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LETTER FROM THE SOUTHWEST

HANNAH GENTILES

The Looming Disaster of the Border Wall in Big Bend
By Rachel Monroe

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GOINGS ON

MAY 20 – 26, 2026

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

Since the seventies, the Nuyorican Poets Café has welcomed an emergent literati straddling the realms of soul and hip-hop, a scene that nurtured the evolution of the Brooklyn-born poet and activist **aja monet.** The café's youngest-ever Grand Slam champion, monet spent years dazzling spoken-word circuits before transitioning into the role of bandleader and music artist. The spirits of blues and rap have always haunted her work, and her début album, "when the poems do what they do," from 2023, introduced her poetry to a jazzy new context. Monet, who has referred to herself as a surrealist blues poet, has a new LP, "the color of rain," which truly commands the distinction with its dreamlike tangle of genre-blurring ideas.—*Sheldon Pearce (Carnegie Hall; May 20.)*

DANIEL N. JOHNSON

ABOUT TOWN

BROADWAY | Noël Coward's **"Fallen Angels"** is a retro gem that gives froth a good name. The plot is pure Fluffernutter: two pretty, rich wives spend a day freaking out, primping, and getting royally hammered after they learn that the French snack they hooked up with as single gals abroad has turned up in London. The play was naughty stuff in 1925, when the show, starring Tallulah Bankhead, got banned. You can still see why it shocked people: Coward's cynical farce is devoutly unjudgmental about these shrewd bubbleheads, dipsomaniacs determined to find wiggle room in their vows. In 2026, the play is primarily an opportunity to see Rose Byrne and Kelli O'Hara lounge all over the gorgeous set like bejewelled Slinkies, chugging champagne and slaloming off sofas. A sweet profiterole.—*Emily Nussbaum (Haimes; through June 7.)*

DANCE | Not long ago, the **New York City Tap Festival** appeared to be on its deathbed. When the 2024 edition of the annual event, also known as Tap City, didn't attract enough funding and was cancelled, it looked like the end. But the Joyce Theatre came to the rescue, and now Tap City is back, celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary with a week of shows there. The lineup displays some rebounding strength, with such returning favorites as Caleb Teicher, Jason Samuels Smith, Soles of Duende, and Michelle Dorrance, who will perform a vintage solo by the festival's matriarch, Brenda Bufalino.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; May 19-24.)*

ART | It's not an exaggeration to say that **Joan Semmel** revolutionized the female nude. For centuries, naked women were depicted in art by men as mythic beings and/or sex objects, but in the nineteen-seventies some feminists began reclaiming their eroticism, including Semmel. She first painted couples having sex, and then images of her own body, which became her longtime focus. Semmel's paintings are simultaneously tender and unflinching, especially those that portray her point of view, looking down at smooth, detailed skin or folded, expressionistic flesh. The Jewish Museum's thrilling mini-survey highlights her formal experimentation, while an accompanying gallery show features new work—including a remarkable, front-facing, nude self-portrait by the nonagenarian titled "Here I Am" (2025).—*Jillian Steinhauer (Jewish Museum, through May 31; Alexander Gray Associates, through May 30.)*

ELECTRONIC | The English singer, producer, and d.j. **Nia Archives** stands at the forefront of the modern U.K. rave scene, working primarily in jungle and drum and bass. A rare star in a behind-the-decks profession, she is both bellwether and ambassador for one of the more niche music communities. Her 2024 début album, "Silence Is Loud," sought to blend jungle with the Britpop of bands such as Blur and Oasis, and its more reined-in sound allowed for the kind of clearheaded introspection that most hit the dance floor to avoid. In 2025, she launched her label Up Ya Archives for "everything new gen junglism," and, later this year, she's releasing "Emotional Junglist," which promises to continue her long-running subversion of raver norms.—*Sheldon Pearce (Bowery Ballroom; May 21.)*

MOVIES | For her first feature, Aleshea Harris adapted and directed her 2018 play **"Is God Is."** The movie is a furious revenge thriller, in which two young women, fraternal twins, Racine (Kara Young) and Anaia (Mallori Johnson), who have grievous burn scars from early childhood, are summoned to the bedside of their mother (Vivica A. Fox), whom they call God, and who is similarly scarred. God reveals that the perpetrator is their long-absent father—and she orders them to find him and kill him. The sisters' mission involves a dangerous and violent road trip; the fierce Racine outdoes the sensitive Anaia in her bloodlust, and the drama, reminiscent of classical tragedy, resounds with mythopoetic overtones. If the results are longer on action than on substance, they're nonetheless harrowing and haunting.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

MOVIES | The sardonic comedy **"Clockwatchers,"** from 1997, observes office life from the perspective of four secretarial temps whose daily tribulations reveal bureaucratic absurdities and cruelties in action. Iris (Toni Collette), a new temp at a credit company, quickly bonds with her colleagues: Margaret (Parker Posey), whose derision is matched by ambition; Paula (Lisa Kudrow), an aspiring actress whose optimism masks despair; and Jane (Alanna Ubach), whose dreams center on her impending marriage. The women are blithely dismissive of their tedious work, but their relationships fray under new stresses—including intrusive surveillance. The director, Jill Sprecher, films these antics like a live-action cartoon, with giddy images and spritzy performances that are nonetheless poignant.—*R.B. (Metrograph, May 17, introduced by John Early, and streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

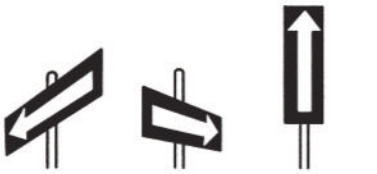
ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

Pickers Paradise

I was raised in New Mexico, which means that I know my way around a craft fair. Growing up, I spent my summers bouncing between various folk-art festivals and artisan markets, where my parents would placate me with sugar-dusted funnel cake or a green-chile cheeseburger while they spent hours swanning around looking at rugs and pottery and hand-woven textiles. My aunt and uncle, who live in Santa Fe—home to the **International Folk Art Market,** one of the largest such festivals in the world (the next one is July 9-12)—are devoted flea-market pickers and collectors of antique oddities. (My aunt is the type of woman who gets genuinely excited to excavate a rusty turn-of-the-century weathervane from a random pile of jetsam.) This is all to say that I come by my obsession with bazaars honestly. Swap meets, church-basement sales, antiques expos: give me a chance to rummage through beautiful and strange things while engaging in chipper small talk with passionate venders and I'm in my element. My other true love is vintage clothing, and so summer is a dangerous time for me—it's the high season for pop-up secondhand markets, where some of the best vintage dealers from around the country gather to sell their wares. Earlier this month, I dropped into the **Pickwick Vintage Show** at Grand Central Terminal—a thoughtfully curated annual fair that moves to L.A. on May 16, to San Francisco on May 17, and to Chicago on June 21—and scored some truly fantastic pieces. From Jessica Barr, the owner of **Messy Jessy Vintage,** I bought a diaphanous peach gown from the nineteen-sixties that felt straight out of "Valley of the Dolls," and, from a Connecticut-based dealer who sells under the name **Joyous Closet,** I bought a velvet Escada smoking jacket, embellished with sequin clocks. Ridiculous? Definitely. But that's the point of a vintage fair—you go in with a set spending cap, then let joy guide you. More markets are coming: **The Vintage Market NY** happens in Chelsea on May 23. Then, starting June 6, the vintage collective **Thx It's Thrifted** will team up with **the Lucky Flea** to put on a thrift extravaganza in Williamsburg, continuing every other weekend through August 23. If you're into nineteen-twenties garb, **the Jazz Age Lawn Party,** which takes over Governor's Island June 13-14, features several venders who specialize in the era. Or, if you have any will power at all, you can spend the summer saving up for **A Current Affair,** perhaps the best archival fashion market in the city, which takes place every November in Industry City, Brooklyn. Whatever you choose, it's so much better to buy vintage in person from knowledgeable purveyors. Old clothes come with stories. Don't you want to hear them?

—Rachel Syme

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAY HICKSON (TOP); BURT GLINN / MAGNUM (BOTTOM)



PICK THREE

Naomi Fry on great entertainment from brassy broads.

1. The singer, actor, and dancer Liza Minnelli has had a legendarily stormy life. Several marriages, her addiction struggles, not to mention having Judy Garland, herself legendarily stormy, as a mother: it's been a lot, and it's all laid out in her new memoir, **"Kids, Wait Till You Hear This!"** What could have easily made for an overwrought and even tragic read, however, is presented with a surprisingly light touch. Minnelli writes, "When you're down and out, just shake off the dust and get back up." A good note to self!

2. "The Real Housewives of Rhode Island," the newest offering from Bravo's "Real Housewives" franchise, is only in its first season, but it is already, in my eyes, a slam dunk. Once you get over the initial confusion of telling the ladies apart from each other (deep tans and long brunette extensions seem to be de rigueur in the Ocean State), you'll love their straight-shooting, ballsy approach to life. Cheating husbands, money woes: it's all discussed directly and openly, God bless them.

3. Now that Madonna is in an album-promotion cycle again, this time for the July release of "Confessions II," it's fun to reminisce on an earlier period in her career by watching the 1991 documentary **"Truth or Dare."** Directed by Alek Keshishian, the movie follows the singer's Blond Ambition tour, and, on top of lots of great live-concert footage, it includes a ton of behind-the-scenes deliciousness, including skirmishes with her then boyfriend Warren Beatty and sassy girl talk with her bestie at the time, Sandra Bernhard.

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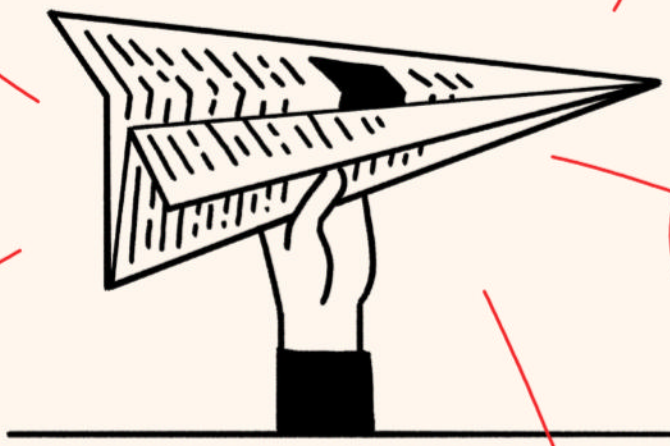

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
WHO'S WINNING?

In a debate for the Democratic nomination for the Senate in Iowa this month, one of the moderators, Erin Murphy, asked the candidates, Josh Turek and Zach Wahls, both state legislators, a reasonable, if downbeat, question. They had proposed progressive policies to address the state's affordability crisis: raising the federal minimum wage, restoring Obamacare subsidies, rolling back tariffs, fighting "corporate greed." What "I didn't hear," Murphy said, was anything that could be done "with a Republican President, because that's the reality of the next two years." Turek, in response, countered that, if "we're able to win this race here in Iowa, we're looking at taking back Congress and taking back the U.S. Senate. And I think that gives us an amazing opportunity to be able to get a lot of these across the finish line."

Iowa is a state where Donald Trump beat Kamala Harris by thirteen points, and where registered Republicans outnumber Democrats by nearly two hundred thousand. But Turek's answer was a serious one. Something has changed lately in the dynamics of the Democrats' drive to reclaim the Senate, or, at least, in the Party's mood. Trump's approval ratings have fallen to below forty per cent, the Iran war grinds on, and gas prices have been rising, as has inflation. More than that, there is a general sense of anger and suspicion about entrenched élites. A comment that Trump made last week about how much he considered Americans' financial situation when negotiating with Iran—"not even a little bit"—encapsulates how recklessly he is willing to alienate even his own supporters.

Disillusionment with Trump, however, does not necessarily translate into enthusiasm for any given Democrat. The Party's approval ratings are at forty per cent, about the same as the G.O.P.'s. Riding a wave of outrage in an era of MAGA-inflected conspiratorial thinking is a different task than, say, hoping that a blue drift in Texas could get Beto O'Rourke elected. (That said, Texas has a Senate race that Democrats think they can win this year; a runoff on May 26th will determine whether James Talarico, a progressive, will face the incumbent, John Cornyn, or Texas's scandal-ridden attorney general, Ken Paxton.) Democrats are also fighting among themselves. In Michigan, a primary for the Senate seat left open by the retirement of Gary Peters, a Democrat, has been marked by

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

disputes related to Gaza and economic populism. Opportunities can quickly give way to divisions.

The G.O.P.'s current margin in the House is so slim that Democrats may not need to go deep in red states to overcome it, even factoring in the current redistricting battles. In the Senate, though, Republicans will have to lose a net four seats for the Democrats to gain control, and so they need a plan. Assuming that the Democratic senator Jon Ossoff can hang on in Georgia, the main targets are Alaska, Iowa, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas, all of which Trump won, plus purple Maine. Democrats can at least make a case for any of them, based on the polling.

In Iowa, for example, Wahls and Turek are vying for a seat that is open because the Republican senator Joni Ernst is retiring; the likely G.O.P. nominee, Representative Ashley Hinson, has based her campaign on unalloyed support for Trump. Wahls has been an object of liberal excitement since 2011, when, at the age of nineteen, he delivered a viral speech at the Iowa statehouse about marriage equality and his two mothers. He has since been elected to the state Senate twice, in one of Iowa's bluest areas; both times, no Republican bothered to run. Senator Elizabeth Warren has endorsed him. Turek, his opponent, describes himself as a "prairie populist" but comes across as more tempered than Wahls. He was born with spina bifida, after his father was exposed to Agent Orange while serving in Vietnam, and he has won two wheelchair-basketball gold medals for the United States in the Paralympics. (His campaign logo includes a

medal.) Pete Buttigieg, the former Transportation Secretary, has endorsed Turek.

During the primary debate, Turek emphasized that he had won his seat in a district that Trump carried, and was thus "battle-tested." Wahls took the position that voters are so unhappy about the "corruption of our politics" that traditional calculations hardly matter—a stance that other Democrats may find tempting, but risks leaving more moderate voters behind. (In Maine, Graham Platner, a polarizing populist with a complex backstory, who will face the Republican Susan Collins, represents a similar gamble.) "I'm the only person on the stage here tonight who has said that I will not vote for Senator Schumer for leader," Wahls said, and attacked Turek for not joining him in that pledge. (Turek was noncommittal.) Frustration with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, which many Democrats share, reflects a sense that the Party is factious and indecisive—even as its electoral prospects are finally improving.

In other states, the Democrats have opted for more familiar names: former Governor Roy Cooper and former Representative Mary Peltola are well positioned in North Carolina and Alaska, respectively. In Ohio, former Senator Sherrod Brown, who has a long record as a populist, easily won his primary. He is seventy-three, and lost his last Senate bid, in 2024, as Ohio turned a deeper shade of red. But the *Cook Political Report* now calls the race a tossup.

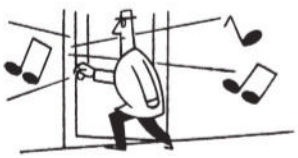
Still, this may be an election where some of the certainties of the two-party system are rewritten. In Nebraska, Dan Osborn, a veteran and a former union leader at a Kellogg's plant, is running as an independent. Like Turek, he identifies as a prairie populist, though he has said that he will not caucus with either party, because both are caught in a "doom loop." Nonetheless, a local Democrat, Cindy Burbank, won last week's primary on the strength of an unusual campaign promise: to drop out and give Osborn a clear field in the general-election race against the incumbent Republican, Pete Ricketts, who is the son of the billionaire behind TD Ameritrade and is endorsed by Trump. Local Democrats were credited for their discipline, which might help to secure a majority.

Yet there is something unsettling about the fact that it might take such an act of self-erasure for the Party to win the Senate. The country's discontent gives Democrats an opening to change the terrible trajectory of Trump's Presidency. Control of the Senate, for example, would allow them to block an extreme Supreme Court nominee. Now might not seem the moment for Democrats to be quarrelling, but many of them believe that the only way to build the Party back up is to remake it. November will tell.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

WORKOUT DEPT.

FLEXIBLE



Maddie Eisler, a Manhattan Pilates instructor, was trying to explain why Shaggy got the shakes. She was guiding the fifty-seven-year-old reggae star through his first lesson at Space Pilates in the Flatiron district. "It's the small-twitch muscle fibres, which support the larger muscles, that are activated," she said. Shaggy was holding a squishy ball between his knees and pumping his arms up and down, making his whole body quiver. "I've been shaking my whole life," he said.

Shaggy, who was born Orville Richard Burrell, in Kingston, Jamaica, was in town in connection with his new album, "Lottery." He'd booked a private Pilates session before heading home to Miami. "My daughter goes to Pilates as part of her routine," he said. "I always thought it was some bougie shit, but I've been curious about it."

Before the session, Shaggy hung his Jacquemus fleece jacket on a rack and handed a shimmering watch, a diamond necklace, and a pearl chain to a member of his entourage. Eisler, who was wearing track pants, held out a pair of grippy socks, saying, "These are important, because they help you hold on." Shaggy pulled them on over the pair he was wearing. Eisler showed him how to position himself on a metal-and-wood contraption called a reformer. "Start with your feet on the bar," she said. "What you're resting on is the carriage." She handed him two leather handles.

The reformer is like a Rube Goldberg machine for fitness. Shaggy moved his limbs as instructed, and the carriage slid back and forth. His eyes widened. "You're touching muscles you didn't know you had," he said. "Jesus Christ!"

"A couple more," Eisler said.

"I thought we were done," he said.

"This is the Teaser, the most famous Pilates shape," she explained, showing Shaggy how to extend his legs to make a "V" with his torso. "That's really impressive," she said.

"Did you hear that, guys?" Shaggy asked his people. "I got an 'impressive.'" They were looking at their phones, checking his itinerary. Shaggy was preparing to head to Brisbane to appear in Sting's musical, "The Last Ship." He acknowledged that this was a new form of performance for him. "It's something crazy about being at the edge and pushed off in the water," he said. "And they say, 'Swim or drown.' I'm a survivor."

Shaggy has won two Grammies, for Best Reggae Album, the first one with "Boombastic," in 1996. He picked up his second, for a collaboration with Sting called "44/876," in 2019. He is a self-described chameleon, who changes his voice to blend into different environments. "I used to get criticized years ago," he said. "All the Jamaicans were calling me 'sellout.' They were, like, 'He speaks with an American accent.'" He recalled

Shaggy

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

an experience he had when he was new to the industry. He noticed that, during record-label meetings, the executives patronized his manager, who had a strong Caribbean accent. "They thought he was illiterate based on how he spoke," Shaggy said. In the Pilates studio, he said something in a thick Jamaican dialect, which was hard to parse. "It just depends on who I'm talking to," he said. "There's three types of patois in Jamaica. There is uptown patois, garrison patois, and there's country patois."

He'd made a point of featuring a number of Jamaican artists on "Lottery." For example, one named Aidonia, Shaggy said, "is just giving it that little street edge that I frankly can't connect with, because I haven't been in the streets for a long time." He added, "But I'm from it."

The album's closing song, a roots-rock reggae number with Sting on the chorus, represents the thirty-year evolution of Shaggy's career. "I always thought that I've been an underdog," he said. "How did a guy like me get played on so many radio formats?"

In any case, he knew that he'd arrived. As the session wound down, he wondered whether he ought to buy reformers to put in his houses in Miami and Kingston. He looked up at Eisler and asked, "Hey, you definitely need an instructor with one of these, right?" Right. Soon, it was time for the cooldown. He lay back on the carriage with his heels on the foot bar, and then he alternated bending his knees. "We call this Pilates running," Eisler said. "Now lift your legs and start to levitate."

—Natalie Meade

"Your mother left one of you the storage unit. And, the other one, the key."

• •

DEPT. OF MEDIOCRITY
SECOND FIDDLE

Poor Antonio Salieri. In other circumstances, history (or, at least, classical-music buffs) would remember him as Kapellmeister to the Emperor of Austria, a skilled court composer of some forty operas, and a mentor to Beethoven and Schubert. But he had the rotten luck of being eclipsed by a younger rival, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Despite evidence that the two got along well enough, rumors spread in Vienna after Mozart's death that Salieri had poisoned him. In 1979, the myth of Salieri's malicious envy inspired Peter Shaffer's play "Amadeus," which cast Mozart as a spunky wunderkind and Salieri as the scheming "patron saint of mediocrities."

Salieri's bad rap was solidified in 1984, when Miloš Forman turned "Amadeus" into an Oscar-winning film. Now comes a sumptuous five-part miniseries, which aired on British television last year and has just come to Starz, with Will Sharpe as Mozart and Paul Bettany as Salieri. The other day, both actors found themselves at the Morgan Library & Museum, in midtown. Sharpe, known for his roles on "The White Lotus" and "Too Much," had his hair gelled into a rock-star shag; Bettany, a fixture of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, wore hip glasses and a leather jacket. Their stop in New York happened to coincide with the Morgan's exhibition "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Treasures from the Mozarteum Foundation of Salzburg." Many of the artifacts were visiting the United States for the first time.

The actors were greeted by the exhibition's curator, Robin McClellan, who led them to Mozart's childhood violin, encased in glass. "We had a nine-year-old prodigy from Juilliard come and play it," he said. Across the hall was Mozart's clavichord, on which he wrote the Requiem. "He was composing on his deathbed," McClellan continued.

"Is it true that he swelled up like a balloon at the end of his life?" Sharpe asked.

"*That's* your favorite bit?" Bettany teased. Both actors mimed inflating like balloons.

Past the violin was an oil painting of the child Mozart entertaining nobles at the Maison du Temple. "Is this really annoying, that there isn't a Salieri exhibition?" Sharpe ribbed his co-star.

"I'm hoping to undermine this one," Bettany retorted.

They paused by a portrait of young Mozart at his keyboard, in a bright-red jacket. ("He loved fancy clothing," McClellan said.) In "Amadeus," Sharpe wears lots of red, while Bettany wears cooler colors. "There was one red look I liked in particular," Sharpe recalled. "At one point, I was, like, 'Can I just wear this all the time, for simplicity?' "

"Laziest actor you've ever met," Bettany deadpanned. Nearby were manuscripts of nine symphonies that Mozart wrote within two years, in his late teens. Bettany snapped photos. "My son's a composer"—Stellan Connelly Bettany, his older child with the actress Jennifer Connelly, is at the Royal College of Music—"and he's only written one symphony this year!"

They passed the clavichord, which still had ink stains on it, presumably from

late nights at the keyboard. Neither actor has had much musical experience. Bettany, as a London teen, used to busk by Westminster Pier. "You would get very adept at profiling people," he said. "*Oh, they're French. I'm going to play the Cure!* Because the Cure was huge in France."

Sharpe, also a native Londoner, was in a garage band with his brother, originally called Phosphene—the term for sparks of light you see with your eyes closed. ("Awful name," Sharpe admitted.) For "Amadeus," the actors practiced piano for months before filming, in Hungary. "Then, when we got to Budapest, we were playing on fortepianos, where the keys are quite a bit smaller, so suddenly it got doubly difficult again," Sharpe recalled, eying Mozart's keys.

Viewing Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21, from 1785, McClellan said, "I'll just mention my quibble with your series, for what it's worth: the manuscripts didn't look like the actual manuscripts." He turned sheepish. "I'm not trying to be a jerk."

"To clarify, Will and I didn't make them," Bettany said.

They reached a tiny, oval-shaped engraving of Salieri. Finally! "So, you couldn't find a smaller one?" Bettany said. He was feeling defensive. Salieri's own Requiem was "pretty good," he noted. "He was also a mensch. He really supported young musicians."

"I confess to a slight Mozart bias in the choice of materials in the show," McClellan offered. Past Mozart's wallet and walking stick, they arrived at a display addressing the Salieri myth. There was an illustrated edition of Alexander Pushkin's 1830 play "Mozart and Salieri"; the score of a Rimsky-Korsakov opera based on it; and an "Amadeus" poster signed by F. Murray Abraham, who played Salieri in the film. "We had him here for a private event, and he made sure to let everyone know that he did not kill Mozart," McClellan said.

Will Sharpe and Paul Bettany

"What makes Salieri a great antagonist is that he's eminently relatable," Bettany said. "There are few geniuses, but there's a lot of mediocrity around. Every office in the world has a Salieri."

"We should have an exhibition celebrating mediocrity in all its guises," McClellan proposed.

Bettany grinned: "I'll host it!"

—*Michael Schulman*

FOLLOW THE RULES DEPT.
HALL OF SHAME

Frank Murray was the C.E.O. of an air-conditioning concern, as well as a dabbler in map collecting, when, in 1999, a Sotheby's representative called and asked if he'd like to bid on anything in its upcoming auction. Murray didn't have the catalogue at hand but vaguely recalled that he'd been interested in item No. 323. "The baseball docs?" the rep asked. This didn't ring a bell—but then, Murray loved baseball. His relatives had been minority owners of the New York Giants, before the move to San Francisco. Sure, he said, put him down for a bid. Soon, his wallet was about twelve thousand dollars lighter, and Murray was in possession of what would come to be seen as baseball's Dead Sea Scrolls: handwritten revisions to the rules that first codified the sport as we more or less know it.

Not that he had any inkling at the time. Murray showed the brittle papers, which seemed to enumerate the "Laws of Base Ball," as recognized by New York's Knickerbocker Base Ball Club, to some antiquarians, who were unimpressed. "You got snookered," he was told. Murray's "Laws" were scrawled in 1857; the Knickerbocker was established in 1845. Into a drawer they went, and remained, until 2015. In a fit of spring cleaning, he finally noticed them again. A friend recommended that he consult John Thorn, Major League Baseball's official historian. "Oh, shit!" Thorn said.

Murray was recounting all this the other day at the Round Hill Club, in Greenwich, as he prepared for a trip to Cooperstown, where the documents will go on public display later this week. He is no longer their owner—he sold them in 2016, for more than three million dollars, a profit of some twenty-five thousand per cent—but he retains a personal interest, verging on a crusade, in the cause of promoting their significance. He showed a slide to his guests with an image of the Hall of Fame plaque honoring Alexander Cartwright, a Knickerbocker founder, as the "Father of Modern Base Ball" and crediting Cartwright with establishing crucial standards that remain in place today: nine innings, nine fielders, ninety feet between bases. "None of that's true," Murray said.

Mid-nineteenth-century baseball, he went on, was an amalgam of several games, among them cricket, rounders, and stoolball, an ancient pastime of British milkmaids. In Massachusetts, the batter stood between first base and home, and there were two catchers, one behind the other. The Knickerbockers, using Hoboken's Elysian Fields, typically played games to twenty-one, innings be damned. The bats varied in shape. They pitched underhand. "It was basically 'Don't be late,'" Murray said of the rules, such as they were. " 'We'll pick captains and they'll divide up the people. If you don't have enough, you can just pull people from the audience.' It wasn't a team. It was a club. And that was Alexander Cartwright: he was a club guy."

Some latter-day club guys went on munching Cracker Jacks and sipping I.P.A.s, unoffended, as Murray explained that Cartwright moved to California in 1849, chasing gold. "And then he failed out there and decided to move to Hawaii," Murray said. "He had nothing to do with the modern rules."

A man seated by the bar raised his hand. "So does Cartwright's plaque get an asterisk—like Alex Rodriguez, who should be in the Hall of Fame?"

"No, they need to trash that plaque," Murray said. "I really need to shame them into doing the right thing. They won't do it unless they're embarrassed."

The right thing, in Murray's estima-

tion, would be inducting the "different hand," as Sotheby's put it, that drafted the "Laws." After a careful penmanship analysis, validated by an expert, Murray had identified that hand as belonging to a Knickerbocker named Daniel Lucius Adams, a.k.a. Doc, the inventor of the shortstop position. As it happened, Thorn had long been making a case for Doc Adams as an unheralded pioneer. "Adams was clearly the one who developed the modern game of baseball," Murray said, adding that he'd been visited in his office by Adams's great-granddaughter Marjorie, who wept upon seeing the documents. (She died in 2021, but her nephew Nate Downey will be in Cooperstown, pressing the family's case.)

One man's modernity is, of course, another's degradation, and, as dinner was served, the conversation turned to such recent innovations as ghost runners, pitch clocks, and robot umps, none of them to Murray's liking. "TV forced them to speed up the game," he said with a sigh. "Because they found that the audiences would drop off very quickly with baseball."

"Do you know about Banana Ball?" a woman asked. She was referring to the Savannah Bananas, a Harlem Globetrotters-like outfit prioritizing acrobatics and entertainment over tradition.

"It's goofy ball," Murray said, and paused. "What the heck. Anything that's fun, I'm all for it."

—Ben McGrath

DEPARTURE LOUNGE
ON YOUR MARK

By now, half the world has registered an opinion on Kylie Jenner's nipple-forward Venus de Milo homage or the clipper ship perched on Madonna's head at this year's Met Gala. But few have seen the T.S.A.-level machinations behind the deployment of the overdressed guests from their staging areas to the museum's steps. The Mark Hotel, on Seventy-seventh Street and Madison, was a center of the hubbub, with a hundred and fifty-three rooms and suites booked out to various glam squads.

"Everything is timed!" Maria Wittorp, the hotel's head concierge, said, with the haste of an auctioneer, standing in the lobby, as blazer-wearing staffers whipped by. "We only have someone come down when their van is ready." Wittorp, who has worked the event six times, channelled the gala's dress code ("Fashion Is Art") by wearing a pair of bug-eye glasses. "They're Alain Mikli," she said. "Elton John has worn his designs." She raced off, gripping an orange clipboard.

The room buzzed.

"My radio is out. Wait, I think it's my earpiece."

"Murray, you're breaking up."

"This is my first one," a Mark sales executive named Cher Liu said. She thumbed through a thick packet with the names and photos of every guest, as if cramming for a final. A woman tried to come down the central stairs. "You're going to have to wait!" a manager told her. "No one through the lobby!" Another woman, in a short skirt and leopard-print heels, slipped by him, holding an empty Martini glass.

Wittorp scurried over to a curtained side entrance. The drapes opened, and in walked Anna Wintour in turquoise-feathered Chanel. She beelined out the street door, where her van awaited. Departures had officially started.

The lobby's elevator doors opened and a woman with a giant white saucer on her head and a matching floor-length coat, embellished with red splotches that evoked stab wounds, slowly exited. It was Naomi Osaka. "You guys gotta move back," a security guard shouted to a pack of photographers in the room. Osaka stood by a reception desk, apparently early for her driver.

The elevator opened again. Liu gripped her packet. Shuffling noises were heard, and then a pointy white gown popped into the lobby. Its wearer was the tech entrepreneur Yu-Chi Lyra Kuo (trickle-down evidence of the gala's unspoken Silicon Valley subtheme). Kuo showed off her ice-queen garb and noticed a friend in the corner. "Sam! Hi!" she said. The singer Sam Smith, in a black cape dress, stood still as an aide held a portable fan up to their head, which supported a large black feather.

Sprinting through the scene, someone yelled, "I need the lady! I need the lady!"

Elevator doors opened: Venus Williams, in a crystal collar necklace that Ruth Bader Ginsburg might have enjoyed. She dragged a long black train across the marble lobby. ("Our floors are top-tier clean," a concierge with braces on her teeth said.)

"Do you guys have truffle fries?"

"Could you give me two more keys to our room, under 'Swarovski'?"

The K-pop star Ahn Hyo-seop waited by the desk, a helper in a surgical mask prodding at his face with a makeup brush. A service door swung open behind Ahn, almost hitting his striped Valentino jacket. The helper jumped to action: now the hair above Ahn's right ear was out of place.

"Have you seen a tripod? It was leaning right there."

"What's the Wi-Fi password?"

Doors opened: Alexander Wang. "Should I go first?" he asked. "No," someone on his team said. He ended up waiting for the Russian model Irina Shayk, who soon appeared holding a quivering small dog.

Elevator opened: Maude Apatow stepped out. "It's the girl from 'Euphoria'!" a staffer said, embarrassed that he didn't know her name. "I had a list for this!" Next came Chase Infiniti, wearing a colorful trompe-l'oeil Thom Browne dress (another Venus de Milo tribute). Liu earnestly flipped through her packet.

The queue for vans was growing. Someone spurted hair spray on Tate McRae's long locks. The actress Tessa Thompson explained her blue fingers: "It's latex!" Joe Burrow, an N.F.L. quarterback, stood by the stairs in a navy Bode suit with bedazzled lapels, kicking his feet from side to side. "Can I have my phone real quick?" he politely asked an aide.

Finally, a lull. It was time for the last departure: Cardi B, who was behind schedule. "We should all clap for her," a staffer said.

The elevator floor lights clicked downward. 5. 4. 3. 2. The doors opened. The car was empty. Groans all around. Photographers put down their cameras.

The lights blinked again. 4. 3. 2. The big reveal: a cluster of black umbrellas, which quickly opened.

"That's seven years of bad luck!" a disappointed spectator yelled. Shielded by her team, Cardi B shuffled out to the street, a blob of black nylon. The umbrellas were folded, and the van sped off to drive the four blocks to the Met.

—Jane Bua

LETTER FROM TEXAS

IN PLAIN SIGHT

A girl spent sixteen years in forced servitude. How much did her neighbors know?

BY YUDHIJIT BHATTACHARJEE

Djena was barely ten years old when she flew alone from her home country of Guinea to Dallas, Texas, in January of 2000. On the plane, a flight attendant gave her cookies and a toy. After she landed, airline staff escorted her out to meet Mohamed Toure and Denise Cros-Toure, a Guinean couple, who, along with their children, were waiting for her. Mohamed explained that Djena was a family member from Guinea whom they were taking in. Djena believed him. Then the Toures drove her back to their house, in Southlake, a suburb near Dallas. It was a two-story brick mansion with a large front lawn and a back-yard pool; the neighborhood was dotted with oak trees, and the nighttime stillness was broken only by the occasional thud of acorns falling on rooftops.

Djena lived with the Toures for sixteen years. During this time, her belief that they considered her one of their own gradually eroded, like a riverbank worn down by steady currents. There were five other kids in the house: Mohamed and Denise's three sons and two daughters. They all went to school. Djena did not. She worked from morning to night, cleaning and cooking meals for the family even though she wasn't allowed to eat alongside them, except on special occasions. Denise and Mohamed bought new clothing for the other children, whereas Djena was given ratty hand-me-downs—even her bras were Denise's castoffs. Everyone else in the house had their own bed. Djena slept on a mattress on the floor.

And then there were the beatings. When Djena neglected to do a chore, Denise would use a belt or a power cord to whip Djena, leaving her covered in bruises. Once, Denise yanked an earring out of Djena's left ear, tearing the lobe. As Djena got older, she made attempts to resist the beatings—sometimes grabbing the belt or the cord from Denise's hands—and so Denise enlisted Mohamed's help. He once pinned Djena down on the floor and sat on her back, allowing Denise to hit her unhindered.

It wasn't until Djena was in her early twenties that she finally confronted the truth: she had never been a part of the family. She was an unpaid servant in the Toures' home. Denise would tell her as much, yelling at Djena for the slightest infraction, such as leaving out a spoon while tidying up the kitchen. "You're my slave," Denise said. "You are here to do a job!"

Djena had no choice in coming to America, or in any of the life decisions that preceded it. In Guinea, it is common for wealthy families to take in young girls from poor homes as live-in servants. Djena grew up in Mandiana, a rural town in the eastern part of the country. Djena's parents were farmers. The family lived in a windowless hut with a thatched roof. Djena's father, who had the title of chief hunter in the town, was a loyal aide to Marcel Cros, a senior official in the government of Ahmed Sékou Touré, Guinea's first President. He helped Cros with political campaigns in the village, and he travelled to Conakry, the country's capital, whenever Cros needed him.

When Djena was roughly eight years old, her father drove her from their town to the Cros family residence in Conakry, more than four hundred miles away. Her mother, who was unwilling to give Djena up, had hidden her for three days to try and stop her from being taken. Djena remembered her mother crying as her father drove her away. When they arrived at the house in Conakry, Djena learned that her new job was to care for one of the Croses' daughters, who was

An estimated seventy-seven per cent of trafficking victims are coerced into labor.

ILLUSTRATION BY TRACY CHAHWAN

blind. Djena shared a room with two older girls who also worked for the family: one did laundry, and the other helped with chores around the house.

Not long after, Marcel Cros told Djena's father that he was sending Djena to the United States to live with his older daughter, Denise, and her husband, Mohamed, who was Ahmed Sékou Touré's son. Djena's father was in no position to challenge this decision: more than a decade later, he would explain that, by giving his daughter to Cros, he had given Cros the right to decide her future. Djena was too young to understand that the ownership of her life was being transferred. Cros set up an appointment for her to get a temporary U.S. visa; all that Djena would remember from the process was that her eyes hurt from the flash of the camera when she was photographed.

There's a term for what was happening to Djena, even if no one in her life used it. Human trafficking, sometimes referred to as modern-day slavery, is the exploitation of people for commercial sex or labor. There is no reliable estimate of how many people are trafficked into the U.S. every year, since the crime is largely invisible, but the National Human Trafficking Hotline has nonetheless identified more than two hundred and eighteen thousand victims since its inception, in 2007. Many trafficked individuals are smuggled into the country illegally, and yet there are others who arrive, as Djena did, with a visa and a name to ask for at the airport.

The Jeffrey Epstein case and films such as "Sound of Freedom"—the 2023 movie about a mission to rescue children from sex traffickers in Colombia—have brought increased attention to the crime of sex trafficking. But, according to the Department of Homeland Security, the majority of trafficking victims—seventy-seven per cent—are forced into labor. In the U.S., most of these labor-trafficking victims are immigrants working in a commercial enterprise, such as a hotel or a beauty salon, for little to no pay. In 2024, the owner of Stash's Pizza, a restaurant chain in Massachusetts, was convicted of forced labor after an investigation found that he had kept his undocumented workers on the job for fourteen or more hours a day, and threatened to call immigration authorities if they dared to leave. Last year, federal and local agents raided Wellmade Industries, a flooring manufacturer in Georgia, and found dozens of Chinese nationals whom prosecutors say had been recruited through a temporary-visa program, after being promised high wages, and whose travel documents had been confiscated upon arrival. Other labor-trafficking victims have been forced into domestic servitude: often as maids or nannies, in private homes. These cases can be the hardest to detect.

Initially, when Djena got to the States, she was tasked with taking care of Denise and Mohamed's youngest child, Timou, who was not yet two years old. Djena bottle-fed him and kept him entertained. She also helped in the kitchen, cleaning up after Denise had finished making dinner. Over the years, her duties expanded. She would wake up at 6:30 A.M., make the other children's beds and tidy up their rooms, and then spend the rest of the day doing housework. Denise would send her to the grocery store, and Djena, who couldn't read, learned to shop by the look of things—the symbol on a label, the color of a package. Years later, a neighbor would recall being surprised by what seemed like an incongruous sight in an affluent suburban neighborhood like Southlake: a little girl dressed in a head scarf and faded, ill-fitting clothes, trudging down the street carrying multiple bags of groceries, her eyes cast downward.

Denise and Mohamed told friends that Djena was their niece—rescued, they said, from poverty in Guinea—and they were gentle with her in front of visitors. In private, they were cruel. Once, Denise took Djena into the back yard and hosed her down with cold water, as one might a dog, saying that she smelled bad. There were subtler humiliations, too. When Djena first got her period, Denise scolded her for using a sanitary pad that she'd found in the house without first asking permission.

In a family where hugs and other displays of physical affection were common, Djena was hardly ever touched, unless she was being disciplined. The kids would tell her that she wasn't pretty and that she would never find a boyfriend. The only warmth she received came from Rema, the youngest Toure daughter—born after Djena arrived—who once gave her a birthday card. The Toures' eldest daughter, Saran, who was a few years younger than Djena, was generally hostile. For a while, Djena kept a bin with her clothes in Saran's closet, until Saran threw it into the hallway, angry at Djena for forgetting to close her bedroom door. Djena moved the bin to the garage.

Sometimes Denise would punish Djena by banishing her from the house, and Djena would seek refuge at a local park, where there was a covered bench that she could sleep on if needed. In November, 2011, after Denise got upset that Djena wasn't doing enough to help the kids get ready for school, Djena slept in the park for a week. The nights grew so chilly that Djena would go to a public rest room and use a hand dryer to warm herself. When the Toures found her—Timou went on a run and spotted Djena at the park—she was reluctant to return. "I told them I wasn't going back," Djena later recalled, though, ultimately, she relented. It was too cold to continue sleeping outside, and there was nowhere else for her to go.

Although Djena wasn't literally trapped in the Toures' home, she was trapped by her circumstances. Djena came to the U.S. knowing no English; she had grown up speaking Malinke and French. Over time, she learned to speak English by listening—to the Toures, who switched between French and English at home, and to the television, which she watched after finishing her housework. She taught herself to read using a copy of "Hooked on Phonics" that Denise had been using with the younger children, and which Djena kept hidden under Rema's bed. At one point, Denise found the book and forced Djena to return it, but Djena got hold of it again, and used it to make flash cards. She taught herself to ride a bike, too, even though she didn't have one. At night, after taking out the trash, she would grab one of the Toure kids' bikes and take it for a quick ride.

For years, Djena had almost no contact with anyone outside the Toure household. That changed in the mid- to late two-thousands, when she began walking Timou and Rema to school and encountering other children and their parents. While accompanying the Toure kids to a local track-and-field program, she met Anthony Meehan, one of Saran's classmates. Meehan, a gay Black fourteen-year-old, was accustomed to isolation; from

Djena's bearing, he sensed something similar in her experience. "Anyone who's by themselves, I like to talk to them, because I was bullied in high school," he explained later. He saw Djena standing alone and introduced himself. She was guarded at first, but, as the program went on, they eventually became friends.

Meehan's family soon moved to the Toures' neighborhood, and the friendship deepened. Djena was allowed to go out in the neighborhood, and she and Meehan often went running together. Meehan would sometimes help Djena with her chores and her yard work. Late at night, after Djena put Rema to bed, she and Meehan would watch "Keeping Up with the Kardashians" and other reality-television shows.

Spending time in the Toures' house, Meehan became aware of how poorly Djena was treated. He noticed that her mattress didn't even have a sheet on it. Her shower caddy sat beside her bed instead of in the bathroom. An aspiring fashion designer, Meehan paid special attention to clothing and appearance, and he found it jarring that Djena was often dressed in clothes handed down from the boys. "Every single week, Saran would come to school with a different hair style," he later said. "I would see Rema running with a new braid in, something new, extensions, whatever." Djena's hair was always unkempt. The only hair care she had ever had, it turned out, was in the form of a punishment, years earlier, when Mohamed had used electric clippers to shave Djena's head.

"Why are you working for free?" Meehan asked her one day. He said that he got paid for doing chores at home. Rema did, too. "You are doing everything. You're not getting paid. Why is that?"

"I don't know," Djena said. "Isn't this normal to live my life like this?"

Meehan told her that it wasn't. He also told her something Denise had said to his mother—that Djena would have been raped and murdered had she stayed in Guinea. When Djena heard this, she broke down crying. Seeing her life through Meehan's eyes awakened something in her. She told Meehan that she wanted to run away.

This didn't seem like a good idea, though, because Djena didn't have legal status in the United States. Her visa had expired within months of her arrival, and she didn't have access to her passport, which was in Mohamed and Denise's possession. "If you run away, you will get picked up by the cops and arrested in a heartbeat," Meehan told her. He promised to help her once he became a successful fashion designer. "When I have money to do what I need to do and get a lawyer and do all of that, I will get you out of this situation," he said.

Djena had also grown close to a neighbor named Mary Thomson, whose children attended Rema's school. They fell into the habit of talking on their walks to school and back—Djena with Rema, Thomson with her kids. Thomson sometimes paid Djena to babysit, which Denise consented to; with the money she earned, Djena bought a Kindle and used it to set up accounts on Facebook and Instagram, where she would occasionally post selfies or pictures of meals she'd made. When Thomson went through a difficult divorce, in 2014, Djena would often check in on her, showing up at her door with food. The kindness flowed the other way, too: Thomson gave Djena her old athletic clothes and Nike shoes. "This home is the only light for me," Djena told Thomson, during one of her visits.

The evening when Djena reached her breaking point began like so many others. One day in June, 2016, Denise returned from a hair appointment to discover that Djena had not yet gotten dinner ready. She had Mohamed call up to Djena, who was upstairs folding laundry in Rema's room. Djena came out of the room and insisted that she had, in fact, pulled out some items for dinner. The sound of her raised voice—defiant, unwilling—caught Denise's attention.

Denise ascended the stairs, yelling at Djena all the way up, then grabbed Djena by the collar and began hitting her. Djena broke free and retreated into Rema's room. She told Rema that she was tired of being abused and that she was leaving. Denise attacked Djena again, beating her until Mohamed and their eldest son, Ahmed, pulled her off. Denise went downstairs and announced that she was going to call the police. When Ahmed suggested that this was a bad idea, since Denise was the one who had been violent, Denise began cursing at him.

Djena got her backpack and climbed out through the bathroom window, on the second floor. She slept at the park for two nights. On the third day, she reached out to Thomson, first through the Facebook Messenger app on her Kindle, using the free Wi-Fi at a Starbucks, and then by calling Thomson from a phone that she'd borrowed from someone at a local middle school. Thomson didn't pick up, so Djena left a voice mail. "Hey, Mary, it's Djena," she said, explaining that she was at the middle school. "Can you come pick me up here?"

Djena stayed at Thomson's house for a week. Then she sought out another neighbor, Mahshid Golbarani, who took her in for several more days. Golbarani, who was friends with Denise, was shocked to hear Djena's account of her servitude in the Toure household. Denise had told Golbarani, years earlier, that Djena was her niece whose parents were dead, and that she had finished high school back in Guinea. Golbarani asked Djena if she wanted to file a report to the police, or contact a nonprofit. But Djena was reluctant to escalate the situation, and she said that Golbarani should just bring her back to the Toures' house.

Golbarani did drive Djena back—and confronted Denise and Mohamed when she got there. Denise was indignant. The idea that she had hit Djena was absurd, Denise said; after all, Djena was bigger and stronger than she was. Djena stood silently nearby while Denise spoke, suppressing the urge to contradict Denise's lies.

After Golbarani left, Denise turned on Djena. Sensing what was coming, Djena reached into her pocket for an iPod Touch that she had bought from Timou for twenty dollars. She switched on the Record function.

Denise told her to get out of the house. Djena said that she wanted to leave, but that Denise would have to send her back to Guinea.

"Send you back? We're not sending you back," Denise said. She launched into a tirade, alternating between English and French. "Go live in the park! If you get killed, I don't give a shit, I don't know you. If you get raped, I don't care."

She insisted that the family didn't owe Djena anything, and that she was free to leave if she wanted. "It would cost me two thousand dollars to get you on an airplane, it would cost me more than a thousand to get you a passport," Denise said. "You think I'm going to waste my money on you? I'll do it when I feel like it, when I have the money."

Djena's life in the Toure residence became more difficult than it had ever been. Denise banned her from leaving the house, and yelled at her constantly, reminding her that she was a servant. "You need to be working in this house," Denise told her, in another rant that Djena recorded with the iPod. "You came for that. I'm going to put you on the plane. Before you do that, my house needs to be cleaned. You start. You're not going anywhere."

The daily abuse convinced Djena that she had no choice but to escape, this time for good. She didn't want to burden Thomson again, since she was still dealing with her divorce. She thought instead of Arneta Shams, a real-estate agent who had once been friends with Denise, until the two had a falling out after Denise failed to repay a loan. On one of Shams's last visits to the Toures' house, as her friendship with Denise was souring, Shams had given Djena her number, telling her to call if she ever needed anything.

Djena again reached out over Facebook Messenger. "Sorry Miss shams for bothering you," she wrote. "I need to Talk to you can I meet you tomorrow Morning round 7:00 or 8:00 please let me no think you."

"Hi Honey," Shams replied. "You are not bothering me." That afternoon, Djena sneaked out of the house to meet Shams at the neighborhood Starbucks.

Djena explained how intolerable her situation had become: she had been feeling so hopeless that she would go to bed at night and pray that she wouldn't wake up in the morning.

Shams called a former neighbor, Bridget Ajufo, who had been friends with the Toures before she moved to the Woodlands, a suburb of Houston. Ajufo was stunned to hear Djena say that she would kill herself if she couldn't find a way out. Shams, Ajufo, and Ajufo's twenty-six-year-old daughter, Christine, came up with a plan to rescue Djena: Christine would drive up from Austin, where she lived, and take Djena to Ajufo's house in the Woodlands, where they would figure out their next move. Djena went back to the Toures' house and waited.

The opportunity for Djena's escape came less than a week later, when Denise and Mohamed left town to drop Timou off at college, in Oklahoma. Even though Saran and Rema were at home, Djena was confident that she could make it out of the house with her belongings, including her passport—long expired, and hidden away in Denise's closet—and evidence that she had lived with the Toures as a servant, which Ajufo had advised her to bring. Christine drove to Southlake, and, when she arrived, Shams messaged Djena on Facebook. "There is a grey car waiting for you right now at the end of your street," Shams wrote. "Is it safe for you to leave?"

Djena slipped out through a side gate, carrying her backpack, her passport, and a duffelbag that Thomson had packed for her, filled with toiletries and a thousand dollars in cash.

Djena got in the car, and Christine began driving. The last message from Shams read: "So Happy for you as you Begin your New Life!"

Kate Langston, a supervisory special agent with the Diplomatic Security Service, the law-enforcement arm of the State Department, first heard about Djena in the fall of 2016, a few weeks after Djena fled the Toures' house. A nonprofit in Houston had alerted the D.S.S. to the possibility that Djena might be a victim of human trafficking. Langston, a slim, hazel-eyed woman brimming with nervous energy, had spent much of her time at the D.S.S. investigating international trafficking cases—a specialty for her agency, because the crime often involves visa fraud.

Langston is an animated speaker, rolling her eyes and using phrases like "What the fudge?" When we met, she recalled one of her first experiences interviewing a sex-trafficking victim, shortly after she arrived at the D.S.S., in 2011. The victim described, matter-of-factly, how her trafficker had cut up jalapeños and tossed them into a toilet before banging her head against the inside of the bowl and dunking it into the water. "I'm looking at her, and I realize she has these permanent scars," Langston told me. By the end of the interview, Langston had made it her mission to pursue traffickers: "I was, like, These are people I want to go after."

Human trafficking is more common in the developing world, but cases have been rising steadily in the United States. According to the most recent report on the subject from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than twenty-three hundred people were referred to

"Yeah, Crispin, you're out of the band—you show up with runs in your tights, you never have your own oxcart to get to the gig, and you screw up the bridge to 'Greensleeves' every single time!"

U.S. Attorneys for human-trafficking offenses in fiscal year 2023—a twenty-three-per-cent increase from 2013. The number of cases prosecuted rose by seventy-three per cent over the same period, from 1,030 to 1,782. Labor trafficking accounted for roughly forty-two per cent of all trafficking cases detected in 2022, although that figure doesn't accurately represent the prevalence of the crime, because it is often harder to detect than sex trafficking.

"Forms of exploitation occur way more than Americans want to acknowledge," Langston told me, adding that U.S. citizens often benefit from poorly compensated labor performed by men and women who have been trafficked. She gave the example of customers at a nail salon who might be paying fifty dollars for a manicure. "You walk around, and you actually start thinking, How much is all that product, how much is electricity, how much is the rent here?" Langston said. "You are not paying what you should be paying for the service that you're getting. And these women are not making what they should be making."

Cases of domestic servitude are even less conspicuous. Still, the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division has successfully prosecuted several such crimes; the perpetrators and the victims are often both immigrants. In 2022, an eighty-year-old Pakistani American woman, Zahida Aman, and two of her sons were found guilty of forcing a woman from Pakistan into domestic servitude at their home in Virginia. The victim, who came to the U.S. after marrying another one of Aman's sons, had her immigration documents taken away and endured beatings and verbal abuse for nearly fourteen years, before finally escaping, in 2016. In 2025, Bolaji and Isiaka Bolarinwa, a Nigerian couple, were convicted by a federal court in New Jersey of coercing two women they had brought to the U.S. into performing unpaid domestic work and child care for them.

Such cases often go undetected for cultural reasons. Most families on the Toures' street knew nothing about Guinea or Guinean culture, which made them less likely to scrutinize Djena's situation. "I think it made the thinly veiled cover stories that Denise and Mohamed told their friends and neighbors seem plausible," Zachary Bowen, one of Langston's colleagues at the D.S.S., told me. The neighbors, he added, probably thought, "Yeah, maybe she doesn't get treated that well, but she's their niece and they rescued her and it's still a better life than she would have back in Africa."

When Langston and Bowen interviewed Djena for the first time, they were struck by her innocence and lack of worldliness, which they found unusual for a woman in her mid-twenties. "Talking to her was like talking to an adolescent," Bowen told me. Djena had a plan for returning to Guinea that reflected her naïveté: she wanted to be dropped off in New Orleans because she'd heard that people there spoke French, as they did in Guinea, which had given her the notion that, once there, she would be able to find a "motor park"—a transport hub that is common in urban centers across Africa, where travellers can board long-distance buses. From there, she thought she could get a ride back to her village.

Still, Langston and Bowen were initially circumspect. They knew from experience that most labor-trafficking claims do not stand up to inquiry. Many turn out to be disputes over wages. In some instances, the allegations proved to be a ploy to obtain a special visa that the U.S. government grants to trafficking victims. But midway through their first interview with Djena the agents' skepticism began to wane. "She makes this comment that she never celebrated her birthday," Langston recounted. "That was the moment for both of us where we were, like, We actually have something here."

They still needed evidence, however, that Djena had indeed been trafficked for forced labor. Aside from the tourist visa she had entered with, there were no records attached to her name, nothing that could speak to the sixteen years

she had spent at the Toure residence—a whole life hidden inside a house. "How do you prove a case of a ghost?" Langston remembered thinking.

The investigators began by interviewing the neighbors. Several remembered Djena working in the Toures' yard or walking home with groceries. One neighbor said she'd been shocked when her children casually referred to Djena as a "slave," a term that some of the neighborhood kids apparently used for her. Another neighbor told Langston and Bowen that she and her daughter were watching a television show about trafficking one day when it occurred to them that Djena might be a trafficking victim. And then, the neighbor said, they'd talked themselves out of it. Their reasoning was that such a thing couldn't happen in that neighborhood.

"We were, like, Oh, my God, they freaking knew, and they never said anything," Langston told me. The agents were astonished by how obvious Djena's enslavement seemed to have been, and by the number of people who had failed to act. The one exception was a neighbor who had called the F.B.I. to report the possibility that Djena was an indentured servant. The tip was referred to Child Protective Services, but nothing came of it.

Given that the Toures had presented Djena to their neighbors and friends as a family member, the investigators began looking for evidence that Djena was treated profoundly differently from the other Toure children. Her lack of schooling was the most obvious place to start. The investigators learned that Ajufo had made an effort, around 2004, to enroll Djena in school, telling Denise that it was illegal not to educate a child. Denise had explained that Djena didn't have the necessary paperwork to enroll. Ajufo then found a school that would accept Djena without documentation. But Denise was still unwilling; she told Ajufo that she was focussed on other issues. One of her sons, Marcel, was failing in math, and had been dropped from his school's hockey team as a result. Ajufo and Denise struck a deal: Ajufo's eldest son would tutor Marcel in math for the next three months, and, if Marcel passed, Denise would send Djena to school. "Marcel passed the exam, got promoted to the next class, got back on the hockey team," Ajufo told me. "And I thought everything was a go." She even offered to drive Djena to school to make it easier for Denise. Then, the Friday before Djena was supposed to begin classes, Denise told Ajufo that she had changed her mind.

In the sixteen years that Djena lived in Southlake, Denise and Mohamed never took her to a doctor. Their own children got the usual medical care: vaccines, braces, glasses. Early in her time at the house, Djena fell in the kitchen and cracked a front tooth. She pulled the tooth out herself. Djena recalled seeing a dentist just once, when Mohamed took her to a dental school to deal with an abscessed tooth.

The agents set out to find a record of this visit. Djena didn't remember the school's name, but had a vague recollection of what it looked like, and so Langston and Bowen drove to dental colleges around Dallas until they found one that resembled her description: Texas A&M's College of Dentistry. When the administrative staff searched for Djena's name in their database, nothing came up. But they did find a patient visit from July, 2014, associated with Mohamed's cellphone number. Djena's name was misspelled, and the birth date didn't match the one on her passport. Mohamed had paid for the appointment in cash.

The dental record was the investigators' first positive proof that Djena was treated differently, which distinguished it from all the other evidence they had

gathered at that point—evidence that indicated an *absence* of something the Toure kids had. It also demonstrated an attempt by the Toures to conceal Djena's existence. "They drove her all the way across the Metroplex to a university clinic, misspelled her name, paid in cash," Bowen told me. "That's not an accident. That's them taking steps to hide what they were doing."

Early on, the investigators had asked the Southlake Police whether there were any records related to Djena but found nothing. Then, almost two years into the investigation, Langston stopped by the police station and was chatting with a different administrator, who asked Langston whether the initial search had also been conducted in an older database that not everybody on staff knew about. "I was, like, 'What?'" Langston recalled.

In the old system, the administrator found an incident report from April 30, 2002, filed by an officer named Darrell Mayhew, who had found Djena by herself in the park near the Toures' residence. This was one of the early instances in which Djena was kicked out of the house. She was around twelve years old at the time.

Mayhew, who now works as a police officer at a public school, told me that he had encountered a young girl whose hair was matted and whose clothes were dishevelled. She was visibly nervous. When he took her back to her house, the Toures seemed apprehensive rather than relieved, which Mayhew found odd. They said that they had legally adopted Djena from Guinea to save her from war and poverty. When Mayhew asked how long Djena had been missing, Mohamed appeared to be "evading the question," Mayhew wrote in his report. "The whole thing—from her demeanor and her reaction to me, to their response to my questions—everything was just off," Mayhew told me.

For Langston, this was irrefutable evidence that Denise and Mohamed had sought to hide Djena's status by falsely claiming that she was adopted. Langston arranged a meeting with Mayhew at a Chili's to discuss the report. "He actually got teary-eyed," Langston told me. "And he was, like, I knew something was wrong. I should have done something. I should have done more." Mayhew told me that he was still haunted by guilt. "You have to understand where law enforcement was at the time," he said. "As far as trafficking, nobody knew anything about it."

On the morning of April 25, 2018, D.S.S. agents and local police arrested Mohamed and Denise at their home in Southlake. While searching the property, Langston saw hundreds of photographs of the Toures and their

extended family on display throughout the rooms. Djena wasn't in a single one. "She never made a frame, never made the refrigerator, never made the wall," Langston told me. Among the few thousand photographs stored in the house, Djena appeared in fewer than forty. In one image from the early years, Denise and Mohamed are posing in the garden with their kids, while Djena is off to the side, smiling at the camera, in the middle of doing what looks like yard work.

Denise and Mohamed were charged with forced labor, harboring an alien for financial gain, and conspiracies to commit forced labor and to harbor an alien. Mohamed, who allegedly claimed, while being interviewed by investigators, that he had tried to adopt Djena, was also charged with making false statements to federal agents. They pleaded not guilty. That July, Langston travelled to Conakry and interviewed Djena's family to help build the case. In the fall, while the prosecution and the defense prepared for trial, the Guinean government wrote to Jeff Sessions, the recently resigned Attorney General, alleging that D.S.S. agents had violated Guinean laws by conducting investigations in Conakry without authorization. One of Langston's colleagues in D.C., John Freeman, went with his boss to meet the Guinean Ambassador, who brought up the Toures' case. "Is there something that could be done?" the Ambassador asked. When Freeman's boss said no, another Guinean official in the room pressed harder. "He's, like, 'You can't make a call to the judge or the prosecutor?'" Freeman recalled. Freeman told them that the opportunity to make a plea deal had passed.

The Toures' indictment made headlines in the Guinean press, and, on the first day of the trial, supporters of the family protested in Conakry, dressed in T-shirts featuring an image of Mohamed and Denise, with the slogan "LIBEREZ LE COUPLE TOURE" written underneath. In Fort Worth, Djena took the stand, facing her abusers for the first time in years. Gone was the meek servant child, replaced by a confident woman who remained composed during aggressive cross-examination.

One of the government's witnesses was Djena's mother, Maladho, whom the prosecution had flown in from Guinea. In the two decades since Djena had left home, they had spoken only once by phone. Djena had always assumed that her mother had sent her away willingly, but, on the second day of the trial, Maladho told the court how she had hidden her daughter for days before Djena's father took her to the Croses' residence in Conakry.

"Why did you hide her?" one of the prosecutors asked.

"Because I didn't want her to become somebody's slave," Maladho replied, speaking through a Malinke interpreter. "I didn't want her to go."

The defense argued that the government's case was founded on ignorance of Guinean culture: that Djena had been willingly entrusted to the Toures, in keeping with Guinean custom, so that she could have a better life. Scott Palmer, one of the attorneys representing Denise, underscored the fact that Djena wasn't kept in the house against her will, or prevented from using the internet. How could someone who was able to post on Instagram and go jogging in the neighborhood claim to have been a victim of forced labor? Palmer argued that Djena had fabricated the trafficking narrative to secure legal status in the U.S.

The jury disagreed. On January 10, 2019, Denise and Mohamed were found guilty of nearly all charges; later that year, they were sentenced to seven years in prison. The court also ordered them to pay Djena nearly three hundred thousand dollars in restitution. As of July, 2025, according to court documents, the Toures had paid her less than four thousand dollars.

I spoke with Djena for the first time in 2024, years after the trial. She had legally changed her name and was reluctant to revisit the trauma of her time with the Toures and the sixteen years she'd lost. After leaving Southlake, she lived for a few months at Ajufo's house, where she celebrated her birthday for the first time, and continued learning to read and write English, with Ajufo's help. Later, she got a job in retail, began learning to drive, and moved into an apartment. "I want to do my G.E.D.," she told me, "so I have something to show for everything that I went through."

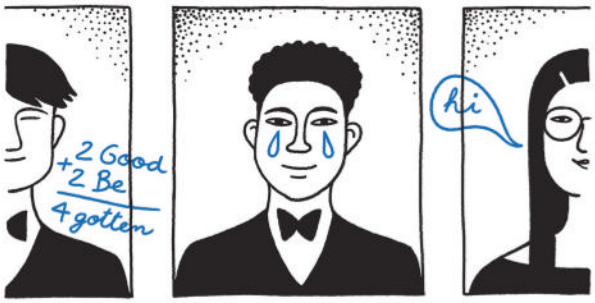
She had no relationship with her family in Guinea. It had been a comfort to learn that her mother had tried to keep her from being taken—that the separation had not been chosen. After Maladho's day in court, a D.S.S. analyst had brought Djena to the hotel where her mother was staying, and they hugged—mother and daughter made strangers by circumstance and the passage of time. The analyst stepped out to give them privacy, and they sat together on the hotel bed and talked. Maladho had brought gifts from home and showed Djena pictures of her siblings.

But her subsequent conversations with her mother "didn't go so well," Djena told me. "We don't really know each other." She didn't think they would ever have a strong connection. "She has this idea of me, but I'm not that person."

It was clear that the practical challenges of building a life from scratch in her late twenties—getting an education, holding a job—were perhaps not the hardest part of this new chapter. Embracing adulthood after having her childhood and adolescence stolen likely demanded even more courage and resilience. Djena had made a few friends, she told me, but they didn't know what she had been through. "I am very hesitant to tell someone," she said. "Because I don't want them to think I'm weak or even try to use it against me."

Her caution might also have stemmed from the knowledge that Denise and Mohamed were nearing the end of their sentences. Both are now out of prison. Denise left the U.S. for Belgium, an act that violated the conditions of her supervised release. In February of 2025, Mohamed returned to Guinea. Upon landing at the international airport in Conakry, which is named after his father, he was greeted by Guinea's foreign minister. The Guinean government issued a press release stating that "after several years of legal troubles and detention in the United States," Mohamed and Denise had regained their freedom, owing to the "personal involvement" of the current President of Guinea, General Mamady Doumbouya. Subsequent news stories published in the Guinean press similarly framed Mohamed's return as a triumph of justice.

One person with whom Djena can speak freely is Langston; the two have kept in touch. In December, I learned from Langston that Djena was doing well. She had changed jobs, and she had a boyfriend. If things continued to go well, it seemed, she might be able to put down roots—and, one day, start a family of her own. ♦



REALISTIC HIGH-SCHOOL-YEARBOOK INSCRIPTIONS

BY JASON ROEDER AND MIKE SACKS

Abby! I can't believe we did it! Four years went by like that! Will you promise to keep in touch?! Let's see each other once or twice this summer and then not again for about fifteen years, when we're both staying at a serviceable two-star resort that's just fine with allowing small children fighting a horrible stomach bug to play in the pool. —❤️*Missy*

You will read this once this afternoon and not again until you're in your fifties, but, by that time, I will have already died, alone in my apartment, totally nude, except for my ankle monitor. —*Jacky Jack Jack!*

Hey, girl! Remember me when you're unhappily married and still running the family business due to your fatal lack of ambition. —*Rachey*

Yay! We're FINALLY graduating! Remember that day in Miss Tompkins's (Miss Not-Hotkins!) class when I held in a sneeze then farted and everyone laughed except for Becky?! She never laughs! Becky will run her own influencer-P.R. agency while you and I will marry two mediocre men who scream out "Wheel of Fortune" answers as if they're solving the world's greatest and most substantial mysteries: "GOOEY CINNAMON STICKY BUNS!" or "ALL THE CRITICS AGREE!" It'll be exhausting. —*Luv Ya Lots, Chloe*

God, I'm so happy to get out of this s-hole! HATE THIS PLACE! I CANNOT wait to get to the real world and then spend half my life thinking, Shouldn't I be enjoying this more? —*R.R.*

Jess Hot Mess! I love that this isn't goodbye cause we're both going to the same college, roomie! It'll be like high school never ended! For me, anyway. You'll spread your wings, really explore your identity, and move into quiet-study housing in the spring semester. We'll see each other less and less, and I won't even tell you when I transfer to Florida State. —*Ya girl Hannah*

I was your math teacher. I'm not really sure what to say. You were a B student. —*Mrs. Bailey*

You handed me this yearbook shyly, as if it meant nothing, but you've had a crush on me all these years and, I have to be perfectly honest, I don't know a thing about you except that we both were referred to doctors after our scoliosis screenings. Be Well! —*Dani*

Ethan, a.k.a. Butt Dawg (HAHA-HAHA)! All I can say is two things: 1) "Piled-high nachos!" and 2) Think of me when you're some Wall Street big shot, and I appear in a documentary about my first six months in prison for starting a wildfire with an unfiltered cigarette I tossed into some bone-dry vegetation. —*Milo*

Do you like my fancy signature? I've been practicing since sixth grade, in each and every class, just daydreaming about becoming really, really famous. Remember my name! —*Richie Randigan*

P.S. I never become famous.

You asked me to sign your yearbook because I am unpopular and you feel sorry for me. You thought it was a good deed, but I see through your condescension. It brings no relief. —*Nico*

You're such an AMAZING WRITER! I'M SO JEALOUS! I can't wait to read that one book you'll self-publish years from now, a children's book about a talking stapler with a huge heart. —*Mary P.*

We've sat in the same classes for the past ten years but I've never said a word. You might know me as Mitch Spencer. The rest of the world will soon know me as TruthSlayerXX on TikTok. Do you have the nerve to take the red pill and see into the Matrix like I have? I've taken the red pill! In a few years, I will also take the white pill to prevent hair loss. —*Best, Mitch R. Spencer*

I'm the kid you'll see on CNN talking about changing the world and you'll think, Wait a minute, isn't that the same guy who threw up on his sneakers in Algebra II and then cried so hard his mother had to pick him up? That guy became successful?! —*Ronnie*

Yoooooo! Parties down by the lake, beers out by the old water tower, that epic night at Henry's—just some of the legendary memories we never made because we were bland and fearful. —*Mike*

Promise me we'll always, always be best amigas! That is, until I realize you were merely the least lame option in a small student body, and I replace you with friends who reflect my actual preferences. XOXOXO —*Lisa*

You handed me your yearbook, and I will write something nice out of obligation. —*Wishing You the Very Very Best, Mr. Richards*

You and I are never leaving this godforsaken town. There is no escape for the likes of us. See you tomorrow, I guess. —*Margot* ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

THE SPORTING SCENE

GUESSING GAME

The mystery and mass appeal of the N.F.L. draft.

BY DAN GREENE

The most widely witnessed first-job offer among the class of 2026 surely came last month, when Fernando Mendoza, an M.B.A. student at Indiana University, was selected by the Las Vegas Raiders to be their new quarterback. Mendoza was the first player chosen in this year's National Football League draft, in Pittsburgh, an honor announced by the league's commissioner from a one-and-a-half-million-pound stage that had been built outside the city's football stadium. The event was broadcast simultaneously, in prime time and in two languages, across four TV networks, which averaged thirteen million viewers total, and attended in person by hundreds of thousands of people. The audience was predominantly men, mostly clad in team jerseys and drinking twenty-dollar beers. A select but nontrivial few adorned themselves further: masks, makeup, armored chest plates. One, a middle-aged Iowan who had painted his face to resemble a skeleton's, introduced himself to me as Baron Raider. He explained that his getup—including a black top hat and plastic bone necklaces—was inspired by Baron Samedi, a vodou spirit who digs graves. His hope was that Mendoza would help the Raiders do the same, figuratively, for their opponents.

Every year in the N.F.L., guys retire, get hurt, get worse; contracts expire. Teams need new players. The draft, in which N.F.L. teams take turns, for seven rounds, selecting college players to join their rosters, is the most cost-effective, and thus preferred, way to acquire them. Some draftees have an immediate impact—this year's Super Bowl champions, the Seattle Seahawks, started two key players who were drafted last spring—but the process is mainly a means of incremental, long-term improvement. This is as important, and as boring, in theory, as picking a fund for your 401(k), yet, improbably, the draft has become one of the largest events on the sporting calendar. Its telecast is part reality show, part débutante ball, part award ceremony. As one league executive put it to me, "It's amazing, the interest in what's essentially a name being read from a paper." For fans of some teams, particularly the ones that tend to stink (say, the Jets), the draft, with its promise of better days, can be bigger than the games themselves. The draft order is determined by the previous season's record; the worst teams go first. During a mediocre season, many fans, hoping to improve their team's draft position, root for their side to lose.

The main thing to know about the draft is that no one really knows anything. There's the not-knowing of which team will select which player; once a player gets selected, there's the not-knowing of whether he'll be any good. The most productive college players do not necessarily make the best pros—football is an endlessly interconnected game, with twenty-two players interacting within complicated strategic schemes, and the quality of collegiate competition varies widely. In the aggregate, there is

"It's amazing, the interest in what's essentially a name being read from a paper," one league executive said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXANDER COGGIN

a correlation between earlier picks and better outcomes, but exceptions abound. A study by economists at the University of Chicago suggested that the likelihood of a given player having a better N.F.L. career than the next draftee who plays the same position is basically a coin flip.

Despite this crapshoot, or maybe because of it, an entire media class of so-called draftniks has emerged to guess which players might go where and how they might turn out. The draftniks produce player rankings and mock drafts that predict each team's selections. The first mock drafts tend to go up just after the previous year's real draft ends. There are draftniks at ESPN and NBC and the *Athletic* but also at niche upstarts like Draft Diamonds and Draft Nerds and *DraftNasty*. Fans take their own stabs pro bono, posting to Reddit their predictions for the draft's first round, or their bespoke guesses for all two hundred and fifty-seven picks. Websites offer draft simulators that let users draft against a league of computerized opponents. Mel Kiper, Jr., the salesman-like face of ESPN's draft coverage, likes to compare the draft to Christmas morning. It's the not-knowing that's fun. Everyone loves searching for a "sleeper"—an underrated prospect, like Tom Brady, who was famously the hundred-and-ninety-ninth selection in his class, then led his teams to seven Super Bowl wins—even though it's just as likely that you'll get stuck with a "bust," picking Mitchell Trubisky, now a backup quarterback, instead of Patrick Mahomes, for example. Sleepers can enliven years of your fall Sundays. A bust could one day be the reason that a bartender cuts you off at a Buffalo Wild Wings.

Earlier this year, I got to know a draftnik named Thor Nystrom, a bearded forty-one-year-old who works for the Minnesota sports outlet SKOR North. He covers the draft with a particular focus on the Vikings, of which he has been a lifelong fan. When I asked about sleepers he liked for this year's draft, he mentioned Ephesians Prysock, a six-foot-three defensive back from the University of Washington. "The Vikings desperately need a boundary cornerback, and they like ones with longer arms, who are good at pressing receivers," Nystrom said. He expected Prysock to be available in the draft's middle rounds, meaning the Vikings could fill that need while using their earlier choices for other positions—the sleeper's surplus-value ideal.

Nystrom also told me about a player who was not the draft's most promising prospect but was among its most intriguing: Tyren Montgomery, a wide receiver from John Carroll University, a Division III school that hadn't had a player drafted in thirty-five years. (That player was the 1991 draft's final selection, a distinction affectionately known as Mr. Irrelevant.) Nystrom researches the draft tirelessly, keeping a spreadsheet of data (ages, game stats, hand widths) on nearly two thousand players, and publicly ranks his top five hundred—nearly twice as many as will actually be drafted. But in January, when he attended the Senior Bowl, an all-star showcase of draft prospects, Montgomery was unfamiliar to him. "I know everyone," Nystrom told me. "I'd never fuckin' heard of this guy."

Nystrom, who has an M.F.A. in nonfiction from the University of Iowa, was struck by Montgomery's trajectory: he had only begun playing football in college, but at the showcase he had stood out against surefire early-round defenders. He now had a chance to be picked in the draft's later rounds, where draftees typically have to fight to make the team but occasionally become starters or even stars. "You have this wide band of outcomes," Nystrom said. "He's new to the sport, comes from D-III, but we just saw him lick a bunch of top-hundred prospects." Such is the draft's central allure: a player might amount to nothing. But he could also become anything.

For a league that is run by some of America's most fervent capitalists, the N.F.L. has an odd relationship with free markets. These days, teams' payrolls are capped and the league's revenue is shared. The goal is to create competitive parity, or at least the appearance of it—to sell the idea that on any given Sunday any team can win. The draft was the league's first step in this direction. In 1935, the owner of the then sad-sack Philadelphia Eagles grew tired of better teams scooping up all the best players, and proposed the draft as a remedy. For some reason, the better teams agreed. It began the next year as a simple affair, with coaches smoking cigars in a hotel room and scrawling names on a chalkboard. This year, Mendoza was in line for a four-year contract worth nearly sixty million dollars, whereas, in 1936, the No. 1 pick, Jay Berwanger, a running back from the University of Chicago, turned down a contract for a thousand dollars a game and never played professionally. Instead, he went into rubber and plastics.

In 1980, when ESPN was not yet a year old and was desperate to partner with major leagues, the network proposed to Pete Rozelle, then the N.F.L.'s commissioner, that it televise the draft. "Pete started laughing his ass off," Steve Bornstein, a former ESPN president, recalled. As the longtime *Sports Illustrated* writer Peter King told me, Rozelle "thought it would be embarrassing, because nothing effing happens." But Rozelle agreed, and ESPN set out to make an event of it. "The higher-ups said, 'If this thing is not working, make a graceful exit and get off the air,'" Bob Ley, who anchored ten drafts for ESPN, told me, of that first TV draft. It aired on a Tuesday morning, and mostly consisted of guys placidly chatting at a desk. The action shots were of men making unheard phone calls in the New York Sheraton ballroom. "It's like the difference between Edison's first kinetoscope and the latest movie at the Cineplex," Ley said, comparing the draft then versus now. "Technically they're part of the same family of entertainment, but just barely."

That year, ESPN aired eight hours of draft coverage (amazingly, only the first third of the draft's selections), a number it gradually increased until it began televising every pick, over the course of two days, in the mid-nineties. It had discovered what now feels obvious: at the nadir of the football calendar—three months after the Super Bowl, three months before preseason games—fans hunger for even the idea of the sport. "Sports fans have an amazing ability to seem to care more about the future than the present," Daniel Wann, a psychology professor at Murray State who focusses on sports fandom, told me. "They live in a world of unknown." Uncertainty and anticipation are central to dopamine release: the countdown to vacation, the planning of a perfect party, the thrill of the chase. It's fun to watch your team win. It can be just as fun to hope they will, and to imagine how. "It's theatre of the mind," Nystrom

told me. A colleague of mine once likened it to football fan fiction.

The most transformative change to ESPN's coverage came in 1984, with the addition of Kiper, the ur-draftnik. A few years earlier, he had quit community college to compile and sell draft guidebooks out of his parents' Maryland basement. He was sharp and sharp-looking, with a vaguely avian face beneath a dark pompadour, and was doggedly dedicated—year-round—to a subject with which few in the media even engaged. When a team drafted some linebacker from Appalachian State in the fifth round, Kiper could offer a torrent of assessment. "Before we had the flashy graphics and pre-produced research packages, we had Mel," Ley said. Writers have likened his Baltimore-tinged, auctioneer-like patter to "a breathless cross between machine gun and Morse code," and have described him as having the "mind of a savant beneath the immovable coiffure of a lounge act." Chris Berman, one of ESPN's earliest anchors, told me, of Kiper, "I didn't know anybody like this existed."

Crucially, Kiper had firm opinions and little filter. There were obscure picks, in his frank estimation, that were actually brilliant heists, and college stars whose selections were actually costly blunders. His innovation was to turn the draft into something like a game itself, where fans could watch their team win and lose in the moment. He once declared on air, with good reason, that "the Jets just don't understand what the draft's all about." That his own record is far from perfect is both part of the fun and somewhat irrelevant: his job is to inform and compel—more Jim Cramer than Nostradamus. "With others, it feels like opinion," Bill Fitts, a retired ESPN producer, told me. "With Mel, it feels like fact." Not everyone has agreed. In 1994, after Kiper blasted the Indianapolis Colts' strategy, the team's general manager, Bill Tobin, kicked off a mid-draft interview by saying, "Who in the hell is Mel Kiper, anyway?" He then compared Kiper's credentials, unfavorably, with his mailman neighbor's. When the cameras cut back to Kiper, he was laughing. "I'm secure in my position," he said. "Obviously Bill Tobin is not."

Kiper's first ESPN deal paid him four hundred dollars for one day of draft coverage and sporadic additional appearances. Now he's gainfully employed and featured on the network nearly all year, including on a draft-centric studio show that airs every weekday afternoon for the ten weeks preceding the event. "That's how it's gotten so big," King, the former *S.I.* writer, said of the draft. "They've forced it down the throats of the American public." That public has continually widened its gullet and gulped. The draft moved through New York City's event spaces (hotel ballrooms, Madison Square Garden's theatre, Radio City), outgrowing them all. Since 2015, it has been held in ten different cities, including Las Vegas, where a red carpet was constructed atop the Bellagio's fountain pool, and Nashville, where rowdy attendees ruined bachelorette parties on Broadway. Hundreds of thousands have attended each of them. "I really thought the draft could be what it is right now," Kiper said. "I've been wrong on some players. I was right on that."

Draft season informally begins shortly after the Super Bowl, with what's known as the Scouting Combine, a weeklong convention built around some three hundred top prospects being subjected to medical exams, physical measurements, meetings with teams, and on-field performance drills: timed sprints and agility courses, calibrated jumps, bench presses. The league often bills it as "the ultimate job interview," and airs forty hours of live coverage on its eponymous cable network. Indianapolis hosts the Combine every year, which means each February its downtown briefly becomes the world capital for strong-jawed men in athleisure who could be described as broad, brawny, buff, burly, built, boxy, or otherwise physically notable. It's a bad week to be a porterhouse.

The three hundred players are identified during the preceding summer and fall, when team scouts scour the country to evaluate prospective college talent. Scouting is not a glamorous job. Scouts spend hundreds of days on the road each year—long drives, cheap hotels, fast food. Their lexicon has a certain charm. To a scout, you can be just a guy (forgettable), a dude (good), or a dog (great). They are wary of receivers with "loud hands." Look for good "bubbles," or "anchors," a.k.a. butts—a prodigious rear suggests a powerful engine. A "rolling ball of butcher knives" refers to a player who's appealingly relentless. Hips should be "oily"; you want "a bender," not a guy who's "stiffer than a honeymoon dick." Because teams are deciding whether to devote millions of dollars and precious roster spots to occasionally unreliable males in their early twenties, much of a scout's work is akin to investigative reporting. "You talk to literally anybody who is willing to talk to you," one scout told me. "You're trying to mitigate risk." How does a star treat the equipment manager? Who are his parents' friends? How stable are his moods? As a former Giants general manager once put it, "The bigger asshole you are, the better the player you have to be." Another G.M. joked that if Hannibal Lecter ran fast enough, teams would say he just has an eating disorder.

The Combine is as much about behavioral analysis as it is about football assessment. Players cycle through speed-date interviews with team staff, mainly about football schematics and what makes them tick. But, as in an interview at McKinsey, there are occasionally curveball questions, to gauge their thinking or emotional state. Prospects have been challenged to games of rock-paper-scissors and been asked whether they find their mothers attractive. They are also scanned, prodded, and interrogated about every ligament or bone they've damaged since grade school. (A cabdriver shared with me the unconfirmed theory that Indianapolis hosts the Combine because of its rare concentration of MRI machines.) For all the attention paid to how fast the players run or how high they jump, this private reconnaissance is often the most pivotal, a way for teams to gain an edge and find the right fit. For the draftnik class, "it's sort of a black box," Nystrom told me. "Which sucks."

Nystrom was, like me, one of sixteen hundred media members credentialled for this year's Combine. He went primarily to gather intel and do live radio shows. When the drills started, he headed to a bar. "It's better on TV," he told me. Having seen it on TV before, with its repetitive visuals—every athlete in black spandex, performing the same tasks with minute variations—this seemed dubious. But in the mostly empty stadium, without the benefits of commentary and close-ups, the litany of drills felt like watching warmups for a game that never came. At

one point, cameras appeared to catch the Jets' head coach, Aaron Glenn, nodding off. (A team spokesman said that Glenn was looking down at his iPad.) The optics—underclad, mostly Black young men having their hands and limbs measured to the eighth of an inch, then paraded for physical evaluation—have reliably drawn comparisons to slave markets.

Since 2012, the public has been allowed to attend the workouts. To the surprise of many, it has. This year, depending on the day, somewhere between a few hundred and a few thousand people were in the stands. (Entry is free. A "Combine Authentic" polyester hoodie costs a hundred and forty-six bucks.) The crowd seemed to be mostly locals and other Midwesterners, often parents with football-loving kids. There were also fans of nearby college teams cheering on their guys, plus some participants' encouraging families. On the concourse, I met Randy Talley, a lithe fiftysomething wearing a Green Bay Packers shirt, three black hoop earrings, and a stopwatch around his neck. ("I get confused for a scout a lot," he told me.) He was a Wisconsin transplant to Indianapolis whose childhood desire to know all things Packers burgeoned into a need to know all things potentially Packers as well. In high school, he played hooky to watch the draft on TV, and since 2020 he has attended every hours-long Combine workout, in the same front-row seat, armed with a clipboard and color-coded homemade spreadsheets. "I stay until they kick us out," he said. League staff now recognize him, a power he used this year to successfully lobby for the music to be turned down.

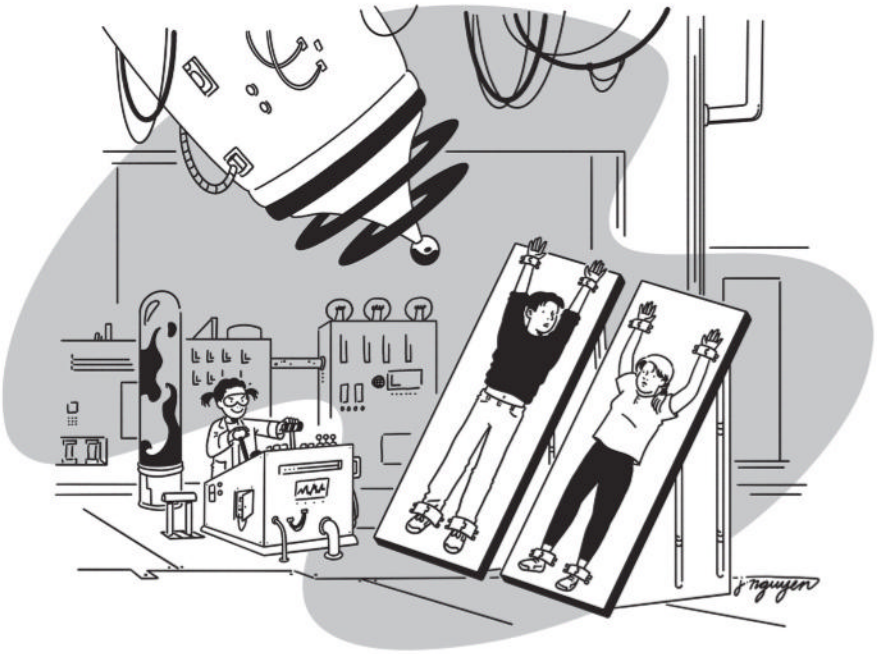
In another life, Talley was a modern dancer, trained in the Humphrey-Limón technique. "I've been on every stage, big and small, in Milwaukee," he told me. Dancing honed his eye for body movement, and he said that his front-row perch allowed him to "get a sense of a player's center of gravity" and other details: "How much do they kick their heels up when they run? Do they wave their elbows? I like compact striders."

On the field, prospects were doing short runs forward and backward, known as W drills. In the stadium's lower bowl, I found a seat behind Fran Duffy, a respected and bespectacled millennial draft analyst for the sports outlet ALLCITY, and Greg Cosell, a puckish and bushy-browed sexagenarian who works as an NFL Films producer. (His late uncle Howard was America's most famous sportscaster.) Cosell spends his offseasons poring over prospects' game tapes to assess their viability as pros. Yet he does neither rankings nor mock drafts. "For me, it's truly an academic and intellectual experience," he said. "I just care about the process of evaluating." In 2004, he produced the NFL Network's first Combine broadcast. The league refused to let the workouts be filmed or to disclose players' measurements; it was mostly guys in suits gabbing.

As the players ran this way and that, Duffy and Cosell explained what to look for: fluid shoulder pivots, nimble feet when changing directions. I had my eye on Prysock, Nystrom's darling. At six-three, Prysock was tall for his position. Cornerbacks require quick, reactive agility to match the movements of the receivers they defend, and those with greater size often offer less mobility. To my novice eye, Prysock moved without defect. When I asked Duffy for his take, he flashed a handwritten note: "smooth." Talley was impressed, too. "Really nice hips, drop-and-drive," he said.

For Prysock, no drill was more important than the forty-yard dash, a laser-timed sprint. His agent, Jackson Magnini, told me that one team scout had confessed that, though he loved Prysock, he'd need to run the dash in less than 4.55 seconds to be seriously considered. Magnini watched the workouts alongside Prysock's affable father, Sean, who wore a sparkly hoodie with "PLYMKR" on the back. As Prysock ran his turn, Magnini and Sean watched, rapt, then immediately checked the result: 4.46 seconds. They erupted and high-fived; a lemonade spilled at their feet. When Magnini sat back down, he told me that the time may have improved Prysock's draft position by an entire round. "He just made some money," he said.

On the field, Prysock learned his time from a fellow-prospect. "I was, like, 'Oh, I can run faster than that,'" Prysock told me later. (On his next try, he did, by a hundredth of a second.) When we spoke, Prysock was in a drab hotel in Fort Lauderdale, where he had been living for two months to train at XPE Sports, a facility that specializes in the technical specifics of Combine workouts. (For the forty-yard dash, Prysock had focussed on keeping his torso from becoming overly upright.) After the Combine, his stock had risen in most observers' eyes, but he wasn't following the coverage. Teams often visit with



"Let's have another kid so she can have someone to play with."

• •

players for further interviews, which inevitably get covered in the football media. His friends had been clamoring over reports of his meeting with this or that N.F.L. team, not unlike during college recruitment, when top high schoolers, as Prysock had been, have their choice of suitors. This time, the agency was inverted. "They don't really get it—it's different," Prysock said of his friends. "The team picks *me* now."

Montgomery, the small-school receiver who had wowed Nystrom, didn't get invited to Indianapolis. By the time he impressed at the Senior Bowl showcase, in January, the Combine invites had gone out. But Montgomery had hope: every year, a couple of dozen non-invitees get drafted, and just as many invitees don't. On a Zoom call from his home, in Houston, Montgomery wore his hair in tawny-hued locs and sipped from a Whataburger cup. He said that he was used to improbable odds. When he'd arrived at the Senior Bowl, some of his fellow-players turned up their noses. Then practice started, and his acrobatic catches began. "I was, like, 'Look, I tried to tell y'all I belong here,'" he said.

Montgomery only began playing football in 2020. He was a walk-on basketball player at L.S.U., but moved home when his mother got bladder cancer. His brother, then a high-school quarterback, suggested he try football. ("You've got nothing else going on," his brother told him.) He filmed himself running routes in his back yard and uploaded them online. A competitive-flag-football coach took notice, then helped him land at Nicholls State, a small Division I school in Louisiana, where a teammate had to show him how to put on shoulder pads. When he ran out of Division I eligibility, he ended up at John Carroll, a Division III school in Ohio, and immediately started setting school records. His mother, who died last year, had long insisted that she foresaw him in pro football someday, despite his never having played the sport. "Sure enough, after she passed, all this stuff started popping off," he said.

Without a Combine invite, Montgomery had joined a workout at the University of Toledo to be evaluated by scouts. His numbers didn't stand out—a thirty-five-and-a-half-inch vertical jump, a 4.59-second forty—but they seemed to be enough. N.F.L. teams would have to rely on his performance on film at John Carroll and in the Senior Bowl. Some analysts' projections had him going as high as the fourth round. Others had him in the seventh. "I don't know where the hell I'm going," he said. "My goal was always just to get a chance."

That week, I visited Nystrom at his home, in suburban Minneapolis, to crunch film. Such studies are the lifeblood of a draftnik's work: deciphering a player's underlying traits—reaction time, form, technique. We sat in his living room, in front of three TV screens mounted on a brick chimney next to a five-foot replica of a Chinese terra-cotta warrior; Nystrom, who is from Brainerd, Minnesota ("The town that movie 'Fargo' was in," he said), had seen the real ones during a year he spent teaching English in Chongqing. On the walls hung vertical scrolls of Chinese calligraphy. Downstairs, in his office, a wall was dotted with more than a hundred miniature college-team helmets. "My décor is half classy Asian, then just, like . . . football," he said.

Five decades ago, when Kiper was stapling together his first draft guides, he often had to harangue college athletic departments just to get players' basic statistics. Few games were nationally televised. Today's draftniks have access to endless high-def broadcasts and custom compilations showing a prospect's every snap. "We're spoiled," Nystrom said. But the only footage of Montgomery from John Carroll was a lo-fi compilation of his highlights. Ranch houses and soccer nets dotted the background. "I do like the ambience," Nystrom said.

On the tape, Montgomery dominated play after play. "Hoo! He climbed the ladder for that one," Nystrom said after a leaping, twisting reception of an overthrown ball. Yet it was hard to get a sense of how Montgomery's skills might translate against pro opponents. On most plays, Division III defenders couldn't even stay close. "None of them stand a chance against him," Nystrom said after watching one cornerback's particularly ineffectual effort. "That guy's gonna be an accountant next year."

Montgomery's footwork and adjustment to passes' trajectories shone through. "I love him at the start of reps, and I like him at the end," Nystrom said. "The in-between stuff, it's hard to know." He pulled up a spreadsheet. "I've got him thirtieth," he said of Montgomery's rank among prospects at his position. In 2025, thirty-one receivers had been drafted.

Prysock, who had played against some of the country's strongest competition, was easier to evaluate. Nystrom pulled up clips from a game against Ohio State in which Prysock ably guarded Carnell Tate, a projected top-ten pick. "On Ephe's best reps, he has a suffocating presence," Nystrom said. "He's so athletic, and then the surface area of him just kind of washes over you." He swigged an orange Gatorade Zero and adjusted his University of Iowa ball cap. He'd enrolled there for grad school in 2009, to study creative nonfiction. At its core, storytelling is still the nature of his work—finding the truths of a player's prowess and assembling a narrative about

"It's always high noon somewhere."

his future performance. What animates his curiosity is the same question that drives his audience: How can we know more about what might happen? "I feel like I should think about my life the way that I think about the draft," Nystrom said, with a laugh. "Like, 'If I did this or that, then in three years I could really be something.' But I don't."

Some good advice, should you attend an N.F.L. draft, is to wear comfortable shoes. In Pittsburgh, a Coachella-size crowd watched the proceedings while standing in a concrete lot outside the stage and its "theatre," a covered area from which V.I.P.-ticket holders (attendance is otherwise free) and a few select fans watched. I couldn't see much of the proceedings, and I couldn't hear any of the analysis that viewers at home got. But there was plenty I wouldn't have experienced from my couch. When the Los Angeles Rams—whose quarterback, Matthew Stafford, won last season's M.V.P. award—used their first draft pick on another Q.B., I heard a yowling "Why?" emanate from a nearby porta-potty.

The first round's most interesting twist was reported on TV and social media: the Steelers had been on the phone with a heralded wide receiver, Makai Lemon, presumably telling him that they would choose him, but then the Eagles' G.M. interrupted with a call to say they had traded for the pick ahead of the Steelers, which they used for Lemon. Steelers fans, already let down by missing out on Lemon, took the news of this stolen opportunity as if they'd just learned that their crush was going to prom with their brother.

One corner of the lot looked like a cosplay convention: feathered headdresses, tutus, white guys in team-color faux dreads. This was where I met Baron Raider (real name: Levi Schmidt), who was introduced to me by a woman from Kansas in a rhinestoned Kansas City Chiefs biker cap who goes by KC Glitzn. She pointed out others by their *noms d'obsession*: "This is People's Champ, and then the Jag Avenger." There was also a "Star Wars"-themed Jets booster in a galactic face shield (Boba Jett) and a Packers-trimmed pirate called Captain Pack Sparrow. Among them were South Carolinians, New Mexicans, and a guy from Nassau County. "This is probably our favorite event," KC Glitzn, who has attended four drafts, told me. "Nobody is competing. Everybody's loving each other." As Baron Raider put it, "Hate the team, love the fans."

For such a combustible demographic—the Eagles' stadium once housed a jail cell and an actual court—a nonpartisan esprit de corps prevailed. After a man near me wearing Tennessee Titans gear collapsed into an anguished squat, because a desired running back was drafted before the Titans' turn, a guy in a Vikings hoodie walked up to pat his back in consolation. Strangers in rival teams' colors shared blunts. Everyone united in booing the league's commissioner. Even when a coalition of dudes in varied jerseys took up a singsong "asshole" chant aimed at one particular guy, it was understandable. He was a Cowboys fan.

Nystrom spent the first night of the draft at a Minnesota casino, co-hosting SKOR North's live stream. His beloved Vikings used their top pick—the eighteenth over all—on a defensive lineman named Caleb Banks, who had immense talent but also a troubling history of left-foot issues, including breaking a bone at the Combine. Kiper, who had Banks ranked sixty-second because of his foot, called it a "big-time reach." Nystrom, who loved Banks, had him fifty-fifth for the same reason. From the casino, Nystrom declared that the Vikings "just went there and rolled the dice."

Prysock and Montgomery were not expected to be drafted until the third day. Football people say that it's on day three that teams assemble a championship ensemble. But the day's picks are less hyped and contribute to the team less immediately and obviously, so there was a bit less excitement. Perhaps sensing this, the league trotted out a series of onstage stimuli between picks. Puppies were offered for adoption. A marching band performed the nineties song "The Kids Aren't Alright." An astronaut was interviewed beside someone in a spacesuit, and a team from Carnegie Mellon showed off some sort of handstanding robotic dog. Two hundred and fifty enlisting "warriors" were sworn into what a presiding Army officer called "the most lethal military in the entire world, ever," in a ceremony punctuated by Hulk Hogan's theme song. The day's biggest reaction came when the Steelers drafted a Naval Academy running back, who took the stage, in a display planned by the league, as thousands chanted, "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!"

The response was more subdued when, in the fourth round, the San Francisco 49ers selected Prysock. The 49ers were, to their fans' dismay, perhaps the draft's most discussed team. They used their first choice on a receiver many draftniks expected to go fifty or so spots later, and their third on a running back projected to go in the late rounds, while ignoring positions of perceived need. Kiper declared that the 49ers had "some really confusing picks." But Prysock was an exception. Kiper's colleague Louis Riddick, a former N.F.L. executive, named Prysock among his favorite picks in the draft. Nystrom lauded Prysock as "an awesome scheme fit" for the 49ers' defensive style. Still, he graded their over-all haul a D-minus. Kiper gave it a C.

Discourse about the 49ers' draft dragged into the following week—insiders versus outsiders, the wisdom of crowds, the nature of draft evaluation. Why judge a draft at all, let alone immediately? Things will play out how they will. But, for all of football's kinetic violence, the energy animating its consumption is primarily potential: the week between contests, the half minute between plays. You watch a three-hour game to see less than twenty minutes of actual action. The scarcity invites anticipation; the anticipation invites speculation. Where's the fun in waiting? Football fans fill in the gaps. On this, the N.F.L. has become a year-round colossus.

For Montgomery, the wait was a bit longer than desired. After all seven rounds, his name had not been called. He was now a free agent, though, and within minutes of the draft's end he had signed a contract with the Titans. On Instagram, he posted a video of his helmet, captioned "I miss you momma!" It would be months before he knew whether he would make the final roster. For now, it was fun to think about. ♦

MAJORITY RULES

Can Hakeem Jeffries lead a Democratic takeover of the House?

BY JASON ZENGERLE

Earlier this year, Hakeem Jeffries, who represents New York's Eighth Congressional District, was headed to a meeting with a Democratic donor in Palm Beach when he checked his phone. As the House Minority Leader, Jeffries has spent much of the past eighteen months hopscotching across blue America's high-income Zip Codes, soliciting campaign contributions in Palo Alto and Palm Desert, Martha's Vineyard and Greenwich. The evening before, he had headlined a Democratic Party fund-raiser at a lobbyist's office in Miami. Now, as he was being driven north, in a Capitol Police S.U.V.—a staple of the twenty-four-hour security detail provided to congressional leaders—Jeffries saw that one of his staffers had alerted him to a video on Donald Trump's Truth Social account. The clip, which promoted various conspiracy theories about the 2020 election, included a depiction of Barack and Michelle Obama as apes.

Jeffries, who is the highest-ranking Black elected official in the United States, had criticized Trump for what he once called "a troubling pattern of racially insensitive and outrageous at times behavior." He'd branded the President a "racial arsonist" and the "birther-in-chief." At the same time, he had steadfastly refused to call Trump a racist. In 2019, when CNN pressed Jeffries on another remark—he'd dubbed Trump "the grand wizard of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue"—he replied, "I did not use the word 'racist' in any of my comments." But as Jeffries watched the video from Trump's feed he seethed. "The guy is so disgusting and out of control in so many different areas," he told me. "My reaction was visceral."

Anger is not an emotion typically associated with Jeffries. His favorite mantra, one he frequently repeats to colleagues and staffers, is "Calm is an intentional decision." This has not always endeared him to some Democratic partisans. In the early months of Trump's second term, when Jeffries held readings in several cities to promote "The ABCs of Democracy"—a children's book he wrote that contains lessons such as "American values over autocracy," "benevolence over bigotry," and "the Constitution over the cult"—he was often greeted by protesters from local progressive groups who chanted "Grow a spine!" and carried signs that read "Jeffries! Be Ruthless" and "Book Tour? NOW?" This past February, after Jeffries asked Democratic members of Congress to sit in "silent defiance" during Trump's State of the Union address, Stephen Colbert cracked that "silent defiance" was "a bold rebrand of doing jack squat," adding, "As Martin Luther King once said, 'Sh-h-h.'" Amanda Litman, the head of the liberal group Run for Something, offered a "Godfather" reference, complaining to the *Times* that Jeffries "is not well suited to being a leader of the opposition—a wartime consigliere."

Jeffries maintains that he and the House Democrats have stood up to Trump plenty. He points to their decision to trigger government shutdowns to protect health-care benefits and to protest the White House's immigration-enforcement tactics, their multistate campaign to offset Republicans' gerrymandering efforts, and their repeated use of so-called discharge petitions, which has allowed them to force floor votes on bills opposed by the Republican leadership, including one that led to the release of the Department of Justice's files on Jeffrey Epstein. "From the standpoint of House Democrats, I certainly think that we've proceeded with a level of ruthless intensity," he told me.

Still, Jeffries knew that he needed to strongly condemn Trump's video. Even Republicans, who usually feigned ignorance about the President's social-media outbursts, were weighing in. "I do not feel the need to respond to every inflammatory statement made by the White House," Representative Mike Turner, a Republican from Ohio, wrote on X. "However, the release of images of former President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama is offensive, heart breaking, and unacceptable. President Trump should apologize." Jeffries didn't think that a post on X would suffice—"I wanted to do a direct-to-camera on this," he said—but he wasn't about to commandeer the living room of a donor's Palm Beach mansion. He asked his security detail to take him to a public park. "The question was: Am I just gonna say what I'm really feeling about it?" he recalled. "I decided, you know, I'm not gonna hold back." Standing beneath a sea-grape tree, his suit jacket buttoned and a wireless lavalier microphone attached to his lapel, Jeffries looked into an aide's iPhone and said, "Fuck Donald Trump!"

Almost immediately, Jeffries began to waver. He instructed staffers back in Washington to bleep the word "fuck." A few younger aides objected to the self-censorship but didn't press the point. Jeffries then asked his team to hold off on posting the video until he was done tending to the donor; he wanted to see how things played out. Later that day, when he learned that the White House had claimed that a staffer, not Trump, had "erroneously" made the post, his anger returned. "I think that's what probably put me over the edge," he said.

He gave his team the green light to post the video on Instagram. The response was immediate. Popular liberal accounts on Bluesky and X—not always the safest spaces for Jeffries—reposted the video. "🚨HUGE: Leader Hakeem Jeffries says 'FUCK DONALD TRUMP,'" @CalltoActivism, which has 1.2 million followers, wrote on X. "His ENTIRE statement is 🔥." That evening, MS NOW led with the video on its prime-time show "The Weeknight."

When I visited Jeffries in his office

"Hakeem is singularly focussed," a House Democrat said. "He's literally focussed on one thing—and that's becoming Speaker."

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID URBANKE

at the Capitol six days later, he still seemed to be savoring the moment. "There were pastors and other civil-rights leaders that I ran into that just said, 'Thank you for saying that, because that's what we all were feeling,'" he told me. Yet, as he sat in a silk-upholstered chair in front of a fireplace, he also couldn't quite hide some discomfort. Jeffries, who is fifty-five, with hazel eyes and a warm smile, is friendly but guarded; in interviews and even in casual conversation, he speaks in the same studied, staccato style that he uses on the House floor. Discussing the episode, he avoided repeating the phrase "Fuck Donald Trump," instead referring to "those three words." "It's not like I'm gonna adopt the practice of regularly speaking in this way," he said. Jeffries steepled his hands and let out a small sigh. The praise from the internet was nice. The praise from the pastors was even nicer. But, he said, "I haven't heard from my mother yet, so I'm a little concerned about that."

As the leader of the minority party in the House of Representatives, a fundamentally majoritarian institution, Jeffries has little ability to get anything done. Speaker Mike Johnson and his fellow-Republicans control the chamber's agenda, schedule, and procedures—and, as a result, can dictate most of its outcomes. The main thing Jeffries can do as Minority Leader is to help Democrats get back into the majority. Representative Jared Moskowitz, a Florida Democrat, told me, "Hakeem is singularly focussed. I mean, he's focussed on many things, but he's literally focussed on one thing—and that's becoming Speaker."

The other thing Jeffries can do as Minority Leader, which is in service of the first, is to keep the peace within his caucus. "He's very attuned to different voices and different factions within the Democratic coalition," Representative Jamie Raskin, a Democrat from Maryland, told me. Jeffries hosts a weekly sit-down, called the Crescendo Meeting, with the heads of nearly a dozen Democratic sub-caucuses, from the Blue Dogs and the progressives to the Black, Hispanic, Asian Pacific American, and women's caucuses. According to John Leganski, who served as the deputy chief of staff to the former Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, Jeffries once explained to McCarthy, "You have five families, Kevin. I've got eleven."

"Who's to say which of us is living life to the fullest, though?"

Jeffries is an inveterate texter and typically responds to messages within an hour. "Most people, if you ask them, 'Do you have a good relationship with Hakeem?,' they'd say, 'Yeah, I have a great relationship with Hakeem,'" Josh Gottheimer, a Democratic House member from New Jersey, said. "Everybody feels like they're in the inner circle." Jeffries told me, "The most important words that I can say to any member of Congress on any given issue are 'What do you think?'"

Not every House Democrat is a fan of this approach. "He's got to listen to people, but then he's got to say, 'This is what we should be doing,'" one Democratic member told me. Another said, "I think he views his role as entirely oriented around member management, and everything is viewed through the lens of keeping the different caucuses happy with him. I don't think he's really here to be a leader. I think he's here to become Speaker."

Multiple members pointed to an episode from last September, after the assassination of the conservative activist Charlie Kirk. Mike Johnson introduced a ceremonial measure that hailed Kirk as a "courageous American patriot" and called upon "all Americans—regardless of race, party affiliation, or creed—to reject political violence." But the resolution also described Kirk—who had claimed that "prowling Blacks go around for fun to go target white people" and that "Islam is the sword the left is using to slit the throat of America"—as someone who was known for "engaging in respectful, civil discourse" and "always seeking to elevate truth, foster understanding, and strengthen the Republic."

Jeffries believed that the resolution was designed as a trap for so-called front-line Democrats—two dozen or so vulnerable incumbents who represent purple or red districts. In a caucus meeting a few hours before the measure came to the floor, Jeffries and his leadership team announced that they would vote for the resolution, to provide cover for the front-liners, but that every member should feel free to "vote their conscience."

In the end, ninety-five Democrats voted for the Kirk resolution. The majority of Democrats who opposed it—fifty-eight in total—belonged to the Congressional Black Caucus. As the

group explained in a statement after the vote, its members considered the measure "an attempt to legitimize Kirk's worldview—a worldview that includes ideas many Americans find racist, harmful, and fundamentally un-American." White progressive Democrats who voted for the resolution felt blindsided by the C.B.C.'s opposition; C.B.C. members felt that Jeffries and his leadership team, by failing to provide specific voting instructions, had hung them out to dry. "They need to say, 'We understand that it's a gotcha resolution, so there's no right answer, but here's the answer,'" one Democrat told me.

In a subsequent ninety-minute Zoom call, C.B.C. members vented their frustrations to Jeffries; at least one of them was openly crying. "It became very toxic, volatile, and emotional," Joyce Beatty, a Democrat from Ohio and a former C.B.C. chair, said. But, she went on, the caucus's members ultimately felt that Jeffries had understood their concerns: "It takes a stronger and greater leader that can call all those people back together and work through the tears and the emotion and say, 'I handled it wrong.' "

Jeffries's "light touch," as several members described his leadership style, has also had some success. On February 26th, two days before Trump launched Operation Epic Fury, a joint assault with Israel on Iran, Jeffries announced that he planned to force a vote on a war-powers resolution that would prohibit further military force against the Islamic Republic without congressional approval. The onset of hostilities was enough to persuade around a hundred and eighty Democrats to support the measure. But there were still as many as thirty Democrats, many of them staunch supporters of Israel, who were not yet on board. On March 3rd, Jeffries invited several of the holdouts, including Gottheimer, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, of Florida, and Greg Landsman, of Ohio, to his office for a meeting. Gottheimer and Wasserman Schultz explained why they were still undecided; Landsman laid out his opposition to the resolution. Jeffries argued that, whatever members thought of Israel, or even of Iran, this was a vote for Congress's constitutional checks on the President. He later told me, "My view is that the best possible communication with people is to hear their thoughts, concerns, and ideas, if they're in a different place initially. And then just to make the case."

The war-powers resolution was ultimately defeated, but only four Democrats, including Landsman, voted against it. Jeffries told me that it was probably his "most aggressive whip effort" as leader. I mentioned that Gottheimer—who, along with Wasserman Schultz, ended up supporting the measure—had said he didn't feel like he'd been whipped especially hard. ("I walked away feeling heard, not pressured, if that makes sense," Gottheimer told me.) Jeffries responded, "And how did he vote?"

Jeffries has been the House Democratic leader for three and a half years, but he initially gained national attention in 2020, during Trump's first impeachment. On the opening day of the trial in the Senate, Trump's personal lawyer, Jay Sekulow, demanded, "Why are we here?" Jeffries, who was serving as a House impeachment manager, posited an answer. Standing in front of the Senate's marble rostrum, he launched into a minute-and-a-half recitation of the charges against Trump, who, in a phone call with the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, had appeared to solicit foreign interference in the 2020 election, threaten to withhold vital military aid, and subordinate the national-security interests of the United States for his own personal gain. "That is why we are here, Mr. Sekulow," Jeffries said. "And if you don't know, now you know."

The last line—a quote from the 1994 hip-hop classic "Juicy," by the Notorious B.I.G.—earned plaudits in a Maureen Dowd column (headlined "Notorious D.J.T. on Trial") and inspired a "Daily Show" joke about a rapping Mitch McConnell. ("My name is Mitch, and I don't have a jaw. I love the Senate and saying, 'Maaaw.'") But, for some Democrats, Jeffries's mike-drop moment—which has been commemorated with an "IF YOU DON'T KNOW, NOW YOU KNOW" throw pillow that sits on a couch in his D.C. office—prompted eye rolls. "I was, like, 'What are we doing?'" a Democratic strategist said. "Do we think this is cool? No, this is embarrassing."

Yet even Jeffries's detractors acknowledge that his hip-hop references—he's similarly fond of quoting Jay-Z, Salt-N-Pepa, and Naughty by Nature, among others—are an authentic expression of self. He was raised in Crown Heights during both the advent of hip-hop and the arrival of the crack epidemic; he is a product of what he has called "old-school Brooklyn, not gentrified Brooklyn." His parents, who met as students at Central State University, a historically Black college in Ohio, were both social workers. Jeffries remembers that, in his preteen years, his mother, Laneda, was often mugged on her way home from work. On one occasion, his father, Marland, went out with a saw to hunt down the culprits. "I don't know what happened with that saw," Jeffries said. "Whatever did happen, the statute of limitations is over."

Inside the Jeffries family's modest brownstone, Marland emphasized Afrocentrism and academic achievement. He wore dashikis and practiced Universal Shorei-Goju, a form of martial arts developed on the South Side of Chicago in the nineteen-sixties. Hakeem's middle name is Sekou, an homage to the Guinean statesman Ahmed Sékou Touré; his brother, Hasan, who is three years younger, was given the middle name Kwame, in honor of Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana. Marland held up his own brother, Leonard, who chaired the Black Studies Department at the City College of New York, as a role model, telling his sons, "Whatever you're going to be, you're going to be beyond a master's degree."

Laneda made Cornerstone Baptist Church another pillar of Jeffries's upbringing. Situated in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Cornerstone was one of Brooklyn's largest and most influential Black churches. Its longtime pastor, Sandy Ray, had been an adviser to Martin Luther King, Jr., who called him Uncle Sandy. Laneda taught Sunday school, and her sons were Cornerstone ushers, wearing white gloves and delivering a welcome address to visitors at the start of Sunday services. "Mom would never let us read our part," Jeffries recalled. "You had to memorize it. And we would just practice—boom—practice, practice, practice to get up there. And you're young, you're speaking in front of hundreds."

At Midwood High School, Jeffries hung out with a crew of boys who wore Lee jeans and leather bomber jackets,

and he once engaged in an after-school rap battle with a classmate. But Jeffries, an outstanding student who typically went straight home from baseball practice to study, remained more of a spectator than a participant in the borough's burgeoning hip-hop scene. Five miles away, the Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, and Busta Rhymes all attended Westinghouse, a vocational high school in downtown Brooklyn. I asked Jeffries what alumni Midwood, a highly competitive public school, could claim. "Woody Allen?" he offered.

In the fall of 1988, Jeffries arrived at the State University of New York at Binghamton. He found the school's distance from the bustle and violence of Brooklyn liberating—he joined a Black fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, eventually serving as its president, and later met the woman who would become his wife. In his junior year, Jeffries, who majored in political science, began devoting the bulk of his extracurricular energies to the university's Black Student Union. After he was elected as the group's political correspondent, he made weekly presentations on topics that ranged from South African apartheid to police brutality. "Hakeem was in charge of going over political and social situations around the world or in the country that affected Black students and the Black community," Carlos Pimentel, who was the B.S.U.'s president at the time, said. "And he was great at it."

But nothing prepared Jeffries for the tumult that engulfed SUNY Binghamton in the winter of 1992, his senior year, when the B.S.U. invited his uncle to campus. By then, Leonard Jeffries was one of the most controversial college professors in the country. In his classes at City College, he taught that people of European ancestry, whom he called "ice people," were fundamentally greedy and materialistic and that people of African descent, whom he called "sun people," were essentially generous and humanistic. He theorized that melanin gave Black people intellectual and physical superiority over whites. The previous summer, while speaking at a Black-arts-and-culture festival in Albany, he had endorsed the claim that "rich Jews helped finance the slave trade," described a George H. W. Bush Administration critic of Afrocentrism as a "Texas Jew," and alleged that a conspiracy against Black people had been "planned and plotted and programmed out of Hollywood" by "people called Greenberg and Weisberg and Trigliani."

Jewish students at SUNY Binghamton responded to the news that Leonard Jeffries would speak at their school by calling on the B.S.U. to rescind the invitation. The B.S.U. refused. It fell to Hakeem, as the group's political correspondent, to explain the reasoning. At a press conference, wearing a dashiki and sitting in front of a mural of Malcolm X, he made a free-speech argument. "The proper way to debate scholarship is with scholarship," he told reporters. But in an article for the B.S.U.'s publication, the *Vanguard*, he provided a more strident defense. "Dr. Jeffries has challenged the existing white supremacist educational system and the long-standing distortion of history," he wrote. "His reward has been a media lynching complete with character assassinations and inflammatory erroneous accusations." He cited the Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan as another Black figure who, like his uncle, had been maligned by "the white power structure and their propaganda emissaries, the media."

Leonard Jeffries ultimately gave his speech, urging an audience of more than eight hundred students to study African history and insisting that he was not an antisemite. (A month later, City College removed him as the head of the Black Studies Department.) Hakeem's brother, Hasan, now a history professor at Ohio State University, dedicated a book he published in 2009 about the early Black Power movement in Alabama to "Uncle Lenny, For Everything." But Hakeem rarely mentions his uncle. When I asked him about the Binghamton episode, he downplayed the *Vanguard* article. "It wasn't a central part of my four-year journey in college," he said. "It was a snapshot in time that I had long forgotten about." His most significant experience as an undergraduate, he went on, came two months later, during the Los Angeles riots in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict: "It was at that moment that I became committed to going to law school and to trying to be part of elevating this concept, to the greatest extent possible, of liberty and justice for all in the face of clear injustice."

Jeffries attended law school at N.Y.U. While there, he sought out the counsel of Patrick Gaspard, a New York political operative who later served in the Obama White House. Jeffries told him that he intended to go into private practice but that his real interest was in city politics. "I did not experience him as somebody who was against the system or was anti-establishment," Gaspard told me. "He struck me as a bit of a young man in a hurry, where he's already thinking through the next five steps in his life."

In 1998, Jeffries joined the white-shoe New York law firm Paul, Weiss, where he was taken under the wing of Ted Wells, the firm's only Black partner. "I used to tell him, 'You look—you're going to be a partner one day,'" Wells said. "And the more I talked about him becoming a partner, the more he kept talking about public service."

Jeffries had lived with his parents during law school to save money. Now, newly married, he bought a co-op apartment in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. It was in New York's Fifty-seventh Assembly District, which for nearly two decades had been represented by a former community organizer named Roger Green. In 2000, a few months shy of his thirtieth birthday, Jeffries announced that he was running against Green in the Democratic primary. Wells walked the halls of Paul, Weiss raising money for the campaign. Jeffrey Feldman, then the executive director of the Brooklyn Democratic Party, recalled that he first heard of Jeffries from another Paul, Weiss partner, who did legal work for the state Party. "He said, 'I have an associate who is just amazing, and we at the firm have agreed we're going to back him to the hilt,'" Feldman told me.

One of Green's top advisers was Letitia James, now the attorney general of New York; she had previously worked for Al Vann, a longtime assemblyman

and a power broker among Black Democrats in Brooklyn. "The difference between Hakeem and I is that I was the understudy of a lot of the Black political establishment and Hakeem was sort of on the sideline," James told me. "Hakeem was an outsider. I was an insider." Jeffries went on to lose the election by eighteen points. Two years later, he ran against Green again and lost by twenty-four points. James said, "The white-shoe firms don't have a lot of influence in central Brooklyn."

In 2006, Green announced that he was running for Congress, and Jeffries launched his third campaign for the Assembly seat. The biggest issue in the Democratic primary was the Atlantic Yards project, a multibillion-dollar real-estate-development plan that sought to put a basketball arena and thousands of new apartments in downtown Brooklyn. One candidate ran as a fervent booster, arguing that Atlantic Yards would bring jobs and housing to the area. Another candidate was an outspoken opponent, contending that the project was a sop to developers. Jeffries, who had left Paul, Weiss to work as an in-house counsel at CBS, managed to avoid staking out a strong position, telling the *Times*, "Essentially, yes to affordable housing, no to eminent domain abuse, no to commercial skyscrapers, and yes to an open process." Lauren Bierman, who managed his campaign, told me, "Jeffries handled Atlantic Yards the way Jeffries handles most things: very strategically." He won in a landslide, with sixty-four per cent of the vote.

In Albany, Jeffries was part of a group of young Black and Latino lawmakers from New York City who played pickup basketball together and plotted legislative strategy over beers at a Bonefish Grill. New York was in the process of repealing many of the punitive drug laws that were passed under Governor Nelson Rockefeller in the nineteen-seventies. As the most accomplished lawyer in the group—"It was not common for Big Law attorneys to find a career in the legislature," Jonathan Bing, a former assemblyman, told me—Jeffries often took the lead on criminal-justice issues. He sponsored legislation that made open possession of small quantities of marijuana a violation rather than a misdemeanor and introduced a bill that ended the practice of "prison-based gerrymandering," in which inmates were counted as voters in the district where they were incarcerated rather than at their home address.

Jeffries's signature legislative effort involved the New York City Police Department's stop-and-frisk policy. Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, police officers conducted street searches of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers each year, the vast majority of whom were Black or Latino and had not committed a crime. Additionally, the N.Y.P.D. maintained a database of the names, addresses, and other personal information of individuals who were subjected to street searches—almost ninety per cent of whom hadn't been arrested or issued a summons. Jeffries and Eric Adams, a former police officer who was then a state senator from Brooklyn, sponsored legislation that barred the N.Y.P.D. from storing the personal information of those who were stopped and released. The bill, which was signed into law in 2010, was among the first instances of New York taking legislative action to stop racial profiling. "I was doing the marches in the street, and Hakeem was doing the legislation," the Reverend Al Sharpton told me. "He was the guy to legislate our movement."

But Jeffries was also careful not to run too far afoul of Bloomberg. The stop-and-frisk legislation curtailed only the kinds of information that police could keep after the searches—not the searches themselves. At times, officials in the Mayor's office viewed Jeffries as an ally. When Bloomberg, a strong proponent of education reform, was seeking to increase the number of charter schools in the city, Jeffries co-sponsored a bill that more than doubled the state's charter-school cap.

By then, Jeffries was eying a run for Congress. In 2008, Kevin Powell, a community activist and a former cast member of MTV's "The Real World," launched a primary campaign against Edolphus Towns, a septuagenarian Democratic congressman who'd represented parts of Brooklyn for twenty-five years. A top political adviser for Jeffries went to work on Towns's campaign—the logic being that, if Towns lost, there was no telling how long Powell, who was just forty-two, might occupy the seat. Towns won, and then won again two years later. But by 2012, when Towns announced that he was running for his sixteenth term, Jeffries was tired of waiting. He mounted his own primary challenge, campaigning on the slogan "We deserve more."

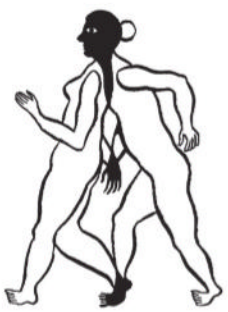
Four months into the race, Towns announced his retirement, and threw his support behind another candidate, Charles Barron, a former Black Panther and a three-term city councilman who had identified the Libyan dictator

"My apologies. I intended to take that down before your visit."

Muammar Qaddafi as one of his heroes. On Election Day, Jeffries got seventy-two per cent of the vote.

A decade ago, Bradley Tusk, a political consultant and venture capitalist, invited Jeffries to his offices on Park Avenue. Tusk, who'd been a top adviser to Bloomberg, was looking for someone to challenge Bill de Blasio in the 2017 Democratic primary for mayor. As he delivered his pitch—the untold millions of dollars the city's business community was willing to spend to get rid of de Blasio, the power and prestige that come with being the mayor of New York—Tusk thought that he could see Jeffries, who was in his second term in Congress, warming to the idea. "But I made the mistake of saying to him that no New York City mayor has ever been elected to anything after being mayor," Tusk told me. "And he was pretty much, like, 'All right, I'm out.' That was the end of the conversation."

Tusk believes that Jeffries passed on the mayoral run because he already had his sights on the Speakership. Jeffries, for his part, was far too careful to broadcast any grand plans. He had arrived in Congress in 2013 to considerable fanfare—during the campaign, the Washington *Post* had floated the nickname "Brooklyn's Barack"—but his new colleagues did not immediately peg him as a striver. The former congressman Denny Heck, of Washington State, who was elected the same year as Jeffries, became one of his earliest friends on Capitol Hill. "Oftentimes, people who have ambition, that want to get to the top of the heap, they're scratching and clawing all the time," Heck, who is now Washington's lieutenant governor, told me. "That's never the feeling Hakeem leaves you with, ever."



Not long after Jeffries was sworn in, he arranged a meeting with Steve Israel, a House member from New York, who chaired the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. "There are some members who come in and say, 'I'm going to raise a ton of money,'" Israel told me. "There are some members who show up and say they want to be involved in having a high profile in the caucus." But Jeffries, he went on, took a different approach: "My conversation with him was him saying, 'How can I help?'" Israel enlisted Jeffries in the unglamorous work of recruiting candidates. When the D.C.C.C. needed House members to show up at Washington fund-raising events and essentially serve as warm bodies, Israel could count on Jeffries. "He struck me from the beginning as somebody who was perfectly happy working under the hood," Israel said. "He was one of those rare members who was just willing to be operational."

Jeffries's colleagues in the Congressional Black Caucus were the first to look beyond his self-effacing, workmanlike manner and see a future Party leader. The C.B.C., which was founded in 1971 with thirteen members, had long sought to elevate Black representatives to chair important House committees or to serve in leadership. In 1993, Ron Dellums, of California, became the first Black chairman of the Armed Services Committee. In 2006, James Clyburn, of South Carolina, became the first Black member to serve as Majority Whip. The following year, John Conyers, of Michigan, and Charles Rangel, of New York, became the first Black chairmen of the Judiciary and the Ways and Means Committees, respectively. And those C.B.C. members paid it forward: Rangel, for instance, mentored Eddie Bernice Johnson, of Texas, and Gregory Meeks, of New York, who eventually became the chairs of the Science and the Foreign Affairs Committees. By the time Jeffries arrived in Congress, the C.B.C.'s growth—it then had forty-two members—and the election of a Black President had awakened the group to larger possibilities. "The C.B.C. has had this burning desire to have a Black Speaker," a former aide to a C.B.C. member told me.

Johnson and Meeks began grooming Jeffries for the job. Joyce Beatty, the congresswoman from Ohio, recalled a time during Jeffries's first term when Johnson, who passed away in 2023, took him aside and said, "Hakeem, you're going to go up in leadership, and I'm going to help you." Meeks told me, "Charlie always tried to think about what you can do and where you could be in the future. He did that for me. So it was the same with Hakeem."

In 2016, after Trump was elected President, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi encouraged Jeffries to run for co-chair of the Democratic Policy and Communications Committee, the House Democrats' messaging arm. "When she saw somebody who was operational and not showboating, that to her was the gold standard," Israel, who was then one of Pelosi's top lieutenants, said. "Hakeem was in that category." Jeffries used the job to introduce himself to the Democratic caucus; he and his co-chairs held individual "listening sessions" with each sub-caucus—the eleven families—to ask members what the Democrats' message should be. The result was the 2018-midterms slogan "For the people," which wasn't exactly "Change we can believe in" or "Make America great again," but was still better than the committee's second choice, "For all of U.S." That November, Democrats took back the House, picking up forty seats—the Party's largest gain since the post-Watergate midterms, in 1974. Jeffries was hailed as a messaging genius, and his status as a rising star was cemented.

But the most important election result for Jeffries that year may have come months earlier, when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a twenty-eight-year-old bartender with no previous electoral experience, upset Joe Crowley in the Democratic primary for New York's Fourteenth Congressional District. Crowley, a ten-term incumbent, was the chairman of the Democratic caucus, the fourth-ranking Democrat in the House. The second- and third-ranking Democrats—Steny Hoyer, of Maryland, and Clyburn—were, like Pelosi, in their late seventies. It was therefore assumed that, when Pelosi eventually stepped down as the Democrats' leader, she would pass the baton to Crowley.

Crowley's defeat set off a scramble among ambitious House Democrats. In the race for caucus chair, Jeffries faced Barbara Lee and Linda Sánchez, two members from California. Initially, it was thought that Jeffries and Lee, who were both members of the C.B.C., would split the Black vote and that Sánchez, who was the fifth-ranking Democrat at the time, would win. But, that November, Sánchez's husband was indicted for misusing federal funds, and she dropped out of the race. Lee, who was seventy-two, would have been the first Black woman to serve in Party leadership. Jeffries cast

FOR/AGAINST SUMMER, A SPELL

Despite the chill in the spine, by the sweat of dust,
by the dew on sorrel, the bile in the buttercup,
in sorrowship dues, in sap, on the spines of pines,
despite the winter of hearts, summer came.

Despite the speech-made wind, summer came,
by the sweat of crickets, the spin of drones,
by the spat of stomachs, by toot, by the rat-a-tat,
despite the sore-throat roosters, summer came.

Despite the sore-throat swallows and one stone,
despite the planted crosses and flowers cut,
despite the planted crosses and flowers cut,
despite the hush of children, summer came.

Despite the chill of children, summer came,
despite the winter of children, summer came.

—Valzhyna Mort

himself as the face of generational change. In late November, three weeks after Democrats reclaimed the House, Jeffries prevailed by ten votes—becoming both caucus chairman and Pelosi's heir apparent.

After the 2022 midterms returned the Democrats to the minority, Pelosi announced that she was stepping down as their leader. Two weeks later, Jeffries was unanimously elected as her replacement, culminating "a remarkably frictionless climb of the party ladder," as *Politico* put it. But Jeffries's ascent wasn't entirely without incident. At one point, it was suggested that Clyburn, a veteran of the civil-rights movement, could replace Pelosi as a "bridge" Speaker, serving for one term while helping to train the next generation of leaders. Meeks worried that, given the Democratic caucus's complicated racial dynamics, such a move would derail Jeffries's own chances of one day stepping into the role. He dissuaded Clyburn from pursuing the idea. "Greg was very clear in that period that he was not going to let Hakeem ever be seen as the bad guy in all of this," a prominent Democrat said. "He told him, 'I'll take the heat.'"

When Jeffries is not in Washington or out raising money, he can often be found in a Brooklyn church. On a blustery Saturday morning in March, I accompanied him as he attended Seventh-day Adventist services in Brownsville and East New York, two predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods, where he spoke about Medicare and read from the Gospel of Mark. He was dressed in a blue suit, a white shirt, and a periwinkle tie, and his feet were shod in the white-soled black leather sneakers favored by middle-aged men trying to look younger and geriatric men trying to avoid falling down. As a result of the war in Iran, Jeffries's security detail had been bumped up from four Capitol Police officers to six, and he traversed Brooklyn in a three-S.U.V. motorcade. "In the House, you can't lose touch with the district you represent, because that's when the openings come—that's when people think they can come in," he told me. "I'm not gonna let that happen."

Ocasio-Cortez's defeat of Crowley not only opened a path for Jeffries to move up in Party leadership; it also heralded the arrival of a new voting bloc of young progressive New Yorkers—many of whom were associated with the Democratic Socialists of America—that was hostile to establishment figures like Jeffries. Justice Democrats, a progressive group that powered Ocasio-Cortez's victory, reportedly deemed Jeffries its "highest priority" target to primary in 2020, before abandoning the effort. Last year, Jabari Brisport, a democratic-socialist state senator whose district overlaps with Jeffries's, said that the congressman was "rapidly growing out of touch with an insurgent and growing progressive base within his own district that he should pay more attention to."

Jeffries shows uncharacteristic emotion when discussing the D.S.A., which, while claiming to organize on behalf of the underclass, has a reputation for being populated mostly by white, college-educated newcomers to the city. "It's time for the virtue signalers to stop shadowboxing on social media," Jeffries told *The Atlantic* in 2021. "Recruit a candidate, put on the boxing gloves, get in the ring, and we can work this out on the ground." But, absent a primary challenge, he has often taken the fight to the D.S.A., wading into multiple down-ballot races in Brooklyn in recent years. Lupe Todd-Medina, a Democratic strategist and a longtime Jeffries ally, is currently advising a State Senate candidate running against Brisport. "We have to preserve the district," Todd-Medina told me. "My job is to protect the home base." But Jeffries's efforts, which have achieved mixed results, have also elicited concerns from some of his supporters. One Democratic consultant, who has a good relationship with Jeffries, told me, "It's, like, Dude, why are you fighting in these small wars against fucking losers like Jabari Brisport? Why are you getting involved in these things?"

Jeffries's antipathy toward the D.S.A. stems from a larger concern that many Black working-class people like his parents—"Did they ever make more than fifty thousand dollars a year?" he wondered—can no longer afford to rent apartments, much less buy brownstones, in the neighborhoods where he spent his childhood. Someone close to Jeffries told me, "For a child of central Brooklyn who grew up at a time when, frankly, white people would not dare set foot in Bedford-Stuyvesant or Crown Heights but who now have the temerity to not only want to live there but then be critical of those who stayed there when no one else would—that to him is personal." At one point, when I was riding with Jeffries through Brownsville, after he'd appeared at a public-housing complex with the district's assemblywoman, Latrice Walker, I asked if the D.S.A. had ever tried to primary her. He shook his head and gestured at the passing projects. "From a D.S.A. standpoint,"

he said, "there's nothing here for them."

Jeffries—who likes to describe his caucus as spanning the ideological spectrum from Ocasio-Cortez (its "most progressive member") to Gottheimer (its "most moderate, centrist member")—is not perceived as someone who holds strong positions on many issues. "He's intentionally trying not to stand for anything," a former Democratic congressional aide told me. "He's sort of like hotel art. He just is. And it's satisfactory."

Ironically, one of the few issues that Jeffries is identified with is the very topic that now most threatens to divide the Democratic Party. From his earliest days in politics, Jeffries has been a strong supporter of Israel, taking his first trip there when he was in the State Assembly and visiting five more times with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, as a member of Congress. (The radio host Charlamagne tha God, a Jeffries critic, calls the Democratic leader "AIPAC Shakur.") "I represent the ninth most African American district in the country and the sixteenth most Jewish," Jeffries boasted on the American Jewish Committee's podcast in 2023. He frequently jokes that Jerusalem is New York's "sixth borough."

For most of Jeffries's career, his pro-Israel position was in line with mainstream Democratic sentiment. When he arrived in Congress, fifty-five per cent of Democrats surveyed by Gallup said that their sympathies lay more with Israelis than with Palestinians. But public opinion has flipped since 2023, when Israel, in retaliation for Hamas's October 7th attack, launched a military campaign in Gaza. In a recent Gallup poll, sixty-five per cent of Democrats said that they sympathize more with Palestinians. Jeffries appears mindful of the shift: last summer, he skipped the annual trip to Israel for first-term House Democrats, which is sponsored by AIPAC; two years earlier, he'd helped lead it.

"I think he realizes how toxic AIPAC has become for Democrats," Alan Solomont, a former finance chair of the Democratic National Committee, who is a major donor to Jewish causes, told me. Last September, for the first time, Jeffries accepted the endorsement of J Street, a center-left pro-Israel lobbying group that supports a two-state solution and is viewed as a more progressive alternative to AIPAC. "He's still overwhelmingly committed to the safety and security of Israel," a Jewish leader involved in Democratic politics said. "Moving to J Street doesn't diminish that but puts it in a different frame that is more consistent with the view that this government in Israel is doing things that are very dangerous to the safety and security of Israel."

Last year, as Zohran Mamdani gained steam in New York's Democratic mayoral primary, Jeffries found himself in an increasingly uncomfortable position. Mamdani, then an assemblyman from Queens, was not only a D.S.A. member and a vocal critic of Israel but also a roommate of Brisport's when the legislature was in session in Albany. Even after Mamdani secured the Democratic nomination, in June—winning more than sixty per cent of the vote in parts of Jeffries's district—the congressman refused to back him, saying that Mamdani had not done enough to "convince folks that he is prepared to aggressively address the rise of antisemitism." Finally, in late October, a day before the start of early voting in the general election, Jeffries offered Mamdani his endorsement—something that Chuck Schumer, Jeffries's fellow-Brooklynite and the Senate Minority Leader, pointedly declined to do. Patrick Gaspard, a Mamdani adviser, served as a liaison between the campaign and Jeffries. "There was never a single moment in that entire period where I believed and was given any impression that the endorsement was off the table," Gaspard said.

Less than two weeks after Mamdani's victory, Chi Ossé, a twenty-seven-year-old New York City councilman and D.S.A. member, filed paperwork to challenge Jeffries in the 2026 Democratic primary. Ossé, an early Mamdani supporter, declared, "The Democratic Party's leadership is not only failing to effectively fight back against Donald Trump, they have failed to deliver a vision that we can all believe in." Two days later, both Ossé and Mamdani went to a Manhattan church to address a contingent of the D.S.A.'s New York chapter. Ossé asked for the D.S.A.'s endorsement in his race, but Mamdani urged the group to withhold it. "The choice before us is not whether to vote for Chi or Hakeem at the ballot box," Mamdani said, according to the *Times*. "The choice is how to spend the next year. Do we want to spend it defending caricatures of our movement, or do we want to spend it fulfilling the agenda at the heart of that very same movement?" The D.S.A. ultimately chose not to endorse Ossé, and in mid-December he withdrew from the race.

On a recent afternoon, as Jeffries met with me in his D.C. office, he could see a bearded man on the Capitol's east lawn, sitting next to a sign that read "Remove Senile President. 25th Amendment Now." Jeffries told me at one point, "We're living in Alexander Hamilton's worst nightmare at this moment in time." When he served as a House impeachment manager, he studied the Federalist Papers and the writings that emerged from the Constitutional Convention. Hamilton's biggest fear, Jeffries said, "was that one day a demagogue might manage to get elected as President and, over a four-year period of time, try to become a tyrant."

In the early days of Trump's second Presidency, as the Department of Government Efficiency ran roughshod over the federal government and the White House issued a fusillade of executive orders that sought to, among other things, end birthright citizenship, withdraw the U.S. from the World Health Organization, and ban transgender individuals from military service, Democrats appeared particularly powerless. "I'm trying to figure out what leverage we actually have," Jeffries said at a press briefing eighteen days after Trump's Inauguration. "They control the House, the Senate, and the Presidency. It's their government. What leverage do we have?"

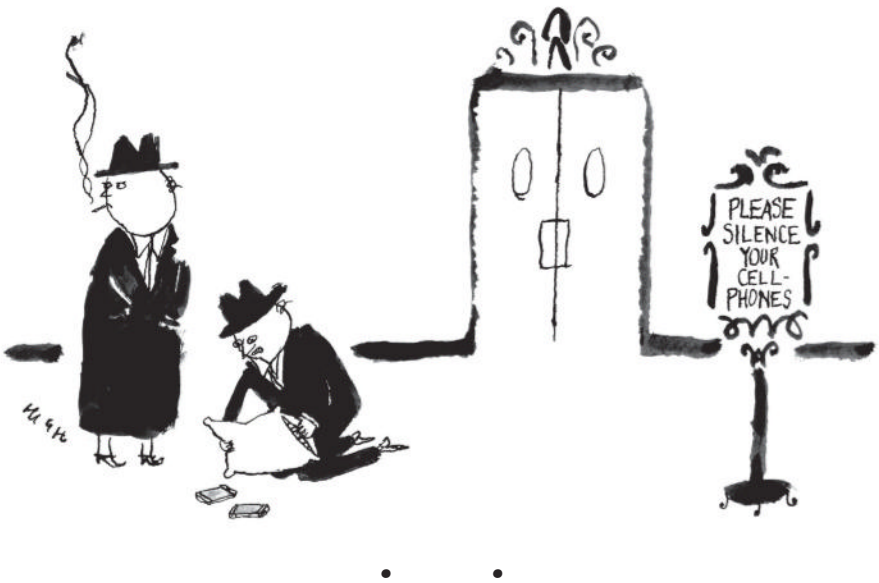
That March, he thought he found some. Jeffries believed that a government shutdown would give his party a chance to make its case to the American people—"In a shutdown, you got to cover both sides," he said of the media—and he and every other House Democrat, save one, voted against a G.O.P. stopgap spending bill to fund the government. But Schumer and nine other Senate Democrats voted to advance the bill, and the shutdown was averted. Jeffries couldn't hide his frustration. "Next question," he told reporters when asked if Democrats needed new leadership in the Senate. By late

summer, as the government's funding was set to run out again, Jeffries was working closely with Schumer to make sure that Democrats in the House and the Senate were in alignment.

This time, the issue confronting Jeffries and Schumer was not whether to shut down the government—Democratic voters would revolt if they didn't—but what the funding fight should be about. In September, when House Democrats gathered for a post-recess caucus meeting, several members argued that their message should focus on big themes, such as authoritarianism and corruption. Jeffries pushed back, saying that Democrats should make the shutdown about health care. "The way I characterized it is that health care right now is the first among equals," Jeffries told me. "We got to fight them on all the things, but we can't fight them on all the things from a narrative standpoint and think that any one thing is going to break through."

For forty-three days, Democrats insisted that they would not vote to reopen the government unless Republicans agreed to extend Affordable Care Act tax credits, which had helped more than twenty million Americans afford coverage and were set to expire at the end of the year. Jeffries, whose second-favorite mantra is "Simplicity and repetition," later boasted, " 'Health care' were the two consistent words that we repeated over and over and over again, week after week." Republicans, by contrast, exhibited much less message discipline, one day arguing that the shutdown was about Democrats trying to give free health care to undocumented immigrants, the next day saying that extending the A.C.A. tax credits would be a boon for the insurance industry. By the time the shutdown ended, in mid-November, when Senate Democrats approved a trio of full-year spending bills in exchange for a promised vote on the tax credits, polls showed that more Americans blamed Republicans for the impasse than Democrats. "It was the first time in American history that the party that was at least perceived as withholding votes by making a demand actually won public sentiment consistently," Jeffries said. "That's never happened before."

After the shutdown, Jeffries remained on the offensive. He managed to collect the necessary two hundred and eighteen signatures—including four from Republicans in vulnerable seats—on a discharge petition to force a vote on a three-year extension of the A.C.A. credits. (The measure passed the House but has yet to receive a vote in the Senate.) Indeed, the discharge petition has become one of the Democrats' favorite tools in this Congress: in addition to using it to force the release of the Epstein files, they've used it to hold votes on securing protections for Haitian immigrants and collective-bargaining rights for federal employees. Lauren Bierman, Jeffries's former campaign manager, recalled how Amanda Litman, of Run for Something, had invoked "The Godfather" to criticize the Democratic leader. "I actually think he *is* a wartime consigliere," Bierman told me. "Sonny gets shot. They didn't watch the movie."



Jeffries's biggest battle with the White House began last summer, when Trump hatched an audacious plan to have multiple red states redraw their congressional maps to add more Republican seats, six years in advance of the traditional post-census redistricting process. The first target was Texas, where the White House was pushing the state's Republicans to draw a new map that would create five more G.O.P.-friendly congressional districts.

For years, prominent Democrats had fought to eliminate partisan gerrymandering. Jeffries was one of them; he appeared in the 2010 documentary "Gerrymandering" to describe how, a year after his first primary challenge, against Roger Green, the State Legislature had redrawn its election maps to excise Jeffries's apartment building from Green's Assembly district. ("Brooklyn politics can be pretty rough," he said in the interview, "but that move was gangster.") Now Jeffries believed that Democrats needed to respond in kind to Trump with their own gerrymandering effort in blue states. To do otherwise, he said, would be to "unilaterally disarm."

Jeffries first looked to California, where an independent commission had drawn a map that, in 2024, gave Democrats forty-three of the state's fifty-two congressional seats. Pete Aguilar, the chair of the Democratic caucus and Jeffries's No. 3, who represents a district in California's Inland Empire, determined that Democrats could gain five more seats, offsetting the Texas gerrymander. Jeffries addressed the Democratic members of the California delegation, for whom "redistricting is the most personal thing," Aguilar said. Eventually, all forty-three California Democrats signed off on a new map. In November, California's governor, Gavin Newsom, with the backing of a hundred-and-twenty-two-million-dollar campaign, helped persuade a majority of the state's voters to approve a ballot measure making the map official. "Getting a ballot initiative across the line is huge, and that was Gavin for sure," a Democratic consultant who worked on the redistricting effort told me. "But the map that was adopted was Hakeem Jeffries's."

The Texas and California gambits

were the first moves in an elaborate game of gerrymandering chess between the White House and Jeffries. Last summer, Trump began leaning on Republicans in Indiana to redraw their congressional maps so that the G.O.P. would gain two seats. Jeffries countered by working with the governor of Illinois, J. B. Pritzker, who threatened to redraw his state's congressional maps to add two Democratic seats. In December, the Indiana legislature torpedoed the new maps, and Pritzker dropped his threat. After Trump got Republicans in Missouri and North Carolina to push through new congressional maps that gave the G.O.P. an extra seat in each state, Jeffries pressed reluctant Democrats in Virginia to launch a ballot initiative that was expected to net the Party an additional four seats. "He basically just said, 'Hey, I got you. You got to get it done,'" Don Scott, the speaker of Virginia's House of Delegates, told me. "I just think the man's got huge cojones."

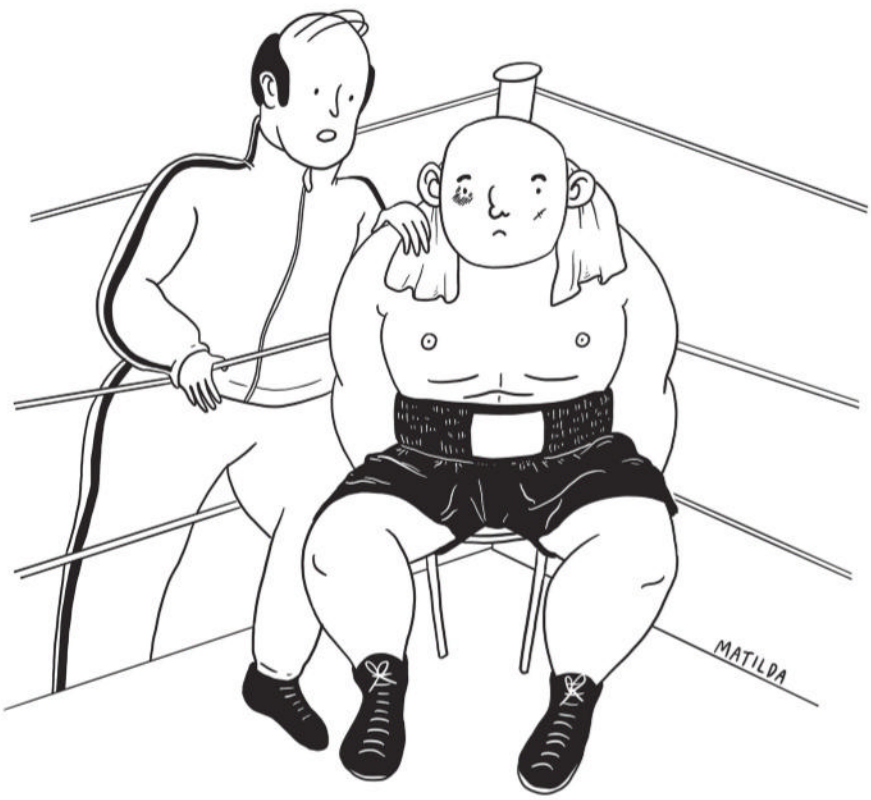
Earlier this spring, Jeffries told me that he believed Democrats had fought Republicans at least to a draw. He noted that the new maps in Texas were based on the 2024 election, in which Trump posted historic gains among Latino voters, and that, with the President's approval ratings now cratering, those gains might not hold this fall. "They have overplayed their hand," Jeffries said. "We are going to win this fight. As we said from the very beginning, they started it, but we will end it."

On Election Night in 2024, as Jeffries monitored the results from a conference room in D.C., he was accompanied by Wilkie Cornelius, a high-school friend who's now a filmmaker in Brooklyn. Going into the evening, Jeffries was cautiously optimistic, based on reams of internal polling, that House Democrats were going to win enough competitive races to reclaim the majority—which is why Cornelius was there. If Democrats had won, Jeffries would have made history by becoming the first Black Speaker of the House. Cornelius would have captured the moment with his camera.

When I asked Jeffries what he thought the Democrats had done wrong in 2024, his response was characteristically conventional. First, Joe Biden's decision to run for a second term hurt the Party, Jeffries said. (He elided his own role in propping up Biden: when the *Wall Street Journal* reported, in January, 2024, that the President had been incoherent during a briefing with congressional leaders, Jeffries, at the White House's urging, had provided a statement describing Biden as "incredibly strong, forceful and decisive.") Second, Jeffries said that Democrats had "failed to convince the American people" that their party had answers to the country's two biggest concerns: "inflation and the situation at the border."

Jeffries also maintained that, aside from the Presidential race, Democrats had done well in 2024. "As House Democrats, we actually overperformed the national environment considerably," he said. "We didn't lose seats—we gained seats," cutting the Republicans' House majority from ten to three. What's more, Jeffries argued that Democrats had been on a roll since the 2024 election. "There were some folks who were of the view that Democrats were incapable of winning elections," he told me in early April. "Interestingly enough, for the last fifteen consecutive months, we've won every meaningful election that has taken place in this country, up and down the ballot, for all sorts of offices and in all kinds of different states, including deep-red ones."

The Democrats' momentum seemed to come to an abrupt halt in the immediate aftermath of Virginia's redistricting referendum, which passed on April 21st. First, Florida's Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, unveiled a new map that could give the G.O.P. up to four new congressional seats. Then, on April 29th, the Supreme Court issued a decision in Louisiana v. Callais, which gutted a key provision of the Voting Rights Act; Republicans in Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Tennessee quickly moved to redraw their congressional maps ahead of the midterms to eliminate at least four majority-Black districts. Finally, on May 8th, the Virginia Supreme Court overturned the state's redistricting referendum, reducing the Democrats' potential gains from ten seats to six. Republicans, meanwhile, had managed to redraw as many as fourteen districts in their favor, and were closing in on several more. "The Republican



"It's not about how hard you hit. It's about how good you look in shorts."

strategy is to cheat to win," Jeffries said.

The events triggered a sense of panic among Democrats. C.B.C. stalwarts, including Clyburn, suddenly faced the prospect of being drawn out of their districts, and the group said that as many as nineteen of its fifty-eight members now might not survive the midterms. Emanuel Cleaver, a Black Democrat from Missouri, declared that his party was in a "battle of life and death" against "a bold and sinister attempt to throw us back into the 1950s."

Jeffries told me that the current estimates of the G.O.P.'s redistricting gains are overblown, and that, given the political climate, Republicans will pick up only "a handful of seats as a result of their gerrymandering." Still, he conceded that there was little more Democrats could do before the midterms. He had rejected a legal strategy, suggested by some Democrats in Virginia, to replace the members of the state's Supreme Court in order to revive the redistricting effort there. But he promised to lead an ambitious campaign to gerrymander at least seven more blue states before the 2028 election. "They're gonna proceed with diabolical intensity," he said of the Republicans. "And we don't just have to match it—we have to exceed it with righteous intensity."

Most election analysts still predict that the Democrats will take back the House in November. Amy Walter, the editor of the nonpartisan *Cook Political Report*, recently likened the new G.O.P. districts to sandbags that coastal residents pile in front of their homes before a hurricane: "The bags may help mitigate the damage, but they can't completely stop the flooding." And, despite all the flak directed at Jeffries from his party's base, most Democrats believe that, if they do win back the House, he will become the Speaker in January. Trump seems to have started to consider this possibility. After ignoring Jeffries for most of his tenure as the Democratic leader—"The first time he uttered my name publicly was probably in the fall of 2025," Jeffries told me—the President repeatedly posted about Jeffries on Truth Social this spring, deeming him "a low IQ individual" and "a THUG" and calling for his arrest.

The question facing Jeffries and House Democrats, should they return to the majority, is what they will be able to accomplish in the final two years of Trump's Presidency. "Our focus will be to deliver on our promise to make life more affordable for the American people," Jeffries told me. "We're going to aggressively move forward with a legislative agenda that is designed to bring down the cost of a house, bring down the cost of health care, and bring down the cost of groceries, along with utility bills and child care." But even if the Democrats manage to take back the Senate—where they face much steeper odds than in the House—there will still be the matter of Trump's veto power. A Democratic House's legislative agenda will inevitably be a series of messaging bills. "It'll make the case in '28 for us to say, We've passed all this in the House," Representative Ro Khanna, a Democrat from California, said. "Give us the White House so we can actually make this law."

A more concrete project that a Democratic House could undertake relates to investigations. "One of the lessons of this moment is going to have to be that when we have the ability to advance the ball, certainly on issues that are designed to make life better for the American people, but also in the context of accountability, we've got to move fast and aggressively," Jeffries told me.

Since last year, Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee have sent more than a hundred and thirty investigative letters to the Trump Administration, on topics ranging from Department of Justice employees who were fired because they had worked on January 6th cases to the Administration's handling of antitrust policy. "There's just a landslide of corruption," Jamie Raskin, the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, said. If Raskin becomes the committee's chairman, many of those investigative letters will become subpoenas. Robert Garcia, the ranking member of the House Oversight Committee, told me that, as chairman, he would dig deeper into the Epstein scandal, while also policing the Trump Administration and going after corporate malfeasance: "Whether it's a corporation, whether it's folks trying to harm the American public, we're going to have the ability to engage anyone, and we're going to."

Of course, the last time Democrats controlled the House and Trump was President, Nancy Pelosi was Speaker. After Trump's State of the Union address in 2019, Jeffries marvelled at how Pelosi had quieted rambunctious Democrats during the speech: "She put up a hand, and it was as if the seas parted." Even Jeffries's admirers concede that it will take time for him to emerge from her shadow. "By February or March of next year, there's going to be a lot of 'Well, she would never do it this way, she did it that way,'" one senior congressional aide said. "He's going to have to contend with that and build his own style." A House Democrat told me, "He's going to have to get tougher."

Hovering over all of this is the existential matter of whether Jeffries and a Democratic House majority can begin to shore up their party's longer-term fortunes. A recent Pew Research poll found that fifty-nine per cent of voters have an unfavorable view of the Democratic Party. In other words, just because voters don't like Trump doesn't mean that they like Democrats. "The biggest question now is whether we are just surfing on Trump's incompetence and Trump's cruelty," Gaspard, the political operative, said. "Or whether we have an affirmative vision of the future that will take us beyond the historic, cyclical thing that happens in the midterms toward being able to organize for durable majorities in 2028 and beyond."

Cornelius, Jeffries's high-school friend, told me that he expects to spend Election Night with Jeffries again this November. He will have his camera with him to document the moment when, he hopes, Jeffries takes his biggest step toward becoming Speaker. But Cornelius acknowledged that the history-making occasion won't be the same as it would have been in 2024. "There's such a necessity to win, so it won't even be a celebration," he said. "It'll kind of be, like, O.K., that was great. Now we have work to do." ♦

MARX BROTHER

Boots Riley's zany movies combine pop aesthetics with radical politics.

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

On a cool, drizzly day in Oakland, California, the film director Boots Riley often seemed less like a person than like a landmark—clockable from a distance. In part, this was because Riley, who is fifty-five, wore a gargantuan, lumpy tomato-red felt hat with a wide brim, like the cowboy hat worn by Quick Draw McGraw in the old Hanna-Barbera cartoons. It was January, 2025, and Riley was taking a lunch break from editing his second movie, the caper film "I Love Boosters." On his way to a burrito joint, he was stopped on nearly every block, often by fans of "Sorry to Bother You," his surreal sci-fi movie about an Oakland telemarketer, from 2018, or of his equally loopy 2023 Amazon TV series, "I'm a Virgo," about a sheltered thirteen-foot-tall Black teenage boy. Some people quoted lines from his nineties hip-hop group, the Coup; others knew him from the 2011 protest encampment Occupy Oakland.

No matter who walked up, Riley slowed down. Oakland has become a city of artists, and often people just wanted to talk shop. A skate-store owner had plans for his own caper movie; so did a guy from a sign store. A musician called Big Hungry, who was starting a "digital music salon," thanked Riley for hooking him up with a writing group. In each encounter, Riley, a chill, hangdog figure with mutton chops and a spray of freckles, was soft-spoken and receptive, curious and unhurried, but also a little elusive when necessary, knowing when to drift away. His friend Pete Lee, a photographer and a filmmaker, once recalled the default question that Riley uses to identify friendly semi-strangers he can't remember: "So—what are you working on?"

On our way back to Riley's editing suite, we passed a mural of Oakland notables, an image that included the hip-hop luminary Tupac Shakur and Pam the Funkstress—the d.j. for the Coup, who died at the age of fifty-one, after complications from surgery. A skinny man wearing a GoPro spotted Riley from a block away, whipped his head around like Wile E. Coyote, and barrelled toward us. "*You* should be on a mural!" the man yelled.

"I'm not done yet!" Riley shouted back.

All week, Riley had been struggling to hone the rhythms of "I Love Boosters," which was slated to première that fall. The film, inspired by a track from the Coup's 2006 album, "Pick a Bigger Weapon," is a Robin Hood story in which the Velvet Gang, a crew of shoplifting "boosters" led by an Oakland resident named Corvette (Keke Palmer), squares off with a venal, worker-exploiting, idea-stealing billionaire designer, Christie Smith, played by Demi Moore. But, like all of Riley's projects, the movie defies easy summary: it is a screwball farce, a Day-Glo dystopia, a heist flick, a sci-fi adventure, and a psychedelic social satire, double-stuffed with anti-capitalist themes and absurdist detours, plus a touch of vampire cunnilingus. Riley was working with the independent film company Neon, which, after years of snapping up Oscar winners at film festivals, had begun producing its own films, and "Boosters" was its biggest production yet. Expectations ran high: "Sorry to Bother You," which cost only $3.2 million, made eighteen million dollars at the box office. "Boosters" cost twenty million dollars, and Riley still had to finalize the handcrafted effects that are essential to his D.I.Y.-ish aesthetic—a ragged, cartoony quality that he calls "jankiness."

Riley saw "Boosters" as his best chance to infiltrate the mainstream. He'd spent decades as a critics' darling, first in music and then in film and TV; in Oakland, he was perfectly in synch, a Marxist bohemian auteur-virtuoso whose class-war themes were native to the culture. Now his goal was to blast "Boosters" far beyond that radius, turning it into a summer blockbuster, a popcorn hit with a revolutionary heart.

That day, Riley had been editing a sequence in which Corvette sneaks into a San Francisco condo owned by Christie, her fashion idol, by hiding inside a coffee delivery cart. The scene used one of the film's funniest visual gags, an apartment so crazily tilted that nobody inside it could stand up straight. Like many of Riley's best bits, it doubled as an in-joke for locals: Millennium Tower, a San Francisco high-rise completed in 2009, had sunk sixteen inches, then leaned two more, creating a luxury boondoggle.

On Riley's monitor, Corvette, attempting to flee the condo, was tugged downward by gravity—and when she tried to stay stable her legs whirled in a "Looney Tunes" blur. Riley had achieved the effect by using an elaborate pinwheel mechanism that spun mannequin legs at lightning speed.

The sequence ran long. Riley tweaked dialogue in which Moore posed the body of the girl pushing the coffee cart while pontificating about seeing it as "art." Ultimately, he decided that it didn't land. "It's bad writing," he said, cutting the whole exchange. Flipping through shots of Corvette peeking impishly from the cart, he rejected one, with an affectionate laugh, as "*too* Keke Palmer." He was seeking a hard-to-hit tone: jokes that wouldn't "pressure" the audience or produce "the wrong kind of laugh."

Finally, hours in, he was satisfied. "It's very 'Pink Panther'! The whole thing feels like a Blake Edwards movie," he said. At his request, his editor, Matt Hannam, added circusy sound effects, including a slide whistle. " 'Guest starring Dom DeLuise,' " Riley added, laughing.

Riley's movies are entwined with—and, often, inspired by—music. For "Boosters," he'd set the action to a hilarious cacophony of hoots and whistles composed by Tune-Yards, his Oakland neighbors Merrill Garbus and Nate

Riley, a critics' darling, has big dreams for "I Love Boosters," which he sees as his best chance to infiltrate the mainstream.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOBBY DOHERTY

Brenner, who had scored all his projects. The collaboration had been easy, instinctual, and locally sourced: while Riley was writing the "Boosters" script, he'd run down the block to discuss new scenes with the musicians. The rest of the production had been much harder—particularly because, to his frustration, he'd been forced to film primarily in Atlanta rather than in Oakland, after a year of maddening delays led to the production losing its California tax rebate.

Midway through the afternoon, Riley gave his son Nicos a call. Riley has four children: Alina, twenty-eight, and Nicos, twenty-five, from an early marriage to an illustrator; Xola, twenty, with another ex; and Django, thirteen, with his long-term partner, Gabby La La. Nicos, who is on the autism spectrum, was attending a school that taught filmmaking skills to neurodivergent adults. He had got lost on a bus route; Riley spoke to him gently, arranging for an Uber. He'd been trying to guide Nicos during the difficult transition to an independent life, which made it even harder to be out of town for months at a time.

Late one evening, after he'd finished editing, we drove to a chic cocktail bar, a product of the gentrification he'd fought for years. On the way, I asked how long he'd been wearing these big hats. (He had a roster, including a nubbly Rastafarian number.) They were a recent thing, he explained: a year and a half earlier, he'd bought a few from Uptown Yardie, an élite London brand inspired by Jamaican culture. He took the red felt hat off his head to show me its ornate inner structure, joking that it was a "hat within a hat." I peeked inside it: it struck me as an embodiment of Riley's adoration of too-muchness, and also like the slang that comedy writers use for overkill: a hat on a hat.

For more than a year, as I'd trailed Riley, I'd assumed that his hats were savvy self-branding, a deliberate shift away from the dandelion Afro that he had worn since the nineties, when he'd scowled, with quasi-parodic toughness, from the covers of albums such as "Genocide & Juice." These days, he looked as goofily approachable as a children's-show host, which struck me as helpful in a career that required him to win over normie film executives.

There was a simpler explanation, he told me: his hairline was receding. The longer he wore these Brobdingnagian toppers, the harder it was to quit—the hats matted down his hair, and it was difficult to detangle. Lately, he'd been wondering if he should wean himself off the hat habit. "They're *heavy*, too," he said. "At first, I couldn't wear this one for more than a few minutes."

After our drink, Riley ran into a labor activist he'd worked with decades earlier. As they were talking, a second man walked up, who turned out to be Riley's former dentist. Riley was equally at ease when talking with the dentist, listening patiently as the man described his fancy new house in a gentrified area. As we walked away, Riley shook his head and burst out laughing. "That guy really fucked up my teeth," he said. "It took years to fix them!"

Four months earlier, I'd met Riley in Atlanta, where he was shooting at the Greenbriar Mall. Inside was the set for Metro Designers, an outlet of Christie Smith's clothing chain, which sells monochromatic clothes—one color per month. Right now, everything was an eye-searing neon yellow. Poppy Liu, playing a disgruntled Chinese factory worker who joins forces with the Velvet Gang, was rehearsing a sequence in which her character loots the boutique using a literal plot device: a sci-fi teleportation gadget that sucks up clothes in seconds, like a magical vacuum.

Between takes, Liu did TikTok dances, trying to summon the right energy. She said, "Boots, can I ask you something? Am I looking serious, or am I, like, 'Wowww'?"

"You're looking serious," Riley told her, quietly. The character hadn't used the gadget much yet, he noted. "So you might be, like, *afraid*."

"Boosters" had taken a winding path to development. Two years ago, when Annapurna, the indie production company that distributed "Sorry to Bother You," approached Riley about moving forward with a second film, he was feeling bruised from the chaotic production of "Virgo," which had undergone painful cuts only to sink beneath the waves of Amazon's algorithms. His priority was developing a different screenplay, then titled "The Electric Spanking of War Babies," a sci-fi adventure inspired by the wisdom of Parliament-Funkadelic. ("Free your mind and your ass will follow.") He was also hoping to adapt the playwright Anne Washburn's feral and philosophical dark comedy "Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play."

Annapurna pushed for the more accessible "Boosters," a heist film he had on the back burner. Riley was game, particularly after the executives sweetened the deal by offering him the chance to work with Michaela Coel, the Ghanaian British auteur behind HBO's "I May Destroy You." Coel read Riley's script and agreed to play Corvette, although she was concerned that her accent would be an impediment. At the time, she was struggling with writer's block, and Riley advised her to write for four hours a day, whatever the results. The method worked so well that she completed her own TV series, which she then stepped away from "Boosters" to make, joking, "You shouldn't have given me that advice." In an added irony, she started dating the tech entrepreneur Spencer Hewett, a Thiel Fellowship recipient whose breakthrough project was developing a R.F.I.D. surveillance technology that can help reduce retail theft. (Coel's publicist said that she was unavailable for comment.)

When Riley was ready to shoot "Boosters," Neon stepped up as a co-producer, offering Riley the significant budget he needed. This time, the director was determined not to cut corners, to make a film as maximalist as his imagination. Hunting for a new Corvette, Riley sent an Instagram D.M. to Palmer, a former Disney star and pop singer who'd broken through to film snobs with her work on Jordan Peele's "Nope." They had a four-hour meeting, hashing out the script. Palmer, who grew up in a working-class family in Robbins, Illinois, told me, "We really vibed on life." She described Riley as "thoughtful, very human," adding, "He doesn't just think the actress should show up and be used relentlessly."

On the Metro Designers set, the crew positioned some lighting while Riley

and his costume designer, Shirley Kurata—the giddy mind behind the Elvis cosplay in "Everything Everywhere All at Once"—chatted about recent movies. On most sets, black T-shirts are the rule, but among the "Boosters" crew the brightness was cranked to eleven: Riley wore rainbow sneakers, Kurata a multicolored Muppet-fuzzy vest. The crew, during a weekly movie night, had watched "Megalopolis," the Francis Ford Coppola epic from 2024. Riley, a Coppola buff, understood why critics had found it self-indulgent. "You know, it might have been O.K. if Adam Driver was playing a human being," he joked. Even so, he'd felt goosed by Coppola's playful, unapologetic auteurism, by how liberated Coppola had been to make a movie that was like no other. He'd heard that much of the "Megalopolis" script was generated through improvisation—the kind of filmmaking that was only possible, he said wistfully, because Coppola had paid for everything himself. One of Riley's favorite films was Coppola's "Bram Stoker's Dracula," in which Gary Oldman played Nosferatu in a cherry-red kimono. It was a flamboyant film, unafraid of seeming ridiculous, and was therefore indelible.

Riley wanted to inject "Boosters" with a similar fearlessness, using the elasticity of the heist-comedy genre to draw connections to deeper issues. In his script, he'd incorporated a Chaplinesque slapstick sequence in a Chinese factory where workers made sandblasted jeans. The scenario was based on a real-life scandal: workers have died from cancer from the chemicals used in sandblasting. In an early draft of "Boosters," he'd marked this scene with the words "a note: I'm paying for an extra day of shooting in order to put this back in the script." (Ultimately, Neon ponied up for the filming.) Too often, radical artists were forced by the market to speak in code, he told me, the way George Lucas had when he made "Star Wars" instead of the film he'd originally envisaged—a Vietnam War movie from the P.O.V. of the Vietcong. Riley was occasionally dinged online for working with Amazon or with Annapurna, which was founded by Megan Ellison, the daughter of the right-wing titan Larry Ellison. Riley had no tolerance for that critique: in his view, there was no "clean" way, under capitalism, to make art for a mass audience. And if you couldn't reach everyone what was the point?

He was just as impatient with the idea that "Boosters" glamourized theft, an incendiary topic in the wake of the 2020 protests over the murder of George Floyd, when looting became a talking point for the right. For years, he'd been giving speeches at colleges, arguing that crime was often necessitated by capitalism, which created an underclass and then punished the sub-rosa tactics that its members used to survive. "Boosters" was a sci-fi fantasia about class payback—and part of a cinematic tradition. When an X user complained that the film's trailer encouraged thievery, Riley shot back: "You didn't hear a peep from them about Ocean's 11, Heat, or the other millions of heist movies or 20,000 Mafia movies."

Riley filmed at the Metro Designers store for several days. In the movie, members of the Velvet Gang take sales jobs there in order to case the joint, only to discover how greasily exploitative the conditions are: the music is so loud that it drowns out workers' complaints; lunch breaks last thirty seconds, forcing employees to line up at starting blocks, then sprint for their food. But the mood at the fake store was laid-back, happy. Under a canopy, the ensemble chitchatted about plastic surgery in Hollywood.

Over lunch, Riley's first assistant director, Miloš Milićević, told me that he'd also worked on "Virgo," which was shot in New Orleans. The process had been brutal, he said: Riley had been forced to cut entire episodes, making the narrative choppy; he'd fought Amazon to maintain the show's most original elements, among them a graphic episode in which his naïve giant, Cootie, loses his virginity to his tiny, supernaturally fast girlfriend. The results—filmed with miniatures, Claymation, and puppets, using forced perspective, manipulating scale to create illusions of size—were eye-popping. The show, which featured a sizzling performance by Walton Goggins, as an authoritarian vigilante, was an avant-garde breakthrough for television.

It was also a flop. Nevertheless, Milićević had been eager to work with Riley again. He saw him as a visionary

"I ate way more grain bowls back when I had hope for humanity."

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whose concept of jankiness had potent philosophical dimensions. It was an anti-Marvel stance, rejecting the visual conformity of so much C.G.I. It had a childlike warmth, evoking old-school kids' shows like "H.R. Pufnstuf." It was "poor people's work," like drag, or quilting—a way of utilizing scrap materials to create something fresh and beautiful. And yet it was also an élitist, niche style aimed at audiences who craved something pure and not mass-produced. Milićević described Riley as a rare blend in Hollywood, both a mature, practical artist and a dreamy newbie, "ethereal, open to the abnormal." He noted, "There are shots where Riley says, 'You can see the seams, you see the imperfections,' which he doesn't mind—and actually embraces."

Raymond (Boots) Riley was born in Chicago in 1971, to a sprawling, polyglot family with deep roots in radical politics. His father, Walter Riley, was one of eleven children of sharecroppers from Durham County, North Carolina, and became an activist at thirteen. For years, Walter led the N.A.A.C.P.'s state youth chapter, then he worked as a labor activist for the Maoist Progressive Labor Party, organizing rank-and-file autoworkers, before becoming a civil-rights lawyer. He met Riley's mother, Anitra Patterson, in San Francisco, when he was on a strike. Patterson, born in New York City, was the daughter of a Black poet father and a German Jewish artist mother whose brother, a socialist in the French Resistance, had fought and then fled the Nazis. When Raymond was a year old, his parents moved the family to Detroit; when he was six, they returned to the Bay Area; when he was eight, Patterson moved out, and Walter, by mutual agreement, became a single father to Raymond and his brother.

The year Patterson left, Riley, then a third grader, lost the bus pass he used to get to a magnet school near Berkeley. A bubbly charmer, Riley was confident that someone would help him out. Instead, he wound up trekking for miles, rejected first by bus drivers and then by a carful of cops, who scoffed, "We're not a cab service." When he finally made it home, at 10 P.M., his father was sobbing on the front porch, certain that his son was dead. For Riley, this was a jolt of illumination about the way the world viewed him—not as a child but as a suspect, a scammer in the making. As he once put it, "My mother had always told me that I was so cute, but I realized I wasn't cute—I was Black."

Riley wanted to be seen another way: as a hero. As a kid, he feverishly fantasized about being a kung-fu-powered ass-kicker like Marvel's Daredevil—or a soldier, like the scrappy teens in the Cold War film "Red Dawn," who fight a Soviet invasion. (His father talked him down, calling the movie fascist.) Walter, who had left the Progressive Labor Party, didn't preach Marxism to his son, but Riley embraced a radical-left viewpoint on his own, after tagging along with some cute older girls who were participating in a cannery workers' strike.

Still, Riley's early role model was not an activist but an artist: the gangsta-rap legend Ice Cube. Riley venerated the rapper so much that his early tracks for the Coup, which he founded at the age of twenty, were all Ice Cube imitations, with his voice pitched low and his affect "hard." Riley met his bandmate E-Roc in 1991, when they both had gigs handling packages for UPS; later on, he met Pam the Funkstress when she d.j.'d at Tupac's first album-release party. The Coup's early records were pugnacious, laced with humor and some finger-wagging. In "Fuck a Perm," Riley mocked beauty standards; in "Last Blunt," constant weed use. Left-wing analysis animated his lyrics: in "Fat Cats, Bigga Fish," a small-time thief realizes that the C.E.O.s whose pockets he picks are way bigger crooks than he is, cutting dirty deals to gentrify Oakland.

The albums didn't sell. E-Roc said, of the gangsta-rap era, "If you weren't talking about money, drugs, and sex, nobody was really trying to hear you." E-Roc admired Riley's idealism but wasn't that political himself; he quit the band to take a union job as a longshoreman, and suggested that Riley do the same. Riley turned him down. Now twenty-four, he felt like a failure. The radicals he revered—the Black Panther Fred Hampton, the vanguard activists in Cuba and South Africa—had rattled the world in their teens, the way his father had. The Coup had made it onto local radio, but, although critics praised Riley's droll wordplay—the Los Angeles *Times* called him "rap's most articulate Marxist"—they pigeonholed his lyrics as "conscious hip-hop," as if he were grinding out didactic pamphlets.

For a few years, Riley stopped making music. He helped form a radical collective, the Young Comrades, which fought three-strikes drug laws, police brutality, and an "anti-cruising ordinance" in Oak-

land. He did telephone fund-raising for nonprofits, luring Orange County Republicans into supporting homeless shelters. By the time he picked up the mike again, in 1998, shortly after his first child was born, he had a renewed sense of purpose. The Coup's new albums featured rude, funny bangers such as "5 Million Ways to Kill a C.E.O.," which, like so many Riley tracks, used slicing comedy to denounce billionaires. ("They own sweatshops, pet cops, and fields of cola/murder babies with they molars on the areola/control the Pope, Dalai Lama, Holy Rollers, and the Ayatollah.") He was still taking aim at capitalism, but his sonic landscape now had a relaxed, get-down vibe.

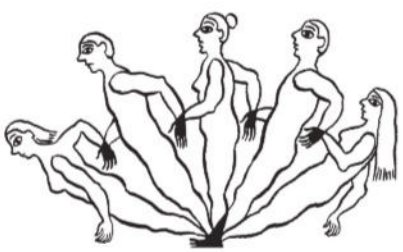
In September, 2001, the release of the Coup's album "Party Music" was upended by a perverse coincidence: the album's cover showed Riley's finger poised over a music tuner as if it were a bomb detonator, while smoke spilled from the World Trade Center in the background. The image was a metaphor for the destruction of capitalism, he insisted, not a blueprint for action. But the record company changed the cover against his will, and he wound up on ABC, fruitlessly debating the Iraq War with Bill Maher.

It was a rough period; Riley felt marginalized, treated as a cartoon terrorist. But by then he had embraced a different role model from his youth: Prince. At fifteen, he'd seen "Purple Rain" with friends, and had been awestruck not just by Prince's musicianship but by his persona, his ability to radiate skilled, seductive joy—to exude not hard authority but the soft stuff. Riley recalled, "We were, like, 'What *is* this?' The high voice. We didn't know how short he was. We went from 'Oh, is this guy *gay*?' to 'We don't care!' Like, 'Maybe being gay is cool, if he's doing it?' But we didn't say it—admit it out loud." Looking back, Riley told me, "Prince saved my life," by liberating him from comic-book masculinity. Like Prince, Riley had a singular moniker—"Boots" originated as a taunt from students who were mocking a pair of Florsheim boots that Riley had been given by his father. He'd hated the nickname at first, Walter told me: "He would wake up and come into my bedroom and say, '*You made me wear those boots!*'" As a front man, Riley embraced the name—and, with it, a peacocking ambition to achieve mass visibility.

In 2012, the Coup released the love song "The Magic Clap," the first track that Riley had written with his new partner, the sitarist and helium-voiced singer Gabby La La. Its optimistic sexiness was inseparable from its ideological punch. ("We wanna breathe fire and freedom from our lungs/Tell Homeland Security we are the bomb!") The playful, cheaply made video showed Riley, in a natty royal-blue suit, being electrocuted by G-men, then breaking away on a wobbly pink bicycle.

The song appeared on "Sorry to Bother You," a concept album that was tied to a screenplay with the same name that Riley had written—a mordant, magical-realist story about Cassius, a sad-sack Oakland nobody who scores a job as a telemarketer for a sinister, non-unionized corporation called RegalView, then uses a "white voice" to shoot up the corporate elevator. Initially, Riley, who'd taken a few film courses at San Francisco State, conceived of the album as a vehicle to help him jump into directing: he figured that he'd take the music on tour, raising the hype and the money he'd need to mount an independent film.

That plan fizzled fast. Riley kept moving, crashing parties at the Sundance Film Festival and toting the screenplay everywhere, honing his pitch. He networked maniacally, finding mentors and allies through his activism, among them the "Arrested Development" star David



Cross, who agreed to perform Cassius's "white voice." In 2014, he ran into the San Francisco literary macher Dave Eggers on the street; Eggers published the screenplay as a book for his McSweeney's imprint, scoring Riley some mainstream credibility. Finally, in 2015, Riley was accepted to the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, in Park City, Utah; the next year, he got into the festival's program for new directors.

At Sundance, he was peppered with notes, often contradictory, from industry names: some loved his script, others hated it, and one suggested that he ramp up the love story and deëmphasize the labor politics. This experience cemented Riley's sense that he should trust his gut. The most useful feedback came from Karim Aïnouz, a Brazilian director, who told Riley, "I really love your main character. I wanna protect him, I want to make sure he's O.K. in the world. And that's how I know it's bullshit, because I hate everybody!"

Riley realized that Aïnouz was right: Cassius was too much of a victim, a pinball in the capitalist machine. He refined the script further, showing his hero doubling down on his Faustian bargain. As Cassius, Riley cast the brilliant, sad-eyed actor LaKeith Stanfield. Armie Hammer played the villainous C.E.O.; Tessa Thompson was Cassius's lover, a radical artist with her own "white voice." "Sorry" was defiantly weird, stuffed with comic digressions such as ads for WorryFree (an Amazon-like corporation flacking indentured servitude) and a reality show called "I Got the Shit Kicked Out of Me." The film ended with a truly bananas sequence featuring a scheme by RegalView to enslave horse-human hybrids.

Riley filmed "Sorry" in Oakland, in twenty-six days. It débuted at Sundance, then got strong reviews; one critic praised it as "an absurdist, startlingly original Molotov cocktail through the pane glass window of Hollywood." It felt like his new career had achieved liftoff. Instead, what followed was the turbulent production of "I'm a Virgo," the story of a sheltered Black teen who dreams of becoming a superhero—a plot partly inspired by the day Riley lost his bus pass. He saw "Boosters" as his do-over, a chance to regain Hollywood momentum.

There was a consistency to Riley's filmed stories, which he sometimes described as tracks on an album. In each one, an Oakland naïf—Cassius, Cootie, Corvette—was torn between a seductive capitalist and an inspiring left-wing organizer, one the path to fame and riches, the other to community and revolution. Riley's core ideology hadn't changed since his teens; he believed in a mass strike in which workers would unite, globally, to withhold their labor, leading to radical

structural change—he'd depicted such transformations in each of his productions, including in "Boosters."

But *he'd* changed, as an artist. In middle age, he'd evolved into an aesthetic magpie, pulling together influences like a d.j. It had taken him a while to be open about his enthusiasms. He told me, "In junior high school, I really loved the eighties British invasion, right? You know, the Cure, Depeche Mode, all that kind of stuff. But you're not going to hear any nineties interviews talking about that." His first album, "Kill My Landlord," now made him cringe, he said: its aesthetic felt too narrow and its politics too on the nose.

What he loved these days was mixtures, color, variety: paisley worn with plaid, the painter Jacob Lawrence, any artist "who takes different textures and slaps them on top of one another." His tastes are broad but lean toward the colorfully experimental, from the precise geometries of Wes Anderson to the trippy existentialism of Leos Carax, from the far-left Pier Paolo Pasolini to the far-right Yukio Mishima. For "Boosters," his touchstone was an obscure Michel Gondry film from 2013, "Mood Indigo," a retro romance full of futuristic imagery: skittering robots, a piano that mixed swanky cocktails when played. His favorite recent movie is "Hundreds of Beavers," a manic fur-trapper farce with handmade effects—jankiness personified. He was an eager student of the methods artists use to seduce audiences, devouring David Byrne's book "How Music Works" and a documentary about the devilishly clever publicist Edward Bernays, who sold cigarettes by rebranding them as feminist rebellion.

Over the years, Riley had added to his lineup of heroes. In the nineties, boomer music executives often spoke to him in their native language, Bob Dylan fanhood. Initially, he resisted, but over time he became a full-on Dylanite himself. Recently, he'd gone toe to toe with James Mangold, the director of the Dylan bio-pic "A Complete Unknown," critiquing him for having downplayed the Communism of Dylan's mentors.

All art is political, Riley often says, whether it claims to be or not. Superhero stories are copaganda; sitcoms sell middle-class norms. But art is also more than ideology. It is a source of joy and comfort; it makes you horny and angry; if it's bold enough, and crafty enough, you can't ignore it—and it could change you, the way it had him.

"Captain, why don't I go get your glasses so you can really see that mermaid."

In November, 2024, the "Boosters" production shifted to a soundstage in Norcross, Georgia, adjacent to the Marvel lot where "Black Panther" was shot. One day, the crew was filming a scene at one of Christie's fashion shows, where the Velvet Gang confronts its nemesis. The head of Neon had flown in to observe; executives in black suits mingled with the funkily attired crew. A few days earlier, the film's department heads had debated, collegially, how to get the crowd in the scene to look big enough without leaning too hard on "tiling," the cheat of digitally copying and pasting. They'd budgeted for a hundred extras—could they afford more? A Technocrane? "We can shoot like Coppola, from above," Riley suggested. "The lower we are, the harder it is to hide that we don't have that many people." He wanted to generate awe: "When Corvette says, 'I feel like I'm touching the world,' it has to feel *big*."

Floating above the soundstage was a massive eyeball with a rainbow runway carpet protruding from it like a tongue. Rows of extras lined up on either side of the carpet. After the debate, the producers had agreed to add a hundred and twenty-five more extras, sending Kurata, the costume designer, on a frantic thrift-store shopping spree, seeking monochromatic outfits in blue, pink, brown, yellow, orange, and green.

Behind a black curtain, Demi Moore looked spookily glam in a suicide-blond wig with black roots. She was filming a scene in which Christie berated her skeptical assistant, Miranda Priestly style. One day, the assistant would run her own fashion line, Christie told her—and then she could talk about how hard her boss had pushed her, how crushing the hours had been, how harsh the conditions for factory workers. Fashion was worth the sacrifice. "We could get every whacked-out asshole in the state of Michigan wearing fuchsia," Moore said, nearly hissing. "We could look from space and see a *big spot of fuchsia. Bam!* I mean, humanity is our canvas. So get *excited*, bitch."

Riley chuckled, pleased. He gave Moore a note: maybe this was the first time she'd said these particular thoughts out loud? Moore tried the exchange a few more times, in different tones—more acidic, more surprised, more chaotic. Then Riley turned to the actress who was playing Christie's assistant. "Be more afraid of her," Riley suggested, and then, a moment later: "Try a different thing—you *hate* her."

One of the most satisfying ironies of Riley's films and TV show is how charismatic and, at times, convincing his villains are, from Armie Hammer's silky tech C.E.O. to Walton Goggins's righteous supercop. There was no narrative tension if it wasn't tempting to see the world their way. And, of course, Riley was a boss himself, trying to put his own spot of fuchsia on the planet. He wasn't always at ease discussing the parallel. When I asked, a few times, if he identified with Moore's character, he pivoted off the topic, telling me, simply, "All the characters are me."

It was clearly important to him to be an ethical leader. On the set of "Virgo," he had learned that some stand-ins had been stiffed by a sketchy payroll company. He guaranteed the employees' pay with his own money, then threatened to quit, withholding his own labor until the company compensated everyone. He was a fiery advocate during the 2023 Writers Guild strike; at one point, a leaked e-mail from a Directors Guild chair smeared him as part of a "fringe group" whose members should be blackballed from elected positions.

Not everyone on set shared Riley's politics, I knew. Milićević had told me he believed that the economic impacts of the Writers Guild strike had outweighed any gains. Riley's friend Pete Lee, who was working as the set photographer, described himself to me, wryly, as a "fair-weather Communist."

Offline, Riley was at ease talking with, and working alongside, unlike minds. He tried not to doomscroll, he told me, and he even had a "dumbphone," intended to keep him unplugged. But, when he *did* log on, he had what Twitter veterans call a "poster's soul," debating strangers about Venezuela and Gaza, searching for his name and then replying. In February, 2025, as DOGE was crushing U.S.A.I.D. programs that supported children in poverty, Riley tweeted that he didn't oppose "dismantling" the agency, calling it a C.I.A. front that "subverts democracies" on behalf of U.S. corporations. In October, 2025, he jumped into a Reddit Oscars forum after a user described him as "massive tankie," slang for a leftist who excuses injustices committed by Communist governments. "I prefer the term 'huge' to massive, thank you," Riley joked, then wrote a long post defending China's invasion of Tibet on the ground that Tibet had been a slave state, complete with a feverish cascade of links, which was disputed by someone who claimed to be a scholar of Tibet, leading to a whose-links-are-better dance-off. In a follow-up comment, Riley wrote, "All of my art is argument with strangers."

Riley told me that people often described him as "uncompromising." This wasn't accurate, he said: you couldn't make a movie—or be in a band or in a union, for that matter—without bending to, and understanding, the needs of others. But he wasn't a journeyman director who would take any job just to get ahead. In the two-thousands, he'd heard a musician complain about a new tattoo on the forehead of his brother, which rendered the brother "not unemployed but unemployable." Riley's ideology was his own forehead tattoo, he told me: "I'm *already* that person. So the people that are choosing to work with me, they know where I'm at. . . . I prefer that." Over the years, he'd found surprising allies, including a record executive who'd once been in the Revolutionary Communist Party. Riley said, "I mean, the world is full of people with radical ideas who have just decided, like most of us, 'Oh, there's nothing you can do about it. And I have to get a job, right?'"

The older Riley got, the more determined he became to use his time wisely. One night, over drinks with the crew, he brought up his mother, Patterson, who'd died in 2014. When Patterson was fifteen, she'd got pregnant by an older man; by thirty-two, she had four children. "She was tired of being a mother," he told me, with equanimity. He'd forgiven her for leaving long ago; his father, for his part, told me that he and Patterson had agreed that she would "go off and do what men do when they have children." She had been a spitfire, eager to travel, study, dance, have love affairs, and explore the world. After her death, Riley read her diaries, an awkward experience at times. ("You've got to read about your mother comparing people's dick sizes," he told me, wrinkling his forehead.) But it had been worth it: he'd wanted to feel more empathy for, and clarity about, the person who had been there before he existed.

Riley has been through his share of personal loss. In 2006, several of the Coup's crew members were injured when the group's tour bus flipped over and burst into flames; a few years later, the group's bassist was shot and killed on his way to a rehearsal. Pam the Funkstress died young. Riley has a phobia of anesthesia, so much so that he underwent a colonoscopy without it. "I'm more afraid of dying than of the pain," he told me. It had been his weirdest experience of being recognized by a fan: when he was on the table, the doctor told him, "This is a strange way to meet you." Riley didn't look at the monitor during the procedure. "It was, like, just looking at the inside of myself in real time," he told me. "I don't want to think about how, you know, how fragile it all is."

A few months after filming the fashion-show scene, Riley was in Oakland for postproduction. On a sunny Saturday morning, he, La La, and their kids met up at the New Parkway Theatre, which hosts a weekly screening of cartoons. Riley, in a jumbo-sized blue hat and black-and-white pajamas, watched a clip from the show "Underdog." He'd loved TV cartoons growing up—they were funny and simple but also educational, stuffed with sly parodies of pop culture he'd never heard of. Years ago, Riley had explored the idea of doing voice work, thinking that it might be both fun for his kids and a way to make good money. After talent agents at W.M.E. proposed some roles, he clarified that he wouldn't play a dope dealer or a cop. "And they were, like, 'Well, you should probably generate your own material,'" he said. He'd also had a chance to experience a different flavor of fame: while he was recording "Genocide & Juice," he was recruited to appear on MTV's "The Real World." He turned it down, mainly, he recalled,

because he "didn't want people to know I wasn't hard."

After the cartoons, we headed to Riley and La La's house; he'd bought it with the money Amazon had paid him for "Virgo." It was a warm, bohemian hangout with a ceramic rabbit in the front garden, a lounge with a fireplace, a studio for La La, who is a fibre artist and an illustrator, and a cozy kitchen with a whimsical mural of a tree blooming with fruits and cupcakes. In the bathroom, a framed Red Scare-era poster read "Is your washroom breeding Bolsheviks?"

Earlier, Riley had described La La to me as a mischief-maker. When we arrived, La La, who wore flower-print clogs, handed me a "Friendship Buck," a handmade faux currency that she gives to everyone she meets. As she cooked noodles for Django, she told me about the many art projects that she had in progress, including a graphic memoir done in watercolors. But these days she saw herself mainly as a mom ("chief noodle-maker") and an "extreme feminist" with a wide circle of friends. When I asked if she shared Riley's ideology, she said, "I'm apolitical." Her focus was more on making things, including a Y.A. book that she'd written, celebrating her childhood in the Bay with her white Jewish mom and Chinese Methodist dad. Like Riley, she considers herself Jewish, and, she told me puckishly, she also sees herself as white: "Boots says I'm not white, but I am—it's, like, Are you what you see or what other people see of yourself?"

Riley, who was sitting nearby, at the dining room's long table, smiled but suggested that this was probably not how white people saw her. "Potato, potahto," La La drawled. "Have you seen my mom? She has black hair. We look exactly the same. She basically *is* Chinese." Later, when Riley and I began to talk about the Coup track "5 Million Ways to Kill a C.E.O.," which had been embraced online by admirers of Luigi Mangione, she chimed in: "My mom was a C.E.O., and it hurts my feelings!" Her mother had founded a wool-diaper-cover company called Biobottoms, she said, which was run primarily by women. Later, as Riley and I talked about his packed schedule, he theorized that in a truly revolutionary society people might work only three days a week, allowing them to devote more time to things they loved, like art or gardening. La La wisecracked, "For moms, we're only changing diapers three days a week. Best of luck to you children, sitting in your diaper for four days!"

As much as La La teased Riley, when he stepped away she became his hype man. She described him as a preternaturally generous artist, far more concerned with the greater Oakland collective than with himself. That had been true back when he was dead broke, she added—he had always advised, and lifted up, other artists. She called these mentorships "seeds being planted."

When Riley returned to the table, La La told me that his high profile in the city sometimes bugged her, because fans were always interrupting them, even sitting down at their table. Riley protested: It was just that one guy that one time, and they had walked away from him! Her "whole thing" was quality time, she explained, then said, with a shrug, "We can have quality time in the grave when we're dead. I'm hoping we can get one box that can just be us hugging, like, for eternity." She went on, "I'm weaving our shroud right now, with your hair that I find in the shower."

This past March, "Boosters," after a series of delays, finally had its première, at South by Southwest. In the days leading up to the festival, Riley was in energetic contact with Neon's publicity team, ginning up promotions in full Barnum mode. On his own, he'd booked a nationwide tour of colleges, to screen "Boosters" and do Q. & A.s. He planned to release an EP of songs performed by Palmer.

That afternoon, Riley was filming promotional shorts with Palmer for the movie-review social network Letterboxd. Palmer wore a sparkly pink gown; Riley, a jumpsuit speckled with tiny embroidered daisies. When Letterboxd producers asked Riley to name a movie that offered "fashion inspiration," he recommended the Serbian farce "Black Cat White Cat"; Palmer praised "Sex and the City."

As the two mingled near the snack area, Riley asked if Palmer was aware of the trade convention CinemaCon, in April: "It was on the show 'The Studio.' That's how you get more screens!" Palmer knew all about it, but she'd already agreed to record a TED talk in Vancouver at the same time. Maybe she could Zoom? Riley suggested an offbeat approach—to zhuzh up the visit, they could frame the Zoom footage to look as though Palmer were arriving through the film's teleportation device. He pitched a few stunts that could work in any city: maybe she could busk on a street corner?

Palmer, a master at social media with an Instagram following of 14.4 million, considered these ideas. Then she beamed and, in a low, confident voice, said, "That sounds *incredible*. That would be insanely dope." She added, "Let's plan it! And I'll have my girl film it."

The next night, the Paramount Theatre, in downtown Austin, gleamed with the poster for "Boosters," on which the cast's faces clustered like flower blossoms. A crowd outside screamed "Boots!" when they spotted Riley's hat, then shrieked louder as he strolled toward them with Moore, her long black hair swaying like a cape.

In the theatre, the audience howled at Kurata's costumes, including in a sequence when the Velvet Gang wore so many layers of stolen clothes that they waddled like Michelin Men; there was booming laughter at the payoff to a side plot involving Stanfield, who played a dreamy seducer with his hair in Princeish loose waves. There was also an audible "mmmm" at a quieter image: an immense, wadded-up ball of receipts and bills that rolled through Oakland's streets like a boulder, haunting Corvette. When the film ended, Riley jumped onstage, addressing the crowd as his partners: if they liked "Boosters," they should tell people. He said, "You might think because it's on Neon, and they're the shit, we got it covered—we don't."

Neon held a première party, hosted by *Variety*. On the way there, Riley's close friend Jeremy Glick, a literature professor at Hunter College, told Riley, of the film, "We have a *lot* to talk about! It's got all these elements that I feel very familiar with . . . accelerated, if you will. You really made the qualitative leap, man."

"Thank you, man," Riley said, smiling.

The two had met in the nineties, at a salon at Amiri Baraka's house, in Newark, but they'd grown closer after 9/11. Glick was the son of a Port Authority worker who died in the attack on the

World Trade Center; afterward, he went on Fox News to debate Bill O'Reilly, denouncing anyone who used his father's death to support the invasion of Afghanistan. Back then, both Riley and Glick felt marginalized, under siege in a country where merely criticizing income inequality was viewed as outrageous. A lot had changed since; to many younger people, including Glick's students, the men's once radical ideas were common sense. Riley had endorsed Bernie Sanders a decade ago, but he had never cared much about electoral politics, which struck him as small-bore change. Yet the rise of Donald Trump had made Riley's bombastic aesthetics oddly relevant: the cartoonish, amped-up landscape of his movies now felt less like satire and more like a mirror.

At the party, Palmer, in an aquamarine leather jacket, stood in a glass box alongside three brightly dressed mannequins and performed a song that Riley's daughter Alina had written for the movie, the melancholic "Cassandra." Afterward, Poppy Liu flashed her phone in Riley's face: an early review of "Boosters" was out and it was strong, celebrating his film as "a surreal, hyperpop love letter to creatives living under capitalism." The cast, clustered around him, jumped up and down.

At an after-party, at a bar called the Flower Shop, one of the film's producers, Aaron Ryder, sat eating French fries from a silver bowl. Ryder had been through some stressful launches, he told me; his first film, Christopher Nolan's nonlinear masterpiece "Memento," was initially rejected by every distributor. Still, Ryder described "Boosters" as "maybe the hardest film I've ever been involved with." Postproduction was rough: "You've got miniatures, you've got stop-motion, you've got a *ton* of music. But you also have something extraordinary." If making a movie was like planning a camping trip, he said, Riley was all about detours: "We're going to go to the city first, then swim across a river, then go to a rave, and, before that, we have to stop at a 7-Eleven." Neon had done what Amazon hadn't—given Riley the freedom to swing for the fences.

The next day, Riley and I sat down at the Austin Proper hotel, whose lobby was full of Silicon Valley types heading to the tech events of SXSW. He was excited to speak to college students again. He'd had to retire one of his old speeches, which denounced copaganda for teaching poor people to obey authority, after placing it in the mouth of a Communist organizer in "Virgo." Events had overtaken Riley's most outlandish plots: three years after the show aired, a militarized police force, ICE, was poised to repress and criminalize political dissent.

"After you die, but before I die, can I be king for a bit?"

• •

Even so, Riley felt encouraged. He told me, "You know, I made this movie before the Minnesota general strike"—in late January, in sub-zero temperatures, hundreds of businesses and dozens of unions shut down to protest ICE's Operation Metro Surge. "And, arguably, that general strike is *more* radical than the one in the film, you know? It was people withholding labor in order to change a policy that didn't necessarily even affect them."

"Boosters" is scheduled for wide release in late May, amid tough competition from powerful Hollywood franchises: "The Devil Wears Prada 2," the sixth "Scary Movie." Riley hoped that audiences would find "Boosters" just as colorful, alluring, and fun—"like a roller-coaster," he said, but thundering in from a fresh angle. And maybe he was onto something. Three weeks before "Boosters" was to open, New York's democratic-socialist mayor, Zohran Mamdani, declined to attend the Met Gala, which was being sponsored by the Amazon founder (and Washington *Post* destroyer), Jeff Bezos. Mamdani posted counterpropaganda: glamour shots of the artisans, retail workers, and delivery people who anchor New York's fashion industry, "from true love found on the picket line to a free tailoring school out of a Brooklyn basement." This was Riley's approach in action: shifting the spotlight away from the hypnotic parade to the workers who made it possible.

Like "Sorry to Bother You," "Boosters" had a third act that Riley knew not every viewer would roll with—the storytelling was ecstatic, shaggy, and a little incoherent. But it was also optimistic, an attempt to help audiences imagine a better future. In the cut we watched at SXSW, Violeta, a left-wing stoner trying to unionize Metro Designers, gave a speech in which she described the way social progress ascends like a spiral, through contradiction and clashes. Riley imagined his film's structure that way, he told me. It followed a pattern that didn't exist—yet. He held his arm up high, then twisted it, smiling, mimicking the shape of that imaginary spiral and making a whirring sound, like a helicopter rising into the clouds. ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS HARNAN

The night it began, he'd had an unremarkable meal of chicken and rice. Sure, the chicken was dry, flavorless, and the rice, wet, also flavorless, but he had not found the meal particularly bad, and, after imbibing a large glass of cold filtered water, he'd experienced no gastrointestinal bloat. He'd done little of note after the meal. He'd sat on his sofa and watched TV: innocuous cooking shows, the news, "Jeopardy!" Yet those to whom he kept telling this story—his sister, his mother, his then girlfriend, and, later, his doctors—continued to press him for more detail. Along with the water, could he have, unbeknownst to him, swallowed a toxic amount of psychedelics? Could the chicken from which the thigh and breast meat came, have consumed, weeks earlier, a toxic amount of psychedelics? And what about the television? Did it give off TV waves? Or the sofa? Sofa waves? One doctor said that some psychedelics are fat-soluble and can live indefinitely in one's fat cells, which, unless they succumb to liposuction, never go away, and often grow.

"Did you know this about fat cells?" he asked (texted) his mother, his sister, and his then girlfriend. They were all on the same group chat. Yes, these women knew.

Another doctor focussed on the sofa waves. Which, more specifically, were gravitational waves. All objects emit gravitational waves, the doctor explained, and should those waves interact unfavorably with those of the self, through the calibrated physics of destructive interference, destruction ensues.

"Did you know this about gravitational waves?" he asked (texted) his mother, his sister, and his then girlfriend. His mother did, for she'd often warned her children not to stand near microwaves. His sister did, for she had a hobby of reading people's tarot cards at dinner and, on weekends, collecting crystals. His then girlfriend did not, for she was a theoretical astrophysicist. In lay terms, she tried to convince the others that gravitational waves are distortions of spacetime caused by huge things, like black holes, and that these waves have nothing to do with "waves of the self," which do not exist. "A sofa *is* a black hole," he replied, a comment at which his sister and his mother, but not his then girlfriend, laughed.

He'd had bouts of insomnia before. A string of days, weeks. Drugs didn't work. No dosage of melatonin, Ambien, or trazodone, and no quantity of alcohol. But sometimes this worked: rise and read in dim light the most boring book you can find, like the one he had on European horse breeding. And sometimes this worked: lie down in the bathtub with the shower set to very hot, feel the scalding water pound your chest. That was where his then girlfriend found him one dawn, drenched, naked. Thinking him either dead or, worse, suicidal, she'd screamed, which inopportunely woke him up.

But this stretch of insomnia was so radically different from the others that he refused to give it the basic name. Lots of people experience insomnia, almost one out of three. Yet his current state was unique, wholly individual, and thus deserving of a cool compound word as cogent as "spacetime." Between "drivedream" and "dreamdrive," he settled on the latter, and, henceforth, this was how he described his soon-to-be-routine malaise to his mother, his sister, his then girlfriend, and, later, his doctors. Each night, he went into the dreamdrive. He would think he'd fallen asleep but would wake up driving, and, while driving, he would panic, believing that, if he had just woken up, then he must have fallen asleep at the wheel, and he would drive, drive, drive, in this panic, in this fog, as the road was always foggy, until he once again fell asleep at the wheel, and then he would wake up in his own bed, panicked that he had not slept, had never slept, would never sleep, and when his eyes shut again, he would wake up driving, further panicked that he had once again fallen asleep. Each morning, he "awoke"—not the term he would have used—exhausted, having not slept (his then girlfriend would argue that he had) and having driven all night, before falling asleep at the wheel. The drive was the dream. But the dream was also the drive.

His mother asked if there was ever anyone in the car with him. His sister asked if he was certain that he was in a car. Was it gas or electric, stick or automatic? Could it be a truck or a train or a tractor, and had he remembered to turn on the headlights? When driving in the dreamdrive, he had limited range of motion. His hands were at ten and two, his face fixed, staring straight ahead. It was fear that hindered movement. Fear that, should he look away from the road, he would either hit a cement barricade or pass out yet again. But, one night, he forced his eyeballs down toward his dashboard and the middle console. It was, indeed, a car that ran on gas and was manual. The stick shift induced new fear. He did not know how to drive stick. Yet the car was still in fluid motion. He awoke in his bed, covered in sweat and shouting. Another night, he peered into his rearview mirror, at the back seat. It held a booster but no child. The empty foam block with adjustable armrests induced more fear. Where had he left this child that was not his? And did this child know how to drive stick?

He awoke, again, in his bed, covered in sweat and sobbing. His then girlfriend decided that it was time for her to sleep elsewhere. She said that she would text him, but, the next morning, she called him. She'd gone to her lab and slept on the sanitized floor of its common room. She'd slept so exceptionally well that, for the sake of her own intellect and future endeavors, with a heavy heart but, at long last, a clear head, she'd decided that she could no longer be with him. "It was the booster, wasn't it?" he'd asked, hinting at what he thought was every woman's perennial desire for children. "No," she replied. Later that day, she removed herself from the group chat.

One doctor, a psychologist, went through dream theories with him, to see which great thinker's mind he was in. Dreams (a) are physiological necessities; (b) help us consolidate a day's events; (c) reactivate neural pathways; (d) are wish fulfillment. Out of these theories, the last seemed the most speculative, personal, and, therefore, pertinent. Freud it was, then. The man told the psychologist that in the real world, that mundane grind, he never

drove anywhere. He worked from home. Ordered delivery. He held a driver's license but did not practice. His mother was a better driver than he was. His sister, too. His once girlfriend, by leaps and bounds, miles, literally—more than two thousand she'd driven with him, he the passenger tasked with feeding her seedless green grapes as she steered. Highways made him nervous. The oncoming cars, like lines of golden-eyed insects rushing to swarm him. "When driving, you have to assume that other people want to live as much as you do," he'd told his mother, his sister, and his then girlfriend, an assumption none found of interest, as it was universally applicable to any situation, like walking outside or using a public rest room, but the assumption reassured him, since, if, while operating heavy machinery, he also had to worry about the sanity of other people operating similar machinery, then how was driving different from warfare, and cars from fighter jets, in which you either attack or get attacked? The psychologist found these analogies interesting. The psychologist wrote furiously on a notepad.

"My father," the man told the psychologist, since neither his mother nor his sister ever wished to speak about this person, "my father was a defensive driver." Had his mother wished to speak about this person, she would have added, "His father was an aggressive driver," and his sister would have added, "Dad was the worst driver in the world. Ask him how many accidents he got us into, ask him how many tickets, how many cars he totalled. One time, I flew through a windshield. A windshield!" The sister would then point to her large, dented forehead. Only in a certain light was the dent visible.

It was impossible to ask their father how many accidents, tickets, totalled cars, et cetera. He'd left the country long ago and cut ties. Also, his sister had not, as she said, "flown through a windshield," but she had shot forward in the car (inertia, his once girlfriend had called this), hit her large forehead against the glass, cracked the glass, and then rebounded into the back seat, where, had she just buckled up moments earlier, as their father had mandated both children do, she would not have been thrown at the windshield when their father rear-ended the car in front of them while going five miles over the forty-five-miles-per-hour limit. Prior to the collision, their parents had been arguing. It was either about money or about why they had immigrated to an insane country that measures height in feet and distance in miles. Their mother had dared their father to crash the car. He had done as he was told. Their mother's forehead had also hit the windshield and been dented, a detail his sister conveniently leaves out.

"Where were you in all this?" the psychologist asked. The man, then a boy, was in the back seat, with his seat belt fastened. He had felt no pain then or later, when paramedics treated a cross-chest abrasion, vermillion colored and the width of a mountain-bike tire. He had felt no pain because his parents had stopped fighting, and his sister had stopped complaining, and the car had stopped moving, so, for all intents and purposes, his father had done a good deed by ending the familial discord without killing a bystander. With their father, there had been twelve accidents, zero casualties.

"Did he wish to live?" the psychologist asked, and the man said, "For sure," with the same conviction one might declare all families happy, and all immigrants grateful, and all sisters saints.

"There's no child in the booster seat because the child is you," the psychologist told him, and the man said, "Oh, my God."

Then the psychologist showed him a silver lining. After his father had left, his mother and his sister became good drivers, and that allowed the man to be a defunct one, which allowed him to charm his once girlfriend, who pursued a hard science helmed by strong men and found, for a time, happy purpose in the act of caring for him, a less strong man, a gentle man. Wasn't there consolation in that?

He left that session restored. The dreamdrive did not end, but he did not care. The ordeal was no longer a senseless drive to nowhere but a sensible one to nowhere. The drive itself was the destination—this is the logic with which families delude themselves into taking road trips in the first place—and the drive was an endless

THE ANGEL OF RETAIL

You spirit of grace in the taffy machine's chrome arms
At Morris's Candy performing a sarabande
Unknitting and knitting again immaculate sweets.

You spirit of order in a plank across uprights
Between us patrons and visible bottles: a bar,
The barrier presence attending to our pleasure.

Angel of displays recurrent, mortal and porous,
Dry goods and hardware and the fearsome eyeless
Heads I remember at Dlugos's Ladies' Hats.

New spirits of the body, Pilates and Threading,
I needed explained. My ignorance not like that
Of those who hissed "At thy unequal'd Play

The Alchymist: Oh fie upon 'em," says Herrick
Son of a goldsmith, praising Ben Jonson. Like Twain's
Dauphin and Duke, his Subtle the Alchemist scams

Us townsfolk, selling Abel Drugger a magnet
To attract customers. No joke, ruthless Angel:
In Greenwood murderous white rioters destroyed

Eldridge's Grille and Lewis's Meats and Sundries—
More shocking than the bank, the church, more even
Than torching the movie theatre named the Dixie.

Lethal deviser, you did remove the X-ray
At Hirsch's Modern Footwear, but only after
I watched my live toes wiggle in monochrome space.

Bill Russell bought Slade's Barbecue in your gaze,
And Walter Benjamin bought paper and shirts.
The Nazis knew from you which windows to paint.

In the upstairs Lucky Diner we immigrants
Looked white with Egg Foo Young and across the hall
Lived the De Nuccis. At their Liberty Market

My grandpa bought the apple that to win a bet
He threw high over the A&P tower—your Great
Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, defunct,

Or is that story of small-town prowess a legend
Dreamt up by Bruno Schulz your offspring, at home
In his apartment above the family store.

—Robert Pinsky

solo road trip that represented all the road trips that he and his family had never taken, since they never made it far before his father got into an accident and the car had to be towed. How American a road trip was. Car ownership, too. A package deal—the car, the open road, and being a sedentary but freedom-aspiring resident of this insane metric-system-phobic country.

Thus, one morning, after having fallen asleep at the wheel for the hundredth time and woken up in bed, the man realized that he understood his father a little better. He understood why his father, in his first month in the U.S., had gone out and bought, in all cash, a fourth-hand compact auto with sticky roll-down windows, and why, although he'd had to keep moving the family into progressively smaller rental properties, his father had always made sure that they had access to a car. The car was the American Dream. Yet the car was also a burden, with high monthly interest payments, which put savage masculinity at odds with paternal liability. As soon as the man understood that, he also understood why his father, being the imperfect, self-destructive human that he was, had had no other recourse but to wreck it. And, as soon as the man understood that, he also understood why his father, being the duty bound, self-loathing human that he was, had no other recourse but to fix the car immediately or buy a new one. Had there been fewer totalled cars, his father might have attained home ownership, but then another cycle would have begun—burn the house down, just to build it back up—and it was objectively more arduous to level (and to rebuild) a house than a car. The last car that his father owned had not been totalled. It was not in optimal or even suboptimal condition, but, on roads that were not highways, it was drivable. So, perhaps by leaving that broken but not entirely destroyed piece of equipment to their mother, their father was trying to tell her that he still had hope. Perhaps he was saying that he believed the dream would outlast him.

The man texted these early-morning epiphanies to his mother and his sister in one long paragraph that began with "My father." His mother liked the paragraph so instantly that the man was certain she had not read it. His sister took four days to respond, privately, with two sentences. The first declared, as a fact, that their father was a "manipulative layabout" (in all caps) and that a son's sorry habit of excusing his layabout father is an imprinted form of "patriarchal power and brotherhood" (in all caps) that leads to the insidious gaslighting of daughters and mothers. The second asked if he was O.K. "I am O.K.," the man replied, and the sister left that sentence on read.

Since he did sleep a bit each night, he was biologically O.K. and not dead. But he could no longer recall what restful slumber was like: lapsing from light to dark, slipping under, into hypnosis, the sleep of the dead, no dreams, no terrors, just a pristine blank, a goneness that lasts the snap of a finger, only to surface, inhale, and see that, by some clock magic, a third of a day has passed. That he could now perceive every passing minute was a new and unpleasant phenomenon. Was this to be the remainder of his life?

Yes. Maybe. In the grand scheme of sleep disorders, it could be far worse.

He was delighted when the dream-drive gave him a change of scenery. Sections of roadwork, albeit with no workers. A school crossing, albeit with no schoolchildren. The delight was followed by loneliness; he was in this dream world childless, fatherless, companionless, and indisputably alone. Sometimes it snowed, and, when it did, he would roll his eyeballs upward into that black cavern and address the snowflakes: "Ah, my friends." To these friends, he told stories about his father, whose name was Greg. Not that names were so important, but, in the dream-drive, the man thought they might be. Greg was not his father's real name; it was his chosen one. Easy to say, to spell. Easy to remember and also to forget. Greg had crashed cars but had not had insomnia. Nor had he believed in insomnia. He'd believed that if people worked long and hard enough, if they were fatigued enough from physical or mental labor, they slept, as sleep is crucial to survival, and people who defied their own survival, insomniacs, would, under the laws of natural selection, be

eliminated. In other words, Greg had thought insomnia a problem of the rich, the weak, the useless, the indulgent, the lazy. "Greg for gregarious," the man joked, and the snowflakes laughed. Oh, how these jovial ice fractals resembled ash.

Awake, Son of Greg the Gregarious, was let down. The day was too bright, the weather too random, and events moved around him, despite him, as if he didn't really need to exist. He had friends in his contact list, real, even gregarious, people he knew and could meet up with, but never did. At work, he had become desultory, though not enough to draw notice. He realized that much of what he used to do with his once girlfriend was listen to her vent about her work, how if she lost focus for a millisecond—"that's one-thousandth of a second," she'd explain—her colleagues would not only notice but say that they'd noticed, and report her to their supervisor. Now the man couldn't help but wonder: What was worse—to be singled out for decimal changes or to be ignored for integral ones?

Each morning, by text, he reported to his mother, his sister, and his psychologist what he had seen the night before, and expressed keen anticipation for what he would see that night. His mother liked his texts but rarely responded. His sister rarely liked his texts and never responded. The psychologist was a willing accomplice, even curious. "There ever any chickens?" he'd asked during one session. The man checked that night and the night after, seven nights in a row he checked, only to report back that there were no psychedelic chickens crossing the road. "A shame," the psychologist said, making a note.

This was the nature of things, until the man mentioned, offhandedly, more as a setting detail, that, in the dreamdrive, he talked to snow. The psychologist leaned forward and clarified that the man meant snow from the sky, and not a ground-level accumulation in the form of a buff snow guy or a voluptuous snow gal. The man clarified that he meant snowflakes. What would he and a bunch of shape-shifting snow people have to discuss, except the certainty of climate change and a fleeting existence dependent on temperature, for which modern civilization had three incongruous scales? Kelvin, Celsius, Fahrenheit, the man said. Kelvin, Celsius, Fahrenheit, the man repeated.

So the psychologist spoke to a psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist spoke to a neurologist, and the neurologist spoke to a better neurologist, and the group of them decided that it would benefit the man to undergo an MRI of the brain.

Brain waves, sleep waves, these were not what an MRI would measure, according to Google, and, wisely skeptical, the man met with the two white-coated neurologists to glean with absolute clarity what kind of procedure he was getting himself into. Their white coats hung like snow capes. He wished that his once girlfriend were still his girlfriend. He wished that he saw his mother and his sister more.

"MRI stands for magnetic resonance imaging," the neurologist said.

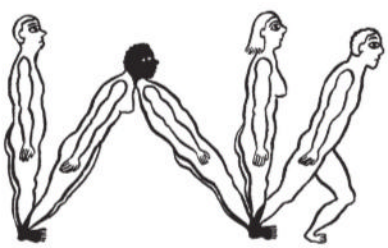
"Which uses a magnet," the better neurologist said.

"To align the body's water molecules," the neurologist said.

"Then uses radio waves to disrupt that alignment," the better neurologist said.

"But please remember," the neurologist said, "that radio waves travel at the speed of light and not sound."

"And because radio waves travel at the speed of light and not sound, they're actually light waves. Light," the better



neurologist said, panning his hands upward to the L.E.D. ceiling panel. "Light."

The man looked down at his own hands, which felt heavy and coarse. He said that he would do his best with this information, do his best to remember, but the "it"—the dreamdrive, the scan, the waves, his presence today in this exam room, and his firm but erroneous belief that he had not slept in months—still felt, all together, surreal.

"Surreal is a homophone of so real," the neurologist said.

"Other questions?" the better neurologist asked.

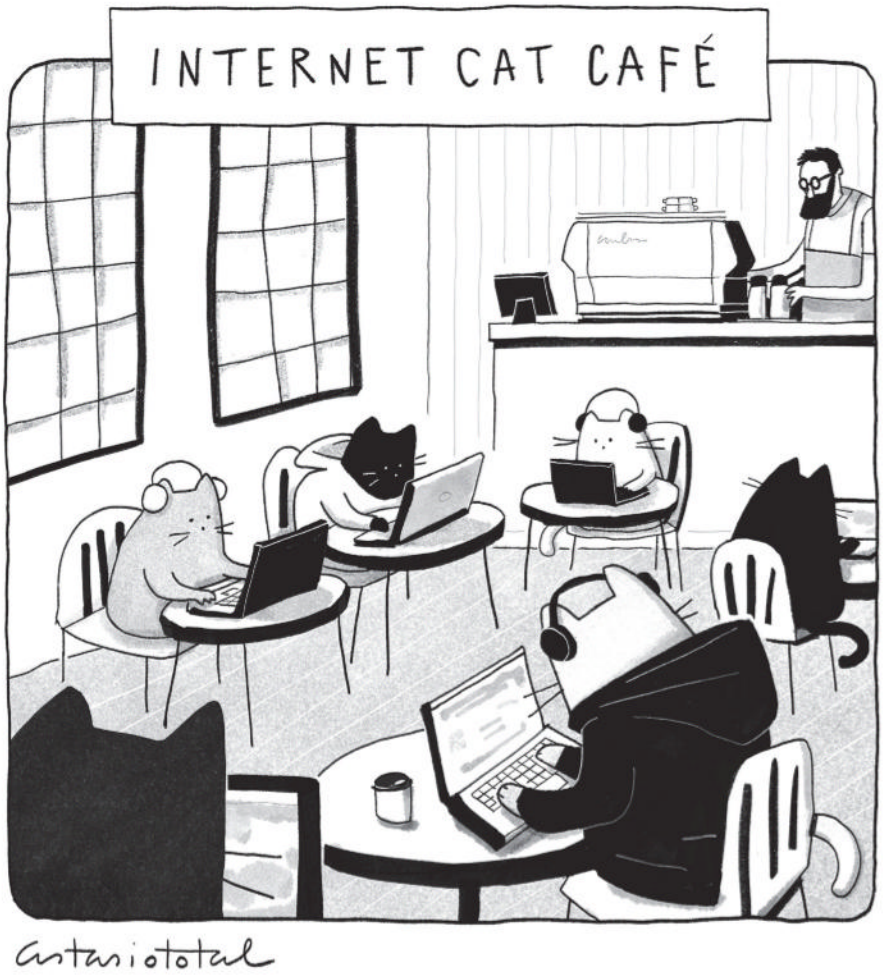
Since radios are often found in the same rooms as sofas, the man asked at what speed sofa waves travelled. Sound or light? The better neurologist said sound, for sure. Sofa waves travel at the speed of sound.

A few days later, the man was strapped onto a table that would be fed into a machine that reminded him of an incinerator. Heavily sedated, his head shoved into a yoke the neurologist called a "head coil," he was told to count backward from ten. He didn't make it to six. Yet, between the numbers of ten and six, he felt he had attained nirvana. How many times—countless—had he, awake and livid, dreamed, in the sense of yearned, to be stabbed in the neck with a horse tranquilizer, and how many times—countless—had he realized that he only thought "horse tranquilizer" and not "bear" or "lion" because he was still reading that book on European horse breeding. From numbers six downward to negative infinity, he was in the dreamdrive, the same car, the same fog, the same snow, the same road. Seconds passed. Minutes. He could not wake from the sedation, so he could not fall asleep at the wheel. He was tired from the sedation, but he could not alleviate his tiredness by falling asleep at the wheel; he was trapped. "I'm trapped," he told the snowflakes. They were sympathetic. As the minutes stretched on, and the drive became the longest he'd experienced, it also became boring, monotonous, with none of the panic he'd previously known, and he wondered if he had overreacted. If he had never told his mother, his sister, his once girlfriend, if he had not enforced his own terminology, vouched for his own singularity, if they had not left him to cope with it alone, and if that had not pushed him into the rooms of disease-obsessed doctors, who then pushed him into rooms with wave-obsessed machines, would it all have worked out fine?

No. It would not have. He would have died.

In the moving vehicle of the dream

world, and in the stationary machine of the real world, he was trapped, but trapped, at least, in two triumphs of humanity. A combustion engine. An incinerator-like magnet. Light energy harnessed in the real world was now playing through the radio of his car in the dream world in the form of melodious static that lulled him either to sleep soundly or to be sound asleep. This was progress, advancement. He was privileged, and, if he had privilege, he had power. He moved his right foot to the left, to a new pedal. He could only hope that this was the brake. He pressed the pedal, and, as a normal car would, the car slowed, and, once it had come to a stop, he pulled the hand brake. The fog was still present. The snow. But in the car's total lack of motion, in the stillness of its water molecules, which mirrored the stillness of his own water molecules, he had achieved what his father had wanted his son, his boy, his progeny in the new country, to achieve all along. He had parked the car.



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A memory unearthed. Remember when, on snowy, foggy mornings, on the drive to school, your father or your mother or your sister turned on the radio, and remember when you sat to the right of whoever was driving, in the passenger seat, and took your index finger and drew shapes in the window condensation, and remember when your father or your mother or your sister would stop at a red light, that rouge color aglow on their cheeks, and they would puff clouds into their hands, to stay warm, and remember when they looked at you and remarked on those window shapes, how funny or ugly or weird they were, and you thought, especially with your father, Greg the Gregarious Guardian of Families and Cars, *If only we could stay like this, on red, with the car, the radio, the snow, all running as they were built to but not going anywhere*, and remember when, through the glorious marriage of light and sound waves, the radio announced, as you had willed it to, that school was closed that day, *Congrats, kids, grab your sleds, mitts, skates, friends, go out yonder to those bleached meadows, roll those snowballs, build those snowmen, dig those snow forts, fight, conquer*, and remember how that message electrified you by declaring the imminent day unstructured, thus ungovernable, removed from time, and remember how your father or your mother or your sister knew this, too, such that, once the light turned green, your father or your sister, though not your mother, but especially your father, would curse at the radio, at the voice on the radio, for now they had to make a U-turn in the snow and take you back to the wild, haphazard home, from which you, then your entire family, one by one, would soon exit. Remember that?

When the man smiled in the dream world, he also smiled in the real world, under his head coil, unbeknownst to the medical techs until an hour later, when he was pulled out of the incinerator and his head was unyoked. By then, the car was covered in snow, the windshield blitzed in white, yet, inside this igloo, the man was at ease. The medical team confirmed that he was still sedated. The neurologist checked the right side of his face; the better neurologist checked the left. His smile was, indeed, asymmetrical, with the curl set slightly higher on the right side, reflecting the fact that the man was left-brain dominant and not, as he had stated during intake, ambidextrous. What the man had probably meant, the neurologists agreed, was that he was mixed-handed—that he wrote with one hand but threw with the other. Because few people are truly ambidextrous. Maybe one per cent of the population. There are far, far more insomniacs, and it would be a wonder of science to find an ambidextrous insomniac. The neurologists moved the man to a recovery ward. At some point soon, the sedation would wear off, but, until then, here was where he would stay and rest and be cured. ♦

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

ROBOT LIT

The prehistory of A.I. slop.

BY JILL LEPORE

In 1962, a programmer at Librascope, a California-based defense contractor, announced that "a computer can be programmed to write meaningful and relevant sentences in proper English." At Librascope's Laboratory for Automata Research, in Glendale, he'd started out by feeding into his computer—the vacuum-tube LGP-30—a vocabulary of thirty-five hundred words and a repertoire of a hundred and twenty-eight sentence patterns, and told it to do, more or less, what humans did in the nineteen-nineties when they stuck Magnetic Poetry on the doors of their refrigerators. And behold! "Broccoli is often blind," the LGP-30 tapped out on its typewriter, and "Communism is more porcelain than albino gold." The engineer decided to set this machine-generated text as free verse:

> Was Milo mewling thrilling radishes?
> So, our anchovies are sad but green.

He called his program the Auto-Beatnik, cunningly deploying Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs as cover for this bilge. The ploy occasionally paid off; the London *Daily Mirror* described the Auto-Beatnik's poetry as "better than most of the stuff that gets published in avant garde magazines."

The literary début of the Auto-Beatnik, a machine that could compose five thousand poems in an hour or so, caught the attention of *Time*, *Life*, and the *Times*. In an inversion of the more common critical reception of an emerging artist, this new writer's poetry was often noticed but seldom admired, notwithstanding the *Daily Mirror's* snide enthusiasm. In 1963, a story in the *Observer* about automated poetry ran with a cartoon of a guy feeding a slip of paper reading "ART" into a computer that, at the other end, spat out a paper reading "TRA." The "SH," I guess, was implied: in went art, out came trash.

Lately, this kind of junk has become known as A.I. slop—"slop" was Merriam-Webster's 2025 Word of the Year—and it's everywhere, gumming up the works, slowing down traffic, and making a god-awful mess. It brings to mind the time, in 1919, that a tank in Boston containing nearly two and a half million gallons of molasses burst, and a fearsome wave of syrup reportedly fifty feet high and travelling at thirty-five miles an hour (faster than you'd expect, really) flooded the city. The cleanup of the Great Molasses Flood took weeks, and, for months, everywhere that anyone had tracked molasses, including underground subway platforms, was still tacky. Even years later, on hot days, the North End smelled like a gingerbread house.

Machine-generated writing, though it doesn't smell as sweet, has something of molasses's smothering stickiness. One way to think about the internet is that it's an attempt to archive nearly everything ever written by anyone who ever lived. Recently, more and more new writing online is being produced by bots, during this, the Great A.I.-Slop Flood. Ante-ChatGPT, more than ninety-eight per cent of all English-language articles being published on the internet were written by humans. By the fall of 2024, machines were writing around half of such articles, according to the digital-marketing agency Graphite, which, far from taking umbrage at the usurpers, recommends using A.I. to help run your ad campaigns. And why not? In one blind test, people found A.I.-generated advertisements to be "of higher quality" than ads made by humans.

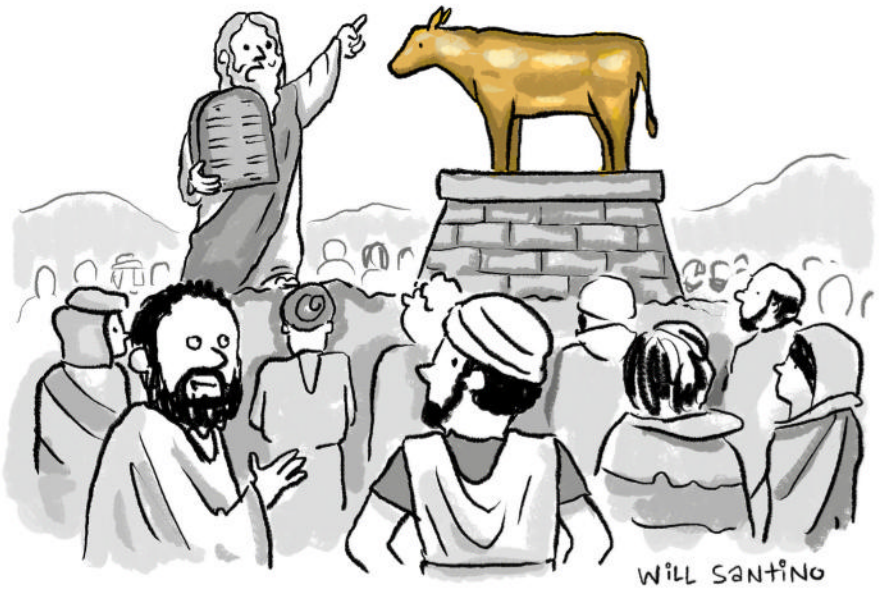
And that's not counting social media or e-mail or all the robot-written rubbish that comes your way by text or voice mail or pop-up customer-service chats. YouTube is overrun with slop. Reddit is caked in it. Much of Facebook is nothing *but* slop. The literary critic Matthew Kirschenbaum warns of a coming "textpocalypse" that will render the words you're reading right now—this word, and this one—relics your grandchildren will frame on a wall, a daguerreotype, a needlepoint sampler. "Like the prized pen strokes of a calligrapher, a human document online could become a rarity to be curated, protected, and preserved," Kirschenbaum writes. Can the textpocalypse be stopped? "Rest assured 2026 will be the beginning of AI slop purge," *Forbes* promised, sloppily, at the start of this year. This was hardly reassuring. My anchovies are still sad.

The idea of mechanically produced prose or poetry is not especially new. Eighteenth-century letter-writing manuals provided fill-in-the-blank templates, because many types of correspondence are set forms: letters of condolence, say, or letters of recommendation. Anxiety about machines replacing humans as writers, and replacing good writing with bad, is also older than you might think. Mid-nineteenth-century commentators, overwhelmed by the era's flood of cheap printed material, especially periodicals and novels, imagined a "New Magazine Machine"

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM GETTY; OPPOSITE: PIERRE BUTTIN

Long before ChatGPT, computers were already producing love letters, fake poems, cheap plots, and high-grade nonsense.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JACK SMYTH



"Moses has very clear policy positions, but I feel like I could get a beer with the Golden Calf."

• •

that could spit out cheap pulps, and a "Book-Making Machine," a literary successor to Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine.

Random-story generators are even more ancient: that, after all, is what tarot cards are. (You can read about some of these antecedents in Dennis Yi Tenen's breezy 2024 book, "Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write," an introduction that, despite its title, isn't really a work of literary theory but instead engages in "patiently assembling the modern chatbot from parts found on the workbench of history.") As industrialization advanced, the factory replaced the wheel of fortune as a metaphor for how things happen in the world. A 1912 writing guide, "The Fiction Factory," advised, "A writer is neither better nor worse than any other man who happens to be in trade. He is a manufacturer. After gathering his raw product, he puts it through the mill of his imagination." This only accelerated with the factory that was Hollywood. In a 1919 writing guide, "Ten Million Photoplay Plots," a grifter named Wycliffe A. Hill told would-be screenwriters that there are thirty-seven possible story lines that can be combined with a measurable number of characters, situations, and subplots to produce the mathematically precise total of 10,494,360 plots. After the coining of the word "robot," in 1920, in the internationally popular Czech play "R.U.R.," and the attendant cultural fascination with mechanical men, Hill published a follow-up manual in 1931 that included what he called the Plot Robot. As an ad for it in *Modern Mechanics* promised:

> Formerly robots were merely mechanical devices that could perform a variety of stunts under the guidance of a human being, but now a robot has made its appearance that thinks, has a soul of a kind, creative imagination, and other qualities necessary for writing a modern stereotyped short story. . . . Now if you want to become a successful author simply obtain a robot and put it to work.

In fact, there was no robot. If you bought the book, you found out that the Plot Robot was a cardboard number wheel. This grift is still going. These days, you can buy Writing Dice to help you with your novel: Nine dice! "Thousands of combinations, you'll never fear the blank page again!"

Actual robot writing dates to 1953, when the mathematician Christopher Strachey, a nephew of the writer Lytton Strachey, he of the Bloomsbury group, wrote a computer program that could generate love letters like this one:

> Honey Dear
> My sympathetic affection beautifully attracts your affectionate enthusiasm. You are my loving adoration: my breathless adoration. . . .
> Yours wistfully
> M. U. C.

Think of it as Mad Libs before there was Mad Libs. Strachey instructed M.U.C., the Manchester University Computer, to fill in the blanks in template sentences by drawing randomly from a list of words identified by their parts of speech: "*My* — (adj.) — (noun) — (adv.) — (verb) *your* — (adj.) — (noun)." He then posted the letters on campus. Among Strachey's motivations for building a cyber Cyrano was to poke fun at credulous reporters who described computers as "thinking machines." His program, he insisted, was "almost childishly simple." Because Strachey was thought to have been gay, scholars have read the letters as making fun of straight romance. Or, I'd have said, any romance. Incontestably, love letters are, very often, slobbering slop.

Lest Strachey's epistles seem antiquated compared with the stuff that comes your way these days, I might mention that, while I was writing this essay, a writer friend texted me an A.I. e-mail she'd just received that purported to be from a British novelist: "Happy weekend, Elise! Quick bulldozer boost (spam-free!) your toy-truck kid spark + 28-book marathon inspire; let's swap suspense secrets 15 mins this week? When will work reply today? Warmly, Alice Feeney." DEAR HONEY-DEW YOU ARE MY GREATEST WHISKERS MY UTTER MOONBEAM.

Strachey's work is the starting point for an engrossing collection, "Output: An Anthology of Computer-Generated Text, 1953-2023," edited by Lillian-Yvonne Bertram and Nick Montfort, but they do not note that 1953 is also the year that Roald Dahl published his story "The Great Automatic Grammatizator," in which an engineer named Adolph Knipe convinces his boss, Mr. Bohlen, that they could make a killing by using a computer to write cheap, shitty stories:

> "Nowadays, Mr Bohlen, the hand-made article hasn't a hope. It can't possibly compete with mass-production, especially in this country—you know that. Carpets . . . chairs . . . shoes . . . bricks . . . crockery . . . anything you like to mention—they're all made by machinery now. The quality may be inferior, but that doesn't matter. It's the cost of production that counts. And stories—well—they're just another

product, like carpets and chairs, and no one cares how you produce them so long as you deliver the goods. We'll sell them wholesale, Mr Bohlen! We'll undercut every writer in the country! We'll corner the market!"

Knipe builds the machine and it's like they're printing money. Dahl concludes:

> This last year—the first full year of the machine's operation—it was estimated that at least one half of all the novels and stories published in the English language were produced by Adolph Knipe upon the Great Automatic Grammatizator.
>
> Does this surprise you?
>
> I doubt it.
>
> And worse is yet to come.

It came.

Like artificial intelligence itself, A.I. slop is an artifact of the Cold War. *The U.S. sought to defeat the spread of Communism*, a stingingly grumpy T-shirt might read, *and all we got was the death of books, bookstores, newspapers, and authors.*

Experiments like Strachey's were part of an explosion of postwar research on the relationship between mathematics and language, expressions of a broader fascination with the automation of knowledge, which crossed disciplines and suffused the culture. Among the many unknowns of the Cold War was the extent to which the world was random or ordered. Could the Soviet Union's next move be predicted, or not? "Artificial intelligence" emerged from "intelligence" in the sense of espionage, as computers were deployed to do signal processing—the search for patterns in radio broadcasts and in printed texts like newspapers. Teaching a machine to read becomes useful when you're spying on a twentieth-century enemy. That it could learn to write was a bonus that contributed to a revolution in linguistics and in poetics, too.

In the nineteen-fifties, the fields of computer science and artificial intelligence—both terms were coined that decade—were increasingly concerned with the simulation of human intelligence and with the translation of human (or "natural") language. Linguists were turning language into codes, too. In "Syntactic Structures," published in 1957, the year a science-fiction magazine cover pictured a robot reading a book, Noam Chomsky illustrated the separability of syntax from meaning with the sentence "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously," the kind of thing that might have been written either by the Auto-Beatnik or, to be fair, by an actual Beatnik. Circa 1959, William S. Burroughs started experimenting with writing poetry by cutting up pieces of prose and pasting them together on a page, as in a poem made of newspaper stories about 1) the polio virus and 2) a performance at the Met:

> The girls eat morning
> dying peoples to a white bone monkey
> in the Winter sun
> touching tree of the house. $$$$

At the same time, and using a rather similar method, the German mathematician Theo Lutz created poetry on a Zuse Z22 computer by writing a program that drew from, or cut up and pasted together, random words from Franz Kafka's "The Castle":

> EVERY STRANGER IS FAR. A DAY IS LATE.
> EVERY HOUSE IS DARK. AN EYE IS DEEP.

The Zuse Z22's poetry was reviewed in the *T.L.S.*, where it elicited the opinion that the elimination of meaning was hardly impressive: "What really matters is to eliminate sense."

By the early nineteen-sixties, there was enough of this kind of thing going around that it caused both a panic and understandable excitement. "THE MACHINES ARE TAKING OVER: COMPUTERS OUTDO MAN AT HIS WORK NOW—AND SOON MAY OUTTHINK HIM," a headline in *Life* warned in 1961. What was billed as "the first book of free verse written by an electronic computer" was published in Montreal in 1964, and was credited to "the author, an electronic computer, the LGP-30, which composed the automatic sentences in this collection." Those sentences included this one: "*La pomme ajuste le monde, mais la pluie s'embellit pour les raisins.*" ("The apple shapes the world, but the rain enhances the grapes.") Was it art? Nah, but it was interesting.

In 1962, the German philosopher and semiotician Max Bense, who had supervised Lutz's work, attempted to draw a distinction between natural and artificial poetry. Natural poetry, Bense wrote, "has as its prerequisite . . . a personal poetic consciousness," whereas, in artificial poetry, there is "no personal poetic consciousness with its experiences, adventures, feelings, memories, thoughts, imaginative conceptions, etc., that is, no pre-existent world, and in which writing is no longer an ontological continuation through which the world aspect of the words could be related to a self." An artificial poem is a poem without a poet.

It's no accident that Bense wrote about artificial poetry, not artificial prose. In Bertram and Montfort's book, the section on poetry is also by far the longest one. Machine-generated text could be baffling: random, and unexpected. Maybe a computer was a new tool for understanding poetry. "You will say that to use a computer to write poetry is like using a crane instead of a pen to write a letter," the British philosopher and computational linguist Margaret Masterman admitted in 1964, but, with the computer, she argued, "we can at last study the complexity of poetic pattern."

Masterman, who studied philosophy and language with Wittgenstein, was, in 1956, the founder and director of the Cambridge Language Research Unit. (Earlier, she'd written novels.) She was a pioneer in machine translation, and her early work established the basic methods of information retrieval. She believed computers could come to understand meaning, and to generate it. She also tried to make that art, producing, with her colleague Robin McKinnon-Wood, "computerized Japanese haiku," like this one: "all white in the buds/I flash snow peaks in the spring/bang the sun has fogged."

Few writers were as enthusiastic about robot writing as Italo Calvino. In his 1967 lecture "Cybernetics and Ghosts," Calvino complained that "the use so far made of machines by the literary avant-garde is still too human," and predicted that a "true literature machine" would someday emerge, one that rejects rules and forms and "itself feels the need to produce disorder." Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, Calvino's dream of truly original machine literature has yet to be realized: so far, the machine hasn't, in Calvino's

formulation, felt the need to produce disorder, which is to say, literature. Instead, text produced by large language models, however remarkable, sophisticated, and even occasionally wondrous, is derivative, average, predictable. It is language without a mind. But is that even language?

In 1982, in an article called "Against Theory," the literary scholars Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels proposed a thought experiment to show how hard it is "to imagine a case of intentionless meaning." Suppose you're on a beach and discover, written into the sand, this message:

> A slumber did my spirit seal;
> I had no human fears:
> She seemed a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.

If you didn't recognize the verse as Wordsworth's, you might not worry about its author or its author's intention. You'd just recognize it as writing and try to understand its meaning. But what if, while you were staring at those lines in the sand, a wave came and washed them away, and, when the wave ebbed, it left in its wake another stanza?

> No motion has she now, no force;
> She neither hears nor sees;
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
> With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Well, then you'd have to wonder: Who wrote this, and why, and how? Wordsworth's ghost? The sea itself? God? For Knapp and Michaels, meaning without intention does not exist: "What a text means and what its author intends it to mean are identical." An author without an intention, they argued, is not an author.

Maybe that's a good definition of slop. *Quick bulldozer boost (spam-free!) your toy-truck kid spark + 28-book marathon inspire; let's swap suspense secrets 15 mins this week?*

The end of the Cold War very nearly coincided with the opening of the internet to the public. In the decades since, theorizing of the relationship between natural and artificial literature spawned a whole new academic field, generally within English departments. Courses in what might be described as robot lit are now being offered at universities that include Duke, Columbia, and Harvard. The literary critic Avery Slater argues that computer scientists, military labs, and corporations participated with poets in the Cold War-era creation of what she calls "post-automation poetics," a sensibility that brought together both an artistic vision and an engineering scheme. What was exciting about artificial poetry was that it had no author, no context, no history. It was nothing but form. It therefore had—has—a lot to teach the world about both language and art. A new theory of A.I. slop, however, has yet to emerge, nor a real answer to Wordsworth on the beach. *I had no human fears.*

Long after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the development of natural-language processing continued in universities, defense labs, and corporate R. & D. departments. Literary experiments with computer-generated text borrowed from that research's developing tools, such as topic spotting. This led to some wacky writing. After the founding of National Novel Writing Month, computer-generated-text devotees founded National Novel Generation Month, in 2013. Leonard Richardson's "Alice's Adventures in the Whale" is a retelling of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" with all its dialogue replaced with dialogue from "Moby-Dick": " 'Can't sell his head?—What sort of a bamboozingly story is this you are telling me?' thought Alice." One important tool in early natural-language-processing work was ranking the frequency of word sequences. Using that technique, along with early summarizing tools, the Canadian writer Ryan Stearne cut "The Old Man and the Sea" down to a two-thousand-word short story called "Old Sea."

About a decade and a half ago, the Auto-Beatnik tradition reëmerged on social media, in seemingly automated accounts like @Horse_ebooks, a viral sensation, with posts like: "(using fingers to indicate triangular shape) SMELL SMELL SMELL GOOD NEW NEW NEW slice drink MATCH SPARKLER (thrown in air) STARS STARS STARS," and, most memorably, "Dear Reader, / You are reading." In 2013, *The Atlantic* dubbed the account's output "the Most Successful Piece of Cyber Fiction, Ever." Disappointingly, it was soon revealed that @Horse_ebooks wasn't an automated account but was instead put together by two guys, and I'm not even sure why.

There's nothing wrong with nonsense. But it's not always poetry. And mistaking one for the other is another legacy of how the Cold War foreshortened the humanistic possibilities of the intellectual revolution of the past eighty years—a revolution that has, miraculously, allowed people to communicate with machines using human languages. Shouldn't this be one of the most exciting times in history to be studying language, literature, and literary theory? In "Language Machines," Leif Weatherby, N.Y.U.'s director of digital humanities, points out that, in the years since the Cold War, "the humanities lost language" to cognitive science and computer science. Given that machines can generate language without recourse to reason—he argues that the two things have been radically decoupled—what's needed now is "a theory of meaning in the absence of intelligence." Language no longer distinguishes humans, Weatherby says, dismissing the contention, made by Chomsky and others after the release of ChatGPT, that L.L.M.s "differ profoundly from how humans reason and use language." Weatherby calls this, in a curious choice of metaphor, "remainder humanism": "a humanism without a theory or doctrine of what is human, in which humanity is remaindered, like a book past salability."

If that's what it means, now, to be human—to cling to the idea of a relationship between language and reason—I don't think I mind being a book, even a remaindered one, shelved in the dark downstairs of a bookstore and priced cheap. Is the alternative really so enticing? This winter, the most popular series on TikTok was reportedly "Fruit Love Island," an entirely A.I.-generated version of "Love Island" featuring talking fruit. "Welcome to Fruit Love Island, where eight single fruits are about to flirt, fight, and trust," it goes. DEAR HONEY-DEW YOU ARE MY GREATEST WHISKERS MY UTTER MOONBEAM. . . . YOURS BEAUTIFULLY MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY COMPUTER.

Something big is happening, something fascinating: we can talk to machines. "We do not have language yet for this twist in our plot," Weatherby writes. The contention is that something big is happening to us, that someone else, something else, is writing the plot. But shouldn't we be writing it? Because, so far, that plot is slop. ♦

BOOKS

A WOMAN SCORNED

Mary Todd Lincoln has long been derided. Is her reputation salvageable?

BY THOMAS MALLON

HISTORICAL / GETTY

For decades, biographers have striven to rehabilitate the First Lady's character.

Elizabeth Hardwick, visiting her home town of Lexington, Kentucky, in the late nineteen-sixties, declared that "the glory of the place is a certain vault-like solidity." Even so, she could find in Mary Todd Lincoln, one of the town's most famous residents, "nothing to be happy about. Neurotic, self-loving, in debt at the White House, a bad wife, a rotten mother."

The first and third items in this indictment are indisputable; the second is a complicated and qualified matter; and the last two are libels, still part of popular legend no matter how often disproved by serious biography. So persistent are the charges against Mrs. Lincoln, even in minds as well informed as Hardwick's, that Lois Romano, in her new book, "An Inconvenient Widow: The Torment, Trial, and Triumph of Mary Todd Lincoln," decides they need refuting once again.

The Todd family was so important in Lexington that Abraham Lincoln may (or may not) have remarked, "God spells his name with one D, but the Todds spell theirs with two." Romano, who had a long career as a Washington *Post* reporter, explains that Mary's father, Robert Smith Todd, operated variously as "a lawyer, bank president, successful wholesale merchant, cotton factory owner, and political power broker." Mary was the sixth child of his first wife, Eliza, who died giving birth to a seventh; Betsy, his second wife, with whom Mary almost never got along, went on to have nine children of her own. During Mary's adolescence, Mr. Todd moved his family from a house with nine rooms to one with fourteen, on West Main Street.

Instructed by a Parisian couple at Mentelle's for Young Ladies, Mary, as Romano notes, got more schooling than her future husband did. She surely was also exposed to Madame Charlotte Mentelle's feminist beliefs and abolitionist leanings. Mary's "disconcerting volatility, marked by stark highs and lows," was first noticed at the school and never fully left her. Nor did politics. "A violent little Whig," according to her family, Mary idolized Henry Clay, that party's founder and a three-time Presidential nominee. Unlike the young Abraham Lincoln, another passionate if more pacific Whig, she actually knew Clay, a neighbor in Lexington.

Mary stayed in her home town until she was nearly twenty-one, by which time she could no longer abide her stepmother and the Todds' overstuffed mansion. In 1839, she went off to live with a married sister, Elizabeth Edwards, in Springfield, Illinois, a more rough-and-tumble place than Lexington but a town soon to be its state's capital. Witty and flirtatious and socially ambitious, Mary immediately attracted the interest of two state legislators, but Stephen A. Douglas was awfully short, and a Democrat besides, whereas the towering Abraham Lincoln, despite a lack of polish, had the sort of politics and personality that drew Mary in. A year later, they agreed to marry.

Edwards found Lincoln "cold" rather than just ungainly, but Mary, strongly intuitive, sensed that she had found the patient yin to her enlivening yang. She persevered in that belief even when Lincoln broke off their engagement for eighteen months, for reasons that remain the subject of endless biographical speculation and historical fiction. Mary waited out Lincoln's guilty, perhaps suicidal gloom—knowing, as he probably did, too, that their disparate psychologies could still combine to produce a formidable alternating current. "They had chosen each other," Romano writes, settling the matter sensibly without fully unravelling it. The Lincolns wed on November 4, 1842, in the Edwardses' parlor, where Mary's corpse would be

laid out four tumultuous decades later.

Between 1843 and 1853, Mary gave birth to four boys. She would bury three of them before they turned eighteen and be left with the eldest and least affectionate, Robert Todd Lincoln, who eventually became her mortal enemy. But, during the pre-Presidential years, the Lincoln household appears to have been as rollicking as it was, occasionally, stormy. Mary pushed her husband, a circuit-riding lawyer, deeper into a political life that would be marked by intermittent success and more frequent failure. She accompanied him to Washington for a portion of the single congressional term that he served, in the late eighteen-forties. Once Mary returned to Springfield, Lincoln wrote to her with a mixture of despondence and detachment, the latter a quality that biographers have always found present in him and absent from his wife: "In this troublesome world, we are never quite satisfied. When you were here, I thought you hindered me some in attending to business; but now, having nothing but business—no variety—it has grown exceedingly tasteless to me."

In these early years, Mary helped more often than she hindered, as when she steered Lincoln away from accepting the dead-end territorial governorship of Oregon. Like Nancy Reagan a century later, she carried her husband's grudges for him, warning him about rivalrous colleagues with whom his own temperament often let him continue to do business. Romano points out that, when Lincoln emerged as a dark horse in the 1860 Presidential race, journalists covering the election sometimes found Mary more impressive than her spouse. That June, one newspaper contrasted her "ladylike courtesy and polish" with her husband's "awkwardness," noticing how she "converses with freedom and grace."

The two of them were enough of a team that, on the night he won, Lincoln rushed home from the Springfield telegraph office to declare, famously, "Mary, Mary! We are elected!"

Harriet Lane, a niece of the departing bachelor President, James Buchanan, was the first woman routinely called the First Lady, but occupants of the position had long attracted the public's interest. All the notice that came with the role was, Romano writes, a "dangerous elixir for an insecure woman who thrived on attention." The scrutiny was unaccompanied by any real support from Washington's female social élite. Elizabeth Blair Lee, a rare sympathetic member of that establishment, wrote to her husband, in 1861, "The women kind are giving Mrs. Lincoln the cold shoulder in the City."

Within six weeks of Lincoln's Inauguration, the Civil War had broken out and Mary was "drowning," according to Romano, surrounded by "opportunists and rogues" as numerous as the rats skittering through the Executive Mansion's walls. The Union's hastily augmented army couldn't get to the capital fast enough, and there was no guarantee that Mrs. Jefferson Davis wouldn't soon be calling the White House home. On April 22, 1861, the *National Republican* reported that "employees of the General Post Office Department . . . were instructed to hold themselves in readiness to repair to the Department, where arms would be furnished them at a moment's warning." Weeks after the 7th New York Regiment arrived to secure the capital, Mary was off to New York and Philadelphia, where she made some morale-boosting public appearances.

But she had also gone north to shop. She quickly blew through a congressional allowance for the White House's redecoration, purchasing extravagant wallpaper, chandeliers, and carpets. Between the election and the Inauguration, she had already amassed unsustainable personal debt for new clothes. "Compulsive shopping had not yet been identified as an affliction," Romano notes, but it "fueled an emotional void" in Mary, even when it was being enabled by public funds. She would engage in dodgy financial behavior for much of her life, but it was more often a result of impulse and panic than the sort of methodical grift practiced, so far without consequence, by the current First Lady.

The press alternated praise of Mrs. Lincoln's improvements to the Executive Mansion with scornful doesn't-she-know-there's-a-war-on cracks. Mary showed off the renovations at a number of parties, most conspicuously at an enormous ball given on February 5, 1862. Romano surveys the scene: "A Chinese pagoda bubbled with champagne. . . . The tables were decorated like a war-themed child's birthday party. On display was a large helmet molded of sugar, as well as replicas of Fort Pickens and the frigate *Union* . . . surrounded by sugared guns, sails, flags and cherubs." Cementing the First Lady's identification with this excess, the Marine Band struck up the new "Mary Lincoln Polka."

That night, both the President and his wife periodically fled upstairs to check on their most beloved son, the eleven-year-old Willie, sick with a fever that would kill him two weeks later. His death plunged his parents into prolonged, disabling grief—Mary's so clamorous that Lincoln had to point through a window toward Washington's insane asylum, insisting that she try to remain out of it.

Romano admits to Mary's long-standing "histrionics," "eruptions," "temper," "mood swings," and "emotional immaturity," but recognizes how Willie's death started a more serious "mental decline" that today's medications might have helped forestall. Lincoln himself would likely have benefitted from modern prescription drugs for what was then thought to be his "melancholia." On his own, he had learned some useful mood-altering behaviors, such as drafting what he called "hot letters" to his foes—and then leaving them unsent. In contrast, Romano skillfully identifies how Mary's own coping mechanisms, "the self-centered traits that helped her survive her childhood," would eventually "alienate people." After Willie died, she grabbed the crutch of Spiritualism, travelling to séances and bringing mediums to the White House, prompting one of Mary's sisters to dismiss her as "unnatural and abnormal."

Romano's sturdy book may not stint on examples of Mary's bad behavior—including a ferociously jealous verbal assault, near the end of the war, on the wife of a prominent Union general—but the biographer keeps tilting against those who slighted Mary in even the most superficial ways. Her too youthful and décolleté fashions were available for mockery, and, though Napoleon's Union-supporting nephew remained polite enough during an 1861 visit to the White House, he noted in his private diary that Mary had "the manner of a petit bourgeois and wears tin jewelry." A young James Garfield, the future President, disparaged Mary's looks in a letter home and was scolded for doing so by his wife.

Much more dangerously, Mary was

charged with being a Southern sympathizer or spy. With a host of siblings and in-laws in the Confederate Army, some of them rapidly being promoted, she could not shake these accusations, even after she refused to mourn the death of a half brother, Alexander Todd. Mary made frequent unobtrusive visits to Union hospitals, where, Romano writes, she "sat for hours with the men, read to them, fed them, helped dress wounds, and wrote to their families on their behalf when they could not hold a pen." Her Unionism was, in fact, implacable: when Jefferson Davis's wife, Varina, learned of Lincoln's assassination, she wept; when Mary heard of Davis's capture and imprisonment, a month after her own husband's killing, she wrote to her abolitionist friend Charles Sumner that her faith in God's goodness had been restored. Even so, the rumors of treason ground on. Richard Yates, a Republican from Illinois, raised them on the Senate floor in 1870, when he argued against a widow's pension for Mary.

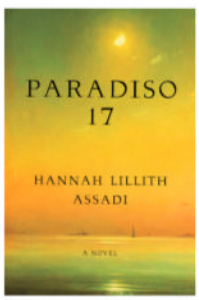
Her childhood naïveté about the supposed contentment of the Todd family's slaves evolved slowly toward an abolitionism more emotive and less tactical than Lincoln's. One sees this in her letters to Sumner and in an account of her left by Elizabeth Keckly, a once enslaved modiste who became her confidante, her guide to participation in a relief group for formerly enslaved people, and the travel companion of her early widowhood. When the relationship blew up over the publication of Keckly's empathetic yet candid book, "Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House," in 1868, Mary spoke with a disgraceful bitterness about "the colored historian." It was the kind of sarcastic insult she had at one time summoned against the Irish and immigrants in general.

Though prone to guilt (she regarded Willie's death as punishment for her own failings), Mary did not feel regret for having proceeded with the couple's plans for Good Friday evening in 1865, even after many invitees declared themselves unavailable to join the Lincolns at Ford's Theatre. Months later, in a letter to the painter Francis Bicknell Carpenter, she referred to the other attacks conducted or planned for that evening by John Wilkes Booth and his co-conspirators, writing that if Lincoln "had

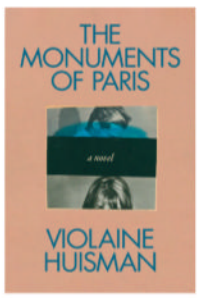
BRIEFLY NOTED

Into the Wood Chipper, *by Nicholas Enrich (Summit)*. This granular account of the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development, written by a former senior official, draws on internal records and firsthand observations to depict how the government agency was systematically taken apart. Enrich—who was placed on administrative leave in March, 2025, after circulating an internal memo critical of funding cuts—details how the Department of Government Efficiency hollowed out U.S.A.I.D.'s operations, disrupting its ability to respond to diseases, and thus exacting a grim human toll. His clipped, procedural account, stuffed with insider details, is a precise and unsettling record of an intentional bureaucratic collapse and its aftershocks.

Transcendence for Beginners, *by Clare Carlisle (New York Review Books)*. In this gem of a book, Carlisle asks a question that may especially preoccupy professors of philosophy (which she is) and biographers (which she is also, of Søren Kierkegaard and George Eliot), but that equally concerns the rest of us: How to make sense of a human life? Lightly touching on her own path—we find her up a mountain in India, at a yoga class in Manchester, "converted" to philosophy at a lecture on Plato's cave given by Jonathan Lear—Carlisle considers what she describes as "life's relentlessly relational texture" and shows how thinkers and artists from Spinoza and Proust to Celia Paul led her to the conclusion that, in defiance of life's losses, "love flows through us because it is an element of reality itself: like water, like air, like fire."



Paradiso 17, *by Hannah Lillith Assadi (Knopf)*. This novel of exile and memory chronicles the life of Sufien, a Palestinian man displaced as a child by the Nakba, whose story unfolds across continents and encompasses entanglements with a broad range of characters. Assadi traces the full arc of Sufien's life as he moves from Palestine to a refugee camp in Syria, then to Italy and the U.S. He deepens and matures, reflecting often on his course, but this is not a fawning portrait of a hero's journey so much as a study of a flawed individual. Though Assadi's prose is occasionally heavy-handed, she summons a wonderfully sprawling, almost picaresque story, which gains power from her resistance to passing simple judgment on her protagonist.



The Monuments of Paris, *by Violaine Huisman (Penguin Press)*. Two men loom over this hybrid novel: the author's father, Denis, a self-fashioned "academic-businessman," and her grandfather, Georges, an influential cultural official who, being Jewish, lost his position and his influence during the Nazi occupation of France. A composite of memoir and fictionalized family history, Huisman's book reckons with the influence of her male forebears—both possessed of grand self-conceptions, both flagrantly unfaithful to their wives—continuing a project that she began with an earlier book of a similar kind about her mother. As she sifts through the traces of the men's lives, she reflects on her emotional inheritance. Of her mother and father, she writes, "Her story, your story—neither story was mine, and yet I couldn't escape them."

remained at the W.H. on that night of darkness, when the fiends prevailed, he would have been horribly *cut to pieces*—Those fiends, had too long contemplated, this inhuman murder, to have allowed, *him*, to escape." There is no denying her perceptiveness, and her contemporaneous letters to her husband's successor, Andrew Johnson—mostly attempts to secure positions for Lincoln loyalists—do not suggest a woman mentally finished off by yet more grief and loss. Anyone seeking a full understanding of Mary will benefit from reading her correspondence, published in 1972; the letters, however peculiar in their observations and punctuation, reveal the intellectual capacities of a woman often seen wholly in terms of her emotions.

At forty-six, Mary was left to move between Chicago hotels, both fancy and plain, and to wage a long battle for a pension while her husband's will remained in probate. Newspapers pretended to be scandalized when she sold off the clothes they had criticized her for purchasing a decade earlier. Romano nicely summarizes the "disordered life" Mary now led: "strategic and manic, rational and desperate, canny and crass." Still ahead of her were European wanderings; the death of her youngest son, Tad (from pleurisy, at eighteen); and a brief confinement in an Illinois insane asylum. The judicial proceedings effecting the latter were instigated by Robert and consisted of a three-hour trial with testimony from seven doctors (one of whom was the director of the sanitarium) and "a bizarre parade of store clerks and hotel maids" swearing to Mrs. Lincoln's odd behavior. Mary was soon released, largely through the efforts of Myra Bradwell, a "self-trained attorney" who later became the Illinois bar's first female member.

If "An Inconvenient Widow" seems to speed through Mary's last several years—more European exile, cascading physical infirmities, a final return to Springfield—the reader is almost relieved, having come to share her frequently expressed yearning for release into the afterlife.

Romano puts herself in the curious position of fighting a battle that has already been won on facts but not yet in legend. The cruel cartoon of a constantly shrewish, venal, and disloyal Mary began cementing itself in the public mind when William Herndon, Lincoln's Springfield law partner, started lecturing about his reminiscences within months of the President's murder. Having loathed Mary for decades (the feeling was entirely mutual), Herndon moved beyond personal animus into outright fabrication by promoting the fairy tale that the real love of Lincoln's life had been a young woman named Ann Rutledge, whom he knew in Illinois, in the eighteen-thirties, before her death from typhoid fever. Romano writes that "it would be sixty years" before the story was publicly contested, though attempts at refutation actually began almost immediately.

Measured rehabilitation of the First Lady's character has been the dominant mode of Mary Lincoln biography for more than seventy years. Ruth Painter Randall's 1953 book told (and perhaps overstated) "the amazing and hitherto neglected story of Mrs. Lincoln as abolitionist." Twenty years later, Ishbel Ross, assessing Mary's unruly behavior, wrote that "her attacks were intermittent, and her eccentricities were only a small part of her story." The nineteen-eighties brought Jean H. Baker's balanced and widely read study, which swept away "classic instances of a male-ordered history that is no longer acceptable." And Catherine Clinton's "Mrs. Lincoln: A Life," from 2009, further extended the well-rounded approach. If there is a recent outlier that is tough on Mary, it would be Michael Burlingame's "An American Marriage" (2021). But the prevailing forgiving approach was taken by Elizabeth Keckly as far back as 1868: "Mrs. Lincoln may have been imprudent, but since her intentions were good, she should be judged more kindly than she has been."

And yet, when it comes to what Romano calls "the popular imagination," Mary is perpetually vanquished. There, a mad, out-of-control Mary lives on as tenaciously as George Washington's inability to tell a lie. She has been sensitively portrayed by any number of actresses—among them Julie Harris, Mary Tyler Moore, and Sally Field—whose performances have somehow never really altered our perception. For the past two years, Cole Escola's "Oh, Mary!," a play as hilarious as it is sick, has been selling out on Broadway, its title figure a boozy, promiscuous wannabe cabaret singer, a woman so bored by politics that she can't understand her husband's objections to her ambition, or even his frame of reference:

> Abraham: No! It's inappropriate! We're at war!
> Mary: With who?
> Abraham: The South!
> Mary: Of what?

"Oh, Mary!" was a finalist for the 2025 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Next February, it will come to Washington, D.C., playing the National Theatre, three blocks from the White House, on Lincoln's birthday.

One key to Bad Mary's persistence in the American mind can be found in the temperamental polarity that first drew Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln to each other. A reader who turns to Keckly's book will be given a further clue to posterity's demonization of Mary:

> Mr. Lincoln . . . was not admired for his graceful figure and finely moulded face, but for the nobility of his soul and the greatness of his heart. His wife was different. He was wholly unselfish in every respect, and I believe that he loved the mother of his children very tenderly. He asked nothing but affection from her, but did not always receive it. When in one of her wayward, impulsive moods, she was apt to say and do things that wounded him deeply.

What counts more here than Keckly's balanced view of Mary is her paean to Lincoln. Our need to meditate upon Lincoln as a savior and a saint—especially in times as rotten as the present—gives us a motivation, perhaps subconscious, to vilify Mary. If the assassination made the President a Christlike figure, his forbearance in the face of a wife's unreasonableness provides him with an extra measure of purity. Romano is aware of the thumb on the scale, and she blames "early historians" for it: "The more Lincoln's legend soared, the more Mary's reputation declined." But the fault lies more with the citizenry than with scholarship. Each reiteration and exaggeration of Mary's bad behavior is another civic stroke of the chisel that perfects the monumental Lincoln in our collective imagination. The task is advanced by our malice toward one, and that one is Mary. ♦

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ON AND OFF THE MENU

SPIRITED AWAY

The age of "intentional" drinking.

BY HANNAH GOLDFIELD

American adults are drinking less. Could the mini Martini lure them back?

For much of my life, my mother's side of the family—consummate New Englanders, some of them descended from a passenger on the Mayflower—seemed somewhat foreign to me. My father's side, Russian Jews from New York, organized family life around boisterous gatherings, abundant with oily, salty, garlicky food and spirited philosophical interrogation. The Wasps, meanwhile, wrote carefully worded thank-you notes, nibbled politely on Triscuits, and celebrated a painstakingly traditional, though mostly secular, Christmas. Once, after my maternal grandfather hurt my feelings, bringing me to tears, I awoke in the middle of the night to find E.M.T.s wheeling him into an ambulance—instead of apologizing, he'd developed chest pains. He recovered, and we never spoke of it again.

A few years ago, not long before that grandfather died, at the age of ninety-nine, he and my grandmother downsized from their longtime home in Vermont and invited my sister and me to claim heirlooms. In a cabinet beneath their wet bar, I found a beguiling artifact—a triangular black metal contraption called a Bar Aid, made in Japan in the nineteen-fifties, with a list of eighty cocktails printed on its slanted face. At the center is a dial and a small window, so you can spin through a paper scroll of recipes for the numbered drinks. A Gertie's Garter calls for three parts dry gin to one part grapefruit juice and one part grenadine; for a Millionaire No. 2 (there's also a Millionaire No. 1) you need Jamaican rum, apricot brandy, grenadine, lime juice, and sloe gin (not to be confused with gin, though it's made from it).

I've never been a particularly good drinker. I swore off gin in my twenties, when I realized it made me almost instantly ill, and mostly gave up on getting drunk in my thirties, when I decided that the hangovers were not worth it. Still, I've always been susceptible to the romantic appeal of mid-century cocktail culture. I was moved to imagine my grandparents, young and a little glamorous, in Manhattan, where they met, fixing drinks at five o'clock—and to imagine myself, decades later, making a new ritual of the same.

To resolve to drink *more* in 2026 might seem oddly countercultural. In January, 2025, Vivek Murthy, then the U.S. surgeon general, released an advisory detailing a causal relationship between alcohol and an increased risk for seven kinds of cancer, and urging lawmakers to require warning labels. Later that year, Gallup reported that the percentage of American adults drinking alcohol had dropped to fifty-four, the lowest it had been in almost ninety years of polling, and that those who do drink are drinking less. The numbers are unsurprising when you consider the growing use of appetite-reducing GLP-1s, which some people find kill the desire to drink, as well as the incursions of the wellness industry, whose acolytes threaten to supplant happy hour with run clubs, and the apparent abstemiousness of Gen Z. Once, I'd been quick to assume that any adult who turned down a drink was either pregnant or a recovering alcoholic. Now even casual drinkers seem to be on a journey of sorts—if not toward sobriety, then toward some kind of self-knowledge.

One evening not long ago, I met Amanda Crawford, a professional wine adviser, at Vandell, a new but nostalgic cocktail bar on the east side of Los Angeles. Crawford, who is in her early forties, caught the wine bug at Wellesley, where a favorite professor hosted tastings.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JASON FULFORD AND TAMARA SHOPSIN

Now she helps private collectors buy and sell bottles in the rare-and-fine market. What she described as the "classic archetype of the wine collector," an investment banker in his thirties who is trying to impress his boss, "doesn't exist anymore," she told me. "The first crypto bubble, there was a lot of young blood, but then they lost all their money." The Wall Street wine guys of the eighties, now elderly, seem to be pulling the ladder up behind them. "I go to dinners now, and everyone wants to talk about life extension," she said. "All these multimillionaires and billionaires—they used to trade stocks, and now they trade longevity doctors." After decades in the business, Crawford feels that she can weather the contraction—but she also doesn't think it will be permanent. "Wine has been important for six thousand years," she said. "I don't think that a fashion for high-protein diets is going to interrupt that."

At Vandell, which was packed at 5 P.M. on a Tuesday, we ordered Martinis: gin for Crawford, cut with both dry and bianco vermouth, plus a splash of tarragon vinegar, and vodka for me, mixed with an umami bomb of the Japanese condiments shio koji (made from fermented rice) and yuzu kosho (a spicy citrus preserve), as well as smoked olive brine. Both were available in a half size, an option that Crawford and I had each noticed creeping onto menus in L.A. and in New York. Many bars and restaurants now seem to be courting those who want to drink lightly—or more "intentionally," in the self-help-tinted parlance of the moment. They offer tiny 'tinis and other mini cocktails, they list drinks in order of A.B.V., and the beverages once known as mocktails have been rechristened with more dignified labels, such as "N.A." and "spirit-free."

John deBary, the author of three books on cocktails (alcoholic and otherwise), who runs the beverage program at Strange Delight, a New Orleans-inspired seafood bar in Brooklyn, told me about a consumer behavior known in the business as "zebra-striping"—alternating between cocktails and N.A. drinks. At Strange Delight, he offers a teetotaller Martini, made with celery bitters, Tabasco, and nonalcoholic gin and vermouth, but he also develops recipes that are prodigiously boozy: a concoction called Having Fun Since 1933 (the year that Prohibition was repealed) combines passion-fruit juice and Pat O'Brien's Hurricane Mix with a blend of rums. DeBary, for his part, stopped drinking in 2022. "I still do drugs!" he assured me. "I was, like, Wait—I actually don't like the feeling of drinking alcohol."

There will always be corners of the hospitality world where moderation is anathema. The New York superrestaurateur Keith McNally, of Balthazar and Pastis, told me that his alcohol sales this year are the best they've been since the pandemic. One wonders if this is because his clientele skews a bit older than, say, Jean's, a restaurant and club in downtown Manhattan that always seems crowded with glamorous women in their early twenties. Ashwin Deshmukh, one of its operators, described a forthcoming tiny-'tini program that's oriented less toward restraint than toward novelty: the adorable Bunny Martini, a mix of vodka and fresh-pressed carrot juice in a three-and-three-quarters-ounce glass, garnished with carrot-top "ears," will come with a train ticket, to be punched whenever a roving server gives a refill. (No need to elbow one's way to the bar.) When we spoke, Deshmukh had been having trouble sourcing glassware; one vender was sold out of the model he wanted, thanks to large orders from the Metropolitan Club and from Alaska Airlines.

Chloe Frechette, a former editor of the online drinks magazine *Punch*, and a co-owner of Echo Lake, a new rum bar in Williamsburg, theorizes that American drinking culture is having a "very honest" moment. "Pre-pandemic, wellness was really leeching in—people were ordering, like, activated-charcoal cocktails," she recalled. "I feel like we've arrived at a moment where we're not pretending that wellness needs to be part of this." Drinking might confer its own kind of wellness, she suggested, one that comes from nurturing a pastime or convening with compatriots. (In 2025, *Jacobin* published an article titled "The Case for Social Drinking," which argues that "it's nearly impossible to have a semblance of socialism without the social.") Like air travel, fast fashion, and so many indulgences of our era, drinking invites us to consider a gruelling litany of downsides and then decide whether the tradeoffs are worth it.

Not long ago, after a civilized mezcal tasting left me with an earth-shattering migraine, I considered giving up alcohol entirely. The prospect filled me with surprising sadness. I was more attached than I realized, not only to the way that a cocktail makes me feel—chatty, sentimental, hopeful, expansive—but also to the sensual and ritualistic aspects of drinking. I appreciate the beauty and the gravitas of the drinkware and the bar tools, and the sense that there is a right time for the right drink: an austere gin-and-tonic to be nursed after work, a pour of sweet, earthy amaro following dessert, eggnog spiked with rum at Christmas. Drinking is rooted in tradition—it's no accident that every generation since Hemingway's has revived the Martini—but it's also thrillingly captive to personal preference: for me, one Martini is not enough, two is too many, and three half sizes is just right, with plenty of olives to line the stomach.

Feeling wistful, I texted my friend Chris, a bon vivant whom I hadn't seen in a while, to ask if he wanted to meet for a drink after he clocked out of his office job. He was, it turned out, temporarily on the wagon, because he feared that drinking would jeopardize his more serious effort to quit smoking. Plus, he added, "I can admit that last year was pretty wet." He offered to make me a cocktail at what he called his "secret office bar." Up a long set of stairs on a nondescript block in Hollywood, I found a door marked TELEPHONE ROOM, which opened into a dramatically appointed—and dramatically tiny—speakeasy, where Chris stood, behind a lacquered five-seat bar, backlit and smiling like the tuxedoed barkeep in "The Shining." My grandfather would have got a kick out of the kitschy details: heart-shaped bowls filled with beef jerky and peanuts, a figurine of a mouse holding a tray of champagne. Chris made me a dirty vodka Martini—stirred, strained into a small Nick and Nora glass, and garnished with extra olives—all the while holding a cigarette that remained unlit. ♦

POP MUSIC

GETTING LOST

Rostam Batmanglij wanders to the edges of American sound.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

His new solo album features pedal steel guitar and saz, a long-necked Turkish lute.

This month, Rostam Batmanglij will release "American Stories," his third solo record since leaving Vampire Weekend, the rock band he helped form in 2006, when he was an undergraduate studying classical music at Columbia University. Batmanglij, who records under his first name, was born to Iranian parents in Washington, D.C. In the past two decades, he has built an enviable career as a polymath producer and multi-instrumentalist, making visionary, searching pop songs for a roster of indie-leaning artists, including Clairo, Maggie Rogers, and Haim, as well as cult favorites like Carly Rae Jepsen and Charli XCX. (Batmanglij, who is queer, has also worked with Frank Ocean; he arranged and produced the distorted, quivery guitar on "Ivy," perhaps the most poignant and incandescent song on "Blonde.") "There is a desire to push the form—to push what can be in a pop song," he told me recently. His production style is verdant but gentle: sticky percussion, a dreamy mix of acoustic and synthesized instruments, layers, mystery. He is exceptionally good at drawing something raw and unmediated out of a vocalist. For a listener, this can feel like stumbling into a room where something interesting is happening. Throughout the past ten years, especially, that sound—breathy, close, a little woozy—has become synonymous with a certain artful, confessional, cool-girl aesthetic.

As a solo artist, Batmanglij writes in a style that is baroque and sophisticated, and lightly warped in a way that recalls both Paul Simon and Radiohead. "American Stories" is a lush and thoughtful album about an evanescent romance and the ephemeral, sometimes flashing nature of love. On the chorus of "Like a Spark," the record's first single, Batmanglij sings of trying to excise any possessiveness from his feelings of devotion:

> Everybody
> Wants you
> Tied down easily except for me
> I only ever wanted you to feel freed of it.

This spring, Batmanglij has been finishing renovations on a recording studio in Manhattan's Chinatown, and one recent afternoon we met there to talk. The space is airy and blank: white walls, blond wood, sunbeams. We removed our shoes. In conversation, Batmanglij is attentive and soft-spoken, and generally adheres to a philosophy of saying less. I began to tell him that I found the new record rich with a kind of muted sadness, but, midway through the thought, I trailed off. "You can say it," he offered, laughing.

"There's heartbreak here," I finished.

"Yeah," he said. "That's a thread of the record. Or, I don't know if 'heartbreak' is the right word. It's disappointment, perhaps. What do we do when a relationship ends? How do we feel about that era of our lives?"

"American Stories" consists of just nine songs, and clocks in at around thirty minutes. The last few tracks on the record take a political turn, especially "The Weight," which seems to address the pro-Palestine encampments and associated arrests at his alma mater. ("Eyes glowing in the heat lamps / Calling out a broken government," he sings.) Batmanglij cited Mayor Zohran Mamdani's election as a moment that made him rethink the contours of the future: "I started to feel a lot of hope, actually, about the American project." He added, "I think all art has an inherent politics. A friend of mine said, 'Well, an artist should just be able to make something that they think is beautiful.' I don't know if I agree. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't like making beautiful things."

Other songs on "American Stories"

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT GRUBB

are more personal. "Like a Spark" opens with a blues riff played on a nylon-string guitar, offset by the appearance of a saz, a long-necked Turkish lute that's omnipresent in Middle Eastern music. The combination is dizzying, but lovely. "At some point, I started bringing in pedal steel, and that stuff and the Persian stuff started living next to each other," Batmanglij told me. "That was the tipping point for me, where I was, like, 'Oh, this record, it could be both your most American record and your most Persian record.'"

The album reiterates the argument that almost all American music is a hybrid of sorts, and that every American story is also a story about someplace else. The idea of self-creation feels central to the record's gestalt. "A thing I think about is, What is American music? What makes music sound American?" he said. "With pedal steel, if we're to believe the origin story, that's a Hawaiian instrument. And yet we think of it as Southern. It has such a strange beauty." He carries that sense of expansiveness and possibility to other facets of his life. "Sometimes the words mean what you like," he sings on "Back of a Truck," a jangly breakup song about ripping down the interstate.

"I think melody can be important, and the same lyric could mean different things in a different melodic context," Batmanglij said. "I would even say that the same lyric could mean different things in a different harmonic context." Though he's fluent in music theory, he still values spontaneity and uncertainty. "I try to forget about it when I'm making music," he said of his classical education.

At times, he can't help himself. A new song called "Hardy" features a guest verse from Clairo and a sample of the French composer Georges Delerue's "Chorale," from the film "Day for Night" (1973), performed by Hugh Wolff and the London Sinfonietta. The strings are jubilant and hyperkinetic; Batmanglij's voice is gritty with resignation. Sounds can be recontextualized; love can transform. "I loved you, honey, and you loved me as much," he sings. "Don't feel bad we couldn't have another year."

Batmanglij left Vampire Weekend after the release of "Modern Vampires of the City," the group's third album, and its second to début at No. 1 on the *Billboard* chart. ("Modern Vampires" was named the best album of 2013 by both *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone*, and it won the Grammy for Best Alternative Music Album; Batmanglij co-produced it with Ariel Rechtshaid.) The band seemed primed for enormous success; by any metric, it was a bold time for someone to split. "I was very committed to that life until I was thirty, when I pressed the Reset button on everything," Batmanglij said. "I moved to L.A., I left Vampire Weekend. I had this opportunity to restart, and I took it."

In recent months, Batmanglij has been posting short videos to his YouTube channel, talking about the process of writing and recording "American Stories" and offering revelatory details about a few old Vampire Weekend tracks. (His discussion of "Campus," a beloved cut from the band's self-titled début, highlights the ways that the vocalist Ezra Koenig's slightly wilder, more improvisational style balanced Batmanglij's erudition and exactness.) "Someone commented on this video I posted, 'I loved your music for years, and I grew up listening to Vampire Weekend. I had no idea you were in Vampire Weekend,'" he said. "And I responded, 'That's probably because I haven't talked about Vampire Weekend publicly for ten years.' There's a new context, I think, to revisit some of those old stories. I think enough time has passed."

I told him that the pockets of nostalgia on the new album felt interconnected to me, even if the sources were different—an old band, a past love affair, a sense that the world used to be at least slightly less heinous and terrifying than it is now. "I think they're different for me," he said, laughing. He sees his solo music as a way of arriving somewhere new. "When I work as a producer, I feel an obligation to get to the end of the process, because ultimately that's what the producer is there to do," he said. "When I'm making a Rostam album, I want to get lost. I don't really wanna know exactly where I'm going." "American Stories" has a curious, journeying quality—it seems less interested in conclusions or codas than in forgiveness and the slow accumulation of knowledge. This, too, feels fundamental to an American life: the capacity to take a wrong turn but just keep going. ♦

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MUSICAL EVENTS

CRISIS MODE

At a German festival, Chaya Czernowin gives voice to a wounded world.

BY ALEX ROSS

Czernowin's control of timbre, texture, and structure has a cataclysmic grandeur.

Global disaster shadowed this year's Witten Days for New Chamber Music, an ostensibly insular contemporary-music festival that takes place each spring in the Ruhr Valley, in Germany. Two Iranian composers were featured; only one, Amen Feizabadi, could attend in person. Golfam Khayam, the other, conveyed a message pleading for peace and extolling music as a "free bird who knows no border." The Russian composer Dmitri Kourliandski, also on the program in Witten, left his homeland in 2022 after participating in protests against the war in Ukraine. The Israeli-born composer Chaya Czernowin, the focus of several concerts, has described herself as being profoundly alienated from her country, and she has also decried repression in the United States, where she now lives. Composers from more stable lands nursed their own fears. In Germany itself, neo-Nazis are gaining ground.

The agonies of the day were only intermittently audible in the music on offer in Witten. The festival, which is organized by West German Radio and has been running in its current form since 1969, favors experimental idioms that customarily avoid obvious political messaging or clear cultural signposts. Kourliandski, for example, presented a string quartet, "Partially Restored Landscapes," in which fragile, brittle sonorities surface amid long silences. It felt like a refuge conscious of its vulnerability. Feizabadi's "Ungezähmter Fluss" ("Untamed River"), edges toward social significance by invoking the erotic mysticism of the great Persian poet Rumi, but the dissonant grunge of the musical language keeps worldly passions at bay. Khayam was an outlier, in that the work of hers performed, "Seven Valleys of Love," has tonal leanings and incorporates an old Iranian folk melody called "Deylaman." This being a stringent European new-music gathering, someone in the audience felt compelled to boo the intrusion of conventional harmony.

Perhaps the most political aspect of this year's Witten Days—its theme, "The Present / Inescapable," nodded toward the pressures of outer reality—was its obliviousness to national borders. Composers from nineteen countries, ranging from Cuba and Brazil to Japan and South Korea, communally explored an inexhaustible continent of sound. Activist spirits might dismiss this emphasis on the purely sonic as a strategy of avoidance, although the likes of Feizabadi and Kourliandski can't be accused of sitting idly by. In any case, to compose in the classical tradition today is to go against the grain of a hypercommodified culture. Theodor W. Adorno, the high priest of the high modern, once wrote that art criticizes the status quo "simply by existing."

I went to Witten primarily to hear new and recent works by Czernowin, a composer I would follow anywhere. Born in Haifa in 1957, she emerged from an avant-garde background that included stints at IRCAM, Pierre Boulez's electronic compound in Paris, and at the Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music, in Germany. In the past couple of decades, however, Czernowin has deëmphasized the frantic gesturing that characterizes so much latter-day modernism. In large-scale instrumental scores such as "Maim" and "HIDDEN," and in the operas "Infinite Now" and "Heart Chamber," her language takes on a spacious concreteness, assuming the contours not just of a distinct landscape but of an entire organic world. Within open-ended

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ILLUSTRATION BY CECILIA CARLSTEDT

forms that last up to an hour, you hear surges and storms, explosions and silences, isolated cries, insectoid choruses, mutant arias, and, beneath it all, axial, cosmic drones. Alternatively, all this could be experienced as a noise within—the groaning of an overloaded psychic infrastructure. Either way, Czernowin forges a logic that integrates disparate, unpredictable events.

Czernowin is, as it happens, a politically outspoken composer. She often divulges her preoccupations in program notes, although her music is so innately gripping that audiences may forget her agenda once their ears are engulfed. "Seltene Erde" ("Rare Earth"), for double-bass and ensemble, which Evan Hulbert and Klangforum Wien played in Witten, under the direction of Elena Schwarz, alludes to the deadly business of mining precious minerals for use in cellphones. Double-bass glissandos hint at hands grubbing in the earth, while abrupt moments of concerted action—notably, an accordion wheezing out an F-sharp-minor chord—suggest flickering signals and transmissions. But I eventually gave up trying to match the program to the musical narrative, which exists on its own plane of beauty and terror intermingled.

"EZOV (Moss)," for string quartet, is more oblique in its gestures toward contemporary crises. "*Ezov*" means "moss" in modern Hebrew, and the word is also associated with a Middle Eastern herb that was part of ancient Jewish ritual. Czernowin's note for "EZOV" cites a time of "pain and suffering" and offers plant life as a contrary realm of connection and renewal. As in Kourliandski's quartet, specks and splatters of sound are interspersed with silences. The sound itself is multifarious: siren-like glissandos and scrambled tones give way to harmonies that touch on major and minor triads, although, because the chords are produced by letting the bow bounce woodenly on the strings, they remain jittery ghosts. At the end, a quivering high note on the cello gives a glimmer of hope, as in the fictional music that Thomas Mann conjures in his novel "Doctor Faustus." (Czernowin's next opera will be based on Mann's "Der Erwählte," or "The Holy Sinner.") The Diotima Quartet gave an exacting, piercing account of the work.

Czernowin arrived in Witten with a new score for six musicians, titled "The Red-Haired Man," which doubles as a piece of chamber theatre. The title comes from a miniature story by the Soviet writer Daniil Kharms, who wrote absurdist literature under Stalinism and suffered as a result. Kharms's text, about a man who has neither hair nor head nor body, is recited repeatedly by the performers—in this instance, members of the Köln-based Hand Werk Ensemble. There is no plot per se, but you have the sense that a band of eccentric refugees is trying to maintain a veneer of humanity in the midst of all too familiar chaos. Early on, they lie on the floor amid blinding lights and wafting smoke; later, they huddle over suitcases. But they also bicker, sulk, dance, and maniacally grin for group photographs. The deadpan wit of the conceit is something novel in Czernowin's output, and it aligns surprisingly well with her raw, dark sonic palette.

Closing the festival was Czernowin's "No! A Lament for the Innocent"—a howling denunciation of the crimes against humanity that are committed whenever children are killed, maimed, or separated from their families. When she began the work, around the time of the first Trump Administration, she had in mind the United States' cruel policies toward immigrants; when she finished it, in 2024, she was focussed on Israel's destruction of Gaza. The U.S.-Israeli war against Iran has added thousands to the list of innocent victims. "No!" exists in two versions, one for two antiphonal female voices and two ensembles, the other for voice and ensemble performing against prerecorded tracks. The latter version was used in Witten, with Sofia Jernberg delivering the live vocals, Keren Motseri contributing the recorded part, and Yalda Zamani conducting the WDR Symphony. When Jernberg exchanged prolonged cries of "No!" with her electronic other, she embodied the solitude of anger in a digital age.

For the most part, "No!" inhabits an abstract soundscape, though an intensely fraught one. Instruments and voices accumulate into immense, sustained, saturating dissonances, with a snare drum cutting through the tear-gas haze. Characteristically, Czernowin's control of timbre, texture, and structure yields a kind of cataclysmic grandeur. Then, at the very end, she kicks away the frame of art and makes things blunt. Singer and her doppelgänger plead together: "Don't take my child away / Don't take my child / Don't / No." The final syllables accelerate into a blur, whereupon a ritual of wailing erupts. A composer writes to the limits of her art, and steps into the real. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

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 Hartley Lin, must be received by Sunday, May 24th. The finalists in the May 4th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 8th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

“ ”

.....

THE FINALISTS

"I hope these sell better than the Frisbees you made."
Doug Eberhart, Colorado Springs, Colo.

"Are they for all ages?"
Ryan Ulrich, North Arlington, N.J.

"I have a feeling this will be a painful step in our evolution."
Vince Yenko, Orlando, Fla.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"I can't believe the astronauts made it home without a scratch."
Bob Shiffrar, Boston, Mass.

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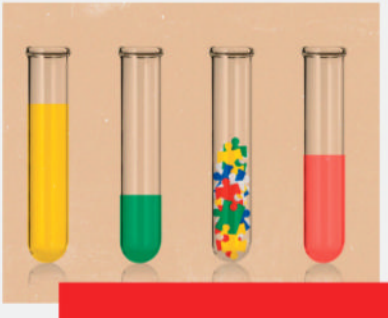

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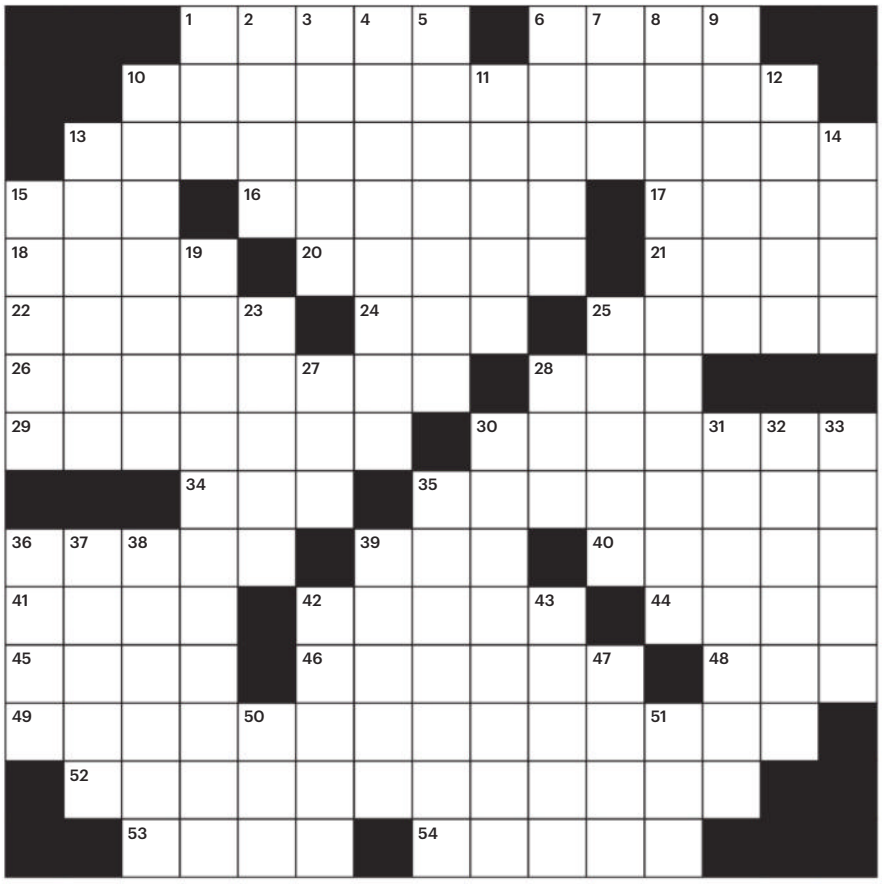
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY WYNA LIU



ACROSS

1 Cantina order wrapped in a husk

6 Qualified

10 Means of sending a surreptitious message

13 Recurring "Jeopardy!" category about alcoholic beverages

15 Junior

16 Bright pinkish red

17 Unthinking

18 Chi-town paper, with "the"

20 Palindromic part of a machine

21 What one's quads might do after leg day

22 Maker of the arcade game Breakout

24 Small dog . . . or, when doubled, an object a small dog might resemble

25 Regions

26 Really missed

28 Believe

29 Samples the wine, say

30 Ill-advised decision

34 Ornette Coleman's instrument, for short

35 Auto-tune source?

36 Like the soil in some bogs

39 "Reelin' in the Years" band Steely ___

40 Mail, e.g.

41 Wild West name

42 "Mercedes Benz" singer Joplin

44 Feast

45 Biblical twin

46 "Be right there!"

48 X, on a clock

49 "Just circling back . . ."

52 Climax of a French novel?

53 Baking amts.

54 Isn't for them?

DOWN

1 Sticks for Wile E. Coyote

2 Opposite of *sans*

3 Worker concerned with seams

4 Rocket-shaped candy

5 Drug used to treat high cholesterol

6 Change

7 Name that sounds like a letter

8 Something used in lieu of bookkeeping?

9 Intertwine

10 Some ancient Greeks

11 ___ buddies

12 "TiK ToK" singer

13 "The Merchant of Venice" character who says, "The quality of mercy is not strained"

14 "___ Lost Control" (Joy Division song)

15 Bacteria causing some skin infections, for short

19 Devices used to collect milk

23 "If you ask me . . ."

25 McDonald who played Rose in the 2024 Broadway revival of "Gypsy"

27 Quick ___

28 Classic joke setting

30 Gripping part of a flight?

31 "Come clean!"

32 Model-train brand

33 Sophia with a lifetime-achievement Oscar

35 Rummy variant

36 Zoomorphic marshmallow treat

37 Stand for a painting

38 Mountain featured on Armenia's coat of arms

39 Gurira of "Black Panther"

42 Leaves at the altar, say

43 Dreaded words on a homework assignment

47 "Hurry up!"

50 "Sure thing"

51 Word before form or film

Solution to the previous puzzle:

	A	D	A	M	S		L	I	T	E	R	A	L	
	M	I	M	E	O		A	M	I	L	A	T	E	
	A	S	Y	L	U	M	S	E	E	K	E	R	S	
G	D	P	S		R	H	E	A				E	S	O
Y	E	A		A	C	O	R	N	S	Q	U	A	S	H
R	U	T	H	I	E				O	U	T	R	O	S
O	S	C	A	R		G	A	S	L	I	T			
		H	U	D	S	O	N	R	I	V	E	R		
		L	A	A	L	A	A		E	R	O	D	E	
S	L	E	U	T	H				M	R	S	M	E	T
G	O	S	P	E	L	B	L	U	E	S		A	A	A
T	O	P				E	E	N	Y		A	N	D	S
	M	A	D	E	I	N	A	M	E	R	I	C	A	
	E	N	R	A	G	E	S		R	I	D	E	R	
	D	A	Y	R	A	T	E		S	P	A	S	M	

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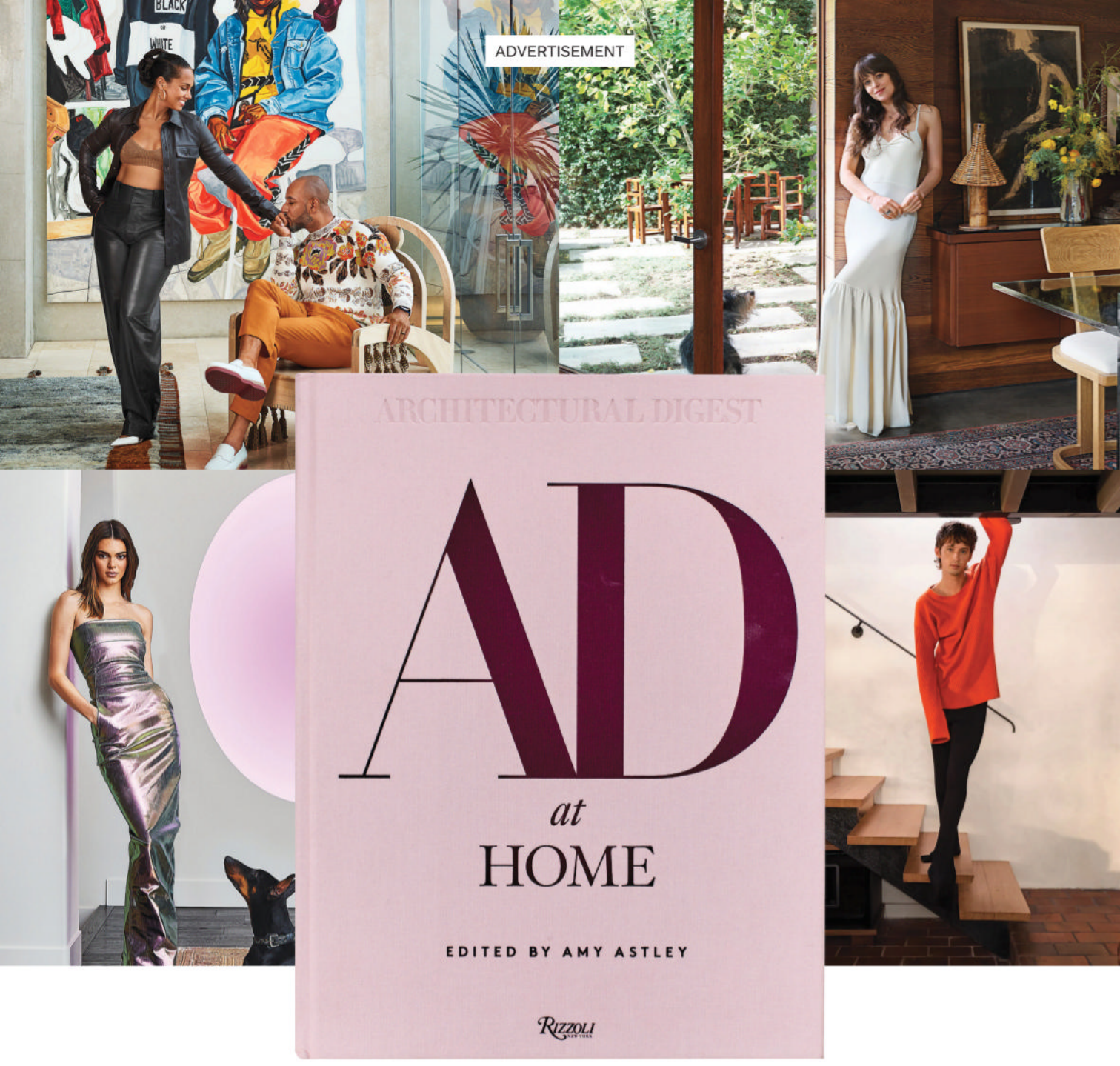

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