'm a polite person, so I know I'm surprising you, but I don't think we should see each other again. I've been wanting to say this to you for a long time, almost twenty years. Something about your making me come here makes

it easy." Vroni gestured toward the emptiness beyond the windows. "I wish you all good things, but I don't want to know what 'good' means to you." She waited for a reaction. Then she took off her cap to comb out her dull, dusty mane with dirty fingers stained brown, killing time with desultory self-care as though unobserved. She tucked her hair up again and took a swig of water from the canteen in her bag.

Julia stared. Had Vroni lost her marbles? Was this what people were asking for when they complained about being ghosted—an explicit jilting, rich in memorable detail? If Vroni's independent, pragmatic mind differed greatly from her own, as she sincerely believed it did and had always found to be a big plus, it might never be possible for her to comprehend what Vroni had just said. Or anything else, either. The whole world might be functionally a hallucination—that was what cognitive neuroscience said. A hallucination with pointy tentacles.

She held her hot chocolate with both hands and said nothing for a good long while before asking, "Are you going straight home?"

Vroni plunked a five-franc coin on the table and said, "Buy yourself another hot chocolate."

She clomped away toward the exit, shedding mud as she went.

Julia later saw her napping on a lounge outside, but she didn't try to wake her. She returned by train to the room in Thun, where there was no trace of her former friend, who hadn't even packed a change of clothes. Vroni's toothbrush was a disposable one from the hotel reception. She had vanished, propelled by repressed hatred. Who knew.

But Vroni appears happier than ever now, and when Julia sees her around town she is cheered by the lasting conviction that she has absolutely no idea what is going on in anybody's little pea brain. She once had a whole theory about Vroni, but that's over. What was Vroni's rejection of her all about? Vroni ignores her, and Julia will never know.

Wolfgang thinks that Vroni always had a screw loose. He says he wouldn't roll down a grassy mountain if you paid him. ♦

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# THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

## LOOK IT UP

*Is the dictionary becoming extinct?*

BY LOUIS MENAND

Once, every middle-class home had a piano and a dictionary. The purpose of the piano was to be able to listen to music before phonographs were available and affordable. Later on, it was to torture young persons by insisting that they learn to do something few people do well. The purpose of the dictionary was to settle intra-family disputes over

the spelling of words like “camaraderie” and “sesquipedalian,” or over the correct pronunciation of “puttee.” (Dad wasn’t always right!) Also, it was sometimes useful for doing homework or playing Scrabble.

This was the state of the world not that long ago. In the late nineteen-eighties, Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary was on the *Times* best-seller list

for a hundred and fifty-five consecutive weeks. Fifty-seven million copies were sold, a number believed to be second only, in this country, to sales of the Bible. (The No. 1 print dictionary in the world is the Chinese-language Xinhua Dictionary; more than five hundred million copies have sold since it was introduced, in 1953.)

There was good money in the word

*The print edition Merriam-Webster was once a touchstone of stability. Then the internet brought about a revolution.*

business. Then came the internet and, with it, ready-to-hand answers to all questions lexical. If you are writing on a computer, it's almost impossible to misspell a word anymore. It's hard even to misplace a comma, although students do manage it. And, if you run across an unfamiliar word, you can type it into your browser and get a list of websites with information about it, often way more than you want or need. Like the rest of the analog world, legacy dictionaries have had to adapt or perish. Stefan Fatsis's "Unabridged: The Thrill of (and Threat to) the Modern Dictionary" (Atlantic Monthly Press) is a good-natured and sympathetic account of what seems to be a losing struggle.

Fatsis is a reporter whose work has appeared in a number of venues, including *Slate* and NPR, and who has mainly covered sports. For one of his books, he embedded with professional football teams—"participatory journalism," a reportorial genre made popular by George Plimpton. For "Unabridged," Fatsis embedded in the offices of Merriam-Webster, which are in Springfield, Massachusetts (home to the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, which I'll bet he visited). There, he played amateur lexicographer, digging up new candidates for inclusion and trying his hand at definitions, which, as he demonstrates, is more challenging than it looks. (He found that asking ChatGPT to do it had poor results.)

As Fatsis tells the story of his lexicographical *Bildung*, he makes genial and informed digressions into controversies in the dictionary racket, some possibly overfamiliar, like how to label ethnic slurs and whether to include "fuck," others more current, like the crusade to come up with a gender-neutral third-person-singular pronoun (after many failed launches, we appear to be stuck on "they," which seems kind of lame) and whether or not large language models can create a dictionary (so far, not). He has a section on our contemporary speech wars, showing that many of the most radio-active words—"woke," "safe space," "microaggression," "anti-racism"—are much older than we might assume.

He also introduces us to terms likely to be new to many readers: "sportocrat," "on fleek," "vajazzle," and the German word *Backpfeifengesicht*, which is defined as "a face that deserves to be slapped or

punched." Martin Shkreli, the pharma bro, was his illustration, until he came across a tweet from Ted Cruz's college roommate. "When I met Ted in 1988," it said, "I had no word describe him, but only because I didn't speak German."

Fatsis concludes, a little reluctantly, not only that the dictionary may be on its last legs as a commercial enterprise but that lexicographical expertise is expiring with it. He cites an estimate that, twenty-five years ago, there were two hundred full-time lexicographers in the U.S. Today, he thinks that the number is "probably closer to thirty." "By the time I finished this book," he writes, "it wasn't clear how long flesh-bone-and-blood lexicographers would be needed to chronicle the march of the English language."

Most free online dictionaries (the free merriam-webster.com was originally based on the eleventh edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate; the company also has a subscription site) are not heavy on lexicographic detail. They are mainly for people who enjoy playing with words. Definitions and correct spellings are no longer the principal attraction. Websites feature a "word of the day," crossword puzzles and word games, lists of emojis, trending slang, usage tips ("Is it 'nip it in the butt' or 'nip it in the bud?"), translation programs, and, of course, ads. Poets and professors are still seduced by the Oxford English Dictionary's supercalifragilisticexpialidocious (which is considered a word by the O.E.D.) etymologies, constructed from a database that dates back to 1857. W. H. Auden is supposed to have worn out his first copy of the O.E.D. from consulting it so often.

But the O.E.D. is subsidized. Merriam-webster.com is not. It needs eyeballs to survive. Merriam-Webster is now owned by Encyclopædia Britannica, another big print-era brand—the original edition was published in Scotland in 1768—that is struggling to compete in an online realm dominated by the nonprofit Wikipedia. Britannica has been losing market share since 1993, when Microsoft released its digital encyclopedia, Encarta. Fatsis quotes a Britannica editor comparing Wikipedia, disparagingly, to a public rest room—a comparison that's not entirely wrong. It's not the most elegant website, but everyone uses it. Britannica stopped printing its physical volumes in 2012.

The problem for Merriam-Webster is that it's too easy to get definitions for free. The problem for the rest of us is the same, but for a different reason. As with everything on the web, looking up a word opens a fire hose of controversy and misinformation. The faith that the old Merriam-Webster's Collegiate, once the iconic eighth-grade-graduation gift, contained the definitive definition, spelling, and pronunciation of every word an educated person needed to know was an effect of smart promotion. But so what? It had authority. Maybe it was validated only by Merriam-Webster's market position, but we live in a market economy. That should be good enough for us. The relationship of the signifier to the signified is (as we all know) arbitrary. We can live with arbitrary. We just need the relationship to be stable, and the old Merriam-Webster was a touchstone of stability. We've lost that. Does it matter?

Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, published in London in 1755, carved out a role for the dictionary: to establish what would become known as Standard English. Johnson himself was aware that language is a living thing, always in flux. But his dictionary, with its conclusiveness, was a huge publishing success. It was considered authoritative well into the nineteenth century. In England, it would be replaced by the Oxford English Dictionary. But, in the United States, its role was usurped by Noah Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language, which made its debut in 1828.

Webster deliberately set out to supersede Johnson. His ambition was to create not a dialect of British English but an identifiably American language. Johnson's dictionary had about forty-two thousand words; Webster's had seventy thousand. Webster added New World words including "skunk," "boost," and "roundabout"; words with Native American origins, such as "canoe" and "moose"; words derived from Mexican Spanish, like "coyote." Most dramatically, he Americanized spelling, a project started in an earlier work of his, a schoolbook speller called "A Grammatical Institute of the English Language," published in 1783. It is because of Webster that we write "defense" and "center" rather than



“defence” and “centre,” “public” and not “publick.” He changed the language.

Webster’s New International Dictionary, Second Edition, announced as “unabridged,” appeared in 1934. Web. II was a doorstop—six hundred thousand entries, thirty-five thousand geographical names, and, in the appendix, thirteen thousand biographical names. It is really an encyclopedia as much as it is a dictionary. It has full-page illustrations of “Coins of the World,” “Common Birds of America,” “Poisonous Plants,” and so on. Some editions include a four-hundred-page “Reference History of the World.” There are twenty definition entries beginning with “banana.”

The production of Web. II tapped into the wisdom of two hundred and seven “consulting editors,” including the president of Johns Hopkins and the dean of Harvard Law School. The aim was to create the rule book of last resort for English-language users. Web. II therefore had numerous ways of indicating words that should be considered nonstandard. “Slang terms and slang meanings of standard words have been entered only when there is evidence that the slang term has been in use for a considerable length of time, and when it has been used in a printed work which is likely to continue being read,” the editors advise. In other words, slang gets in as long as people insist on using it. But it’s still nonstandard. Web. II told you which is the respectable way to write and speak English. If you are meeting the dean of the law school for sherry, you will want to know that “irregardless” is *infra dig*.

Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, published in 1961, flipped the script. Fatsis says that it “changed lexicography.” Web. III had an open-door policy. It was descriptivist. The editors did not abandon the concept of Standard English, which they defined as English “well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated,” and they indicated when a word was considered nonstandard. But they eliminated the label “colloquial” and reduced the number of words labelled as slang. The spirit was nonjudgmental.

This seems unexceptionable today, when even popular language columnists, such as the *Times*’ John McWhorter,

are manifest descriptivists. Language is what people say, not what they ought to say. But Web. III was brutally attacked. This was not too surprising. The people who attacked it were professional writers, and their attacks appeared in leading publications. No groups could have had a greater proprietary interest in Standard English. Verbal punctilio was the very basis of their livelihood. If anything goes in the realm of usage, they go, too.

So the *Times* attacked Web. III for “permissiveness” and “informality.” “Intentionally or unintentionally,” the paper said, “it serves to reinforce the notion that good English is whatever is popular.” Let the *Times* decide what’s fit to print, please. *The Atlantic* called Web. III “a scandal and a disaster.” It was ridiculed at entertaining length by Dwight Macdonald in these pages and, some forty years later, at equally entertaining and longer length, by David Foster Wallace, in *Harper’s*. (The proximate target of Wallace’s article was *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, but he devoted a lot of his piece to attacking Web. III. Some of his claims about it were erroneous.) In 1964, the *Times* saw fit to run a story with the headline “Outdated Webster II Still Sells; Educators Like Old Dictionary Better Than New One.”

The flash point was the inclusion in Web. III of “ain’t.” (The president of Merriam-Webster had ruled out “fuck,” over the objections of the dictionary’s

editor-in-chief, Philip B. Gove.) The “ain’t” taboo is a little odd; the word is just a contraction of “is not,” “are not,” or “am not.” But, in 1961, the use of “ain’t” in the United States was a very clear marker of social class, like saying “I seen him at the mall.” The “ain’t” controversy laid bare the stakes in lexicography: language use as an indicator of status.

This was, after all, the era of “My Fair Lady,” which is entirely about language and class. The setting of the musical is British, but that may be why it was so popular in America. Americans didn’t see themselves being lampooned. The 1956 Broadway production won six Tonys, including Best Musical, and had the longest run of any musical at the time. The cast album reached No. 1 on *Billboard* and remained in the Top Two Hundred for four hundred and eighty weeks—nine years. “My Fair Lady” touched a cultural nerve, and it prepared the way for the hostile reception of Web. III. *The New Yorker*, itself a cynosure of proper usage in those days, ran a cartoon showing a receptionist at Merriam-Webster telling a visitor, “Sorry. Dr. Gove ain’t in.” That was no doubt enjoyed by the magazine’s “My Fair Lady” fans.

The war over Web. III was, in short, a culture war, and culture wars are really class wars. Which group is up or down, top or bottom, in or out? Who is calling the shots for whom? In a review for *The American Scholar*, Jacques Barzun, the Columbia historian, called Web. III



*“Maybe we should take our mouse ears off.”*

“the longest political pamphlet ever put together.” According to the editors of the new edition, Barzun complained, “whatever ‘the people’ utter is a ‘linguistic fact’ to be recorded, cherished, preferred to any reason or tradition.” He made it clear that this was not a cultural dispensation of which he could approve. Is the latitudinarian, post-humanist, post-standard world that Barzun dreaded the world we are living in today?

I doubt that dictionaries can tell us. Maybe the whole dictionary concept has been oversold. Maybe our expectations for dictionaries are way too high. What does “unabridged” even mean? The last print edition of Web. III (which was the basis for Merriam-Webster’s subscription website) is two thousand seven hundred and eighty-three pages and has four hundred and sixty-five thousand entries. You need a book stand to use it. But it probably contains less than half of the words in the English lexicon. According to one study of digitized library books, there were about six hundred thousand words in the lan-

guage in 1950, and more than a million by 2000. The same study concluded that fifty-two per cent of English words found in printed books are “lexical dark matter,” not represented in any standard reference work. And that is leaving out speech, which, until recently, was uncollected, because it’s largely uncollectible. (The Cambridge Dictionary now collects speech for its international corpus, a database that includes more than a billion items.)

The second and, as it turned out, final print edition of the O.E.D., published in 1989, comes in twenty volumes, weighs a hundred and thirty-eight pounds, and has a little under three hundred thousand entries. The online O.E.D. weighs nothing (so there’s less risk of user injury) and has eight hundred and fifty thousand entries. The dictionary is updating or adding new words at the rate of fifteen thousand a year. With the internet, the O.E.D. can expand forever, but it will never come close to recording every meaning of every word used by English speakers—

of which there are, according to the International Center for Language Studies, 1.52 billion. Even the most unabridged of unabridged dictionaries is a highly curated sample of the language.

One reason for the explosion in the number of words is an expansion of our notion of what counts as a word. Take “K.” “K” can mean one kilometre, a thousand monetary units, one thousand twenty-four bytes of computer storage space, a strikeout in baseball, a degree on the Kelvin temperature scale, the nation of Korea (as in “K-pop”), the chemical potassium, a measure of the fineness of gold (karat), the drug ketamine, kindergarten (as in “K-12”), the king in a chess move (as in “Kd2”), a South African racial slur (as in “the K-word”), the shape of a kind of economic recovery, and a protagonist in Franz Kafka’s novels.

Then is “K” a word? The O.E.D. says it is and gives five definitions for it. “K” is also a word in the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, in which it has eight definitions, and the Cambridge Dictionary, in which it has four. Those are among the most popular online English-language dictionaries out there. Cambridge claims to have more than 2.3 billion page views a year; Merriam-Webster has about a billion. Oxford reports that, on average, every second of every day someone somewhere in the world is looking up a word on oed.com. (That’s a smaller number than it sounds, actually, but the O.E.D. has a paywall.) Still, not one of them gives what is surely the most common meaning of “K,” one used every day in speaking and texting: O.K.

There is also an indeterminate number of private languages: endearments, local allusions, punny neologisms. You would not expect to find those words defined in a dictionary, but, if you say them or write them and someone else understands what you mean, they are part of some language.

Of all the words that human beings use, publicly or privately, written or spoken, which ones belong in a dictionary? Does a frequency threshold need to be crossed for a word to make it lexicographically? Does it have to be accepted first by whatever gatekeepers may still be out there—professors, editors, podcasters . . . influencers? And



*“The problem with space is that no one here is impressed that I am an astronaut.”*



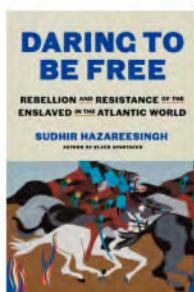
does a particular level of disuse have to be reached for a word to be dropped into the lexical dustbin? Fatsis reports that the Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles, from 1944, has five pages of terms starting with “buffalo.” Today, you could probably find many “cyber” words and “bro” words. How much longer will these combinations be in use?

Looking at online dictionaries, you can see plenty of selection going on, but it’s hard to grasp the principles that are guiding it. Take “groyper,” a name for followers of Nick Fuentes, the white-nationalist Svengali. (“Svengali” is in the O.E.D. and Merriam-Webster, but not in Cambridge.) “Groyper” has popped up a lot recently, because Fuentes was in the news. But the word is reportedly eight years old—and it has still not made it into the online O.E.D., Merriam-Webster, or Cambridge dictionaries.

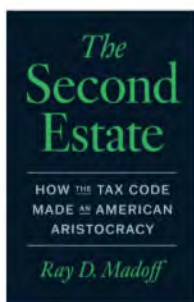
It does have an entry in Wikipedia, whose policy of giving entries to everything helps it keep ahead of the dictionaries. It can also operate quickly because it’s crowdsourced. It does not employ experts. Having found the definition for “groyper” somewhere, you might care to know how to spell it. In Wikipedia, the word is capped as a proper noun, but the *Washington Post* lowercases it in most uses. Normally, you’d look to a dictionary to tell you which is correct, but, since most popular online dictionaries do not recognize “groyper” as a word, this can’t be done. Welcome to the desert of the virtual.

On the other hand, the free Merriam-Webster online does list “cheugy,” a word meaning uncool, used especially as a put-down of trends associated with millennials. It is possibly related to the excellent Australian word “daggy,” but the coinage is credited to one Gaby Rasson, who is supposed to have used it with her friends at Beverly Hills High School in 2013. Not exactly Dr. Johnson territory. “Cheugy” has no etymology. It’s a nonsense word. Rasson said it just sounded right. “Cheugy” is pretty niche. It’s missing from Cambridge, the O.E.D., and even the American Heritage Dictionary, and it seems to have lapsed into disuse. It is also missing from the latest print edition of Merriam-Webster—the twelfth, which was released in November—and

## BRIEFLY NOTED



**Daring to Be Free**, by Sudhir Hazareesingh (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). This history reconstructs the extraordinary stories of “fugitive resisters” to examine the crucial role that captives played, over centuries, in dismantling the transatlantic slave trade. If abolition was impossible without decrees by Western governments, Hazareesingh argues, it was unthinkable without enslaved peoples’ own push for emancipation. Documenting diverse acts of rebellion from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas, his book shows how guerrilla strategies—influenced by spiritual traditions and characterized by solidarity across social groups—were deployed from the earliest days of enslavement, and helped to shape ideological currents of autonomy and self-determination.



**The Second Estate**, by Ray D. Madoff (*Chicago*). The aristocrats of France’s ancien régime did not have to pay taxes. America’s modern-day plutocrats, this bracing book contends, enjoy a similar privilege. By eschewing salaries, lobbying Congress to gut the estate tax, and contriving elaborate writeoffs and work-arounds, the very rich have placed much of their wealth beyond the reach of the state. To finance America’s teetering Social Security system and to pay for programs such as Medicare, the federal government relies primarily on revenues collected from working people. The U.S. tax code is around seven thousand pages long; Madoff makes its failures gripping and accessible in a book that can be read, with as much pleasure as indignation, in an afternoon.



**Best Offer Wins**, by Marisa Kashino (*Celadon*). In this diabolical satirical thriller, a millennial woman resorts to extreme measures to secure the million-dollar house of her dreams. Margo, who works in P.R., and her husband, a government lawyer, have been outbid on eleven homes in the Washington, D.C., area, where they live. Determined to escape “real estate purgatory” through property ownership and start a family, Margo stalks a London-bound couple in the hope of snapping up their brick Colonial in a posh suburban neighborhood. Kashino, a former real-estate reporter, playfully charts the increasingly unhinged tactics Margo employs as she takes the art of negotiation to a frightening level.



**A Love Story from the End of the World**, by Juhea Kim (*Ecco*). Set in the near future, these finely wrought stories examine lives and relationships amid climate change and technological innovation. Characters are at once accustomed to and unnerved by the measures that allow for their survival: a “biodome” that protects against perpetual sandstorms; ships that house humanity after the land has become unlivable. The stories portray characters of varying ages living across the world—a young woman coming of age on a reservation in Oregon, a South African boy who forms a rapport with an elephant—while examining human selfishness and finding gleaming moments of care and conviction, often prompted by an encounter with a nonhuman being. Humanness, Kim suggests, cannot be wrested from the natural world: when we lose the latter, we lose ourselves.

will presumably proceed to disappear down a lexical memory hole.

Scientific and medical terms are a problem, partly because there are so many but mainly because nonspecialists almost never use them. The standard edition of Merriam-Webster does not give us a lot of help with even the brand-name versions of these terms. It defines “Prozac” as “a preparation of fluoxetine”—technically correct, but not what people are thinking when they use the word. Merriam-Webster admits “Lipitor” as a word online; the O.E.D. does not.

Product names generally are an area of oversupply. Merriam-Webster has “Kleenex,” but not “Triscuit,” even though Triscuits have been around longer. American Heritage does not have “Triscuit,” though it does have “Kleenex” and “Coke.” The O.E.D. has all three brand names, plus “Guinness.” Speaking of brands, “OED” is a word in the O.E.D.

Geographical terms, too, are a case of linguistic surfeit. Web. III has “Asia” and “Brooklyn,” and includes “Haverhill” (Massachusetts), but not “Hanover” (New Hampshire). Why not? Wikipedia has a page for every New York City subway station—all four hundred and seventy-two of them. Merriam-Webster and American Heritage have “SoHo,” but not “NoHo” or “Dumbo.” Merriam-Webster admits “Tribeca”; American Heritage gives it a pass.

Sometimes a word has to serve time in lexical purgatory before it can be admitted to the Big Book. “Irregardless” is a classic example. Even today, Microsoft Word’s spell-check flags it. But people use it, and everyone knows what they mean. It may even be used by speakers who know it’s “wrong,” but who like the rococo effect given by the extra syllable.

Texting has produced a substantial vocabulary of acronyms and shorthand expressions, many of which date to when cellphones had numeric keypads, or at least to when messages were restricted to a hundred and sixty characters. (How did we ever live like that?) Many of those terms have migrated into e-mail and even into print. Merriam-Webster acknowledges the text-speak invasion by including LOL, TMI, IRL, and IMHO. But it does not recognize SMH, LMK, or JK—or “u” for “you” or “r” for “are.” “JK” can be important to know. The practice of acronyming and nicknaming

is now widespread, part of a general speeding up of speech: “def,” “rando,” “preggers,” “FOMO,” “homes,” “GOAT.” Are these words? They function as words.

Once a word is in print, is it permanently in the lexicon? Or do words have a sell-by date? If you search the O.E.D. for words used in print for the first time in Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” you will get, amazingly, a hundred and seven results. Many of those words became part of the language, but many others (“fardel,” “bisson,” “drossy”) were nonce words that are now considered obsolete. Should they be included in a dictionary, since Shakespeare is Shakespeare and people still read “Hamlet”?

Then, there is linguistic play with parts of speech—nouns recently converted to verbs, verbs used as adjectives. I suspect that blogging and online writing in general have increased this kind of stylistic freebooting (one of the best things to happen to American prose, IMO). But the question of when a grammatically trans term deserves a dictionary entry remains unsettled. Merriam-Webster has the verb form of “nail,” for instance, as used in the sentence “She nailed the test,” but not the adjectival form, as in “Tom Brady was nails in the fourth quarter.” None of the online dictionaries carries “awkward” as a noun, as in “Being seated next to his ex at the company dinner served up a big bowl of awkward.”

There are also what could be called pop-up words, labels that attach to a certain social or cultural phenomenon as it flashes across the sky. Some of these are minted for the occasion, like “TACO,” for Donald Trump’s tariff waffling, and others are older words given new prominence, like “quarter zip.” But is “quarter zip” spelled with a hyphen? Don’t ask Merriam-Webster, Cambridge, or the O.E.D. None of them has it. By the time they do, quarter zips may already be too cheugy for school.

Seventy-five per cent of English speakers speak it as a second language. They are likely to mix languages, even in the same sentence, or to speak a hybrid dialect. What about Spanglish? Or Ebonics, a.k.a. African American Vernacular English? Is that a separate language? How many Yiddish terms are in the English lexicon? Cambridge does not recognize “mishegoss,” which seems like an oversight. It does list

“schmo” and “schmuck,” but gives them the same definition: “a stupid or silly person.” Those words are not synonyms. We can empathize with schmoes but never schmucks.

Regional words are a parallel type of dialect. If you ask for a grinder in Philadelphia, they will have no idea that you mean a hoagie. Elsewhere, “hero” or “sub” is the designated term. But there is a small part of the country where a grinder/hoagie/hero/sub is known as a wedge. Should that meaning of “wedge” be in the dictionary?

If you’re too old or too young (and you always are), generational slang is impossible to stay current with—and what’s the point, anyway? Any Gen Z-er can tell you what “gooning” means, but it’s not in most dictionaries; nor is its near-synonym “edging.” For such words, on the borderline of respectability, the fallback resource is the online Urban Dictionary (which has “fleece quarter zip” without a hyphen). But it, too, is crowdsourced, and you will often get random irreconcilable meanings, along with an alarming amount of contributor trash talk. Is “Skibidi” a word? Is “six seven”? How do you define them? They have no content. What about “bigly”? A lot of what comes out of our mouths is word salad.

Dictionaries rely on the belief that the word is the basic unit of linguistic meaning. It is not. The basic unit of meaning is the sentence, or, sometimes, especially in speech, the phrase. You can memorize vocabulary, but if you can’t make a phrase you can’t speak the language. This is not simply a matter of grammar, of syntax and morphology. It’s ultimately a matter of cultural literacy. The dictionary is like the periodic table: it can tell you what the elements are, but not how to combine them. Words take a lot of their semantic coloration from the words around them.

“The dictionary projects permanence,” Fatsis concludes, “but the language is Jell-O, slippery and mutable and forever collapsing on itself.” He’s right, of course. Language is our fishbowl. We created it and now we’re forever trapped inside it. The only way we can make sense of words is by producing more words. Still, language is by far the most fascinating thing humans have invented. If we cannot have one dictionary for everything, then let us have a thousand. ♦



## FREUDIAN SLIPS

*The psychology of fashion.*

BY LESLIE JAMISON

*The historian Valerie Steele argues that garments offer glimpses of the unconscious.*

In “Fashion and the Unconscious,” a book from 1953, the psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler describes a patient in her mid-thirties who wore so much gray clothing that her friends called her the Lady in Gray. When Bergler asked the woman why she dressed this way, she said simply, “I like it”—the kind of reply that, to a mid-century analyst, dangled like a red flag before a bull. Eventually, Bergler tells us, he excavated the unconscious motive for her gray attire: beginning in her late teens, the woman had spent six years composing music and devising ballets, but she gave up when the work on which she’d pinned her highest hopes—a tragedy about moths attracted to a great, beautiful light, who all end up burned to death—was rejected. Bergler grew convinced that, after her artistic dreams were

thwarted, she’d begun to identify as one of these burned moths. “Aren’t moths—gray?” he asks her. He then triumphantly reports, “The patient did not answer.”

One senses that there may have been more to the woman’s silence than awe-struck agreement, but Bergler cheerfully adds her to his portfolio of case studies, in which patients’ sartorial peculiarities are unfailingly traced to episodes from their pasts. An artist who always wears red claims to find the color “reassuring,” a feeling that Bergler comes to understand as rooted in an early exposure to Cecil B. DeMille’s film “The Ten Commandments” and its depiction of Moses parting the Red Sea. Another patient has a pattern of sleeping with married men and a penchant for wearing green dresses with gold accessories (or, occasionally, gold dresses

with green accessories). Believing the two tendencies to be linked, Bergler diagnoses her with an ongoing rebellion against her mother, a literary critic who wore drab colors and once offered an unsatisfying explanation of a line from Goethe’s “Faust”: “My dear young friend, grey is all theory. The golden tree of life is green!”

It’s easy to dismiss Bergler’s conclusions as far-fetched or suspiciously matchy-matchy. (It doesn’t help that he’s now often remembered for propounding the view that homosexuality is a curable disorder.) Yet his deeper idea—that our clothes may say things about us that we don’t realize we’re saying, like material slips of the tongue—is arresting. The fashion historian Valerie Steele takes this notion as a point of departure in her new book, “Dress, Dreams, and Desire” (Bloomsbury), which examines the surprisingly extensive interplay of fashion and psychoanalysis. Early on, Steele grounds her project in an idea she quotes from the British analyst Adam Phillips: “In psychoanalysis, we treat the objects of desire as clues.” (Phillips actually wrote, “We treat the objects of interest as clues.” Steele’s pivot to “desire” might itself strike an analyst as a clue.) A classic Freudian would read the desires expressed by clothing in terms of compensation and lack. Freud himself, according to Steele, once said, “The necktie is something that one can choose, that one can have as pretty as one wants it—which is, unhappily, not the case for the penis,” and elsewhere suggested that weaving had its origins in women wanting to conceal the missing phallus. But Steele is less interested in such theories than in using psychoanalysis as a lens through which to scrutinize the “power and allure of fashion, as well as the ambivalence and hostility that fashion also attracts.”

Steele is no stranger to this hostility. She describes arriving at Yale in 1978 to pursue a Ph.D. in modern European history and having an early encounter that made her worry about her future in the field:

A famous professor asked about the subject of my research. “Fashion,” I said. “Fascinating!” he exclaimed, with suspicious enthusiasm. “German or Italian?” I stared at him. What in the world did he mean by German fashion? Finally, the penny dropped. “Fashion, as in Paris. Not . . . fascism,” I replied. “Oh,” he said, and walked away. There was nothing to say to someone working on such a frivolous topic.

For many years, Steele writes, “fashion



*"And thanks again, Mom and Dad, for raising me as  
an account executive instead of as a wolf."*

continued to be 'The F Word' in much of academia" and was often treated as "a matter of surface appearances, shallow, not deep, and by extension not serious, meaningful, or important." In the course of more than twenty books, she has insisted that it's a mistake to think that surface and depth are in opposition. She prefers the idea of "deep surfaces," a term used by the authors Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick, who write that clothing "does not just operate as a disguising or concealing strategy" and that surfaces are as much the domain of the unconscious as are "the psyche's innermost hidden depths." Steele argues that, even as our garments afford unwitting glimpses of our unconscious lives, fashion visibly dramatizes the ways in which the self is not something that exists so much as something that we are constantly creating. "We are not born," she writes, "but rather *become* who we are, and that becoming continues throughout our lives." When it comes to clothes, we have no choice but to keep becoming. As Adam and Eve discovered, it's impossible to wear nothing at all.

Steele's book begins with an account of Freud's obsession with being "tailored to perfection." He wrote letters to his fiancée, Martha, expressing his anxiety about wearing the right clothes,

and fantasized that he would one day be able to fill her wardrobe with dresses of the latest fashion. Steele writes that he often "confided in Martha about his latest 'reckless' purchase, be it a silver watch ('Without a watch, I am really not a civilized person') or 'the two suits I need so urgently.'" For much of his life, he had his beard trimmed virtually every day, which meant that he was often late, including to his father's funeral. (Unsurprisingly, this haunted his dreams.) Steele sees the young Freud as engaged in what we now call retail therapy, writing that "real and fantasized purchases of new clothing seemed to temporarily ward off anxieties related both to his status as a Jew in an antisemitic society and his precarious socioeconomic position."

Steele's fascinating book effectively traces a historical double helix, examining fashion designers' lives and work in analytic terms and examining analysts' attitudes toward dress, as expressed in their writings and sometimes in their wardrobes. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was notoriously dandyish—favoring mandarin collars and embroidered velvet coats, and often appearing in a purple-checked suit—whereas mid-century British analysts tried so hard not to draw their patients' atten-

tion that their appearances became, as one scholar put it, "almost theatrically boring." What a therapist should wear remains a subject of debate. The analyst and writer Jamieson Webster recently e-mailed me about her long struggle to figure out how to dress in a "neutral" way with patients, as her supervisors had advised her to do: "Spent YEARS trying to figure out how these people wanted me to dress, only to finally give up and dress like myself." The idea that clothing could be "neutral," she wrote, "finally just did me in." Analysts or not, none of us can be neutral. Clothes are always saying something.

Perhaps the first big style shift of the psychoanalytic era came in the years after the First World War, with the rise of androgynous looks typified by the boyish profile of the flapper. Steele offers an analytic reading of Coco Chanel, who was known for her "chic and androgynous dandyism." Abandoned at an orphanage by her father, Chanel invented a version of herself whom he had loved and doted on, even claiming that Coco was his fond childhood nickname for her. She then created styles that allowed her to become a version of the father she'd imagined having. Steele quotes what Chanel wrote about herself to her friend Salvador Dalí: "All her life, all she did was change men's clothing into women's: jackets, hair, neckties, wrists. Coco Chanel always dressed like the strong independent male she had dreamed of being." Chanel's description of herself in the third person was another act of self-construction—a way of distancing herself from her vulnerabilities and turning them into something sharp and stylized.

But it was Chanel's rival, Elsa Schiaparelli, who collaborated more extensively with Dalí and claimed Surrealism as an inspiration. (Chanel allegedly derided her as "that Italian artist who makes clothes.") Steele focusses on Schiaparelli's "Hall of Mirrors" evening jacket, designed for the winter 1938-39 season, interpreting it according to Lacan's famous concept of the "mirror stage," which he'd introduced a couple of years earlier. (She notes that both Schiaparelli and Lacan were friends with Dalí.) The idea was that an infant developed a sense of self by



identifying with her reflection in a mirror, yet still felt a disconnection between the “wholeness” of that reflection and the disjointed experience of her own body. Schiaparelli’s jacket arguably evokes something comparable: impeccably tailored in black velvet, it has a highly structured silhouette but is covered with shards of broken glass arranged in the shape of two fractured mirrors.

Virginia Woolf had portrayed a similar tension between unity and fragmentation a decade earlier, with Mrs. Dalloway gazing at herself in the mirror:

That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy.

For Steele, much of the sculptural, breathtaking artistry of haute couture finds a way to dramatize the friction between the composed selves we offer the world and the fragmented, chaotic sensation of being alive. We only *look* coherent; inside, it’s chaos.

As the twentieth century progresses, Steele moves from Christian Dior’s New Look—which brought back feminine opulence in the postwar period, with decadent skirts and cinched waists—to the rise of punk as a style that emphasized abjection, discomfort, and aggression. (Vivienne Westwood called it “confrontation dressing.”) Surveying the eighties, Steele examines the “hard body fashion” of Thierry Mugler and Jean Paul Gaultier (think Madonna’s cone bra), which she considers alongside the notion of the “phallic woman.” She mentions that, while working on a previous book, “Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power,” she showed a group of analysts a famous photograph by Peter Lindbergh, published in a 1985 issue of French *Vogue*, of a woman in all black pushing a stroller and smoking a cigarette. As she recalls, “They immediately exclaimed: ‘The phallic mother!’”

Throughout, Steele draws on the psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu’s concept of the “skin ego,” which casts skin as

both container (“a unifying envelope for the Self”) and communicator (in Steele’s words, “an interface between the self and the world”). It is a useful way to understand clothing—as something simultaneously seen and felt—especially when it comes to the familiar conflict between wearing something because it feels comfortable (the envelope function) and wearing something because it looks good (the interface function). Think of the threshold moment of wriggling free from work clothes, or an evening gown, and pulling on a pair of wash-softened flannel pajamas. Many Gen Z-ers have collapsed the conflict by crafting a style that elevates ease above all—pajamas and pimple patches freely worn in public, promoting an aesthetic that exalts comfort rather than thwarting it. Steele finds an earlier example of this convergence in the French designer Sonia Rykiel, whose elegant knitwear ensembles of the seventies became emblematic of a turn from haute couture to ready-to-wear. “I go to Sonia Rykiel as one goes to a woman, as one goes home,” Hélène Cixous wrote, “dressed to the closest point to myself. Almost in myself.”

Steele positions Rykiel as an alternative to what Lacan termed “the Procrustean arbitrariness of fashion”—that is, fashion’s often antagonistic relationship to the body. (In ancient Greek myth, the robber Procrustes would torture his victims by making them lie on a bed that fit no one and stretching



them or amputating bits of them accordingly.) Certainly, fashion, whether in its haute-couture form or in the standardized sizes of ready-to-wear clothing, frequently feels as if it’s designed for impossible bodies. Steele contrasts two designers of the nineties and two-thousands, John Galliano and Alexander McQueen, by looking at their differing relationships to the female form.

Galliano’s fashions, she writes, particularly his “body-worshipping, bias-cut evening gowns,” strove to “position the woman who wears them as the object of desire.” McQueen, however, wanted his designs to “provoke fear” and allow the woman to become a figure of terrifying power. His collections, with titles like “Jack the Ripper Stalks His Victims” and “Highland Rape,” not so subtly gestured toward the violence often involved in producing or possessing beauty. His 1996 collection “The Hunger” featured a tailored silver jacket worn over a molded plastic corset that held wriggling masses of dirt-covered worms. McQueen’s work asks us to confront the ways that our awe at beauty can be marbled with disgust. The worm corset—a high-concept art piece that was also stubbornly, horrifyingly corporeal—was a kind of *vanitas* skull, a reminder of the body as vulnerable flesh even as it becomes the site of surreal artifice.

Steele pays particular attention to Galliano’s “Freud or Fetish” collection, from 2000, one of the most explicit intersections between fashion and psychoanalysis in the book, and also one of the least interesting. Galliano said that he wanted to conjure a “young child looking through the keyhole and seeing what the real world was about.” The collection invoked a series of fantasies and nightmares: a chauffeur his mother was sleeping with, a nurse with a giant hypodermic needle, “a kinky barrister” and a bejewelled French maid, a “crocodile woman” with an arrow stuck through a reptilian creature perched on her head. The designs are eye-catching, but they feel motivated by the surface tropes of psychoanalysis rather than by its inner engines.

Steele links Galliano’s crocodile woman to a metaphor of Lacan’s: “The mother is a big crocodile and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off, suddenly making those jaws clamp down.” I found myself wishing that Steele would follow the crocodile even further, into an examination of the relationship between beauty and fear. By creating fashions that allow women to become overtly, even cartoonishly, frightening, Galliano points our gaze toward the human impulse to make art about the things

that scare us—to follow objects of beauty back to the first things in this world to which we ever surrendered.

To accompany the book, Steele has curated an exhibition at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where she has been the chief curator for nearly thirty years. Many of the garments she discusses are on display, and standing in the same room as them, having previously seen them only on the page, is to realize how irreducibly material the power of clothing is. In person, one can see the long, bony appendages protruding from the shoulders of Anouk Wipprecht's Spider Dress 2.0 (reminiscent of an alien skeleton), which are programmed to extend whenever a person comes too close, and a Kei Ninomiya dress made from white hair extensions and thin steel rods which looks like a dandelion puff coming apart in the breeze. Such encounters are reminders that the impact of fashion is often visceral: it hits us before we understand why.

This gap between impact and understanding is something that psychoanalysis feels singularly poised to help us wrestle with. But Steele's project never quite addresses this gap directly, and I craved a fuller reckoning with the deeper questions motivating her inquiry: How can psychoanalysis aid us in understanding the ways fashion works on us—how it compels and repels us? How can clothing speak what we cannot yet bring ourselves to say?

In part, this is because Steele's focus is more on designers than on the people who end up wearing their creations. Galliano, in a Profile in this magazine, described his runway shows as "fantasy time," saying, "I want people to forget about their electricity bills, their jobs, everything." But Steele's exhibition made me wonder what the fantasy time of the runway can reveal about the quotidian fantasies involved in dressing ourselves—not *apart* from electricity bills and jobs but amid them. If we bring analysis from the runway to the closet, it invites us to explore how garments give us access to different versions of ourselves, offering an exhilarating outside—an entire rack of alternatives—to the claustrophobic delusion of a single, monolithic self. We are always becoming and reshaping our-

selves, and what we wear expresses this state of perpetual flux. Selfhood is a shifting thing, as much outfit as skin, that is constantly performed, exchanged, and re-created. We might not even realize what we want to be until we find ourselves putting on a skin that feels nothing like our own.

I think of a pair of white pants I bought in Wales in 2003, while on a backpacking trip during college: skin-tight, with a big flare and a huge silver buckle, like nothing I'd ever worn, like something you'd find in a night club—or, more accurately, something that I, who had never been to a night club, thought you'd find in a night club. These pants weren't "me," but they gestured toward some things I didn't yet know about myself: that I was interested in certain forms of recklessness, in a different relationship to my sexuality, in long nights that led to unknown places. These possibilities were part of what the pants offered me, even though I didn't know why I bought them. The "me" I was familiar with hated being noticed, hated being seen; but the "me" who wore those pants was always noticed, because they were the most noticeable pants you could imagine—like a reflective vest worn at night. Those bright-white pants were how I told myself, without telling myself, that underneath my timid self was another part of me, softly crying out, with her flared hems and her silver buckle, "Look at me." It was a way of speaking when I was too shy to speak, offering me shots of adrenaline in the face of my mildness.

Dressing, then, becomes a series of tiny risks and excursions, experiments in otherness. Getting dressed isn't always an act of self-expression, just like writing isn't always autobiographical. We might wear garments because they feel *nothing* like us—because they allow us to become, however briefly, strangers to ourselves. A garment invites us to invent a self that has never existed before, and then, when we take it off, to kill that provisional self—to keep shape-shifting with giddy abandon, a spirit of play and possibility born of faith in the eternal redo of the next morning, the next outfit, the next self. These days, I mostly wear clothes from thrift stores, which make the feeling of trying on other selves even more concrete, shimmering into the

discarded snake skins of strangers and inviting them to haunt me.

But not all the selves we try on are anonymous. In my early twenties, I worked as a personal assistant for a moderately famous and monstrously egotistical magazine writer who lived in a palatial town house near Lincoln Center. Walking there from the subway each day, I passed boutiques that sold exquisite garments ten times more expensive than anything I'd ever owned. My employer, who'd had many assistants through the years, comfortably spoke about me in the third person, enumerating my many failures to others while I was standing right beside her. She brought me to tears at least once a day. But there was something intoxicating about her ambition, her productivity, and her power. Plus, the job paid well, including a tin box of "petty cash"—hundreds of dollars laid aside for lunches and other expenses.

Eventually, things got bad enough that I quit without giving any advance warning—something unlike anything I'd ever done. One Friday afternoon, I just walked out the door, leaving a note and ten résumés of possible replacements on her desk and taking with me the last of the petty cash. On my way home, I stopped at one of the beautiful boutiques and bought a camel trenchcoat that cost half my rent. I wore that coat every day that winter—I still wear it—because I loved it and because it reminded me of the side of myself I'd discovered that day. It was a wilder, more aggressive version, one that was willing to actually *upset* someone else. That's what I told myself: that I wore the coat as a reminder of my freedom—how I'd left my boss in the lurch, got out from under her thumb.

Yes, I wanted so badly to be free of her that I wore a reminder of her every single day. After reading Steele's book, I realized there was something I'd never admitted to myself: perhaps I wore the jacket not to commemorate leaving her but because some part of me wanted to *be* her. It was like mean-person drag. The coat allowed me to try on the parts of her I coveted but couldn't quite admit I coveted: her willingness to prioritize her own needs, her raw ambition. When I wore the coat, I got to wear her mercilessness and her wealth. I got to fight her and beat her and become her all at once. ♦





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# THE SOUND OF SILENTS

*Organists continue to perform imaginative accompaniments to century-old films.*

BY ALEX ROSS



*"Nosferatu" is ideal for organ: battles with the unholy thrive on churchly tones.*

A hundred and three years on, F. W. Murnau's "Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror" still haunts the moviegoing unconscious. Newcomers feel shudders of recognition on seeing Murnau's indelible evocations of a Transylvanian vampire on the prowl: a reverse-negative image of Nosferatu's carriage clattering through a forest; majestically disquieting sequences of a pestilential ship gliding across the frame; the vampire toting his coffin through the deserted streets of a German town; his shadow seeping along the wall of a stairwell, bony fingers outstretched. Film societies, symphony orchestras, and alternative venues show "Nosferatu" on a regular basis, especially around Halloween. Remakes by Werner Herzog, in 1979, and Robert Eggers, in 2024,

have further boosted the fame of the original, although neither matches its sinister lyricism. The appearance of the word "symphony" in the title highlights the revolutionary musicality of Murnau's style, his way of turning images into silent song.

But how to handle the music itself? Although "Nosferatu" came out five years before sound came in, the composer Hans Erdmann supplied a score that ensembles could play at larger theatres. Much of Erdmann's music later disappeared, and the surviving fragments, humbly late-Romantic in style, don't suggest a lost masterpiece. In the absence of a fixed soundtrack, hundreds of alternatives have been devised, variously, by classical composers, film composers, rock bands, doom-metal groups, jazz ensembles, and

noise collectives. Just before Halloween, the vocalist and composer Haley Fohr, who performs as Circuit des Yeux, supplied a gloomily atmospheric accompaniment for a screening of "Nosferatu" at the Philosophical Research Society, in Los Angeles—a blend of guitar drones, spectral vocals, and churning minimalist figuration.

In my experience, though, "Nosferatu" is most convincing when backed by organ. Battles with the unholy thrive on churchly tones. In late October, I went to San Diego to see the film at the Balboa Theatre, a century-old movie and vaudeville house. Its prized possession is a 1929 Wonder Morton organ, a four-manual instrument that once resided at a cinema in Queens. The performer was David Marsh, a thirty-year-old musician based in Mission Viejo, California. Marsh, an enthusiast of French organ improvisation, brought no written music to the gig, though he had a plan of action. He told me beforehand, "'Nosferatu' allows me to use everything I've got. There are romantic, sentimental moments, as when the young hero leaves his wife to go to Transylvania, and those call for an Old Hollywood sound. But it's also horror, and that allows me to be an absolute madman—dissonance, chromaticism, cluster chords."

In the idyllic early scenes, Marsh deployed a Korngoldian theme with rising intervals of a fifth and a sixth, then shifted it to the minor mode as a Transylvanian chill descended. When Nosferatu showed his corpselike face, the Wonder Morton's Vox Humana (human voice) and concert-flute pipes buzzed together in a shrill cluster. Relentless ostinato figures underscored Nosferatu's voyage by boat. The sunrise finale had a touch of M-G-M Messiaen. The audience exploded in applause before Marsh was done, and rightly so.

During the silent era, thousands of movie-theatre organs raised their quirky, quavery voices, with the Mighty Wurlitzer being the most popular model. According to the American Theatre Organ Society, a few hundred instruments remain in theatres, and they are experiencing a modest renaissance. Resident organists accompany silent-film screenings at, among other venues, the



Stanford Theatre, in Palo Alto; the Ohio Theatre, in Columbus; the Circle Cinema, in Tulsa; and the Fox Theatre, in Atlanta. A raucous Mighty Wurlitzer at the Castro, in San Francisco, had a longtime cult following; the theatre is undergoing renovation and will reopen early next year with what is billed as the world's largest digital organ.

In Los Angeles, the best place to see organ-powered silents is at the Old Town Music Hall, in El Segundo. This two-hundred-seat venue, which looks a bit like a Wild West opera house, first opened in 1921, providing entertainment to Standard Oil workers. In 1968, two theatre-organ enthusiasts, Bill Coffman and Bill Field, rented the building and installed a massive twenty-six-hundred-pipe Wurlitzer that they had rescued from the Fox West Coast Theatre, in Long Beach. Coffman and Field died in 2001 and 2020, respectively, but Old Town continues on a nonprofit basis, under the aegis of devoted volunteers.

Before a screening last month, I got a backstage tour from Stirling Yearian, a retired engineer and an amateur organist who helps maintain the Wurlitzer. The pipes, arrayed in chambers at the back of the theatre, must constantly be tuned, tested, and adjusted. In the basement are two vintage Spencer Orgoblo wind blowers, which power the pipes. Further complicating the upkeep is the mechanical intricacy of the Wurlitzer's built-in sound effects: car horns, doorbells, footsteps, thunder. Yearian told me, "I haven't accompanied a full-length silent yet, but I've done some shorts. They want me to do Laurel and Hardy's 'Big Business,' which will be fun—a lot of door-knocking and door-slamming in that."

Waiting in the greenroom was Robert Alan York, a veteran organist who studied classical repertory and improvisation in Paris and also possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of the American songbook. His assignment that day was a demanding one: King Vidor's 1925 film "The Big Parade," a two-and-a-half-hour epic about a rich playboy who goes to fight in the First World War and learns the ways of the common man. York told me, "When I first played it cold, I found myself in tears at times. It starts out as a sweet, romantic thing, and then it gets very in-

tense." Like Marsh in San Diego, York had no music in front of him, trusting that his memory and instinct would carry him through.

If "Nosferatu" has eerily failed to age, parts of "The Big Parade" are difficult for modern audiences to digest. The hero's antic flirtations with a French maiden drag on at inordinate length, leaving an organist little room for creative invention. Later, though, Vidor generates an atmosphere of muddy dread that anticipates the harrowing tableaux of Lewis Milestone's "All Quiet on the Western Front," released five years later. Two complementary images frame the central battle sequences: first, trucks carry cocksure soldiers toward the front; then ambulances bring their bodies back. York responded with menacing pedal tones and Mahlerian march rhythms, relying heavily on the Wurlitzer's automated drums.

On Halloween itself, silent-film buffs in L.A. gravitate toward Disney Hall. For more than twenty years, Disney has marked the day by screening a classic horror silent with the mightiest imaginable soundtrack: live accompaniment on its sixty-one-hundred-pipe concert organ, which the composer Terry Riley once nicknamed Hurricane Mama. This year's offering was Wallace Worsley's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," from 1923, with Lon Chaney in the lead. At the console was Clark Wilson, a virtuosic, period-conscious organist who intermingles improvised episodes with stock pieces of the kind that were often used in the silent period: Saint-Saëns's "Danse Macabre," the Largo from Dvořák's Ninth Symphony, "La Marseillaise." These days, horror directors like to unsettle audiences with subterranean skronks and rumbles: none could equal the seismic impact of Hurricane Mama's thirty-two-foot-long C pipe.

Audiences tend to come away from theatre-organ screenings in a jubilant mood, and I think I know the reason. Here, passive consumption becomes active and creative: the performer reacts with individual spontaneity while summoning sounds of orchestral heft. The technological mastery of cinematic spectacle is humanized by the immediacy of live performance. You understand why an artist like Murnau considered silent film the perfect medium. ♦



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## THE THEATRE

# ON Y VA

*"Tartuffe" closes out a year of Molière.*

BY HELEN SHAW



*Matthew Broderick stars opposite David Cross and Amber Gray.*

Based on the sheer quantity of revivals and new translations flooding our venues, New York theatre has chosen its Person of the Year: Molière. The satirical god of the seventeenth-century French stage has taken his throne back after a decade of near-neglect. For most of 2025, we were either watching one of the playwright's comedies or bracing for one. In June, we had almost simultaneous productions: Taylor Mac's "Prosperous Fools" (an update of "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme") and Jeffrey Hatcher's fizzy adaptation of "Le Malade Imaginaire." And, this fall, one version of the comedy "Tartuffe" (at the House of the Redeemer) had barely closed before New York Theatre Workshop premiered its own. This sumptuously produced, frequently amusing, occasion-

ally inert staging of "Tartuffe," adapted by Lucas Hnath and directed by Sarah Benson, stars Matthew Broderick as the titular grifter and David Cross as Orgon, his easily buffaloes mark.

If it's the year of Molière, then it must also be the year of the liar, the hypocrite, the poseur, the clown. In many of his comedies, as in "Tartuffe," a man at the head of a family exaggerates some seeming virtue (respect for doctors, piety) to a fanatical degree, threatening the happiness and the fortunes of everyone who depends on him. These obstinate paterfamilias types, particularly the narcissists who think that they're strong-minded pillars of society, are exactly the kind of flattery-prone suckers who make easy prey for charlatans—quacks, tutors, lay religious counsellors on the

make. Molière, writing at the pleasure of Louis XIV, was a court-approved playwright who had both a popular audience and aristocratic patrons, and so although he often mocked rich men as gullible fools, he never suggested removing them from power. Instead, it seems, idiots with sway must be placated, educated, accommodated, worked around. You don't need to study the demographics of those who gained influence after the last election—those *hommes d'un certain âge*—to understand Molière's new-old popularity. (Maybe we can pick up some pointers?)

As the play begins, we enter Orgon's household to find it already in a tizzy: he and his mother (Bianca Del Rio) have transferred their loyalties to Tartuffe, an in-home "spiritual adviser" who has—very much unbeknownst to everyone but the two of them—fixed his lecherous eye on Orgon's young wife, Elmire (Amber Gray). Her brother, Cléante (Francis Jue), and Orgon's two grown children, Damis (Ryan J. Haddad, spitting mad from word one) and Mariane (Emily Davis), question Tartuffe's motives, as does Mariane's adored, impecunious fiancé, Valère (Ikechukwu Ufomadu). No one, of course, is quite as forthright as the maid, Dorine (Lisa Kron), who has the soubrette's license to call 'em like she sees 'em. "Pursuit of godly goals my ass, all he does is constantly harass," she tuts, while levering her bosom a little higher out of her low-cut corset. (Enver Chakartash designed the extraordinary costumes, which employ baroque silhouettes in plummy red or bubble-gum pink, sometimes over a modern shoe.)

Cross, wearing a white wig à la Shakespeare (bald on top, but falling fluffily to the shoulder on either side), plays Orgon's fascination with the religiously exacting Tartuffe not as God-fearing terror but as a late-in-life crush, sniffing the other man's hat shyly when unobserved or coaxing him to curl up in his lap like a cat. Broderick, in severe black pantaloons and a Puritan's white collar, treats the whole farce with gentle befuddlement; he tends to settle his body so it faces all one way, like a penguin, creating a real sense of fuss and bother anytime he has to gesture. His Tartuffe doesn't try to curry favor or even stand on sanctimony. Instead,



he assumes a pleasant perplexity, which never changes—not when he’s offered Mariane’s reluctant hand in marriage, not when Elmire tries to seduce him in a complex bluffing scene, not even when Orgon disowns his own son on Tartuffe’s behalf. His bland expression asks, “Is it *my* fault I keep getting everything handed to me?” If you’d told me that Broderick had been chosen from the audience right before the show, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

Cross and Broderick here offer studies in otiose passivity. Each gets big laughs from portraying inertia: their performances abound in side-eyed glances and awkward pauses followed by “So . . .” These gags can be funny, but the propulsive mechanics of farce require more of a sense of movement. As in many Molière plays, the setting (designed here by the collective called dots) is a kind of all-purpose room, a public-private parlor in Orgon’s house where guests and residents alike can rush in and out. There are lines drawn on the floor, which recall a room being readied for painting or possibly a Sun King-era tennis court. When either of the two stars took the stage, though, I thought of a car that breaks down in the middle of a road and then stays there, hazards blinking, as traffic detours around it.

And something has certainly stalled in this particular meeting between playwright and playwright. Hnath, whose writing in, say, “A Doll’s House, Part 2” or “The Thin Place” relies on the well-placed pause, is less deft when shaping rhyming couplets, which must be taken, like fences, at a gallop. Fashioning an English version out of Molière’s hexameter is notoriously difficult, particularly because the poet Richard Wilbur already dominates the field, with a shelf’s worth of intricate lacework translations. Other adapters have taken their sparkling turns, like David Ives (who has made a long practice of verse adaptation) and Hatcher, who avoided the whole poetry issue in his zippy “Imaginary Invalid” because the original was written in prose. But Hnath, working from Curtis Hidden Page’s translation, from 1908, gets tangled up in the requirements of rhyme and is forced into some unfortunate expediences, as well as the occasional repetition.

For contrast, here’s the Wilbur, from 1965, when Cléante is chastising Orgon for failing to see through Tartuffe’s play-acting religiosity: “There’s a vast difference, so it seems to me/ Between true piety and hypocrisy:/ How do you fail to see it, may I ask?/ Is not a face quite different from a mask?” In roughly the same place in Hnath’s script (there’s no exact correspondence, because he has made savvy cuts, to craft an intermissionless hour-and-fifty-minute show), we hear Cléante say, “It’s not hard for someone to act like they’re holy/ and not actually be holy,/ and in fact, those I know who are holiest/ are far from the showiest.” With versifiers, too, we can distinguish a mask from the real thing when we see them side by side.

What Hnath has done, though, is keep his eye on the larger rhymes, namely, the ones with our current era. He emphasizes the rex-ex-machina ending, for instance, in which Louis XIV, as represented by a royal decree that arrives at the last possible moment, sweeps away all of Tartuffe’s machinations and plots. Various sketched-in relationships in the original involve Orgon’s support for the royal side during the wars of the Fronde, but Hnath tweaks these into indications of some past financial impropriety. In a dicey moment when Orgon thinks that his secret crookedness might mean his family’s utter ruin, a messenger from the King arrives. Donors get to play by a different set of rules.

At this point, there has been very little overt political commentary in the production, which otherwise points to modernity mainly in its language. (Tartuffe is a “dipshit,” etc.) But here, when we see a ruler bending legality for his friend’s benefit, we recognize our current White House’s pardon-as-golden-ticket strategy. Molière, mindful that Louis was his patron—not to mention the rescuer of the interdicted “Tartuffe” itself, which had been banned for five years because it annoyed the Church—would never have implied that the King’s final gesture was anything other than a touch of grace. Hnath, though, uses this moment as a queasy reminder of what it is to live in a country with a sovereign executive. “We all know and we agree/ We’re the good ones obviously,”

the cast sings, dolefully, as the music (composed by the great Heather Christian) turns increasingly sour, like clabbered milk left out on Election Night.

Happily, there are pleasures that precede this grimness. Benson, whose connection to the Off Broadway experimental scene runs deep, has cast two of the finest comic performers in town as the play’s young lovers, and although they cannot be onstage all the time, it is not for lack of trying. Davis, wearing a particularly Bo Peep-y set of pink panniers, turns the character into a masterpiece of clownery, sulking delightfully and throwing magnificent tantrums while her arrangement of topknots—the hair designer is Robert Pickens—bounces on her head like a prize curly lamb. This Mariane makes little rushes at people, particularly the capable Dorine, eager to fling herself at someone’s feet. Davis’s many bouffon gifts include a mouth that she can make completely diagonal, registering gradations of concern from unease to outright panic as the angle increases.

And then there is Ufomadu, our clown prince. His Valère wears seafoam blue and a gigantic turquoise hat, and glides onstage like a mid-century talk-show host, his voice at once booming and soothing. Ufomadu’s non-stop bonhomie made me love Hnath’s lines in a way that I hadn’t before. There are a few scenes, I hate to say it, that do not require Valère, but then Ufomadu turns up anyway, always confident that no one will protest. He breezes in as a sort of courier. “It’s someone we’ve never met before,” Dorine says, as Ufomadu raises a *brown* hat to the group, simultaneously pulling up his wig. And, later, he marches on as Louis’s messenger, wearing an outfit that makes him look like a gingerbread soldier. The production’s finest, most perfectly farcical moment ensues—a bit of purely theatrical silliness—and *hey presto!* Here is Valère again. I laughed at the revelation; I’ve laughed every time I’ve thought of it since; I plan to keep on laughing at it. At the end of a difficult year, I hope that we can share in Valère’s undaunted spirit. May we all believe that we are always, always welcome. Don’t worry if you’re in the scene or not. Stand behind the door, push it open, and *voilà!* ♦

## THE VICTOR AND THE SPOILS

*"Marty Supreme."*

BY RICHARD BRODY

Josh Safdie's hectic new film "Marty Supreme," set in 1952, mainly in New York, is, essentially, "Uncut Gems" but with a happy ending. That recklessly exuberant 2019 drama, which Safdie co-directed with his brother, Benny, stars Adam Sandler as a jewelry dealer in Manhattan and a compulsive gambler who takes thrilling risks to pay off his credi-

tor; nonetheless, with his irrepressible energy and his wiles, he gets out of his low-rent neighborhood and into ever-wilder exploits that, in the story's eight-month span, fling him about and leave him changed—perhaps even for the better.

Marty's chutzpah is justified by his story; the character is loosely based on the table-tennis hustler and champion

especially from a Japanese player (the real-life table-tennis star Koto Kawaguchi), who uses a new kind of paddle and grip. But what matters even more than winning any one match is to get into the spotlight and into the higher echelons of society, since, to launch an international career, Marty needs rich backers—and, in any case, he craves fame and the trappings of success. Bulldozing his way into a suite at the Ritz, Marty focusses his impudent charm on a glamorous former movie star, Kay Stone (Gwyneth Paltrow), and also ingratiates himself with her husband, a wealthy businessman named Milton Rockwell (the entrepreneur, politician, and "Shark Tank" judge Kevin O'Leary) with an eye for publicity and, as he says, a nose for bullshit.

While there, Marty also partners with a Hungarian former champion, who survived Auschwitz (Géza Röhrig, who played an Auschwitz inmate in "Son of Saul"), in a table-tennis stunt duo. His relationship with Rachel, who works at a pet shop and has a lumpish husband, Ira (Emory Cohen), tightens—or, rather, she tightens it, with a ruse of her own. Then Marty faces a quandary, akin to the money emergency that screeches like a siren through "Uncut Gems": hit with a fine by the table-tennis commissioner (the writer Pico Iyer) for boorish behavior in London, and left with little time to pay it off in order to enter a tournament in Tokyo, he starts Ping-Pong hustling again, in the company of a cab-driver friend named Wally (the rapper Tyler, the Creator). The result is a whirlwind of chaos that involves such out-of-control elements as a gangster (the filmmaker Abel Ferrara), a dog, a car crash, a break-in, a shoot-out, a fire, a flood, another affair, and a display of public defiance so brazen that it risks becoming an international incident.

Safdie delivers this bustling, hyperkinetic story with a hyperspeed aesthetic: whizzing and whipping camerawork (overseen by the cinematographer, Darius Khondji) that presses very close to the actors and exaggerates their frenzied motion, clattering high-velocity dialogue that seems pounded onto the screen with hammer and die, characters expressing themselves with impulsive gestures, editing that slashes away any moments of repose, a script that's filled with hairpin reversals of fortune. With its breathless



*Timothée Chalamet stars as a prodigiously charismatic Ping-Pong player.*

tors and learns that the house always wins. With "Marty Supreme"—Safdie's first feature directed without Benny since 2008—the happy ending follows logically from a happy beginning, so to speak. The film's first scene features a tryst, in a back room of a shoe store, between the protagonist, a twenty-three-year-old salesman named Marty Mauser (Timothée Chalamet), and a young married woman named Rachel (Odessa A'zion).

But Marty's greater happiness involves another secret, one that he's scheming to spring on the world: that he, a Ping-Pong hustler who plays locally for modest stakes, is about to prove, in an international table-tennis tournament in London, that he's the best in the world. For a scuffling guy from the Lower East Side, it's a tall

Marty Reisman, who died in 2012, at the age of eighty-two. Like Marty, Reisman came from the Lower East Side and travelled overseas in 1952 for an international tournament. Other details, freely tweaked, mesh, too, but the main similarities are in temperament—a megawatt personality and a penchant for braggadocio.

Unlike Sandler's gambler in "Uncut Gems," Marty bets on no one but himself. It isn't easy for Marty, who lives with his emotionally and financially dependent mother (Fran Drescher), to fund the trip to London: it takes ruses and threats and some outmaneuvering of his boss, his doting but tough uncle Murray (the writer Larry Sloman). So, once Marty gets there, he has to make the most of it. He finds the competition stiffer than he expected—



pace, “Marty Supreme” favors a style of acting that’s far less dependent on technique to construct scenes than on personality and presence to create moments—which explains the film’s zesty mix of professional actors with notables from other fields of endeavor. It’s a practice that the Safdies relied on in their previous features, but never as extensively or as effectively. The drama built into the casting of “Marty Supreme” reaches its apex when, playing the tycoon Rockwell, whom Marty beseeches at a crucial time of need, O’Leary utters the word “power” with hardened authority.

Nonetheless, “Marty Supreme” is Chalamet’s show, and he dominates it, incarnating Marty’s callow enthusiasm while also lending it an edge. Marty is a born performer; the hustle itself is a performance that depends on an elaborate pretense of playing badly, which he persuasively amplifies with a show of whiny kvetching. His shameless publicity-seeking involves wheedling, bragging, blustering, or just plain lying with a straight face that could put professional actors to shame—and indeed does, when he pursues Kay (who’s attempting a comeback) into a rehearsal and upstages her co-star. Chalamet embodies Marty’s ardent showmanship with an evident joy in performance, exactly as Marty himself schemes not only shamelessly but jubilantly. And his energy is contagious—A’zion and Paltrow tussle with him at the same level of electrifying intensity.

Though “Marty Supreme” is Safdie’s sixth fiction feature, it’s only the second that he has directed solo. (The first, “The Pleasure of Being Robbed,” from 2008, which he completed at the

age of twenty-three, also features a Ping-Pong hustle of sorts.) He co-directed the four in between—“Daddy Longlegs,” “Heaven Knows What,” “Good Time,” and “Uncut Gems”—with Benny, whose first solo feature, “The Smashing Machine,” an appealing but mild biopic of the mixed-martial-arts fighter Mark Kerr, was released earlier this year. Judging from the brothers’ new solo features, it’s Benny who has been the voice of logic in their collaborations, Josh the engine of fury. Benny’s absence is detectable in a few omissions, especially in scenes of mayhem and their aftermath which never get the attention of the police. Also, with his emphasis on Marty’s audacious escapades, Safdie never gets into Marty’s head—or into his body. The movie offers little in the way of athletic subjectivity, of his feel for the game or his competitive strategies.

Still, Josh appears to have come out ahead in their separation, because, in “Marty Supreme,” he remained in partnership with Ronald Bronstein, who is, in effect, the third Safdie brother—a co-writer and co-editor of all four of the brothers’ joint movies, and the star of their quasi-autobiographical “Daddy Longlegs,” playing a version of the brothers’ father.

Bronstein is one of the hidden heroes of the modern cinema. He has directed only one feature to date, “Frownland,” which premiered in 2007; it’s the story of a troubled young Brooklynite whose soul is shredded by the cruelty and coldness he endures at work, at home, and in love, and its hallucinatory turbulence opened vistas for a new generation of harsh, high-strung, and uninhibitedly inventive independent movies,

such as those of the Safdies, Alex Ross Perry (whose “Pavements” was a highlight of this year), Amy Seimetz (“Sun Don’t Shine”), and his wife, Mary Bronstein (whose 2008 feature “Yeast” is a high point of Greta Gerwig’s acting career and whose new one, “If I Had Legs I’d Kick You,” is among the most acclaimed movies of 2025). The Bronstein cinematic DNA even extends to Paul Thomas Anderson’s “One Battle After Another,” in which a key role is played by Paul Grimstad, a musician and professor with only one prior acting credit—for a major role in “Frownland.” (He also has a bit part in “Marty Supreme.”)

Though “Marty Supreme” is based (albeit loosely) on the true story of someone else’s life, it’s Safdie’s most personal film to date. It’s one of the very few movies that dramatize—hyperbolically, comedically, even mockingly, yet optimistically—the boldness unto folly of a young fanatic turning ambition into reality. I’m not, of course, suggesting that Safdie or Bronstein has ever done anything Marty-like—lied, cheated, threatened, insulted, seduced, betrayed, stolen, clobbered, been clobbered, or endangered others in pursuit of their art—but that, in imagining Marty, they’ve successfully extrapolated from the mind-bending extremes of energy and will that the movie life demands. Safdie, like Marty, bet on himself, starting with D.I.Y. filmmaking, and advancing through a decade-plus of critically acclaimed movies on the industry’s periphery. Now, with “Marty Supreme,” he’s in reach of the brass ring, even as he self-deprecatingly admits what it feels like to have fought his way there. ♦

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*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby, must be received by Sunday, January 4th. The finalists in the December 8th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 19th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“I was just one ring away from retirement.”*  
Scott E. Gilbert, Comfort, Texas

*“Someday, when you least expect it, you'll get a terrible paper cut, and you'll know it was me.”*  
Tyler Stradling, Mesa, Ariz.

*“I knew you couldn't stand living in my shadow.”*  
Krista Agatielli, Staten Island, N.Y.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“I'm sure you will find this is plenty.”*  
Doug Haslam, Newton, Mass.





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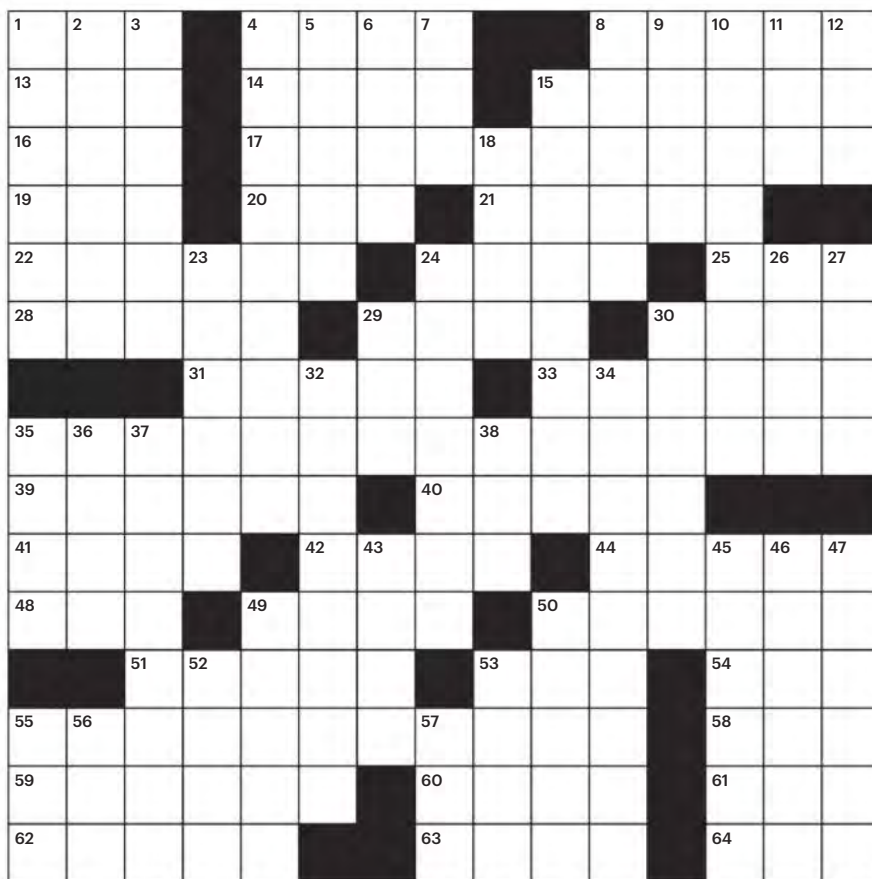
# THE HOLIDAY CROSSWORD

2025 in language.

BY PATRICK BERRY

## ACROSS

- 1 Campbell's container
- 4 \_\_\_ Minor
- 8 Competitor of Sealy
- 13 Bird on Australia's coat of arms
- 14 "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" org.
- 15 Honey alternative?
- 16 Like Netflix's logo
- 17 *Having a meltdown*
- 19 Yale collegian
- 20 Cabinet department that oversees Ginnie Mae, for short
- 21 Come onstage
- 22 *Low-quality digitally generated text, images, or videos*
- 24 SAT section
- 25 Tech company that developed the U.P.C. bar code
- 28 Ravens quarterback Jackson
- 29 Shopping center
- 30 "Scott Pilgrim vs. the World" actor Michael
- 31 Pertaining to birth
- 33 \_\_\_ studies (discipline that examines issues of race and nationality)
- 35 *Diet Coke, in a modern analogy to a smoke break*
- 39 Cash in
- 40 Enjoy great success
- 41 Wednesday's boarding-school roommate, on "Wednesday"
- 42 Delay deciding
- 44 Uproar
- 48 Speck in a Seurat
- 49 Sounds of sorrow
- 50 *Pointy-toothed plush monster toy that became a global fad in 2025*
- 51 Cherish
- 53 Villainous computer of film
- 54 \_\_\_ Peacock ("Clue" suspect)
- 55 *Doing something with the express purpose of seeming cool*
- 58 Equine mouthpiece
- 59 Uninterested in right and wrong
- 60 Subject of the 2013 documentary "Blackfish"
- 61 Jeans brand
- 62 Brother of Zeus who abducted Persephone



- 63 Heady stuff?
- 64 "Childhood's \_\_\_" (Arthur C. Clarke novel)

## DOWN

- 1 Chex or Kix
- 2 Children's-book housekeeper \_\_\_ Bedelia
- 3 Stripped-down life style?
- 4 City that makes up roughly forty per cent of Alaska's population
- 5 IHOP offering
- 6 Device at some checkout counters
- 7 Podcasters' revenue sources
- 8 Instrument for the Pet Shop Boys and Men Without Hats
- 9 Boundary line
- 10 Change the direction of
- 11 Greek letter used as a symbol for torque
- 12 Fourth word of the Lord's Prayer
- 15 Julep garnish
- 18 Get better
- 23 Touched down
- 24 Speaks ill of
- 26 Telly viewer
- 27 Blunt medieval weapon
- 29 Bub
- 30 Little angel
- 32 \_\_\_ lobe (portion of the brain involved in language processing)
- 34 Horatio Nelson's final battle
- 35 "Portlandia" star Armisen
- 36 Nevada city named for a Union general
- 37 Sled-dog race that begins in 4-Down
- 38 Successfully pulled a prank on

- 43 Cab-company competitor
- 45 What haptic video-game controllers sometimes do
- 46 Talk-show host who launched the Legally Prohibited from Being Funny on Television Tour, in 2010
- 47 Oxidized
- 49 Swallowers of TV remotes
- 50 Knight stick?
- 52 Have the courage (to)
- 53 Fill a job opening
- 55 "That's really relaxing"
- 56 Thurman of "The Producers"
- 57 Pitchfork-wielding crowd

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*



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