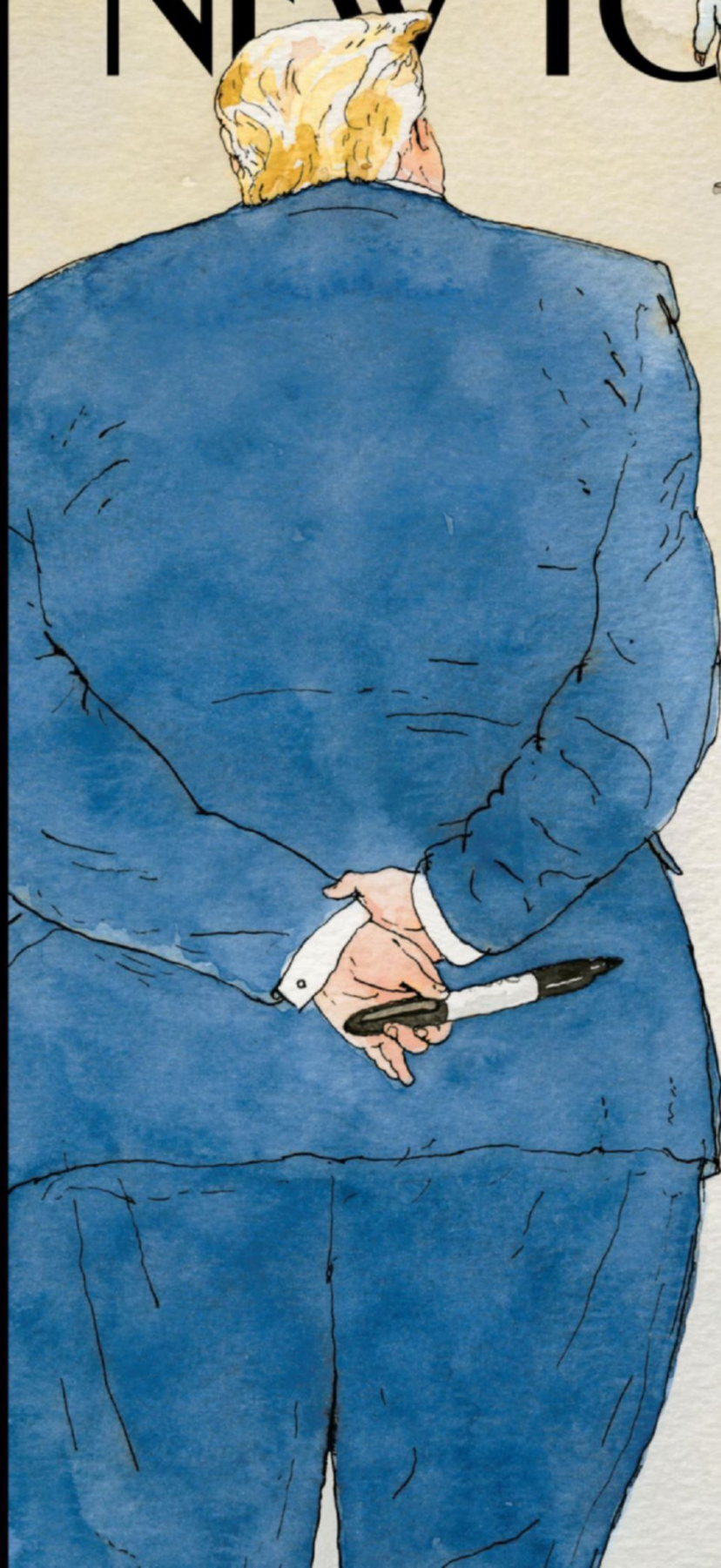


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NEW YORKER



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NOVEMBER 2, 2026

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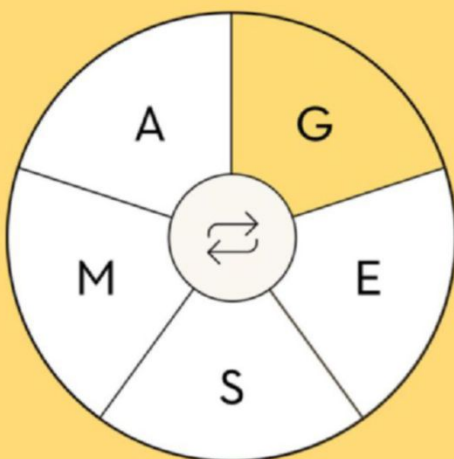
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Barry Blitt "Polling Place"

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THE POLITICAL SCENE



Alaska’s Senate Race Could Be Decided by Salmon
By **Zach Helfand**

Read this digital-only story on the New Yorker app, the best place to find the latest issue, plus more news, commentary, criticism, and humor.

THE MAIL

ON THE MONEY

Nicholas Lemann's report about Proposition 40, California's proposed one-time wealth tax, presents a comprehensive account of its context ("For Richer," October 12th). I agree with Michael Moritz, whom Lemann quotes: a tax on the rich in one state to address one funding deficit would, if it passed, be a mere sandbag in the path of the rising flood-water of inequality. Our real problems are deregulation, the capture of the two main parties, and corporate welfare. The solutions are a viable populist alternative party and an end to oligarchy. In the Gilded Age, the Populist and Progressive Parties elected members of Congress and began to reverse the concentration of money and power. We need the same today, along with a policy overhaul to reestablish more equal distribution of our country's productivity.

Alan Cohen
Eugene, Ore.

Billionaires who are skeptical of California's proposed wealth tax on the ground that such a policy cannot possibly have a positive effect should take a look at the results of Massachusetts's so-called "millionaire's tax." That tax—which taxes income, not wealth—charges an additional four per cent on incomes above a million dollars, and its revenues are earmarked for transportation and education. For example, it funds community colleges, so that Massachusetts residents can attend them for free. Since 2022, when the law passed, enrollment in community colleges has grown by twenty-seven thousand.

Many wealthy Americans attended community college, including the Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, the filmmaker George Lucas, and the Costco co-founder Jim Sinegal. Their educations helped propel them to successful careers. Although only ten per cent of Proposition 40's proceeds would be earmarked for education, including funding for such colleges (how much, if any, would depend on how the California legislature chose to direct Prop 40 income),

history certainly suggests that these institutions can be a worthwhile investment.
Ken Farbstein
Concord, Mass.

THE WAY BACK

I enjoyed Peter Hessler's article about southwest Colorado's scenic—if perilous—U.S. Highway 550, a particularly risky portion of which is known as the Million Dollar Highway ("Danger Drive," October 5th). I know I'm getting older, but I was still surprised to realize, while reading the piece, that I may be one of the few left who travelled on 550 before it was fully paved. I still have a memory of seeing the road before that: My father and I were returning home from Silverton, Colorado, to Bloomfield, New Mexico, and the midday sun on the packed-earth surface of the road shimmered with the innumerable pieces of pyrite—that is, fool's gold—embedded in it. My father saw me with mouth agape as I looked past our old Packard's windshield, sure to see Oz soon. "Yep," he said, "that's why they call it the Million Dollar Highway."

Paul Mitchell
Cochiti Lake, N.M.

JUSTICE UNDONE

Eyal Press's story about the plight of Justice Department lawyers under Donald Trump brought back memories from earlier in my career ("Should I Stay or Should I Go?," October 5th). I was the first Assistant U.S. Attorney hired by the Nixon Administration—I started a few minutes after noon on January 20, 1969. I had interviewed for the job in the fall of 1968, with the Assistant Attorney General at the time—a Democratic appointee—but I didn't want to start until the next June. Then Richard Nixon won the election, and I was told courtesy dictated that the A.A.G.'s successor, who was working with Nixon's transition team, should have a chance to vet me. He asked me if I was politically active; I said no. He asked me if I would promise to stay that way as long as I was with the D.O.J.; I said yes. Then he said,

"Welcome aboard." In January, when I started the job, we listened together to the radio broadcast of Nixon taking the oath.

I treasure my memories of those years because I got to work in an office that lived up to its motto: "The Government wins when Justice is Done." Those were great times, and I join the thousands of other D.O.J. alumni in mourning for what we—and the country—have lost.
Steven Kazan
Oakland, Calif.

CHILDLESS WITHOUT CHOICE

Margaret Talbot, in her review of Anna Louie Sussman's new book about declining fertility rates, concludes by endorsing policies that make "family life" easier (Books, September 28th). I agree with Talbot, but I also think that one factor too often ignored in society's conversation about boosting fertility rates is the subset of would-be parents who dearly want children but don't have the luxury of choice: the one in seven adults, or 13.4 per cent, experiencing infertility.

My multiple failed I.V.F. cycles have opened my eyes to the fact that many infertile people cannot afford the upfront costs of bringing a child into existence. Even alternative pathways, such as adoption, surrogacy, or gamete or embryo donation, can cost a small fortune. Governments could increase birth rates by requiring insurers to cover fertility treatments and subsidizing their costs.

Funding medical research would also help. In my case, severe endometriosis, overlooked by doctors for twenty years, destroyed my ability to have children. Endometriosis affects an estimated 6.5 million people in the U.S. alone. Surely, many of them would be having children if they could.

Katie Segal
Watertown, Mass.

•
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GOINGS ON

OCTOBER 28 – NOVEMBER 3, 2026



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

Be afraid, be very afraid: this theatre season, horror plays are, unusually, front and center. The flagship production is Broadway's **"Paranormal Activity"** (August Wilson; through Feb. 28), cunningly adapted by Levi Holloway from the hit movie franchise. Danny Robins's **"2:22: A Ghost Story"** (Lucille Lortel; through Jan. 17) sees a woman's claim of a nightly haunting put to the test when dinner guests stay up with her to witness it. Jamie Armitage's **"A Ghost in Your Ear"** (Minetta Lane; through Dec. 12) stages an audio-book-recording session in which the story of a sadistic father seeps into the sound booth. In Candle House Collective's remote play **"claws,"** by Evan Neiden, you, the sole audience member, receive a phone call from a teen-ager begging for help, and must advise him. Proceed with caution.—*Dan Stahl*



ABOUT TOWN

ALTERNATIVE R. & B. | The singer-songwriter **Yebba** spent much of her initial breakout in mourning. A soloist in the classic soul and gospel traditions, she possesses a commanding and hypnotic voice that feels unignorable. But just as a performance of her original song "My Mind" was going viral, in 2016, her mother died. The elegant, sumptuous 2021 début she released in the aftermath, "Dawn," dealt in processing that loss, rather than developing her personal style. This March, Yebba returned with the album "Jean," and with a new directive: more reined-in, inward-looking music that is just as vulnerable yet focussed less on the power of her voice than on its character.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Paramount; Nov. 2-3.)*

DANCE | About a decade ago, **Oona Doherty**, an Irish choreographer of rare and risk-taking

honesty, made a name for herself with danced portraits of Belfast lads. Reacting to sudden fame, she swerved in other directions, but she has since swerved back with "Specky Clark." A dance with dialogue, fuelled by the punkish sound of the Irish folk band Lankum, it takes the story of her great-great-grandfather working in an abattoir as a child and pushes it into Lynchian fantasy horror. On Samhain, the Gaelic festival during which boundaries between the living and the dead blur, he follows a pig into the spirit world. "Specky Clark" comes to the Irish Arts Center in time for Halloween.—*Brian Seibert (Oct. 25-Nov. 15.)*

DANCE | **American Ballet Theatre's** fall season is short and sweet, with three mixed bills plus a gala (Oct. 29). The latter includes both Fred-

erick Ashton's poetic male solo "Dance of the Blessed Spirits"—danced by the equally poetic Daniel Camargo—and Michel Fokine's rococo "Le Spectre de la Rose." In one program, Ashton's undeniably magical "The Dream" (based on Shakespeare) will be performed alongside a new sextet, "Trio Élégiacque," produced by a young dancer in the company, Brady Farrar. Another program is anchored by Natalia Makarova's suite from the nineteenth-century Spanish-themed ballet "Paquita," a tour de force of classical dance. And yet another offers a glimpse of Kyle Abraham's stylish ensemble work "Mercurial Son," in which the men of the company, in particular, have a chance to shine.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch; Oct. 21-31.)*

OFF BROADWAY | **"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button"** is a stunner—a gorgeously performed, gloriously staged, philosophically perverse fairy-tale musical that left me swooning. You may know the premise even if you haven't read F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story: a baby is born as an elderly man and ages backward; along the way, he struggles, has worldly adventures, and falls in love. Andrew Durand, with his handsome crab-apple features, makes a perfectly quizzical Benjamin; Kelsee Kimmel is stirring as his true love, who shares his age just once. The harmony-singing, instrument-playing ensemble is terrific, and the show's strong score, by Darren Clark and Jethro Compton (who also wrote the book and directed), has a touch of "Hamilton" and a streak of "Come from Away." Everything clicks: even the moon, swinging from a green net above the clever nautical set, stole the show.—*Emily Nussbaum (Public Theatre; through Dec. 6.)*

ART | A terrible weight hangs over "Burning in the Eyes of the Maker," an exhibition of recent paintings by **Celeste Dupuy-Spencer**. The heaviness comes from the fact that the artist died in April, at age forty-six, but it's also embedded in the paintings on view—in the bursts of fire and swirling floods that mark them. Dupuy-Spencer had a reputation for clear-eyed renderings of both the tenderness and the brutality of our world; here, darker forces prevail. Mythical beings hover over apocalyptic scenes crowded with tiny, ghostly figures, which seem to emerge from the paint. The monumental four-panel piece "The Shape of the Rock That's Hurling Towards the Sea" (2022) is a parable in which only the rich seem to survive. But there's one saving grace: the yellows, oranges, and reds of Dupuy-Spencer's fires are achingly beautiful.—*Jillian Steinhauer (Jeffrey Deitch; through Oct. 31.)*

MOVIES | The historical drama **"Fatherland,"** written and directed by Paweł Pawlikowski, zeroes in on an intriguing literary byway: the elderly, Nobel Prize-winning German novelist Thomas Mann's trip to Germany in 1949, sixteen years after his self-exile upon Hitler taking power. The tale is energized by the thoughtful performances of Hanns Zischler, as Mann, and Sandra Hüller, as the author's daughter Erika, who accompanies him while reviving conflicts from her own past. But the story, set amid Cold War tensions, and involving Mann's vain belief in the importance of his visit to reconciling East and West, along with his nostalgic dream of a politics-free realm of art, is told with restrained images and a terse script that leave little room for dramatic complexity.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY SAM KALDA



PHOTO BOOTH

Andre D. Wagner's Eye for the Photo-Ready

There is a moment that defines, for me, the ambition and affection that live in equal measure within the work of Andre D. Wagner. We were sitting together in a car, waiting at a stoplight, somewhere in one of the Carolinas, in 2019. A publication had paired us together to explore a region of the country. Wagner and I had never met before this assignment. On this particular day, he had assumed most of the driving duties, a fact I must admit because it makes the moment in question more spectacular.

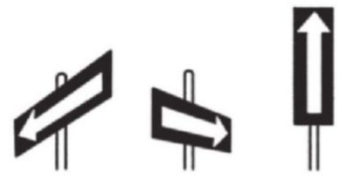
In the few seconds before the light changed, a group of young Black boys rode up alongside us on motorbikes. They sat piled two per bike, some with their shirts off, delighting in the gentle warmth of autumn on the horizon. Wagner, with one hand on the wheel, aimed his camera toward the kids. And they, previously indifferent to our presence, became even more lively for the camera, throwing their hands up, smiling wide. It was a split second. It felt slow only because the camera existed within it, a vessel that freezes time but which, when in action, can also slow time.

Wagner shared with me something that I've thought about ever since: the idea that Black people are often photo-ready. Photo-eager. We've already got

fly, we already believe ourselves to be fly: why *shouldn't* someone want to take our photo? The person listening to music through headphones and dancing in a universe made by and for them and no one else. The person crossing the street carrying shopping bags, wearing sunglasses, a bandanna, and a shirt with the words "BLACKJOY" blazoned across the front. When you point a camera at a Black person on the street, Wagner told me, the response, in so many cases, is one of embrace—of wanting to become a part of the archive, the archive of what the foolish might call the mundane, but we know better. (His latest book of photographs is "Andre D. Wagner: New City, Old Blues.")

In another favorite photo, a young Black sailor blows smoke into the air. He's looking straight ahead, a slight smirk on his face, the smoke largely obscuring the faces of his peers next to him. The smoke is as much a character in the photo as the man himself. And it's such a nonchalant gesture, something you might see every day on city blocks. But you've not seen this specific person, in this specific corner of the world. You maybe haven't seen someone who knows he is fly, even fresh out of a military program that strives to make you shed that which makes you unique. It is beautiful, this photo. It captures all of our flyness, in opposition to a world that tries to dull its shine.

—Hanif Abdurraqib



PICK THREE

Michael Schulman on downtown entertainers making grand returns.

1. The sui-generis musical "**Hedwig and the Angry Inch**" originated as a gender-flouting, genre-busting phenomenon at the Jane Street Theatre, in 1998, performed by John Cameron Mitchell as the titular bewigged East German rocker. Mitchell wrote, directed, and starred in a movie version in 2001. (The songs are by Stephen Trask.) To celebrate the film's twenty-fifth anniversary, Mitchell is touring the country with 4K screenings, followed by Q. & A.s and acoustic performances. The tour hits the Beacon Theatre on Nov. 16. Wigs welcome.

2. The dearly departed Hulu sitcom "Difficult People" ran from 2015 to 2017, starring the comedians Julie Klausner (its creator) and Billy Eichner as snarky show-biz aspirants. The series was thick with pop-culture barbs, including ahead-of-the-curve digs at Kevin Spacey. Klausner and Alex Scordelis wrote an unproduced screenplay, "**Difficult People: The Movie**," which she and other members of the original cast—including Eichner, Andrea Martin, James Urbaniak, and Gabourey Sidibe—will read at The Town Hall on Nov. 3, along with such special guests as Paul Walter Hauser, Cecily Strong, and Michael Urie.

3. The drag king Murray Hill has the look of a mustachioed Atlantic City lounge lizard and the shticky comic delivery of Don Rickles. In his moving new memoir, "**Showbiz! My Life as a Middle-Aged Man**," Hill recounts his abusive childhood; his self-acceptance as a trans man; his breakout in New York's downtown cabaret scene in the nineteen-nineties and then the burlesque revival of the two-thousands; the fire that destroyed his apartment on his fiftieth birthday; and his role as the bon vivant Fred Rococo on the HBO series "Somebody Somewhere."



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT RUNNING WILD

The midterm campaigns have been going badly enough for the Republicans that they have inspired in White House principals some rare candor. “You don’t turn the Titanic around overnight,” Vice-President J. D. Vance said on the trail earlier this year, in Toledo. He was speaking about the economy, but the same might be said now about the second term of Donald Trump, or, perhaps, about Vance’s own political prospects; on Tuesday, the President said that it was “very early” to endorse him as his preferred successor. Later that day, Trump was in North Carolina, a state that he won in the 2024 Presidential election, but where his handpicked Senate candidate, Michael Whatley, is trailing by so much that the G.O.P. has essentially stopped putting money into the race. On Wednesday afternoon, at a rally in Greenville, Trump said of Whatley’s Democratic opponent, Roy Cooper, “He’s going to become your senator. And it’s crazy.”

It is at least a little crazy how sharply politics have turned on the Republicans. Last week, prediction markets favored Democrats to win Senate races not just in North Carolina but in Ohio, which Trump won in 2024 by more than ten points, and in Alaska and Texas, each of which he won by thirteen points. Democrats are still underdogs in Kansas, which their party last represented in the Senate in 1939, and in Iowa, but they are drawing close. By Wednesday, when a headline on *Axios* read “Senate

Republicans Fear Mississippi Is in Play,” things had started to feel a little surreal. The Republican predicament was summed up by an apparent A.I. prompt, mistakenly published on the website of Eric Pratt, a nominee for Congress in Minnesota: “The President is not popular, so all messaging should be focused on local politics and needs.”

On this point, most Republican candidates have seemed on message. A *Times* analysis found that more than ninety-nine per cent of G.O.P. ad spending is now going to spots that do not mention Trump. But even that strategy is backfiring. The campaign of Vivek Ramaswamy, who is running for governor in Vance’s home state of Ohio, paid for an ad in which the estranged mother of his Democratic opponent, Amy Acton, a doctor and the former director of the state health department, denounced her.

The ad neglected to note that Acton had been removed from her mother’s care when she was twelve, after her stepfather was indicted on a charge of raping her. Several prominent Ohio Republicans, including Senator Jon Husted, who is up for reelection, disavowed the ad; Vance dismissed their objections as “whining,” while Trump said that the ad had hit “pay dirt.”

A similar fissure has appeared in some Senate debates. In Minnesota, the G.O.P. nominee, Michele Tafoya, answered the opening question by referring to “a number of areas where I’m going to disagree with the President.” (She also called the killings in her state of Renee Good and Alex Pretti, by federal law-enforcement agents, “devastating.”) In Michigan, the Republican candidate, Mike Rogers, said, a bit testily, that the President’s high-profile tariffs on goods from Canada “were not well thought through.” In Maine, the long-time Republican incumbent, Susan Collins, bragged that she had voted against Trump more often than she’d voted against Joe Biden. Even the Alaska senator Dan Sullivan, who has been a reliable party-line vote for Trump, said that sometimes he will “forcefully oppose” things “in private.”

One policy choice that Republicans have started to oppose in public is, in retrospect, the pivotal decision of the midterms, and likely of Trump’s second term: the war in Iran. Trump’s approval ratings have never been especially high this term, but they began to drop below forty per cent around late March, a month after the war started, and have



steadily declined since then. The elections analyst Nate Silver noted last week that Trump's ratings were nearly as bad as George W. Bush's were in his second term. The war has, as predicted, driven up both energy prices and inflation—a situation that has made it much harder for Republican candidates to convincingly claim that their businessman President is doing anything about affordability. It has also forced those same candidates to try to defend a war that few believe in. (*The Atlantic* reported that even Donald Trump, Jr., has taken issue with his father over it—in private.) During an Iowa Senate debate, the moderators displayed images of two soldiers, native Iowans, killed in action in the Middle East.

In Iowa and in other Midwestern states, the price of diesel, which has risen more sharply than other fuel prices, has become a potent political issue. In response, Trump waived U.S. policy and

announced a deal in October with President Vladimir Putin to purchase hundreds of thousands of tons of Russian diesel. A week later, Trump suspended a sanctions package on Russia—named for Lindsey Graham, the late Republican senator from South Carolina, who made the war in Ukraine his signature fight—which the Senate had passed and the President himself signed in September. Meanwhile, Elon Musk, who has spent more than four hundred million dollars on Republican campaigns this election cycle, slowed Ukraine's access to his Starshield satellite network, leaving that country more vulnerable to Russian attacks. For some Republicans, this was too much. On Wednesday, Ashley Hinson, a politically savvy congresswoman who is the Senate nominee in Iowa, said before a joint rally with the President that she would tell Trump to his face that the deal with Putin was “a bad idea.”

It is also a betrayal. On Wednesday

night, Trump campaigned in South Carolina with Darline Graham, who was appointed, at Trump's behest, to finish her brother's Senate term, and who championed the Russian-sanctions bill. She has often said on the campaign trail, “I don't trust Putin, and I don't trust Russia.” But she is in a surprisingly competitive race in a deep-red state, and she needs Trump's help to win there, even if it is largely his fault that she might lose. At the rally, she watched as the President casually told a story of calling Putin and asking for a favor, as if to make a show of how responsive the Russian leader is to him. War is horrific, but clarifying. It has exposed Trump, to at least a segment of the public that has long stood with him, as someone who stands not with them but with the oligarchs. And it has shown politicians like Graham and Hinson exactly the terms of the deal they have made.

—Benjamin Wallace-Wells

BAD NEWS, GOOD NEWS DEPT. PRIVATE CITIZEN



Bob Iger took a seat on a balcony outside the Perelman Performing Arts Center, in lower Manhattan, the other day and ran a hand gently over his right knee. He was unshaven and dressed casually, in a black V-neck over a white T-shirt, black pants, and black-and-white Nikes. “It's my second knee, and it's a slog,” he said, alluding to recent surgery. “Not to complain, but it's kind of barbaric—they literally saw the top of your tibia off, and the bottom of your femur. They replace what was there with metal. And they tell you to walk that day, and they send you home. So there's a lot of pain management.”

Iger, who stepped down as the C.E.O. of Disney in March, votes and pays taxes in California, but he has long maintained an apartment in New York. “I have four adult kids,” he said. “They all live here—and five grandchildren.” He had spent the previous day at the apartment, watching football with two twentysomething sons and noticed, with a veteran media

man's weary resignation, that their attention was “somewhat diverted,” as he put it, by the rectangles in their hands.

Iger was soon to receive an Icon of Culture award from PAC, and that achievement, plus a looming acquisition of the Los Angeles Lakers, gave him occasion to reflect on what he viewed as an unlikely career. It began in 1973, after he graduated from Ithaca College with dreams of becoming an anchorman. “Who wouldn't want to be Walter Cronkite?” he said, recalling his habit, as a preteen on Long Island, of devouring the *Times* before school. “Air-raid drills, the Kennedy era and assassination, the birth of the Beatles, and the Vietnam War and free love. It was a very, very rich time.”

He started, instead, as an Ithaca weatherman. “It was a great experience, because it taught me how to give people bad news,” he said. A roof over the balcony shielded him from gusting wind that left commuters turtling their necks into sweaters. “If we were in Ithaca, it would probably be a little bit colder and a little bit wetter.”

Ithaca was on a lot of minds for a different kind of bad news, involving an alleged gang rape at Cornell that had become another proxy battle in the culture wars. “We don't have to talk about

it,” Iger said. He meant this not just as an evasion but symbolically. Too many opinions. He had turned out to be better at delivering bad news off camera than on: a quiet consensus builder with a ruthless streak. Ten years ago, like not a few executives of his generation, he thought about going into politics, as a pragmatic centrist. “I sensed that there was a disillusionment with the state of political affairs and that people were looking for more outsiders to get involved,” he said. Then, having missed his Trump moment, he watched as politics invaded the theme parks, the airwaves, and the boardroom alike, with everyone spouting off. “I spent a lot of time not just reminding people but exhorting people to focus on what our No. 1 goal was, which was to entertain,” he said. “Walt Disney created Disneyland in part to enable people to put their daily frets aside and just cocoon themselves in a happy experience.” He added, “The company had to pull people back and remind them that, in a way, you give up your private-citizen status.”

He brought up a recent *Times* story about political polarization across the globe and contrasted it with what he'd seen during the World Cup—foreigners happily drinking their way through American cities. “There's something

about sports that's a uniting factor," he said. This brought him to the Lakers deal, worth a reported \$12.5 billion, with Josh Kushner as a business partner. "My relationship with Josh began with his then girlfriend, Karlie Kloss, asking me if I could spend some time with her boyfriend," Iger marvelled. Kloss, a supermodel, was friends with Iger's wife, Willow Bay, a former model and the dean of the journalism school at U.S.C. Kushner showed up to their first meeting with a list of annotated questions—"I can't remember if there were Post-it notes, or whatever"—about leadership techniques.

Iger's hand returned to his knee. Sitting left it behaving like a "rusty gate," he said. He stood and glanced toward the reflecting pools in the footprint of the old Twin Towers and recalled that his best friend from Ithaca, Jay Fischler, had become a battalion chief in the New York City Fire Department. "I spent seventy-two hours listening to his answering machine, hoping that he'd pick up," he said, thinking back to 9/11, but in the middle of the crisis there was no one to deliver the good news that Fischler was alive and well.

—Ben McGrath

THE PICTURES STICKY FINGERS



John Turturro slipped into Madison Square Park and greeted a man sitting inconspicuously in a black coat and a fedora. In the new film "The Only Living Pickpocket in New York," directed by Noah Segal, Turturro plays an old-school thief named Harry—a holdover from the era of subway graffiti, lost in the brave new world of cryptocurrency—who provokes the Mob when he unwittingly lifts a flash drive from the wrong guy. The man on the park bench was his pickpocketing consultant, Apollo Robbins. Known as "the gentleman thief," Robbins spent years as a Vegas entertainer, relieving willing spectators of their wallets, watches, and rings (and then giving them back). As this magazine reported, in 2012, he

once cleaned out the pockets of Jimmy Carter's Secret Service detail: itinerary, badges, keys to the motorcade.

"His hands—he's like a concert pianist!" Turturro said. Robbins had tutored him at the movie's production office, where they practiced techniques on a stunt guy and devised Harry's steals. ("Like a fight choreographer," Robbins said. "But I was a theft choreographer.") They considered having Robbins act as a hand double, but Turturro wanted to bring off the grabs himself. Among other things, he had learned from Robbins that a pickpocket's gait changes after a steal. "You just want to disappear," Turturro said, demonstrating how to blend in with the crowd.

A woman approached Turturro to tell him that her son used to play basketball with his. After she left, Robbins revealed that he'd cased her: two bags, one slung around her back, the other under her arm. "So probably her valuables would be there," he said. "Usually, you'd just cut the bag and drop the contents out." He took a leather wallet from his coat. "They used to have a term called 'peeking the poke,'" he went on. "Poke" was another name for wallet, so peeking the poke was: Where is this going to be? If it's in the inside pocket, that's called 'the pit,' or 'uptown.'"

"I'm going uptown!" Turturro said, relishing the lingo. The actor had never been pickpocketed himself, but when he worked as a bartender in the seventies he'd been robbed at knifepoint. The ethics of pickpocketing intrigued him; unlike mugging, it's usually nonviolent and requires finesse. "There's a balletic aspect to it," he said. Turturro found pickpocketing a bit like acting, insofar as he is stealing from life to create a character. "You stitch it together," he continued. "But you are a thief in the night sometimes."

Robbins showed off a move called "reefing the kick": using your fingers to walk an item up to the top of someone's pocket from the outside. The resurgence of baggy jeans, he said, has been good for pickpockets. "There's a fine line between fondling and pickpocketing," he cautioned.

"Too bad that line's not in the movie," Turturro said. A young red-headed guy came up and introduced himself as Zane Roth, a sometime magician. "Can we

rob you?" Turturro asked. Robbins had Roth hold out his wrist, and showed how he would pop off the strap of his watch. After a few minutes, he handed Roth his wallet, having filched it from his front pocket during the conversation. Impressive enough. Then Robbins



Apollo Robbins and John Turturro

asked for Turturro's wallet, from which he produced Roth's student I.D.

Growing up in Springfield, Missouri, Robbins had two older half brothers who stole for a living, before moving on to bigger crimes. He pulled off his first notable feat at age eleven, pocketing some cigarettes at a convenience store. The manager confronted him, and he slipped them into the man's apron. (Robbins's father, a preacher, later tried to exorcise him.) At fourteen, he discovered magic. "I started seeking mentors in both worlds"—crime and magic—"and created a hybrid out of those two," he said.

Robbins has studied "theft culture" around the world. In China, pickpockets use chopsticks, and bystanders tend not to interfere. In Japan, subway riders cram together but spread out once they're off the train. Technology is a mixed bag: people are distracted by their phones, making themselves easier marks, but increased surveillance means that pickpockets have to fool the cameras as well as their victims.

Thieves used to contact Robbins, but he's less keyed-in now. "There are different criteria when you have a family," he said. "How much time do I want to

spend with criminal networks?" A few years ago, he gave up full-time performing and now runs a security company called Ludus Labs, using his insights into misdirection and deception to advise government contractors. He still pickpockets at client presentations—U.S. marshals, chiefs of police—to demonstrate blind spots in critical thinking. "The stealing is now a metaphor," he said. "I've become a walking analogy."

—Michael Schulman

DEPT. OF DISHES WHERE THE HEARTH IS



If you've watched a Hallmark movie, you've likely encountered the Robert Frost line "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Which is a nice idea, unless you misheard and "home" is actually the new, seven-thousand-square-foot West Village restaurant Humm, where it'll be nearly impossible to get a reservation for the foreseeable future.

But Humm is a decidedly homey, nostalgic place, with garnet, sage, and ochre velvet seats and a central hearth,

which was not yet lit when Daniel Humm, the chef known for his decades at the helm of Eleven Madison Park—the standard-bearer for lavish tasting menus—surveyed the space a few weeks before its opening.

Humm said he believed that all his restaurants were "soulful" but noted that "everything on this menu is very recognizable—the roast chicken here is my mom's roast chicken. She would stuff it under the skin with a bread-crumb-lemon crust, or on Christmas she made it with foie gras and truffles."

In strolled the artist Francesco Clemente. He'd spent months painting the dining room's ceiling with stars, trains, and clocks. In the eighties, Clemente had decorated the walls of the Palladium, a Steve Rubell night club. "I remember what my attitude was then, and it's the same now," Clemente said. "To make something that would feel as if it was there before the space, like something that maybe had been covered up over time."

Humm's father was an architect. "He introduced me to this idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*," Humm said. "That's what I think a restaurant is—the way Richard Wagner composed his sets." When Humm was ten, his parents took him to the Musée de l'Orangerie, in Paris, and he wept in front of Monet's water

lilies. "I just didn't know—was I sad or was I happy?" he recalled.

The artist Rashid Johnson, who'd also made works for the restaurant, showed up and wished Humm a happy (belated) birthday. Humm said that another painter pal, Rita Ackermann, had cooked goulash for him on the big day. Johnson's birthday, meanwhile, was coming up—on it, he'd be cooking for Humm and his wife. "I make chili," Johnson said. "Or I do, like, a pork-chop dish. It's not like Daniel's judging my fucking cooking."

Johnson gazed at one of his own paintings, which hangs in the dark-red lounge and features outlines of houses. "I was making these works that were about the way we interrogate 'home' from a very simplistic position but also from a very complicated one, and how you think about that duality around neighborhood, collective housing, how we think about shelters, how we imagine ourselves inhabiting these spaces," he said.

The trio settled in to draw on sheets of paper with circles printed on them, which Humm uses to come up with dishes.

"Is this the size of the plates?" Johnson asked.

"No, this is the idea of the plate," Humm responded.

Johnson grabbed a pencil and divided his "plate" into thirds, which he labelled "V," "M," and "C" (vegetables, meat, and carbs).

"I'm glad you didn't say 'protein,'" Clemente said.

Humm outlined two cutlets. "So, this is, like, a chicken," he explained.

"I see a salad," Clemente said.

"Francesco is very lucky because Alba, his wife, is one of the best cooks on the planet," Humm said, as he added yellow mushrooms to his composition. "For me, a dish is like a feeling, really. Of course, visually, we want to do something pleasing, but I don't think of a plate like a painting." (Counterpoint: the artist Paul McCarthy purportedly declared, upon eating Humm's celery root cooked in a pig's bladder, "Oh, my God, I feel like I'm eating a painting by Robert Ryman.")

Clemente mused, "One paints for the dead and cooks for the living."

"When you make art, you're in this conversation with a lot of dead people," Johnson agreed.

Humm mentioned a portrait of his



"Radiator spirit, we implore you to turn on and heat our apartment to a reasonable temperature that's not too, too hot. . . ."



Daniel Humm

wife that hangs in their dining room at home. He said, “Francesco painted it for my proposal to her.” Humm had bought an engagement ring and shown it to Clemente to incorporate into the work in progress. “Are you sure she’s going to say yes?” Clemente had asked. Humm proposed in the artist’s studio, in front of the finished painting.

The men completed their drawings. Clemente described his plate as “autobiographical—depressed, in a panic.” Johnson had obscured his original “V-M-C” with swirling rainbow lines. “I make these characters, I think of them as souls,” he said.

Humm asked Johnson how he liked the velvet chairs. “You know what you want in a chair when you’re at a restaurant?” Johnson replied. “Not to think about the chair that you’re sitting in. So the fact that I haven’t noticed it is a very fucking good sign.”

—Emma Allen

THE BOARDS SEMPER FIDELIS



Like the gung-ho sailors of “On the Town,” the actor Alex Ekker, twenty-seven, is a military man new to New York City and game for sightseeing. Ekker, who has kind eyes, close-cropped hair, and excellent posture

(How tall? “Six-two, but people say I’m six-four for some reason”), served in the U.S. Marine Corps for four years, and currently plays a marine in Aaron Sorkin’s “A Few Good Men” at Lincoln Center. On a recent day off, he cheerfully stuck to a plan to visit the Empire State Building, despite fog, wind, and a downpour; presumably, he’s endured worse. “There’s zero-percent visibility,” a gruff guard said at the entrance, with a hint of *What’s wrong with you idiots?* Ekker, in a zip-up jacket and khakis, proceeded through the building’s near-empty museum, enjoying its immersive marvels: twenties street scene; theatre of E.S.B. fare (he’d seen “Sleepless in Seattle,” “‘Superman,’ of course,” and “the Jack Black ‘King Kong’”); Kong room, with vibrating ape hands. The elevator simulated the skyscraper’s construction, complete with New York accents. “It’s an amusement-park ride,” Ekker said. “What is going on?”

On the eighty-sixth floor, he ventured toward the observation deck: “Ready to brave it?” Outside was bluster, loud, hail-like. “Whoa, yeah!” Ekker yelled, with military vigor. He gazed out at the fog. “It’s hard to see any of the lights,” he observed. “Oh, there’s some stuff! Whoo!” A few lights, possibly a river. Ekker laughed and headed back in: “Oh, my goodness gracious.”

Ekker was cast in Sorkin’s play this summer, having just graduated from acting school in North Carolina; his Broadway debut is also his professional debut. “A Few Good Men” (in movie form: Tom Cruise, Jack Nicholson, “You can’t handle the truth!”) centers on a court-martial of two marines and a possible coverup. In this production, featuring the Sorkin veteran Bradley Whitford, Ekker’s roles include regular M.P. (“Ten-hut”) and sergeant at arms (“Ten-*hut!*”). He also understudies two others. “I’m excited, if the day comes,” he said. “But I like my tribe now, and I get to wear the dress blues.”

An indoor gelato stand sold Empire State Building Hot Chocolate; Ekker got in line. “I never thought I wanted to be an actor,” he said. “I love stories. In the Marines, I met people from all around the world, listened to

these incredible things. . . . I think we have a sheltered view here.” When his service ended, he decided to try acting. He said, “I wanted to express, in a way, what I wanted to do when I joined the Marine Corps”—to help people. “I didn’t know exactly how to fit in with everybody when I was younger, and I hated bullies. But I love people—or what people are capable of.”

Ekker, the son of two now retired Navy officers, grew up in Virginia Beach and Chesapeake. As a kid, he admired marines, who’d come to his school for Toys for Tots drives; his parents admired them, too. “I wanted to be a protector,” Ekker said. He enlisted at nineteen. Boot camp was humbling, he said, but later “you think, ‘Why was I such a wimp?’” He loved the marines’ unbreakable brotherhood (“You’re in the suck together, and the barriers fall away”) and learned about “what honor means for different people.” In “A Few Good Men,” he said, “everybody is fighting for what they think is right, a lot of them for a greater cause. How much has to be sacrificed in order for it to work? And maybe it’s the greater good, maybe not.” His E.S.B. Hot Chocolate was ready—and towering. “Whoa,” he said. “It’s mostly whipped cream!”

After the Marines, “going to an arts conservatory was a complete one-eighty,” he went on. From brotherhood “no matter what you say to the guy next to you” to “Oh, man, I have no idea what anybody’s talking about. I don’t know the next-generation celebrities. I don’t know why everybody’s singing and dancing.” But his acting cohort became a family, too.

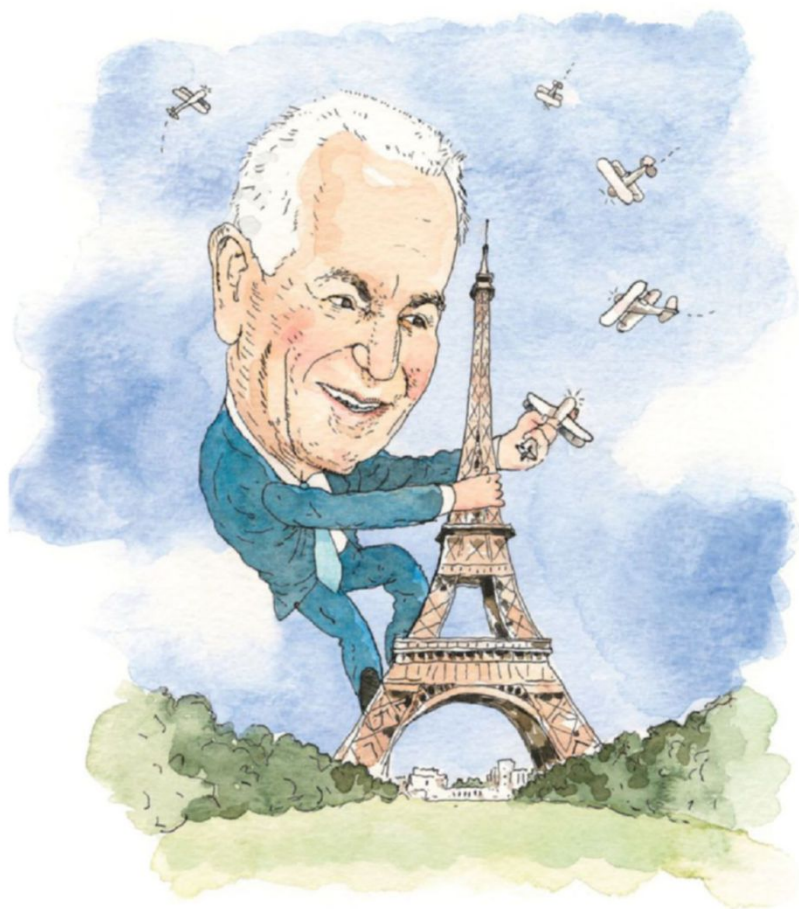
Before leaving, he took one more spin around the observation deck. “I wonder what this looks like from the ground,” he said. He looked up, to a beautiful sight: the top of the Empire State Building, glowing like a lighthouse in the fog. And between it and him, an old, somewhat tattered friend. “The American flag!” Ekker said, taking a picture. “This is so awesome.” Afterward, on the sidewalk, a tourist approached. “Where is the Empire State Building?” he asked. Ekker lit up. “Just go around the corner and turn left,” he said.

—Sarah Larson

OUR MAN IN PARIS

The American ambassador in the age of Trump.

BY LAUREN COLLINS



In July, to fête America on its Semiquincentennial, Charles Kushner, the United States Ambassador to France and Monaco, hosted a lavish party at his official residence, the Hôtel de Pontalba, in Paris. Louis XV-style sofas, adorned with throw pillows in stars and stripes, dotted the villa's enormous lawn. Servers circulated in cigarette-girl fashion, carrying wicker baskets loaded with little glass bowls of dorade ceviche, as French guests in military dress perused a spread of fajitas, pronouncing the dish with a hard "j." (Per a placard, all the food was "kosher and prepared under rabbinical supervision.") Like his boss back in Washington, Kushner had un-

dertaken an ambitious makeover of his temporary home, funded largely by donations from French businesspeople. He planned to add A.C., and had fixed the building's façade, which had been held together with steel mesh to keep concrete from falling on people's heads. "Literally, we did power washing, and we had six foot of balustrades that came off," Kushner told me later. "This is America's home, and it was not dignified."

During previous Fourth of July celebrations at the Embassy, guests had mingled freely, but now a V.I.P. section had been installed toward the front of the garden, cordoned off by red velvet ropes. The imposition of such a hierarchy

seemed an odd choice for an event celebrating the birth of one democracy on the soil of another—more bridge-and-tunnel than all-men-are-created-equal or *liberté-égalité-fraternité*. But it was in keeping with the Kushner family's predilection for conducting public service as a private affair, and with Kushner's role as an exemplar of MAGA-style diplomacy in Donald Trump's second term.

Since taking up his post, in the summer of 2025, Kushner has gained a reputation for lobbing provocations onto France's domestic scene at sensitive moments. Just six weeks after arriving in the country, he published an open letter to President Emmanuel Macron in the *Wall Street Journal*, accusing him of allowing France to become a bastion of antisemitism. Ambassadors are ostensibly bound by Article 41 of the 1961 Vienna Convention, which forbids them to interfere in their host country's internal affairs. In response to the open letter, the French foreign minister, Jean-Noël Barrot, took the unusual step of issuing Kushner a summons, an official demand that he appear for a meeting. Kushner ignored the request.

About six months later, in February of 2026, a far-right activist died of a brain injury after being beaten by members of a far-left group following a street brawl in Lyon. As with the assassination of Charlie Kirk, the event prompted an onslaught of uninformed commentary and partisan distortion. French authorities urged people to avoid politicizing the incident while an investigation was under way, but Kushner's office did not oblige. "Violent left-wing extremism is on the rise," the American Embassy pronounced on X. In an unprecedented back-to-back censure, Barrot convoked Kushner again. When Kushner flouted that summons, too, Barrot temporarily barred him from meeting with members of the French government, citing his "apparent misunderstanding of the basic expectations of an ambassador."

Kushner may have belatedly learned his lesson. In early October, French high-school students, protesting poor learning conditions, blocked the entrances to their schools, setting off demonstrations that have spread across Europe. Trump saw a midterm-friendly angle in the mayhem, calling the French protests the result of "Islam" and "mass migration," but

Charles Kushner has practiced diplomacy by repeatedly alienating the French.

Kushner rejected his boss's assertion. He told me, "I would not make that broad generalization." His French bodyguards had explained that their compatriots are "professional protesters," he said. Even after October 17th, when a day of demonstrations ended with vandals attacking government buildings and looting thousands of shops, he declined to join the Administration in pointing fingers. "I can't stop thinking about those small-business owners who lost everything—it's heartbreaking," he said, adding, "Our top priority is keeping Americans safe."

In recent decades, under both Democratic and Republican Presidents, around seventy per cent of ambassadorships have been filled by career diplomats rather than by political appointees. By contrast, only about twenty per cent of the ambassadors whom Trump has tapped since his reelection have any professional experience in diplomacy. His hundred and twenty-two appointees have included a restaurant mogul, a Broadway-musical producer, a former N.F.L. running back, and the President's eldest son's ex-fiancée. The last of these, Kimberly Guilfoyle, was night-clubbing and brokering energy deals from Athens until she was forced to resign, in mid-October, in response to allegations that she'd asked a G.O.P. donor to wire a hundred thousand dollars to pay off her American Express bill. The restaurant guy, Tilman Fertitta, is posted in Rome. Over the summer, in a video shared on Instagram in which he wandered around his four-hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar superyacht with a plastic cup in hand, he announced that he would be conducting a program of "coastal diplomacy" to honor America's birthday by touring thirteen regions "to meet and celebrate with hundreds of Italians from local communities." In other words, he was going on a cruise. Eric Rubin, a former U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria, told me, "Every Administration has what we call 'clunkers,' but we've never had quite this number of flagrantly unqualified people."

Even among this cohort, Kushner, a New Jersey real-estate developer who happens to be the father of Trump's son-in-law Jared, stands out. He does not speak French. He has never lived abroad. He served time in federal prison for illegal campaign contributions, tax evasion, and witness tampering, and was

later pardoned by Trump, in 2020. The last crime, a blackmail scheme that involved hiring a prostitute to seduce his sister's husband, suggests a dubious approach to conflict management. By Kushner's own admission, he lacks the "natural ingredients for diplomacy," as he told the *Times*. Yet Trump saw fit to hand him one of the most coveted posts in American diplomacy, the seat once held by Thomas Jefferson and by Benjamin Franklin, stewarding the relationship with America's oldest ally. (Kushner told me that the "family issue" had "probably zero" to do with his appointment.)

That Kushner even managed to secure *agrément*, whereby a state accepts a foreign ambassador's nomination, was a little miracle of American hegemony. Peter Ricketts, a former British Ambassador to France, observed, "Coming from any other country, they'd probably have said, 'No, thanks.'" Many American career diplomats were taken aback. "The guy's a former convict, and a pretty seedy and salacious one, at that," Lew Lukens, a former U.S. Ambassador to Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, told me. "I don't know how anyone's not shocked by the notion that he's the best person to represent the United States in France."

On America's birthday, at least, Kushner's mood was persuasively statesmanlike. Behind the velvet ropes, he appeared at a lectern, a white-haired Jared doppelgänger in a dark suit and a red power tie, and delivered a speech paying tribute to the long-standing symbiosis between France and America and the "blood mingled" on the battlefields of Yorktown and the beaches of Normandy.

The reason for this unusually Franco-ophile display became surmisable when Kushner welcomed his guest of honor, his friend Bernard Arnault, the head of the luxury-goods conglomerate L.V.M.H. and a major sponsor of the evening. The invitation was both a Trumpist statement—Arnault, one of the richest men in the world, embodies what *Le Monde* has called "the inversion of the balance of power between politics and business"—and a mark of personal admiration. Kushner, minutes earlier so composed, bobbled his words and told Arnault that he was "beyond grateful" for his attendance, as the garden filled with the unmistakable scent of a man crush.

As a treat for Arnault and his wife, Hélène, a concert pianist, the Kushners had arranged for a performance by Andrea Bocelli. The tenor emerged in an iridescent dinner jacket and blue-tinted sunglasses. The sky was darkening as Bocelli told the guests, "I think you know this song, if you want to sing along with me," and launched into "Nessun dorma," a Trump-rally staple.

When the show was over, I walked up to the V.I.P. area and tried to step behind one of the velvet ropes, but a man in a U.S.-military uniform rebuffed my approach. A fireworks display began, and guests filtered home while strains of Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" carried over the garden walls.

France became the new American nation's ally in 1778, when Louis XVI signed the first treaty recognizing the United States' sovereignty. Less than two decades later, the bond was tested by a scandal known as the XYZ Affair, in which France's foreign minister, Talleyrand, demanded bribes from American envoys to Paris. More recently, the French and American governments have sparred over such issues as the Iraq War, N.S.A. spying, tariffs, the war in Ukraine, Greenland, and NATO funding. Kushner's fraught relations, however, are notable for being a product largely of his own making. He has shown scant interest in his host country. Introducing himself to the French public in a social-media video, he said that he knew "a limited amount about France" but that he and his wife, Seryl, came often on her birthday, to "walk down the Champs-Élysées and just enjoy." (This is kind of like saying that what you really like to do on your very regular visits to New York City is stroll around Times Square.) The sight of a packed café has been known to leave him wondering if Parisians ever go to work.

Kushner's esteem for public servants has likewise tended to hover somewhere between condescension and outright disgust. He once vented to the trade publication *The Real Deal* about "stupid ethics watchdogs," complaining, "All they want to do is assure that poor, not successful people go into government." Kushner so far has participated little in the ceremony of the job, avoiding most receptions and ribbon cuttings. The French news channel

TF1 once mistakenly referred to him as Jared. He prefers to go where he can make an impact, his advisers said, pointing to successes in bringing the N.F.L. to Paris, for its first-ever regular-season game in France; increasing French investment in the U.S.; and expanding opportunities for American businesses in France. Last spring, I was told that he hadn't been doing many public events—it would be unseemly to be quaffing champagne in Paris as America dropped bombs on Iran. That didn't stop Kushner from hosting a party to celebrate the release of “Melania,” the First Lady's Amazon-backed documentary. Guests were invited to enjoy a “private screening in the presence of the film's director, Mr. Brett Ratner,” who has been accused by multiple women of sexual misconduct. (Ratner has denied the allegations.) One attendee recalled that the Embassy seemed keen to avoid publicizing the affair: “We were specifically asked not to take any pictures or to post anything on social media.”

As a nepo hire on what *Le Figaro* has referred to as “the drunken ship of American diplomacy,” Kushner has often seemed less interested in winning over the French than in impressing the in-laws back in Washington. Ronald Neumann, the president of the American Academy of Diplomacy, told me, “I don't see how he can possibly affect the opinions of the French government by regularly irritating them.” Even potential allies seem to regard Kushner warily. The former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has been tacking ever closer to the far right, revealed in a recent memoir that Kushner tried to visit him late last year in a Paris prison, where Sarkozy was confined for twenty days after being convicted of conspiring to fund his 2007 Presidential campaign with money from the late Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi. (Sarkozy is appealing.) Kushner told me that he was motivated by empathy. “I've been prosecuted, and my heart feels for the man,” he said. But the gesture seemed designed to cast doubt on the French judiciary's verdict, suggesting that even a supposedly sovereign justice system was vulnerable to American meddling. Sarkozy confessed that he was “particularly surprised” by Kushner's overt and uncertain how to handle it, wanting neither “to spark an unnecessary controversy” with his own country's government nor to “turn away

the representative of the world's leading power while I myself was detained.”

In a new book, “Sous Influence Américaine” (“Under American Influence”), the CNN journalist Melissa Bell writes that the U.S. today is behaving like Russia, seeking to “destabilize, fragment, and vassalize Europe,” but that American interference can be even more insidious, “because it comes from a ‘friendly’ country.” Nathalie Loiseau, the chair of an ad-hoc European Parliament committee that aims to combat foreign interference, noted, as examples, the Trump Administration's decisions to sanction the French bureaucrat Thierry Breton for his role in regulating American tech companies and to freeze the assets of Nicolas Guillou, a French judge on the International Criminal Court panel that issued arrest warrants for Israeli leaders. Magali Lafourcade, a French magistrate and the secretary-general of the National Commission on Human Rights, told me, “The idea is to say, ‘You're under scrutiny, and you're all at risk the moment you touch American interests.’”

Kushner is Trump's man in Paris, but he is also a filial franchisee. One recent visitor to the Hôtel de Pontalba stumbled upon a supply closet filled with copies of “Breaking History,” Jared Kushner's 2022 memoir, neatly labelled “Signed.” Last fall, the Embassy's Instagram page posted a video of Charles pacing the ornate rug of a wood-panelled office with a phone to his ear. “POV: your son calls mid-meeting to tell you that he did it!” the caption read, touting Jared's role in brokering a Gaza peace agreement. In “Breaking History,” Jared writes, of Arab leaders, “As the son-in-law of the president, and a former executive of a family business, I represented something that they found familiar and reassuring. They knew that when I spoke, I did so as an extension of the president in a way that few administration officials could.” Charles is an extension of the extension, burnishing the Kushner brand in the heart of Europe.

The Kushners' longtime habit of mixing family and business has found new applications since they've entered the political realm. In 2018, when their real-estate firm, Kushner Companies, was in desperate need of a bailout for its over-leveraged purchase of a tower on Fifth

Avenue, Jared traversed the globe, hobnobbing with world leaders as a senior White House adviser. At the last minute, an investment fund controlled by the Qatari government swooped in with the billion dollars that the Kushners needed. (The Kushners claimed that they hadn't broken any ethics rules, because Jared had divested from the building, and that the deal had nothing to do with Trump's subsequent efforts to negotiate an end to Gulf nations' anti-Qatari blockade.) More recently, Jared's private-equity firm, Affinity Partners, has raised billions of dollars from Middle Eastern governments as Jared serves as a U.S. envoy in the region.

The Kushner family business stretches back three generations, to Charles's father, Joseph. He and Charles's mother, Rae, were Polish Holocaust survivors who spoke often about the traumas they had endured. “There was seldom a family gathering or holiday meal in which it was not mentioned,” Jacob Schuller, one of their grandchildren, writes in a family history, published in 2024. Joseph had spent most of the war hiding in the forest with the Bielski partisan force, a Jewish resistance group. Rae, trapped in a ghetto in Novogrudok, watched the Nazis murder her mother and one of her sisters. She was forced to scour blood from the paving stones of the town square after a mass killing, accompanied by an orchestra. Eventually, after villagers dug an escape tunnel, she fled to the forest with the remainder of her nuclear family. Her brother, Chanan, became separated from the others and was never found.

Joseph and Rae spent several years in an Italian displaced-persons camp before immigrating to the United States. Kushner was Rae's family name. As Andrea Bernstein writes in “American Oligarchs,” Joseph adopted it as his own and passed himself off as Rae's father's son, to more easily obtain a visa. After a few years in New York City, the couple settled in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where Charles, the third of their four children, was born, in 1954. He was named in honor of Chanan. Despite the family's measure of suburban stability, money was tight. Joseph was transitioning out of the carpentry trade into real estate, and he and a partner were planning to build spec houses on three lots that they'd bought in Rahway. Jacob Schuller recounts that

Joseph, cash-strapped from the purchase, “borrowed a hundred dollars from his uncle, Moshe, to make Charlie’s bris.” According to *New York*, when a young Charles came home from school one day with a guitar, Joseph broke it over his knee, saying, “A boy has to learn how to make a living, not play a fiddle.”

Joseph ultimately acquired some four thousand rental apartments in New Jersey. After his death, in 1985, Charles prevailed in a succession battle with his older brother, Murray. Armed with a law degree and an M.B.A., he transformed his father’s parochial holdings into Kushner Companies, amassing properties and investments. As his fortune grew, he took on a seigneurial role in the community, endowing yeshivas, underwriting World Series outings for sick children, and handing out prodigious political contributions, mostly to Democratic candidates. Masters of social capital, he and Seryl were ubiquitous at weddings and on the funeral circuit (they’d show up for the services, not just for the shivas) and were renowned for, as a family friend recalled, “taking care of their friends” while never forgetting a grudge. As major donors to pro-Israel causes, they got to know Benjamin Netanyahu, who once spent the night at their house, borrowing Jared’s bedroom.

Murray worked for the company, as did Charles’s two brothers-in-law (his sister’s husband and his wife’s brother). But in 2000, during a Passover Seder at the Fontainebleau hotel in Miami Beach, Charles and Murray clashed over a plan to buy another firm for more than a billion dollars; the deal had collapsed when Murray refused to sign off on it. The next year, again at the Fontainebleau, Charles lashed out at his sister, Esther, and her husband, Billy Schuler, whom he suspected of sympathizing with Murray. “You’re a fucking putz!” he screamed at Billy, according to *New York*, cementing one of the most consequential family feuds of the twenty-first century.

Kushner’s complicated web of interests had begun to attract the attention of federal authorities. In 2003, he learned that a grand jury was investigating him on charges of tax evasion and campaign-finance fraud—and that Esther and Billy were coöperating with investigators. Kushner, in a fury, devised the salacious revenge plot that has colored his reputation ever since. With the help of a moon-

lighting East Orange police captain and his private-eye brother, he recruited a sex worker to set a honey trap for Billy. The tryst was consummated at a motel called the Red Bull Motor Inn, where Kushner’s accomplices had installed a video camera inside a digital alarm clock.

The former New Jersey governor Chris Christie, who prosecuted Kushner’s case during his years as a U.S. Attorney, has called him “the most disgusting defendant” he encountered in his career. In Christie’s memoir, he describes how Kushner screened footage of Billy’s rendezvous in a conference room at his corporate offices, letting out “raucous guffaws.” Kushner wanted to show the tape to Schuler’s children—Kushner’s own niece and nephew—but ultimately settled for mailing a copy to the Schulers, timing the delivery so that his sister would receive it just before her son’s engagement party. In August, 2004, Kushner pleaded guilty to eighteen counts of tax fraud, witness intimidation, and F.E.C. violations. Six months later, he was sentenced to twenty-four months in prison. His reputation in shreds, he reported to a federal prison camp in Alabama.

Charles apologized for his actions, writing in a letter to his sister that he

had “let hatred invade his heart” and had “committed a terrible sin,” but Jared never stopped believing that his father was a victim. His book, putatively “a White House memoir,” opens with Charles’s arrest, which Jared calls “an astonishing betrayal” on the part of his relatives. For years, he writes, he was traumatized by the smell of popcorn and Pop-Tarts, which were available in the vending machine of the prison’s waiting room. In February of 2006, after serving eight months, Kushner secured a transfer to a halfway house by claiming that he was an alcoholic.

That July, just weeks before Kushner’s return home, Jared paid ten million dollars to buy the *New York Observer*. One of Charles’s business associates told a reporter that the paper was a “graduation present” for Jared, but the purchase was very much a joint venture, guaranteeing entrée, for father and son, into a Manhattan world of very important people who didn’t much care about whatever the Kushners had got into across the river. “Charlie was a New Jersey criminal, so he needed a social reset,” the family friend recalled. A few years later, Jared married Ivanka Trump, at Trump National Golf Club, in front of



“That’s my off-site storage facility.”



"I knew it was over when my wife had bed bollards installed."

five hundred guests, including Rupert Murdoch and Russell Crowe. The Kushners had arrived.

After Trump's election in 2016, Jared and Chris Christie found themselves together on the Presidential transition team. Then Christie was abruptly fired, a move that he accused Jared of engineering as payback. Christie recently told me about an encounter with Charles, in the spring of 2023, at Fresco by Scotto, a clubby Tuscan restaurant near Rockefeller Center. Christie was there having lunch with the former New York governor Andrew Cuomo. "All the sudden, I see Cuomo's eyes get bigger," Christie recalled. "I felt someone pat me on the shoulder." He turned around in his seat to find Charles Kushner standing behind him. According to Christie, despite the fact that he had sent Kushner to prison, the two men had never spoken.

"Governor, I think it's long overdue that we meet," Kushner said to Christie. "My son has suggested that we get together for dinner."

Christie interpreted Charles's approach as a typically Kushnerian power play. "He and his son are carbon copies, and they have this very passive-aggressive style about them," he said. "That was him hoping I'd be uncomfortable." At the end of the encounter, Kushner held out a hand. "You can call me Charlie," he said. (Through a spokesperson at the

U.S. Embassy in Paris, Kushner characterized Christie's account as "inaccurate.") If nothing else, the incident demonstrated Kushner's extraordinary capacity for the long game, for grinning and bearing anything that might eventually allow him to best an adversary. No get-together was ever arranged, but Christie told me that more recently, after he'd sat down at Ristorante MV, an Italian spot in Bernardsville, New Jersey, a server brought a bottle of expensive red wine to his table. "I told him, 'I didn't order any wine,'" Christie recalled. "He said, 'Oh, no, sir, the wine was sent to you by your friend—Mr. Jared Kushner.'"

For both Republican and Democratic Administrations, the plush, well-staffed U.S. embassies of the major European capitals have traditionally served as parking grounds for big political donors who excel at schmoozing, if not at statecraft. Trump's first Ambassador to France, Jamie McCourt, a G.O.P. fundraiser and a former co-owner of the L.A. Dodgers, took a look at the Hôtel de Pontalba's lush garden, which abuts the Élysée Palace, in the heart of one of the city's most historic districts, and, as aides recalled, asked if she could put in a pool. Kushner's appointment to the Paris post was the most controversial since 1993, when Bill Clinton selected Pamela Harriman, a thrice-married Washington

power broker who was ridiculed as a promiscuous gold-digger. During her confirmation hearing, Senator Strom Thurmond proclaimed, "They're sending the Whore of Babylon to Paris!"

In the lead-up to Kushner's arrival last summer, speculation about his agenda swirled in Paris. The French didn't know what to expect. In one sense, the appointment was an insult. Géraud Araud, a French Ambassador to the United States during Barack Obama's Presidency, wrote on X that Kushner, "needless to say, doesn't have the slightest knowledge about our country," and counselled followers to read Kushner's résumé: "'Juicy,' as the Americans would say." At the same time, Kushner's proximity to Trump presented an opportunity. "It's always better to have the ear of the President, no matter the Ambassador's competence," Célia Belin, the head of the Paris office of the European Council on Foreign Relations, told me. "The French actually love to deal with those kinds of Republicans, because their interests are laid out more simply, and they may actually be aligned on things like strategic autonomy."

Kushner got to Paris on July 10th. The same day, he visited the Mémorial de la Shoah, noting afterward the "profoundly personal" nature of this "first step of my stay in France." Just weeks later, he shared his impressions of the place in his open letter to Macron in the *Wall Street Journal*: "I write out of deep concern over the dramatic rise of antisemitism in France and the lack of sufficient action by your government to confront it." Macron had announced his intention to recognize Palestinian statehood at the upcoming U.N. General Assembly, and Kushner wrote that Macron's public statements on the subject had served to "embolden extremists, fuel violence, and endanger Jewish life in France." His language closely echoed that of a letter Netanyahu had issued to Macron a week earlier. Kushner offered twinned reminders, one political and one personal. "Anti-Zionism is antisemitism—plain and simple," he wrote, adding, "President Trump and I have Jewish children and share Jewish grandchildren. I know how he feels about antisemitism."

The letter called out the very real problem of resurgent antisemitism in France.

Since October 7th, antisemitic acts have soared, from fewer than five hundred incidents in 2022 to more than fifteen hundred in 2023 and again in 2024, with thirteen hundred and twenty acts reported last year. “There has truly been an explosion,” the historian Marc Knobel told me. According to one study, nearly a quarter of French people under the age of thirty-five consider it “acceptable” or “understandable” to vandalize a Jewish business or a synagogue in order to express opposition to Israeli policy. Kushner told me that he’d experienced antisemitism in France directly, when one of his grandsons was visiting and wore a yarmulke out for a walk during Passover. Kushner recalled, “We put one step out the door here—people yelling, ‘Fuck the Jew! Fuck the Jew!’”

David Amar, the president of the Consistoire de Paris/Île-de-France, an organization that oversees Jewish worship in the capital region, defended Kushner’s letter, telling me, “He simply said what everyone thinks aloud.” But, to many other leaders in France’s Jewish communities, Kushner’s claim that the French government had failed to act did not reflect reality. Responding on X to Netanyahu’s letter, Yonathan Arfi, the president of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France, had praised “the regular dialogue established with public authorities against antisemitism over the past twenty years,” pointing to, for example, the government’s commitment to safeguarding Jewish places of worship. The lawyer Patrick Klugman, a longtime advocate for Jewish causes, told me, of Kushner’s intervention, “Theoretically, I should have been very pleased, but I was not, because it wasn’t serious, it wasn’t balanced, and it gave a false picture. Just because you’re not happy with what France is doing in the Middle East, you can’t say that the country is permissive to antisemitism.”

Kushner’s stunt, Klugman added, had put French Jews in an impossible position, awakening noxious stereotypes that reached back to the Dreyfus Affair. “It makes the Jewish population in France look as if they were not French but under American jurisdiction or protection, and this is totally counterproductive,” Klugman told me. If Kushner’s goal was to fight antisemitism in France, immediately alienating the country’s leadership and a significant portion of French Jews

didn’t seem like a particularly efficient way to go about it. Nathalie Loiseau, the European lawmaker, said, “Sometimes you have to do undiplomatic things to have an effect, but the effect he had was most people teaming up against him and telling him to mind his own business.” (Kushner told me, “I think what I did was a net-net very positive, because nobody has the courage to say what I say, to express what I express.”)

The summons from Jean-Noël Barrot requested that Kushner appear at Quai d’Orsay, the seat of the French Foreign Ministry, the next day. These choreographies can be stagy, but most diplomats take them seriously, cognizant of the fact that they’ll need solid relationships in the event of a crisis, like, say, a terrorist attack. John Emerson, a former U.S. Ambassador to Germany who received his own summons after it emerged that Chancellor Angela Merkel’s phone had been tapped by the C.I.A., told me, “When you’re dealing with an ally, you go in and play your role. You respect their protocols. Otherwise, that disrespect becomes the story, instead of the message you want to deliver.” When Kushner didn’t show, *Paris Match* ran a piece headlined “The American Ambassador Prefers to Continue His Vacation,” with an accompanying photograph of Kushner on the French Riviera in a jaunty straw hat. He told me, of his decision to blow off the meeting, “I’m seventy-two years old. I’m not getting called to the principal at this stage in my life.”

The whole affair seems to have had little effect on Kushner’s sense of tact.



Last October, he attended a *diner mondain*—a networking dinner for people far too well placed to attend networking dinners—with luminaries from French business, culture, and journalism. It was hosted by James Lieber, a prominent consultant, at his apartment in Paris. The goal was to add social lubrication to the creaky wheels of diplomacy, but, accord-

ing to several attendees, the conversation took a contentious turn. One guest told me, “Kushner started the dinner by saying that France was the main antisemitic country of Europe, with Macron as the Antisemite-in-Chief.” (Lieber and the Embassy spokesperson denied that Kushner made these comments.) Eventually, the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy spoke up with an opinion that, per *Le Monde*, left Kushner in a “fury.” Lévy’s latest book, “Israel Alone,” argues that the October 7th attack prompted “a worldwide eruption of anti-Semitism, cloaked in anti-Zionism,” but, even for him, Kushner’s accusations went too far. According to the guest, “Lévy said, ‘*Quand même*, the letter you sent to the *Wall Street Journal* was quite tough.’” Kushner’s mood darkened as he replied, “No, it was actually very mild.” Lieber said that “the frank differences of opinion” were “only a brief part of an otherwise pleasant and interesting evening.”

Trump’s decimation of the federal bureaucracy, which included cutting thousands of jobs at the State Department, has triggered an unprecedented exodus from the Foreign Service. As of 2025, an estimated one-fourth of active officers had left the government altogether. Counting Guilfoyle’s vacated seat, ninety-three ambassadorial posts are currently unfilled, including in critical countries such as Germany and the United Arab Emirates. “It’s a big up-yours to the rest of the world,” Rubin, the former U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria, told me of the vacancies. “And it’s a huge gift to countries like China, which never fails to fill their embassies overseas.”

Within the diminished ranks, Kushner is hardly the only Ambassador to run afoul of his host country. Not long before Guilfoyle’s resignation, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that she’d warned the Greek energy minister that the U.S. could topple governments in “any country we want.” In Canada, more than a quarter of a million citizens have signed a petition to remove Ambassador Pete Hoekstra, for, among other things, having “normalized the Trump administration’s threats to annex Canada as the ‘51st state.’” In Brussels, the Ambassador to Belgium, Bill White, was summoned by the government after publicly claiming that an Antwerp prosecutor’s investigation into

ritual circumcisions by Jewish mohels without medical training was antisemitic. During an America 250 celebration that White hosted, police aggressively ejected a reporter and his editor after the reporter tried to ask White a question.

This new class of flamethrowing amateur diplomats has little reason to pursue the humdrum work of nurturing ties. Peter Ricketts, the former British Ambassador to France, told me, “I think the motivation of all these people is to get a good word from the boss. They don’t really care a fig how it’s received in the country they’ve been sent to.” Their provocations often feel like crude extensions of the American culture wars, as when the Ambassador to the Dominican Republic recently had a painting by Kehinde Wiley removed from the U.S. Embassy there, complaining that it depicted a “picnic” with “some lesbians.” The Ambassador’s partner in that endeavor was Erin Scavino, a former “Apprentice” star who now runs the State Department’s Art in Embassies program. According to *Puck*, Scavino, acting as a sort of MAGA art enforcer, has also targeted works such as a psychedelic glass sculpture featuring a horned figure and an infant’s impassive face, which was removed from the U.S. Ambassador’s residence in Bucharest after a G.O.P. congresswoman deemed it “satanic baby art.”

Such tactics dovetail with the Administration’s wider political objectives abroad, from establishing white victimhood to bolstering Israel and fighting the perceived weakening of Judeo-Christian values. Last year, at the Mu-

nich Security Conference, Vice-President J. D. Vance shocked Europeans by warning that the biggest danger to the Continent was not Russia or China but “the threat from within.” Soon after, Samuel Samson, a twenty-seven-year-old Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, expanded on the Vance doctrine in a manifesto, published on the State Department’s Substack account, titled “The Need for Civilizational Allies in Europe.” Across Europe, he wrote, “a decadent governing class afraid of its own people” was waging “an aggressive campaign against Western civilization itself.” Further evidence of the Administration’s attitude toward the Continent surfaced in a private Signal chat that had been formed just before the U.S. launched strikes against the Houthis in Yemen. Vance wrote, “I just hate bailing Europe out again.” Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth found time to chime in: “VP: I fully share your loathing of European free-loading. It’s PATHETIC.” In the Trumpian mind, Europe is to the world as Manhattan is to America—an irksomely glamorous den of effeteness and decay.

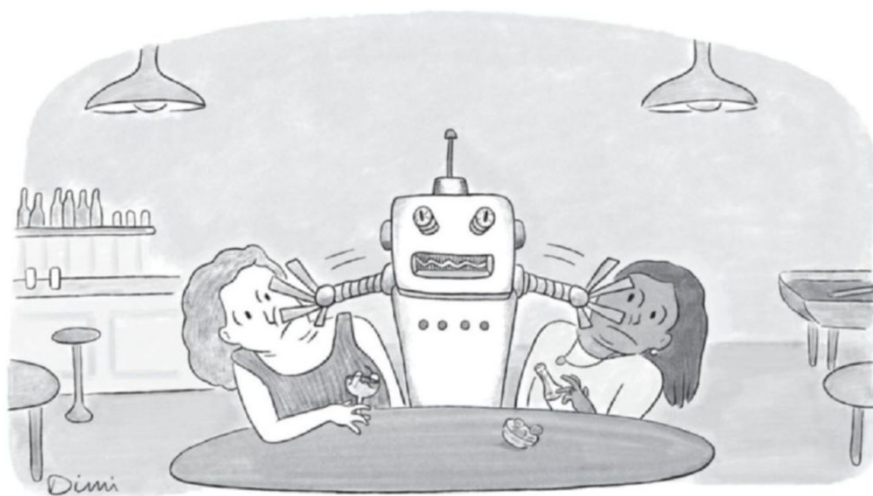
Compared with Vance’s and Hegseth’s grudges, though, Kushner’s concerns about the Continent run deep. Less than a century ago, the Kushners were Europeans, too. Over the summer, he reportedly urged Trump to extend refugee status to French Jews, even as the White House was stripping Temporary Protected Status from hundreds of thousands of Haitian immigrants who’d fled catastrophe in their home country. The guest at the *dîner mondain* recalled Kush-

ner remarking, with tears in his eyes, “The reason I’m here talking to you tonight is that my parents got wise enough to move to the United States.”

Among U.S. Ambassadors to France, domestic pot-stirring is not unprecedented. Charles Rivkin, an Obama appointee, wrote, in a leaked classified cable from 2010, that he intended to hammer France on the theme of “minority rights” and to challenge officials on “sacred cows” of French thought, such as the idea that universalism transcends ethnic and racial identities. What is different now is the scale, the stamina, and the straightforward ruthlessness of American obtrusions, and a sense that, as the transatlantic alliance deteriorates, the Trump Administration has made France a laboratory of interference.

Last year, for instance, soon after Kushner’s confirmation, Pierre Haski, the president of Reporters Without Borders, received an unusual visit, orchestrated by the American Embassy, from two State Department representatives. One of them, it turned out, was Samuel Samson, the author of the “Civilizational Allies” manifesto. The pair handed Haski business cards, emblazoned with golden eagles, and then started interrogating him about press freedom. The men cited, as the basis for their concern, the treatment of the far-right leader Marine Le Pen, who earlier that year had been found guilty of embezzling millions of euros in E.U. public funds to finance her political party, Rassemblement National (R.N.). According to *Le Monde*, the pair characterized her conviction as an authoritarian crackdown, and compared France to North Korea. Haski told me, “It was one of the most bizarre encounters I’ve ever had.”

France is the European Union’s only nuclear power and its only permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. It is also home to the Continent’s largest Jewish and Muslim populations. Magali Lafourcade, the magistrate who heads the National Commission on Human Rights, told me that this makes France “the best country to attack in order to attack Europe.” Lafourcade had had her own off-putting encounter with the same duo who visited Haski. Again, the men’s questions focussed obsessively on Le Pen and her legal troubles. “They were very courteous and at the same time very



“Would you like me to summarize this discussion?”

intimidating,” Lafourcade recalled. The meeting left her alarmed enough that she reported it to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She said, “I even went out to smoke a cigarette, and I don’t smoke—I felt so uneasy.” The incident preceded Kushner’s arrival in Paris, but it struck Lafourcade as a fitting prelude to his controversial public statements. The Administration’s tactics have reminded her of recent malicious acts in France tied to Russian operatives, such as the defacing of a Holocaust memorial with bloody handprints and the planting of a pig’s head outside a mosque. “It’s all to increase division and polarization,” she observed. (After Lafourcade discussed her encounter on television, her X account was suspended. She told me, “I perceive this as retaliation and a restriction of my freedom of expression.”)

The Presidential election, next May, will be of great consequence for France. After a decade in power, Macron cannot run again. His tenure has left a vacuum in the center, with a profoundly disillusioned French public gravitating toward extremes. Le Pen has been polling far ahead of any other candidate, and the recent unrest stands to strengthen her appeal among law-and-order voters seeking a vehement response. Amy Greene, a senior fellow at the think tank Institut Montaigne, told me that Trumpist actors view France as a “hopeful horizon” for a wider right-wing movement. “If such an economically powerful, nuclear power swings to the far right, then this is really a precursor for what the rest of Europe could look like,” she said.

In October, I returned to the Hôtel de Pontalba and met Kushner in the Samuel Bernard Room, a gilded salon named for one of Louis XIV’s bankers. After small talk about his properties in New Jersey, Kushner installed himself on a fauteuil upholstered in gold brocade. Seryl sat nearby, on a matching couch, facing three advisers. “I can’t sit on those sofas anymore at my age,” Kushner said. The air was suffused with the scent of freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies, which an aide proffered on a silver plate.

Several months into Kushner’s appointment, he had invited Le Pen and Jordan Bardella, the R.N.’s mediagenic young president, to the Hôtel de Pontalba. He then posted a photo of the

three of them on X, writing that he “appreciated the chance to learn” from Le Pen and Bardella “about the R.N.’s economic and social agenda and their views on what lies ahead for France.” Trump has publicly backed the R.N., but for Kushner, a public servant singularly invested in combatting antisemitism, the French far right is an awkward ally. Marine’s father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the



founder of the movement, famously believed that the Nazi gas chambers were a mere “detail” of history. In recent years, the R.N. has remade itself as a champion of Israel, but I wondered whether the Party’s history bothered Kushner.

He told me, “I asked Marine Le Pen very directly, ‘Your father was a Holocaust denier. You have become, a generation later, a supporter of Israel. How did that light switch turn on and off so quick?’ She said it was a long time ago, and that she’d distanced herself from her father and his generation.” Kushner added, “I accepted that.”

In September, the French investigative outlet *Mediapart* unearthed antisemitic messages that Bardella had allegedly sent as a young R.N. adherent in the twenty-tens, including statements like “All the banks are owned by Jews.” (Bardella has denied sending the messages.) Kushner has met with representatives from center-left parties, but he told me that he has pointedly shunned Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s far-left party, La France Insoumise, over concerns about antisemitism in its leadership and its ranks. “I made it clear that blatant antisemites supported by the Muslim Brotherhood are not welcome in this residence, and whoever likes it, and whoever doesn’t, I don’t care,” Kushner said. But, when I brought up Bardella’s slurs, Kushner seemed untroubled.

“I know that he’s been to Israel, that he’s been very well received in Israel, and that he’s been very outspoken about being in favor of Israel,” he said.

“Would you receive him again here?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

During our conversation, Kushner wavered between tough-guy talk and surprising delicacy. His views on Europe didn’t always align with the narrative of decline that his MAGA colleagues are pushing so vigorously. He told me that he had not witnessed much evidence of the “threat from within,” noting, “I don’t necessarily see it the way J. D. Vance sees it.” But he did share with his colleagues in Washington a capacious sense of the privileges of public office. After Sarkozy was released from prison, last November, Kushner finally met him, for lunch. As a further show of support, Kushner invited Sarkozy and his wife, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, to his Fourth of July bash, and gave them a place of honor next to him and Seryl, with the Arnaults on the other side. Kushner told me that it was a “terrible slap in the face to France” to jail a President, “no matter what you did or didn’t do.”

“So is your idea that people in positions of power should not be put in prison or prosecuted?” I asked.

“I think if he shot somebody in the street, I’d feel different than if he had some nebulous dealing with some government,” he replied. Then he added, sounding miffed, “Ask me a fair question.”

An aide cut in to say that our time was up.

Kushner quickly recovered his bonhomie and said how proud he was “to represent our country.” Seryl began wrapping the untouched cookies up for me in napkins embossed with the ambassadorial seal. “I just got the coasters made,” she said. On my way out, the Kushners stopped by a side table, stacked with documents and tomes. “Do you have our son’s book?” Charles asked, handing me a copy of “Breaking History.” They insisted that I leave with more family mementos: a magazine with the face of their younger son, Josh, on the cover; a copy of a new children’s book co-written by Josh’s wife, Karlie Kloss, titled “Spaghetti Code: A Story About Problem-Solving, Pasta, and the Power of Big Ideas.” Speaking of their closeness to their kids and grandkids, all of whom live in the U.S., Kushner had told me, “It was a big sacrifice for us to come here.” He added, “We go back whenever we can.” ♦

SUMMIT AND SHADOW

How Jim Morrison surmounted tragedy to achieve his mountain feats.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

Jim Morrison's children finally appeared to him, seven years after their deaths, as he neared the summit of Mount Everest in the spring of 2018. He was climbing up the North Ridge, thirty minutes from the top, and he realized that they were alongside him, laughing and chattering in their familiar way. He began to laugh along with them, and then to cry.

Since losing his wife and kids, he'd been expecting that they would somehow reveal themselves. At the seaside, in the woods, up in the high alpine, he searched for a sign. Fishing a river, he waited for his kids to come out of the water. He imagined returning home from work to flowers on the table, or to a light mysteriously turned on. "This was a dream, a hope, and a desire, and because it never happened it caused me incredible grief," he told me recently. "I concocted my own beliefs about life

and death, and—energy. Their energy, who they really were, isn't, or wasn't, their body, their physical form."

They had died when Jim's wife, Katie Morrison, like him a pilot, was flying a single-engine turboprop Cessna, with the kids aboard—Wyatt, six, and Hannah, five—from Long Beach, California, to Henderson, Nevada, to visit a friend. A bad pocket of air over the desert caused the plane to plummet and crash.

Morrison, back home in Truckee, California, went to pieces. Each minute seemed impossible. The coroner strongly discouraged him from viewing the remains. His friends, most of them mountain people accustomed to untimely death, rallied around him. Sherry McConkey, whose husband, the freeskier Shane McConkey, had died a few years earlier, in a BASE-jumping accident, told me, "I was scared Jim would do some-

thing. I went to see him. He asked me, 'What do I do?' I said, 'You're fucked.'" She meant it as encouragement.

I first met Morrison in Puerto Rico, in the fall of 2018, when he buttonholed me at an athletes' summit hosted by the North Face, the outdoor-gear company; the theme of the retreat, faddishly, was "storytelling." I had been invited to tell stories about telling stories. "Do you want to hear my story?" Morrison asked. I wasn't prepared for it. I was used to tales of avalanches and fatal falls, where the victims were inevitably people who had chosen to take the risks. The thrust of his telling, though, was of his recovery, amid a renewed, almost fanatical commitment to his lofty ambitions as a climber and a skier. He had discovered, during a hike soon after the tragedy, that the exertion went well with his tears. Endorphins altered the intensity of his grief, turning it into a twisted kind of exultation. The mountains became his balm.

On an expedition to Makalu, an eight-thousand-metre peak in the Himalayas, in 2015, he met the mountaineer Hilaree Nelson, who was freshly estranged from her husband, and they soon became inseparable, as lovers and as expedition partners—beasts of a similar nature and ability. Just before the



JIMMY CHIN

Morrison and his partner, Hilaree Nelson, planned a first-ever descent of Everest. After her death, he pushed on.

Puerto Rico trip, Morrison and Nelson had successfully completed the first-ever ski descent of the Lhotse Couloir, the so-called Dream Line, a steep and unrelenting route from the peak just south of Everest. Now they were savoring their accomplishment with Nelson's two preteen sons. On the second night of the summit, a few hours after Morrison told me his story, the team of athletes sponsored by the North Face held a ceremony to crown Nelson its new captain—an acknowledgment that, even in this assemblage of adventure all-stars, she was essentially the M.V.P.

Not long afterward, Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, fresh off winning the best-documentary Oscar for “Free Solo,” about the climber Alex Honnold, began shooting footage for a film about Nelson and Morrison—their lives together; their commitment to their craft, in spite of the risks and losses; and their project of all projects, a first-ever descent on skis of the north face of Everest. It was, as skiers say, the ultimate line, and something that Morrison had been dreaming about since he was a teen-ager.

The standard route up Everest is from the South Col, on the Nepal side; this is the source of those photos featuring long lines of snowsuited climbers gridlocked in the death zone. The north face is in Tibet, and the Chinese are strict about access. The route Morrison and Nelson had in mind, the Super Direct, via the Hornbein and Japanese Couloirs, has proved almost unclimbable, much less skiable. Only five people had ever reached the summit by that route. In such extreme terrain, a skier ideally wants to climb the line he is going to descend, to assess the snow. In 2002, a snowboarder named Marco Siffredi, who had ascended via another route, tried to descend the Hornbein. He dropped in and disappeared. His body was never found. No one had attempted it since.

The route is steep (up to sixty degrees), exposed (most of it in the “you fall, you die” category), punishingly long (nine thousand vertical feet), and prone to hellish conditions. During the usual climbing season, in the spring, there isn't enough snow to ski on. The Hornbein is a flute of stone, with a thin ribbon of ice and snow. In the fall, after

the monsoon, there is too much snow; constant avalanches make it suicidal to attempt. But Morrison and Nelson deduced that there might be a slim window, before the arrival of winter, when the avalanches have abated, leaving a firmer surface—skiable, if you have the chops and the guts.

Morrison and Nelson had both. Each of them had previously been to the summit of Everest—Morrison in 2018 (he'd skied part of the way down), Nelson in 2012 (she also reached the summit of Lhotse in the same twenty-four hours, setting a record). The pandemic interfered, but they picked other peaks, rehearsing for Everest, with the filmmakers along for the ride. On a 2022 trip to Manaslu, in Nepal, the cameras were there, recording the moment when Nelson, two turns into her run, got swept up in an avalanche and went over a mountainside. They were also there in the ensuing hours and days, as Morrison and his Sherpa companions searched the enormous debris field for her corpse. The recovery mission, involving remote, unexplored terrain, a helicopter at extremely high altitude, and the constant threat of more avalanches from above, was as dangerous, perhaps, as anything these men had ever attempted. But they shared the conviction, unusual for mountaineers in such a hostile place, that they couldn't leave without her.

“It was a profound, transformational moment for me to know that when I found Hilaree, she wasn't in her body,” Morrison told me. “I dug her out of the snow. I held her in my arms. I screamed, and I cried, but it was just her dead body. She was no longer there, and it was as clear as anything has been in my entire lifetime. I had been haunted so much by my wife and my children, and what state they were in when the plane crashed, and how they were recovered. I had been haunted by these visions of their half-burned corpses. Then contrast that with what I went through with Hilaree. There was so much more finality to it.” Morrison had her body cremated in Kathmandu, at a Buddhist temple.

The film project—and the Everest project—had changed. Cameras still rolling, Morrison, now doubly cursed, continued the quest without Nelson, while her boys, the ones I'd met in Puerto Rico, became motherless young

men. It took three attempts, in the three years after Nelson's death, to get it done. This is the heart of Chin and Vasarhelyi's new film, “Everest: The Other Side,” which comes out this week.

Perhaps a spoiler alert is in order, but the news did travel far and wide last fall. On October 15th, Morrison's team put a dozen climbers, including Chin and several of his film crew, on the summit, more than tripling the historical total of Super Direct summiteers in a single push. This time, it was Hilaree, rather than Wyatt and Hannah, whose presence came to Morrison on top, amid the summiteers' celebration. He scattered some of her ashes, clicked into his skis, then set off toward the Hornbein, on the least hospitable snow he'd ever encountered. He took four hours to descend. A World Cup downhill race is two minutes. It's hard to contemplate the burn, or the concentration, or the work and time and luck and loss that went into the effort. Here was four hours alone with the task, and with the sense that, if he fell, he'd consider his life to have been well lived. At the bottom of the face, he wept and shouted, in the conviction that he'd done right by Nelson, and by himself. But it would be a while before Morrison could get his own head around the accomplishment. “It dawned on me at a rate of about one per cent per day, for a hundred days,” he said. “But it was pretty damn satisfying, and it still is.”

Morrison has a house on Lake Tahoe, a trim three-bedroom that he renovated, stripping the dry-wall to expose stone walls and massive cedar beams. His friends call it the smallest house on the lake. Maybe so, but it's good living. Glass doors open onto a patio, overstrung with prayer flags, a hot tub, a thin strip of lawn, and a dock. It was hard—looking out past the pier at the lake, with a full moon rising over Nevada—not to think of Michael Corleone, glowering in his parlor. While on Everest, freezing in his tent, Morrison watched “The Offer,” the TV series based on the making of “The Godfather.”

When I stayed with him one week-end last month, he also had as visitors Rob DesLauriers and his girlfriend, Merrill Joy. DesLauriers was one of the

most prominent extreme skiers of my generation, a film star who also skied Everest via the South Pillar route, in a campaign, with his then wife Kit, to ski each continent's highest peak, the so-called Seven Summits. (Jimmy Chin skied Everest with them.) DesLauriers, now a real-estate developer in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, officiated at the wedding of Chin and Vasarhelyi, in 2013. He was in town for a weekend of golf with his brothers.

"For a guy who doesn't drink, that's a pretty great bar," DesLauriers said, pointing to a table stocked with fine liquor. Morrison, who is fifty-one, generally avoids alcohol, but he likes house guests, and host gifts. He's tall and muscular, like an N.F.L. tight end, ruddy, rarely without a ball cap on a mostly hairless dome. He'd got a partial knee replacement four months before he went to Everest. During my visit, he had a deep cough that I mistook for a high-altitude croup, but it was just a whatever-phlegm, from weeks of glad-handing and travel for the film. He'd recently been the maid of honor at the wedding of the pro freeskiier Michelle Parker. Friends say that in his younger years he was intimidatingly aloof, but now he has a serene, almost saintly air of self-possession—the product, one surmises, of calamity and achievement.

Large-format mountain photos hung on the walls around the house, but there were no photos of Morrison except for a small one by the kitchen sink of him and Chin, on the back of which Chin had written, "The Rest is Gravy. Everest '25." It was taken at the Rongbuk Monastery, in Tibet, the highest in the world. They stopped there, briefly, thirty-six hours after the descent. They had a flight to catch, and their Chinese minders were upset that Morrison wanted to linger at the monastery and light candles. "But I just skied the north face of Everest, so I can do what I want," he told me. The monk inside, serving tea, seemed to recognize him and led him into the main monastery, a rare privilege, to meet the head lama, who, seeing Morrison, said, "Summit!" and mimicked with his arms the act of skiing.

"The Sherpa telephone," DesLauriers said. "They always know everything."

"We'd been focussed on this goal

for six years," Morrison said. "The rest is gravy," we kept saying. Then we came home, and I realized I wish I was at eight thousand metres again, trying to light the stove, just wondering if I could get this lighter lit." Gravy, apparently, consisted of travelling, repeating himself in Q. & A.s, and meeting celebrities, to promote the film and the feat.

All he really wanted to do was go rock climbing. On Saturday morning, we met up with a bunch of his local friends at a gas station and headed up to a lesser-known crag. "It's my favorite place here," he said. The trailhead was twenty minutes up a rutted jeep track, through a creek and a pine forest. Forty-five minutes of hiking later, we were up on a ballroom floor of glacially smoothed granite which met a near-vertical wall some five stories tall. Jim Zellers, a pioneer of big-mountain snowboarding and a friend of Morrison's for almost four decades, had for several years been bolting new routes on this face, refining and naming and grading. These days, Zellers stages events for the North Face; a few weeks before, he'd had the climbing team here for its annual meeting, but made the climbers promise not to identify the wall in their social-media posts. The others with us that morning were Sherry McConkey; Morrison's frequent climbing partner Emi Kawakita, a Japanese Swedish woman from Stockholm; Shelton Gregory, a local contractor; Zellers; and Nick Russell, a professional snowboarder, who was leaving in two days for an expedition in Nepal. I trundled along, making excuses about not having climbing shoes, or any vestige of an abdominal core.

They paired up and warmed up on some less challenging pitches and then got to work trying to climb a route that had occupied their attention for months, called Jazz Hands, a 5.12b. "It's the hardest I've ever done," Morrison said. "It's got it all."

"It's fifty-seven moves," Gregory said.

"I lie awake at night thinking about it."

"Me, too!" Gregory said. Picture Tahoe City's middle-aged men, wide-eyed in the should-I-pee hour, shadow-climbing the same fifty-seven moves on the same granite face.

Gregory cued up some music on a speaker: a playlist (psychedelic cumbia)

that he'd been spinning all summer, to the mounting annoyance of the others. It gave the proceedings a comic timbre. These hale adventurers lounging around an amphitheatre of granite: one could imagine they had it all figured out. They had modest but beautiful homes, gainful employment, health, free time, outdoor escapades. Then again, a quarter of their cohort was dead.

Soon it was Morrison's turn on Jazz Hands, with Gregory belaying from the ground. He put on his shoes and chalked up.

"Today's four years," he said, half to the others, half to himself. His friends knew without his saying more that he meant it was the fourth anniversary of Hilaree Nelson's death. "It's Hil Day," he said.

"Shane died on a twenty-sixth, too," McConkey said. "So did Kip and Allison."

"Sketchy day," Morrison said. He put his hands on the rock. "Let's see if I can manage not to fall." He reddened with effort.

"When you do something really hard, it clears the brain," McConkey said to me. "That's why Jim is climbing mountains. We hold him. They held me. Everyone here is part of that death clan, which is pretty cool to have around you."

The crag was in the shade. A crisp wind brought an autumnal chill. Everyone wore down puffers, which they took off when it was time to climb. Morrison had lent me one, and after a while I put my hands in the pockets. In the left one I felt a vial. Drugs? No. It was Hilaree—the last of her ashes, the rest having been scattered at the summit of Everest, a year before. I gave the vial to Morrison, and he walked over to a patch of brown grass at the base of Jazz Hands and, without any fuss or pomp, scattered the remainder of the ashes.

When Chin and Vasarhelyi's film screened at the Telluride Film Festival, in Colorado, last month, *The Hollywood Reporter* published a withering review, calling it "a portrait of two reckless, ruthlessly self-involved people." It referred to the climbers' rationales as "selfish pabulum" and to their "stunts" as "calculus and cruel," in light of Nelson's leaving behind two children. (Chin was

risking doing so, too.) Certainly, it is gutting, knowing what we know, to see Nelson onscreen addressing the possibility of death, and insisting on her right to pursue her ambitions. In the film, Vasarhelyi expresses dismay that her husband—the father of their two kids—is signing on for the Everest expedition, especially after so many of their friends have died.

“Let’s look at what the loss actually looks like,” she told me, regarding her intentions as a filmmaker. “I think about agency a lot. I have agency. Jimmy has agency. But the kids don’t.” (She and Chin are now getting divorced.)

Still, maybe these people aren’t reckless, any more than, say, astronauts might be, nor are they necessarily more callous toward their offspring than the law partner who works eighty-hour weeks or the celebrated artist who cycles through five wives. They’re adventurers, pioneers, limit testers, outliers, freaks. They are attempting to do the dangerous thing safely, as well as elegantly and uniquely, both for a living and for the nourishment of their souls. Their nutrients may not be yours. “To die is bad style,” a climber once told me. It is also inevitable. “There’s a cost to not taking risks, too,” Chin told me. “You can sit on your couch and eat chips until you have a coronary.”

Morrison has two professional careers and has thrived in both. He’s a skier and a home builder. These have more in common than you’d think, insofar as the culture of skiing has become the pretext for (and pretense behind) the kinds of houses he builds, and the kinds of clients he builds them for. As rugged mountain villages became, in the second half of the twentieth century, hubs of adventure sport—skiing, climbing, biking—they began to attract ever greater wealth. The dirtbags kicked off the cycle that eventually brought the new mega-West of log mansions, heated parking lots, and ersatz Frederic Remington oil paintings. The Rockies and the Pacific ranges are now latticed with ultra-fancy resort towns, with colossal lodge-like houses and high-end restaurants and shops. In the Lake Tahoe area, spread out as it is, the displays of extreme wealth may seem more diffuse than in the valley



“I had a happy childhood, but I was younger then.”

confines of Telluride, Aspen, and Jackson Hole. Still, they are abundant. The tech billions flow uphill from the Bay Area. The hills are alive with the sound of nail guns.

Many ski bums who stuck around became local grandees. The life style they personified served as advertising, in the way that artists and gay people colonize derelict urban neighborhoods and make them alluring to gentrifiers. The outdoor-apparel companies, by sponsoring athletes and films and catalogue shoots, converted derring-do into marketing fodder for developers and Realtors. Morrison has been on the front end and the back end, working the golden goose from tip to tail. He reckons that he has built about a hundred luxury homes in the area.

Morrison was born in Pittsburgh but reared in Walnut Creek, California, a suburb in the East Bay. His father was an electrical engineer at Westinghouse. Morrison caught the mountain bug when he was twelve, at the local gear store, Sunrise Mountain-

eering; his mother, a manager at a law firm, was buying him a water bottle and some hiking boots for a Boy Scout backpacking trip. He was transfixed by the climbing tools hanging from the walls, and by the photographs of the store’s owners scaling snowy peaks in Alaska. He did a little research and learned that people climbed on Mount Diablo, nearby. “I went to the store and talked to the employees there and read books and learned about it,” Morrison said. “And eventually I got to Mount Diablo, and I set up my own top rope, with my own equipment, with nobody else. And I did my own rappels.” He practiced out of his bathroom window, on the second floor of the family tract house. “I made an anchor on my toilet. Now I’m a contractor—you realize that a toilet is fastened by two little bolts. It’s basically just sitting there.”

On weekends, he skied at Lake Tahoe, first at Alpine Meadows, then on the mogul team at Squaw Valley (which was renamed Palisades Tahoe six years ago). Like many grooms of his

generation, he had a V.H.S. copy of the Greg Stump ski film “The Blizzard of Aahhh’s,” and watched it every day for a year. The summer after his junior year of high school, he arranged to go to New Zealand for a mogul camp. To raise the necessary funds—he wasn’t earning enough in his job, as a stock boy in the women’s-shoe department at Nordstrom—he biked around Walnut Creek with a stencil kit and offered to repaint residents’ sun-faded addresses on the curbs in front of their houses, at ten bucks a pop. After a showdown with the president of a homeowners’ association, he finagled a contract to do the whole subdivision, which got him the sum he needed for the trip. “My parents, while I was gone, read my yearbook and saw all these notes from friends that were, like, ‘We should do bongz this summer,’” Morrison said. “And they were, like, ‘What the heck is happening? Who are you? What is wrong with you?’”

What was really wrong with him, though, was that he had begun to cultivate the idea of climbing and then skiing down the world’s biggest moun-

tains. He already had eyes for the north face of Everest and the Hornbein Couloir. He dropped out of college, moved to Chamonix, France, the epicenter of alpinism, and began to level up, knocking off semi-obscure first descents in order to make a name for himself. He was competing on the international extreme-skiing tour and was sponsored by some of the top gear companies. Then, his second winter there, he blew out a knee.

He flew back to Tahoe and moved in with his parents, who had a house share there. On his first night without crutches, he went to a party because his older brother, John, who was also a skier, had told him that the marketing director of the North Face would be there. She was not, but, as he sat alone, rubbing his knee, a woman—Katie—approached him and started razzing him about nursing his injury. They began to flirt. Two years later, they were married. Morrison, in her thrall, put aside his skiing career and his inchoate dreams of Everest, and instead, with his characteristic intensity, tried his hand at home construction.

The first project was putting on a deck, which earned him three thousand dollars. “So now I had a net worth of three thousand and forty bucks,” he said. He knew a local real-estate agent who was marketing a new development, with thirty-five buildable lots. Morrison found a partner who would pay for one of them. Morrison would build the house and get twenty per cent of the equity. The catch was that he didn’t actually know how to build a house. Zellers poured the foundation, and Morrison hired fellow ski bums to do the framing, masonry, and tiling. For a while, he was operating under the contractor’s license of his former mogul-team coach. Across the street, Ernst Hager, a national-ski-team coach and an operations guy at Squaw Valley, was building a house at the behest of the same real-estate agent. Morrison visited the site regularly and studied Hager’s work. “I was learning how to do it the day before I did it,” Morrison said. “Like, ‘Why is there glue in all these joists?’ ‘Well, you put glue in the hangers so they don’t squeak.’ The next morning, I told my crew, ‘We need glue for the joists.’ ‘Glue? Why?’ ‘So the hangers don’t squeak.’”

Morrison was twenty-four years old. He met his parents for dinner to tell them about his new career. “All they did was try to talk me out of it,” he said. “My father always used to talk about hard work, how nothing comes for free. ‘Money doesn’t grow on trees,’ he said. ‘You’ll see.’ But when I saw this lot, in that development, I thought, This is money growing on trees.”

Ten years later, Morrison had two kids and a thriving construction business that was building several houses at a time. The family was living in Lahontan, a high-end gated community on a golf course, in Truckee. “I was the youngest member there, by a long shot,” he said. “I’d made a lot of money at this point. And I was leveraging all of it into the houses. Build a house, make it work, sell it, do it again.” The family moved in and out of his builds. “My daughter lived in five houses by the time she was five years old.”

One night, when Katie had flown down to Los Angeles, he called her and said, “Honey, this business is cranking, our kids are in a great place, we’re really going to do this.” They had a plan



“Our next brew will be a collab with the chill dudes over at Long River Aleworks.”

to spend part of the year in Chamonix, enroll the kids in school there. “I had the world by a string,” he told me. “I thought we had it all.” And then, the next day, they were gone.

After a second day of climbing, Morrison, in his Chevy pickup, took me on a tour of some of his building projects. He brought me to a newer gated community, called Martis Camp. “It’s Lahontan on steroids,” he said. Two thousand acres, almost seven hundred lots, snug against the Northstar ski area, with views of the Martis Valley and the Sierra Crest. The golf course, glimpsed through the pines, was unexpectedly lush. “I’ve built, like, seventy-five houses in here,” Morrison said.

During the 2008 financial crisis, most of the construction at Martis Camp came to a virtual halt. But Morrison kept going, despite being leveraged to the hilt. Now, as he navigated the winding blacktop roads, past monstrosities both ultra-modern and outré-Montana, he told the story of his financial survival—the cunning, the bravado, the near-disasters—and it was as harrowing, in its way, as any expedition in the Himalayas. Still, one wouldn’t expect it to become a Chin and Vasarhelyi IMAX spectacular anytime soon.

He pulled up at a house he’d finished in the spring for two Bay Area investors, brothers. It was ten thousand square feet, three years in the making, and, although he wouldn’t tell me how much he got paid for the job, it was obvious to me, after years of hate-reading the Mansions section of the *Wall Street Journal*, that this house had to be worth tens of millions of dollars. It was what you might call deep Vail-core: heavy stone, big wood, big glass. An immaculate garage had a fleet of bicycles and golf carts and kids’ scooters. We removed our shoes and went from room to room. Muscular floorboards of stained oak, with wooden pegs; massive steel posts and beams clad in a veneer of reclaimed wood; florid paintings of cowboys and bears; excellent whiskeys and patios and books; a stone fireplace the size of a lighthouse. Say what you will about the taste, but the work was very fine. “There are ninety-six pieces of wood

in this column,” Morrison said. “Seven hundred or so pieces of wood in this room.” Here and there was custom metalwork fashioned by the burly homeschooled guy from Vermont who earlier that day on the crag I’d seen climb a 5.12d+, and whose shoes I’d borrowed to get a taste of a 5-point-much-less. Side-by-side desks stood in the brothers’ office. One held the business book “Margin of Safety,” and the other held “Brave New World.”

Driving back to his house, we were talking about marriage, or, really, about some of our friends’ marriages. There had been a run of divorces in his mountain set. He recalled visiting Katie’s family in northern Michigan, when he and Katie first started dating, and seeing her parents in the back of a boat, cuddled up under a blanket, giggling. “They were so in love with each other,” he said. “That’s what I want.” He’d had it and lost it twice. “I’m either doing that, or I’m not doing it at all.”

Recently, Morrison had found himself in another kind of relationship, one that was as nourishing to him as it was baffling. Of all the crazy things that had befallen him since skiing Everest—Prince Harry buying him rounds, Meghan Markle texting him on the crag, dining with John Malkovich—one stood out. Speaking in Los Angeles at a conference organized by Jeffrey Katzenberg, he was invited on a podcast with Oprah Winfrey. She had followed the Everest triumph but had had no idea about the tragedies he’d endured. Morrison was taken by her energy, her presence. “It was just a tremendous amount of similarities in our passion, in our lives, and in how we have manifested our own outcomes through hardship,” he told me. “I was just, like, I love this woman.”

They exchanged numbers and made plans to meet in Telluride, at the premiere of the Everest film. She had a house there, and he had one, too, which he’d originally built to live in with Nelson and her sons. (He sold it over the summer. Telluride got a little

weird for him: Hilaree’s town, without Hilaree. “Every time I went to get groceries, it was, ‘Are you O.K.? Are you *really* O.K.?’” He got a house in Aspen, instead, but still sees and keeps in touch with the boys.) He and Winfrey went for dinner in town. She began planning a party for him and the film. “I’ve never had a party at my house before,” she told him.

Tent, band, flowers: everything just so. “It was essentially a wedding for me,” Morrison said.

“A part of my soul was stirred by him,” Winfrey told me. “It makes me tear up to think about him. He’s one of the most extraordinary people on the planet.

Here’s a guy who can have joy and grief existing in the same heart.” For the party, she had him write something that she could print on a four-by-six-inch card and leave at each place setting; she also read it aloud to the guests.

When Morrison told me about all this, we were sitting at his kitchen table, still in our clothes from the crag. Night had fallen on the lake. The conversation would go on deeper into the night—“I’m an endurance athlete,” he’d say—but at this moment he stood and fetched a tawny box, made of paper from Nepal, tied up in twine, and began gingerly unwrapping it. Inside was one of the cards, which bore twenty-two lines, center-formatted on fine grainy stock, his signature at the bottom.

I read it to myself, as one does, in my inner Oprah voice: “The mountains have given me so much. They’ve also taken a great deal from me. I don’t climb or ski for the risk. I do it for the presence it demands.” Then I handed it back, and he put it aside to wrap it up again. “I was going to give this to my mom,” he said.

It was tempting to think of this as another node in the grief-industrial complex, the gyre of thrills and kills, sentiment and content, but the force of Morrison’s belief, his tenacity and quietude, and the way it seemed to reflect what little I knew about those characteristics in Winfrey, made me feel suddenly and resolutely happy for him. This was when he began to tell me about encountering the spirits of his children on the North Ridge. ♦



BLOCK THE VOTE

State officials are defending the midterms from the President.

BY BARTON GELLMAN

Now and then, not often, Deidre Henderson will still work up the nerve to drive herself to the market for milk or bread. She will sit in the parking lot in her big S.U.V., engine running, doors locked, ruminating on risk. Generally, she heads home without getting out of the car.

Henderson, who is fifty-two years old, is the lieutenant governor of Utah, a Republican midway through her second term. That makes her the state's chief election officer. (Elsewhere, the responsibility most commonly falls to a secretary of state.) It also makes her a target. Along with her counterparts in dozens of other states, Henderson has refused to allow the Trump Administration to obtain state voter rolls and to oversee the removal of voters it deems unqualified, in advance of the midterms, on November 3rd. For that resistance, election conspiracists have deluged her with threats of sexual violence and murder.

"It's scary," she told me late this summer. "It's horrible. Honestly, I've had to have counselling just to function, to deal with the burden of fear that comes from the threats I've been getting."

Many of the messages, however disturbing, are protected speech under the First Amendment. Some, though, have been treated by law enforcement as posing a credible danger to Henderson's life or safety. In Utah, a lieutenant governor does not routinely get a security detail. But in Henderson's first term, when she opposed Donald Trump's attempts to overturn the 2020 Presidential election, she received threats that were so intense and specific that the Department of Public Safety placed her under protection for more than two years. The protection resumed before the 2024 election for a period. Henderson said that at times she has hired other protection. (The D.P.S. declined to comment on Henderson's security detail.)

It was not always this unnerving to

be an election official. But persistent lies about voter fraud, a centerpiece of Trump's political narrative, have set loose torrents of hostility toward the men and women who oversee balloting nationwide. There are more than ten thousand voting jurisdictions in the United States, ranging from townships to states. In a national survey of local election officials this year, a third of them reported that they had personally been subjected to threats, harassment, or abuse because of their work. Half said they feared for the safety of their colleagues.

In this election season, the familiar threats, online and often pseudonymous, have been accompanied by new ones from federal authorities. The Department of Justice has warned Henderson and her counterparts that they may face criminal prosecution and imprisonment if they fail to surrender state voter rolls and purge them as the President directs.

Never before, not even when Trump tried to nullify his defeat by Joe Biden, six years ago, has an American President marshalled the coercive authority of the executive branch to reshape an election for his own benefit. Trump fought in court, in Congress, and in state legislatures to reverse the results of the 2020 election, but, as Brendan Nyhan, a Dartmouth political scientist who studies democratic erosion, told me, "he did not use his powers to try to undermine that election in advance." And Trump ultimately failed to persuade high-level subordinates, such as William Barr, who was then the Attorney General, to wield their government power on his behalf. This year, multiple federal agencies, following Trump's directives, attempted to strong-arm state election officials long before the first votes were cast. Trump, Nyhan told me, has tried "to tilt the playing field the way authoritarian populist leaders do in countries around the world."

Article I, Section 4, of the Constitution reserves for the states the power to

prescribe the "Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives," with the proviso that Congress may change the rules by statute. The Framers granted the President no role in elections. Trump has declared otherwise. In an August, 2025, post on Truth Social, he wrote, "Remember, the States are merely an 'agent' for the Federal Government in counting and tabulating the votes. They must do what the Federal Government, as represented by the President of the United States, tells them, **FOR THE GOOD OF OUR COUNTRY**, to do." Trump is open about his motives. He has warned Republicans that if they fail to purge the "millions and millions" of noncitizens who, according to his fantastic claims, are voting, they "will never win another election as a Republican."

Early in his second term, Trump issued an executive order to restrict voter registration, impose new standards for voting machines, step up prosecution of "election crimes," and forbid state authorities to count ballots that are mailed on time but arrive after Election Day. This past March, he issued another executive order with fresh instructions for election oversight, including a call for the Department of Homeland Security, in concert with other agencies, to "compile and transmit to the chief election official of each State a list of individuals confirmed to be United States citizens" and eligible to vote. The same order outlined new restrictions on voting by mail, specifying that the U.S. Postal Service "shall not transmit mail-in or absentee ballots from any individual" who does not appear on a U.S.P.S. list of eligible voters. How that list would be compiled, and by whom, and under what criteria, was left unclear. A coalition of states, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and voting-rights groups separately filed suits. (The Brennan Center for Justice at N.Y.U. School



The Department of Justice has threatened election officers who do not surrender voter rolls with criminal prosecution.



"Sorry—the drumsticks are already spoken for."

of Law, where I am a senior adviser, is a co-counsel in two of the legal challenges.) For now, courts have blocked the most consequential provisions of both orders, primarily on the ground that the President has no lawful authority to impose them.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department set to work on a separate path. In a string of nearly identical lawsuits, filed beginning in September, 2025, it accused chief election officers in thirty states and the District of Columbia of violating Title III of the Civil Rights Act by failing to hand over electronic copies of their unredacted voter-registration lists. All but one state fought the lawsuits, including seven that had Republican chief election officers. (Oklahoma agreed to submit to the D.O.J. demand in exchange for dismissal of the case.) In response to *United States of America v. Deidre M. Henderson*, the Utah lieutenant governor, like most of her counterparts, cited privacy laws that obliged her to protect the personal information of voters, and said that the Trump Administration had no legal power to demand access in any case.

Since the litigation began, twenty-seven U.S. district judges and one appellate panel have reached decisions. All of them ruled against the Trump Administration. The case against Henderson was dismissed on October 23rd. One representative opinion, by Judge David

O. Carter, in California, held that the D.O.J.'s declared purpose was "contrived" and that its demand for voter lists "wholly disregards the separation of powers."

As its civil lawsuits foundered, the Justice Department reached for another weapon to compel obedience from state election officers. In a letter dated July 7th, the Assistant Attorney General Harmeet Dhillon warned Henderson and her counterparts that the D.O.J. was "also authorized to prosecute criminal violations" of the relevant statutes. Winning the civil litigation, in other words, would not prevent a state election official from being indicted for unspecified crimes. None of the election officials surrendered to that threat. "Garbage—I'm not breaking the laws," Arizona's secretary of state, Adrian Fontes, a Democrat, told me. Trump, he said, is "trying to pick his own voters, because he doesn't believe in the American people. He believes in preserving his own power."

The following week, the Secretary of Homeland Security, Markwayne Mullin, issued a warning of his own. His department had repurposed a program called SAVE (Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements), which previously had been used only to check immigrants' eligibility for federal benefits, and pressed state election officials to use it to verify citizenship. A federal judge had blocked

this use of SAVE. Mullin, however, warned that election officials who failed to use SAVE to screen voter rolls for non-citizens could face "prison time." (The Supreme Court later stayed the district judge's order but noted that it was too late to make large-scale changes to voter-registration lists.)

The Trump Administration's efforts to cull the electorate before the midterms have, by and large, failed. Courts stripped the President's executive orders of meaningful impact. At least sixteen states, all Republican-controlled, voluntarily agreed to turn over voter rolls to the Justice Department, but only three—Alaska, South Carolina, and Texas—signed agreements allowing the D.O.J. to oversee the removal of supposedly ineligible names. Twenty-eight states have voluntarily registered to use the SAVE data to check their voter lists for noncitizens, but it is unclear how many have relied on it to remove voters. In any case, it is too late for further purges: the statutory deadline to "systematically remove" ineligible voters is ninety days before a federal election.

In a last-ditch effort, the Justice Department brought a new lawsuit on October 15th, asking a California judge to require the state to set aside the ballots of about twenty thousand people, who the Administration alleged were "likely noncitizens." The following day, the acting Deputy Attorney General, Trent McCotter, sent a letter to Los Angeles County election officials, threatening them with prosecution if they knowingly count the alleged noncitizens' votes. On October 19th, McCotter said that twenty-eight California residents had been charged with violating federal voting laws.

Similar D.O.J. claims of widespread voter fraud elsewhere have proved spurious. In Nevada, the Administration alleged that there were nearly sixteen thousand noncitizens on voter rolls and produced the names of a hundred and eighty-five people, saying that it had manually verified their alien status. In September, state officials established that all of them were U.S. citizens. (A spokesperson for the D.O.J. said that the department continues to investigate individual cases of alleged noncitizens who voted in recent Nevada elections. A White House spokesperson said that, though "extreme Democrats and the media con-

tinue to dismiss concerns about voter fraud, the Trump Administration is taking decisive action to protect our elections, including prosecuting election crimes.”)

In another late-breaking intervention, this one even more extraordinary, the Trump Administration asked a federal judge on October 23rd to prevent certification of the Alaska Senate race if the Republican incumbent, Daniel S. Sullivan, loses narrowly. D.O.J. lawyers argued that the presence of a candidate named Daniel J. Sullivan on the ballot may deprive the senator of votes intended for him. (The Alaska Supreme Court had already ruled, in June, against an effort by the senator and the state G.O.P. to disqualify the challenger.)

Michael Waldman, the president of the Brennan Center, told me, “It turns out that our backstop is the fragmented nature of our political system, and federalism—that the election isn’t run by decree by any President, good or bad.”

If one thing has been decisive in safeguarding the nation’s electoral machinery, it is the tenacity of state officials who willingly accepted the political, financial, and personal risks of defying the President. They did so in a strong majority of states, including some under Republican control. “In order to protect democratic institutions,” Nyhan said, “we still depend on politically ambitious people sacrificing their careers.”

Henderson is among the most intrepid of the chief election officers who have stood in Trump’s way. For months, not a single Utah G.O.P. leader offered her public support. Yet, even as other Republicans who were resisting federal orders avoided open conflict with Trump, she spoke out against unlawful intervention from Washington. “It sure looks like they’re trying to take over control of elections to make sure only people they want to vote are voting,” she said recently. “To me, as an American and a Republican, it’s offensive.”

The Justice Department launched its campaign to seize control of voter rolls in May, 2025, when it began sending letters to state election officials which alleged that they had “anomalies” on their lists. Henderson received a letter that July, citing the Attorney General’s authority to bring “enforcement actions” under the National Voter Registration

Act and questioning whether Utah was obeying the law. “Utah has the lowest rate in the nation for voter registration records removed” from the rolls, it alleged. The letter directed Henderson to “produce for inspection” a full electronic copy of Utah’s voter rolls, which contain sensitive personal information such as driver’s-license numbers, partial Social Security numbers, full dates of birth, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses.

It was unexpected and perplexing, Henderson said, to “get a letter from the U.S. Attorney General’s office citing all sorts of federal code.” Scott Cheney, a Utah assistant attorney general who serves as her principal legal adviser on elections, was out of the country. Henderson requested help from the office of Utah’s attorney general, Derek Brown. Brown sent over two lawyers, who, Henderson said, seemed to believe that she had no choice but to comply.

Henderson was skeptical. “I knew there were other federal statutes that applied,” she said, including the Privacy Act and the Driver’s Privacy Protection Act, which limit the release of personally identifying details. Henderson and the lawyers decided that the D.O.J. had overstepped. Their ensuing correspondence with the department began politely but devolved into threats and demands emphasized in italic type. She declined to hand over personal information about voters, citing state and federal privacy laws, and instead offered “the most current version of the public statewide voter registration list.” The next letter came from Dhillon,



the Assistant Attorney General. Henderson’s reply was unacceptable, she wrote: “The Attorney General is demanding an electronic copy of Utah’s complete and current” voter rolls, and “Utah must ensure that it contains *all fields*.” Any contrary obligations that Henderson thought she had under Utah election and privacy statutes, Dhillon wrote, were “clearly preempted by federal law.”

Months later, the D.O.J. explained for the first time precisely why it was seeking the voter rolls. On December 2nd, a new D.O.J. lawyer, Eric Neff, sent Henderson a proposed “memorandum of understanding,” which disclosed that the D.O.J. intended to do a complete analysis of the rolls. Neff, a longtime legal warrior on behalf of election conspiracy theories, explained that the department would notify the state of any “insufficiencies, inadequacies, deficiencies, anomalies, or concerns” that it found. Utah would have forty-five days to “clean” its voter rolls and send back an updated list proving that “proper list maintenance has occurred.” The existence of this agreement between the state and the federal government, according to the memorandum, could not be publicly disclosed. The Justice Department sent a similar memorandum of understanding to many of Henderson’s counterparts in other states. Henderson decided to disregard the request for secrecy. She made all the correspondence public and announced that Utah would not comply with the D.O.J.’s demands.

On September 16th, the Justice Department filed lawsuits against the chief election officers of Maine and Oregon. Later that month, it did the same in California, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania. In January, at a conference of the National Association of Secretaries of State, Henderson denounced Dhillon’s contention that states needed federal help to clean up their rolls. (Dhillon had claimed that the D.O.J. had “found two hundred and sixty thousand plus dead people” on state registration lists.) “The things that have been said publicly, frankly, are quite appalling,” Henderson told a White House official, Jared Borg, in open session, adding, of Dhillon, “She’s pretty much slandered all of us.”

By the time Dhillon’s office filed suit against Henderson, on February 26th, the Justice Department had already lost three of the cases against state election officers. Henderson began to taunt the Trump Administration.

“0-8,” she posted on Threads on May 21st, after judges dismissed five more of the D.O.J.’s lawsuits.

“0-9,” she posted on June 22nd, when a Maryland judge did the same.

“Persistence in the face of defeat is

usually an admirable quality, but not in this case,” she posted on July 14th, when the count was 0–13.

I asked Henderson one day why she had chosen this provocative tone.

“Am I provoking?” she replied, sounding a little annoyed. “Now, it’s interesting that the person bringing the conflict into the light, highlighting the injustice of the situation, the unconstitutionality and illegality of the situation to the public, is the one that’s considered provocative.”

Had other Utah Republicans urged her to turn down the heat? I asked.

“Not to my face,” she said.

Many of them, though, including the highest-ranking state legislators, criticized her for refusing to cooperate with the Trump Administration. Some, notably the former gubernatorial candidate Phil Lyman, accused her of being involved in election fraud. “I don’t think that her voter rolls can withstand scrutiny,” he told me. Others privately expressed fear that Henderson would provoke retaliation from the President, perhaps causing the state to lose pending federal grants to build nuclear power plants and to restore the Great Salt Lake.

For years, Henderson had told her staff that her No. 1 rule was “If it feels good, don’t say it.” She wanted to do her job and stay out of political combat. But that stance was changing. Utah’s governor, Spencer Cox, has said that he will not seek a third term in 2028, and Henderson told me that she is “seriously considering running.” I asked whether she thought her public conflict with Trump would hurt or help that campaign. “I have no idea, and I don’t care,” she said. “If discharging the duties of my office with fidelity means that I am unelectable in 2028, I am O.K. with that.”

Rena Cowley, a Republican political consultant who admires the lieutenant governor, said that she did not doubt Henderson’s commitment to principle but thought another consideration might also be on her mind. “I think that Deidre is strategically poking the bear, and it is both a brilliant political strategy and exactly what her voters want her to do,” Cowley said. “We’re Westerners for a reason,” she continued. “We wanted to be able to live our lives and do so free from the all-seeing eyes of

the government. Of all the things to push back on, this is perhaps the most palatable, strategic, winningest issue that she could pick.”

In mid-August, I visited Henderson in Utah. As I rode with her to her office, she steered her S.U.V. onto the capitol grounds and edged toward what appeared to be a blank granite façade. An unmarked entrance opened to reveal a dimly lit parking bay, just big enough to accommodate side-by-side vehicles, for Henderson and Governor Cox.

In an hour, at Henderson’s request, a team of election and law-enforcement officers from across the state would gather in her conference room for a crisis-management exercise. She had asked an outside consultant to devise scenarios for the midterms to test the preparedness of her team. Election officials around the country run similar tabletop exercises before each voting cycle, to plan for contingencies ranging from extreme weather and power failures to bomb threats and foreign interference.

First, Henderson convened her senior staff for an update on the workaday operations for the election: auditing certification procedures, offering assistance to voters, unsnarling data conflicts, interpreting obscure rules. They met in the lieutenant governor’s private office, which is outfitted with polished dark wood, green curtains, and tan leather chairs. A painting on one wall depicts Seraph Young, who in 1870 became the first woman to cast a ballot in the Utah Territory. It is a point of pride for Henderson that voting rights for women there predated the Nineteenth Amendment by half a century.

Ali Majid, the state director of election systems, told Henderson that his quarterly audit of voter rolls had been updated to comply with a Utah statute that required a passport, a birth certificate, or similar proof of citizenship to vote in state races. He reported that thirty-five hundred people would soon be disqualified from voting in state elections because they had not responded to requests for that documentation. (Most states have no such requirement.)

Henderson was disturbed by the number. She had been mistakenly disqualified a few years back, because she was born in the Netherlands, where the Air

Force had stationed her father. “Are we making sure clerks are actually reaching out to voters?” she asked.

In one database, Majid said, the list of registered but inactive voters included “thirty-three voters that were unconfirmed and ten voters that were likely noncitizens.”

“None of them ever voted,” Henderson said, in what seemed like more of a statement than a question.

“None of them ever voted,” Majid confirmed.

Next, Henderson and her staff discussed a new D.H.S. rule, announced in July. Mullin’s department had said that it would cut twenty per cent of FEMA homeland-security grants to states that did not comply with “election security” requirements. No one at the table was sure what the state attorney general planned to do about the rule, but they hoped that Utah would join lawsuits by other states to challenge it.

“Because we’re going to lose all the funding, not just twenty per cent,” Henderson said, sounding resigned.

“There’s the nonsense of it,” Ryan Cowley, Utah’s election director, replied. “You have FEMA, who knows nothing about elections, now dictating not just, like, ‘You have to have secure elections.’ Now they’re dictating exactly how.”

On September 28th, a federal judge ruled that FEMA could not withhold the funds.

The President’s campaign to seize control of the midterms has gone far beyond voter purges and threats to withhold federal funding. Ranging widely across the executive branch, it has included F.B.I. raids to seize election and voter-registration records, and menacing suggestions that Trump may send armed ICE agents to the polls.

One of Trump’s earliest attempts to “take over” elections, as he has put it, was the 2025 executive order on voting, which would have required, among other things, that people show a passport or comparable proof of citizenship in order to register. A national survey found that at least twenty-one million Americans do not possess or have no ready access to those documents. The House had passed a similar requirement, called the SAVE (Safeguard American Voter Eligibility) Act, but Republicans in the

Senate were struggling to wrangle enough votes. Trump tried, unsuccessfully, to bypass Congress and impose the rule himself.

The same executive order directed the Election Assistance Commission, an independent federal agency, to “rescind all previous certifications of voting equipment” and establish new standards to address some of the claims that Trump and his allies had made about rigged election machinery in 2020. This provision of Trump’s order was among those struck down by a federal judge.

The President also enlisted law-enforcement agencies to produce new evidence of voter fraud, past and present. This past January, Kurt Olsen, a prominent election denier and at the time the newly appointed White House director of election security and integrity, asked the F.B.I. to launch a criminal investigation in Fulton County, Georgia, according to an F.B.I. affidavit, and the Bureau did so with uncommon dispatch. Trump had brought unsuccessful lawsuits alleging extensive fraud by Fulton County election officials in the 2020 Presidential election. The F.B.I.’s mission was to revive those allegations. In Georgia, dozens of F.B.I. agents—accompanied by Trump’s director of National Intelligence, who called the President immediately afterward—seized more than six hundred and fifty boxes of ballots, tabulator tapes, electronic ballot images, and other records from the 2020 election.

Five months after the Georgia raid, about a hundred F.B.I. and D.H.S. agents descended on the Cleveland offices of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, a left-leaning group that advocates for voting rights and organizes voter-registration campaigns. The agents seized records and electronic devices, looking for evidence of unspecified criminal behavior. Last year, the President also ordered the D.O.J. to launch a criminal investigation of Chris Krebs, a former director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, in part on the ground that he had publicly disputed Trump’s claim that the 2020 election was rigged.

Federal law-enforcement agencies have also been involved in what amounts to a psychological operation ahead of the midterms. Trump’s subordinates have been hinting for months that ICE agents

or other federal officers may turn up at polling places on Election Day. Federal law forbids the presence of “troops or armed men at any place where a general or special election is held.” But in March, Todd Blanche, who was then the Deputy Attorney General, said that he saw nothing wrong with it. “Why is there an objection to sending ICE to polling stations?” Blanche asked at the Conservative Political Action Conference. “Illegals can’t vote.” Mullin has raised the prospect several times, saying that ICE is not restricted from conducting enforcement operations at polling places, and may even be needed to protect them. (In a statement, D.H.S. said that it has no plans for operations “targeting polling locations.”)

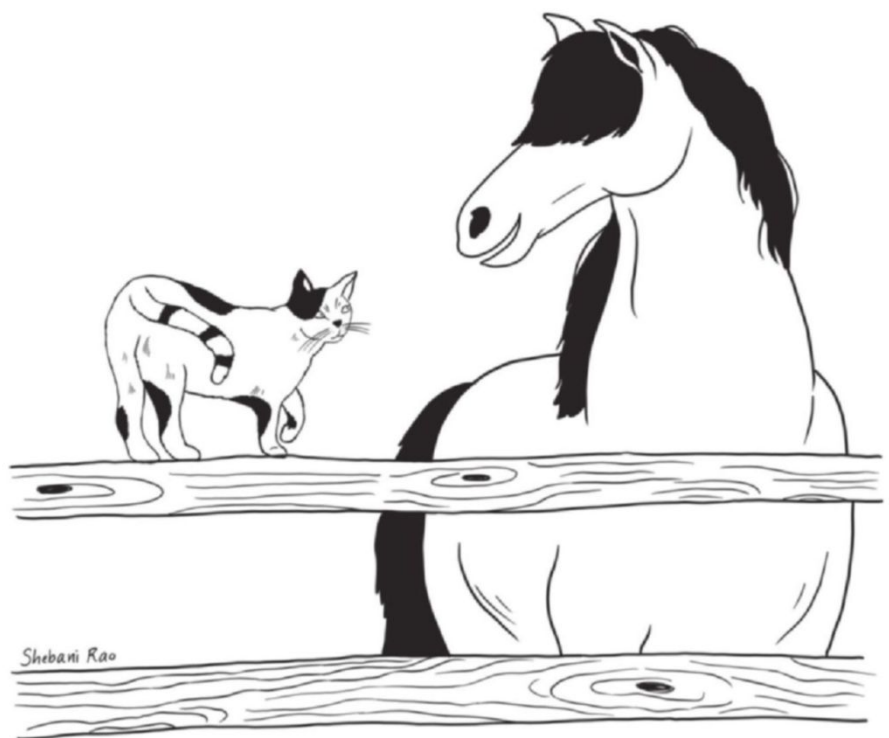
Voting-rights advocates regard these statements as thinly veiled efforts to intimidate lawful voters. “They make headlines to use them as deterrents with no intention of deploying” on a large scale, Maria Teresa Kumar, the founding president of Voto Latino, said, noting that Latino voters have seen a lot of ICE violence in their communities, and that millions of citizens live in “mixed-status families,” with relatives who are vulnerable to deportation. Kumar said that the spectre of illegal voting was a pre-

text for the ICE threats, citing a study that found that fewer than 0.0001 per cent of ballots in the 2016 Presidential election, or one in a million, were cast by noncitizens.

The Trump Administration, for all its efforts, has failed to establish a commanding position over the federal voting landscape. No indictments or evidence of voter fraud have emerged from the raids in Ohio and Georgia. A Trump-appointed judge blocked a subpoena to collect what he called a “staggering” amount of personal information about election workers in Fulton County. Senate Republicans never found enough votes to pass the SAVE Act.

David Becker, a former senior trial attorney in the D.O.J.’s voting section and the founder of the Center for Election Innovation & Research, said that he saw “no coherent strategy” in the disparate attempts to carry out Trump’s wishes for the midterms. “There’s malevolence, but there’s a lot of incompetence,” he said, citing competing directives from the D.O.J. and D.H.S. and the stunning record of setbacks in court. “They don’t have a single success.”

Becker continued, “I think there’s a lot of people within the conspiracy-theory ranks—within the economy of



“No, no, I’m not in emotional distress—I’ve actually always had bangs!”

grift that's grown around election denialism—who are seeking approval from President Trump. And they're all doing their thing to do that. And often those things conflict."

Control of the House and the Senate will be decided by some very close races. Even the marginal success of Trump's effort to disqualify voters in states that agreed to use D.H.S. citizenship data might tip one or more of these contests. And there is still a hypothetical risk, election experts say, that the President could do something new and outlandishly lawless on or close to Election Day.

In Henderson's conference room, a test of nightmare scenarios commenced at 10 A.M. with a cheerful slide that read "Ready for Anything." Cowley and Majid, the state election officials, were there. So were several lawyers and the election clerks of two of Utah's twenty-nine counties.

The consultant who wrote the scenarios said she had devised "scary situations" that Utah's previous contingency planning might not have addressed. About nine in ten Utah voters cast ballots by mail, but most of the scenarios would involve federal agents dispatched to Utah polling places or tabulation centers.

"I will just let you know they're a little bit provocative, and that's intentional," she said. "I want to drive up the temperature just a little bit."

Utah, which has long been represented exclusively by Republicans in Congress, might seem an unlikely place for conflict with Trump over elections. But in 2025 court-ordered redistricting created a strongly Democratic-leaning First Congressional District centered in Salt Lake County, where Kamala Harris beat Trump by ten points in 2024.

In one scenario, the consultant said, "the President announces that federal agents are going to 'flood the zone' on Election Day in certain areas with large immigrant populations." He does not specify where the agents will go but states that "2026 will be the most secure election ever, thanks to ICE, C.B.P., and D.O.J." Angry protests begin to build, but the protesters find no federal agents to confront.

"I think the first thing to do," Henderson said, is "we try to find out from the federal agency, Who are you sending? What is the purpose of it?" State law-enforcement leaders, she said, should

handle communication with their federal counterparts.

"I think this is an opportunity to remind the public of what you can and can't do around polling places," Cowley added.

The consultant laid out an escalated scenario. Now the election is days away, and federal agents have set up checkpoints on roads near early-voting sites. News cameras arrive. The Salt Lake County clerk requests assistance to secure the polls, but the sheriff, unsure about jurisdiction, declines. Meanwhile, "the neighboring chief of police deploys officers to 'protect and support the federal agents.'"

One of the lawyers said that the legal questions were complicated because federal agents could say, "We're not interfering with elections. We're investigating a bomb threat."

"You don't want to pit yourself against the Feds," a senior staff member said. Instead, he suggested, state law enforcement could try to coordinate with the federal agents to clear the roads to alternative voting centers: "The win is we are trying to help voters get to polling places."

Another escalation. Federal agents arrive at multiple Utah voting centers on Election Day, enter the "no-electioneering zone," and begin to question voters. The state attorney general posts on social media that federal officers are expected to comply with all state and federal laws. Trump responds, "This guy has no idea what he's talking about. He has no power over our federal officers."

The agents in this scenario clearly appeared to be breaking the law. Could state authorities do anything to stop the incursion?

Henderson said that she would leave it up to the commissioner of public safety to decide whether "state law enforcement needs to intervene." Nobody wanted a standoff between armed state and federal officers. (Voting-rights lawyers, however, would already be racing to federal court.)

Yet another escalation. Citizens' groups are now setting up counter-perimeters and demonstrations outside a voting center where federal agents are deployed. A car drives through the scene, injuring one of the Feds. The President posts that he is sending more federal officers to "secure the election against violent individuals."

"It's totally law enforcement," the lawyer told the room. "It has nothing to do with elections or free speech at this

point. They've got to de-escalate the situation." All a local election official can do now, Henderson said, is give directions to move voters away from danger and toward another polling place.

One last escalation. The clock winds back to October 29th. F.B.I. agents show up at a county election office and execute a search warrant to seize "all mail ballots and mail-ballot return envelopes, a current list of all voters eligible to vote in Salt Lake County, and a current list of all voters who were sent a mail ballot." An election worker on the scene reports that half the ballots and envelopes have been loaded onto F.B.I. trucks. "So, if that's the case, I've already been taken to jail," one of the county clerks said. She meant that she would have tried to safeguard the election by resisting the seizures.

Another lawyer cut in. "First of all, do you recognize you're dealing with a signed federal search warrant? Do not interfere," he said. "There's certain precautions that you can take."

He rattled them off: Stay calm. Don't hide files or shut down computers; doing so would look like obstruction. Contact counsel immediately. Request the lead agent's name and agency, the prosecutor's name, and a copy of the warrant. Don't consent to searches beyond the warrant's scope. Assign an observer to watch what is taken. Mark whether that includes privileged materials.

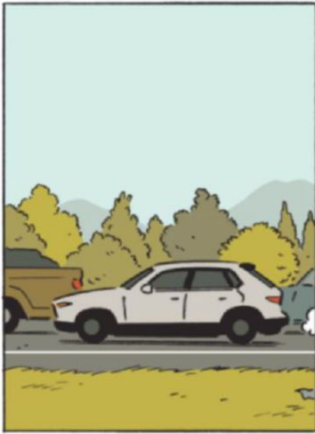
Henderson's mind seemed to be elsewhere. She was thinking, she later told me, about the broken chain of custody of the confiscated paper votes. How, she was wondering, could election officials reliably reconstruct how the votes were cast?

"Are these ballots that have been counted?" she asked finally.

She got no answer.

If Trump manages to interfere with the midterm elections in a meaningful way, experts told me, it will probably resemble the final minutes of Henderson's tabletop exercise.

Stephen Richer, a Republican who was the Recorder of Maricopa County, Arizona, in 2021, resisted chaotic efforts by Trump, state legislators, election deniers in Washington, and conspiratorial litigants to discredit Biden's victory in the state. Now a fellow at the Cato Institute and Harvard's Ash Center for





"O Romeo's, Romeo's, wherefore art thou, Romeo's?"

Democratic Governance and Innovation, Richer has studied just about every way an election can be attacked. He believes that nearly all the election threats commentators have talked about this year are "overblown." But there is one that still worries him.

"I think Fulton County was the real warning shot," he said. "It showed an increased appetite for actually going into voting jurisdictions and taking tabulation equipment or ballots. And if they do that after all the ballots have been counted and certified, then it's old hat, and we'll defend the election if it's defensible against liars. If they do it during a live election, I don't know what we do." The problem is the same one that preoccupied Henderson: chain of custody over ballots.

Suppose, Richer said, the F.B.I. rolls up to a voting center and seizes paper ballots before they are digitized or tabulated. Even if election authorities obtain an injunction and get the ballots back the same day, the ballots will have been "in an unobservable place for an hour or two hours, whatever it is," he told me. "And I don't know if I would trust those anymore." Much the same

quandary arises if agents seize and later return tabulation equipment.

Becker, the former D.O.J. voting lawyer, agreed that "if they were to break chain of custody, it would be very bad and very difficult to reconstruct." (Depending on circumstances, he explained, "there might be ways" to authenticate the votes.) But in order to seize ballots, he noted, federal authorities would have to obtain a warrant, and the magistrate judge who signed the Fulton County warrant came in for a drubbing by legal commentators because the F.B.I. affidavit she approved did little more than recycle disproved conspiracy theories. After that, Becker said, "I don't know if they're going to find a federal judge who will issue a warrant" to seize voting materials, "especially in the middle of elections." Richer's hypothetical, he concluded, is "extremely unlikely yet disastrous if it happens."

After the tabletop exercise, I walked with Henderson through the vaulted marble halls of the capitol on her way to lunch. We ran into Brown, the attorney general, who had been elected as a MAGA stalwart and has care-

fully avoided public comment on Henderson's conflict with the Administration. I introduced myself as a journalist and told Brown what I was writing about. He took a step back and shot a look of unease, or perhaps reproof, at the lieutenant governor.

"Election law is a growth industry, and not in a good way," he declared, in a faux-jocular tone. His expression did not convey amusement. He excused himself and walked briskly away.

Henderson told me that Brown "has been very good and supportive" behind the scenes, and she said the same thing about Cox. Still, she added, "there's been a lot of silence. And that's been challenging. Because, in my mind, I'm standing up for our legislature. I'm standing up for our state. I'm standing up for our voters." A few weeks later, more than a year into the dispute, Cox spoke out in defense of Henderson for the first time. "It is wrong for the D.O.J. to investigate or threaten the lieutenant governor for carrying out her responsibilities under Utah law," he posted on X.

When Henderson started her political career, she was closely aligned with her party's "most conservative elements," according to the Utah senator Todd Weiler, a Republican who has similarly turned against Trump. A lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she had dropped out of Brigham Young University at eighteen to get married. (She earned her degree in 2022.) She had her first child at twenty. In the fall of 2007, she was, at thirty-three, a stay-at-home mother of five, wondering, as her youngest started preschool, what came next.

In those days, Henderson listened to a lot of right-wing talk radio: Limbaugh, Hannity, Beck. She considered herself a political junkie and thought that she might like to get involved. At the time, Jason Chaffetz was a little-known conservative firebrand running a long-shot challenge to the incumbent congressman in Utah's Third District. Henderson went to hear Chaffetz speak one evening, at a small gathering in a private home. His campaign platform emphasized limited government, border enforcement, opposition to same-sex marriage, and a ban on federal funding for abortion. Henderson's husband, Gabe, a physical therapist, recalled, "She said, 'We found our

candidate. We are going to help Chaffetz.”

Chaffetz, recalling those early days, said he knew nothing about Henderson at first except that she was willing to work for free. She began to put in daily shifts, and soon she was planning events, giving speeches, and reaching out to local notables. After Chaffetz won, he gave her a paid position as his campaign manager.

Bryan Schott, a veteran political reporter at the Salt Lake *Tribune* and the founder of Utah Political Watch, a local journalism outlet, said that Henderson played a decisive role in Chaffetz’s victory: “The people who run campaigns here in Utah will tell you that she’s responsible for him getting into Congress the first time.” Chaffetz balked at handing her that much credit but said, “She was a talent, and I encouraged her to run for her own seat.” Henderson did just that in 2012, seeking and winning an open seat in the state Senate. By then, Gabe Henderson said, her political philosophy was evolving beyond the Chaffetz talking points: “She came home and said, ‘I am tired of being muzzled by what he wants me to say. I want my own voice.’”

Henderson built a reputation in the Senate for pragmatism but also for stubborn resolve on matters of conviction. She championed a bill to reduce criminal penalties for polygamy, arguing that fear of prosecution kept women trapped in abusive marriages. Although she supported the state’s ban on abortion after eighteen weeks of pregnancy, she walked out during the vote for a bill that required women seeking abortions to have ultrasounds, which she said was too intrusive. Knowing that the measure would pass, she recalled, “I thought, Well, I’ll just take a walk during roll call.” The way she recounted the story, she was surprised to discover that “all the other women followed.”

On the morning of the first day I spent with Henderson, she drove me to a graveyard. “It’s a little dorky,” she said, climbing out of the driver’s seat. “But this is a place I go on occasion when I need to reset.”

Henderson had dressed for work in heels that were not made for the rain-soaked grass. She led me to a modest bevel marker, embedded at an angle into the ground and inscribed “MARTHA HUGHES CANNON—1857-1932.”

Cannon, Henderson explained, was

an immigrant from Wales who joined a wave of nineteenth-century pioneers from the Church of Latter-day Saints as they fled violent persecution back East. It was a history of faith and hardship that Henderson had learned as a child.

Cannon “became deeply involved in the women’s-suffrage movement,” Henderson said. “And one of the interesting things about Utah women that people don’t understand is they were portrayed by the Eastern press as subjugated and enslaved. They were ridiculed and mocked because of their religious beliefs and practices, but they were very much empowered.”

Cannon had earned a degree in medicine, a rarity for women at the time. She studied oratory. She became a well-known advocate for women’s right to vote, testifying in Congress. And in 1896, the year Utah achieved statehood, she became the first woman to be elected to the state Senate. Henderson said, “She ran against her husband, Angus, and won.”

“On the hard days, and there are a lot of them, I remember Martha,” she said, standing over the grave. “If you wonder why I’m the nail that’s sticking up to get hammered down, or why I’m saying the things I say, why I’m taking my role so seriously, it’s because it’s not mine. It’s entrusted to me right now. And I think about Martha and other women all the time.” Later, she described herself as “a heretic” within her party, adding, “I’m not going along with the Holy Scripture of the current Administration, which is election denialism.”

Henderson attributed the silence of some of her peers to timidity. “I think one of the biggest problems we have is that not everybody in the Republican Party thinks that we’re doing the right things, but a lot of people in the Republican Party are afraid to say that,” she said. “They’re afraid to push back. They’re afraid to speak out.” Chaffetz, the man she helped elect to Congress and a likely opponent if she runs for governor in 2028, said that, in his view, Henderson was the one who had strayed: “Politically, she’s a very different person than when I knew her, not nearly as conservative.”

On a drive south of Salt Lake City,

Henderson paused for a pit stop at one of Utah’s drive-through “dirty soda” franchises, a regular habit, and ordered a quart of Diet Mountain Dew infused with a syrupy jolt of artificial strawberry and pineapple. (L.D.S. doctrine, as she understands it, forbids coffee and tea but does not prohibit caffeine.) I told her what Chaffetz had said about her becoming less conservative. Nothing in her expression suggested that she took offense at the remark, but her choice of words—in response to a man who now works as a Fox News podcast host—was tart. “I’ve mellowed,” she said. “I’m not always so certain of my rightness in everything. I’m much more curious now than I was before. I’ve seen that there’s talking and then there’s doing. And when it comes especially to state government, local government, you gotta have doers. Talkers don’t matter.”

On September 4th, Henderson received a reminder of the retribution that might await her. (Similar reminders arrived in other states.) Neff, the D.O.J. voting lawyer, notified Henderson formally that she might be in breach of federal law because she had failed to comply with the Justice Department’s demands. “As you are aware, you are currently under investigation,” he wrote, directing her to preserve all relevant records.

“Um, no, I was not aware, but I guess I am now,” Henderson responded on Threads. “It would be nice if the good folks at the D.O.J. would focus on actual problems instead of baselessly harassing election officials.”

Henderson and I had spoken about Trump’s many political enemies who had been placed under criminal investigation or indictment. These were expensive and life-changing burdens, even for those who avoided trial and conviction. How did she think about the risk to herself?

“I’m actually not terribly concerned about being prosecuted,” she told me. “I don’t presume to be someone important enough for the President to actually care about.” But, she added, “on the other hand, too, it gives me a little bit of hope when they start escalating like this. Because they’re getting a little desperate. Their attempts aren’t working.” ♦



A DEADLY PATTERN

An alternative-medicine guru faces accusations of negligent care.

BY D. T. MAX

Thomas Rau is a prominent Swiss doctor of alternative—or, as he calls it, “biological”—medicine. He believes that in most cases the best way to cure disease is not to attack the ailment directly but, rather, to boost the body’s natural defense systems. In his eyes, most conventional medical practitioners are timid and overly literal-minded. (A patient of Rau’s remembers him calling specialist doctors “narrowists.”) Whereas most doctors give a standard battery of CT scans and MRIs, Rau uses a technique called dark-field microscopy. He takes a dab of a patient’s blood, places it on a slide, and observes the cells’ behavior over time. Do they clump up, or are they motile? The presence of toxins or inflammation—indicated, Rau told me, by irregular formations or “stacked rings” of cells—dictates specific treatment protocols, often including a change of diet. He has written, of dark-field microscopy, “Hardly any other examination leads so quickly to conclusions about dynamic processes in the body.” He performs the test at BioMed, a clinic that he owns, along with an adjoining hotel, in the picturesque town of Schwendbrunn, Switzerland. Guests often stay for several weeks and spend tens of thousands of dollars.

Rau believes that virtually anyone can benefit from his interventions, many of which he defines as preventive. But he told me that his specialty is treating people with what he calls “unclear” conditions. He estimates that eighty per cent of such patients—principally, sufferers of long COVID or chronic-fatigue syndrome—go home from his clinic “massively improved.” In 2024, he spoke at an event in Brooklyn called “The Future of Medicine,” in which he described himself as “the master in rebuilding cellular function.”

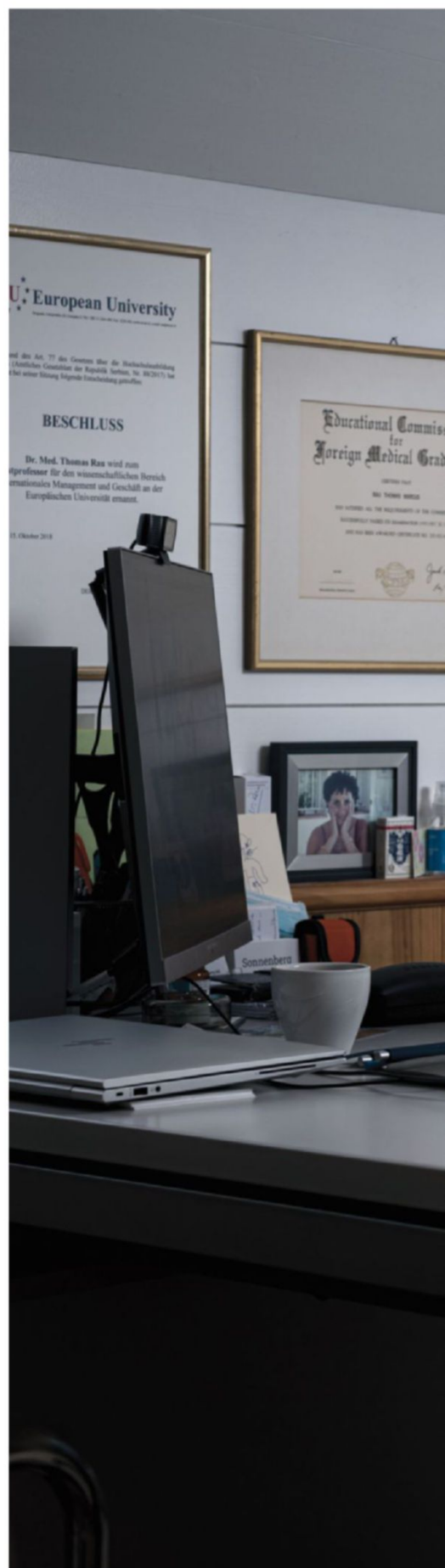
Rau’s tool kit includes colon hydrotherapy (irrigating the bowels with warm water), ozone treatments (infusing the

blood with the gas), and hyperthermia therapy (placing a patient on a bed heated by infrared-A radiation to mimic a fever, which supposedly shrinks tumors). He isn’t concerned by the absence of studies confirming that the treatments performed at BioMed work. “I pay a lot of taxes,” he told me when I visited him in Switzerland, in 2024. “I pay scientists’ salaries.”

Rau, a licensed doctor in Switzerland, says that he doesn’t reject mainstream medicine. But he certainly seems skeptical of its efficacy. He has said, “You give anti-inflammatories, you give anti-immune drugs—you give anti, anti, anti.” Although he’s not always opposed to conventional treatments, he often modifies the typical approach to fit his theories. For instance, he sometimes injects a chemotherapy drug directly into a tumor site—a nonstandard application. (He boasted to me, “This is a treatment I developed!”) A key goal of his cancer-treatment protocol is to lower inflammation throughout a patient’s body by removing gluten from her diet. Good health, he likes to say, comes from harmonizing the patient’s “inner milieu.”

Rau, who is seventy-six, has been practicing for forty-four years, mostly in the northeastern canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, which includes Schwendbrunn. He estimates that he’s seen more than ten thousand patients. The back cover of his book “The Swiss Secret to Optimal Health,” which was published in English in 2007, touts him as the “Mozart of medicine.” He has taught hundreds of other doctors, naturopaths, and healers his techniques.

Traditional doctors do not generally rate the kinds of treatments given by Rau highly. American health authorities, for example, do not consider live-blood analysis to be a reliable diagnostic tool. The F.D.A. regards ozone as having no “known useful medical application in specific, adjunctive, or preventive therapy.” The distribution of ozone machines



Dr. Thomas Rau, who runs BioMed, a clinic



in the foothills of the Alps. He's called himself "the master in rebuilding cellular function" and "the Mozart of medicine."



for medical treatment is prohibited in this country—at least for now. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who currently leads the Department of Health and Human Services, is a champion of alternative treatments. (Rau told me that he approves of Kennedy’s push to “really evaluate vaccinations” and his efforts to study alternative techniques.)

In February, 2021, Rau, who had run a clinic in another Swiss town for more than twenty-five years, opened BioMed with Alexandra Kotthaus, a German doctor. Kotthaus, who is fifty, had been working with Rau for several years. She became interested in practicing alternative medicine because of a metabolic condition related to her liver. She also considers herself unusually sensitive to medication. “It took me a lot of time, power, and investigation to heal myself,” she told me.

That March, a seventy-six-year-old patient from a wealthy Cypriot family, Evie Lanitis, arrived at BioMed, complaining of a host of minor maladies, including bursitis in her toes, dental pain, and digestive issues. She was the sort of person who often finds her way to Rau. Many of his patients are well-to-do women. (Women are gen-

erally more likely than men to see doctors when they don’t feel well, and the gaps in research on how illnesses affect women leave an opening for alternative practitioners.) Alexandra Manglis, Lanitis’s daughter, told me that her mother “erred on the side of hypochondriac.” Lanitis told Kotthaus that she wanted to improve her stamina so that she could be a good grandmother—in three months, Manglis’s first child was due.

Lanitis’s treatment began, in part, with a yarrow compress placed over her abdomen, to soothe her liver. The next day, she got a ginger wrap for her kidney area. She was also prescribed the hyperthermia treatment, followed by a “restorative infusion” and then a colon cleanse. Rau wrote in Lanitis’s medical log, “Healthy! Really has mostly stomach symptoms and sleep problems.”

After a week or so at BioMed, Lanitis was given an I.V. infusion of alpha-lipoic acid. The substance has long been available as a pill; health-food stores often market it as an antioxidant supplement that can help alleviate nerve pain, among other benefits. In pill form, alpha-lipoic acid may ease symptoms, cause mild harm, or do nothing. But an intravenous dose reaches the bloodstream

more thoroughly. In the U.S., the F.D.A. has not approved the use of alpha-lipoic acid as a treatment for any condition. Nevertheless, some alternative-medicine doctors give these infusions to their patients. This can be risky, in part because high-dose intravenous use of the acid has been associated with reduced levels of blood platelets, which play a key role in clotting.

Rau told me that he has given patients the infusion hundreds of times. But Lanitis began experiencing severe pain in her upper abdomen within a few hours of being administered the acid. She rested in her hotel room for a while, then managed to get downstairs to an examining room, where Rau tested her platelet count. He found it abnormally low. Within the next two hours, the count plummeted even further, to seventy-nine billion platelets per litre of blood. (Normal platelet counts vary from a hundred and fifty billion to four hundred billion per litre.) Rau and Kotthaus drove her to a hospital in the nearby town of Herisau. The doctors, seeing her platelet count, suspected liver failure and concluded that a better-equipped hospital should treat her. As her condition worsened, she was transferred by ambulance to a hospital in St. Gallen, the largest city in the area, where she threw up blood.

All the while, Lanitis was texting her sister in Cyprus, who was, in turn, updating Manglis and the rest of the family. As things turned worrisome, Manglis, who lives in Massachusetts, texted a sibling that she’d spoken with doctors at the St. Gallen hospital, who told her that BioMed had treated their mother with, as she put it, “some half-baked alternative shit.”

Lanitis told her sister that her vomit was almost black—usually a sign of bleeding in the gastrointestinal tract. Manglis called the hospital and was put through to her mother, who described her sudden decline as “the strangest thing.” After they hung up, Manglis sent her mother a text telling her not to worry—both Lanitis and her future grandchild would be O.K. When a WhatsApp message reaches the recipient’s phone, two small ticks appear next to it on the sender’s screen. “That second little tick never appeared,” Manglis told me. During the crisis, Lanitis’s phone battery had apparently run down.

That night, the doctors in St. Gallen intubated Lanitis. She died the next day. Kotthaus was holding her hand as she passed away.

The Swiss have a long history of support for alternative medicine, and many of the clinics dedicated to it are based in Appenzell Ausserrhoden. In the early eighteenth century, the village of Gais started attracting swarms of visitors, many from abroad, who wanted to sample *Gaisschottenkur*, a treatment featuring goat's whey. Locals claimed that drinking it was helpful for a variety of respiratory and digestive problems. One Herr Steinbrüchel, of Zurich, was said to have been miraculously cured of his chest disease, and before long preparations of *Gaisschottenkur* were being used to combat everything from dysentery to gonorrhea. A bustling spa in Gais accommodated four hundred visitors at a time. In 1791, a local pastor noted, of the inn's restaurant, "One was allowed to sit with a sleeping cap, a nightgown, and slippers at the table."

There was no proof that goat's whey actually worked. In 1869, a German physician named Hermann Lebert lamented, "One may well ask whether an era can truly be considered enlightened when such unclear physical-chemical views on whey prevail among the thousands of doctors who prescribe."

The development of the railroad helped to end the goat's-whey craze. By the end of the nineteenth century, health tourists could easily travel to Davos, in the east of Switzerland, where the mountain vistas were more dramatic and newer treatments, such as chest rubs with marmot fat, awaited. Davos is the setting for Thomas Mann's masterpiece "The Magic Mountain," which centers on a sanatorium that caters to an international cohort of tuberculosis patients, in part through a daily regimen of extended sunbathing. In the book, the clinic has recently acquired an X-ray machine, and these "internal portraits," Mann suggests, signal an epochal shift in medicine toward technological tools—and away from charismatic quacks. But spas in the vein of "The Magic Mountain" still dot the Alps, and they often attract people who aren't satisfied with conventional methods of healing. Evie Lanitis, for instance, was devoted to Qigong, the traditional Chi-

nese practice that combines movement, meditation, and intentional breathing.

Although Lanitis did not know it, a BioMed patient had unexpectedly died about a week before she arrived. Doris Ammann, who was in her mid-seventies and lived in Zurich, was a regular visitor to Rau's clinics. Whereas Lanitis was just well-to-do, Ammann was enormously rich—she was a famous art dealer. After her death, her gallery sold Andy Warhol's "Shot Sage Blue Marilyn" for a hundred and ninety-five million dollars, then the highest price ever paid for a twentieth-century work of art at auction.

Rau, who is an art aficionado, had met Ammann at Art Basel. "Doris was really important to me," he recalled, in a hearing about her death. Ammann's partner, Georg Frei, an art historian and dealer, later testified, "We went to the clinic happy and healthy, having meditated and swum together beforehand." Frei said that Ammann underwent Rau's treatments "not for an ailment but for prevention."

When Ammann visited BioMed on March 18, 2021, however, she did have a physical complaint—a tremor on her left side. Rau wrote that she had "unclear neuropathy," and that her lab results showed the presence of "neurotrophic viruses." She had a colonic irrigation before joining Rau and Frei for a private vegan lunch. Afterward, Ammann got an alpha-lipoic-acid infusion—the same treatment that Lanitis would soon be given—followed by an infusion of mugwort.

At first, Ammann felt fine, but by the time she got into her car to return to Zurich, a few hours later, she had developed



intense abdominal pain. Frei, in later testimony, remembered that, as Ammann's chauffeur was loading bags into the car, Ammann began "screaming like crazy, like an animal, from all the pain." Rau took her back into an examining room to try to pinpoint the source of her stomach discomfort. (One suspect was the lunch they had been served.) Kotthaus

performed an ultrasound on Ammann, which did not appear abnormal. Rau gave her a small amount of morphine. She was also given an anti-spasmodic. At some point that night, Ammann vomited black fluid, Frei later testified. He recalled asking if they should go to the hospital, and Rau telling him that the hospital "always makes a fuss." They decided that Ammann should remain at the hotel, where Rau could watch over her. (Rau told me that he would not have spoken that way, and that if he'd seen black vomit it would have been "an alarm sign.")

Ammann slept through the night. In the morning, she told Rau that she wanted to go home, and he approved. Around this time, he noted in her patient log, "SEPSIS is possible, even though she is feeling much better now." Ammann ate breakfast at the hotel and had a massage before Kotthaus did another ultrasound, which again wasn't concerning. Ammann shook Rau's hand, and her chauffeur drove her and Frei home.

But that afternoon she began vomiting again. Rau soon reviewed a blood-work report showing that Ammann had a low platelet count and a high white-blood-cell count—a possible sign of infection. He remembers suggesting to Frei that he take Ammann to a hospital but Frei saying that she didn't want to go and was eager to sleep. (Frei testified that if he'd been told about her blood work he likely would've taken her to the hospital.) He had been waking Ammann up every hour and giving her some water. At around 3:30 A.M., he tried to check in with Rau, and then with Rau's wife, Elizabeth—but nobody picked up. (He tried Rau four more times that night.) Just after 6 A.M., Frei texted Rau that Ammann was apathetic and confused. "She falls asleep again while drinking," he wrote.

Not long afterward, Rau finally got in touch and told Frei to call an ambulance. She was admitted to University Hospital, in Zurich, where she died the next day. A postmortem report attributed her death to cardiovascular failure and septic shock.

Soon after the Ammann and Lanitis incidents, Appenzell Ausserrhoden prosecutors began investigating their deaths. But the clinic remained open for business, and reports of the inquiry did not go beyond Swiss news outlets. This

meant that Rau's foreign clientele—a significant portion of his business—had no idea that some of his methods had fallen under suspicion.

I first met Rau in 2024, at the “Future of Medicine” event in Brooklyn. It had been a pleasant evening—patients offered tributes to Rau while attendees enjoyed wine and vegan hors d'œuvres. It felt transgressive to ask him about the two deaths in front of so many admirers, but when I did so he did not miss a beat. “They came super sick to us,” he told me. “I sent them to the hospital, and then they died in the hospital.” He quickly clarified: “But not because of me—in spite of me.”

In a conversation the next day in an Upper East Side apartment—a patient was hosting him—Rau said that he could not talk about the specifics of the two cases because they were under investigation. He expressed confidence that he would be vindicated and urged me to visit him in Schwellbrunn to see him at work.

Rau's clinic is about an hour east of Zurich. I travelled there in May, 2024. BioMed and the Sonnenberg Health Hotel lie just off the main street of Schwellbrunn, a hilltop village with about fifteen hundred residents. In town, an austere Reformed church is flanked by houses featuring the round shingles and steep gabled roofs typical of the region. Most of the area's rolling hills remain pastureland, and during the day the loudest sound is the jangling of cowbells. In the distance looms Mt. Säntis, which, when I visited, was still topped with snow.

Switzerland makes a huge amount of money from rich foreigners seeking better health, and spas and alternative-healing resorts are often built to cater to voguish international tastes. But the Sonnenberg—a balconied building of four stories—is not a showy facility. When I visited, there were flowerpots and tables with umbrellas out front, and if you drove by you'd think you were passing one more comfortable hotel in a comfortable country. The only obvious sign of luxury was Rau's silver Porsche 911 parked out front.

The Sonnenberg had been a medical facility long before Rau bought it. For decades, it was a “cure house”—a place where ill Swiss citizens could spend weeks, or months, getting fresh air and taking restorative walks. In Switzerland, someone with a cold might still address

it by pouring a homeopathic liquid onto sugar cubes and then ingesting them. In a 2009 referendum, sixty-seven per cent of Swiss voters supported integrating nonconventional medicine into the country's health-care system. But the practice of long rest cures had waned in Switzerland in the nineteen-nineties, in part because health insurers stopped fully covering extended stays at spas and wellness centers. Despite this shift, Rau, when buying the Sonnenberg, was confident that he had built a reputation strong enough to insure BioMed's success. When the hotel and clinic opened, he had just turned seventy. “Technically, I shouldn't be practicing anymore,” he told a Swiss radio station. “But this is an absolute passion for me—it's my life.”

Although you can book a room in the Sonnenberg on the usual travel apps, it's not a typical hotel. There's a dedicated room for blood infusions on the main floor, and a pharmacy on the fifth. In 2022, a man from Hungary named András, who had stayed at the hotel, reported on Booking.com that “some of the patients in the ‘hotel’ has terminal illnesses—which is normal part of life, but if you are arriving to holiday with your family you might find it quite embarrassing.”

When I entered the lobby of the Sonnenberg, a woman from Palm Beach was chatting with the clinic receptionist, who sits next to the hotel receptionist, fretting over the timing of an appointment in which some of her teeth that had silver-amalgam fillings would be pulled out. (Dental amalgam contains mercury, and many alternative doctors believe that certain health problems, including chronic fatigue, can be caused by mercury “off-gassing.” The F.D.A. considers the removal of such fillings to be unnecessary.) The woman wanted the procedure done at the start of her stay, not near the end. She said, of Rau, “The original idea was I do this and then he *treats* me.”

A moment later, I saw someone I thought I knew—and in a sense I did. It was a very well-known American actress, dressed in loose clothes in preparation for a day of treatments. (She asked me not to use her name.) She told me that this was her eighth visit to see Rau, and that she has previously brought along her husband and her daughter.

The actress, who is in her seventies, said that she undergoes an annual “liver

cleanse” with Rau. This involves five liver poultices (in which a castor-oil-soaked cloth is placed on the abdomen) and two colon-hydrotherapy sessions, and ends with “a strange night where you drink a combination of Epsom salts and grapefruit juice and, I think, olive oil.” The procedure leaves her better able to meet the demands of her gruelling schedule, she told me: “You really need a lot of stamina, and your body is your instrument.” She said, of the cleanse, “It's about taking the toxic load off the liver so it can do *its* job, which is breaking down cells or rebuilding them.” (According to the American Liver Foundation, a liver cleanse is an unnecessary procedure.)

Soon afterward, Rau greeted me. With short gray hair and a trimmed beard, he looked like a kindly owl. As with doctors everywhere, he was a celebrity in his own facility—while we spoke, patients and nurses circled around him, trying to get his attention. We eventually moved into the dining room and had a delicious vegan lunch of lentil-cabbage-turnip soup and baked potatoes with leeks and mushrooms. He took off a white coat, revealing a Mr. Rogers-style cardigan, the cuffs folded back. Several patients were eating alone. Lunch is not a social meal at the hotel, as patients are often in the midst of treatments, many of which can be exhausting. Dinner is more convivial; patients plan trips to nearby towns or ascents of local hills together.

Rau told me that he had started the day by treating a retired doctor who struggled with an autoimmune condition and had come to BioMed after “seeing forty-eight doctors.” He'd also met with a European academic who had salivary-gland cancer and had stopped traditional treatment. “He has no more pain,” Rau said, adding that the tumor was “really much smaller.” After lunch, Rau was seeing a woman from California with multiple myeloma. Next would be another American woman, whom Rau had named the “queen of colonics.” This woman had booked an appointment with him at the end of his workday. (She told me that she had chronic-fatigue syndrome and was also “slowly dying of heavy-metal poisoning.”)

Rau didn't think that the criminal investigation had hurt his business. And it certainly hadn't sapped his energy or made him doubt his skills. He recounted how

he had turned to alternative medicine. He graduated from the University of Bern's medical school in the late seventies, with a specialty in rheumatology. For a few years, he treated patients using conventional techniques, prescribing anti-inflammatory and anti-rheumatic drugs. "My patients did not get better," he said, adding that he was the only doctor who seemed to notice. Soon he was integrating holistic medicine and investigating nonconventional methods, such as dark-field microscopy. Not that he particularly needed that tool these days, he said: "I *feel* from the patient if they have a toxic load."

Rau likes to flip the logic of the phrase "alternative medicine." In his view, what *he* practices at BioMed should be "the fundamental form of medicine," and "only when that proves unsuccessful should conventional medical measures be employed."

Lanitis's and Ammann's deaths were not Rau's first brush with legal problems. In 2014, the Swiss national regulator, Swissmedic, determined that Rau's former clinic, the Paracelsus, was distributing prohibited medications. "One day, unexpected, unannounced, the police came," Rau told me. The clinic successfully filed an appeal. But, in 2003, Rau had been accused of something far more serious—being connected to the death of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, the seventy-year-old uncle of the Aga Khan, the Muslim spiritual leader. From 1966 to 1977, the Prince had been the High Commissioner for Refugees at the United Nations, and he had gone on to become an environmental activist.

Rau and the Prince were friends—alternative medicine seems to depend on personal relationships as much as the art world does. Sadruddin had survived mucinous colloid adenocarcinoma, an unusual form of breast cancer, and had become a devotee of Rau's at the Paracelsus clinic. A local paper quoted him enthusing that its holistic treatments were the best he'd ever had; Sadruddin particularly appreciated the combination of familial hospitality and modern technology provided by Rau.

On one visit, Rau injected the Prince's chest with a mixture of selenium and mistletoe extract, which he believes stimulates an anti-cancer response in the body. By the end of the day, Sadruddin was



"Dear Margaret, I hope this letter finds you well and, because I'm a dog without thumbs, that you can read my handwriting."

suffering from chest pain and a fever; he returned to Bellerive Castle, his residence in Geneva, in distress. He soon had a serious infection in his chest area. He died in Boston, at Massachusetts General Hospital, some nine months later.

An obituary in the *Times* stated that Sadruddin's family members provided "no cause of death," but they seem to have had no doubt about who was at fault. Sadruddin himself had clearly blamed Rau for the infection, which, he believed, originated with the subcutaneous chest injection. In a letter to Rau written in January, 2003, excerpts of which were eventually published in a Swiss newspaper, Sadruddin accused him of "brash arrogance and unprofessional behavior."

Before the Prince died, he asked his family to sue Rau and the Paracelsus clinic. Two months after Sadruddin's death, the family's lawyer filed a complaint with the canton's health authority, calling for an investigation into whether Rau had violated his duty of care. In another letter that the Swiss newspaper quoted from, the Prince explained that he hoped a lawsuit would enlighten "others who remain dependent on this disastrous individual." The health authorities investigated the complaint. A former chief physician at the St. Gallen hospital presented an expert opinion stating that the Prince's health crisis had begun with an infection that the Prince got under Rau's care, adding that Rau had "regularly used medica-

tions that were not approved" and that it was ill-advised "to repeatedly breach the protective skin barrier and administer subcutaneous injections in an area of the body weakened by radiation therapy," according to Swiss news reports. (In a recent conversation with me, the physician reiterated his assessment that, though the ultimate cause of the Prince's death was uncertain, his infection was "very likely" caused by Rau's injections.)

A prolonged legal battle followed. Rau filed a civil suit against Sadruddin's family to clear his name, and blamed the Prince's death on the doctors who had later treated him. Sadruddin's family countersued, seeking about \$1.4 million in damages. The family's complaint eventually expired under the Swiss statute of limitations. When I asked Rau about the case, he told me that he still held the doctors who had seen Sadruddin after him responsible for Ammann's death.

The day after my arrival, Rau's son Felix, who is the C.E.O. of BioMed, took me for a tour. (Rau has four children. One son, Milo, is a well-known theatre director in Europe.) Felix told me that many of BioMed's machines were originally developed to address the needs of high-level athletes. "We want to have the same benefit as sports medicine," he explained.

On the first floor, there were private spaces for medical-massage therapists, who were doing acupuncture,

cupping, lymphatic-drainage massages, and “everything else.” Elsewhere, a team of nurses administered detoxifying infusions. (Alpha-lipoic acid was no longer an option, I was told.)

I was astonished at the high-tech equipment at this otherwise unassuming facility. There was a large, pulsating magnetic-field-therapy machine. “You just put your head in here,” Felix explained. The device, he said, helps regulate “cell-membrane potential”—the difference in voltage between the interior and exterior of cells. In another room was a machine for intermittent hypoxic-hyperoxic training. You sat on a couch and put on a face mask that delivered fluctuating levels of oxygen. “You go up the mountain, and then after a few minutes you come down,” Felix said. “It’s like a mitochondria treatment.”

Next, we visited a red-light-therapy suite. There was a narrow bed and, above it, a row of light bulbs that emitted infrared beams. Its purpose, Felix explained, was to heal both physical and psychic wounds. It was one of the facility’s most requested treatments. Because each machine took up its own room, patients tended to spend a lot of time alone. This reminded me of a Swiss treatment for tuberculosis from the nineteenth century: patients were instructed to spend long stretches in a cowshed, to inhale ammonia from bovine urine.

In a consulting room, Rau was seeing the patient from California. The setup was, at first glance, like any doctor’s: medical degrees on the wall, an examination table at the center. But I also noticed a small silver machine in a corner, called a VEGATEST II, which measures changes in a patient’s electromagnetic fields, purportedly to ascertain sensitivity to certain toxins. It had knobs—one was marked “Provokation”—and a display with a needle that went from zero to one hundred, like an old-fashioned laugh-o-meter. Rau explained that he had just used the VEGATEST II to investigate the harm done by toxins that had “leached” from the patient’s silver-amalgam fillings. In a 2018 documentary about the alleged dangers of root canals, “Root Cause,” Rau was quoted as saying that ninety-seven per cent of his breast-cancer patients between the ages of thirty and seventy had had “a root canal or toxic situation in the teeth.” (The film received fierce criticism from

WAVES, CORDS

Faces and names warm waves kept washing in,
Decades of faces that recur, no matter
If names don’t surface, drowned out now, unlike
Their words and voiceprints—counsel, banter, twists
Of phrasing still heard even if the speakers
Have slipped away in some rough undertow,
Departures now confirmed or probable,
Given how many rising tides have fallen.

The psyche: a kind of twine, a cordage spun
Of optic fibre drawn from a thousand minds—
Strands this instant wondering if yarns
Of mine in turn wound up in others’ cable,
A hawser mooring then to now and selves
Whose face and words remain, if not their names.

—*Alfred Corn*

the American Dental Association, and Netflix, which had been streaming the documentary, pulled it.)

The Californian had short dark hair and carried a thermos from the luxury spa Canyon Ranch. I was invited in after she’d finished a colonic irrigation. (“I draw the line at that one,” she told me.) The patient, who was in her early fifties, told me that she’d developed multiple myeloma in her early forties. She’d had two bone-marrow transplants and was advised to undergo maintenance chemotherapy. She refused and instead began treatment under Rau, who focussed on ozone therapy and on removing gluten from her diet. Her multiple myeloma did not recur. “It sounds so kitschy,” she said. “But he’s basically saved me.” She now made a yearly visit to BioMed, where her regimen included multiple injections. “Only two today?” she asked, surprised. (She once received twenty-seven injections in a single session, she recalled.) She said, of one admixture, “They call it the tumor infusion—it’s specifically for people with cancer. Don’t ask me to tell you what’s in it. The ampules are always in German.”

Rau also gave her a dark-field-microscopy screening. “Look at all the rouleaux,” the Californian said, clearly upset. Rouleaux, in the vocabulary of dark-field microscopy, are blood cells that are stacked like pancakes. In theory, such an arrangement diminishes the

cells’ ability to transport oxygen from the lungs. But Rau was preoccupied with another problem: images from the screening indicated that she was in a state of “hyper-proteinization.” The Californian was contrite. “We went to Italy for four days, and I wasn’t vegan or gluten-free,” she confessed. “But I’m back on it. I bet it will improve.”

“Look here—it’s not so bad,” Rau said, consolingly. “The cells, they move.”

On April 13, 2021—the day after Lanitis died—the Appenzell Auser-rhoden prosecutor’s office ordered the seizure of relevant records and called for an autopsy, which revealed that Lanitis had died of multiple organ failure.

Around this time, Kotthaus, Rau’s colleague, wrote to Lanitis’s daughter, Manglis, saying that she was “heartbroken.” Manglis asked what, exactly, had caused her mother’s organs to fail. Kotthaus answered that it was disseminated intravascular coagulation—a blood-clotting disorder. Manglis told me that her family secured a lawyer “pretty fast.”

The Lanitis family was warned that a toxicology report might be slow in arriving—the substances in Lanitis’s body were not the sort that the canton’s forensic scientists typically evaluated. After nearly a year, a report on Lanitis’s death was finally released to the family. It noted that the clinic had used alpha-lipoic acid in an off-label manner, and possibly with-

out providing adequate information to the patient, which is required in Switzerland. By then, prosecutors had raised the possibility that the infusions had been contaminated. They were sent off for special testing at the hospital in St. Gallen. Nothing was found. This meant that the pharmacist who had prepared the I.V.s was not at fault—and that Rau and Kotthaus remained the main figures of judicial interest.

Manglis had started Googling Rau to see if he had a history of problematic outcomes. She eventually found Swiss newspaper articles, in German, about Sadruddin Aga Khan. Suddenly, Manglis said, she was confronting “the possibility that this doctor has been losing patients for a long time under suspicious circumstances.” She added, “I felt like I bore some responsibility for not vetting my mother’s medical choices.”

Before the two doctors were scheduled to testify in the inquiry, the prosecutor’s office called in a woman named Vera Torosian, who had been a naturopath at BioMed during the period in question. Torosian had been working in the United States, and Rau hired her in the hope that she would attract American patients to the clinic. She had no animus toward Rau, she testified, but from the beginning she was skeptical of many of the techniques she observed at BioMed. For instance, she saw patients being sent to the hyperthermia machine even though they seemed too weak to endure extreme heat. A few days after Lanitis’s death, Torosian called the police. (In her testimony, she recalled struggling “for a long time beforehand about whether to do it.”) She was directed to the prosecutor’s office, where she laid out her concerns—including an incident that she found alarming. Torosian, who left BioMed soon afterward, claimed that she’d seen a Swiss patient in the waiting room who was so weak that she could barely stand. The woman had been getting various treatments, including repeated sessions with a PAPIMI—a device, not approved by the F.D.A., that applies high-intensity, short-duration electromagnetic pulses to the body. The woman ultimately died of advanced cancer.

One patient that Torosian had introduced to Rau was a friend named Mary Anne Hawrylak, an American who owned a medical-services company. Hawrylak was not a hard-core believer in alterna-

tive medicine, but she prided herself on keeping an open mind. She had suffered from an excruciating autoimmune disorder decades earlier, and she wanted to take steps to prevent its recurrence. “I’m interested in things beyond standard of care, because standard of care doesn’t always address things beyond just the symptoms,” she told me. After discussing her condition with Rau, she signed up for a three-week stay at BioMed.

Her visit overlapped with Lanitis’s, and they became friendly. They had meals together and chatted about their children and grandchildren. They planned an excursion to St. Gallen.

On April 9th, a few hours before Lanitis received her infusion, Hawrylak herself underwent an alpha-lipoic-acid treatment. When I asked her about the various infusions she received at BioMed, she said that she had asked Rau about them, and that he had said very little. “He never told me the ingredients,” she said. “And, had he told me the ingredients, I might not have known what that meant, anyway, unless he said, ‘Here are the potential side effects.’” (Rau says that all of his patients are given consent forms.)

After receiving the alpha-lipoic acid, Hawrylak felt confused and dizzy. She went to her hotel room to lie down. “Honestly, I thought I was going to die,” Hawrylak remembered. Torosian encouraged her to go to the hospital, but Hawrylak refused: COVID rules were in force, and Hawrylak, who doesn’t speak German, was scared that she would have to enter the emergency room alone. A while later, Rau tested Hawrylak’s platelets and found that they were slightly reduced.

In the meantime, Lanitis had fallen seriously ill. After Jeff Hösel, the hotel manager, told Hawrylak that her friend had been taken to the hospital, Hawrylak asked Rau, “Is she going to die?” Rau said that it didn’t look good.

Rau, wondering if his patients had been poisoned somehow, had his staff check the kitchen for contamination. He went to the infusion room and found the used ampules of alpha-lipoic acid in a biohazard-waste container. He tested some remaining drops and found no problems. Rau wondered whether the women’s COVID vaccines had caused them to have adverse reactions to the acid. A month before Lanitis died, she had received the AstraZeneca vaccine, which

has been linked to problems with blood clotting at a rate of one case in every hundred thousand. Hawrylak, however, had been given the Pfizer vaccine, which has not been strongly implicated in any blood-clotting issues.

Rau called the hotel’s guests to a wood-paneled library where copies of “The Swiss Secret” were on display. He announced that a patient had been given an infusion and subsequently died. There would be no more such treatments until he could rule out the infusion as the cause. The guests seemed less upset by the death than by the news that their infusions would be halted. Hawrylak remembers their response as “We paid so much money—we want these infusions.” She told me, “I thought I was in ‘The Twilight Zone.’”

Hawrylak was shocked when Rau told the guests that other patients had been given the same treatment and had not been harmed. “I looked at him and he gave me a weird look,” she told me. (Rau disputes this.) She was so angry that she took a walk in the snow to gather her emotions.

Hawrylak soon left. She said goodbye to another friend she’d made at BioMed, a British woman with cancer. She did not warn the woman that Rau was untrustworthy. “I didn’t want to talk to her about it, because she had just complete faith in this,” Hawrylak told me. “And the last thing I want to do is shake somebody’s faith.”

Torosian’s testimony stunned Manglis and her family. “It’s the first time I’m understanding the extent of what’s happening,” Manglis told me. She now knew that her mother and Hawrylak had been given the same infusion on the same day and that both had appeared to have had strong adverse reactions. A possible reason that Hawrylak had survived was that she was physically larger than Manglis’s mother, who was petite. The earlier death of Ammann—who weighed little more than a hundred pounds upon her final arrival at BioMed—was consistent with this hypothesis.

Gossip was swirling at the clinic. Torosian had told the prosecutor’s office that an undernourished, severely disabled girl who was receiving treatment at BioMed was subsisting entirely on spinach—on Kotthaus’s orders. After

learning of this and other allegations, Rau and Kotthaus each sued Torosian for defamation. (They lost these suits, but Kotthaus told me that the accusation about the disabled girl was “bullshit.”)

Eventually, Höselser was contacted by the police, and afterward he began exchanging texts on WhatsApp with Zacharie Tachi, an employee at the hotel’s restaurant.

“This is getting tight for Dr. Rau,” Tachi texted.

“I can’t really remember who all died, names and number of deceased, do you still have them in your head?” Höselser wrote.

Tachi said that he couldn’t remember any names.

Höselser speculated about several such deaths. There was “the Zurich woman”—Ammann. “The lady from Cyprus”—Lanitis. A “lady from Germany.” A “lady from Slovenia.” Rau told me that these texts reflected medical ignorance: the last two women had come to him terminally ill. (The prosecutor’s office opened a separate investigation into allegations of mistreatment and additional deaths at the clinic and identified no criminal misconduct. The case against Rau has remained limited to Lanitis and Ammann.)

Like Torosian, Höselser left his job, and he later shared his texts and other evidence with prosecutors. The restaurant in the Sonnenberg, he told them,

was meant to be a place of “*joie de vivre*.” But Rau’s arrangement was “a money-making machine with the potential to save lives but not to bring joy.”

In May, 2023, the prosecutors finally interrogated Kotthaus and Rau. Kotthaus attended the hearing but declined to answer most questions. Rau spoke more freely. He said that he didn’t remember much about Lanitis—Kotthaus had been the doctor in charge and had done most of the interfacing. But, to indicate how seriously he had taken the incident, he noted that this was “the first time in my life” that he had driven a patient to a hospital himself. He did not deny that Lanitis’s death might have been related to the alpha-lipoic-acid infusion or to other treatments she’d received, though he cautioned that “the causal connection seems to have been drawn a bit too hastily.”

On November 18, 2023, the Sunday edition of the Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* published an investigation into the deaths at BioMed, written by a reporter named Leo Eiholzer. It laid the blame mostly on Rau, who brought legal action against the paper, demanding to be allowed to publish a rebuttal in its pages. (A judge denied his suit.) After the article ran, canton officials invited Hawrylak to fly to Switzerland and recount her experience to prosecutors.

Rau, in his first round of testimony, seemed to acknowledge having used alpha-lipoic acid off-label. And he entertained the notion that he should more explicitly inform patients about the potential risks of such treatments. “That has nothing to do with the causality with the tragical cases,” he said. “But I can see the point.” In his second round of testimony, he took a tougher tack. He insisted that the infusion was completely appropriate. Lanitis’s toe bursitis had been accompanied by “subtle neurological problems,” and to him this seemed to be “a classic indication for the infusion.” He said, “It’s too narrow to say that just because she hasn’t had diabetes it’s not indicated.”

Later in this testimony, Rau claimed that it was unreasonable to expect him to inform patients “about complications that practically never occur.” All the same, he emphasized, he *did* take his duty of care very seriously, especially when using medicines off-label. Indeed, he had personally reported Lanitis’s death to the canton. “If I had wanted to cover something up, I certainly wouldn’t have done that,” he said.

The prosecutor then turned to the death of Ammann. Both sides dug in hard here. The postmortem report, which was conducted by an expert at the Zurich hospital, found that Rau had mishandled Ammann’s case from the start. He had missed clear signs of intestinal paralysis, which can lead to sepsis, and had failed to respond to severe gastrointestinal bleeding, which can occur in someone with an abnormally low platelet count. Rau should have sent her to a surgical clinic; cases like hers have “an excellent success rate and survival prognosis.” The report called BioMed’s diagnostic efforts “incomprehensible.” It concluded that Rau had breached “the doctor’s duty of care.” (Rau disputes this report and commissioned a counter-expert opinion that challenged the report’s assessment about the cause of Ammann’s death.)

Rau called the allegation that he’d missed an intestinal issue “nonsense”—the day after he gave Ammann the infusion, he’d placed a stethoscope on her abdomen and heard normal digestive activity, and he was further reassured when she ate and didn’t vomit. In addition, he said that Ammann had nerve inflammation, which in his view was more or less peripheral neuropathy—a condition for which



“Look closely, Phelps. This is how you disappear around a corner.”

alpha-lipoic acid is approved in Germany. The question of whether the infusion caused Ammann's death was more complex than in Lanitis's case, because none of the acid remained in Ammann's blood at the time of her death, nearly three days after the treatment. (Melissa Gittinger, a medical toxicologist, told me that the substance passes through the system "in hours.") But the fact that Ammann's platelet count, like Lanitis's and Hawrylak's, had been impacted after the alpha-lipoic-acid infusion suggested that Ammann, too, might have had an adverse response.

Rau testified, of Ammann's case, "In our opinion, this death is still completely unclear." His late friend, he said, had had various problems with her inner milieu, including a history of "heavy-metal contaminations." Rau said that he doubted Ammann had screamed in pain—the Doris he knew was too suave for such an outburst. The prosecutor later asked him why her partner would make such a detail up. Rau couldn't say.

As to why it had taken so long for Ammann to be sent to a hospital, Rau said, it was in part because she was famous in Switzerland and shy of publicity. Moreover, he added, "trying to prove whether time was lost here is just a matter of finding someone to blame." At one point, he protested, "I'm a good internist." The charge of "negligence," he went on, "hurts me. I'm not a negligent doctor. That's why I have many patients from all over the world."

In January, 2025, Rau gave prosecutors a written defense of his actions. He insisted that the Swiss woman whom Torosian had found in the waiting room had not been mistreated, pointing out that her family had thanked him in the woman's obituary in the St. Gallen newspaper. The woman, whose family did not want her to be named, had died of advanced cancer. But, when I reached the woman's husband, he said that Rau "didn't act as a doctor but as a business partner." Although he said that Rau had given his wife a good final month, he wondered if she might have lived longer if she hadn't left standard care: "She simply blocked conventional medicine, and that's actually Rau's business model—he grabs her and says, 'Yes, come to me.'"

Rau told me with pride that many of his patients came back more than once—

he affectionately called them "repeaters." Manglis saw this differently. "Part of the gift is to keep you coming back," she said. But others I spoke with insisted that Rau was a master diagnostician. Xenia Lehner, a nursing specialist in St. Gallen who worked at BioMed for a year, and at Paracelsus before that, wrote to me, of Rau, "Both he and Dr. Kott-



haus were providing much care and quality in their treatment—probably the main reason why patients follow them."

In October, 2022, Ammann's sisters filed a criminal complaint accusing Georg Frei of failing to get her to a hospital promptly. "This situation should have filled a life partner with great fear," it said. Rau's lawyer has noted that Frei stood to inherit two properties and nearly fifty million dollars upon Ammann's death. This past March, a prosecutor dismissed the complaint, finding that Frei had acted in a sufficiently "timely manner" and had taken "the measures that could reasonably be expected of him."

When Torosian, the naturopath, testified for a second time, in February, 2025, Rau's attorney made a shocking insinuation. After questioning Torosian about an F.B.I. course in criminal investigative analysis she had taken, he implied that she might have poisoned the victims with arsenic. This stratagem went nowhere: when he asked her to confirm that a person with her expertise would know how to disguise arsenic poisoning, there was "tumult" in the courtroom and the question was declared inadmissible. Moreover, Torosian claimed that she had never administered *any* substances at BioMed. All the same, prosecutors requested an expert report on arsenic poisoning, which caused further delay.

This past March, the Appenzell Ausserrhoden prosecutors finally charged Rau and Kotthaus with two counts of negligent homicide and sent the case to a judge for a trial. In Switzer-

land, a trial is a much smaller, more compact affair than in the United States. The proceeding often takes place in a single day. But it has still not been scheduled and may not happen for many months.

Earlier this year, after the prosecutor signalled that he intended to stop collecting evidence and file charges, Rau's lawyer demanded that the prosecutor recuse himself, claiming that he was "trampling on Dr. Rau's right to evidence." Rau plans to submit his counter-expert report on Ammann's death for the trial, and continues to plead his case—he recently produced an annotated hundred-and-fifty-page chronology of events relating to her case, in which he describes her having various maladies, including a hormonal imbalance and chronic inflammatory-bowel disease. He also sent me a shorter document about the death of Lanitis, saying that he didn't know why she died and calling for the case to "be assessed by a truly independent, interdisciplinary expert review."

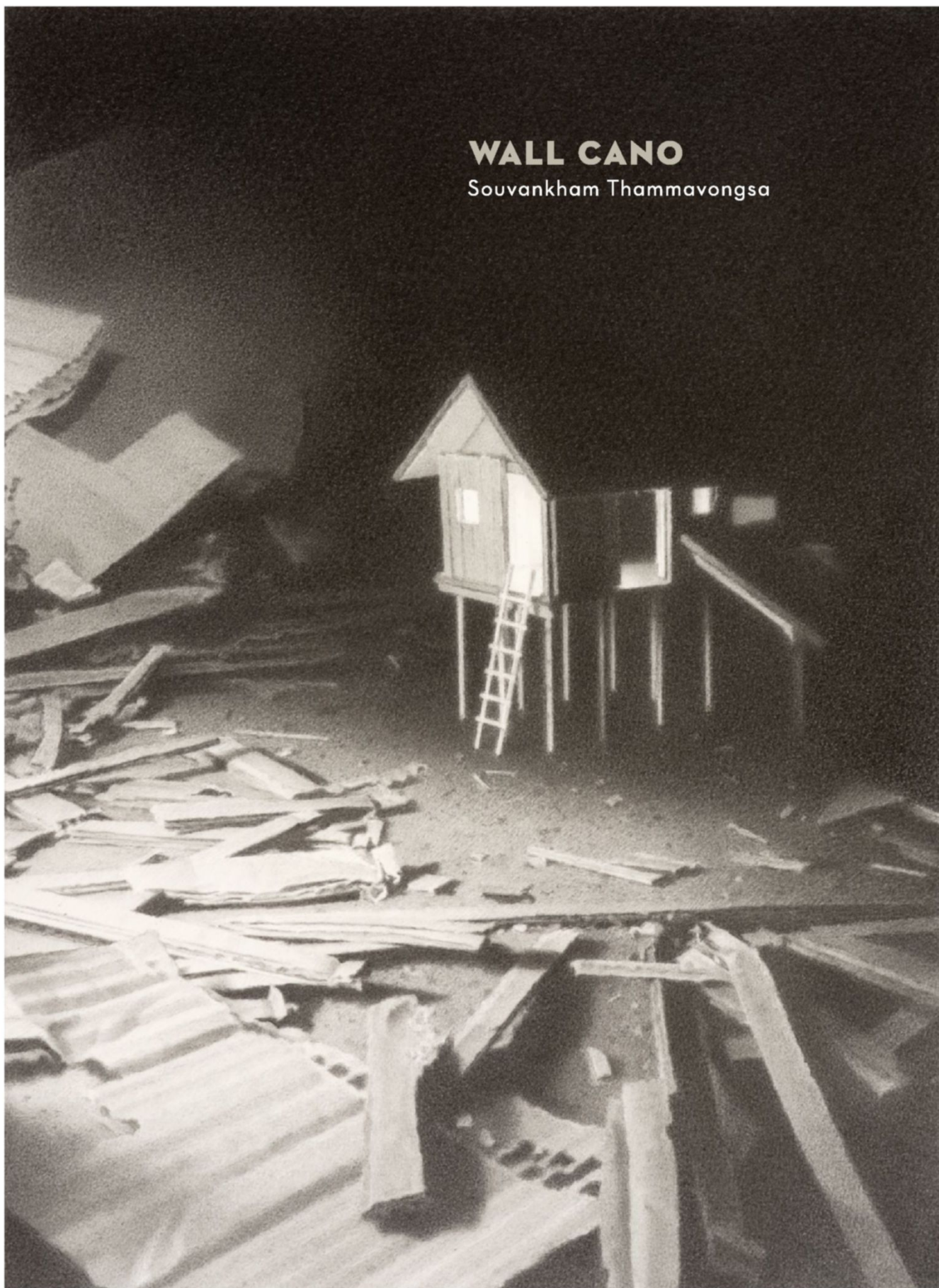
The prosecutor has asked for a suspended fourteen-month prison sentence for Rau and a ten-month one for Kotthaus. A licensed psychiatrist, Kotthaus has started her own practice in the nearby town of Herisau, focussing on "body/mind" medicine. Kotthaus feels that she and Rau are being scapegoated for practicing alternative medicine: "The things the emergency-room doctors wrote down in Herisau, in St. Gallen . . . it's, like, prejudiced. Since we don't do mainstream medicine, we do harm. We do not know what we are doing."

Whatever happens in court, the canton could try to prohibit the two doctors from practicing medicine. But Rau is an eminent figure in the area, and Andreas Dudli, a lawyer for the Lanitis family, told me, "I'm not sure if they have the courage to take away his license in this tiny canton." Rau's lawyer told me he was prepared to appeal the case all the way to the European Court of Human Rights.

Manglis hopes for a guilty verdict, in part, to warn patients away from BioMed. She said recently, "I think a lot about how, when I spoke to my mother the day before she died, she was so confused about what was happening to her." It still made no sense to her that her mother's visit to a serene alpine retreat had ended in painful sudden death. "It feels like I'm often occupying that same state—the state of 'What the fuck happened?'" ♦

WALL CANO

Souvankham Thammavongsa



Mom left. Dad didn't tell us anything. He just got up, and dressed, and told us to eat something. I saw some bananas on the kitchen counter with a few freckles on them and tore one from the bunch. Dug a nail through the end and peeled its yellow skin off. It came away in strips, three thick strips. I looked for bruises. I can't stand eating a banana with bruises and was glad to see there were none. I peeled another one for my brother. "We don't have much time," my dad said, hurrying us out the door.

I looked for a smile from my dad.

He had a great smile, a mouth full of even teeth, and a dimple in each cheek. He was wearing his work clothes, not his nice ones. He wore nice clothes no matter the occasion, except when he went to work. None of the wool suits at the shops around here fit him, so he would buy the fabric at a store and take it to the one tailor he knew. That way, the shoulder stitching wouldn't hang below his shoulder and his pants wouldn't drag on the ground. You couldn't tell he was short.

The tailor worked out of his home, not far from where we lived. My dad's pieces were side projects the tailor took on for extra cash. He worked on them when he had time. There was never a finish date set, and my dad wasn't pushy about it. My dad wasn't tall, but he was handsome, especially when he wore his suits. He wore them to weddings, funerals, any kind of party or place with a dance floor. And he loved to dance. With Mom, especially. They were the first ones on the dance floor at a wedding. My dad always made sure that anyone who wanted to dance would have a chance to with him.

Whenever my dad went to drop off fabric at the tailor's or received a call letting him know that the pieces were finished, we'd go with him, to give Mom a break. We'd wait in the car outside the tailor's. It wasn't long. Twenty minutes, maybe. He said, "That man doesn't like kids." Even if my father was angry or disagreed with someone, he smiled. Just smiled through it all.

My father worked somewhere that had a lot of cardboard boxes. We had a lot of cardboard around our place. We lived in a basement with two bedrooms. My father taped cardboard to

all our windows so that no one could see us from the outside, but that also meant that we couldn't see out from the inside. Still, he kept the cardboard taped to the windows because, he said, "It's cheaper than curtains. More privacy, too." My father also cut out a small square of cardboard for us to put our winter boots on. He said, "This way we won't ruin the floor in the entryway." I don't know why he worried about that. It wasn't like he owned the place. "Doesn't matter. What if we move out, and someone else comes to live here? We don't want them to think we're pigs," he said.

My brother and I shared one bedroom. He took the top bunk, and I took the bottom. He was two years younger than me, but that difference wasn't a big deal. We talked about all our friends at school, and their parents, and our parents. "Did you see her dad? I thought he was her grandfather because he was *sooooo old!*" We were proud of how young our parents looked. They were often mistaken for teen-agers at the high school just down the hill from our school. And the guys in sixth grade would say to our mom, "What's *uuup*, girl? You new here?" She'd smile, and me or my brother would say, "That's our mom!" They'd apologize and ask, "Why's she young?"

At night, there was always some noise outside that I couldn't recognize, and it would take me a while to make up something to explain it away before I could calm down and go to sleep. I was a child who lived in my own mind and scared myself, and had a hard time talking myself out of it. Once, I thought I heard gunshots outside, but it was firecrackers going off. It was the Fourth of July. I thought there was a fire outside when what I was smelling was a car's exhaust. A woman screaming at night turned out to be the blaring siren of an ambulance. For the longest time, there was this pretty, ethereal sound, as if a fairy were about to appear before me, but the fairy never appeared. I couldn't sleep. When we walked to school, my brother showed me what it was. "Look, it's that fairy music you hear," he said, pointing to a porch with a small wind chime hanging from the ceiling.

My brother was really sensitive and noticed things that I didn't. "Did you

see Ryan at school today? He didn't have anything to eat, and his mom doesn't pick him up anymore. It's a woman, but it's not his mom. And Miss Stevens got a perm," he said. "Someone called her Miss Curly in class, and everyone laughed. It must be hard to be a teacher. To go to school for so many years and know all that stuff and then come teach us so we know it, too."

Our dad said that he never got to go to school like us. In Laos, the war came, and that was it. At least he knew how to read people, he said. "I just poo-poo paa-paa my way around until something makes sense to them. That's how English works." He smiled, like someone who was about to be hit but thought he could stop the blow if he shrank into himself and made like he was so tiny he wasn't worth anything. Our mom didn't know how to read and would tell us to take our questions to our dad. When she was still living with us, she'd grab the side of her head and tell us it hurt, and then she would go into their bedroom and close the door. Because of the cardboard, our place was always so dark.

When I think about it, other people were always trying to break up our parents. There was the woman on the sixth floor, who often forgot her keys and would press our buzzer to get Dad to go out and open the door for her. She knew that our intercom didn't work properly and that the superintendent hadn't come around to fix it. So she'd buzz, and Dad would have to go out there and let her into the building, and they'd talk in the hallway. I don't know what they talked about, but Dad would come back and Mom would be so angry. He'd do his three smiles for her. He'd start with a smile that made his dimples sink in, then his lips would turn tight, as if he were pretending to smile, and then he'd flash a more relaxed smile where the wrinkles in his forehead didn't show. He'd say he was ugly and no one wanted him, let alone wanted him enough to steal him away. "What for, to be a pet?"

It wasn't the same when it came to Mom. Any man Mom talked to, our dad said, was a man trying to steal her. So it was our job to watch out for these men and make sure they didn't come near our

mom. “She’s married,” I would say if a man sat next to her on the bus. Me and my brother would squeeze in between to let him know she had children.

One time, at a park on a hot summer day, an old man came out of nowhere and sat on the blanket with our mother. He had hair the color of my pee, and there were so few hairs on his head I could count them all. I’d never seen him before, and I didn’t know who he was. He was the type of person who called my mom a lotus flower or yelled “Ten dollars! Ten dollars!” at her. People like that were always telling us to go home. I don’t know why. It was just a basement. We didn’t even have a balcony.

I tapped my brother on the shoulder and showed him that I had some stones in my hand, and I turned my chin toward the man with my mom. My brother understood. We crept close and hid behind a tree stump that was half poking out of the ground, and we threw the stones at him. We were nice about it at first, using small ones that mostly hit him on the arm. He laughed and kept on trying to talk to her. After that, we knew we had to do greater damage.

I signalled like a soldier to my brother to try a spot on his face. He said, “I don’t want to. He’s just a man.” I did it myself—picked up some more stones, heavier ones, and threw them. They whizzed by the man’s head. Then I picked up another one, and it hit the man on the mouth. My mom looked at us, and then back at the man, and laughed. The man got up off the blanket and shouted at me, “Fucking kids!” I stared back at him and took my index finger and slid it across my neck like it was a knife. I yelled “Fucking old man!” and stuck out my flat chest. My brother slunk away and hid inside an orange tube slide.

We didn’t tell our dad. He wouldn’t have been able to get past the fact that some man had come to talk to our mother, so I couldn’t even tell him how I’d protected her. Some things you just do and you know you did right. You don’t have to wait for someone to tell you.

I didn’t know what homework was. And since my parents had never gone to school themselves, they never asked me about it. I thought that because we spent all day at school sitting at a

ABCMIAMI

I’m in Miami, sign here. I return to collect my former self
And every day I leave with a new one.
I have bought one a day for the past forty-eight days.

My, do I wear many hats!
Floppy for photo ops,
Baseball for redundancy,

Plinth for protection,
Rattan plinth for recipes,
Gingham for controversy.

And every morning Bob’s Barricades rebuild,
It isn’t hard when there’s nothing behind it.
My photo op. I need to need this.

Miami is shaped like a design
Of anything I need.
If I stuff the pain down with more pain

desk—working—when I got home my evening was supposed to be like Dad’s. It was supposed to be for rest, for watching television as long as my eyes would stay open. I brought school-work home with me, but I just left it in a plastic bag by the door. The science project, though, was a big thing. Our teacher had talked about it since the first day, and we were supposed to work on it all year. I’d forgotten about it after Mom left, and now there were only three weeks until this big show. There would be prizes. I’d never won anything before, and my brother said, “Dad can make something easy. First place, too, I bet,” so I told Dad and we scrambled something together two nights before it was due.

He took a piece of cardboard from the corner of our kitchen window and asked me to cut it into small strips, the size of Popsicle sticks. We needed more sticks, he said. The more cardboard we took from the window, the more light we let in, and the more we let people see us. But once we’d got about a hundred of those sticks he began building something. It looked like a house, but not like the houses here. It was on stilts. He said he’d lived in a house like that before we came here. “Now I’m a refugee,” he said. I didn’t know what a refugee was, and neither did my brother,

but I thought that since my dad had said he was one that must mean that we were, too, like the way we carry our last name. Whether we wanted that name or not, it was just there, telling everyone where we came from and that we were related.

The thing my father made was tiny and beautiful and so delicate and tender. If it weren’t for the glue, I was pretty sure the whole thing would have fallen apart real easy. I didn’t want to take it to school and have it on display. It was so obvious that I hadn’t built that thing. This was an adult’s hand at work. All the same, I was proud of my dad and what he’d made, and I wanted everyone to see it.

When I brought my dad’s little house into the classroom and placed it on top of my desk, a crowd formed quickly. Everyone was impressed. There were doubts, even accusations already that I hadn’t made it. I didn’t defend myself. I just stayed quiet. I looked around at the other projects. A bowl of water. If you dropped ice cubes into it and then dropped a thread with a bit of salt in, it would melt the ice and the thread would sink into it. A kid held up a thread, and an ice cube dangled from the end of it. Someone else had made an eyeball. It had labels, explaining what each part was called and

There will be more numbers
One two three four five six.
When I lost access to my password,

I regained it only through months
Of physical therapy muscle memory.
I write it the wrong way

So when I, too, lose access to my left side
And they try to put it together
No one will know this piece of me.

My followers will raise so much in honor of my hats,
That short-lived but most lucrative period of my life,
I never know what's going to bring me fame, but I'm lucky if I get it

Even if only for forty-eight hours of frost.

—*Adrienne Raphel*

how it all worked—what happened when a part got damaged and a person couldn't see. What it means when we wear glasses. I thought that was interesting. Then, there was this brown thing that looked like a pile of shit. I really did not know what it was. It was gigantic and took up a whole table all by itself. Smoke came out of a hole. When someone poured liquid into that hole, you could hear something rumbling and foaming. It was impressive. The moment I saw that thing, I knew that the competition was over and it would win. By the time school ended for the day, the prizes had been awarded. First, second, third, and honorable mention.

I walked home with the thing my dad had made and left it in the living room. I should have just trashed it, but I didn't have the heart. I knew it was something you didn't destroy. So I just brought it home.

When my dad came home from work, he came running toward me, excited, and he asked me what we'd won. He was so certain and confident.

I told him that what he'd made didn't win anything.

I don't know why it meant so much to him, but my dad began to cry then. His shoulders dropped, and his arms hung by his side. He looked like he

was smiling, but he was crying. Tears wet his whole face, even though his eyes were closed. My brother cried, too. He cries at just about everything, and the sight of my father crying—well, it didn't matter why. He was done for.

I didn't know what to do for my father then. It didn't seem right to tell him that things would be fine. It didn't seem right to tell him there was always next year. It was just that he'd never been to school. He didn't know you could work so hard and no matter what you did, it wouldn't be good enough. He didn't know that once you began to understand something, something else would come along and you'd have to learn to understand it all over again.

He turned to me after he was done crying, wiping his nose and tears. Who won? he asked. He wanted to know. I told him that I couldn't remember. And it really didn't matter. What mattered were the hours he'd put into making his house. Making something beautiful that no one had ever seen before. And I don't know why I said this or where it came from or what I meant exactly, but I said, "Sometimes the winner doesn't win."

I didn't want my father to know that something called a "wall cano" that looked like a pile of shit with foam

coming out of its hole had won first place. Or that an eyeball thing had won second. Or that a stupid trick with ice cubes had won third. I just knew not to bring my schoolwork home and have my dad help me ever again for as long as I lived. I would go it alone. The man just wasn't cut out for that stuff.

Not long after this, I thought I saw my mom across the street from my school. I felt something bright draw my eyes, and when I looked a woman was standing there, but I wasn't sure if it was her. She had messy hair, and her clothes looked too big. I told my dad that night. He smiled at me without showing any of his teeth and pretended that I hadn't said anything, and told me to finish my dinner. I tried to talk to my brother about it when we were alone in our room. I thought maybe he could tell me if it was her, and we'd talk about where she was or might be. But he also got quiet, tried a few words, and then disappeared into the dark. He pretended that I hadn't said anything, too. People become who they are, and I think that's a moment when my brother became who he is now.

I am not ten years old anymore, but I still have the same feelings at thirty-seven. Once, I was visiting a friend when she put up a finger like she'd heard a sound from the ceiling, but that was her way of telling me to pause our conversation. She leaned back in her chair and called out to her ten-year-old to remind him about his book report. He said he'd done it already, and he brought the report over for her to read, to look for spelling mistakes, to check for clarity. She reminded him what to aim for. A clear beginning, a middle, and an end. My friend had gone all the way in school. She'd finished and taken all the degrees. When I was ten, I did not have her, someone like her. I had to learn all that by myself. Out of order, probably. Middle, beginning, end. End, beginning, middle. End. What is an end, and when you think you have one, where does it go, exactly, when there is no one to tell you? ♦

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THE CRITICS



BOOKS

THE MOTHER LODE

Nathaniel Philbrick's rich history of the California gold rush.

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

Eight pages into “The Rush: California Gold, the Civil War, and the Making of the Modern World” (Viking), Nathaniel Philbrick tells us why he wrote it. Philbrick, who is seventy years old, has lived for the past four decades on Nantucket, a home that has doubled as the wellspring of his career. After publishing two books about its history—“Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and Its People, 1602-1890” and “Abram’s Eyes: The Native American Legacy of Nantucket Island”—he turned his attention to one of the countless whaling ships that sailed forth from the island in the nineteenth century. This was the *Essex*, which weighed anchor there in 1819 and was subsequently destroyed by a sperm whale in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, stranding its steadily dwindling number of crew members at sea for three horror-filled months and inspiring Herman Melville’s “*Moby-Dick*.”

Philbrick’s own gripping narrative of the fate of the *Essex*, “In the Heart of the Sea,” marked a turning point in his career. It won a National Book Award, in 2000, spent forty weeks on the New York *Times* best-seller list, was adapted into a Hollywood movie, and made its author an eminence in the field of Dad History. Philbrick’s subsequent books include popular-in-both-senses accounts of the Mayflower, the Battle of Bunker Hill, and the Battle of Yorktown. With one exception, a book about the Battle of the Little Bighorn, they have been set on the East Coast or on the ocean or both, natural enough contexts for a man who has spent most of his life on an island off the coast of New England.

So why California all of a sudden? Because, Philbrick tells us, so many Nantucketers before him developed an abrupt interest in it, too. After gold was discovered in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, men who were born and raised to make their living from the sea sailed their whaleships fourteen thousand miles to San Francisco, abandoned them in the harbor, and rushed inland to try to make their living from the ground instead. “Over the course of nine months in 1849,” Philbrick writes, “Nantucket, once the whaling capital of the world, lost a quarter of its voting population to the goldfields.” That is a staggering fact, one that drags behind it a whole ghost book about what happened to Nantucket and countless other places across the country after so many of their citizens left to try to strike it rich in California.

This is not Philbrick’s subject, but almost everything else is. “The Rush” is a sprawling book, characters and stories spilling out everywhere, as dense with claims as the goldfields it describes. Of these, two emerge as dominant. The first, which is woven throughout the book—albeit in the strict sense that it keeps appearing and disappearing—is that the discovery of gold in California set off a mad scramble for wealth, land, labor, and power that contributed to the onset of the Civil War and then helped determine its outcome. The second is that what mattered most about the gold rush was not the gold but the rush. The headlong haste with which those Nantucket whalers picked up their lives and went West was representative, Philbrick argues, of a new and distinctly American appetite for speed, novelty, and transfor-

mation, one that has defined our character and shaped our future from the time of the forty-niners to the planned Anthropocene I.P.O.

“The Rush” is not particularly convincing about either of these claims. This is partly because both are a little rickety and partly because they are too different to comfortably coexist in a single book: one is about history and causality, the other is about psychology and culture. Mostly, though, it is because Philbrick keeps veering off into a larger, messier, less instrumentalized account of the gold rush and its aftermath. A better title for his book would be “A History of California, 1848-1878.” Lest that strike you as dull, consider that those are three of the most thrilling, harrowing, and action-packed decades since the founding of our nation. In a sense, then, the tacit question “The Rush” asks is not about the history it covers but about history in general: Does the past need to explain the present to be worthy of our attention?

If you know anything at all about the gold rush, you’ve likely heard the story of Sutter’s Mill, whose construction on the banks of the American River unearthed the shining flecks that, in January, 1848, kicked off the whole adventure. Philbrick, who understands that what happened next had less to do with good luck than with force, influence, and cunning, swiftly turns away from John Sutter, who never got rich off the wealth beneath his mill, to introduce a man named Samuel Brannan. At the time, Brannan was the leader of San Francisco’s Mormon community, though no



Sam Pit, a Native American who worked at Sutter's Mill. Countless Indigenous people were killed during the gold rush.

one who subsequently knew him would have called him godly. When he heard about the discovery at Sutter's Mill, he did not head toward the mountains. Instead, he bought up every pick and shovel he could lay his hands on, then paraded through town waving around gold dust and telling anyone who would listen where to find it. In short order, Philbrick writes, San Francisco was half empty and "Brannan was on his way to becoming a millionaire." When Brigham Young caught wind of all this and asked his West Coast emissary to remit the appropriate tithe, Brannan supposedly told him to have God send the receipt. That was the end of his stint as a Mormon.

News of the gold spread fast, not least because people kept discovering more of it. In most places on Earth, gold is sparsely distributed, averaging around five parts per billion. But, in the California Mother Lode, a hundred-and-fifty-mile stretch of the Sierra Nevada, you could find it almost everywhere: in extant streams and ancient riverbeds, in gravel bars and veins of quartz, in sand and soil and silt and sometimes, on a very good day, just sitting there. By the end of 1848, it seemed that half the nation was dreaming of going West to claim a share of it. But there was a problem: the available steamboat and railroad routes terminated at the Missouri River, two thousand miles from the California goldfields. To get there by land, you had to traverse, by foot and wagon, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the deserts and salt flats—whose fatal aridity was soon evidenced by the discarded belongings and bleaching bones of earlier parties—and, finally, the sheer walls of the Sierras, which, no matter how exhausted and emaciated both man and beast were by then, had to be crossed before the snow started falling. All told, the journey generally took half a year. Nearly one in ten did not survive it.

The wonder is how many attempted it. In 1849 alone, more than forty thousand people travelled overland to California, while roughly the same number headed there by sea. This sometimes entailed sailing to Panama, crossing the jungled isthmus partly by canoe and

partly by foot, horse, or mule, then waiting for another vessel on the Pacific side—a shorter journey, in theory, if the bottleneck wasn't too bad and you didn't succumb to malaria or yellow fever. Alternatively, you could do what those Nantucketers had done and set sail from the East Coast, track southward all the way to Cape Horn, pass through the terrifying waters where the world's two largest oceans meet, then head north again, clear around the hemisphere to San Francisco. That, too, took around six months, plus an iron stomach.

No matter the route, the duration of the journey was at drastic odds with its perceived urgency. Those who were obsessed with reaching the goldfields were maddened by the exigencies of getting there, and so, Philbrick writes, "a seething impatience gripped the American people that hasn't let go of us yet." What drove these California-bound migrants particularly crazy, he continues, was "the knowledge that tens of thousands of people are *already there*." Some of these were long-standing residents; Native Americans had called the region home for millennia, and, in 1849, tens of thousands of them lived in the vicinity of the Mother Lode. So did many Mexicans, known as Californios, who had lately been expatriated without moving an inch: California had been part of Mexico until 1848, when it was ceded to the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War.

But others were recent arrivals. Even Australians who wanted to get to San Francisco had less than half as far to travel as someone sailing from New York, and more than ten thousand of them soon passed through the Golden Gate. China was likewise comparatively proximate, and huge numbers of its people crossed the Pacific to reach the mines. Immigrants poured in from Latin America, too, especially Chileans, who hailed from a country rich in precious metals, and who taught many a New England lawyer and Midwestern farm boy the art of mining. Thirty thousand French people came to seek their fortunes as well; locals called them Keskadees, a corruption of "Qu'est-ce qu'il a dit?"—what did he say?



Well might they ask. The newly named city of San Francisco, which had been a sleepy port village with perhaps eight hundred residents in 1848, suddenly became a booming Tower of Babel. By 1849, property there had become some of the most expensive in the nation, even when it wasn't desirable, or, for that matter, habitable; many people lived in tents, but there was also a thriving business in "water lots," which were staked out in the bay to someday be filled with rubble and converted to land. The streets, where they existed, were tunnels of wind-whipped dust in the dry season—one resident called it Sand Francisco—and a muddy mess the rest of the year. Out in the harbor, the skeletons of derelict ships abandoned by sailors who had gone searching for gold formed the first and strangest San Francisco skyline. And yet this inhospitable, half-built, helter-skelter city was, for a while, the destination of choice for profiteers, speculators, and schemers from every corner of the globe.

While California was becoming a magnet for those from abroad, it was provoking a political crisis at home. In 1849, there were thirty united states—fifteen of them slaveholding, fifteen of them free. Constantly rebalancing that map had been an unhappy necessity from the earliest days of the Republic, but the discovery of gold in the brand-new territory of California set off a national furor over what kind of state it would be.

Most histories of the Civil War divide the nation into North and South. Give or take Bleeding Kansas, most also focus their attention east of the Mississippi River. "The Rush" redraws that map, relocating the center of gravity westward, to California. As Philbrick makes clear, sectarian concerns over who would control the state's wealth ran high from the beginning, and many of those who went West after 1848 were not just seeking a private fortune. Instead, as would later happen in Kansas and Nebraska, slaveowners and Southern sympathizers on the one hand and abolitionists and Free-Soilers on the other all flocked to California to try to tip the political scales in their favor.

In this demographic competition, the South had both geography and weather on its side. Migrants from the slave states could head West at any time of the year,

along a route known as the Gila Trail, which passed through New Mexico and Arizona to the southern edge of California. By contrast, those from the Northern states had to time their journeys carefully, since the Rockies and the Sierras could not be crossed in winter. In part because of this advantage, the South made steady inroads in the California interior, where town after town soon announced its cultural allegiance right on Main Street, via businesses like the Texas Saloon, the Mississippi Shoe Shop, and the Alabama Emporium.

Still, the North quickly established a strong presence in San Francisco, and it had something going for it in the goldfields, too: thanks to their work, many miners had a profound antipathy to forced labor. Philbrick tells the story of a Texan who showed up in a popular mining area and started staking claims not only for himself but also for his fifteen enslaved workers; in short order, he was run out by outraged locals. This resistance to slavery had little or nothing to do with humane fellow-feeling. "Not one in ten cares a button for its abolition," the then mayor of Monterey wrote, of the miners there. The real issue was that the presence of the enslaved in the gold mines increased the ranks of the competition.

In the end, of course, the opponents of slavery were victorious. When a group of delegates assembled to write a constitution for California, in the autumn of 1849, they unanimously agreed that, within its borders, "neither slavery, nor involuntary servitude, unless for the punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated." A year later, via the Compromise of 1850, California officially became the Union's thirty-first state and its sixteenth free one. But this triumph came at a considerable cost to the rest of the nation: in exchange, the South got a dramatically harsher Fugitive Slave Act, which stipulated that all American citizens could be required to help capture runaway slaves, and established heavy fines and prison sentences for those who aided fugitives.

Meanwhile, trouble was also brewing in California, where surface gold was getting harder to find and the competition for it was getting uglier. Gangs of armed Americans fanned local resentment of immigrants and steadily drove them off their claims and out of the country. A new law required Cali-

fornios to prove the validity of their property titles in court, an expensive process that took an average of seventeen years; meanwhile, squatters made use of extrajudicial means, from burning crops to outright murder, to make them give up their increasingly valuable land. But the worst fate befell the region's Native Americans, who were first driven from the goldfields and then subjected to a campaign of wholesale annihilation. White militias destroyed their homes, torched their food supplies, and slaughtered them outright so routinely that a secondary economy of kidnappers sprang up to sell the survivors, children and adults alike, into servitude.

Philbrick relates all this less as history than as a stage play. He is fond of characters and good at depicting them, and he does not so much trace the influence of the gold rush on the Civil War as introduce us to various

people with a stake in its outcome. One of these was William Gwin, a wealthy Mississippi plantation owner turned California power broker who was bent on aligning his new home with the slave states and making himself one of its first senators. Another was David Broderick, a working-class Irish American politician from New York whose crew of henchmen belied his sensitive streak; he didn't drink, never married, avoided brothels, spent his free time alone reading literature, and despised the institution of slavery.

Both Gwin and Broderick ultimately ended up in the Senate, and Philbrick describes the clash between them as "the center of the narrative" of his book. But that is not the reader's experience, partly because "The Rush" is too desultory to have a center and partly because neither man stands out particularly clearly against the ensemble cast. This includes at least



"Somebody needs to tell him we can all do that."

thirty-three major characters, some of whom are more memorable than the putative protagonists. The abolitionist Jessie Frémont, for instance, was married to the famous war hero John Frémont but was, as a contemporary observer commented, “the better man of the two.” After John lost the 1856 Presidential election to James Buchanan, it was widely whispered, according to her obituary, “that if the lovely Jessie had been the actual candidate, she, and not Buchanan, would have occupied the Presidential chair.”

Another star turn goes to Mary Ellen Pleasant, who was arguably America’s first Black millionaire and inarguably one of the most canny and chameleon-like figures this country has ever produced. “I am a whole theatre unto myself,” she once declared, and it was true; she was, among many other things, an abolitionist, a civil-rights activist, a domestic worker, a domineering owner of boarding houses and laundries, and a supporter of John Brown, though Philbrick gives far too much credence to her claim to have been his most important financial backer.

It is a pleasure to meet these people in “The Rush,” but not every character makes an equally strong case for belonging there. Primary sources are a necessary and wonderful tool for historians, but they can have a fun-house-mirror effect, making some aspects of the past bulge and others narrow. To his credit, Philbrick is sensitive to those parts which we usually see inaccurately or not at all. He tells us, for example, that, although more than ten thousand Chinese workers helped build the transcontinental railroad, not a single diary or letter from one of them has ever been found, leaving a vast lacuna where their own California story should be.

Still, “The Rush” is ultimately more hamstrung by what it contains than by what it does not. We spend the first fifty pages of it following one Vicente Rosales, a Chilean man who arrived in California in early 1849. Rosales was a keen observer of life in and around the goldfields, but his experiences there, though interesting, don’t really bear on any of Philbrick’s broader themes. Yet we are spared no detail about him—down to the number of cows he brought home from a visit to Monterey and the

day job of the man who once dug a well for him—and one suspects that Rosales earned his lengthy place in these pages not because his story was particularly relevant but because he documented it so thoroughly.

A similar problem of abundance attends the book over all. Philbrick has a keen eye and a magpie curiosity, and he can’t stop finding fascinating tidbits to share, from the 1850 flooding of the city of Sacramento to a brawl on the floor of the House that made thirty-seven members of Congress, many of them otherwise given to bloviating, forget the old dictum about using your words. All this is fun to read, since Philbrick is an adept and congenial storyteller. But well told is not the same as telling, and, in the end, the overarching claims in his book are occluded rather than revealed by the surfeit of detail.

Or perhaps the claims themselves are the problem. It is true, of course, that the discovery of gold in California altered the balance of the states and the economics of the nation, but Philbrick never mounts a convincing case that it was therefore decisive to the course and conclusion of the Civil War. Yes, the Compromise of 1850 played a role, but so did a series of political and constitutional crises that had little or nothing to do with California and its gold, including the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott decision, and the election of Abraham Lincoln. To support the claim that California’s enormous wealth helped win the war, Philbrick quotes Ulysses S. Grant saying, while the battles were still raging, that he did not know what the North would do “if it were not for the gold sent from California.” That’s interesting but hardly probative, and countless other factors, unmentioned by Philbrick, contributed to the stronger financial position of the North, such as greater banking and borrowing power and a more industrialized economy and a larger population.

Philbrick himself, having set out to write about the gold rush and the Civil War, nonetheless seems tentative about the relationship between the two, and the one he establishes is not so much causal as metaphorical. “The discovery

of gold in California,” he writes, “was part of a much larger—and ultimately more consequential—rush: the rush to the Civil War.” Yet even the metaphor stumbles, since it is hard to see anything like the mad frenzy of the forty-niners in the very long road to the Civil War, whose origins date all the way back to the founding of the United States.

How much explanatory work can—or should—a single word do? From the title on down, “The Rush” makes much of the idea of rushing, of the allure and danger of speed and impulsivity. Indeed, that idea becomes the book’s organizing principle; it explains why we skip over most of the Civil War itself, which cannot be contained within that rubric, but spend fifty pages on the construction of the transcontinental railroad, a way to hasten the movement of people and capital across the country. And it explains, too, the otherwise odd finale of “The Rush,” which concerns the photographer Eadweard Muybridge. In 1860, Muybridge was thrown from a carriage, resulting in a head injury that radically changed his personality and possibly heightened his artistic inclinations. The accident took place in what is now southeast Oklahoma, and Muybridge, headed for Europe, was planning to put a whole ocean between himself and the goldfields, yet Philbrick writes that “Muybridge had been brain-damaged by the Rush.”

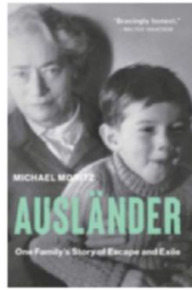
That strains credulity, but the larger question is what Muybridge is doing in this book in the first place, other than famously taking mid-gallop pictures of a horse belonging to Leland Stanford—the former governor of California and the owner of a sprawling estate south of San Francisco that he named for an exceptionally tall redwood tree nearby. The answer is that Muybridge helps form the dots Philbrick wants to connect for us by way of conclusion: the invention of motion pictures (“the Rush could now be projected onto a screen through a gas-lit device Muybridge called the Zoopraxiscope”), the origins of Palo Alto (meaning “tall tree”), and the founding of Stanford University, “the nucleus of what we now call Silicon Valley,” which “spawned one technological ‘gold rush’ after another—the microprocessor, the microcomputer, the internet, and

artificial intelligence.” Like so many of us, Philbrick is gravely worried about the latter: “We are all passengers on a hurtling train. The end of humanity might be the ultimate destination.”

In Philbrick’s framing, the root cause of this crisis was the discovery of gold in California nearly two centuries ago. “This is the world in which we live today,” he writes earlier in the book, “jammed into jets on our frantic way to the next new thing—a world created in 1849 by the California Gold Rush.” But did the gold rush create our contemporary world, or do the two just resemble each other? It’s true that many features of eighteen-fifties California are also visible in the current A.I. boom, from the benefits of arriving early and the outlandish profit to be made in infrastructure—whether picks and shovels or microchips and data centers—to political instability, environmental destruction, and wild inequality. But resemblance is just a surface relationship, and nothing in Philbrick’s book makes the gold rush seem like a motive force behind the breakneck, and maybe break-everything, boom of today. Nor does anything in it make avaricious urgency seem specifically American; how could it be, when all those Aussies and Frenchmen and Chinese and Chileans likewise dropped everything and sped to California?

The more plausible explanation is this: put any group of people within striking distance of a potential source of spectacular wealth, and many of them will behave in similar ways, including moving toward it, competing for it, cheating over it, exaggerating about it, inventing new ways to extract it, creating rules to manage access to it, breaking those rules, and generally using all available means, legal and otherwise, to dominate and profit from it. “The Rush” is at its best when it simply shows us this mayhem as it unfolded in a specific place and period, instigated, abetted, opposed, documented, and occasionally averted by marvellously specific human beings. One sympathizes, in these dark and confusing times, with the desire for the past to illuminate the present. But the past is its own kind of gold—abundant, difficult to access, inordinately valuable—and sometimes it is enough to let it shine. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED



Ausländer, by *Michael Moritz* (Pegasus). This piercing family memoir assembles a portrait of a clan that, like millions of others, was “torn to shreds by the most murderous whirlwind of the twentieth century”: the Holocaust. Moritz, a successful venture capitalist, summons up his relatives vividly. Among them is his paternal grandfather, Max Moritz, who fought for Germany in the First World War, only to be later murdered by Nazis at Dachau. Michael was born in Wales—his father, Alfred, came to England as a teen-ager, and his mother, Doris Rath, arrived on the Kindertransport—and his account is filled with both historical detail and candid observations about the gap between his and his parents’ experiences, and about his mother’s and father’s respective attitudes toward their lost homeland.



Frivolity: A Defense, by *Jehanne Dubrow* (Columbia). This roving work mounts an investigation into that which is typically dismissed as unserious—for example, fashion, perfume, and romantic comedies. Dubrow argues that the charge of frivolity often serves to disparage figures and activities associated with femininity and queerness, by tying those qualities to vanity and indulgence, and she attempts to make a case for its necessity. “Frivolity calls us to our bodies,” she writes, “which crave pleasure and joy.” Though the connections that Dubrow draws between subjects can sometimes feel forced, she nevertheless offers a thought-provoking meander through a charming array of artifacts and ideas.



May We Feed the King, by *Rebecca Perry* (Transit). This poetic debut novel, a finalist for the Booker Prize, is narrated largely by an unnamed curator who specializes in reconstructing scenes from the past. Her “guiding rule” is to make viewers feel as if those who would’ve inhabited her installations “have just left the room.” At the story’s outset, she begins a commission at a mediaeval palace, and decides to re-create a room that would have housed a particular king, whose reign has been reduced to just a single page in the historical record. Soon, the curator is transported into that king’s world, but it remains unclear whether the narrative that unfolds is a figment of her imagination. Such is the novel’s own guiding rule, to refute “the idea that we owe anyone the answers they seek—for they are theirs alone to find.”



Sophie, Standing There, by *Meg Mason* (HarperCollins). The protagonist of this engrossing novel, Sophie, begins the story freshly separated, broke, and working on the production crew of a local literary festival. Her existence is relatively isolated—she is estranged from her best friend, and confides only in her brother—until she becomes obsessed with a writer named Lilac Dunne. Sophie, along with reading Dunne’s books, listens constantly to podcasts on which she appears, and even speaks to an invented version of her, as though she were a friend. When Dunne comes to the festival and the two meet in real life, the author is icy—but also seems interested in Sophie, much to Sophie’s surprise. As their relationship develops, the roots of Sophie’s isolation are revealed—a turn that charges the novel’s argument for the value of connection, literary and personal.

MIXED COMPANY

The cultural collisions behind the Broadway musical.

BY ADAM GOPNIK



The Broadway musical astonishes us by its continued existence. Thrown off balance first by the talkies, then by television—not to mention the pop-music revolution of the sixties, which quickly made its narrative style (set, scene, song, repeat) seem dated—it should surely have died a quiet death many years ago. Some outdated genres really do die: those paintings of bank C.E.O.s or college presidents lining executive conference rooms seemed formidable until the postwar era, when they began to look wan and embarrassing and make you wish for a photograph.

Yet the Broadway musical persists, in its wholly impossible format, imposing

eight big singing shows a week on its stars, which is, as any veteran will tell you, one of the most brutal workloads possible for a performer—and, when it occurs in long-running shows, mostly invisible as a personal triumph. The Phantom in the thirtieth year of “The Phantom of the Opera” might just as well be a phantom. For all that, theatre after theatre fills, leaving new shows searching for a landing spot. Much of this is the simple economics of New York tourism, but some significant part of the persistence stems from the genuine devotion to an otherwise dated craft by an ardent niche audience—akin to the wine world, another diversion

that ought to have been fully mechanized long ago but never quite has been. A subgroup of obsessives keeps the quality alive through sheer passion.

What perpetual-motion engine does the musical run on? In search of a partial answer, the conductor John Mauceri and the Columbia linguist John H. McWhorter have now collaborated on a new and amiably revisionist history, “Broadway in Black and White: The Untold Story of the American Musical” (Norton). Focussed on an interchange that may seem, from a conventional point of view, auxiliary but is in fact foundational, their book’s “untold story” is that of the Black Broadway musical and of how its reception, sometimes hot and sometimes cold, shaped more familiar stories and shows. The book moves from the still minstrelsy-adjacent productions of the twenties—“Shuffle Along,” “Blackbirds”—through various appropriations of the style by such landmark musicals as “Show Boat” and “Porgy and Bess,” to much later shows like “The Wiz,” the Black adaptation of “The Wizard of Oz,” which was a huge hit in its day. All of this leads inevitably to “Hamilton,” that most improbable apotheosis in the history of entertainment, in which a show essentially about quarrels over the federal government’s debt-assumption policy in the late eighteenth century became, for a while, a felt vehicle for American racial redemption. What emerges is that part of the musical’s staying power rises from its capacity to meld musical traditions, and make that marriage embody the political preoccupations of changing times.

Our two authors collaborate, unusually, by addressing the reader in alternation, with Mauceri’s musical knowledge balancing McWhorter’s broader social nous, sometimes with a lovely idiosyncrasy: Mauceri points out that a man named McWhorter criticized “South Pacific” for its preachiness, and McWhorter adds that the critic may have been related to the family who once owned his ancestors. Together, they make a persuasive case that the signature style of the Broadway musical was the genius of Black agony passed through the prism of Jewish melancholy. It probably isn’t insignificant that the creators of such classics as “West Side Story”

Every successful Broadway musical has had a liberal politics and liberal breadth.

and “Hello, Dolly!” were all gay Jewish men. Broadway’s affinity for certain kinds of outsiders helps explain something about its style: its makers struggled to slip “subversive” material into their shows while struggling just as hard never to seem subversive. Their art drew energy from the tension between those impulses. (Mauceri and McWhorter belong to the small fringe group of heterosexual non-Jews who live a furtive, shadowy existence within the Broadway world, knowing their own kind at a glance yet never fully accepted by the mainstream.)

Though the specifically Black shows were marginalized, the effect of their music—amplified, of course, through the larger megaphone of jazz recordings—was seminal. One has only to compare Jerome Kern’s beautiful but still Viennese-inflected scores for the “Princess” musicals he wrote with P.G. Wodehouse in the nineteen-tens to any Gershwin score of the twenties to sense how large a change this was, as Black sounds entered the theatre and never left.

Yet one language can have many dialects within it. What is striking about the “crossover” music that Mauceri and McWhorter examine is that, in Black blues-based Broadway songs, the minor thirds and bent notes tend to carry the more sombre meaning of the words, whereas in their Great White Way versions they are more purely romantic, registering an emotional high, not a low. In Fats Waller’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?”—written for the 1929 Broadway musical “Hot Chocolates”—the blue notes and expressive wail land tellingly on the words “black and blue” in the lyric. In a great blues-derived ballad like the Gershwins’ “How Long Has This Been Going On?,” written for the original “Funny Face” just a couple of years earlier, the blue note lands on the “going on?” query of the title. (The singer is comparing kisses sold at a charity fair to the real thing.) The same musical inflection that voices humiliation in Waller’s song becomes an expression of delighted discovery in the Gershwins’. The white composers took a demotic, street-made style and turned it into one that was declamatory and stage-bound.

The music of the Broadway musical has several lives, or layers. Blues and ragtime supplied a largely Black musical

language that helped American composers break free of European operetta, even as jazz performers then gave them a life beyond the theatre. Cole Porter’s songs of the thirties, for instance, are better known through Frank Sinatra’s recordings of the fifties than through earlier theatrical recordings, while Ella Fitzgerald’s songbook series offers an encyclopedic survey of the Broadway repertory, particularly the songs of Gershwin, Berlin, and Rodgers. Just as we are told to love the sinner and hate the sin, it has been possible in the past to love the songs and hate the singers, or at least the scenes and scenery in which the songs were originally set. Wilfrid Sheed’s fine volume on the American songbook, “The House That George Built,” treats the shows themselves with indifference and sometimes embarrassment. A caustic critic of Sheed’s generation could recoil from the sentimentality of “Oklahoma!” or even “Carousel” while loving Fitzgerald’s or Sinatra’s versions of the songs they contain. Broadway had adapted Black musical forms to the demands of theatrical storytelling; jazz performers took the resulting songs back out of their theatrical settings and made them their own.

The most arresting chapters in Mauceri and McWhorter’s book are devoted to “Porgy and Bess,” the Gershwins’ 1935 “folk opera.” The authors aren’t much interested in condemning it, the way some do, as opportunistic cultural appropriation, with Broadway composers appointing themselves spokespeople for the Black residents of Catfish Row (which it is), or saluting it as an enduring American classic (which it also is). From the outset, they point out, “Porgy” gave Black performers a rare opportunity to play major, fully human roles in New York’s commercial theatre, without a hint of Tomming. Eighty years before “Hamilton,” the Gershwins contractually reserved the Black roles for Black performers, a condition that persists today.

Mauceri and McWhorter also trace the appreciation of the show, and the novel it was based on, among Harlem Renaissance figures, who saw empathy in what others saw as condescension. Even Maya Angelou recalled that her first encounter with the piece left her

“totally consumed,” even “stunned,” because it “had shown me the greatest array of Negro talent I had ever seen.” She went on to win a dancing role in the touring company. McWhorter writes that his mother was “typical of her Black generation” in adoring “Porgy and Bess”: “What mattered was that Black characters were singing some of the most beautiful music ever written.” DuBose Heyward’s novel is, in fact, anything but condescending to its characters, and it is frank about their mistrust of even well-meaning whites like its author. Mauceri and McWhorter show how “Porgy and Bess” gives its Black characters an unusual sense of roundness: Bess’s “romance” with Crown is a grownup erotic addiction that the decent, disabled Porgy cannot rival, one that’s fuelled by a parallel addiction to cocaine. (It’s easy to forget that the lovable Sportin’ Life is a drug dealer.)

George Gershwin conceived the work as an opera, drawing on a stage adaptation by Heyward and his wife, Dorothy, but it arrived in New York on Broadway, playing eight times a week at what is now the Neil Simon Theatre. However ambitious, it was crafted as a musical. The more self-consciously operatic versions aren’t necessarily closer to the composer’s intentions. Often overlooked, too, is the blending of DuBose Heyward’s solemn lyrics with Ira Gershwin’s Upper West Side wit: Ira wrote “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” DuBose wrote “Summertime,” and they collaborated on “Bess You Is My Woman Now.” Lyrics are notoriously hard to collaborate on; here, mutual respect met a division of labor, one wry, one wise.

One comes away from the book thinking of “Porgy and Bess” as perhaps the greatest triumph of Broadway sensibility: Black musical traditions reimaged through the Gershwins’ show-business genius and the Heywards’ storytelling, then deepened by Black jazz performers. McWhorter observes that in “Bess You Is My Woman Now” the blue note falls on the first syllable of “woman,” where it “seemed to suggest sexual attraction.” And, yes, the best versions of the songs may be those that spring free of the opera, including Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong’s deeply personal account and a later one by Ray Charles and Cleo Laine. American music’s endless

spiralling outward is nowhere clearer than in the afterlives of “I Loves You, Porgy.” Black style passes through Gershwin and out into Nina Simone’s famous take and Bill Evans’s imperishable version, where the blues is filtered through Erik Satie’s minimalism to become a haunted, achingly beautiful elegy. Of such social spirals great music is made.

“Broadway in Black and White” feels generally revivifying in its insistence on taking the musical seriously. Yet the obsessive reader may come away feeling a little discouraged, because the world it describes had an organic dynamism that seems hard to retrieve. Of course, every form feels in crisis or exhausted to its admirers at any moment—if the musical is in trouble, it should look over its shoulder at its cousin, the straight problem play, which is surely in even worse shape. Still, it sometimes seems as if three kinds of weeds—the jukebox show, the campy meta-parody show, and the I.P. show—have been outcompeting the native flowers on Forty-second Street.

The jukebox shows (“MJ,” “Jersey Boys,” “Beautiful: The Carole King Musical”) are fun if you already like the music, mostly dispiriting if you want to hear something new. The meta-musicals have their delights but can be no less demoralizing. “The Book of Mormon” and “Spamalot” are the best loved and most efficiently funny examples; the recently revived “Gutenberg! The Musical!” is the most mechanical. But Mel Brooks’s lovable “The Producers” also qualifies as one, with a make-believe score, scavenged from other people’s clichés, that relentlessly and affectionately sends up the musical’s hard-won conventions. The

scores and scenes of these productions offer the safety of all meta-art: Are we kidding or not? Who cares! The musical’s storytelling tropes have become so familiar that parody can deliver the very pleasures it mocks, even as the labor of love that established its conventions gets lost in the joke. The I.P. shows, based on some recognizable “property”—“The Outsiders” or “Water for Elephants” or “Death Becomes Her”—usually end up feeling less realized than executed. (“The Outsiders” won the Tony for Best Musical, and certainly worked onstage, but I have never met anyone who can summon up a single song from the show.)

A familiar movie can acquire a richer musical life, as “Big Fish” and “The Band’s Visit” demonstrate. These shows, along with other notable musicals of this century, such as “The Light in the Piazza,” are among those inspired by Stephen Sondheim’s imposing example. Sondheim’s influence in his world—only the influence of Balanchine in American ballet is comparable—is such that, already the subject of a few biographies, he is now the subject of yet another, Daniel Okrent’s “Stephen Sondheim: Art Isn’t Easy,” part of Yale University Press’s Jewish Lives series. And a good one it is. We are reminded that Sondheim was not merely a dramatist but a self-dramatizer: he often referred to a letter that his mother wrote him saying that she wished he’d never been born, but the letter may have been fabricated or misrepresented by the son, to organize his own feelings of abandonment while assigning blame to Mom.

A great example, of course, can be a roadblock as much as a path forward. Sondheim’s implicit possibilities were

broad; his explicit rules were narrow, emphasizing scene and storytelling at the expense of the delight in wit and melody that had long distinguished American songs from those of European operetta. (Like every artist, Sondheim made his best work at right angles to his professed beliefs: so many of his best songs are either exercises in linguistic play for its own sake, like “Uptown, Downtown,” or stand-alone soliloquies rising from the artist’s isolated heart.) But Sondheim is a jealous God, or at least his acolytes are even more easily enraged than acolytes usually are. As a Sondheim schismatic myself, worshipping and wondering at the same time, I have found what generations of heretics have found: you can protest the purity of your faith as loudly as you like while they drag you to the scaffold.

The Sondheim scruples, Okrent shows, begin with what he overlearned from Oscar Hammerstein, his beloved mentor: the priority of storytelling over the sensual delight of wordplay—a decent rule for beginners, but not one that Shakespeare ever followed—and the greeting-card habit of moralized instruction. Sondheim’s worst songs are dragged down by uplift, whose insincerity shines right through. The man who wrote “Finishing the Hat,” about the artist’s essential and incurable solitude, did not for a moment believe that “No One Is Alone,” as the hastily written eleven-o’clock number of “Into the Woods” would have it. He thought that we are all alone pretty much all the time, amid small, intense, providential pacts of togetherness. “Sunday” is about the accidental urban coexistence that cities provide and artists perceive, rather than “community” or common experience. For all his insistence on making the song match the scene, to the straitjacketing detriment of some of his students, he, like all real artists, wrote one song over and over: the tale of a lonely artist desperately seeking to connect.

For decades, a hope has persisted: that the popular music of the rock era and beyond, the “second American songbook,” would invigorate the Broadway tradition. There have been high-profile breakthroughs, like “Hair” and “Tommy” and “Jesus Christ Superstar,” but they remain isolated monuments

New York,
or Nowhere

Unless It's
Barcelona

Tokyo, I Could
Really See Myself
in Tokyo

I'd Make an
Exception for
London

Fine, Chicago,
But We Leave
Before Winter

Rio, Before
We're Too Old

Don't Tell
Anyone: Berlin

Paris,
But I'm Not
Learning
French

Anything but
Los Angeles

—BRUNO

rather than the foundation of a form. Even ventures involving songwriters of genius, including Paul Simon's "The Capeman" and the Bob Dylan-inspired "Girl from the North Country," have often felt oddly flightless. The attraction is obvious; the difficulty lies in what the songs are built for. A theatrical song gives a character something to do: persuade someone, resist someone, make a decision. The great modern American ballad, from Dylan or Joni Mitchell or Simon, often takes the form of a private self-inspection, a singer reflecting on experience. Even when songs like "Bridge Over Troubled Water" or "A Case of You" address another person, their emotional drama unfolds within the singer's own soul. Such songs can illuminate a character's feelings while leaving the scene where it was. Poetically alight, they are theatrically inert. (Billy Joel is a partial exception: he *can* write dramatic songs, as the Broadway success of "Movin' Out" showed, and that overt theatricality is one reason that he so often seems cringe or corny to the illuminati.)

Lin-Manuel Miranda grew from a richer mulch: Sondheim worship mixed with a desire to modernize the musical and an ear open to everything. In "Lin-Manuel Miranda: The Education of an Artist" (Simon & Schuster), Daniel Pollack-Pelzner traces the formation of someone who was, like many artists, a liminal figure. The son of a Puerto Rican political strategist, Miranda grew up in northern Manhattan but also played as a child at Gracie Mansion. He was indeed the man who would make hip-hop part of the Rodgers tradition, but he did it first at Wesleyan. The beautiful encirclements of American music encircled him, too: Sondheim became his mentor, after Miranda was hired to translate some of the lyrics of "West Side Story" into Spanish for the 2009 revival, giving its Puerto Rican characters more of their own language. Yet his admiration left room for playful off-rhymes. ("I'm afraid it's unlawful, sir. . . . She's married to a British officer.") Like Irving Berlin, Miranda is an instinctive musician whose mistakes can be worth more than other people's rules. He finds harmonic surprises partly because he doesn't know he shouldn't. One realizes, by the

biography's end, that Miranda is doing with hip-hop what his predecessors did with jazz and the blues, and that, as a Puerto Rican, he occupies a place between white and Black, as did his Jewish predecessors on Broadway. His template for "In the Heights" was a favorite show of his, "Fiddler on the Roof."

That breadth of influence helps explain why "Hamilton" is no more a hip-hop musical than "Porgy and Bess" is a blues musical. Its palette is broad, moving from comic to straight rap, from Cab Calloway swing to Beyoncé-style ballads, each idiom chosen for its dramatic purpose. "Hamilton" fulfills the musical's original cultural function with extraordinary amplitude: turning the music of streets and dance floors into storytelling, and making American music whole.

One thing becomes clear in all these books: Broadway's dominant disposition has long been liberal in a capacious sense, hospitable to difference and drawn to the possibilities of a shared American life. It goes without saying that first-class music and art can cut in every ideological direction, and American folk and country music are often deeply conservative—reacting to social alteration with alarm, as working-class Americans often do. Merle Haggard and even Bob Dylan find their essential subject in modernity's threat to a coherent American mythology. But every long-remembered Broadway musical has had a liberal politics and a liberal breadth beneath it. And truly liberal rather than leftist: pluralistic, optimistic, committed to the ideal of integration that Broadway's music exemplifies more fully than almost any other American art form, as different traditions find ways to live together within a shared musical language.

We don't think of "My Fair Lady" as political in the way "West Side Story" is, but its cosmopolitan, outward-looking sensibility belongs squarely to Adlai Stevenson liberalism. "Guys and Dolls," seemingly apolitical, becomes, in the hands of its book writer Abe Burrows, a hymn to the coexistence of New York's Irish, Italian, and Jewish worlds, with room even for the Salvation Army.

The delight of Nicely-Nicely Johnson's revival-meeting song lies in how readily a Jewish gambler takes up the language of evangelical Christianity. "The Music Man," far from being nostalgic Americana, is anti-Iowa: the con man Harold Hill is a gift to the straitened, parched culture of River City, Iowa, and its librarians. And "West Side Story" ends with Jets and Sharks solemnly, if improbably, united in carrying Tony's body away.

Perhaps the crisis of the musical reflects the crisis of liberal America. A theatre that imagines a shared life needs an audience drawn from many kinds of lives. Its economics increasingly work against that ambition. When a manageable investment can bring a decent return,

producers can risk something unfamiliar, and audiences can afford to try it. As the stakes rise on both sides of the footlights, familiarity becomes insurance.

The great eras of popular dramatic art have generally depended on broad access. Shakespeare's Globe charged a penny for standing room and sixpence for its best seats: tiered prices brought different classes into the same house. Broadway once worked more recognizably on that principle. When "A Chorus Line" opened there, in 1975, its top ticket cost fifteen dollars, or around ninety today. A persuasive case can be made that the economics of the Broadway musical in 1960 resembled those of Shakespeare's Globe more closely than those of Broadway today, with its extremes of expense. Affordability helped make theatre a habit, and the habit sustained the risks that made theatre an art.

That regular audience is theatre's condition of existence. Great art can emerge from a garden cottage in Massachusetts or a madhouse in the South of France and find its audience generations later. Theatre needs its audience tonight. Even the highest tragedies, from "King Lear" to "Death of a Salesman," must first of all offer their customers the prospect of a nice night out. Even as common rituals dwindle, the shared passion persists: people still want that night out. The show must go on because someone wants to see it. Eleven o'clock now happens at nine-thirty. Still, it happens. ♦



THE DYER'S HAND

London's Victoria & Albert Museum opens two new buildings.

BY REBECCA MEAD

*At the gargantuan Storehouse, warehouse meets Wunderkammer.*

In the past eighteen months, Britain's venerable Victoria & Albert Museum has added two new outposts. The nation's most important repository of applied and decorative arts, it possesses far more than its custodians can (or would want to) put on permanent display at its long-standing location, in South Kensington. For decades, hundreds of thousands of its objects were available only to scholars and curators. The museum finally decided to find a way to both store and display its excess holdings, and the inspired result, the Storehouse, opened in East London in May, 2025. Designed by the architectural studio of Diller Scofidio + Renfro, it is a coolly contemporary solution to the puzzle of an inordinate collection: warehouse meets *Wunderkammer*. Then, this past April, another building, the V. & A.

East, opened, with an inviting anthropological focus: Why are humans so driven to make things? In our age of A.I. slop, the V. & A.'s devotion to physical objects is a tonic. And if two new buildings seem like overkill, think of all those data centers.

The Storehouse is gargantuan, extending over four airy, interconnected levels and containing a quarter of a million objects. Visitors explore vast corridors of metal racks filled with bentwood chairs, bicycles, and beyond. Objects on display range from the very small—a Palladian-style, mahogany doll's house from the seventeen-twenties—to the very large. A darkened galley is dedicated to examples from the museum's collection of stage cloths; it currently hosts a design by Natalia Goncharova for a 1926 Ballets Russes production of "The Firebird." Measur-

ing more than thirty feet by fifty feet, the cloth invites a jeté from more agile museumgoers. Visiting the Storehouse is like browsing an IKEA filled with irreplaceable items. Instead of Sektion kitchen cabinets, there's the Frankfurt Kitchen, a model of modernist efficiency designed, in the nineteen-twenties, by the architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky and retrieved from an apartment in Frankfurt. Instead of Billy bookcases, there's a gorgeous office—a symphony of cypress surfaces—that Frank Lloyd Wright created for a department-store mogul.

Visitors can't touch the Wright office—there are limits to accessibility—but they can reserve delicate items from the archive in advance and examine them in a study area. A fashion enthusiast, say, can summon a Balenciaga dress from 1954 or an eighteenth-century mantua gown with a skirt as wide as an automobile. The building's size has accommodated the installation of large-scale architectural holdings, including a three-story section of the concrete façade of Robin Hood Gardens, an influential brutalist public-housing project in East London. (Completed in 1972, it was recently demolished.) Visitors can walk along a reconstruction of what the building's architects, Alison and Peter Smithson, characterized as a "street in the sky"—a covered walkway. An accompanying recording of residents' voices attests to the sense of community that the design fostered.

The V. & A. East, playfully designed by the Irish firm O'Donnell + Tuomey, resembles a billowing concrete skirt. Its programming draws from the surrounding borough of Newham, which is one of London's most vibrant and diverse districts, with more than a hundred different languages spoken among its residents. A visitor entering the two permanent Why We Make galleries is immersed in a buzzy sense of generative energy and self-expression. One eye-catching display is dedicated to the work of Ron Hitchens, a self-taught artist from East London who, in the late twentieth century, adorned his home with tiles carved in abstract relief patterns of his own devising. Nearby is a ballet costume, from 1987, inspired by the night-club garb of the performance artist Leigh Bowery. The ensemble includes a fabric mask covered in elaborate appliqué crewelwork and a codpiece

bedazzled with pink sequins. This kind of cross-pollination—bondage wear combined with eighteenth-century pastoral—will surely inspire students at the neighboring London College of Fashion.

Visitors move from one thrilling juxtaposition to the next. A patchwork quilt made by inmates at Wandsworth Prison, in southwest London, features an embroidered fingerprint flanked by strands of coiled DNA and the words “I didn’t do it Guv!! Honest!” A sampler embroidered around 1830 by Elizabeth Parker, a seventeen-year-old servant, takes the convention’s form—to demonstrate the fineness of a practitioner’s needlework—and turns it into a gripping narrative of abuse by her employer. In neat red stitches, Parker explains that “for trying to avoid the wicked design of my master I was thrown down stairs.” Nearby is a talismanic shirt inscribed with the entire text of the Quran. The shirt, likely made in India around five hundred years ago, was intended to protect its wearer in battle—or in childbirth. I didn’t expect a museum of craft and design to move me so, but I found myself on the brink of tears, struck by the palpable humanity of those who had made, and worn, such works. The armpits of the Quran shirt are stained with centuries-old sweat.

The V. & A., founded in 1852, has tears aplenty in its history. Much of its collection is a product of imperial extraction. In the eighteen-eighties, it absorbed twenty thousand objects from the former India Museum, which was founded by the East India Company. This notorious commercial entity, a precursor of the global corporations of today and big enough to command its own army, ruthlessly exploited foreign resources, human and material. One of the most celebrated objects from the India Museum is a mechanical wooden sculpture of a ferocious tiger gnawing at a British soldier’s throat. It was stolen from the palace of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore, after he was killed in an assault by British forces in 1799.

Reckoning with the bloody history of global conquest has become a task for all museums whose collections are legacies of colonial control. But Tristram Hunt, the V. & A.’s director, has noted that it is “impossible and ahistorical to seek to ‘decolonise’ a museum like the V. & A.,

given its foundational connection to the history of British imperialism.” Instead, Hunt has argued, the V. & A. museums explicitly seek to represent a version of British culture that incorporates the historical fact of empire—rather than simply repudiating it, as some on the left might wish, or celebrating it, as some on the right might do. One years-long project is attempting to recover where, and by whom, the India Museum’s objects were made, thus conjuring “the world they inhabited before they were obscured by empire,” as Hunt has written.

After all, this history is constitutive of current British culture. Among the U.K. residents who visit these museums, there will be some who go see relatives in Mysore every year; others will be descendants of people employed by the East India Company. It has become commonplace to speak of multicultural societies like Britain, and cities like London, as being mosaics in which many fragments cohere into a gorgeous whole, or tapestries woven of varied threads. These metaphors take on fresh force at a museum whose collection contains so many mosaics and so many textiles, and which is increasingly dedicated to uncovering the personal stories of their makers.

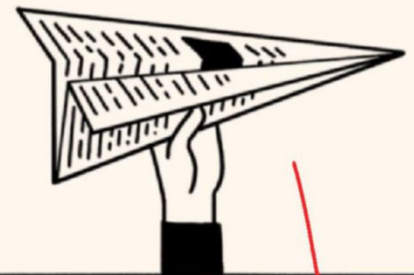
This is especially true when the skilled fashionings of the human hand—not to mention the cogitations of the human mind—are being displaced by digital simulacra. One of the Why We Make galleries features a remarkable work called “Anatomy of an AI System,” by Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler. Created in 2018, it maps myriad manufacturing processes underlying the Amazon Echo, from the mining of rare-earth metals to the pollutant-producing manufacture of components and the laying of submarine cable. A handy sidebar shows the monthly remuneration of people involved in the Echo’s making, from a C.E.O. towering at the top to a Congolese miner at the bottom. The entire piece is, appropriately enough, too big to take in in one glance; a viewer must step from side to side, and peer and squint, to make any sense of it. The sun has long since set on the British Empire, but, as this work reminds us, it has not set on practices of rapacious exploitation. The rest of the museum’s collection underscores the precious value of taking matters, and materials, into our own hands. ♦

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NEOCONS AND COMMIES

"Other Desert Cities" and "A Bright Room Called Day."

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



The "Desert" cast is off-kilter, like billiard balls only sometimes landing in the pocket.

On the night that I attended the current Broadway revival of Jon Robin Baitz's 2010 play, *"Other Desert Cities,"* there was a mad clapper at large, a mercenary determined to let us know whose side he was on. It was clear which actor he favored: Joe Keery, who shot to fame on the Netflix hit *"Stranger Things"* as the moody, mulleted Steve Harrington, a small-town doofus drafted into a teen militia. In *"Other Desert Cities,"* Keery plays a different sort of conscript, the quietly perceptive reality-TV producer Trip Wyeth, a louche charmer negotiating a ceasefire between his neocon parents and his sister, Brooke, who is threatening to spill the family's secrets in the pages of this very magazine. I have no idea whether the clapper was a Keery superfan or just agreed with Trip's critique of his family,

but he wasn't wrong on either count, with the actor delivering a career-making performance: loose, bright, and unpredictable. After his best speech—a witty stem-winder that ends with the declaration "I am California! And California is not happy!"—I was tempted to clap, too.

Unfortunately, the starry ensemble surrounding Keery felt unevenly weighted and off-kilter, like billiard balls only occasionally landing in the pocket. Baitz's story is set in Palm Springs, in December, 2004, at the home of Polly and Lyman Wyeth, an opulent sandstone aerie with meditative views of the desert, a massive Christmas tree, and portraits of eminences like Barry Goldwater. The Wyeths are Republican grandees and L.A. royalty: Polly (Julia Louis-Dreyfus, all sparkle and venom) is a retired screenwriter,

Lyman (a craggy, mournful Ed Harris) a former Hollywood cowboy. Polly, a verbal sharpshooter in a family of clay pigeons, is a dab hand at witticisms like "Sarcasm is the purview of teen-agers and homosexuals," but if she's a casual bigot she's also a reinventor, a steerer of fates: a Jewish go-getter from Texas, she co-wrote frothy commercial films with her sister, then married into Wasp aristocracy with Lyman, who became a government ambassador after their pal "Ronnie" got elected President. By the time we meet the couple, however, that's ancient history: the Iraq War is raging, and they rarely leave Palm Springs, where they're in a right-wing bubble, barely tolerating Polly's now estranged sister, Silda, a lefty dipsomaniac fresh out of rehab, who is played with leggy relish by Allison Janney. The plot revolves, as it inevitably does in shows like this, around a collective trauma. Here, it's the loss of a third sibling, a radical son who, in the chaos of the seventies, blew up his life and warped the family trajectory. That's the dark story Brooke is ready to tell the world in a manuscript she's brought from Sag Harbor—the world's least welcome Christmas present.

This material should feel resonant, given how many families are split right now—over MAGA, over Israel—and how much of a default confessionism has become online. (These days, Brooke could post an incendiary tweet storm and skip the airfare.) The script is full of pungent, funny debates about power, with observations that still land. "Families get terrorized by their weakest member," Polly argues. And Trip tells Brooke, "Isn't it revenge enough that everyone worries about you all the time?" If the exposition creaks, the cast is sprightly, and, for a long time, it's a blast to watch them spar, particularly Louis-Dreyfus, who scores laughs off the smallest phrases—a disgusted "amongst the Basques," say. Together, she and Harris capture something formidable about the slice of Old Hollywood the Wyeths represent—sybaritic and hypocritical, brined in self-pity but with a fierce, glamorous quality.

The primary problem is, unfortunately, Lily Rabe, who plays Brooke in a different, blunter register than everyone else onstage. I've seen Rabe give beautiful, varied performances, from her dignified Hermione in this past

summer's "The Winter's Tale" to her demon-possessed nun in "American Horror Story," gyrating saucily to "You Don't Own Me." In "Other Desert Cities," she's all sulk and grimace. To be fair, it's a hard role: Brooke is a solipsistic bummer, a frustrated writer who spends months in a mental hospital being tended to by her mother, then ambushes her with a score-settling tell-all. Instead of seeming righteous but flawed, Rabe's Brooke validates Polly's harsh judgment that she's a reckless brat convinced her truth is the only truth. When, in the final act, a twist re-frames the Wyeths' behavior as, if not fully sympathetic, more understandable, it just made me furrow my brow. By then, it was hard to imagine Brooke's parents opening up and easier to imagine them manipulating her—defusing, by any means necessary, their daughter's incendiary literary device.

Even so, I had fun. I loved every costume and considered trying to dress more like a Palm Springs Republican, as Polly would want me to. And there was even, perversely, a touch of escapism to the experience. "Other Desert Cities," so topical in 2010, now feels as if it were written in the Paleolithic era. If the Wyeths are monsters, they're also dinosaurs, eclipsed by the nihilists who followed. There's a wonderful moment when Harris puts on a show, mimicking the death scenes he specialized in onscreen: he buckles at phantom gunshots, then mimes shock, his torso atilt. It was his one true skill, Lyman says, modestly, with a Reaganite twinkle—he always knew how to make an exit.

Two nights later, I went to Crown Heights to catch a revival of a play that felt much more timely, despite having debuted in 1987 and being set in the nineteen-thirties. A tiny, passionate production of Tony Kushner's "A Bright Room Called Day," directed by Rachel Gita Karp, was being staged in a town house in the heart of Brooklyn's so-called Commie Corridor, which helped steer Mayor Zohran Mamdani to victory. As I reclined on a sofa, sipping rosé, a cadre of Berlin bohemians—Reds, fellow-travellers, anarchists, and homosexuals; actors, socialist-realist painters, and writers—began celebrating New Year's Eve, 1932, at a kitchen table just a few feet away. Lifting glasses of champagne, they

toasted, giddily, to "health, happiness, and relative safety on this fierce and splendid night and for many years to come." It flashed me back to nights of political hope in recent decades, and I felt sick.

"Day" is Kushner's debut—his early problem play, which premiered, in San Francisco, four years before "Angels in America." At the time, the project felt hyperbolic, largely because of the finger-wagging interventions of Zillah, a modern-day punk anarchist who ranted about Reagan as a new Hitler. (With "Angels," Kushner found a more fruitful comparison: Roy Cohn and the Red Scare.) Zillah's speeches have since been reworked, most notably in a 2019 production in which a Kushner-y character called Xillah debated her, framing the story with an anxious meta-narrative. By then, the Hitler comparisons had a different feel: if Kushner had once been the boy who cried wolf, the wolf was at the door.

In 2026, the gemlike Brooklyn venue lent Kushner's project a magical quality, turning the audience into ghosts from the future, eavesdropping on the fall of the Weimar Republic but unable to intervene. There was no meta frame, and although Zillah still chimed in, it was in smaller doses—and the truth is, we no longer needed her guidance. As the characters playfully debated the rise of Fascism, the dialogue often felt transcribed from some Brooklyn polycule. Is class the best lens for understanding Hitler's appeal, or is daddy worship? Can anything be learned from sleeping with Nazis? When, ultimately, is it time to flee? The cast was excellent, particularly a sad, sexy Molly Rose Heller as Agnes, a movie actress clinging to her perfect Berlin rental, Jonathan Bock as her Trotskyite beau, a poignant Portal Rose as a sexual adventurer, and Aja Downing as a morally malleable starlet toying with working for the Reich.

Still, the real star was Kushner's text, a message in a bottle. Witty, bitter, flamboyant, and emotionally grounded, the dialogue swings, delightfully, between intimate exchanges and grandiloquent soliloquies, capturing the vulnerability of idealists in the face of evil. When the Devil himself appeared, in a puff of smoke, the town-house alarm went off and the play paused. For a moment, it all seemed, surreally, to be part of the production: yet another alarm to ignore so that the show could go on. ♦

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LABOR PAINS

"Possible Love."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

The South Korean writer and director Lee Chang-dong makes beautiful films about terrible things. The question that haunts his stories, giving them a pulsing undertow of dread, is whether those things have already happened or not. In "Secret Sunshine" (2010), a young widow moves to a new town with her son; tragedy has scarred them

with Oh Jung-mi, proves more willing than usual to bridge the gap between then and now. The outset is linear enough. We are in an unnamed town where, two years earlier, a manufacturer named SP Heavy Industries laid off forty per cent of its workforce. The workers organized a strike, but their efforts were brutally suppressed. Among the terminated is a

though, stands calmly apart. Her name is Lee Ye-ji (Cho Yeo-jeong), and she's shooting a documentary about laid-off workers. Ye-ji is an amateur but she has a muckraker's instinct for drama. When Mi-ok whisks a cup of soju away from Ho-seok—he's an alcoholic, and has promised never to drink in public—Ye-ji, anticipating an outburst, thrusts her lens into the fray. "Do we amuse you?" Ho-seok growls at her. She apologetically lowers her camera, though not for long. She knows there's a story here, and Lee does, too.

Despite this inauspicious start, Mi-ok and Ye-ji become fast friends. So enlivened are they in each other's company—and so gracefully does Jeon's performance harmonize with Cho's—that you're tempted to forget Ye-ji's ulterior motives. But Mi-ok is never blind to them, or to another complicating fact: her new friend is very wealthy. At one point, she calmly calls her out for wearing a pricey-looking shirt while interviewing people who've been laid off. Ye-ji has a hunky hedge-fund-type husband, Sang-woo (Zo In-sung), who condescendingly tolerates, but doesn't finance, his wife's cinematic caprices. Seeing her attempt to empathize with her subjects, Sang-woo extends the most backhanded of compliments. "You're different from those people. But you yourself believe that you're the same," he says. "That's great."

Ye-ji blanches at that jab but only tightens her grip on her project: the Chois are to be the battered working-class foundation of her *vérité* masterpiece. Ho-seok wants no part of it. Inarticulate with self-loathing, he can scarcely drag himself to his ex-colleagues' regular group-therapy sessions, let alone unburden himself on camera. But Mi-ok is game to be interviewed, and her words spring to life in wistfully lovely flashbacks. Here she is as a young girl, witnessing, for the first time, the depths of her mother's working-class shame. And here she is as a teen-ager, catching the eye of a brashly confident Ho-seok, and sensing, with a thrill, that her sheltered world has finally burst open. The first time I saw "Possible Love," these forays into the past, for all their dewy poignancy, felt like missteps—a rare concession to the backstory gods. Only on a subsequent viewing did I see the craftiness in Lee's design: Are these Mi-ok's tearily recalled



In Lee Chang-dong's film, a community stricken by layoffs finds itself on camera.

both, but the film, relentless in its ability to surprise, has even graver ills in store. "Peppermint Candy," which had its première in 1999, unspools a nightmare in reverse: it opens with a man's suicide, then rewinds gradually, through two decades of accumulated agonies, to reveal how he got there. In Lee's movies, time tends to flow inexorably in a single direction, sans flashbacks (or flash-forwards). We see the characters' histories in their anxious posture, their stricken faces, their frustrated yearning for a glimmer of transcendence.

Time works a bit differently in "Possible Love," Lee's first feature since the masterly psychological drama "Burning" (2018). The pain of this story lies squarely in the past, and Lee, who wrote the script

welder, Choi Ho-seok (Sul Kyung-gu), who wears a frown so implacable that it might have been etched in steel. He has since found another manufacturing job, and his sharp-witted, warm-spirited wife, Mi-ok (Jeon Do-yeon), works at a protective-face-mask factory. They have a young son, Cheol, an ordinary kid with a telltale core of solemnity. The Chois can't shake their memories of more prosperous times, or of the profit-motivated culling that brought them to an end.

They are not alone in their trauma. We meet the Chois on their way to a memorial gathering for a former colleague of Ho-seok's who took his own life. The grief of those in attendance goes beyond one death; they seem zombified by their anguish. One woman,

flashbacks? Or are they being imagined by Ye-ji, eager to transform her subject's every reverie into a reenactment?

All of which is to say that "Possible Love" is a multitasking marvel: a drama about the fragility of unions, in every sense, wrapped in a seminar on documentary ethics, but one with implications for the fiction realm, too. In an interview, Lee has said that it's no coincidence he and Ye-ji share a surname, however common. He employs a lightly jostling handheld camera that insidiously mimics the formal syntax of Ye-ji's documentary—and, in so doing, leaves the mere idea of authorial objectivity by the wayside. (The cinematographer is Kim Ji-yong.) Lee seems to be acknowledging his own potential for dramatic exploitation, if not of his characters, then of the events that inspired the story—an automaker's restructuring in Korea in 2009 that threatened thousands of layoffs, leading to both a strike and a police crackdown. Lee knows that the liberties of fiction do not absolve him of a responsibility to tell the truth.

No wonder some of the film's most piercing moments are on the periphery. One woman in a group-counseling session recalls the joyous early days of the strike, with their almost sacred spirit of community: "In all my life, I've never felt such happiness." Another speaks of dreading the elevator in her building, lest she run into neighbors who still work at SP Heavy. Lee's films have often zeroed in on misfits and outcasts, cut off from society's embrace. What he evokes here is a different kind of alienation, suffused with bitterness and loss: a mass-casualty event that once brought people together must now be suffered in isolation.

The boldest declarations of solidarity, Lee knows, often precede the quietest and cruellest of betrayals.

After the film's premiere, at the Venice International Film Festival (where it won the Silver Lion Grand Jury Prize), more than a few observers invoked another class-conscious, double-decker marriage story from Korea: Bong Joon Ho's "Parasite" (2019). (In both films, Cho Ye-jeong, evidently cursed with resting rich face, plays the wealthier of two wives.) Lee's contemplative realism could hardly be further removed from Bong's blood-slicked flamboyance, but let's indulge the reductive comparison. Like "Parasite," "Possible Love" leads us into an enviable piece of real estate—Sang-woo's family vacation home, a beachside paradise that was built for knotty third acts. But Lee, who has been known to gut his characters in the final stretch, doesn't raise the body count to Bongian proportions. There is violence here, but it comes at us obliquely, with no inflection or exaggeration—in a sex scene that shivers with menace, or through a grimly mediated screen of documentary footage. Physical force has a hundred ways to shock and linger, but, crucially, it isn't granted the last word.

The title asks whether love can survive what life throws at it: unemployment, depression, addiction, disappointment, poverty. A superficial glance would conclude that Ye-ji and Sang-woo are a dream couple, yet the more we see of them, the more glaring their lack of emotional capital. Miraculously, though, whenever the camera shifts to Ho-seok and Mi-ok—whether they're bickering on their way home or scarfing down late-night snacks on the kitchen floor—love feels not just possible

but plausible. Sul and Jeon have admittedly had plenty of practice; this is the third movie, after "I Wish I Had a Wife" and "Birthday," in which they've played a couple. Both actors have also worked with Lee before, to tremendous effect. Sul was the suicidal protagonist of "Peppermint Candy," and Jeon was the grieving heroine of "Secret Sunshine"—two performances that, for sustained emotional force, have few rivals in the acting annals of this century. They, too, are part of the past that haunts "Possible Love."

Faced with such a high-stakes reunion, the actors, wisely, rise to the challenge with exacting understatement. You keep waiting for Sul to explode, but Ho-seok's sadness lies beyond histrionics, and we realize that he isn't angry or distant by nature; his decency cost him almost everything, and he now wields detachment as a shield against further harm. Without his wife to chide and console him, where would he be? Mi-ok feels her family's losses acutely, but her impishly defiant spirit—watch as she tells her boss she's starting a union, almost on a whim, like a goofball Norma Rae—has armored her against despair. And Jeon, in the most intricately detailed and emotionally liberated performance I've seen this year, gives flesh and definition to the character's sardonic sense of mischief, her sudden spasms of grief, and her deep understanding that the most romantic gestures can be the most pragmatic. Hence the gorgeous moment when Mi-ok joins Ho-seok for a nightcap under the stars—secret moonshine—and affirms that, in the face of insurmountable problems, enduring them together is their only solution. "Drinking without you, it's so bitter," Ho-seok says. Solidarity forever. ♦

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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 Felipe Galindo, must be received by Sunday, November 1st. The finalists in the October 19th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the November 16th 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



“Of course we'll keep in touch. We've got your tracking number.”
Andy McDonald, London, England

“Can we return to sender?”
Lynn Gilbert, New York City

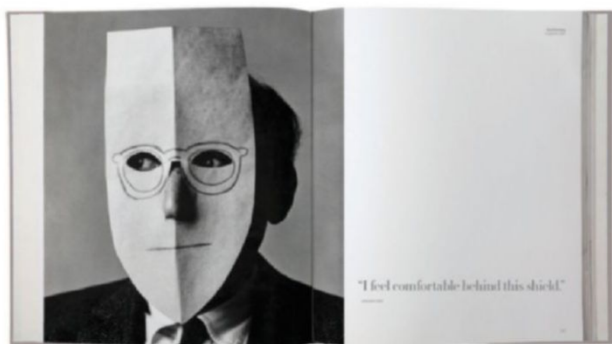
“This is why I wanted a slot in the door.”
Maureen Shepard, Adelaide, Australia



THE WINNING CAPTION



“If I wanted to be hit on, I'd be at the game.”
Vinny Cannizzaro, Harrisburg, Pa.



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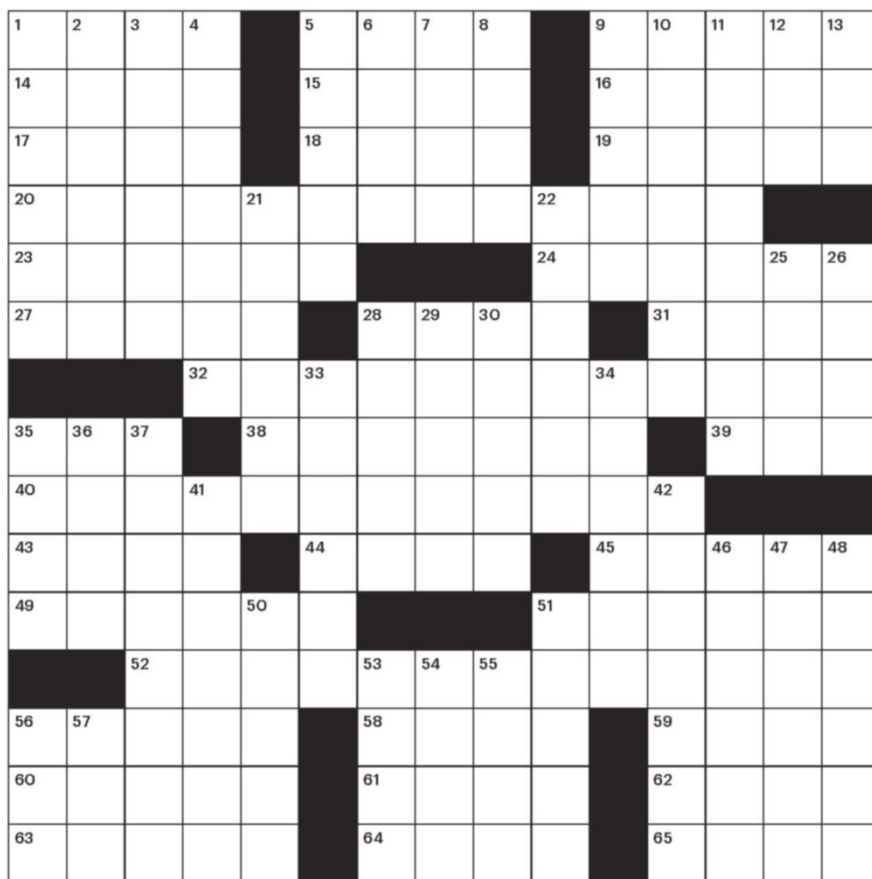
BY ELIZABETH C. GORSKI

ACROSS

- 1 "Sabrina" actor Kinnear
- 5 Clever shortcut
- 9 "La ____" (folk song with the lyric "Yo no soy marinero")
- 14 Figure in a congressional office
- 15 ____ mater
- 16 Leftward, at sea
- 17 Cut
- 18 Space
- 19 Future fern
- 20 Bank deposit?
- 23 Word before age or number
- 24 Élite groups
- 27 "____, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid" (Pulitzer-winning book)
- 28 Great American Ball Park players
- 31 Classic soda brand
- 32 Artwork that's created at arm's length?
- 35 Ending for the record books?
- 38 Manhattan restaurant mentioned in Billy Joel's "Big Shot"
- 39 Skylight?
- 40 Face-painting experts
- 43 Letter-shaped construction piece
- 44 Bath buggy
- 45 Poet whose "Age of Anxiety" inspired Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 2
- 49 They may have locks
- 51 More than just crushing
- 52 Roots of Thanksgiving celebrations
- 56 Rummage
- 58 Pseudonym used by Charles Lamb
- 59 Botanical bristles
- 60 Less cautious
- 61 Ring
- 62 Terse denial
- 63 Killarney's county
- 64 Place to buy a customized gift
- 65 Church section

DOWN

- 1 Non-stop talker
- 2 Central area in Venice



- 3 1994 title role for Johnny Depp
- 4 Sequencing subjects
- 5 Copper head?
- 6 ____ chaat (snacky potato dish)
- 7 "Let's go!"
- 8 Sanskrit word for pleasure
- 9 Ingredient in some marinara sauces
- 10 Name
- 11 Evening occurrences during a waxing-crescent phase
- 12 Comment from someone who's underdressed
- 13 Took a few courses?
- 21 "Who Knew" memoirist Barry
- 22 Has some of
- 25 Ten Commandments word
- 26 Priory of ____ (secret society in "The Da Vinci Code")
- 28 Show again
- 29 1996 title role for Madonna
- 30 Overall makeup?
- 33 Pass
- 34 Capital of Kazakhstan
- 35 Grand
- 36 Japanese noodles
- 37 Shift
- 41 Shrimp boat, e.g.
- 42 Raisin variety
- 46 Music style that became popular in the fifties

- 47 Arena listings
- 48 Subject of the infamous "surgeon's photograph," familiarly
- 50 Suspicious
- 51 Nation where three Winter Olympics have been held
- 53 Place for *un b ret*
- 54 Conspiracy
- 55 Makes less noisy, maybe
- 56 Sen. for whom the Triborough Bridge was renamed, in 2008
- 57 Rage

Solution to the previous puzzle:



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A man with curly brown hair and sunglasses is sitting on a large, light-colored rock. He is wearing a dark, tailored suit over a white shirt. He is holding a small, dark, woven clutch bag in his lap. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with a large, light-colored rock on the left and a body of water in the distance. The overall mood is sophisticated and elegant.

BOTTEGA

VENETA