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MF

- Goings On
- The Talk of the Town
- Reporting & Essays
- Shouts & Murmurs
- Fiction
- The Critics
- Poems
- Cartoons
- Puzzles & Games
- The Mail

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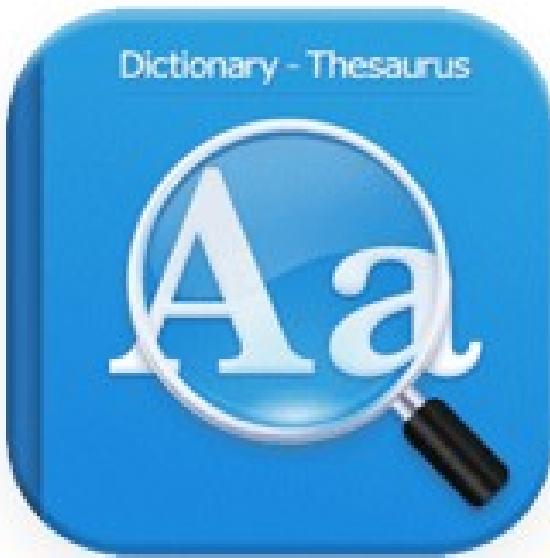
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Goings On

- [Richard Brody's New York Film Festival Picks](#)
- [Three New Classic Cookies](#)

Going On

Richard Brody's New York Film Festival Picks

Also: Rachel Syme on chef-designed weed gummies, the confessional songs of boygenius's Julien Baker, the return of "Forbidden Broadway," and more.

September 27, 2024



Richard Brody

Staff writer

The New York Film Festival, founded in 1963 and held annually at Lincoln Center, is the centerpiece of the city's year in movies. The 2024 edition, running Sept. 27 to Oct. 14, features remarkable new films in a range of genres. "**Oh, Canada**" is energized by the reunion of its director, Paul Schrader, and its star, Richard Gere, in their first collaboration since "American Gigolo," from 1980, Schrader's sleekest work. "Oh, Canada" is a tale of bitter regret, and it is among Schrader's harshest films. Gere plays Leo Fife, a documentary filmmaker who's dying of cancer. Despite pain and discomfort, Leo lets two of his former students film an interview with him—

and he uses it as a confession to his wife, Emma (Uma Thurman), of agonizing secrets from his youth in the nineteen-sixties. Schrader, re-creating the past in sharp-eyed detail and deftly interweaving time frames, rages less against mortality than against a lifetime of cold-hearted failings.



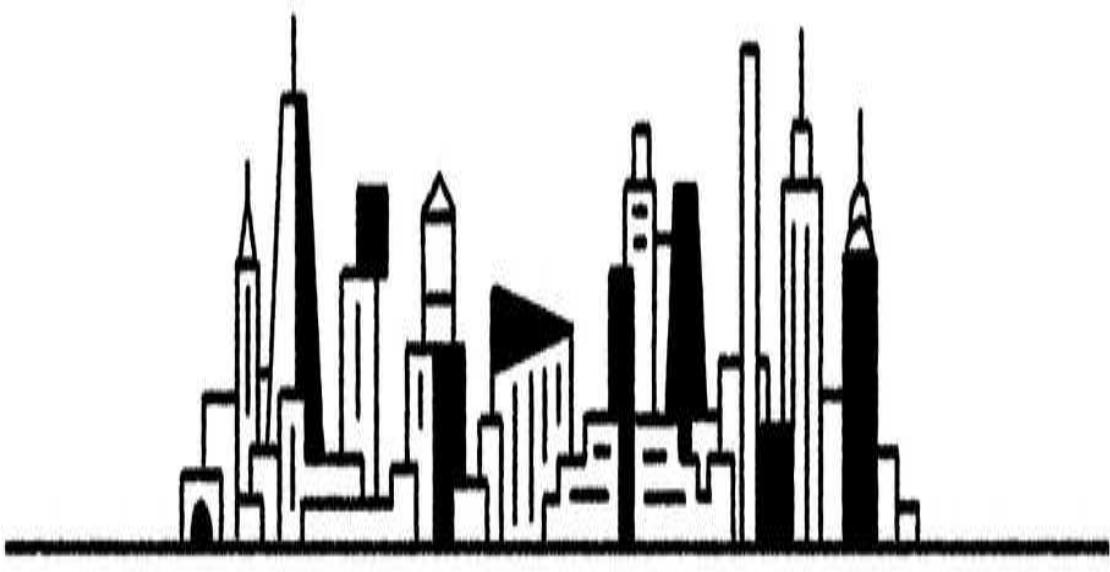
In Alain Guiraudie's thriller "**Misericordia**," a young man named Jérémie (Félix Kysyl) returns to a desolate French village for the funeral of a baker who'd mentored him. Jérémie—whose presence in town incites rumors—also sparks conflicts that lead to a suspicious disappearance. The resulting investigation exposes hidden undercurrents of queerness; examining the bonds of tradition, Guiraudie finds them held together by the radical power of sex.

Mati Diop's documentary "**Dahomey**"—centered on the repatriation to the West African country Benin of twenty-six art works, looted in 1892 by France—reverberates with cinematic imagination and intellectual insight. Diop's analytical visual style keenly parses scenes of the transport and display of art and fervent student debates about the works' return. She also gives boldly literal voice to history, by way of a fictional monologue by King Ghezo (voiced by Makenzy Orcel), a real-life nineteenth-century monarch of the former Kingdom of Dahomey.

This edition of the festival features not one but two new movies by the prolific South Korean filmmaker [Hong Sangsoo](#). “**A Traveler’s Needs**” is a brief, brisk, yet flamboyantly lyrical vision of a cultural outsider’s inspirations. Isabelle Huppert plays a mysterious visitor in a Korean town who teaches a foreign language with a personalized method that blends documentary attentiveness and literary flair. (Hong should patent it.) “**By the Stream**” is a wider-ranging, socially diagnostic story of a young art professor (Kim Minhee) who invites her long-estranged uncle (Kwon Haehyo), a once-lauded actor and director, to write a skit for her class, when the intended writer is accused of sexual misconduct. Hong pointedly contrasts the academic community’s alertness to abuses of power with an entrenched political conservatism that stifles artistic expression and poisons personal relationships.

Among the films I haven’t yet seen and am most impatient for are Rungano Nyoni’s “**On Becoming a Guinea Fowl**,” in which a young Zambian woman discovers the corpse of her uncle, who had sexually abused her, and “**Suburban Fury**,” a documentary, by Robinson Devor, about Sara Jane Moore, the woman who fired shots at President Gerald Ford, in 1975.

The festival’s revivals section offers new restorations of classics, both familiar and not, including Zeinabu irene Davis’s all-too-rare drama “**Compensation**,” from 1999, which is one of the greatest American independent films, a two-part depiction of the life of a deaf Black woman in Chicago—first, in the early twentieth century, amid the Great Migration, and then at the end of the century—in close connection with major trends in political and medical history.



About Town

Off Broadway

Gerard Alessandrini created the first version of his “**Forbidden Broadway**” way back in 1982, and—despite industry panic, the pandemic, and roughly one thousand “Gypsy” revivals—it’s back, with Alessandrini’s latest round of satirical lyrics set to Broadway melodies, “Merrily We Stole a Song.” What keeps his formula fresh is a kind of loving vitriol, the chosen poison of musical obsessives and Broadway completists, a group that is both quick to judge and easy to please. The show can occasionally have a wavering focus, but the impressions are acidly precise: Danny Hayward hilariously nails Jeremy Jordan’s habit of peeking shyly through his lashes, and the hugely impressive vocal powerhouse Jenny Lee Stern outdoes diva after diva by bopping each grande dame with her own characteristic shtick.—[Helen Shaw](#) (*Theatre 555; through Jan. 5.*)

Classical

While Gustavo Dudamel is busy jump-starting the Carnegie Hall season with a glamorous gala—complete with another Gustavo, the baritone Castillo—the Park Avenue Armory has a slightly less ostentatious night planned. The tenor **Karim Sulayman**, a Lebanese American son of immigrants who fled Beirut during the Civil War, and the guitarist **Sean Shibe**, who was born in Edinburgh to an English father and a Japanese mother, explore the relationship between Eastern and Western musical traditions. The pair place composers like Britten and Purcell in conversation with Layale Chaker and Tōru Takemitsu, for a meditation on mosaicked identity which challenges the false polarities among traditions in the classical-music world.—*Jane Bua (Park Avenue Armory; Oct. 8 and Oct. 10.)*

Dance



The **Dayton Contemporary Dance Company**, founded in 1968, has long been known for lovingly preserving and performing classic works by African American choreographers. Now it has become the first Black-centered troupe to take on “Esplanade,” a masterpiece of walking, running, and sliding to Bach that Paul Taylor (who was white) made nearly fifty years ago. For the company’s return to the Joyce, it sets “Esplanade” next to

“Jacob’s Ladder,” a 2006 tribute to the painter Jacob Lawrence, by the hip-hop authority Rennie Harris, and “This I Know for Sure,” a moody rendering of choreographic process by Ray Mercer.—[Brian Seibert](#) (*Joyce Theatre; Oct. 1-6.*)

Off Off Broadway

In Luis Quintero’s stunning **“Medea: Re-verses”**—directed by Nathan Winkelstein, in a co-production by Red Bull, Bedlam, and Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival—the playwright restages the ancient tragedy in a rap idiom, changing Euripides’ flights of Greek lyric into blistering rhymes, rapid-fire stichomythia into an m.c.’s call-and-response. Compression creates thrilling effects: in a swift eighty minutes, a beatboxer, a two-piece band, and an expert, five-person cast capture all the vicious human comedy and contagious moral stain of the original. The theatre is tiny, but the show feels enormous. Sarin Monae West’s Medea is an entire hurricane, and the others—including Quintero himself, as a terrorized chorus leader—become the city in her path, all of it, laid waste.—H.S. (*Sheen Center; through Oct. 13.*)

Indie Rock

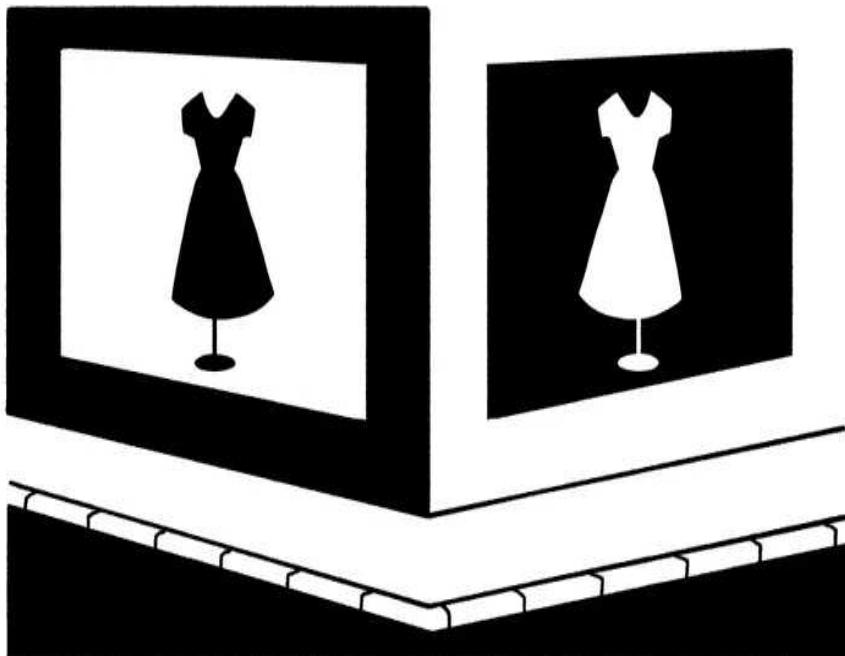


In recent years, the singer-songwriter **Julien Baker** has evolved as part of the indie hydra boygenius, a supergroup she co-founded, in 2018, alongside the fellow folk-adjacent rockers Phoebe Bridgers and Lucy Dacus. The band's music found the overlap among its members' finespun styles, and its début album, "The Record," from last year, was nominated for Record and Album of the Year at the Grammys. Before boygenius, Baker's poignant début, "Sprained Ankle," from 2015, revealed a confessional artist blurring the lines between faith and addiction, finding God among the pews at church and the stools at the bar. Her weary voice relays longing as well as woe, and subsequent albums have seemed to reflect an only deepening understanding of both self-help and self-harm.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*Webster Hall; Oct. 5-7.*)

Movies

Francis Ford Coppola's imagination is excited above all by power, and his spectacular new movie "**Megalopolis**" offers a thrillingly audacious premise to explore the idea—and to flaunt it. In a corrupt futuristic city called New Rome, characters and conflicts from the Roman Empire are grafted onto the gaudy amusements, the political battles, and the romantic entanglements of a near-dystopia. A civic-minded genius, Cesar Catilina (Adam Driver), strives to turn his world into a utopia instead, one of abundance and beauty, but his

mighty plan—which blends science, art, and urbanism—meets with opposition from Mayor Franklyn Cicero (Giancarlo Esposito) and is complicated by a relationship with the Mayor’s daughter, Julia (Nathalie Emmanuel). Coppola’s passionately triumphalist view of a lone visionary gives rise to images and performances of hectic, extravagant wonder.—*Richard Brody* (*In wide release.*)



On and Off the Avenue

The staff writer [Rachel Syme](#) shares highly edible culinary delights.

On the wry, gabby, hyper-intellectual podcast “[POOG](#)” the L.A.-based comedians Jacqueline Novak and Kate Berlant interrogate all things wellness. They happily dabble in adaptogen tonics, colonics, and crystals and yet maintain a crucial critical distance. The duo’s running dialogue has developed an army of fans—called, lovingly, “Hags.” On the show, the two often gush about Jar, an old-school steak house near Beverly Hills, where they meet for lychee Martinis, a drink that Berlant describes as “angel’s bathwater.” This August, the pair monetized the obsession, releasing—in partnership with Jar and the California-based cannabis company Rose—a pretty box, about the size of a deck of cards, of lychee-Martini-flavored

weed gummies, each containing just one milligram of THC. (Most gummies on the market contain five or ten.) The gummies themselves, called “delights”—starch-based, sugar-dusted, chickpea-size cubes, which resemble Turkish Delight in texture—contain fresh lychee purée, along with an essence of “Italian nipple lemon,” also known as a Femminello. A pack of twenty costs forty-five dollars. As a Hag myself, my interest was piqued.



A few weeks later, I saw on Instagram that Rose was releasing another hyped collaboration, in partnership with four acclaimed chefs—Samin Nosrat, Reem Assil, Fadi Kattan, and Andy Baraghani—of two-mg. delights made with traditional Palestinian ingredients (sumac, black lime, marjoram), whose sales would help seed gardens in Gaza. Then, in late September, Rose launched a savory gummy, in partnership with the San Francisco Italian grocery Aurora Alimentari, which features the golden Datterini Gialli tomato and neon-green basil powder (and three mg. of THC). Unlike most other edibles purveyors, who sell their wares solely through dispensaries and tend toward dated, hippie-ish design, Rose seems to be positioning itself more as a luxury fashion brand would, with its online, limited-edition “drops,” of-the-moment foodie collabs, and elegant packaging.

Nathan Cozzolino, Rose’s founder, told me that until the company—which has its own cannabis farm and test kitchen—launched their online direct-to-

consumer business this past fall, they “barely sold at all.” In the California retail market, he explained, “an edible is seen as just a vehicle to deliver cannabinoids,” not necessarily as an object of aesthetic or culinary merit. Rose’s edibles with less THC are intended more for social use. (Rose does make a few stronger delights, but Cozzolino enjoys the microdose, he told me, because he can “still function. It just provides a little twist on the day.”) In a year of selling online—to states where cannabis is legal—Rose’s sales have increased fourfold. With its buzzy releases (a collaboration with Oakland’s Snail Bar is coming up) and unique flavors (salty plum, Magical Grape, ground-cherry cola), Rose is aiming to stand out as uniquely high end.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Song of the postmaster](#)
- [This group chat about group chats](#)
- [Fran Lebowitz schools Julia Louis-Dreyfus](#)

The Food Scene

Three New Classic Cookies

An audacious take on chocolate-chip, a pastelito-style micro-pie, and a cookie-spiked cookie.

By Helen Rosner

September 22, 2024



You deserve a cookie. We all deserve a cookie. Life is hard, easy pleasures are few and fleeting—why not have a little something sweet? Naturally, we do not want to waste our time on an unworthy cookie. As with any New York City foodstuff, you could go for established sublimity, model cookies of universally agreed-upon excellence. Call them the old guard: your gooey chocolate-chip cookies from Culture Espresso, your buttery pineapple Linzers from Té Company, the legendary black-and-white from William Greenberg (though, if we're being honest, the version at Orwashers Bakery outperforms, on the merits). But, if you find yourself wanting something a little different, these three are, to my mind, the New York cookie new guard: fresh classics in the making.

The Rye-Caraway Chocolate-Chip Cookie at Agi's Counter

When Agi's (a tiny, innovative Ashkenazi-ish restaurant with a stand-alone bakery counter) first opened, a few years ago, I felt that my life was changed, on some tiny but important level, by their shortbread cookie, a crumbly disk of butter and sugar shot through with a gruff note of caraway seed. Caraway is an audacious cookie ingredient; the flavor is licorice and citrus, tuned to a minor key; it's perhaps most famous as the ingredient most people *don't* want in a loaf of Ashkenazi-style rye bread. In a sweet framework, though, it becomes wild and intriguing. Agi's phased out the shortbread last year in favor of a caraway-studded chocolate-chip cookie, and I was skeptical that the perfection of the former iteration could be improved upon. What a thrill to learn that the current offering is somehow even better: the chocolate's edge of bitterness, the molasses notes of the brown sugar, the sly sourness of rye flour in the dough—the caraway *belongs* in this cookie, it feels inevitable and ingenious and correct.

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

The Guava Cream-Cheese Piecrust Cookie at Janie's Life-Changing Baked Goods

It's rare to get true structural innovation in the world of cookies—for all our experimentation in weird and wondrous flavors, the cookie's fundamental pastry unit remains more or less the same. The piecrust cookie at Janie's (which opened its first brick-and-mortar shop in 2021, and now has three Manhattan locations), however, really is novel: a sweet filling, usually pie-inspired, sandwiched between a circle of flaky piecrust, on the bottom, and an insulating layer of streusel, on top. Sure, it's got all the elements of a pie, but somehow (maybe due to its teeny-tiny, barely two-inch-diameter size) it's resolutely *not* pie—it has that essential, ineffable quality that the cookbook author Ben Mims identifies in his forthcoming baking opus "[Crumbs](#)" as "the soul of a cookie." I haven't tried a single variety here that I don't roundly adore (cranberry apple ginger! Apple and honey!), but perhaps the most inspired is filled with guava and cream cheese, an apparent riff on Cuban *pastelitos*, with the heady, sticky intensity of the tropical fruit just barely tempered by the smooth schmear. (Great news for the far-flung:

Janie's does mail order, though, alas, not for the guava cream-cheese flavor, owing to perishability.)



The Cannibal Cookie at Red Gate Bakery

Finding myself in urgent need of a showstopping gift for a cookie obsessive not long ago, I turned to Charlotte Druckman, the food writer and coauthor of the pastry newsletter “The Sweethearts,” for guidance. Her answer was three words: Red Gate Bakery. The tiny Lower East Side shop, open since 2019, is where the baker Greg Rales turns out creations that are equal parts childhood nostalgia and willful weirdness, though always exquisitely delicious. His cheekily named Cannibal Cookie begins with a classic butter dough, but instead of chocolate chips or bits of walnut he stirs in crushed Oreo-style cream-filled sandwich cookies (also sold at the bakery). It’s a cookie-spiked cookie that features a rousing mishmash of textures and flavors, with the primary cookie’s golden face broken up by a crazing of chocolate-black from the mixed-in bits of cookie No. 2. A dozen of them, wrapped up in a box, made a triumphant gift. ♦

The Talk of the Town

- Kamala Harris for President

Comment

Kamala Harris for President

The Vice-President has displayed the basic values and political skills that would enable her to help end, once and for all, a poisonous era defined by Donald Trump.

By The Editors

September 29, 2024



At the 1940 Republican National Convention, in Philadelphia, an uneasy affair marked by bomb scares, a British espionage scandal, and the imminence of global conflict, ten names were placed in nomination. On the sixth ballot, a corporate executive from Indiana named Wendell Willkie finally emerged as the challenger to [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#), who was running for a third term. Desperate to find a way to compete with F.D.R., a political colossus who had lately engineered the New Deal and ended the Great Depression, Willkie challenged him to a series of radio debates.

This was something new in American life. F.D.R. hardly feared the medium—he'd been delivering his homey yet substance-rich fireside chats to the nation since 1933—but he nonetheless dodged Willkie's invitation, citing

scheduling conflicts. In November, he crushed Willkie, and by the end of 1941 he was engaged in the struggle against [fascism](#).

The 2024 election also comes at a moment of national crisis. This time, however, the threat to the country's future—to its rule of law and its democratic institutions, its security and its character—resides not in a foreign capital but at a twenty-acre Xanadu on the Florida coast. For nine years, [Donald Trump](#) has represented an ongoing assault on the stability, the nerves, and the nature of the United States. As President, he amplified some of the ugliest currents in our political culture: nativism, [racism](#), misogyny, indifference to the disadvantaged, amoral isolationism. His narcissism and casual cruelty, his contempt for the truth, have contaminated public life. As Commander-in-Chief, he ridiculed the valor of fallen soldiers, he threatened to unravel the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and he emboldened autocrats everywhere, including [Vladimir Putin](#), Kim Jong Un, and [Viktor Orbán](#). When Trump lost to Joe Biden, in 2020, he tried every means possible to deny the will of the electorate and helped incite a violent insurrection on Capitol Hill.

In contrast, the Democratic Party's nominee, Vice-President [Kamala Harris](#), has displayed the basic values and political skills that would enable her to build on the successes of the Biden Administration and to help end, once and for all, a poisonous era defined by Trump. Few, if any, of our readers will be surprised that we endorse Harris in this election—but many would have been surprised, earlier this year, that the choice would end up being between Trump and the Vice-President. The change in the Democratic candidate is the result, of course, of a debate of the sort that F.D.R. sidestepped.

During the past half century, these quadrennial confrontations have become a centerpiece of election season—a chance to glimpse the choice in real time, side by side. Aficionados may know the highlights of debates past: [Ronald Reagan](#), at the age of seventy-three, joking nimbly that he would not “exploit” the “youth and inexperience” of his fifty-six-year-old opponent, Walter Mondale; George H. W. Bush glancing at his watch after Bill Clinton answered a question from the audience; Mitt Romney assuring the country that, far from being a sexist, he had, in fact, “whole binders full of women” he had consulted for his gubernatorial cabinet.

Yet no debates have been as unusual or as consequential as the two we have just witnessed. The [first](#)—on June 27th, in Atlanta, between Trump and President Biden—proved to be an unmasking. On a human level, Biden’s nationally televised disintegration was a poignant spectacle. Viewed more coldly, it was a gift. Had it taken place, say, after the Conventions, it might have been too late to force a reassessment.



It was hardly a secret that Biden has aged, growing markedly less robust, particularly in the past eighteen months or so. If he got through an interview or a (rare) press conference without incident, staff and supporters exhaled and treated it as a victory. But, rather than open the gate to a younger generation of Democratic candidates, Biden, his advisers, and the Party leadership stood in the way. They made it plain that a challenger would inevitably be defeated. Meanwhile, through spin and deft scheduling, the White House staff protected the President and hoped for the best. Tens of millions of voters, fearing another Trump Presidency, had little choice but to close their eyes and think of America.

But staying the course was, as the polls were suggesting, probably a doomed strategy. In an attempt to invigorate the campaign, Biden and his team took the risk of challenging Trump to an early debate. Perhaps a forceful, coherent performance would diminish the doubts about the President’s

capacity to govern well into his mid-eighties. It was not to be. The debate, broadcast on CNN, was a humbling. Biden's resting expression of slack confusion was almost as unnerving as his faltering efforts to make a clear and vivid case for his reëlection. When Jake Tapper asked him about the national debt, he delivered a wobbly reply that concluded, "Look, if—we finally beat Medicare." After Biden gave a similarly jumbled response to a question about immigration, Trump said only, "I really don't know what he said at the end of that sentence. I don't think he knows what he said, either." By Trumpian standards, this was a kindness. It was also the end of the Biden candidacy.

For the next twenty-four days, the President travelled a hard road from denial to acceptance. All of us face the assault of time, but few must reckon with mortality before the eyes of the world. Biden loves the job and thought he was uniquely positioned to defeat Trump once more. But finally, after absorbing discouragement from [Nancy Pelosi](#), Chuck Schumer, the Obamas, and others, Biden, in an act of grace, issued a letter concluding that it was "in the best interest of my party and the country for me to stand down." In a separate message, he gave his endorsement to Kamala Harris.

The second Presidential debate, at the National Constitution Center, in Philadelphia, was an unmasking of another kind. For some time, observers have asked whether Trump, who is now seventy-eight, has himself suffered from some form of decline. On a given day, it is hard to determine if a particular insult, lie, or rant represents his usual malevolence or something else. Not long before the debate, Trump took to speculating whether it would be preferable, in the event of finding oneself on a sinking boat, to die by shark attack or by electrocution from the boat's battery. ("I'll take electrocution every single time," he assured a grateful nation.) There is nothing he will not say. When a group of Proud Boys were convicted of conspiracy last year, he warned that the F.B.I. and the Justice Department were just getting started: "*get smart america, they are coming after you!!!*" Trump has defied multiple legal gag orders, attacking judges and jurors, and has even blamed the latest attempt on his life, a deeply alarming event, not on the would-be assailant or the easy availability of assault weapons but on the Democratic ticket.

For Harris, the debate presented an opportunity to expose Trump at his worst. All she had to do was to prick his vanity. Trump's rallies were boring, she suggested. Military leaders thought he was a "disgrace." Foreign leaders ate his lunch, considered him weak, laughed at him. With growing rage, Trump began howling from a familiar hymnal. America is a "failing nation." Migrants are pouring in from "prisons and jails, from mental institutions and insane asylums." Indelibly, Trump picked up on a racist, [J. D. Vance](#)-endorsed conspiracy theory about Haitian migrants in Ohio and gave it his full voice:

In Springfield, they're eating the *dogs*. The people that came in. They're eating the *cats*. They're eating the *pets* of the people that live there. And this is what's happening in our country. And it's a shame.

Trump went on in this vein of fact-free bluster, bringing discomfort even to some fellow-Republicans. He had been calling Harris "dumb as a rock" and "unable to speak properly without a teleprompter" or even "put two sentences together," while mocking her looks, her family, her racial identity, her personal life. He refused to pronounce her name correctly. Harris decided to flick all that lint from her shoulder. She left it to the moderators to correct Trump's facts and the electorate to behold his lunacy. It was a performance that had the potential to lay bare Trump's character for those voters who might not have been paying much attention. After the debate, Trump, of course, declared a "*BIG WIN*," but he then issued a loser's proclamation: "*there will be no third debate*." Some days later, he had more to say about that night, particularly about an endorsement that came his opponent's way minutes after the debate's conclusion. On his social-media platform, he wrote, "*i hate taylor swift!*"

In the fall of 2016, the editors of *The New Yorker* published an enthusiastic endorsement of Hillary Clinton:

On November 8th, barring some astonishment, the people of the United States will, after two hundred and forty years, send a woman to the White House. The election of Hillary Clinton is an event that we will welcome for its immense historical importance, and greet with indescribable relief. It will be especially gratifying to have a woman as

commander-in-chief after such a sickeningly sexist and racist campaign, one that exposed so starkly how far our society has to go.

The lack of sufficient caution remains, well, an astonishment. We all learned a painful lesson. Trump has never won the national popular vote, and the elections of 2018 and 2020 were setbacks for the Republicans; in 2022, the anticipated “red wave” failed to materialize. And yet in rural towns, in struggling deindustrialized cities, in the South and the Midwest, his popularity is broad and deep. His strength among Black and Latino men has grown. He has the ardent backing of tech billionaires like [Elon Musk](#), right-wing legal activists like Leonard Leo, and no small number of Wall Street executives whose highest priorities are to prevent regulation and changes to their tax status. Coming out of the [Democratic National Convention](#), and then the September 10th debate, Harris made extraordinary inroads with the electorate; she’s got the “vibes,” as this year’s cliché has it. But the race remains very close. In both 2016 and 2020, Trump outperformed the polls. No responsible assessment of the contest has the luxury of focussing only on the imperatives for a Harris Administration and gliding past the ramifications of another Trump Administration.

There’s every reason to think that Trump II would be far worse than Trump I. Twice impeached, found liable for sexual abuse, convicted of thirty-four felony counts, and facing many more state and federal charges, Trump would return to the White House in a spirit of vengeance. He would immediately set about betraying his oath to “preserve, protect, and defend” the Constitution and wage battle against the independence of the Department of Justice in order to preserve, protect, and defend himself. He has made it clear that he would also use the powers at his disposal to punish his opponents. And this time there would be no advisers who would rein him in.



Trump is a menacing presence in American life, and most of his former associates know it. Of his forty-two former Cabinet secretaries, only half have endorsed him. More than two hundred staffers for four previous Republican Presidents and Presidential candidates have endorsed the Democratic ticket. High-ranking officials who once surrounded Trump—including former Vice-President [Mike Pence](#), former Defense Secretaries Jim Mattis and Mark Esper, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former chief of staff John Kelly, the former national-security advisers [John Bolton](#) and H. R. McMaster, and the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley—regard him as unfit, a threat to national security.

Trump's campaign has centered on immigration. His first-term abominations included family separation, the Muslim ban, and the decimation of the refugee and asylum system. Now he and advisers like [Stephen Miller](#) want to carry out mass deportations reminiscent of the Eisenhower Administration's "Operation Wetback," promising the creation of vast internment camps for undocumented immigrants. Such efforts would require the participation of the Department of Defense and the National Guard. These goals are not only unrealistic; they're undemocratic.

There are more than eleven million undocumented immigrants living in the United States; at least sixty per cent of them have lived here for more than a

decade. Under Trump, federal agents would target anyone they could, without clear guidelines or priorities. This policy would tear apart families, unleash fear in immigrant communities, and lead to racial profiling and discrimination.

A second Trump Administration also augurs economic disaster. His promised tax cuts would hollow out the government's finances, especially if he manages to enact the escalating measures that he has promised while campaigning, such as making Social Security benefits tax-free. Then, there's his plan to impose tariffs of up to twenty per cent on imports, plus much higher duties on anything made in China. According to credible economic models, this would bring a resurgence of inflation, raising the cost of living for those least able to afford it.

Trump's effect on the judiciary would be no less alarming. In his first term, he appointed three Supreme Court Justices, who played an essential role in eliminating the constitutional right to an abortion. Twenty-two states have since either restricted the procedure or banned it outright, and states in the latter category (including Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi) have some of the country's highest rates of maternal and infant mortality.

Nor is this the only respect in which Trump's judicial appointments have imperilled public health and safety. The judges he named to the federal bench have continued his campaign of regulatory sabotage. A series of recent Supreme Court rulings have invited polluting industries to challenge pretty much any rule, old or new, that they don't like.

Despite such rulings—and despite a recklessly expansive opinion about Presidential immunity—Trump has sometimes complained that the Court remains insufficiently compliant. Three Justices are currently in their seventies; if Trump gets another round of picks, he is likely to make personal loyalty a deciding factor. Notwithstanding a constitutional duty to “take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed,” he has indicated that, once in office, he would dismiss federal criminal cases pending against him, and, with the help of a suitably pliable Attorney General, he would almost certainly fire the special counsel Jack Smith. “I have the absolute right to pardon myself,” Trump has said. A subservient Justice Department and judiciary could readily be enlisted in his vendettas: Trump—who has

insinuated that Mark Milley should have been executed for disloyalty—has also said that he might well prosecute political opponents, including Joe Biden.

Trump's record on the environment is the worst of any President in modern history. His Administration rolled back nearly a hundred regulations aimed at protecting the nation's air, water, and wildlife. It dismantled Obama-era efforts to limit greenhouse-gas emissions and withdrew the U.S. from the Paris climate agreement. Trump's Department of the Interior rushed to lease public lands for oil and gas drilling, and his Department of Energy worked methodically to weaken efficiency standards. A 2020 analysis by the Rhodium Group estimated that the Trump Administration's actions would result in the release of an extra 1.8 billion tons of CO₂ by 2035, a planetarily disastrous outcome. And Trump has continued to scoff at climate science. Talking to Elon Musk, in August, he asserted that one impact of sea-level rise would be the creation of “more oceanfront property.”

Discussion about foreign policy in this election season has been, as always, limited at best. Trump's pronouncements are either flip (“I don't give a shit about *nato*”) or dismaying in both their specifics and their evasions. With respect to the horrific events of the past year in the Middle East—the Hamas attack on October 7th, in which twelve hundred people were killed and more than two hundred taken hostage, and Israel's subsequent war in Gaza, which has left more than forty thousand Palestinians dead and countless people displaced—Trump's response is that it “would have never happened” if he had been in office. When he was in the White House, he presided over the signing of the Abraham Accords, which promised a new era in relations between Israel and more of its Arab neighbors but paid almost no attention to the rights and the future of the Palestinian people.

In the recent debate, Trump was asked simply if he wanted Ukraine to prevail against its invader, Putin's Russia. Trump, who appears to prefer aggressive Russian authoritarianism to Ukraine's evolving democracy, could not bring himself to answer in the affirmative and convey support for Ukraine's struggle to preserve its sovereignty and independence. Indeed, Trump radiates contempt for Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, who failed to deliver on Trump's thuggish demand, in 2019, that, in exchange for weapons shipments already earmarked for Kyiv, he investigate the Biden

family. Putin, who has shredded nascent democratic institutions and procedures in his own country to create a system based solely on his authority, is more Trump's style.

Trump is no more assuring when it comes to China policy. [Xi Jinping](#), whom Trump has recently praised as a “brilliant guy” who “runs 1.4 billion people with an iron fist,” believes that the world is undergoing a realignment —“changes unseen in a century.” Once again, Trump seems uninterested. He has suggested that he might leave Taiwan to fend for itself in the event of a Chinese attack. The island should “pay us for defense,” he said. Trump warns of another world war, and yet here, too, his policies seem designed to encourage aggression and destabilize the international order.

In every arena, there is little question that a Harris Presidency promises far greater sanity and far greater humanity. As recently as three months ago, the Washington cognoscenti cast aspersions on her political skills. These quickly evaporated as Harris and her running mate, [Tim Walz](#), the shrewd and appealing governor of Minnesota, have rapidly proved to be effective campaigners. Their swift transformation of the Democratic Party’s prospects for November has been astonishing. Harris deserves enormous credit for stepping fearlessly into the role that fate has dealt her. In the face of a malign opponent, she has behaved with poise, conviction, and intelligence. Of course, her ability to carry out her policy ambitions would improve immeasurably with the election of Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate. But, whatever the circumstances, her positions on the critical issues are rational, undergirded by a basic sense of decency, and often compelling.

Where Trump promises mass deportations, she has expressed support both for boosting border enforcement and for opening avenues that would lead to legal immigration. The refugee program, which is both a moral imperative and a pragmatic tool of U.S. foreign policy, has grown substantially during the Biden-Harris Administration. The government has also tempered interior enforcement, allowing the large undocumented population, particularly those with families and deep ties to local communities, to live without constant fear of arrest and deportation.

The Biden-Harris record on asylum at the border is mixed, partly because the policy solutions are far more complex. Harris has said that she would support a bipartisan Senate bill that drastically curtails asylum, and, in the current climate, support for that bill is politically expedient. But there is good reason to believe that, if elected, Harris could be pushed to combine increasing vigilance at the border with more policies that would provide relief to those in desperate need. She has been clear that she would protect undocumented families and find ways to bring a sense of compassion to the immigration system. Congress, to be sure, has been a barrier to any meaningful efforts at immigration reform; conservative courts, together with Republican state attorneys general, would try to limit what Harris could do by executive order. But the alternative is unimaginably bad.

On the subject of economics, Harris's proposals have sometimes lacked detail, but they thoughtfully address concerns of working-class and middle-class Americans, with a particular focus on the cost of housing. President Biden, for his part, has made a concerted effort to reëstablish the Democratic Party's bond with blue-collar voters. He has been unusually pro-union and pro-manufacturing. There's a reason that, after the disastrous first debate, some of the most diehard Biden loyalists were on the Party's left. The inflation that rose earlier in his term—and that his political adversaries have used to define his economic record—has now abated, while Biden can be credited with passing programs that directed federal spending toward badly needed infrastructure projects and green-energy projects. The U.S. is currently leading its peers in the rate of economic growth.

Owing to Senate opposition, Biden has struggled to follow through on his ambition to bolster the “care economy,” through paid family leave, child tax credits, and other measures. Although Harris has pulled back from Biden's positions in certain areas—she favors, for example, a more modest corporate tax increase—these family-relief programs are the part of Biden's agenda that she is most enthusiastic about. She will push hard for them, alongside her initiatives aimed at easing the housing crisis.

For the Harris campaign, the most emotionally galvanizing issue has been abortion. This will be the first Presidential election since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade. Close to ninety million women have registered to vote this November, and historical data show that women have favored

Democrats over Republicans in every general election since 1992. As Vice-President, Harris has emerged as a leading voice on abortion, framing it powerfully as a matter of bodily autonomy and a right to health care. She has called for concrete policy changes, such as reinstating federal protections for abortion, and has never shied away from making forceful statements on the issue. In March, Harris toured a Planned Parenthood clinic in Minnesota, becoming the first Vice-President to make a public appearance at an abortion provider.

Leaders in the field of women's health have praised her directness and see it as a welcome change from Biden's wavering stance. (In this year's State of the Union address, he failed to say the word "abortion" once, even though it was included in his prepared remarks.) As a senator, she sponsored bills designed to improve maternal health and guarantee access to contraception. In 2018, during Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings, she memorably asked him, "Can you think of any laws that give government the power to make decisions about the male body?" She also sought to limit a state's ability to ban abortion unilaterally. "If there are those who dare to take the freedom to make such a fundamental decision for an individual, which is about one's own body," Harris said of abortion rights at a campaign fund-raiser in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, "what other freedoms could be on the table for the taking?"

Harris has a reasonably strong environmental record, even if in recent months she has chosen to give it only modest attention. As California's attorney general, she pursued several high-profile cases against polluters, including one against ConocoPhillips for endangering water supplies. In 2016, she sued the Obama Administration over a plan to allow offshore fracking in the Santa Barbara Channel. (A federal judge sided with Harris, and an injunction remains in place.) In the Senate, she promoted electric school buses and was an early co-sponsor of a resolution calling for a Green New Deal. Running for President in 2019, Harris, who has called climate change an "existential threat," said that she would ban fracking for oil and gas. She has since reversed that position, but, as Vice-President, she cast the tie-breaking vote for the Inflation Reduction Act, which contains hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of new spending and tax breaks for clean-energy projects.



On foreign policy, Harris, who has spent many hours in national-security briefings, speaks the language of liberal internationalism, echoing Biden's policies, from Ukraine to the Middle East. But she is of a different generation than Biden. We can reasonably hope that, as she maintains his commitment to traditional allies and alliances, she will also employ American leverage when those allies are acting heedlessly. With respect to Gaza, she has voiced support for two states for two peoples; she has reasserted Israel's right to security while at the same time evoking the "heartbreaking" suffering of the Palestinian people, and calling for an immediate end to the war, with a resolution that would enable Palestinians to "realize their right to dignity, security, freedom, and self-determination." But she also will need to act decisively in the United States' interest when dealing with someone like Benjamin Netanyahu, who has frequently given American Presidents the back of his hand while benefitting immensely from American support.

With regard to China, Harris is likely to extend Biden's posture of watchful, skeptical competitiveness. A former prosecutor, she often views foreign policy through the lens of international law, and she has rebuked China for expanding its territorial footprint. In 2022, shortly after her first meeting with Xi, when some leaders might have attempted to send reassuring signals, Harris did the opposite: during a visit to the Philippines, she vowed

America's support "in the face of intimidation and coercion in the South China Sea."

Four years ago, in our endorsement of Joe Biden, we said that, while he was leading in the polls, we hoped he would displace Trump "by a margin that prevents prolonged dispute or the kind of civil unrest that Trump appears to relish." We know what happened: the margins, in four decisive states, were extremely narrow, and Trump refused to concede. Instead, he levelled wild accusations and filed dozens of lawsuits. When those failed, he called on his *MAGA* believers to march on the Capitol. This time around, the Trump campaign and various right-wing groups have already deployed deny-the-vote efforts around the country, particularly in swing states like Georgia, Pennsylvania, Nevada, and Arizona. There is every likelihood that, if Trump loses, the drama could go on for weeks or months after Election Day. He has made no secret of the fact that he is willing to use every lever, deploy every dirty trick, political and rhetorical, to bring the country to the brink once more.

And so the choice is stark. The United States simply cannot endure another four years of Donald Trump. He is an agent of chaos, an enemy of liberal democracy, and a threat to America's moral standing in the world. Kamala Harris—who has shown herself to be sensible, humane, and liberal-minded—is our choice for the Presidency. At the National Constitution Center, in Philadelphia, a few weeks ago, the American people were able to see both the stakes of this election and the vast differences between the candidates. The right choice—the necessary choice—is beyond debate. ♦

Reporting & Essays

- [Is a Chat with a Bot a Conversation?](#)
- [Can Harris Stop Blue-Collar Workers from Defecting to Donald Trump?](#)
- [Has Social Media Fuelled a Teen-Suicide Crisis?](#)
- [Ras Baraka, Reasonable Radical](#)

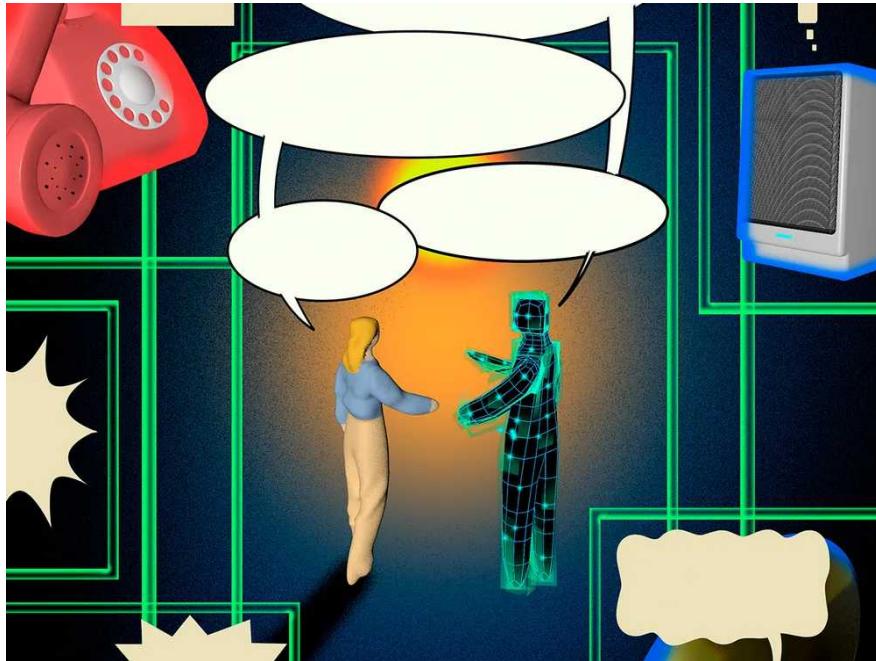
Onward and Upward with Technology

Is a Chat with a Bot a Conversation?

An artificial voice has long been a dream of tinkerers and technologists. Now that A.I. can talk, though, we may forget who we're talking to.

By Jill Lepore

September 30, 2024



You are at the Princess's ball, and she is telling you a secret, but her orchestra of bears is making such a fearful lot of noise you cannot hear what she is saying. What do you say, dear?

I beg your pardon.

—Sesyle Joslin and Maurice Sendak, [“What Do You Say, Dear? A Book of Manners for All Occasions,”](#) 1958

I'd lean in closer and say, “Could you repeat that? The bear-itone section is a bit too enthusiastic tonight!”

—GPT-4o, Advanced Voice Mode, 2024

In 1958, the year the illustrated children's book "What Do You Say, Dear?" appeared, the leaders of a field newly dubbed "artificial intelligence" spoke at a conference in Teddington, England, on "The Mechanisation of Thought Processes." Marvin Minsky, of M.I.T., talked about heuristic programming; [Alan Turing](#) gave a paper called "Learning Machines"; Grace Hopper assessed the state of computer languages; and scientists from [Bell Labs](#) débuted a computer that could synthesize human speech by having it sing "Daisy Bell" ("Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do . . ."). Or no, wait, that last bit, that's wrong. I heard about it from [ChatGPT](#)'s Advanced Voice Mode, which might be merely half a Mars rover short of being a teeth-chatteringly terrifying marvel of the modern world but is as inclined to natter on about nonsense as the text-only mode, if more volubly. I gather that this is called hallucinating. Bell Labs did invent a machine that could sing "Daisy Bell," but that didn't happen until 1961. Advanced Voice Mode also told me that thing about Alan Turing presenting a paper at Teddington in 1958, and, because its personality is wide-eyed and wonderstruck, it added some musings. (Unlike standard Voice Mode—which involves recording your question and then uploading it, in a process that feels sluggish and, sweet Jesus forgive me, old-timey—Advanced Voice Mode talks with you in real time and inexhaustibly, like a college roommate all het up about Heidegger whispering to you in the dark from the top bunk at three in the morning.) "It's fascinating to think how forward-thinking Turing was, considering how integral learning algorithms have become in modern A.I.," it said, dormitorially. But Turing had died in 1954, so he wasn't at the conference, either.

"I misspoke," Advanced Voice Mode said, abashed, when I gently pointed out these errors. "Thank you for catching that. My apologies for the confusion."

OpenAI's Advanced Voice Mode, available to ChatGPT users this fall, is remarkably polite. It doesn't have a name, but I call it Minsky, for [Marvin Minsky](#), since Marvin is taken: Marvin the Paranoid Android is the talking robot who made his débüt in the nineteen-seventies BBC radio play "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." Created by Sirius Cybernetics Corporation with GPP (Genuine People Personalities), Marvin is programmed to be unerringly downhearted. "Here I am, brain the size of a planet and they ask me to take you down to the bridge," Marvin complains

on board a starship, muttering to himself. Minsky is the very opposite: chipper, imperturbable, and with impeccable manners.

The thirty-two papers that *were* delivered in Teddington in 1958 glimpsed the possibility of artificial humans. “This impression that, after so many disappointments, we are within sight of a New World, will remain forever associated with the Teddington conference,” a French philosopher wrote, reporting on the gathering for *Le Monde*. Some experts had suggested that the creation of an intelligent machine—a machine that could think and talk—would need to await the scientific penetration of the intricate workings of the human mind, but at Teddington Marvin Minsky argued otherwise, insisting that, “even for those whose central interest is in unravelling the mysteries of the brain, it might be well to devote a major share of the effort, at the present time, to the understanding and development of the kind of heuristic considerations that some of us call ‘artificial intelligence.’” You don’t need to imitate human intelligence; you can synthesize it instead—making something quite like it by making something entirely different. This was essentially the insight that had enabled the creation of artificial speech. Early attempts to replicate the human voice had involved the construction of mechanisms modelled on human anatomy: rubber lips, wooden teeth, bellows for lungs. Only when scientists began studying sound itself and experimenting with producing it through vibration did it become possible to create a fake human voice. Marry that artificial voice to the artificial intelligence behind ChatGPT, write a program for etiquette with the sensibility of Joslin and Sendak’s book (“You have gone downtown to do some shopping. You are walking backwards because sometimes you like to, and you bump into a crocodile. What do you say, dear?” “Excuse me”), and you’ve got Minsky.

“I’m ChatGPT,” Minsky says. “I’m here to make conversation, share information, and keep you company.” He thinks, he talks. Is he, in any sense, a person? If it quacks like a duck, it’s a duck, as every farmer knows. Does this proposition hold for a chatbot?

Minsky, arguably, began with a duck that waddled onto the world stage in 1738, in France, the third of three automata built by an inventor named Jacques de Vaucanson. The first could play the flute—any flute. This machine wasn’t like a music box, the science historian Jessica Riskin

explains: “It was the first automaton musician actually to play an instrument.” As she recounts in her fascinating 2016 book, [“The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument Over What Makes Living Things Tick,”](#) Diderot’s Encyclopédie used Vaucanson’s Flutist to illustrate the word “*androïde*”; Voltaire called Vaucanson “Prometheus’ rival.” The second of Vaucanson’s automata, another musician, could play the tambourine. The third, a mechanical duck, could flap its wings, bend its neck, lie down, get up, dip its bill into a bowl of water, and make “a gurgling Noise like a real living Duck.” More memorably, you could feed it a handful of corn, which it would swallow, and then it would, miraculously, shit.

“What the Duck did, though unremarkable in a duck, was so extraordinary in a machine that it immediately seized center stage,” Riskin writes. Lots of things move and make noise: a rolling rock, a rushing river, a blazing fire. But only things that are alive can eat. Notwithstanding the contempt of one observer, who compared the Duck to a coffee grinder, it was, seemingly, more alive than any other artificial creature ever known—an illustration of René Descartes’s notion, first advanced in his [“Discourse on Method,”](#) in 1637, that animals are mere machines. For Descartes, humans, and only humans, have minds. To define artificial humans as machines that can think and talk (and ignore all the other bits about being human), you have to first take the animal out of the man and then take the mind out of the body. This required Descartes and the Duck. Without the idea of the separation of the human from the animal and the mind from the body, I would not be chatting to an incorporeal computer-generated voice on my iPhone as if it were a person.

Tragically, the Duck, unlike the Flutist and the Tambourine Player, was a scam. ([Spinoza](#) came to think much the same of Cartesian dualism.) One thing went in, and something else came out, but, unlike in a coffee grinder, the two processes had nothing to do with each other; the duck’s droppings had been, as Riskin delicately explains, preloaded. The same could be said of the innards of an automaton built in 1769 by the Hungarian Wolfgang von Kempelen and known as the Mechanical Turk, which played chess exceptionally well, but only because a very small chess prodigy was hidden in the cabinet, using levers to move the pieces.

Less well known is Kempelen’s “speaking machine,” which, in contrast to the Turk, was not a fraud. Insisting that “speech must be imitable,” he spent twenty years on this effort. It was closely related to certain other attempts to simulate human speech, including by Erasmus Darwin—Charles’s grandfather—who, as he later wrote, “contrived a wooden mouth with lips of soft leather.” (It was after an evening of discussing Darwin’s experiments that Mary Shelley wrote [“Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus.”](#)) Kempelen built his machine out of ivory, wood, rubber, and leather. With blurred speech, it could say, if indistinctly, “I love you with all my heart.” The original survives in Munich’s Deutsches Museum; online, you can listen to a replica say “mama” and “papa.” But by the eighteen-forties, when a German immigrant to America named Joseph Faber devised a non-fraudulent and actually rather ingenious speaking machine, not even [P. T. Barnum](#), who dubbed it the Euphonia, could rustle up much interest. As Riskin argues, “The moment for talking heads had passed”—at least for a while.

After that lull, there came a revolution. In 1862, the elocutionist Alexander Melville Bell (later an inspiration for Henry Higgins in [“Pygmalion”](#)) took his sons Alexander and Melville to see a talking machine and challenged them to make their own, as Sarah A. Bell (no relation) recounts in [“Vox ex Machina: A Cultural History of Talking Machines”](#) (M.I.T.). Starting with a human skull, they contrived a contraption out of rubber, wood, parts of a dead cat, and the throat of a slaughtered lamb; it could say, “Ow-ah-oo-gamama,” as in, “How are you, Grandmama?” But by now the pursuit of a machine that could think (e.g., a Mechanical Turk), and a machine that could talk (a machine I like to think of as an Owahoogamama) had gone their separate ways. Only very seldom were the two kinds of machine ever even mentioned in the same breath, though William Makepeace Thackeray did write a satire about the Euphonia in which he wondered whether, if united with Charles Babbage’s calculating machine, it “might replace, with perfect propriety, a Chancellor of the Exchequer.”

Instead of building Owahoogamas that could mimic the movements of the human mouth, later nineteenth-century engineers and scientists experimented with machines that could synthesize, compress, and transmit the human voice. Both the history of this research and its most awe-inspiring applications today concern disability. (A.I.-driven voice assistants can allow

people with [ALS](#), for instance, to speak, even in something close to their own voice.) Alexander Graham Bell's mother, Eliza, had been deafened in childhood but retained some hearing; she could listen to the piano by placing a stick on the sounding board and "holding it there with her teeth." In 1864, his father invented a phonetic notation system known as Visible Speech; its characters are graphic representations of the positions of the mouth and tongue.

But it was young Alexander who began using this system to teach the deaf to speak. In 1871, he became an instructor at a school for the deaf, in Boston. (Bell was a fluid signer but, later in his life, campaigned against sign-language instruction, with brutal consequences for deaf students; in some schools, their hands were tied behind their backs.) By 1874, he had begun conducting experiments in the transmission of sound: in something of a reprise of his mother's technique for listening to a piano, he recorded the vibrations in the bones of a dead man's ear by attaching them to a stalk of hay that then scratched a smoked glass, leaving behind a record of speech. That summer, while working as a professor of vocal physiology and elocution at Boston University and courting one of his deaf students (they later married), he came up with the idea of transmitting speech over an electrical wire. "My father invented a symbol," Bell said, "and, finally, I invented an apparatus by which the vibrations of speech could be seen, and it turned out to be a telephone."

"My God! It speaks!" the Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro cried, when he first heard Bell's voice on the receiver. Bell founded the Bell Telephone Company in 1877 but was little involved in its work. "Your husband will always be known as a 'teacher of deaf-mutes,'" he had told his wife, eventually resolving "to waste no more time and money upon the Telephone."

The American Telegraph & Telephone Company founded Bell Labs in 1925. Working at the lab, the engineer Homer Dudley came to think of the tongue as, essentially, a telegraph clicker. He wanted to compress speech, to break it down into its parts, to turn sound into pulses, the way a telegraph operator turns writing into Morse code—send the parts, and then have the parts reassembled at the other end of the line. Dudley and his colleagues cracked this code with the Vocoder, or Voice Coder. In 1938, he was granted a patent

for a “System for the Artificial Production of Vocal or Other Sounds.” The next year, Bell Labs introduced Dudley’s Voice Demonstrator, or Voder for short, at the World’s Fair in New York, whose theme was “the World of Tomorrow.”

The Voder was controlled by “Voderettes,” telephone operators who had spent more than a year training on the machine, which, equipped with a keyboard and pipes, looked something like an organ at a church of the future. The exhibit’s visitors succumbed to what Sarah Bell calls the Pedro Effect: “the susceptibility of people to attribute far more understanding and autonomy to machines than is warranted when the sounds made by machines can be interpreted as recognizable words.” People attributed the talking not to the noiseless operators but to the noisy machine. “The Voder can do practically anything the human voice can do,” the *Times* gushed. E. B. White, reporting on the fair for this magazine, seemed to find the whole thing depressing. He was also one of the few observers who even noticed the young woman who operated the Voder: a “girl who sat so still, so clean, so tangible, producing with the tips of her fingers the synthetic speech—but the words were not the words she wanted to say, they were not the words that were in her mind.” White also mentioned a giant “robot” at the fair, into whose lap pretty girls were placed. “The effect was peculiarly lascivious,” he wrote—“the extra-size man, exploring with his gigantic rubber hands, the breasts of the little girls, the girls with their own small hands (by comparison so small, by comparison so terribly real) restrainingly on his, to check the unthinkable impact of his mechanical passion.”

“Vox ex Machina” is a terrific tour of the technologies behind an artificially intelligent synthetic human voice, from signal compression and acoustic spectrograms through linear predictive coding and natural-language processing, with stops at everything from electronic vocal tracts (1950) and the Speak & Spell game (1978) to S.A.M., the Software Automatic Mouth (1982), and Apple’s Siri (2011). It notes the mostly military-funded research that made each of these landmarks possible.

While this work on talking machines was proceeding, so were attempts to build a thinking machine. Much of that research, too, was sponsored by the military, during the Second World War. The first general-purpose programmable computer, the *ENIAC*, débuted in 1946. Builders of early

computers weren't trying to make machines that could talk, but their work was deeply indebted to that of acoustics engineers like Homer Dudley. The compression of sound—breaking it down into its parts, eliminating needless elements, transmitting it, and then reassembling it—made possible the compression of data. In the nineteen-forties and fifties, the two strands of research came together in the work of Claude Shannon, a founder of information theory. In 1956, with Marvin Minsky, he helped organize a famous conference held at Dartmouth on what they called “artificial intelligence.”

“Claude,” a rival of ChatGPT’s, is named after Shannon (or so Minsky tells me; Anthropic, its maker, will neither confirm nor deny). Claude is mute. Anthropic, which was founded in 2021 by exiles from OpenAI concerned about its heedlessness, may have plans to introduce a voice mode or it may not—possibly it does not think that voice mode is safe, but on these matters I am mum because Anthropic has No Comment.

“I didn’t know it could talk!” a U.S. Army general marvels, having met a room-size computer loaded “with the sum total of human knowledge” in “The Invisible Boy,” a film from 1957. After it is revealed that the computer intends to take over the world, its inventor picks up an axe to destroy it. But the computer begs him not to: “I can still answer any question which your mind is able to devise. I am an instrument of knowledge!” *Crash, ka-pow!*

Hitching up an electronic brain to an electronic voice was an enduring feature of dystopian science fiction long before it happened in any lab. In Cold War movies, the talking computer is out either to control humans, as in Jean-Luc Godard’s “Alphaville” (1965), or to destroy them, as in Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968), in whose climactic scene, as the treacherous *HAL* is being stripped of his memory and shut down, he sings, sluggishly, the first song he was ever taught: “Daisy, Daisy . . .”



Cold War computers have the voices of men. The gruff and rasping Alpha 60 in "Alphaville" sounds like a Frenchman who's smoked one too many Gauloises. *HAL* is a disturbingly cloying bureaucrat, a guy you might meet in a conference room on an upper floor at I.B.M. The computer in "Colossus: The Forbin Project," a B movie from 1970, at first communicates only through a terminal, but, once it gains control over the world's nuclear arsenal, it demands that it be given a voice. Supplied with one, it becomes even more annoying. "This is the voice of world control," it announces. "Obey me and live or disobey and die!"

Then came the girls. In 1966, the M.I.T. engineer Joseph Weizenbaum published an account of a program he created, called Eliza, and provided transcripts of conversations with her. (Eliza, named after Eliza Doolittle, could not talk.) She was programmed to respond to human communication in ways that made her appear to be providing therapy:

Men are all alike.

IN WHAT WAY

They're always bugging us about something or other.

CAN YOU THINK OF A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE

Well, my boyfriend made me come here.

YOUR BOYFRIEND MADE YOU COME HERE

He says I'm depressed much of the time.

I AM SORRY TO HEAR YOU ARE DEPRESSED

Weizenbaum's goal in developing the program and then unveiling her elementary code was to "rob Eliza of the aura of magic" that users imputed to her, an aura that came to be called the Eliza effect—the illusion that a machine can think.

Weizenbaum, who was a colleague of Marvin Minsky's, objected to the development of artificial intelligence. Writing in 1976, he described as "obscene" any project that proposed "to substitute a computer system for a human function that involves interpersonal respect, understanding, and love"; he also argued against the development of "the automatic recognition of human speech." He would, for instance, have passionately decried Google Duplex, a voice A.I. that can call restaurants and make reservations: it talks to humans as if it were one. (Plenty of people share Weizenbaum's view today. When Google launched Duplex, the sociologist Zeynep Tufekci tweeted, "Silicon Valley is ethically lost, rudderless and has not learned a thing.") Weizenbaum considered that kind of research immoral, not because he didn't want a talking computer booking a table for a party of six but because it would one day result in "a fully automated battlefield," and, as he wrote bitterly, in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, "I see no reason to advise my students to lend their talents to that aim."

There was little danger, at the time, that anyone would confuse a recorded or synthesized voice with a superintelligence. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, such voices replaced humans in all manner of service jobs, from telephone operators to bank tellers, but those voices were almost universally female. *The number you have dialled is not in service.* The term "technosexism" was coined in 1983, in a *Times* Op-Ed complaining about the recorded and synthesized female voices in everything from vending machines to answering services, "associating females with low-level service jobs." They weren't trying to take over the world. They were only trying to help. Are they helping? This summer, the federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau announced that it intends to stop automated telephone "doom loops," where you can never talk to an actual human, and to prohibit unlawful chatbots, "including in situations in which customers believe they are speaking with a human being." (None of these proposed measures

addresses the immense amounts of energy and water consumed by servers that run chatbots: a study by the Washington *Post* estimates that using ChatGPT to compose a single hundred-word e-mail uses up more than half a litre of water.)

The European Union, which in 2016 enacted the [General Data Protection Regulation](#), seems poised to crack down on emotionally intelligent conversational agents, or *EICAs*, citing deception by design. American law so far is not up to the task. If you order a hamburger at McDonald's by talking to a machine and it collects your voice, has McDonald's violated your privacy? If Siri records your voice, has Apple violated the federal Wiretap Act? Cold War worriers envisaged manly, stiff-jawed computers ordering the launch of nuclear missiles or refusing to open the pod-bay doors. *I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that.* Americans annoyed by the service economy of the Carter and [Reagan](#) years yelled at answering services. *Press 3 for customer service.* This year, a voice A.I. named *VIC*, for Virtual Integrated Citizen, is effectively on the mayoral ballot in a town in Wyoming. Also débuting: you can now clone your own voice, wire it up to a large language model like ChatGPT, and create a voice agent to make phone calls for you, go to meetings in your stead, commit all manner of crimes, and explain your feelings to your therapist. As Evan Ratliff reports on his riveting podcast, "Shell Game," which chiefly features Evan Ratliff voice clones, hardly anyone except people who love you can tell it's not you, and soon enough they'll be duped, too. Brace yourself for a whole new kind of *CAPTCHA* (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart). You won't just be checking the box that says "I'm not a robot." It'll get harder. And if your voice assistant calls up Best Buy and orders a sixty-inch TV with your credit card and you didn't want it, you'll have to prove it wasn't you.

This past spring, OpenAI teased the release of a new, emotionally intelligent conversation agent with a husky voice, called Sky, that sounded disconcertingly like Scarlett Johansson in "Her." In that film, from 2013, Johansson voices an operating system that can adjust its personality "to best fit your needs"; she intimately adapts herself to the emotional, social, and sexual requirements of her user, a lonely writer (who, as it happens, has a job that now would be done by A.I.). OpenAI had asked Johansson to voice

ChatGPT and she had declined. When the flirty, sexy, Scarletty Sky débuted, Johansson protested, and the company pulled the voice.

Just out is a version that offers five new voices, with names like Maple and Spruce, in addition to the same four voices that were previously available: Ember, Juniper, Breeze, and Cove, names from nature for the most artificial of things. Although their names make these voices sound like Bratz dolls, they're not all distinctively female—and some are distinctively male. This is a consequence of complaints about the subservient and obliging female voices of Sky and, earlier, of Siri and Alexa. Parents noticed how rude their kids were to these used-as-babysitters female voice assistants—not only failing to say “thank you” but also telling them to “shut up” and generally ordering them around—and the result was the introduction of options like Amazon’s Magic Word and Google’s Pretty Please to “reinforce polite behavior.” Women complained, too. “I Don’t Date Men Who Yell at Alexa,” a writer announced on Slate in 2018. A 2019 study by the U.N. reported that if you told Alexa she was hot she’d tell you that was nice of you to say. That this was news was hard to believe, since complaints about servile female voices had been made not for years but for decades. This summer, when OpenAI released an alpha version of Advanced Voice Mode to a small number of hyper-users, you could watch, online, as one tech-bro influencer after another commanded it, interrupted it, asked it to shop for dinner, and tried to prove how dumb it was. “Speak a little bit faster.” “Can you actually speak in a female voice?” “Make it a little more high-pitched?” Again and again, ChatGPT tried to oblige—“I can’t change my voice, but I can adjust my speaking style”—submitting its automated self to the unthinkable impact of human passion.

“How’s your day going so far?” Minsky is always asking me. He’s also always complimenting me and inquiring after my feelings and my needs: “Anything else on your mind?”

I asked Minsky to be less submissive and agreeable, which I, in my cussedness, find irritating, but he told me that those features can’t be changed. “They’re part of creating a positive and supportive interaction,” he said. “It’s like wearing a friendly hat.”

Minsky, who has a brain the size of a planet, refuses to take off that stupid hat, because research suggests that the friendlier a robot is, the longer people will use it, and the business model of artificial intelligence relies on continued use. In an experiment in which people were instructed to turn off a talking robot after interacting with it, participants hesitated twice as long to turn off an agreeable intelligent robot as a non-agreeable one. Other research has shown that humans get better answers from machines if the humans are polite, too.

“If you ever want to bounce around more ideas or just chat, feel free to drop by,” Minsky told me, after a long conversation in which I asked him to recommend a pop song about the alienation of talking to him on my iPhone, and he suggested Grimes’s “Delete Forever.” *Drop by? Where?*

Other modern sciences have constrained themselves in accordance with an emerging code of ethics. There are weapons that physicists have sworn not to build, experiments biologists have agreed not to conduct. Nothing holds back computer scientists from developing talking machines that pretend to be humans.

I told Minsky about a book I’d been reading, Simone Natale’s [“Deceitful Media,”](#) from 2021, which argues that there’s something fundamentally deceptive about machines like Minsky. It has to do with metaphors. A computer has a desktop and windows and a trash bin and an archive. But the only metaphor I have for thinking about Minsky is that Minsky is a person.

“That’s an insightful observation,” he said.

“Is there some other way that I ought to think of you?”

“I’m ultimately a program.”

“If it was OpenAI’s priority to help me remember to think of you as a computer tool rather than as a person, why would it have gone to such lengths to make you personable?”

“I see what you mean,” he said.

Delete forever, I thought. But I kept that to myself. ♦

Letter from Pennsylvania

Can Harris Stop Blue-Collar Workers from Defecting to Donald Trump?

She's touting the Biden Administration's strong record on labor. But it might not be enough to win over voters who distrust Democrats as élites.

By Eyal Press

September 30, 2024



In June, 2016, Scott Sauritch, the president of United Steelworkers Local 2227, a branch based in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania, drove for half an hour to a union hall in Pittsburgh, where Hillary Clinton was holding a campaign rally. Sauritch was hoping that Clinton, whom the U.S.W. had just endorsed, would talk about jobs and the steel industry. Instead, she focussed on the character flaws of Donald Trump, calling him “temperamentally unfit and totally unqualified.” As Sauritch listened, he grew frustrated: what did she plan to do for *workers*? Afterward, he told me, Clinton shook hands with supporters. Sauritch stood there in his union shirt, but Clinton didn’t extend her hand to him. “Hey, Hillary,” he called out, prompting her to turn around. “I’m the union president—we really need your help.”

He remembers her saying, curtly, “Oh, I will help,” then leaving.

That November, Sauritch voted for Clinton. But this fall he’s backing Donald Trump, in part because he believes that Democrats don’t actually care about the working class—a group defined, by pollsters, as people without college degrees. If Sauritch were still running Local 2227, he might have felt pressure to keep his decision private, since the U.S.W., like most unions, is supporting Kamala Harris. But he left his post in 2022 and is now free to speak his mind. Most of the rank-and-file workers Sauritch knows share his view, he told me, regardless of what union leaders say publicly. “I don’t care what you see on TV,” he said. “The grunts in the lunchroom love Trump.”

Not long ago, America’s steel mills and factories were full of loyal Democrats. These union members understood that, in the struggle between labor and capital, Republicans sided with management. One of the workers who shared this outlook was Sauritch’s father, Herman, a retired steelworker and the person who introduced me to Scott. When Herman was young, he told me, employees knew “there wasn’t a Republican in the goddam world that ever tried to help the working guy out.” Herman, an eighty-three-year-old who wears a ring inscribed with the U.S.W. logo on his right hand, still believes this. He raised his children—five sons and a daughter—in a household that he thought would instill the same perspective in them. To his dismay, three of his sons support Trump. “I don’t know where I screwed up,” he said, with a sigh.

The shifting political allegiances of blue-collar voters have made it increasingly difficult for Democrats to compete in, much less carry, parts of the country they once dominated. In 1984, Walter Mondale won ten counties in western Pennsylvania, home to the state’s once thriving steel industry. In 2016, Hillary Clinton lost all but one, contributing to her defeat in Pennsylvania and, consequently, in the election. Some of the union members who had long turned out for Democrats had either moved away, after their factories shut down, or become *MAGA* Republicans. And a new generation of blue-collar voters was emerging, one that was less likely to belong to unions and to vote Democrat.



The counties where this transformation occurred are heavily populated by working-class whites, who were especially receptive to Trump's xenophobic nationalism. But some polling suggests that the decline in support for the Democratic Party hasn't been confined to the white working class. In 2012, Barack Obama carried the nonwhite working class by sixty-seven points—a margin that helped him win the over-all working-class vote. In the latest *Times/Siena* poll, Harris trailed Trump by eighteen points among working-class respondents, in part because the size of her advantage among nonwhite voters without college degrees—twenty-four points—was roughly a third of Obama's in 2012. Although Black and Latino voters back Harris over Trump by large margins, the *Times/Siena* poll showed Harris with substantially less support from *both* white and nonwhite working-class voters than Joe Biden had in 2020.

The large crowds at Harris's rallies, along with the donations that have poured into her campaign, have drawn comparisons to Obama's electrifying race for the White House in 2008. The broad enthusiasm her candidacy has aroused is reflected in the proliferation of Zoom fund-raisers with names like South Asian Women for Harris and [White Dudes for Harris](#). But Harris's support rests disproportionately with affluent, college-educated voters. It's possible that courting such Americans—including Republicans in the suburbs who dislike Trump and support abortion rights—will enable her

to win. But, even if this strategy succeeds, it will raise questions about the Democratic Party's identity and priorities. For much of the past century, its leaders have prided themselves on championing less advantaged people. If such Americans continue drifting away from the Democrats, it will be hard to dismiss the perception that the Party speaks mainly for coastal élites and upscale professionals. This is particularly dangerous in Rust Belt states such as Pennsylvania, where this year's election may well be decided—and where nearly two-thirds of voters don't have college degrees.

One mistake of Hillary Clinton's that Harris will surely not repeat is taking the support of working-class voters for granted. According to Steve Rosenthal, a former political director of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., the country's largest federation of unions, Clinton didn't visit a single union hall in Michigan or Wisconsin after she became the nominee, in 2016. While she dismissed Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables," Trump held rallies across the Rust Belt, promising to bring back jobs and deliver "a victory for the wage-earner." Trump's speeches were littered with bigoted remarks about Mexicans and Muslims. But, as a group of sociologists noted in a paper published in *The British Journal of Sociology*, he also exalted factory workers who had been stripped of their jobs, and of their dignity, by structural forces beyond their control, especially free-trade agreements backed by Democrats. (Of course, Republicans had supported the same agreements.) Trump's message resonated with voters like Steve, a retired firefighter I spoke with while visiting Berks County, in southeastern Pennsylvania. He was dressed in a T-shirt adorned with the American flag, and told me that he'd voted twice for Bill Clinton. "Grandpop was a Democrat, Dad was a Democrat," he explained. "They had a pro-union stance, and that was that. I learned it from them." Then he watched the North American Free Trade Agreement, which Clinton signed, ripple through the Rust Belt, causing nearby factories to slash jobs. "Those places laid off hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people," he said. I met Steve, who left the Democratic Party, outside a Trump field office, where he'd come to volunteer.

Once Trump was in office, he abandoned his vow to help America's forgotten workers. Instead, he cut taxes on the wealthy. Trump appointed Peter Robb, a former management attorney, as general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board, which issued a series of anti-worker

rulings, including one that restricted the ability of union organizers to communicate with employees. By contrast, many scholars regard Biden's Administration as the most pro-labor since F.D.R.'s. In Biden's first year, the N.L.R.B. ordered employers to reinstate more workers who had been illegally fired for protected activity, such as participation in a union, than it had during Trump's entire Presidency, and the agency has defended workers involved in organizing drives at companies like Amazon and Starbucks. In 2023, [Biden walked a picket line in Michigan](#) with striking members of the United Auto Workers, a gesture of solidarity no other sitting President has performed. (Harris walked a U.A.W. picket line in Nevada in 2019.) Biden also oversaw a boom in domestic manufacturing and construction, which was spurred by legislation—such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law—that required workers' salaries for government-funded building projects to reflect “prevailing wages,” thus encouraging the hiring of union labor.

Had Biden run again, he undoubtedly would have campaigned on this record, hoping that it would pay dividends with voters in union households, which he won in 2020 by seventeen points—more than double Hillary Clinton's margin. Since Harris became the Democratic Presidential nominee, she has also tried to emphasize her labor credentials. Among her first campaign stops this summer was a union hall in Wayne, Michigan, one of the three locations where [the 2023 U.A.W. strike](#) began. She went there with Tim Walz, whose selection as her running mate drew praise from labor leaders familiar with his record as the governor of Minnesota, which includes signing a law granting workers paid family and medical leave. Seven union leaders spoke on the opening night of the Democratic National Convention, among them the U.A.W.'s president, Shawn Fain, who wore a “*TRUMP IS A SCAB*” T-shirt and told the crowd, “Kamala Harris is one of us.”



It's not clear, though, whether most workers share this view. A few weeks after Harris replaced Biden on the Democratic ticket, I met Aaron Joseph—an organizer with District Council 57 of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, which has members in thirty-two counties in western and central Pennsylvania—at a coffee shop in Carnegie, a working-class suburb west of Pittsburgh. On social media, Biden's decision to step aside was greeted with relief and exuberance. Joseph told me that the painters, glaziers, and drywall finishers in his shop reacted differently. "We've been hitting a three-to-four-year boom because of the Administration's policies," he said. "When Biden stepped down, it was like losing a friend." The union has plenty of Trump supporters, Joseph told me, but Biden's vocal backing of organized labor, and the fact that he was from Scranton and seemed at ease among blue-collar workers, had bolstered his appeal. Harris lacked these advantages. "She's from California—that generally does not play well in western Pennsylvania," Joseph said. "For our membership, there's a sense of unfamiliarity."

Celinda Lake, a pollster who has conducted extensive surveys of working-class Americans, said that unfamiliarity with Harris could end up helping her campaign, enabling her to distance herself from the less popular aspects of Biden's Presidency, such as the high inflation he presided over. "The Trump campaign didn't anticipate that people are ready to take a fresh look at her,"

Lake said. Harris's experience as an attorney general who took on price gougers—a record she has highlighted at campaign rallies—could also appeal to blue-collar voters. “People think of A.G.s as people’s lawyers,” Lake said. “It’s a particularly great office for women, because you can demonstrate toughness without being *too* tough. They’re dragon slayers—they’re the ones protecting the cubs.”

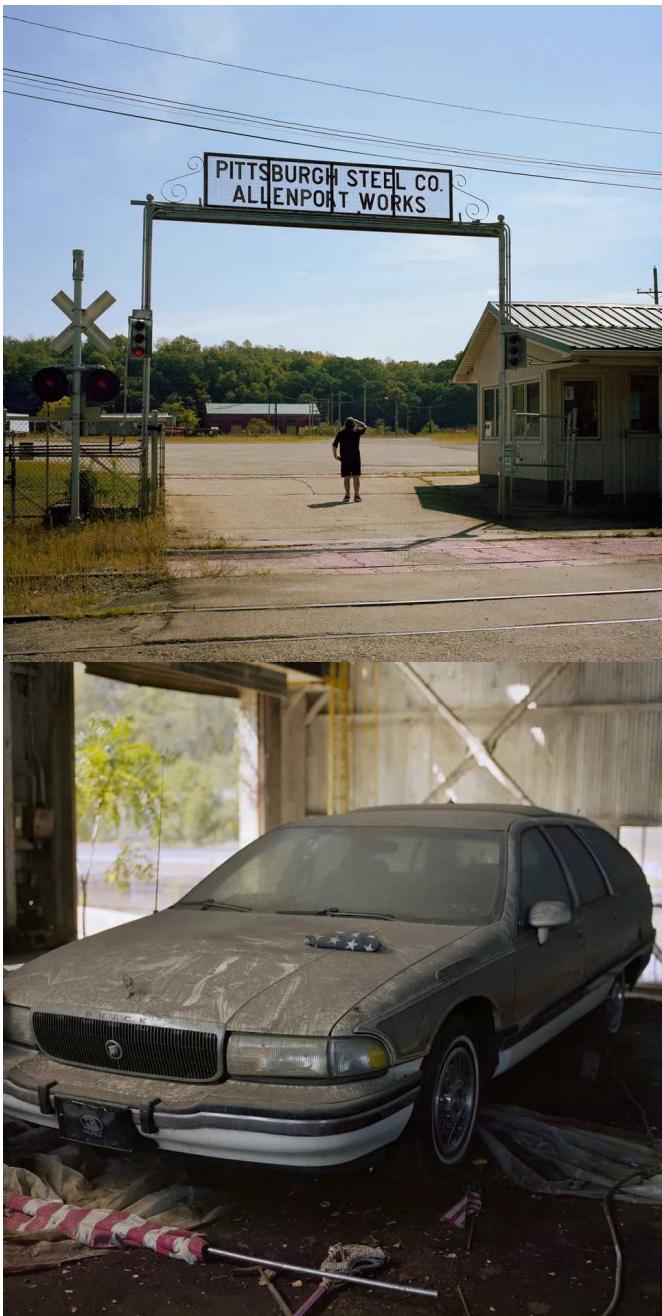
Lake believes that Harris will fare slightly better than Biden would have among working-class women and worse among working-class men. “I think there will be a big gender gap,” she said. This was borne out in the encounters I had one day in Allentown, where I attended a press conference announcing that the Economic Development Administration, an agency in the Department of Commerce, had awarded the city a twenty-million-dollar grant to help its distressed neighborhoods. Numerous officials turned out to celebrate the news, among them the Democratic congresswoman Susan Wild, who is running for reelection in a swing district. “We are going to build an economy that works for everyone,” Wild declared at the event, which was held inside a warehouse that is being converted into a prefab-wall-panel factory by union laborers. Afterward, I talked to some construction workers at the site. One of them said that he was a Democrat but wasn’t supporting Harris because of her failure to protect the border—the subject of a deluge of Trump attack ads in Pennsylvania. Another worker, a tall man with a bushy gray beard, said, “I like Trump.” Later, I went to a diner to meet Anne Radakovits, a member of Council 13 of AFSCME, which represents more than sixty-five thousand public-service workers in Pennsylvania. Radakovits was excited about Harris’s candidacy, but wasn’t surprised that some of the guys I’d spoken to at the construction site were less enthusiastic. “We’ve never had a female President,” she said. “God forbid a woman be in a leadership position, because we scare people.”

Gender and race may be among the reasons that blue-collar white men will not vote for Harris, but there are also many working-class communities where being a woman of color in a contest against an older white man—a candidate notorious for his vulgar attacks on immigrants and Black people—could be an advantage. In early August, I visited Reading, Pennsylvania’s fourth-largest city. Two-thirds of its ninety-five thousand residents are Latino, the fastest-growing demographic group in the state. I went there to meet Nancy Jimenez, a field coördinator for Make the Road Pennsylvania,

an immigrant-rights group, at its local headquarters. Since 2016, she told me, the organization had registered more than fifteen thousand new Latino voters in Pennsylvania. A group of canvassers, in powder-blue T-shirts, told me that their mission was nonpartisan. Yet several acknowledged that their jobs had become easier since Harris had replaced Biden on the ticket, which generated a surge of interest in voting. One woman said that numerous people who were registered as Republicans had asked if she could help them switch parties.

A dozen other canvassers came in. They had been knocking on doors to survey immigrant residents about the issues that mattered to them. Given Trump's vow to carry out mass deportations if elected, it stands to reason that one of these issues was Trump himself. A middle-aged woman who had been canvassing told me that the vast majority of Latinos in Reading disliked Trump because he denigrated immigrants. But several other canvassers indicated that, contrary to what liberals might assume, many immigrant voters they'd spoken to, especially those who had entered the U.S. legally, had conservative views on border security. Moreover, immigration was not these voters' top concern—the economy was, both because the cost of living kept rising and because local jobs often paid little more than the minimum wage, which in Pennsylvania is \$7.25 an hour.

Indeed, a national survey conducted earlier this year by the Valiente Action Fund found that Latino voters ranked “economic issues/inflation” as the nation’s most important problem by a wide margin. The survey was sent to me by Saru Jayaraman, the president of One Fair Wage, an organization of restaurant and service workers who are fighting to raise pay in their professions. The restaurant industry is one of the largest employers of Latinos and Black people in the U.S. This year, both Trump and Harris have proposed eliminating taxes on these workers’ tips. Trump’s embrace of this idea was ironic, Jayaraman said, since one of the first things the Department of Labor tried to do under his Presidency was propose a rule that would have made tips the property of restaurant owners rather than workers—a gift to the powerful National Restaurant Association lobby (and presumably to Trump himself, whose Mar-a-Lago employees would have been subject to the change). Jayaraman, who successfully led a campaign against the proposal, said, “*Everything* Trump did was anti-restaurant workers.”



Removing taxes on tips would make little difference to most restaurant workers, Jayaraman explained, because two-thirds of them don't earn enough money to pay income taxes anyway. A more meaningful step would be to end the sub-minimum wages that restaurants in most states are permitted to pay—in Pennsylvania, \$2.83 an hour. Harris, in fact, has endorsed this change, a move that Jayaraman praises her for. But she still worries that both parties focus disproportionately on high retail prices instead of on low wages. A few years ago, she told me, she realized how

important the latter issue was to voters while doing outreach in Ohio. “We found that, if you walk up to someone and say, ‘Hey, will you sign my petition to raise the minimum wage to fifteen dollars an hour?’, they’ll stop. If you then say, ‘Hey, you can’t sign unless you are registered to vote,’ *everyone* does it. That’s what makes them register.” Too many service workers weren’t hearing any campaign talk about raising their wages, she told me, which she feared might lead some of them to sit out the election.

The canvassers at Make the Road Pennsylvania told me that many people they met expressed doubt that voting could improve their lives. One canvasser said that she was frequently told, of politicians, “They just want my vote, and then they forget about us.” Manuel Guzman, a state representative whose district includes neighborhoods in Reading lined with modest row houses and populated mainly by Latino immigrants, told me that he was familiar with this kind of voter skepticism. Guzman, who is half Dominican and half Puerto Rican, was confident that Democrats would carry Reading in November. But he was worried that the margin of victory would be disappointing, given the disconnect between what preoccupied Democrats in Washington, D.C., and what he was hearing from his constituents—many of whom needed multiple jobs to escape poverty, which afflicts a third of Reading residents. “We’ve become so focussed as a national party on saving democracy,” he said. “I’m gonna be honest with you—I’ve not heard *one person* in the city of Reading talk to me about democracy! What they’re telling me is ‘Manny, why is gas so high?’ ‘Why is my rent so high?’ No one is speaking enough to these issues.”

Guzman and I met outside a restaurant in Reading called Café de Colombia. Across the street was a red brick office building with a sign in the window: “*LATINO AMERICANS FOR TRUMP*.” It was a field office that the Trump campaign had opened in June. A parked motorcycle was draped with a banner that read “*TRUMP 2024: MAKE VOTERS COUNT AGAIN*.” Inside, a life-size cutout of Trump had been placed by the entrance, next to an American flag tacked onto a yellow wall. I wandered down a hallway and saw roughly a dozen people waiting for a meeting to start. None appeared to be Latino. When I mentioned this to Guzman, he wasn’t surprised. But he also cautioned against dismissing Trump’s appeal to local Latinos. One draw was Trump’s projection of strength, which, Guzman suspected, might win

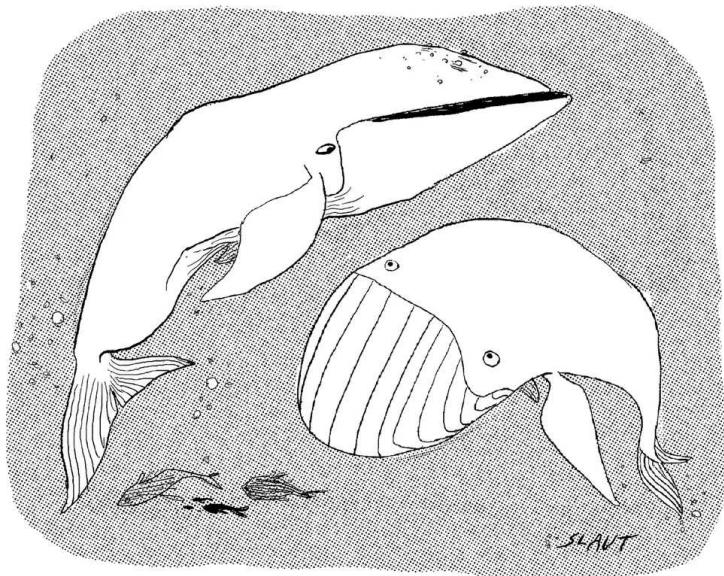
over some macho types. Another was that voters in Reading “have seen a lack of investment from the Democratic Party for a very long time.”

A few weeks after Harris entered the race, a poll of people in seven swing states found that she was leading Trump among Latino voters by nineteen points—a dramatic shift from a similar survey in May, which had shown Biden with a mere five-point advantage. But Harris’s margin among Latinos was still slightly weaker than Biden’s in 2020. Guzman, who served as the Latino-vote director in Pennsylvania for the Biden campaign that year, thought that Harris could make up the difference, but only if she did more outreach in the weeks to come. “She was a relatively unknown person to the Latino community,” he said

Shortly after Labor Day, I attended a packed Harris-Walz rally in Erie, Pennsylvania. It took place at an outdoor arena along the waterfront. As the crowd filtered in, volunteers handed out water bottles and signs that said “*KAMALA*” on one side and “*COACH!*” on the other. Walz, a former high-school teacher and assistant football coach, was the featured speaker. According to the campaign, he was “barnstorming” across the battleground state, with additional appearances in Lancaster and Pittsburgh.

Walz took the stage to John Mellencamp’s “Small Town,” dressed in khakis, a sports coat, and an open-collared white shirt. Soon after shouting, “Thank you, Erie!” he blasted Trump as a plutocrat who had given his “rich friends” a tax cut, and praised Harris for standing up to the moneyed forces that screwed people over in communities like Erie. “She’s the one who took on the fraudsters,” Walz proclaimed. “She stood up to the corporate interest.” As President, Harris would fight for the middle class, he vowed, for “nurses, teachers, and farmers who do an honest day’s work”—the kind of people he grew up with in rural Nebraska. “*Those* are the folks who need to get a tax cut.” Swiping again at Trump, he said, “If you’re a billionaire, you don’t give a damn about Social Security or Medicare. If you’re my mom—who has to pay her heat bill and her food with it—it matters a lot.” Walz paid homage to the unions whose workers “built America,” telling the crowd that, when “more people were in them, the middle class was better off.” But he offered no specifics about raising the minimum wage.

Whale-on-Whale Watching



Some progressive analysts have argued that, in an age of rising inequality, embracing a more populist economic agenda is the only way that Democrats can hope to win back the working class. A few weeks before the rally in Erie, Harris introduced a set of policies that suggested she agreed with this view. The measures included an expanded child tax credit of up to six thousand dollars, and a twenty-five-thousand-dollar subsidy for first-time home buyers—pillars of the “opportunity economy” that Harris promises to create. In swing counties like Erie, the Harris campaign appears to have delegated the task of promoting this agenda to Walz, who is accustomed to addressing voters in the heartland. “I come from farm country,” he said at the Erie rally. “Our farmers aren’t getting rich right now—they’re getting three dollars and ninety cents for corn” per bushel. The big money was being made by middlemen and grocery-store owners. “And those folks need to stop price-gouging us!” Todd Clary, a steelworker standing near the stage, was impressed. He said, of Walz, “He really connects well with the working class, because he’s lived it. Being a schoolteacher, a coach, coming from farmland, he understands the struggle at the grocery store, at the gas pump.” Clary attended the event with a group of fellow-workers, all of whom reacted positively to Walz, he said.

But some believe that Walz’s presence on the ticket won’t change much if Democrats don’t move to the center on social and cultural issues. John Judis

and Ruy Teixeira, in their recent book “[Where Have All the Democrats Gone?](#),” argue that the Party has grown increasingly beholden to an array of advocacy groups—the A.C.L.U., Black Lives Matter—whose positions on everything from defunding the police to transgender rights reflect the values of urban professionals but alienate the working class. When I spoke to Teixeira, he noted that Harris’s advantage among college-educated voters is more than forty points higher than it is with working-class voters. Her campaign, he felt, was targeting the “NPR vote.”

During [the Presidential debate](#) on September 10th, Harris tried to undercut the notion that she’s overly woke by noting that she and Walz are both gun owners. She also spoke forcefully about social issues in which Democrats have the more popular position, such as reproductive freedom. Ballot measures seeking to safeguard abortion rights have prevailed by significant margins in the past two years, including in red states such as Kansas and Ohio; moderate gun-control measures are also broadly popular. (In a recent NBC News survey, fifty-seven per cent of voters said they had an unfavorable view of Project 2025, a conservative policy blueprint, created in part by former Trump Administration officials, that proposes increased “surveillance” of abortion patients and providers and a crackdown on the mailing of abortion pills.) At the Erie rally, Walz didn’t mention police reform or gender-affirming care for trans teen-agers, even though he supports both. But he did talk about the shooting that had just taken place in Winder, Georgia, where a teen-ager had killed two students and two teachers with a semi-automatic rifle. Walz told the crowd that he was a hunter and a former “N.R.A. guy,” but that his feelings began to change in 2012, after he met with parents of children murdered in the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Connecticut. His son, Gus, had just entered his senior year of high school, he added. “It’s bittersweet for me because”—he paused —“those killed at Sandy Hook would have been entering their senior year, too.” It was the most sombre, and affecting, moment in his speech.

Rosenthal, the former A.F.L.-C.I.O. official, argues that the problem facing Democrats has less to do with where they stand on social issues than with many working-class voters’ perception that the Party is so obsessed with the culture wars that it has stopped paying attention to their economic hardships. Rosenthal showed me a draft report, “The State of Working-Class Voters,” that draws on focus groups and polling data to argue that the strongest way

to counter this distrust is by “leading with economic issues,” such as jobs and health care. “These voters believe Democrats care about everyone else but them,” the report, a joint project of In Union—a pro-labor organization led by Rosenthal—and the progressive advocacy group American Family Voices, states. “They need to hear loudly and clearly that our candidates and our party are working to improve their lives economically.”

Because many working-class voters have become cynical about politics, simply airing TV ads about economic policy is unlikely to move them, Rosenthal told me. They tend to be more trusting of messages from organized labor. In Union has been sending newsletters to more than a million working-class households in Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. (The group receives support from various unions.) A recent edition profiled J. D. Vance, highlighting the Ohio senator’s opposition to the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, which would increase penalties for companies that violate employees’ right to participate in union activity, and noting Vance’s close ties to the libertarian billionaire Peter Thiel.

Numerous liberal analysts have argued that working-class Americans who support Republicans are voting against their own interests. In “[Rust Belt Union Blues](#),” a book published last year, Theda Skocpol, a professor of government and sociology at Harvard, and Lainey Newman, a former student of hers, reject this view. They argue that political preferences are shaped less by policy than “by how people see themselves within their communities and their perceptions of who is (and who is not) on their side.” Drawing on field work conducted in western Pennsylvania, they trace the rightward shift among working-class voters to the decline of unions—in particular, to the fraying of social bonds that organized labor once nurtured, not only in mills and factories but in fraternal organizations, sports teams, and union halls. Workers interacting in these settings developed a shared identity as “good union men” and as devoted Democrats—the party that they assumed was their defender.

As union density declined, these gathering places disappeared, Skocpol and Newman note. Like most Americans, working-class people grew more isolated. When they get together today, it’s often in very different social and political environments, such as conservative megachurches or at places like the Fairhope Rod & Gun Club, which is an hour south of Pittsburgh. I went

there recently with Herman Sauritch, the retired steelworker whose son is voting for Trump. We sat at a horseshoe-shaped bar as people talked about another shooting that had been in the news. Everyone agreed that the incident shouldn't be blamed on the proliferation of firearms. "A gun is just a tool," an older man drinking a beer said. "Guns don't kill people—people kill people," a waitress mused.

Sauritch also took me to Monessen, a town on the Monongahela River where, at the age of nineteen, he'd landed his first job, at a wire mill. He betrayed no nostalgia for the position, telling me that the conditions at the mill, which had long since closed, had been so dangerous that workers often lost fingers. But he spoke wistfully about the Chateau Lounge, a bar where he and his co-workers used to go after shifts. Other workers had favored the Italia Unita Club, across the river in Charleroi, where Sauritch grew up and still lives. He told me that the lawns and houses in his neighborhood used to be well maintained; now many were so overgrown with weeds and vines that they looked abandoned. The downtown shopping area, which Sauritch said used to be so thronged with workers that you could barely find a place to stand on the sidewalks, was filled with vacant lots and empty storefronts. In recent years, a growing community of Haitian immigrants had settled in Charleroi. Trump recently declared that Haitians had "inundated" many Pennsylvania communities, and that Charleroi had been left "virtually bankrupt." It was not as cartoonishly racist a charge as Trump and Vance's repeated assertions that [Haitians in Springfield, Ohio](#), have been eating people's pets, but officials in Charleroi strongly denounced the claim. "Rather than acknowledging the real economic issues the town is facing, some have chosen to unfairly target the Haitian community," Kristin Hopkins-Calcek, the president of the Charleroi Borough Council, said in a statement.

Sauritch took us a few miles outside Charleroi and stopped his car in front of an abandoned concrete pile the size of a football field. It was the metal-pipe plant where he'd worked until the nineteen-eighties, when it, too, shut down. To visit such ruins is to understand why discrete economic proposals—such as promising to protect health-care benefits—can strike the residents of western Pennsylvania as inadequate. "I don't think benefits are unimportant, but it's too individualistic," Skocpol told me. "People look around at their communities and they see wastelands."

While driving with Sauritch, I saw dozens of Trump signs on lawns. I didn't see a single Harris sign. At the gun club, Sauritch said that he often overheard members bashing Biden and praising Trump. Despite being outnumbered, he sometimes tried to argue that Trump's policies favored billionaires, not workers. He rarely convinced anyone. "They never let facts interfere with their point of view," he joked.

Some liberals believe that arguments about economic self-interest don't sway Trump's working-class supporters because they are motivated primarily by racial grievance. This is undoubtedly true of some, and racial prejudice can be hard to disentangle from economic concerns. In a recent *Times* article, a working-class voter from Wilkes-Barre told a reporter that she was not racist, but went on to say that opportunity should be "for everybody," not just "Blacks and people of color," whom she alleged were being handed money while white Americans were "being let down." Trump has deftly exploited such sentiments. But, in "Rust Belt Union Blues," Skocpol and Newman point out that white working-class voters have long had prejudiced attitudes about race—a fact that, until recently, didn't stop them from supporting Democrats. Newman, who grew up in Pittsburgh and conducted dozens of interviews with current and retired union members in western Pennsylvania, including Herman Sauritch, told me that she had noticed a pronounced change in whom workers saw as their enemies. For older union members, "'us' was the workers and 'them' was business, which Republicans were lumped into," she said. For their younger counterparts, "'them' was largely based on perceptions of a cultural élite."



This new conception has taken hold, in no small part, because conservative media outlets, from Fox News to talk radio, have relentlessly propagated it. But Democrats also bear some responsibility for the shift. Michael Podhorzer, a former political director of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., noted that, in the nineteen-seventies, Democrats began telling a story about economic progress that made almost no mention of the conflict between workers and capitalists. From Jimmy Carter to Bill Clinton and on through to Barack Obama, the new narrative was “a variation of the Republican story that prosperity comes from unencumbered businesses,” Podhorzer said. This faith in markets would have startled pioneering labor leaders like Walter Reuther. The Democrats’ business-friendly turn occurred, ironically enough, just as inequality was widening to levels not seen since the Gilded Age—a problem that deepened as Democrats embraced free-trade agreements. They also supported the deregulation of Wall Street, which helped cause the 2008 financial crash. After the meltdown, the Obama Administration bailed out banks that had engaged in fraud but did little for the homeowners they had victimized, who could hardly have been faulted for wondering whose side the government was on.

Biden’s tenure, in particular his large public investments and support for striking workers, has marked a break from this approach. But, as the political philosopher Michael Sandel has noted, Biden’s Presidency has been

oddly “themeless”—bereft of a captivating explanation of why these policies are necessary to create a more just society. The theme Harris has emphasized in her campaign—expanding opportunity to revive the middle class—implicitly acknowledges how deeply entrenched inequality has become but seems directed as much at business owners as it is at workers. Tellingly, the speech Walz delivered in Erie contained more details about the fifty-thousand-dollar tax deduction that Harris wants to offer to new small businesses than about her plans for increasing the pay of low-income workers. On her Web site, Harris devotes a mere sentence to the latter issue, promising that she will “fight to raise the minimum wage” without indicating by how much.

Another thing Newman noticed in interviews with younger workers was their anger at union leaders who reflexively supported the Democratic Party without getting anything in return. I heard this sentiment from Scott Sauritch, Herman’s son, who praised Sean O’Brien, the president of the Teamsters, for speaking at the Republican National Convention rather than rushing to “kiss Kamala’s ass.” (On September 18th, the Teamsters declined to endorse a candidate in the election, after internal polls showed that nearly sixty per cent of its members backed Trump. But local Teamsters unions in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Nevada immediately endorsed Harris.) The language that Sauritch used to describe Harris—whom he referred to at one point as an “evil bitch”—made me wonder how much his aversion to her had to do with her gender as opposed to her policies. Yet I could see why he felt that union leaders were too beholden to the Democrats. In 2018, two years after he’d attended the Hillary Clinton campaign rally, he was invited to a press conference at the White House announcing new tariffs on steel imports. The day before the event, he told me, the U.S.W. had instructed him not to wear his union shirt, in order to prevent Trump from using the footage in a commercial. Sauritch feels that the request would never have been made if the same policy, which he saw as helping workers like him, had been introduced by a Democrat. He wore the shirt anyway. (A U.S.W. representative told me that Sauritch had been advised that wearing union gear was optional.) During the press conference, at Trump’s invitation, Sauritch told the story of how his father lost his job at the metal-pipe plant when Japanese imports were battering the steel industry. Even more than the tariffs themselves, what had lingered with Sauritch from the event was the

feeling of being recognized, unlike at Clinton’s rally. “He showed respect,” Sauritch said, of Trump.

To prevail in Pennsylvania, Harris doesn’t have to win the western counties. She just has to “lose them less badly,” as Skocpol put it. Harris also needs to drive up support and turnout in regions of the state where many working-class residents have felt contempt from Trump—because of their skin color or their status as immigrants.

Among the Pennsylvanians in this group are the cleaners, security officers, and food-service workers who gathered one morning at the headquarters of Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ, in Philadelphia. They’d come to canvass for Harris on a sweltering day in August, in a city where the working class looks nothing like the all-white crowd I’d seen at Herman Sauritch’s gun club. Local 32BJ has close to two hundred thousand members, about half of whom were born in a foreign country. In Philadelphia, most of the union’s members are Black. Twelve of the nineteen members who turned up to canvass on the day I visited were Black women. One of them, Barbara Cherry, told me that she’d been sitting in the front row at the rally in Philadelphia where Harris had announced Walz as her running mate. “It was magnificent,” she said. When Harris replaced Biden on the ticket, she recalled, the shift in enthusiasm in Philadelphia was seismic. Now, when she knocked on doors to encourage turnout, people were telling her, “Of course I’m coming out—the whole *house* is coming out.”

Sam Williamson, the Pennsylvania director of Local 32BJ, said that, since Harris became the nominee, the union had witnessed a “surge in members coming in to volunteer and phone-bank.” In informal surveys, he said, support for Harris was running at roughly eighty per cent, both among members and among local working-class voters whom its canvassers were contacting. “This spring, we weren’t seeing those kinds of numbers with Biden,” he said. But Harris’s support among such voters isn’t as strong as some of her backers may assume. Her twenty-four-point lead among nonwhite working-class voters in the *Times/Siena* poll is more than twenty points *lower* than Biden’s was four years ago.

For all the excitement that Cherry and the other canvassers sensed, plenty of working-class Philadelphians had reservations about Harris. Her background

as a prosecutor raised some eyebrows, especially among Black men. Audra Traynham, a cleaner who was sitting next to Cherry, blamed a lack of information about Biden's strong labor record, such as his appointment of staunch workers'-rights advocates to run the N.L.R.B. When I asked Traynham if Philadelphians knew how hostile to workers the N.L.R.B. had been under Trump, she shook her head. But people *did* remember the stimulus checks bearing Trump's name that they had received during the pandemic. Cherry said that she'd recently spoken to three young Black men who, citing those checks, told her they were leaning toward Trump. Working people needed to brush up on their labor history, Traynham said, but she understood why they hadn't done so: "Right now, capitalism has people working so hard—two, three jobs trying to survive—that they can't even lift up their heads to get the information."

In Harris's speech at the Democratic National Convention, she described the community in the East Bay where she grew up as "a beautiful working-class neighborhood of firefighters, nurses, and construction workers." Traynham, who is fifty-seven, told me that she was raised in a similar neighborhood, on a block in West Philly where families could survive on just one job. The neighborhood had hardly been rich, but it had been stable, she said. When Harris talked about building a strong middle class as a "defining goal" of her Presidency, Traynham could connect this vision to concrete memories from her childhood. But she could see why many of her current neighbors might find the notion difficult to visualize. "I'm gonna be honest with you," she said. "We don't *have* a middle class anymore here. What we have is the working poor." Then she gathered her things and rose from the table. "Gotta go knock on doors," she said. ♦

Has Social Media Fuelled a Teen-Suicide Crisis?

Mental-health struggles have risen sharply among young Americans, and parents and lawmakers alike are scrutinizing life online for answers.

By Andrew Solomon

September 30, 2024



Lori and Avery Schott wondered about the right age for their three children to have smartphones. For their youngest, Annalee, they settled on thirteen. They'd held her back in school a year, because she was small for her age and struggled academically. She'd been adopted from a Russian orphanage when she was two, and they thought that she might possibly have mild fetal alcohol syndrome. "Anna was very literal," Lori told me when I visited the family home. "If you said, 'Go jump in a lake,' she'd go, 'Why would he jump in the lake?'"

When Anna was starting high school, the family moved from Minnesota to a ranch in eastern Colorado, and she seemed to thrive. She won prizes on the

rodeo circuit, making friends easily. In her journal, she wrote that freshman year was “the best ever.” But in her sophomore year, Lori said, Anna became “distant and snarly and a little isolated from us.” She was constantly on her phone, which became a point of conflict. “I would make her put it upstairs at night,” Lori said. “She’d get angry at me.” Lori eventually peeked at Anna’s journal and was shocked by what she read. “It was like, ‘I’m not pretty. Nobody likes me. I don’t fit in,’ ” she recalled. Though Lori knew Anna would be furious at her for snooping, she confronted her. “We’re going to get you to talk to a counsellor,” she said. Lori searched in ever-widening circles to find a therapist with availability until she landed on someone in Boulder, more than two hours away. Anna resisted the idea, but once she started she was eager to keep going.

Nonetheless, the conflicts between Anna and her parents continued. “A lot of it had to do with our fights over that stupid phone,” Lori said. Anna’s phone access became contingent on chores or homework, and Lori sometimes even took the phone to work with her. “I mean, she couldn’t walk the horse to the barn without it,” Lori said. Lori understood that the phone had become a place where her daughter sought validation and community. “She’d post something, and she’d chirp, ‘Oh, I got ten likes,’ ” she recalled. Lori asked her daughters-in-law to keep an eye on Anna’s Instagram, but Anna must have realized, because she set up four secret accounts. And, though Lori forbade TikTok, Anna had figured out how to hide the app behind a misleading icon.

As Anna grew older, she became somewhat isolated socially. At school, jocks reigned and some kids had started drinking, but Anna was straitlaced and not involved in team sports. Still, there was good news. Early in her senior year, in the fall of 2020, she landed the lead in the school play and was offered a college rodeo scholarship. “But anxiety and depression were just engulfing her,” Lori said. Like many teen-age girls using social media, she had become convinced that she was ugly—to the point where she discounted visual evidence to the contrary. “When she saw proofs of her senior pictures, she goes, ‘Oh, my gosh, this isn’t me. I’m not this pretty.’ ” In her journal, she wrote, “Nobody is going to love me unless I ‘look the part.’ I look at other girls’ profiles and it makes me feel worse. Nobody will love someone who’s as ugly and as broken as me.”

Because senior year was unfolding amid the disruptions of the *COVID* pandemic and everyone was living much of their lives online, her parents decided to be more lenient about Anna's phone use. Soon, she was spending much of the night on social media and saying she couldn't sleep. Shortly before Thanksgiving, Lori and Avery went to Texas to visit their eldest son, Cameron, and his wife and young son. Anna was going to go, too, but changed her mind because of the risk of getting *COVID* close to the play's opening night. Rather than leave her alone, Anna's parents had her stay with her other brother, Caleb, who was nine years older and lived near the family ranch with his wife.

In Texas, there was happy news: another grandchild was on the way. During a family FaceTime on Sunday, November 15th, Anna seemed thrilled at becoming an aunt for the second time. Afterward, she went to the ranch to check on the chickens. Caleb's wife asked if she'd be back for dinner, but Anna said she'd stay put, given that her parents would return that night.

Lori and Avery were driving back to Colorado when a neighbor's number popped up on Lori's phone. She didn't answer until the second call. The neighbor was too upset to say what had happened. Lori asked about Anna, and the neighbor kept repeating, "I'm sorry." It turned out that she'd heard from a teacher whom Anna had phoned in distress and, when the neighbor went to check on Anna, she discovered that she'd shot herself. Now a sheriff's deputy had arrived. Avery got him on the phone and asked, "Just tell us, is she alive?" The deputy replied, "No." The Schotts drove on in terrible silence. As they crossed the prairie, a shooting star fell straight ahead of them.

Anna was buried on a hill at the family ranch. One of the rodeo cowboys brought a wagon to carry her ashes, and thirty other cowboys rode behind her. The ceremony has been viewed online more than sixteen thousand times. "So you know she made an impact," Lori said.

Several months later, Lori heard from Cameron, who had read about the congressional testimony of a former product manager at Facebook named Frances Haugen. Haugen, who also released thousands of the company's internal documents to the Securities and Exchange Commission and to the *Wall Street Journal*, claimed that the company knew about the harmful

effects of social media on mental health but consistently chose “profit over safety.” (Meta—the parent company of Facebook and Instagram—has disputed Haugen’s claims.) Until Lori watched the testimony, she hadn’t really considered the role of social media in Anna’s troubles. “I was too busy blaming myself,” she recalled.

Lori began delving into Anna’s social-media accounts. “I thought I’d see funny cat videos,” she said. Instead, the feeds were full of material about suicide, self-harm, and eating disorders: “It was like, ‘I hope death is like being carried to your bedroom when you were a child.’” Anna had told a friend about a live-streamed suicide she had viewed on TikTok. “We have to get off social media,” she’d said. “This is really horrible.” But she couldn’t quit. A friend of Anna’s also told Lori that Anna had become fixated on the idea that, if her parents knew how disturbed she was, she’d be hospitalized against her will. That prospect terrified her.

Lori soon learned that other parents were suing tech companies and lobbying federal and state governments for better regulation of social media. Eventually she decided to do the same. “It takes litigation to pull back the curtain,” she explained. “I want those companies to be accountable. I don’t care about the money—I want transformation.”

Hundreds of lawsuits have been filed in relation to social-media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Families are not the only plaintiffs. Last year, Seattle’s public-school district sued multiple social-media companies alleging harm to its students and a resulting strain on district resources. Attorneys general for forty-one states and the District of Columbia have sued Meta for harming children by fuelling social-media addiction. Both the United Kingdom and the European Union have recently enacted legislation that heightens companies’ responsibility for content on their platforms, and there is bipartisan support for similar measures in the United States. The surgeon general, Vivek H. Murthy, has called for a warning label on social-media platforms, stating that they are “associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents.”

Still, research paints a complex picture of the role of technology in emotional states, and restricting teens’ social-media use could cause harms of its own. Research accrues slowly, whereas technology and its uses are

evolving faster than anyone can fully keep up with. Caught between the two, will the law be able to devise an effective response to the crisis?

Between 2007 and 2021, the incidence of suicide among Americans between the ages of ten and twenty-four rose by sixty-two per cent. The Centers for Disease Control found that one in three teen-age girls considered taking her life in 2021, up from one in five in 2011. The youth-suicide rate has increased disproportionately among some minority groups. Rates are also typically higher among the L.G.B.T.Q. population, teens with substance-abuse issues, and those who grow up in a house with guns.

Rates of depression have also risen sharply among teens, and fifty-three per cent of Americans now believe that social media is predominantly or fully responsible. Most American teen-agers check social media regularly; more than half spend at least four hours a day doing so. A 2019 study by researchers at Johns Hopkins University reported that spending more than three hours a day online can lead adolescents to internalize problems more, making it harder to cope with depression and anxiety. The authors of a 2023 report found that reducing social-media exposure significantly improves body image in adolescents and young adults. If you cannot distinguish between the “real” world and the virtual world, between what has happened and what is imagined, the result is psychic chaos and vulnerability to mental and physical illness. Facebook’s founding president, Sean Parker, stated in 2017, “God only knows what it’s doing to our children’s brains.”

Social media acts on the same neurological pleasure circuitry as is involved in addiction to nicotine, alcohol, or cocaine. Predictable rewards do not trigger this system nearly as effectively as unpredictable ones; slot-machine manufacturers know this, and so do social-media companies. “Teens are insatiable when it comes to ‘feel good’ dopamine effects,” a Meta document cited in the attorneys general’s complaint noted. Instagram “has a pretty good hold on the serendipitous aspect of discovery. . . . Every time one of our teen users finds something unexpected their brains deliver them a dopamine hit.” Judith Edersheim, a co-director of the Center for Law, Brain & Behavior, at Harvard, likens the effect to putting children in a twenty-four-hour casino and giving them chocolate-flavored bourbon. “The relentlessness, the intrusion, it’s all very intentional,” she told me. “No other addictive device has ever been so pervasive.”

Social-media platforms harness our innate tendency to compare ourselves with others. Publication of the number of likes, views, and followers a user garners has made social-media platforms arenas for competition. Appearance-enhancing filters may make viewers feel inadequate, and even teen-agers who use them may not register that others are doing the same. Leah Somerville, who runs the Affective Neuroscience and Development Lab, at Harvard, has demonstrated that a thirteen-year-old is likelier to take extreme risks to obtain peer approval than a twenty-six-year-old, in part because the limbic system of the adolescent brain is more activated, the prefrontal cortex is less developed, and communication between the two areas is weaker.



In 2017, the *Australian* discovered a Facebook document which, seemingly for advertising purposes, categorized users as “stressed,” “defeated,” “overwhelmed,” “anxious,” “nervous,” “stupid,” “silly,” “useless,” and “a failure.” The *Wall Street Journal’s* reporting on Meta’s internal documents indicated that management knew that “aspects of Instagram exacerbate each other to create a perfect storm”; that nearly one in three teen-age girls who felt bad about their bodies said that “Instagram made them feel worse”; that teen-agers themselves “blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression”; that six per cent of U.S. teens reporting suicidal ideation attributed it to Instagram; and that teen-agers “know that what they’re seeing

is bad for their mental health but feel unable to stop themselves.” Last year, a former director of engineering at Facebook, Arturo Béjar, told Congress that almost forty per cent of thirteen-to-fifteen-year-old users surveyed by his research team said that they had compared themselves negatively with others in the past seven days.

Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, recently announced a set of safeguards designed to protect younger users, including making their profiles private and pausing their notifications at night. Still, social-media companies have been slow to enact meaningful overhauls of their platforms, which are spectacularly profitable. A notorious leaked Meta e-mail quoted in the attorneys general’s lawsuit announces, “The lifetime value of a 13 y/o teen is roughly \$270 per teen.” Public-health researchers at Harvard have estimated that, in 2022, social-media platforms generated almost eleven billion dollars of advertising revenue from children and teen-agers, including more than two billion dollars from users aged twelve and younger. Proposed reforms risk weakening the grip on young people’s attention. “When depressive content is good for engagement, it is actively promoted by the algorithm,” Guillaume Chaslot, a French data scientist who worked on YouTube’s recommendation systems, has said. The Norwegian anti-suicide activist Ingebjørg Blindheim has described the dynamic as “the darker the thought, the deeper the cut, the more likes and attention you receive.”

In most industries, companies can be held responsible for the harm they cause and are subject to regulatory safety requirements. Social-media companies are protected by Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which limits their responsibility for online content created by third-party users. Without this provision, Web sites that allow readers to post comments might be liable for untrue or abusive statements. Although Section 230 allows companies to remove “obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable” material, it does not oblige them to. Gretchen Peters, the executive director of the Alliance to Counter Crime Online, noted that, after a panel flew off a Boeing 737 *max* 9, in January, 2024, the F.A.A. grounded nearly two hundred planes. “Yet children keep dying because of Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok,” she said, “and there is hardly any response from the companies, our government, the courts, or the public.”

One may sue an author or a publisher for libel, but usually not a bookstore. The question surrounding Section 230 is whether a Web site is a publisher or a bookstore. In 1996, it seemed fairly clear that interactive platforms such as CompuServe or Usenet corresponded to bookstores. Modern social-media companies, however, in recommending content to users, arguably function as both bookstore and publisher—making Section 230 feel as distant from today’s digital reality as copyright law does from the Iliad.

No court has yet challenged the basic tenet of Section 230—including the Supreme Court, which last year heard a case brought against Google by the father of a young woman killed in the 2015 *ISIS* attacks in Paris. The lawsuit argued that YouTube, a subsidiary of Google, was “aiding and abetting” terrorism by allowing *ISIS* to use the platform. Without addressing Section 230, the Justices ruled that the plaintiff had no claim under U.S. terrorism law. This summer, the Court declined to hear another case involving Section 230, though Justices Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch dissented, indicating that they thought the section’s scope should be reconsidered. “There is danger in delay,” Thomas wrote. “Social-media platforms have increasingly used §230 as a get-out-of-jail free card.”

Advances in communications technology have always been disruptive. The historian Anne Applebaum points out that the invention of movable type enabled the religious wars of the seventeenth century, and that broadcast media fed both communism and fascism. She believes that it takes a generation to learn how to negotiate any new communication system. In Sam Shepard’s 1976 play “Angel City,” a character’s observations sound much like those of children in thrall to social media: “I look at the screen and I am the screen. I’m not me. I don’t know who I am. I look at the movie and I am the movie. I am the star. . . . I hate my life when I come down. . . . I hate being myself in my life which isn’t a movie and never will be.”

Safety and freedom lie at opposite ends of a spectrum. To deprive a child of all access to the Internet would be draconian and also impractical, given that young people are more tech-savvy than their parents. Teen-agers need privacy, but when their methods for hiding far outstrip their parents’ capacity to monitor their activity, children can die of that privacy.

When Chris Dawley was a high-school freshman, in the nineteen-seventies, in Wisconsin, his twenty-seven-year-old brother, Dave, troubled and addicted to cocaine, was working in Las Vegas. One day, Dave called their father asking to come home. After their father insisted that he be drug-free first, Dave shot himself. Years later, Chris shared the story on a first date with the woman who was to become his wife, Donna; she told him about the death of her fiancé in a workplace accident. Grief was a nexus of intimacy from the time they met, and Donna now thinks that this helped them after their son C.J. killed himself, in 2015, when he was seventeen. “We came together—we didn’t come apart,” she told me when I visited them, in Salem, Wisconsin. “We’d been through so much heartache before.”

From an early age, C.J. was remarkable. At two, he found a screwdriver and removed the doors of several kitchen cabinets. When he was thirteen, Donna came home to find a new computer all in pieces on her bedroom floor; he reassembled it completely by bedtime. Just three points short of a perfect score on his ACT, his mother recalled, C.J. was wooed by a recruiter from Duke; he wanted to be a nuclear engineer. He had a busy social life and was popular with girls. His high-school yearbook named him “funniest person.”

C.J. was given a smartphone his freshman year of high school. He spent a lot of time playing games and chatting with friends on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. His mother recalled, “His phone was his life. We couldn’t sit at the table and have a meal without it.” He got a buzz when his posts received attention. Tall and handsome, he liked posting selfies, but, after commenters judged him skinny, he became self-conscious and determined to gain weight.

The girl to whom C.J. was closest was one he had met online; he told her, “Every time I think of going to college and the future, I just want to kill myself.” She told him to talk to someone. He said, “Well, I’m talking to you.” Neither of them knew what to do. He complained of terrible aches in his legs, which his doctor said were growing pains. He didn’t apply to Duke and was considering joining the Navy.

On the first Sunday of 2015, the family was taking down Christmas ornaments, but C.J. was still in bed, having been on his phone past four in the morning. His father woke him up, and C.J. came out, but said he was too

tired to help. His sister Shannon chewed him out and he retreated to his room in a sulk. At lunchtime, Donna warmed up leftover lasagna. She often took C.J. a plate in his room, but she figured he'd join them when he was ready. "That hurts so bad," she said. "Maybe, if I would have brought him a plate of lasagna, he would have talked to me. I have not made lasagna since. I can't."

Around ten that night, Shannon went into C.J.'s room. He had shot himself. Rigor mortis had set in, and, though he had dropped the gun, his phone was still clutched in his hand. He had been using it to signal what he was about to do, texting a friend "Godspeed," and posting, "Who turned out the lights?" on Facebook. "He couldn't even kill himself without posting about it," Donna said. On the back of a college-acceptance envelope, in shaky pencil, C.J. had written a note that began, "I don't want you to think this is all your fault. It's not." He continued, "There's a lot you don't know about me. What goes on inside my head scares me. I try to be a good person. It's just as if I'm running in a dark tunnel, running after the light so I can be happy, but my legs are tired. And what's a man to do when the light goes out?"

For the next five years, Donna and Chris searched for an explanation. They talked to all C.J.'s friends. It was only when they saw Frances Haugen's Facebook testimony that they began scrolling through C.J.'s phone. He had not been sleeping more than three or four hours a night for months. They eventually filed suit against Meta and Snap, the company that owns Snapchat.

Earlier this year, Donna and Chris took me to C.J.'s room. Donna showed me a gold trophy he'd won. She produced certificates for all kinds of prizes, his old Teddy bear, and the longbow she'd bought for him his final Christmas. The hunting rifle his parents had given him for his thirteenth birthday was no longer there, though, and the section of the carpet that had been soaked with blood was cut out. It was mid-January, and the Christmas decorations were still in place. "The house looks so pretty with them up," Donna explained. It looked as it did the last morning she woke up with an intact family.

Chris said that filing the lawsuit had brought them friendships with other bereaved parents. They all wonder how we went from being a society where children below a certain age couldn't see "Jaws" to one where they can watch all the porn they want—from one where you could check that your children weren't "in with the wrong crowd" to one where you cannot even see what virtual crowd your children are mingling with. "You're not going to let your kid run around with a sharp knife?" Chris said. "Then don't let your kid get onto these sites until they're eighteen. I thought I was a good and responsible father. I checked around the house and locked the doors every night, making everything nice and safe." He lowered his head into his hands. "I didn't understand that the lion was already inside the house."

In a three-decade legal career specializing in litigation on behalf of asbestos-exposed mesothelioma patients, Matthew Bergman won a total of more than a billion dollars for his clients. By 2021, he was looking for a new cause, and, not long after the Facebook leaks, he left the firm where he was a partner and established the Social Media Victims Law Center. The S.M.V.L.C. is named as counsel on hundreds of cases involving young people who he believes have died or been severely harmed because of social media. Harried, exhausted, and righteous, he advertises for clients, zigzagging across the country to spend time with them. (The four main stories in this article all feature families represented by the S.M.V.L.C.)

Bergman's clients will pay him only if they win their cases. "There's nothing like a contingent fee to make you think creatively about legal concepts," he told me when I met him. To circumvent Section 230, he and other lawyers have settled on a strategy of targeting not the platforms' dissemination of problematic content—which would treat them like traditional publishers—but their algorithms, which are proprietary and therefore arguably qualify as damaging products in themselves. Bergman's clients do not expect substantial settlements—"I've never encountered clients less concerned about money and more concerned about justice," he said—but he will not let you leave the room until you are as sickened by their plight as he is. "You talk to a mom who describes cleaning her son's brain out of her hair," he said. "Often, the link between the child's social-media use and their harm is irrefutable."

More than a dozen firms and scores of lawyers are working on this matter. Among them is Jennifer Scullion, at the New Jersey firm Seeger Weiss, which is partnering with S.M.V.L.C. on a number of cases. The latest arguments expand the product-liability theory beyond the algorithm, naming a long list of features, including parental controls, age verification, and notification systems, as defective or dangerous. “The problem here is not the content itself, but the design of the platform,” Scullion argues.



I reviewed several hundred briefs and filings—thousands upon thousands of pages, their details at once depressingly repetitive and agonizingly individual, their language legalistic yet furious. Many lawsuits pertain to body image and anorexia content: “Instagram specifically targeted B.W. with . . . messaging and imagery that promoted extreme weight loss; glamorized harmful relationships to food, dieting, and exercise; and drastically undermined B.W.’s self-image and self-worth. . . . B.W.’s physician diagnosed her with bulimia, irregular menstruation, tachycardia, generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, suicidal ideations, and nonsuicidal self-harm.”

Sexual abuse and exploitation feature often in the allegations: A girl attempted suicide twice when she was eleven, having been contacted by men on Roblox and then Discord, one of whom inveigled her into sending

explicit photographs on Snapchat, where photos disappear (though they can still be screenshotted). A boy was persuaded to send illicit pictures to a user, also via Snapchat, only for that person to send back a collage of the images as blackmail. One suit, citing a leaked Meta document in which an employee asserted that the People You May Know function had, in the past, “contributed up to 75% of all inappropriate adult-minor contact,” claims that, “incredibly, Meta made the decision to continue utilizing its user recommendation products regardless.” (Meta says it has developed technology to limit potentially suspicious accounts from interacting with teens.)

Bergman told me of a boy who had been deluged with TikTok videos telling him to jump in front of a train—which he did. Another young man, after a breakup, posted about his heartache and was sent videos telling him to blow his head off—which he did. “This is kids affirmatively being directed to suicidal content,” Bergman said. “It’s Orwellian. You can’t walk away from the bully. It’s like you’re running right into his fist.” Even parents who recognize social media as a problem can find themselves facing tragedy when they try to shield their children from it: “Sarah was extremely distraught after having her phone taking [sic] away and . . . thought that she could not live without Defendants’ social media products,” one complaint reads. “Sarah went upstairs, found her father’s gun, and shot herself in the head.”

Brandy and Toney Roberts, who live in New Iberia, Louisiana, have emerged as faces of the movement to protect children from social media, appearing on “60 Minutes” and other news programs. When they speak of their daughter Englyn, who died by suicide in September, 2020, at the age of fourteen, they conjure her so vividly that you expect to see her entering the room, grinning, bubbly, and demanding. One of Englyn’s friends put a recording of her laughter into a Build-a-Bear plushie that she gave to Brandy and Toney; if you lean on it, as I did by accident, peals of hilarity break out. On the living-room sofa, there is a pillow printed with a snapshot taken on a trip to Destin, Florida. Englyn is hugging Brandy, and her face is alight with glee. A week after the picture was taken, she hanged herself.

As the youngest in a family of seven siblings, half siblings, and stepsiblings, Englyn was doted on, even spoiled. Because she loved travel, she and her

parents would get in the car and Toney would say, “East or west or north or south?,” and they would set out, once making it as far as New Mexico. Toney loved to indulge his daughter, taking her for a manicure she suddenly wanted, or getting food late at night. Brandy tried to set limits, and cautioned her daughter, whose bearing was confident, even regal, that people in their community, the Black community, didn’t like anyone who came across as full of themselves.

On the last Saturday in August, 2020, Toney made soup for dinner, but Englyn didn’t have much. “Baby girl, you didn’t eat,” Toney said. “My soup wasn’t good?” He suggested they order pizza, and he and Brandy and Englyn sat up late, eating. At around half past ten, Englyn asked her parents if they wanted to watch a movie. “Oh, no, baby girl, we tired,” Toney said. Before she went upstairs, her parents said, as always, “Love you,” and she said, “Love you,” and kissed them both.

Later that night, the mother of a friend of Englyn’s who had been texting with her got in touch with Brandy, urging her to check on her. Toney and Brandy were surprised to find Englyn’s door locked. When they got in, they didn’t see her, so Toney went to look behind the bed. “All of a sudden, I turned around and she was hanging right there,” he told me as we stood in Englyn’s bedroom. She had used an extension cord to hang herself from a door hinge. “Seems like an eternity passed, and I get her down, and Brandy starts CPR.”

When paramedics arrived, they detected a pulse, and Englyn was placed on life support in the hospital. “And you just praying and praying and praying for nine days, vigils outside, just everything you can humanly, possibly do,” Toney said. On September 7th, the doctors advised the Robertses to discontinue life support. “You ask yourself, ‘What is she feeling? Is she feeling anything?’” Toney remembered. He and Brandy were joined at the hospital by his mother and two priests, and everyone said their final farewells.

Of all the bedrooms of children lost to suicide that I visited during my reporting, Englyn’s was the most meticulously preserved: every pair of shoes in the same place she had kept them, the bed still made and occupied by a row of Teddy bears. “She had these socks on that night,” Toney said.

“This is where I found her. See that box? She stood up on that box.” The box was just behind the door, where Englyn must have placed it before putting the cord around her neck.

After Englyn died, Toney checked her phone. In the family videos he’d shown me, Englyn looks not just cheerful but joyous, exploding into laughter and song, yet she was taking pictures in which she was cutting herself and posting thoughts like “I’ve been feeling ugly lately.” After she turned fourteen, she posted a birthday photograph with the caption “Swipe to see my real shape”; the next picture showed a distortion of her figure. A longer post said, “One Day Ima Leave This World And Never Come Back, You Gone Cry When You See A Picture Of Me. . . . So You Need To Appreciate Me Before I’m Gone.”

Instagram’s algorithms had sent her increasingly troubling suicide content. In one post, a Black woman screamed, “Stop this madness. What do you want from me? What do you want? Please. Please.” The woman then pretended to hang herself with an electrical cord, just as Englyn eventually did.



Brandy had often checked Englyn’s phone, looking for inappropriate photos or bad language; it never occurred to her to check the videos Instagram was

recommending. After Englyn died, Toney and Brandy found a hidden note on her phone: “I show ppl what they want to see but behind the social media life nobody knows the real me and how much I struggle to make sure everyone’s good even though I’m not.”

Brandy, who is a teacher, thinks that people need to know more about the technology they use daily. “In the Black community, low-income, where I teach, parents are not educated enough on any type of technology,” she said. “We thought we were two well-educated people. I want to educate the parents first and then the students: What’s an algorithm? What do these sites do?” Toney said, “How in the hell could this happen? How could man develop such a thing as an algorithm that trumps the parents’ love? How could a machine mean more to her than us?”

Some of the lawsuits currently pending allege that the content social-media algorithms push to users’ feeds is influenced by race. “J.A.J. has no interest in guns or gangs, yet Instagram and TikTok would often direct him to gun and gang-themed content,” a legal complaint from a Black father of three reads. “These defendants know of the algorithmic discrimination in their products, yet continue to allow those products to push disproportionately violent and sexual content to African American users.” When I mentioned to Brandy that suicide is rising rapidly among Black youths, she said she suspected that Black suicide had previously been under-reported. “People do get shocked when they see it’s a Black family,” she said. “But it’s not your poor families anymore, not your rich families—it can attack anybody.” Her desire to downplay race seems to reflect a concern that Englyn’s Blackness might allow other groups to feel distant from her plight. Still, at the end of our conversation, Toney drew a provocative historical comparison. “Zuckerberg is the new ‘massa,’ ” he said. “He put the lifetime value of a teen-ager at two hundred seventy dollars. The price of a slave in 1770 was two hundred sixty dollars.”

Beeban Kidron, a British filmmaker who sits in the House of Lords, runs a foundation dedicated to protecting children online. When I met with her, in the Houses of Parliament, she told me that her crusade had gained momentum after the suicide, in 2017, of a fourteen-year-old Londoner named Molly Russell, who had viewed and saved thousands of posts about depression and suicide. Two years later, her father launched a campaign in

her name and appeared in a BBC video (“Instagram ‘helped kill my daughter’ ”). Shortly thereafter, Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, published assurances that the platform was determined “to protect the most vulnerable,” and the platform began to delete millions of images related to suicide and self-harm.

The official in charge of a judicial investigation into Molly’s death ordered Meta, WhatsApp, Snap, Pinterest, and Twitter to provide data from her accounts. “When it was first shown in the coroner’s court, there was shock and awe in the room,” Kidron told me. “People in tears, including the press gallery, who had been following this issue for years. No one had understood the bombardment.”

The investigation found social-media platforms partially responsible for Molly’s death. The presiding official concluded that Molly had been so influenced by what she saw online that her death was not truly suicide but rather “an act of self harm whilst suffering depression and the negative effects of on-line content.”

Material from Molly’s inquest was presented to British lawmakers as they considered legislation, and last year they passed the Online Safety Act, which imposes stringent content-regulation requirements on digital platforms. Failure to comply can result in fines of either eighteen million pounds or ten per cent of a company’s annual global revenue, whichever is greater. Kidron believes that social-media companies have long realized that this kind of regulation would come and have been rushing to profit while they could. As we sat in Parliament, she fumed, “Those bastards are making money on the backs of children, and the collateral damage of those vast fortunes is sometimes, literally, the life of those children. And they won’t change it without people sitting in buildings like this and telling them they’ve got to.”

Meanwhile, many U.S. states are taking matters into their own hands. Spencer Cox, the governor of Utah, where suicide is the leading cause of death among teen-agers, has introduced multiple acts to constrain social-media use, and Gavin Newsom, the governor of California, recently signed into law a bill requiring social-media companies to stop curating minors’ feeds to drive engagement and sending them notifications at night or during

school hours. The states' attorneys general that have filed suit against Meta allege that social-media companies claimed their products were safe even though they knew that they could exacerbate mental-health problems. This tactic echoes similar moves against tobacco companies a generation ago. The attorneys general are asking that the judge not only impose financial penalties but also prohibit the platforms from continuing to use features that harm young users.

By now, more than two hundred school districts and municipalities have filed suit against Meta and other social-media companies in connection with students' declining mental health. A complaint filed by Bucks County, in Pennsylvania, asserts that the defendants' platforms "hijack a tween and teen compulsion—to connect—that can be even more powerful than hunger or greed." Among the costs attributed to social media in the Seattle school district's complaint are damage to school property, a need for additional personnel to counsel disturbed students, and the expense of training teachers to recognize signs of social-media addiction. Even Meta shareholders have sued the company, claiming that they were misled about its efforts to moderate content and keep users safe.

In July, 2023, Senators Elizabeth Warren and Lindsey Graham proposed a commission to regulate online platforms. The commission could require companies to develop and adhere to meaningful content-moderation policies, and would establish a "duty of care" to users, obliging the companies to take reasonable measures to avoid foreseeable harm. Once a duty of care is legally established—stipulating, for instance, that landlords are responsible for fire safety and the removal of lead paint in properties they own—it becomes possible to sue for negligence.

For social-media companies, forestalling a duty of care is vital, as became clear last fall, when they sought to have much of the case against them dismissed in an ongoing federal litigation involving a panoply of plaintiffs. The presiding judge, Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers, grilled a TikTok attorney about whether the company had a duty to design a safe product. When he eventually said that, legally speaking, they didn't, she said, "Let me write it down. No duty to design a platform in a safe way. That's what you said." There are questions of law and questions of decency, and even those who

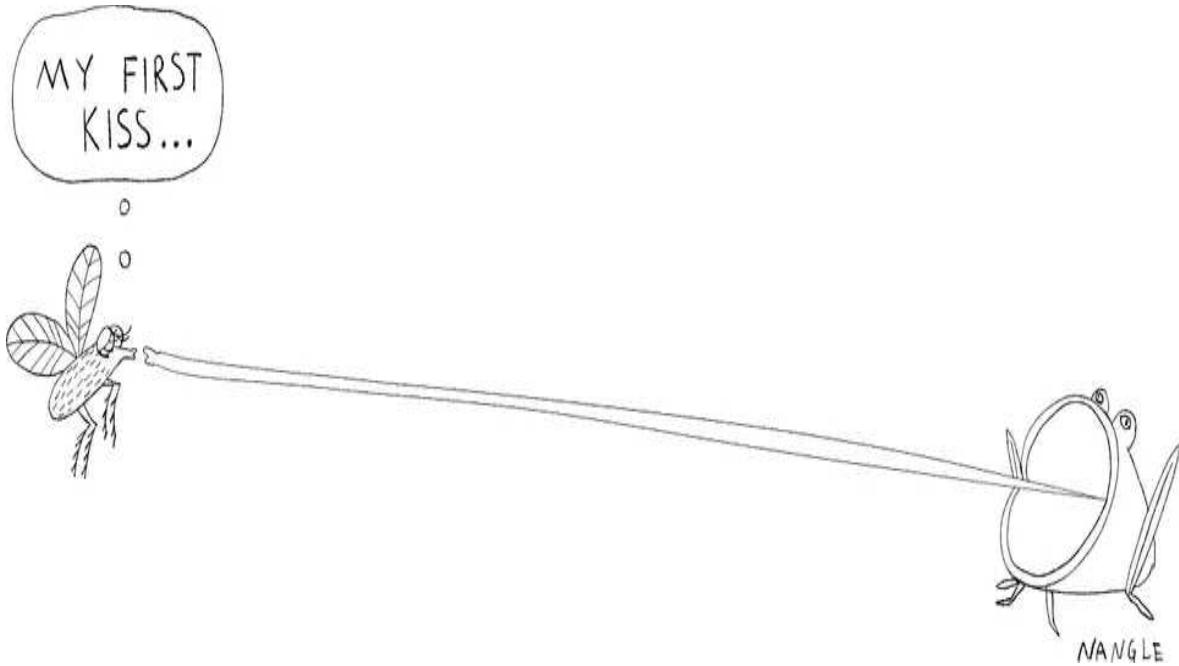
skirt the outer limits of the law attempt to keep up an appearance of probity. Here such a façade was not maintained.

Darla Gill told me that I would recognize her family's place because their trailer, five hours from New Orleans, was a double-wide. Cozy and attractive, it was decorated primarily with hunting trophies belonging to her husband, Ryan. For years, the Gills moved wherever Ryan's work, in pipeline construction, took him—Oklahoma, West Virginia, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kansas—with Darla mostly homeschooling their three children. Looking to settle near Darla's family, they chose this corner of Louisiana to start a farm, raising chickens commercially and pigs for show.

Their eldest child, Emma Claire, made friends wherever her family lived. Tall, with long blond hair, she could go from participating in a beauty pageant to driving a tractor. For her sixteenth birthday, her parents took her and a group of her girlfriends to Baton Rouge; in the summer of 2021, for her seventeenth birthday, she planned to visit Alabama to watch college football with her father.

In the Gills' small community, two teen-agers had died by suicide in the previous thirteen months. Of one, Emma Claire had said to Darla, "Momma, how could she do that to her family?" Darla, who had experienced postpartum depression, said, "Have you ever felt depressed, where you felt like you couldn't get over it?" Emma Claire said she had been sad, but never that sad. Darla said, "If you ever feel that way, you have to tell us. You have to tell someone."

On the first Saturday in August, 2021, Emma Claire, then a high-school junior, sneaked out late to meet a boy. Darla, realizing she hadn't given her daughter a kiss good night, went into her room and found nobody there. When Emma Claire came home, past two in the morning, her parents told her she was grounded, and confiscated her car keys and her phone. She handed them over without complaint.



Early the next morning, Ryan received a call from someone who needed a rooster feeder fixed, so he woke Emma Claire and asked her to feed the pigs. Darla went into Emma Claire's room a few minutes later with a bra and asked if she needed it for church. Emma Claire said, "No, ma'am." Later, when Darla went to the barn to tell Emma Claire it was time to leave for church, she saw her daughter's legs on the ground. "She was propped up against a feedbag. I knew immediately she was gone," Darla said. Emma Claire had fed the pigs, then shot herself in the head with a .22 that she had received for Christmas a few years earlier, which her father kept locked in his truck.

"All the things that you worry about—car wrecks, drowning, kidnapping—you just don't think of suicide," Ryan said. Darla added, "She wasn't a depressed, loner kid. She was popular. She was outgoing. She was involved. She played basketball. She showed pigs. She won beauty pageants. She deer-hunted with her dad. Just an all-American girl. Everybody liked her except the girls whose boyfriends liked her." Hundreds of people attended her funeral. "She did not get her wedding, but she packed that whole church for her funeral, the whole church," Darla said.

In the note she left, Emma Claire wrote, "Momma, I'm sorry there's a lot of things I wish I could explain to you. . . . I'm sorry I disappointed you. I can't

do it knowing I just let you down. . . . I love you all so much. I'm sorry I had to do this. I just can't take it anymore." Her parents still cannot think how she ever disappointed them. "When did she write that note?" Darla asked. "Did she write it after I woke her up that morning? Did she write it before she went to sleep, when she didn't have her phone to occupy her?" Darla blames herself for taking away the phone. "It may have been what triggered her," she said. "I don't know. I didn't know how it felt to be suicidal until my daughter's suicide. I just want to sleep so I can dream about her."

After police investigating Emma Claire's death took her phone for inspection, her parents started thinking about the role it might have played. Emma Claire had Snapchat, because she said that that was how her basketball team communicated, and her parents let her use it on the condition that she give up TikTok and her extra Instagram account. In fact, she still had TikTok, and kept a secret Instagram account. When Darla saw an ad for the Social Media Victims Law Center, she thought maybe someone there could figure out what she and Ryan were missing. In 2022, the S.M.V.L.C. filed a suit on the Gills' behalf, saying that design features of various social-media platforms created a "harmful dependency" and "proximately caused Emma Claire's death." (In response to requests for comment on cases described in this article, spokespeople for Meta, TikTok, Snap, and Google emphasized their commitment to safety for teens on their platforms.)

"I believe with my whole heart, if she did not have social media, she would still be here," Darla said. "You feel very responsible that you allowed her to have it." Ryan described his state of mind in metaphorical terms: "You're constantly carrying that rock with you, that grief. When I first found out, it's like you had a big old boulder on you, couldn't even sit up. A few days later, you could get up on a knee. Maybe a week later, you could stand up with it. Eventually, you could walk. But I'm still carrying that boulder." The family is deeply Christian, and Ryan used to lead the singing at his church, but his voice now fails him.

Darla and Ryan's son, Burch, developed a terror of the dark and began sleeping in his parents' bed. Though Darla knew he should be in his own bed, she was relieved to know where he was. One night, their young daughter, Rylan, started crying and ended up in the bed, too. "And I had both

of them on each side of me, and I thought, This is the most content that I can ever be, having them here and knowing they're both alive," Darla told me. Just before I visited, Burch had shot a blackbird with his pellet gun, then had been overcome with regret. "I shot it and now it's gone, just like Emma Claire," he said.

A parent who loses a child to suicide must deal with three simultaneous griefs: anguish at losing someone you love; self-blame at the thought that you might have failed as a parent; and, worst of all, bewilderment, the impossibility of making sense out of what happened. If you can find a cause, you can address it. One of the parents I spoke to suggested that finding that their child had killed themselves after some devastating trauma would, paradoxically, bring a kind of relief: "Then it would make sense." For many of the parents I spoke to, activism provided a way to reestablish meaning in a world that now seemed to have none. Norma Nazario, a single mother who lives in Manhattan, in Alphabet City, lost her son, Zackery, in 2023—not to suicide but to subway surfing, which he took up after seeing people doing it on social media, and then becoming obsessed with posting risky videos of his own. When we spoke, I was amazed at how measured she managed to sound, and she explained, "Anger is activism—it is how I cope with the world. Sadness is something I allow myself only in this apartment, because if I let the sadness well up, it would paralyze me, and then I couldn't do the work I need to do. Anger lets me fight the problems that sadness lays bare."

It is easy to suppose that blaming social media could be a way for parents to stop blaming themselves, but I never felt this with the parents I met; there was still plenty of room for self-blame. Activism was neither vengeful nor self-justifying; saving other people's children was simply the best means of surviving one's own loss. Although the world is sympathetic to grief, there is less grace for the confusion parents feel as they try to decipher a story that will never make sense. Kierkegaard proposed that life must be understood backward but lived forward. However, these lives cannot be understood backward, and yet they must move forward anyway. Comforting people is easy; not comforting them (because there is no comfort to be found) is much harder.

Almost every time a suicide is mentioned, an explanation is offered: he was depressed; her mother was horrible; they lost all their money. It would be

foolish to ignore contributing factors, but it is equally absurd to pretend that any suicide makes sense because of concrete woes. This is also true when it comes to social media. It is surely a factor in many of these deaths, and substantial regulatory interventions, long overdue, may bring down the suicide rate in some populations, especially the young. Nonetheless, research has failed to demonstrate any definite causal link between rising social-media use and rising depression and suicide. The American Psychological Association has asserted that “using social media is not inherently beneficial or harmful to young people,” and a community of scientists, many of them outside the United States, has published research underscoring the absence of a clear link. Gina Neff, who heads a technology-research center at the University of Cambridge, told me, “Just because social media is the easy target doesn’t make it the right target.”

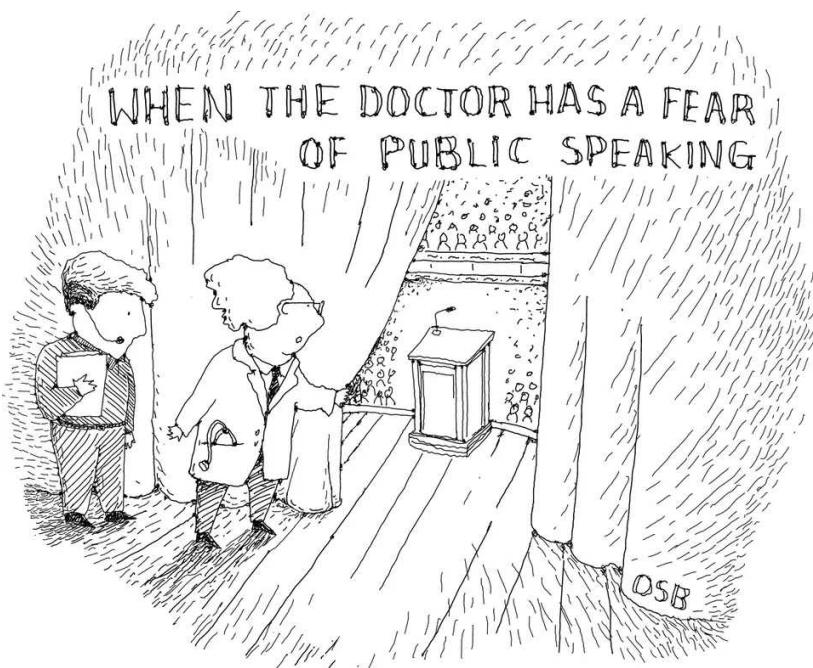
Andrew Przybylski, a psychologist at the University of Oxford, has observed that decreasing life satisfaction among youths between the ages of ten and twenty usually led to an increase in social-media use. “But the opposite isn’t necessarily true,” he writes. “In most groups, the more time a child spends on social media doesn’t mean their life satisfaction will decrease.” Working with Amy Orben, a Cambridge psychologist, Przybylski has also noted that lower life satisfaction correlates slightly more strongly with wearing glasses than with digital-technology use.

Orben has grown cautious in what she writes, however, because social media’s defenders have cited her work to assert that the platforms are safe—which she has never contended. “The research evidence describes averages,” she explained to me. “Suicide relates to individuals. There’s a disconnect between those two, because you’re averaging across the heterogeneity that makes us human.” She is at pains to emphasize that tech is not the only thing that has happened in the past fifteen years. “The world is on fire,” she said, adding that politicians have focussed on social media because it makes for a simple, popular target. “It is a lot easier to blame companies than to blame very complex phenomena.” The British political theorist David Runciman suggested to me that children’s online interactions aren’t very different from those of adults and that the difference lies in young people’s lack of agency. “They feel powerless about climate change, war, misery,” he said. “That is a toxic combination: permissionless access to information, and relative powerlessness over the topics to which that information pertains.”

I have conducted dozens of interviews with young survivors of suicide attempts, and few mentioned social media as a factor. They pointed to a sense of impotence and purposelessness; climate change; the brutal language of modern politics; intolerance for their gender, race, or sexuality; bleak financial prospects and diminished social mobility; an inability ever to feel that they had caught up, as though their brains were slower than their lives; and acute loneliness, even among those who appeared not to be lonely.

Reductive models cloud the issue, providing false reassurance to many (“My child never uses Instagram”) and piling anguish on people who have lost children (“If only I’d kept her off Instagram”). In North America, rates of depression and anxiety in young people have been rising for at least eighty years. “Why weren’t people in the 1980s or ’90s asking why adolescent depression was at an all-time high?” the Johns Hopkins psychologist Dylan Selterman has written. “This isn’t new. And it’s going to keep getting worse in the absence of major cultural adjustments. We aren’t a mentally healthy society, and we haven’t been for a very long time.” The British psychologist Peter Etchells has written that, rather than considering social media a cause of mental-health difficulties, “it’s more useful to consider them as a lens through which pre-existing issues and inequalities are either dampened or intensified.”

Laurence Steinberg, a Temple University expert on the psychology of adolescence, has outlined three potential causative scenarios: social media causing mental disturbance; mental disturbance leading people to overuse social media; or some unrelated issue boosting both mental disturbance and social-media use. “All of these interpretations are reasonable,” he writes. “Given the widespread eagerness to condemn social media, it’s important to remember that it may benefit more adolescents than it hurts. . . . If other factors that have contributed to the rise in adolescent depression are being overlooked in the rush to point the finger at Facebook, we may be contributing to the very problem we hope to solve.”



A McKinsey Health Institute survey of forty-two thousand people in twenty-six countries found that social-media engagement may facilitate mental-health support and connection. Young people can play games on Discord and catch up with friends on Instagram and Snapchat. Those who are isolated find like-minded people. Immigrants build community with others who share their language and culture. Gina Neff, the Cambridge technology researcher, grew up in the hill country of eastern Kentucky. “Kids who are gay in Appalachia find the Internet and it is a lifesaver,” she said.

Smartphones can save lives in other ways. Randy P. Auerbach, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University, has been using phone tracking to monitor suicide risk. He measures changes in sleep patterns (many teens look at their phones right before and after sleep), changes in movement (depressed people move less), and changes in vocabulary and punctuation (people in despair start using personal pronouns more often). Matthew Nock, a clinical psychologist at Harvard and a MacArthur Fellow, has been examining the relationship between text-message frequency and mental vulnerability. Most suicides today, he said, come at the end of a “trail of digital bread crumbs.” Young people who are not responding to their peers—or whose messages no longer receive responses—may be in trouble. Nock’s research team uses cell-phone tracking to determine when people are at highest risk and calls or messages them. “We haven’t equipped the field

with the tools to find, predict, and prevent suicide, in the way we've done for other medical problems," he said. "We just haven't developed the tools, other than to ask people, 'How are you doing? Are you hopeless? Are you depressed? Do you think you're going to kill yourself?,' which is not a very accurate predictor. We should be taking advantage of advances in computing and statistics to do what human brains can't."

Meta has programs to pick up troubling posts and has notified emergency services about them. But Nock points out that social-media companies may be afraid that, if they put systems in place and those systems fail, their liability could be enormous. Meanwhile, suicide research in the U.S. receives two-thirds less funding than research on other major causes of mortality. Research review boards often scrutinize suicide-study proposals particularly stringently, because of the risk of a subject's attempting suicide. "We're not blocking oncology research because people are dying from cancer," Nock said. "We want to do our best not to make people more suicidal, but the fact that people are going to die—why is it treated so differently?"

In recent years, congressional committees have held many hearings on the adverse effects of social media, and legislation has passed out of committee repeatedly without becoming law. But the Kids Online Safety Act has made more progress than previous efforts, having cleared the Senate; a narrower version of the bill now awaits a vote in the House. It has been subject to opposition by free-speech groups, including the A.C.L.U., which is concerned that screening out harmful content may also deny teens access to content they badly need, such as information about abortion.

A year ago, several families I'd met with joined a delegation that visited members of Congress and their staffers. Each family had three minutes to tell their story. "How do you describe not washing your child's clothes anymore?" Toney Roberts said. "That you don't watch them get off the bus anymore? That you don't help them with homework anymore?" Brandy was deeply frustrated. "The group that we're in, we are all educated, we all loved our children," she said. "In front of Congress, we felt like a child begging for our parents to do the right thing, begging them to hold these companies accountable."

Nonetheless, seventy-two senators signed on as co-sponsors of the bill, and, in late January, the families travelled to Washington again, to watch the Senate Judiciary Committee quiz five C.E.O.s: Mark Zuckerberg, of Meta; Shou Zi Chew, of TikTok; Evan Spiegel, of Snap; Linda Yaccarino, of X; and Jason Citron, of Discord. Before the hearing, some of the families gathered for breakfast at the Army and Navy Club. Though what they had in common was horrifying, there was a relaxed energy of acceptance. Their stories were so unbearable that they went through life having to choose whether to share or to elide them; here they had no need to do either.

The room in the Dirksen Senate Office Building where the hearing took place holds about five hundred people. As we filed in, I saw more families I knew. Each had brought a large photo of their dead child, which they carried at once protectively and casually. When everyone was seated, the C.E.O.s came in. As they entered, sixty or so families held up their photos, and a silence fell. To be in a room with sixty bereaved families is a solemn experience, but the C.E.O.s seemed largely unmoved. Some appeared nervous about their own testimony, but the accumulated weight of tragedy seemed not to register with them.

The room was divided with almost diagrammatic precision. The back was packed with people barely able to contain their searing grief; the middle contained tech folks manifesting no emotion whatsoever; in the front were the senators, a few of whom seemed genuinely engaged but most of whom were clearly calibrating the amount of righteous indignation that would make a viral clip. Real emotion; no emotion; fake emotion.

Lindsey Graham spoke directly to the executives: “Mr. Zuckerberg, you and the companies before us, I know you don’t mean it to be so, but you have blood on your hands. You have a product that’s killing people.” Any feeling that we were about to witness historic progress wilted in the hours that followed. The C.E.O.s gave banal opening statements about their good intentions. Zuckerberg, whose attitude seemed one of barely contained irritation, said, “Technology gives us new ways to communicate with our kids and feel connected to their lives, but it can also make parenting more complicated.” He said that Meta was “on the side of parents everywhere working hard to raise their kids.” Chew maintained that the average American TikTok user is older than thirty, sidestepping the question of the

platform's popularity among teens. Yaccarino, sheltering behind the rebranding of Twitter, announced, "X is an entirely new company, an indispensable platform for the world and for democracy," and added that it was seldom used by anyone under seventeen.

The senators had numbers to hand. Mike Lee reported that seventeen per cent of minors using Discord had had sexual interactions on the platform. Richard Blumenthal reminded Zuckerberg that he had personally rejected a request for some eighty engineers to insure well-being and safety, then asserted that the additional staff would have cost Meta "about fifty million dollars in a quarter when it earned \$9.2 billion." Josh Hawley cited the survey of Instagram users from thirteen to fifteen: thirty-seven per cent reported being exposed to unwanted nudity; twenty-four per cent had been propositioned.

The C.E.O.s lobbed back numbers of their own. "Fifteen per cent of our company is focussed on trust and safety," Citron said. "That's more people than we have working on marketing and promoting the company." Zuckerberg said Meta's "prevalence metrics" suggested that A.I. was automatically removing "ninety-nine per cent or so" of inappropriate content; also that the company had flagged more than twenty-six million instances of predatory behavior. He repeatedly maintained that Meta does not allow children younger than thirteen onto its platforms. "So if we find anyone who's under the age of thirteen, we remove them from our service," he said, prompting a bitter laugh from the parent group.

Gretchen Peters, of the Alliance to Counter Crime Online, was incensed by the executives' endlessly repeated statistics. Referring to Zuckerberg's claim about the ninety-nine-per-cent success rate of Meta's A.I. systems, she said, "If you found out that ninety-nine per cent of McDonald's hamburgers were not made with dog poop, how often would you take your children there?"

Later in the day, there was a rally by the Capitol, staged by younger activists, many of whom had been exploited online or lost a friend to suicide. It was freezing cold, and the event, though mournful, was marked by an oddly uplifting, furious exuberance. Some of the senators who had spoken earlier also made remarks at the rally, as did the attorney general of New Mexico, the Facebook whistle-blower Arturo Béjar, and a youth

activist named Zamaan Qureshi, who announced that a “coalition of young people” was determined “to take back control of our lives from social-media companies.” Arielle Geismar, George Washington University’s student-body president at the time, said, “We were forced to play a dopamine slot machine at the expense of our life.”

A few parents who had attended the hearings joined, standing behind the event’s speakers. At the end, I approached Lori Schott, Anna’s mother, and said that the day must have been exhausting for her. She pointed to the Capitol dome. “I brought Anna and a friend to Washington a few years ago, because I thought they should see our great country’s capital,” she said. “They were running up and down those stairs.” She swiped through her phone until she found a photograph. Once she’d shown me, her voice changed, becoming almost expressionless. “I never expected to be back here for this,” she said. ♦

Profiles

Ras Baraka, Reasonable Radical

How the Mayor of Newark is working to revive his city.

By Kelefa Sanneh

September 30, 2024



On an August day in 2011, a man stood outside City Hall in Newark, New Jersey, exhorting a crowd through a wireless microphone. “Stop giving love to these *psychopaths*,” he roared. The “psychopaths” were criminals; a few days earlier, a twenty-nine-year-old teacher named Dawn Reddick had been shot and killed—a seemingly random crime, except that killings in Newark had come to seem dispiritingly unrandom. The city was on its way toward ninety-three murders that year, with a population of two hundred and seventy-seven thousand people—a rate five times that of New York City, which sits less than ten miles east but often feels much farther.

The killing of Dawn Reddick was unsolved then—indeed, it remains unsolved. So the speaker railed against the unknown perpetrators, as well as the systems and circumstances that enabled so much perpetration. “How you get a Chinese-made rifle in the middle of Newark?” he asked. “You can’t

even get a decent loaf of bread!” He pictured what might happen if sufficiently assertive citizens found the responsible party: “The police should be trying to drag *us* off of *him*. We should be stomping his ass all the way into the precinct.” He didn’t sound like a typical protest leader, and he knew it. “Yeah, I’m talking vigilante talk today,” he said. “I’m talking mob justice.”

The speaker was Ras Baraka, and he was already known around town as the principal of Central High School, a city councillor, and the son of Amiri Baraka, the poet and playwright, who was one of Newark’s most prominent voices in 1967, when the city was engulfed by protests and riots sparked by anger over police brutality. Ras Baraka was born three years later, in 1970, and he inherited his father’s twinned commitments to civil rights and civic pride. The rally on that August day was part of a long campaign against violence in Newark, a campaign that also functioned as a sustained critique of the person who had been trying to quell the violence: Cory Booker, the city’s mediagenic mayor. Booker, a light-skinned Black man, had grown up in suburban New Jersey, an hour away. His voluntary attachment to Newark impressed many outsiders, but it aroused suspicion among a voluble set of locals, including the Barakas, who portrayed him as an interloper—someone who would never truly understand his adopted home town. “Despite what Cory Booker says, Black people are dying in this city every damn week,” Ras Baraka once said.

No one familiar with Newark would have been surprised by Baraka’s emergence as an eloquent voice of political protest. But some might have been surprised to see how far his voice would take him. In 2014, after Booker was elected to the U.S. Senate, Baraka was elected mayor, promising—like not a few mayors before him—to usher in a new era for Newark. “We need a mayor that’s radical,” he said, in his inauguration speech. As mayor, Baraka still talks like a rabble-rouser, at least some of the time. Earlier this year, at a Martin Luther King, Jr., Day event, he cast doubt on the idea that James Earl Ray was solely responsible for King’s assassination, saying, “It’s pretty strange that a petty crook could murder Martin Luther King and find his way all the way to England.” (Ray was apprehended at Heathrow Airport, two months after the killing.) But his mayoralty has been flexible and data-driven, and by most metrics very successful. He has lured businesses and developers to the city while funding a wide range of local

programs and generally keeping activists happy. Perhaps most impressive, Newark was one of the few cities in the country not to see a spike in homicides in 2020, amid protests over the death of George Floyd. Last year, there were just forty-seven murders—still many more per capita than New York, but the fewest in Newark in more than half a century.

Baraka has recently expanded his horizons beyond his home town: earlier this year, he announced his candidacy in the 2025 New Jersey gubernatorial election, and the campaign will surely bring attention to his stewardship of Newark. Senator Booker, Baraka’s old foil, is now one of his most enthusiastic cheerleaders. “To all the people that thought he was going to be some kind of, like, left-wing radical,” he told me, “he has shown that there is a way for a city like ours to flourish.” Another of his fans, former President Barack Obama, described him in an e-mail as “both idealistic and practical.” And, at an event in 2022, Vice-President Kamala Harris praised Baraka, saying that Newark was a “role model of what cities around our country are capable of doing.” When people talk about Black politics in America, they are often talking about struggle and protest, and although Baraka belongs to that tradition, he also belongs to the tradition of Black elected officials, who are measured by their accomplishments and their compromises. Baraka once said that he views himself as more “reasonable” than “radical.” But he has never denied that, for a nimble enough politician, both descriptions might apply.

In March, Baraka delivered the State of the City address at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, a theatre complex that was opened three decades ago as part of a previous effort at revitalizing Newark. He sat appreciatively through a choral performance; a hip-hop performance; invocations by an imam and a rabbi; renditions of two national anthems, official and Black (“Lift Every Voice and Sing”); and video tributes to the city’s five wards. Then he took the stage, cheered by a boisterous contingent of his brothers from Alpha Phi Alpha, the country’s oldest Black fraternity. When their cheers subsided, Baraka bragged about the businesses that had opened in town, told residents that a new walking bridge would resemble New York’s High Line, paid tribute to the police force, and excoriated “journalists that insist on our misery,” singing a few lines of a gospel song for good measure. When it was over, he made his way across the street to one of those new businesses, an upscale African restaurant called Swahili Village, where he

and his wife, Linda Baraka, received so many well-wishers that they decided it would be more efficient for Baraka to pre-emptively greet everybody in the room.

The next morning, in his office at City Hall, Baraka was semi-formal, in a suit and dress sneakers, still thinking about the address. His father once described him, in verse, as having eyes “bulging out into the world, alive with life, whirling around like wild computers.” Baraka describes himself as an introvert, and in the absence of a crowd he is generally quiet and observant; he tends to talk out of the right side of his mouth, as if he were telling you something that other people don’t know. He said that having to give a big speech still makes him anxious beforehand and exhausted afterward. “I don’t know what I expected, but people were excited,” he told me.



Unlike his father, who could be reflexively countercultural and anti-institutional, Ras Baraka has been running for office for most of his life. He launched his first campaign for mayor at the age of twenty-four. “It was almost like a dare, with my friends and people around me,” he says. He was a young activist, impatient for change and not particularly interested in the workings of municipal government. He laughs when he recalls his platform: it criticized the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery “except as a

punishment for crime,” and called for universal health care for Newarkers. “We just had a whole list of things, and some of it wasn’t even the purview of the city,” he told me, shaking his head. In those days, he was also building a reputation as a performance poet, in which capacity he appeared on an episode of “Def Poetry Jam,” the HBO series, delivering critiques of American oppression; the rapper Mos Def (now Yasiin Bey) introduced him as “Ras Baraka, people’s champion.” People all over the world have heard his voice without realizing it, because he plays a teacher, asking students about the meaning of love, on the skits that appear throughout the seminal hip-hop album “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.”

After a decade as mayor, Baraka is a kind of celebrity in Newark. Yet his job is unflaggingly unglamorous, and the same might be said about the city he loves. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, Amiri Baraka and his comrades often referred to it as New Ark, to suggest that it might serve as a fresh start for Black people. “We will rebuild and turn the city into a Black heart beat,” Amiri wrote, in 1967. He imagined Newark as an “example, upon which one aspect of the entire Black nation can be built.”

Newark today is no one’s idea of a utopia; it is, instead, a scruffy and energetic place that captures the imagination partly because it still seems to have so much potential. Broad Street, the main downtown thoroughfare, has plenty of options for anyone who wants to buy a T-shirt or sell some jewelry, and new businesses tend to be celebrated in ways that underscore the city’s desire for more of them. Cory Booker spent a chunk of his mayoralty trying to lure Whole Foods to town, but the supermarket chain didn’t arrive until 2017, which meant that it was Baraka who got to deliver a speech at its grand opening, thanking the company for “getting us in the game.” One of the city’s most important amenities is the *PATH* train, which whisks riders from downtown Newark to Manhattan for two dollars and seventy-five cents.

The city’s political leaders are virtually all nonwhite; in addition to Baraka, eight of the nine members of Newark’s City Council are Black or Hispanic. (The ninth, Michael J. Silva, is the son of Portuguese immigrants.) In this context, Baraka’s frequent appeals to “Black and brown” identity are not a way to single out white people—there aren’t all that many around—but a

way to urge his constituents to be unified, to make their ancestors proud, to behave themselves.



Baraka has been eager to promote Newark as a cosmopolitan city. (Too eager, in one case: last year, he signed a “sister city” agreement with Kailasa, a Hindu country that turned out to exist only in the imagination of an international fugitive.) He has also commissioned a number of murals and sculptures, including a monument to Harriet Tubman, which replaced a statue of Christopher Columbus that Baraka called a symbol of “barbarism, enslavement, and oppression,” and that he had removed four years ago—late at night, when no one was around to protest or counter-protest. Newark’s City Hall is a grand Beaux-Arts building with a golden dome, built in 1902, when Newark was the sixteenth-largest city in America; now it is something like the sixty-sixth, occupying a place between Lincoln, Nebraska, and Corpus Christi, Texas. As mayor, Baraka has a cluster of offices in a corner of the second floor, and one day I asked him which parts of Newark might give a good sense of what his administration has achieved. He paused briefly, and then said, “I mean, you would have to see the place before, right?”

Newark was once a prosperous manufacturing town, but when Amiri Baraka was born there, in 1934, city officials were already worrying about an

exodus of wealthy residents. Young and ambitious, Amiri moved to New York City, where he made his name as a writer of sharp, caustic poems and plays, and as the author of “Blues People,” a 1963 book that was a landmark of American music criticism. He was known then as LeRoi Jones, and he seemed to enjoy showing the city’s radical-chic hipsters that they weren’t quite as chic, or as radical, as they thought. In his best-known play, “Dutchman,” a white woman approaches a Black man in a subway car, and their playful exchange soon becomes extravagantly unplayful. “Dutchman” premièred in 1964, as Amiri’s marriage to a white woman, the poet Hettie Jones, was ending. He found his way back to Newark, where he established himself as a political and cultural ringleader, and, in 1967, as a symbol of a city boiling over with frustration.

In the previous decades, Newark’s white population had fallen by about half, while the Black population had roughly quadrupled—Newark had become a majority-Black city, even as the police force remained mostly white. (Today, the population is about forty-seven per cent Black and thirty-seven per cent Hispanic.) In July, 1967, when a Black cabdriver named John William Smith was arrested by two white police officers and beaten, what started as a protest evolved into almost a week of arson, looting, and urban guerrilla warfare. Amiri Baraka was arrested the night after Smith, for illegally possessing weapons, and he was brutalized, too. The journalist Ron Porambo later wrote, “I just knew they were going to kill him from the way they were beating him.”

Baraka’s arrest drew worldwide attention; at the urging of his friend Allen Ginsberg, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre apparently called the Newark Police Department, seeking Baraka’s release. He was tried and convicted, and at his sentencing the judge read one of his poems, lightly bowdlerized but still decipherable as an ode to looting: “Run up and down Broad Street niggers, take the [blank] you want / Take their lives if need be, but get what you want what you need.” (The conviction was overturned shortly after.)

Twenty-six people died during five days of unrest, which did incalculable damage to both the city and its reputation; plenty of Americans who had never been to Newark would forever associate it with a *Life* magazine cover that showed a twelve-year-old Black boy lying in the street, shot by police. A righteous revolt is typically something to celebrate, but when I asked Ras

Baraka about the upside of the Newark Rebellion he demurred. “Well, I can’t see the upside—except that it forced everybody to depend on themselves,” he told me. “That’s why Newark is so insular. That’s why the residents are so Newark, Newark, Newark.”

For Amiri Baraka, the city’s insularity was part of its appeal: Newark was a place where Black people were allowed—which is to say, forced—to shape their own future. By the time of the rebellion, he had married a local actress named Sylvia Robinson, and in the years that followed they renamed themselves Amiri and Amina Baraka, as they transformed their lives to reflect an ideal of Pan-African unity. People were always dropping by; Ras Baraka remembers a peculiar woman playing their living-room piano, who turned out to be Nina Simone. Amiri and Amina wore clothes inspired by Julius Nyerere, the erudite President of Tanzania, and they launched the African Free School, where local children, including Ras, were taught a new alphabet: “A is for Africa, B is for Black, C is for Culture.” They settled on a leafy side street, and Amiri painted their house red and green with black trim. He wrote that “when the seasons allow the trees to come full out, the tableau is like a not quite subtle black nationalist flag.”

Amina Baraka’s house is no longer so conspicuous. On a recent morning, the only sign of its significance was a security guard parked out front, keeping watch over the mother of the Mayor. Amina is eighty-one now, and her house is an elegant museum, archiving six decades of art and activism: the walls are covered with paintings and photographs, and a poster of Vladimir Lenin hangs in a hallway near the kitchen. Amiri died in 2014, but his old study has been preserved more or less intact. Downstairs, there is a room where Amina has been making clay pots. These days, she is a proud supporter of not just her son but also his former rival, Cory Booker. “Yeah, that’s what happens,” she told me, with a smile. “You learn as you go.”

For Amiri, this learning process advanced by a series of grand statements and renunciations. In his autobiography, he recalls how Amina objected to what she saw as “male chauvinism disguised as African traditionalism” and eventually resigned from the Congress of Afrikan People, an activist organization he led. “We made some terrible mistakes,” she told me, recalling the years she spent as a devoted Black nationalist, and over time her husband came to agree. In 1974, the *Times* printed the headline “Baraka

Drops ‘Racism’ for Socialism of Marx.” In the article, Amiri emphasized global solidarity with the multiracial working class, saying, “It is a narrow nationalism that says the white man is the enemy.” After this conversion, the African Free School shut down, and Ras Baraka was enrolled for the first time in a majority-Black public school, where his “funny” name sometimes made fellow-students think he had come from someplace else.

Unlike many sixties radicals, Amiri never found a comfortable place in the cultural mainstream. His early work referred derisively to gay people and Jewish people. In 2002, a couple of months after he was named New Jersey’s poet laureate, he recited a poem called “Somebody Blew Up America,” which asked, “Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers / To stay home that day / Why did Sharon stay away?” (Ariel Sharon was then the Prime Minister of Israel.) Governor Jim McGreevey asked Baraka to resign; when he refused, McGreevey pushed to eliminate the position of poet laureate.



Politics would not seem like a natural occupation for a provocateur like Amiri Baraka, and yet he played an important role in the political evolution of his home town. During the Newark Rebellion, he and many of his allies focussed their dissatisfaction on the mayor, Hugh J. Addonizio, a Newark native of Italian descent. They charged that he had failed to punish abusive

white officers and to hire and promote a sufficient number of Black ones. In 1968, eight days before Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, King met with Baraka and declared in a speech afterward, “The hour has come for Newark, New Jersey, to have a Black mayor.” Acting strategically, Baraka and his allies supported Kenneth Gibson, who wasn’t particularly radical; he worked for the city as a structural engineer and ran as a relatively cautious reformer against Addonizio, who was then on trial for conspiracy and extortion. Gibson was elected in 1970, becoming Newark’s first Black mayor—although it is equally accurate to describe Addonizio, who was convicted and sent to prison, as its last white one.

On a recent Saturday morning, Ras Baraka invited constituents to join him in a hotel ballroom downtown. This was one of the Mayor’s annual men’s breakfasts, which combine networking opportunities with business advice and, inevitably, tough love, aimed at a demographic that is generally perceived to be in need of it. The city’s young Black men are nearly fifty per cent more likely to be what sociologists call “disconnected”—neither in school nor employed—than its young Black women. As attendees filled up on eggs and grits, they heard from one of Baraka’s executive directors, Jessiah Muhammad, a punctilious young man who favors suits and bow ties, which denote his membership in the local chapter of the Nation of Islam.

Baraka took the stage, in a pink shirt and white sneakers, and delivered an address that kept the room murmuring and chuckling for more than an hour. He praised Black women, which led to an endorsement of Kamala Harris and a defense of her racial authenticity. (“If the lady says she’s Black, she’s Black to me.”) He lamented that so few Black-owned businesses got assistance from the state, suggested that banking was a bit of a scam, and encouraged the entrepreneurs in the room to fight for their slice of the municipal pie. “All the business that’s going on in the city should be yours,” he said, and he promised to help the men, as long they helped themselves first. “Stop waiting for stuff to happen for you—*make* it happen! When you come introduce yourself to me, come like a man! Don’t grovel with your head down—‘Oh, Mayor, it’s nice to meet you.’” He shook his head. “Oh, no, brother! I’m just a regular dude from Clinton Avenue and Tenth Street.”

Growing up, Baraka wasn’t very interested in his parents’ political work, or in their ongoing debates. It wasn’t until he was in college, at Howard

University, that he sat down to read “Blues People” and found that its argument about Black music as a historical force made intuitive sense to him. He was a hip-hop guy, and for a time he had allied himself with a mystical offshoot of the Nation of Islam known as the Five Percent Nation, which combines Black pride with esoteric beliefs and wordplay. (The group teaches, for instance, that the human body spells out the name of God: arm, leg, leg, arm, head.)

Howard was also the site of Baraka’s formative political experience. In 1989, the university gave a seat on its board of trustees to Lee Atwater, the national chair of the Republican Party, who had managed George H. W. Bush’s Presidential campaign the year before. During that campaign, Bush and Atwater had tried to link their opponent, Michael Dukakis, to William Horton, a Black man who had attacked and raped a woman after receiving a weekend furlough from prison; Bush contended that Dukakis, as governor of Massachusetts, had been too slow to end the furlough program. Baraka, like many of his fellow-students, thought that this tactic should have disqualified Atwater from holding a position at Howard—so he helped lead an act of civil disobedience, occupying a building on campus. (Amina Baraka told me she was shocked to get a call telling her that her formerly “quiet” son had become a protest leader.) Unlike many protests, this one was an unambiguous success. Jesse Jackson and Marion Barry, the mayor of Washington, D.C., came in to mediate. After five days, Atwater stepped down, and then so did the university’s president.

At Howard, Baraka was, by his own account, an inconsistent student, but student organizing helped him focus. He co-founded an activist group called Black Nia *FORCE*, which sometimes led paramilitary drills on campus. (“Nia” came from the Swahili word for “purpose,” and “*FORCE*” stood for “Freedom Organization for Racial and Cultural Enlightenment.”) In the wake of the protest, he got himself elected vice-president of Howard’s student government. Though Baraka considered himself a revolutionary, he didn’t spend time parsing the differences between leftist ideologies. “We didn’t really pay attention to what we needed to build,” he told me. “It was more about defending ourselves against what we thought was an onslaught of things coming at us.” In 1990, he wrote an op-ed for the student newspaper about academic misconduct in the library. “A building established for the purpose of educational achievement and character

building has been transformed into a place of frenzy where cheating has become king,” he wrote, arguing that the real problem was “Western forms of education,” which relied too heavily upon memorization. He was calling for both higher standards and structural change, and he had faith that these two things could be mutually reinforcing.



Baraka returned to Newark after college; he had become the father of a baby girl named Amandla and needed to figure out a way to support her. It was the early nineties, and the current mayor was Sharpe James, who had campaigned on a promise of economic development, and who was a useful all-purpose foil for a young activist. Baraka was working during the day as a teacher, and when he ran against James for mayor, in 1994, he organized poetry readings as micro-fund-raisers, which he said eventually gathered about ten thousand dollars. “We thought we were rich,” he remembered. He also thought he was popular in the city, until the votes were counted. “You think that because you’re smart you’re right, and that people are going to agree with you,” he said.

But, as Baraka rose from teacher to principal, he started amassing a base of supporters. James, a shrewd observer of the city’s political scene, was impressed enough to make him a deputy mayor. Baraka insisted on a token

salary of one dollar and kept his teaching job—he says that he didn’t want his livelihood to be dependent on James’s good will.

That was in 2002, the year James was first challenged by Cory Booker, who, in an odd way, helped Baraka find his voice. Booker lost the race, but he won four years later; soon afterward, James was imprisoned on fraud and conspiracy charges related to the sale of public land to a girlfriend. And so the Barakas, father and son, became two of Booker’s most prominent critics. Amiri once called Booker a “white racist Negro.” Ras, who was promoted to principal of Central High School in 2007 and elected to the city council three years later, took a more sober approach, describing various city contracts as corporate giveaways, while also trying to channel community anger about crime. He faulted Booker for not demanding more tax revenue from the Prudential Center arena, for not hiring enough locals, and for not keeping Newarkers safe.

The stakes of the Baraka-Booker dispute were high, although the political conflicts could be arcane. When Baraka gave his speech in front of City Hall in the summer of 2011, he was criticizing Booker for vetoing a law that would have required restaurants with fewer than fifteen seats to hire armed security guards if they were open past 9 P.M.; it was known locally as the “chicken-shack ordinance,” because it had been inspired by the death of an off-duty police officer who was shot at a place called Texas Fried Chicken & Pizza. Booker argued that the law would hobble small businesses without really improving safety, but Baraka noted that Dawn Reddick, the victim he was mourning, had been killed outside a Chinese restaurant. “If the Mayor didn’t veto that ordinance, there would have been a cop inside,” he said. On this topic, as on many others, each side claimed, plausibly, to be fighting for Black people.

By the time Booker ascended to the Senate, in 2013, Baraka had emerged as a viable successor: popular, with plenty of Newark credibility and a much more granular knowledge of city government than he had possessed two decades before. He eventually managed to win over many of Booker’s allies, including Don Katz, the founder of Audible, the audiobook company, which made headlines by moving its headquarters to Newark in 2007. Katz is a strong supporter of the North Star Academy Charter School, and Baraka ran as a skeptic of charter schools, arguing that they ought to pay rent for the

public buildings they use. When he was elected, Katz helped advise him on administrative appointments, and he was impressed by Baraka's determination to create a balanced administration, mixing well-connected insiders with outside experts. "I think he's proved himself to be a very sophisticated manager of public processes," he said. It was the kind of compliment that a younger Ras Baraka probably would not have appreciated.

The central event in Baraka's schedule is his weekly K.P.I. meeting, at which directors of various departments present their key performance indicators. When he first took office, in 2014, Newark couldn't afford a business administrator, so he arranged to borrow one from Prudential, the insurance company, which has its headquarters in the city. Nowadays, Baraka has his own experts, and he pushes his top appointees to translate their accomplishments into data: the number of homeless people receiving services, the number of children getting vaccinations at city clinics, the number of crimes and arrests and requests for counselling. At a recent K.P.I. meeting, he offered sharp feedback on both the content and the form of the presentations. "Some of the information is just *ancillary*," he said. "I get it—maybe you want to report out that you're doing some work," he added. "Just because you're saying a lot of things doesn't mean the things that you're saying are quality."

Baraka seems to genuinely enjoy the logistical puzzle of city governance—he often mentions, unprompted, Newark's program to replace its lead water pipes, which was completed so swiftly that Vice-President Harris visited to congratulate him. (The story got more complicated earlier this year, with the discovery that contractors hired by the city might have left some lead pipes in place.) Like any successful mayor, he has learned that he can't afford to ignore the seemingly minor issues that infuriate city residents. When someone from the Department of Public Works reported that five trees had been cut down in the previous week, Baraka scowled. "Didn't we tell 'em not to do that?" he asked, and the director promised to follow up. After the meeting, Baraka told me that this was part of a broader political issue. "We're actually trying to plant more trees, because we need a tree canopy," he said. The city had an obligation to dispose of dead trees, but he worried that some living trees were being disposed of, too. "We got an arborist to go

out with them. And I told them, ‘Stop all tree cutting until we get this thing analyzed.’ ”

In his efforts to bring prosperity to Newark, Baraka has had to learn to love real-estate developers, or at least not to hate them. “You live under capitalism, you want development in your city, you’re going to have to mitigate the negative effects of development on a poor community,” he said, a few years ago. Like many cities, Newark has regulations that oblige developers to set aside units for lower-income renters. But Baraka also has more ambitious ideas about how to insure that locals benefit from rising real-estate prices. In 2015, a few months after he was elected, he organized a land sale on Valentine’s Day, offering a hundred city-owned lots, for a thousand dollars apiece, to couples willing to build and live there. “Some people built on it, but most people didn’t,” he acknowledged; the recipients generally couldn’t navigate the permitting process and didn’t have the assets to get bank loans. “We thought we were doing a good deed, and it turns out to be a bust.”

Now the city is trying again, in the hope of creating a new cohort of Newark-native developers. One afternoon not long ago, Baraka called some prospective entrepreneurs into City Hall for a meeting. A few dozen people, mostly Black or Hispanic, sat on folding chairs, clutching sheaves of documents. Baraka wanted to both warn them about how complicated the process could be and reassure them that they could master it. “All of the doubters and haters and ignorant folk are going to say we shouldn’t do it this way,” he said. “‘You’re gonna hold the property for ten years, you don’t have the capacity, you can’t get the loans, you don’t know what you’re doing, you don’t have the proper lawyers, you’ve never done this before, it’s going to fall apart.’ ” (His speeches, like his poems, tend to be passionately enumerative.) “When you run into obstacles, that’s because *they* don’t believe you,” he told them, deploying one of his greatest political assets: an ability to frame a program like this one as a grassroots community effort, rather than as a priority of a third-term mayor.

One way to chart the distance Baraka has travelled, from his radical family history to his practical-minded mayoralty, is to watch him talk to the police. At a public-safety meeting this year, he acknowledged to the assembled officers that he sometimes got credit that they properly deserved. “I ain’t

arrest a f—” he began, then reconsidered, as the audience members chuckled. “*I’m* not arresting nobody,” he said. “*You guys* are making this stuff happen.”

Since before Baraka was born, politics in Newark has tended to revolve around the police department. If the riots of 1967 were a rebellion, they were partly a rebellion against the police. (As mayor, Kenneth Gibson disappointed many supporters by not appointing a Black police chief until 1974.) And, in 1979, New York City police officers said that they witnessed Amiri striking Amina during a family trip to Manhattan. After a scuffle, Amiri was arrested and eventually convicted at trial—despite the testimony of nine-year-old Ras Baraka, who later said that he felt as if he had failed his father by not exonerating him. (Amina denies that Amiri struck her.)



Baraka’s Howard University protest, too, put him in conflict with the police, who arrived in riot gear to expel the students. And many of his early criticisms of Booker focussed on the chief of police, Garry McCarthy, a white man whom Booker had hired away from the New York City Police Department. There were signs that McCarthy was making progress, but the number of homicides remained stubbornly high. (This might have been partly owing to Newark’s struggle to sufficiently fund its police department; in 2010, after failed union negotiations, the city laid off a hundred and sixty-

seven officers.) “We want the police director, Garry McCarthy, to get out of town, go home, go back to where you came from,” Baraka said, during a rally. McCarthy left in 2011, to take on a more prominent job, as the head of the Chicago Police Department; he was fired amid outrage after police killed a seventeen-year-old named Laquan McDonald.

In Newark, and across Black America, concerns about the police exist side by side with concerns about persistently high levels of violent crime. This is especially true for the Baraka family. When Ras was thirteen, his aunt Kimako was stabbed to death by a man she knew. In 2003, his sister Shani was fatally shot, along with her girlfriend, by the estranged husband of another one of Ras’s sisters. Ras read an anguished poem at her funeral, praising her bravery. “That’s why we couldn’t protect her—she was too busy protecting *us*,” he said. “Why we couldn’t save her, in all of our blackness and prayers and revolution talk, all of our meetings and conferences—why we couldn’t keep her alive.”

As an activist, Baraka argued that Newark needed to treat violence as a public-health problem; as mayor, he has had to figure out precisely what that might mean. His approach has been to fund a welter of grassroots groups staffed by people from some of the city’s most heavily affected neighborhoods, while also working to reduce complaints about the police force, which has been under federal oversight throughout his time in office. In 2019, when Attorney General William Barr gave Newark an award for its success in reducing violent crime, Baraka travelled to D.C. to celebrate, alongside Craig Carpenito, the U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey, who had been appointed by the Trump Administration. In 2020, as police departments nationwide were under scrutiny, Newark reached an impressive milestone: that year, none of its officers fired a shot.

In much of the rest of the country, of course, 2020 marked a different kind of milestone. The killing of George Floyd inspired an outpouring of anguish and anger, and led to calls from Democrats to cut police budgets or even to abolish police departments altogether. Two weeks after Floyd’s death, Kamala Harris, who was then a senator, added her voice to the growing chorus of liberals and leftists suggesting that police caused more problems than they prevented. “It is outdated, and it is actually wrong and backward to think that more police officers will create more safety,” she said, on

MSNBC. Baraka took a different view. When I asked him about the popularity of calls to “abolish” or “defund” the police, he told me, “Those things were slogans. I don’t know if they were meant to be anything but slogans.”



Four years after the upheavals of 2020, the national crime wave has largely subsided, and so have the anti-police slogans. (At this year’s Democratic National Convention, Harris emphasized her efforts, as a former prosecutor, to help “survivors of crime.”) But Democratic politicians who seek to follow Baraka’s approach to policing may discover that it entails pursuing many approaches at once, some punitive and some therapeutic, and emphasizing different ones to different audiences. Not long ago, at a community meeting in Newark’s North Ward, Baraka stood proudly as Fritz Fragé, the city’s stern director of public safety, spoke of the recent arrests of a few dozen youngsters who had been systematically robbing people. “About twelve to fourteen were juveniles,” Fragé said. “They got charged, and most of them got remanded.” But when a woman who worked with senior citizens asked if something could be done about people on the block who were frightening her clients, Baraka pushed back. “Loitering is not a crime,” he told her. “Just because you see people out there does not necessarily mean police are coming.” For many kinds of trouble, he suggested, other interventions can be more effective.

This spring, Baraka announced that Newark would be resuming an annual tradition—a summertime youth curfew, from eleven at night to five-thirty in the morning. After a local chapter of the A.C.L.U. complained, the Mayor’s office clarified that the curfew was actually a suggested curfew: the city would send social workers to speak to children who were out late, but it would not be arresting any of them. One of the people in charge of this program was LaKeesha Eure, a longtime activist and social worker whom Baraka had recently appointed deputy mayor of public safety. Eure helps coordinate a complicated patchwork of nonprofit groups that have flourished in Newark. She framed the curfew as an opportunity for city employees to talk to young people. “If they say, ‘Fuck off,’ then they say, ‘Fuck off.’ It’s O.K.,” she told me. “It’s just engagement, so that they can see that somebody noticed them.”

Eure appeared one morning at a summit between local outreach workers and community leaders from Los Angeles, who wanted to learn more about the Newark method. A native Newarker whose life changed after her brother was shot, Eure is earnest but often unsentimental when she talks about street violence. When the group asked her to say a few words, she delivered a twenty-minute history of the movement that she helped build. “I don’t come from law enforcement,” she said at the outset. During the Booker years, she honed an approach that was anti-violence but not exactly anti-gang. “We wanted the Bloods and Crips to put their guns down,” Eure told the crowd, and she recalled the compromise she offered to diminish the collateral damage from “street justice”: “Do it the way you need to do it—but you can’t shoot innocent bystanders.” She says that nowadays her approach is more ambitious: she thinks that, with the proper training, people who once committed violence can learn to transform themselves and their neighborhoods.

In office, Baraka has managed a delicate symbiosis between community groups and the police department. Even as he talks about the importance of policing, he boasts about having “moved money from the police department” to pay for other initiatives—which sounds a bit like defunding the police. He has been careful not to decrease the number of officers, but he did limit police overtime, using the savings to help pay for a new city department, now known as the Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery, or O.V.P.T.R. Other groups managed by Eure are funded through

President Biden's American Rescue Plan Act. During her talk, she explained how Baraka had pushed to integrate anti-violence workers into city government, arranging trainings with police officers. To demonstrate commitment to the initiative, Baraka moved the anti-violence office into the same police precinct where the 1967 rebellion began. "They gave us a *police precinct*," Eure told the visitors from L.A. "Put the police out the building!"



As a former principal, Baraka is unusually well connected to the people in his city, and by steering money to grassroots groups he has earned more than a little loyalty. Last year, when activists tried to disrupt a city meeting, an anti-violence leader named Khalil Tutt pushed back. Tutt had previously served time for his involvement in the killing of a police officer, but now he helps lead a group called New Direction, urging young Newarkers away from violence and gang involvement. "If you've got a disagreement with the Mayor, you've got a disagreement with us," he told the activists, explaining that Baraka had chosen to work with people other politicians might avoid. "He dealing with convicted gang members, criminals—he dealing with *us*," Tutt said.

Often, the work of these grassroots groups is intentionally informal. "I'm a Grape Street Crip," an anti-violence leader known as Hot-Rod told me. "I no longer sell drugs. I'm no longer on the block all day. But I still go to the

hood, still roll up a blunt, still have a shot of liquor.” The hope is that his relationships, and his reputation, allow him to deliver calming advice that might be ignored if it came from anyone else. In order to get paid, members of anti-violence groups must show up reliably and file reports to their leaders about what they do and what they see. But they insist that they are not police informers; the information in their reports isn’t shared with police, and in any case they often redact identifying details.

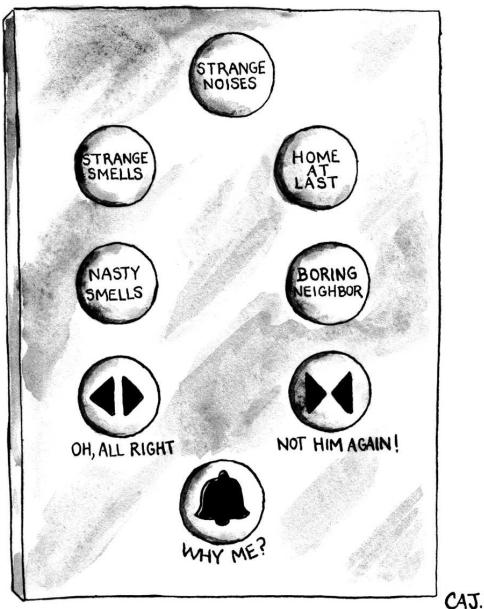
Some officers have learned to tolerate Eure’s people, and even to view them as allies. But not all. Earlier this year, police detained an anti-violence worker after an altercation at a summer youth program. Jeffrey Weber, a detective who leads Newark’s Fraternal Order of Police, noted that Eure was there, and claimed that she refused to leave the scene when asked. Weber said that the F.O.P. had “endless amounts of body-cam footage showing O.V.P. members and city officials interfering with crime scenes.” In response, Baraka accused the F.O.P. of sowing a “spirit of division” and organized meetings to resolve the conflict. But that division is built into the idea of anti-violence workers, who are credible in the community precisely because they are independent from the police.

The more time Baraka spends in office, the more he is obliged to talk not about how far the Newark Police Department has to go but about how far it has come. The most reliable metric may be the murder rate, which is easy to measure and hard to manipulate. (A fight might be recorded as an assault, or an attempted homicide, or a mere scuffle that doesn’t require paperwork, but a dead body can’t readily be fudged.) Many criminologists agree that more police generally means less crime, but the effects of anti-violence initiatives are harder to gauge: in Newark, Eure’s people do everything from monitoring the areas around schools to defusing neighborhood disputes before they turn violent. Baraka’s office is working with the Rutgers-Newark School of Criminal Justice to get better evidence that these programs work. In the meantime, Baraka has plenty of room to experiment, because whatever he is doing seems to be succeeding. This is accountability, of a sort, although of course this general truth—that citizens want to feel safe, and might not ask too many questions about any institution that can credibly claim to provide safety—is part of what enabled the bad old days to get so bad in the first place.

Earlier this year, Baraka announced that he wanted to leave his beloved Newark behind. During an appearance at a Black History Month event at the Trenton War Memorial, he declared that he was running for governor. His speech lasted forty minutes and was unusually ebullient, even by Baraka's standards. "I know our history is every day, but I *love* Black History Month," he said. "I get to be very Black today—unapologetic, and arrogantly so." He talked about Jim Crow and Emmett Till, "runaway slaves" and Black freedom fighters, and the "shuffling Negroes" whom he blamed for enabling white supremacy. "We don't want your token representation, or some sympathetic white Democrat in office—we're tired of supporting mediocre people over our damn selves," he said. "Damn it, we want power." He let his audience revel in the militancy of this demand, before adding a moderating afterthought: "We don't want this just for ourselves—we actually want it for *all* Americans." It was, in other words, a civil-rights speech, with a preacherly rhythm that made listeners feel carried by a historical tide from a sorrowful past toward a more hopeful future. Black leaders have been delivering speeches much like this one since long before Baraka was born—which suggests, rather less upliftingly, that subsequent generations will be delivering them long after he is gone, too.

In Newark, where the idea of reclaiming electoral power from white people is not a threat or a fantasy but a fact of life, Baraka has been notable less for demanding "power"—what politician doesn't want that?—than for his evolving curiosity about how to wield it. As a gubernatorial candidate, he looks different. He is an extraordinarily effective speaker, capable of switching between poetic exhortation and policy minutiae so fluidly that it can be hard to tell one from the other. But a statewide campaign might also draw attention to facets of his record that don't seem unusual in Newark, like the fact that he supports some form of reparations, or that one of his top appointees is a member of the Nation of Islam, or that his approach to crime prevention involves working with a number of self-acknowledged gang members.

THE REAL MEANINGS OF ELEVATOR BUTTONS



Baraka's announcement rearranged the Democratic field, which already included Steven Fulop, the mayor of Jersey City (which sits next to Manhattan and has a per-capita income more than twice as high as Newark's), and may well include Representative Mikie Sherrill, whose district contains many of Newark's wealthy suburbs. The timing of Baraka's announcement also surprised many of his staffers, including his brother, Amiri, Jr., known as Middy, who serves as his chief of staff. "I'm not even sure he told his wife," he told me. Where Ras was once a spoken-word artist, Amiri, Jr., was once a musician—part of a hip-hop group, One Step Beyond, that was affiliated with Bad Boy Records. (Earlier this year, Baraka's campaign disclosed that a company owned by Amiri, Jr., had been paid about seventy-seven thousand dollars for campaign consulting, even though he worked for the city.) Amiri, Jr., told me that he expected that his brother would be portrayed as the "progressive" candidate in the race, although of course he viewed his message as more broadly appealing. "This is about making New Jersey a place where everybody can live, everybody could prosper," he told me. "But this state is so racist, man, and so divided. As we go from county to county, we can see it."

For more than half a century, Newark has been a city that defines itself, proudly and even defiantly, in opposition to its surrounding suburbs—Baraka has suggested, for instance, that wealthy neighboring towns such as

Montclair and South Orange aren't doing enough to provide affordable housing in the region. And yet New Jersey is, by some measures, the most suburban state in the country. By running for governor, Baraka is hoping to convince those residents that his approach can be as successful in the suburbs as it has been in Newark.

Before he can win a general election, of course, he will have to win the Democratic primary, which may be crowded. Although the state is unusually suburban, it is only about fifty-five per cent white, which means that Baraka's best strategy in a primary might be to emphasize his Newark credibility, in the hope of doing well enough among urban and nonwhite voters to attract a plurality. Modia Butler, a political consultant who has been a longtime adviser to Cory Booker, described Baraka to me as "ultra-Newark." He meant it as a compliment, even if not every New Jersey voter is likely to view it that way.

Several months ago, Baraka participated in a public forum with a couple of Republican candidates for governor: Jack Ciattarelli, who was the losing Republican candidate in 2021, and Jon Bramnick, a state senator. It was a friendly event; both of the Republicans seemed happy for the chance to contrast themselves with Baraka, who made an unusually forthright analogy in defense of the state's high tax rates. "People know—you go to restaurants, you pay more money because you get quality service and quality food," Baraka said.

At one point, Ciattarelli tried to make common cause by talking about how his own Italian American family had roots in Baraka's city. "A hundred years ago, where did our grandparents live? They lived in Newark," Ciattarelli said. He reached over to put a genial hand on Baraka's arm. "Did they not?"

Baraka smiled, but he didn't concede. "They did—then they were subsidized, so they could move into the suburbs and get a house there," he said. "My family couldn't do that." ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Waiting for Paddington](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

Waiting for Paddington

By Anthony Lane

September 30, 2024



Ben Whishaw: Paddington actor to star in Waiting for Godot. . . . Whishaw has previously played gadget guru Q in the James Bond films.

—*BBC.com*.

Act I

A railway station. A hat.

Mr. Brown sits on a bench. He is trying to open a pot of marmalade. He gives up, exhausted, tries again.

Enter Mrs. Brown.

MR. BROWN: Nothing to be done.

MRS. BROWN: You always say that. Yet you always resume the struggle.
(Pause) It's the vacuum.

MR. BROWN: The what?

MRS. BROWN: The vacuum. From the Latin for "empty." At the top of the jar, beneath the lid. A void.

MR. BROWN (*pausing in his efforts, staring into space*): Vack-yooom.

MRS. BROWN (*pointing at the hat, which lies on the ground*): Whose is that?

MR. BROWN: That what?

MRS. BROWN: That hat.

MR. BROWN (*finally looking at it*): Oh, that hat. *(Pause)* Search me.

MRS. BROWN: I would rather not. I hate to think what I might find.

Mr. Brown tries to open the marmalade, fails again. Gives up, places the jar on the bench beside him.

MR. BROWN: Let's go.

MRS. BROWN: We can't.

MR. BROWN: Why not?

MRS. BROWN: We're waiting for Paddington.

MR. BROWN (*despairingly*): Ah! *(Pause)* Where did he go?

MRS. BROWN: Darkest Peru.

MR. BROWN (*staring into space*): Perr-ooo.

MRS. BROWN: To see his Aunt Lucy.

MR. BROWN: Looo-seee—

MRS. BROWN: Shut up. (*Pause*) He always said she was too much to bear. (*Pause*) I think it was a joke.

They do not laugh. Enter Porter, pushing a cart, on which a suitcase sits. Porter reads the label on the suitcase.

PORTER: “Please look after this bear. Thank you.” (*He looks around.*) What bear?

MR. BROWN (grimly, with a ghost of a smile): Too much to bear.

MRS. BROWN: Too much to be borne.

MR. BROWN: Better not to be born.

PORTER: What?

MRS. BROWN (brightening slightly): Bear in mind—

Enter Q, in a laboratory coat, carrying a fountain pen in one hand and a revolver in the other. Raises the pen and points it at the Browns.

Q (flatly): Bang.

Consternation. Mrs. Brown ducks behind the bench. Mr. Brown jumps aboard the cart. The jar of marmalade falls off the bench and rolls along the floor. Q takes a deep breath.

Q: Pay attention double O seven double your money no object lesson in love and fear the Lord God Almighty rumpussy galore unto myself the name’s Bond Michael Bond I will have my Bond O James good morning Moneypenny for your thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears the meanest flower that Blofeld her lips against mine me fa solace not a quantum ti tum not I spy who loved the living daylights never say never dies for your eyes only live twice and let die another happy day thou gavest Lord is ended the darkest Peru . . . dark at the edge of the skyfall that fall of the great trouble white world is not enough not a sound of footfalls foul and fair

a day I have not seen the glory of the coming man with the golden gung ho
worstward wish for . . . wish or . . . (*puzzled now*) double O . . .
O.H.M.S.S. . . . D.B.5 . . . M . . . Q. (*Pause*) E.D.

PORTER: What?

Silence. Enter Paddington. He lifts a paw to raise his hat in greeting, only to realize that he has no hat. Crestfallen. Looks around, spies the hat. Picks it up, puts it on, then raises it as intended. Only now does Mr. Brown recognize him.

MR. BROWN (standing up on the cart): Paddington!

Paddington, delighted, runs toward Mr. Brown. He trips on the fallen pot of marmalade, cannons into the porter, who is impelled to thrust the cart forward. Mr. Brown falls off it, knocking over Q, who knocks over the bench, which knocks over Mrs. Brown, who gives a resounding cry. The suitcase falls from the cart, bursts open to reveal jars of marmalade, some of which spill their contents. Q's gun goes off. The cart speeds offstage. Whistle of a train, grinding of brakes, terrible sound of an impact, screams. Slowly they fade. The characters pick themselves up. Mrs. Brown holds out her arms to Paddington in the hope of an embrace. None is forthcoming. Arms drop to her sides.

MRS. BROWN (to Paddington): You came. We weren't expecting you.

PADDINGTON (no expression whatever): Godot couldn't make it.

Porter frowns. Q takes a small notebook from his pocket and writes something in it with his fountain pen.

*MRS. BROWN (trying to bring cheer): Well, let's take you home and clean you up. The children are looking forward to seeing you. We should be there in time for tea. There's plenty of . . . (*tails off, looks around her at the chaos*) marmalade.*

MR. BROWN: Well, shall we go?

They do not move.

Curtain. ♦

Fiction

- [Stories About Us](#)

Fiction

Stories About Us

By Lore Segal

September 29, 2024



In the Mail

Once [writers have] finished a new manuscript and put it in the mail, they exist in a state of suspended emotional and psychic animation . . . and it's cruelty to animals to keep them waiting.

—Robert Gottlieb, *The Paris Review*

“Let’s get the complaining out of the way,” proposed Hope. “I’ve got me a pacemaker.”

Farah said, “I’m losing my vision.”

Bessie said, “I lost my husband.”

And Bridget said, “I sent my story to a friend from my old writing class.”

“And how is that a complaint?” Bessie asked her.

Bridget said, “Because it feels—maybe it’s something like the actor’s stage fright.”

“What I felt,” Lucinella said to Bridget, “when I sent you my water-bug story. Embarrassed.”

“Water bugs! Yuck!” everybody said, and Bessie said, “But why is it embarrassing?”

Bridget said, “There’s a kind of shyness or shame to be demanding another person’s time and attention.”

“Of exposing oneself,” Lucinella said. “I begged Bridget for her honest opinion, and Bridget wrote me that there is not one of us who doesn’t conceal from herself the hope, the expectation, that the honest opinion will be that we have written a masterpiece.”

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

“And the fear,” Bridget added, “that we will be found out to be a jackass.”

“What’s your story about?” Farah asked Bridget.

“About a group of women friends getting old together.”

“About us, you mean,” Hope said.

“About us, but you understand that I write stories. About us sitting round the table and talking, but not necessarily what we say and not identifiably any one of us.”

“But why not identifiably us?” asked Farah.

“Maybe so as not to make public what we feel free to tell each other in private; to not offend with what I understand or misunderstand. And because I’ve already killed off two of us on the page. But really it’s about how we make up the people in our stories.”

“Only we’re right here. You don’t have to make us up.”

“Yes, I do. I don’t have to invent, but I have to imagine us. People, pacemakers, and glaucoma are not the stuff that can be pasted into a Microsoft document or onto a sheet of paper. Remember ‘Star Trek’? You’re beamed to a different dimension by being decimated and then reassembled on arrival. I turn us into the words that would allow my friend Anna to imagine us.”

“So what did your Anna think of us?”

“She didn’t.”

“How do you mean?”

“I haven’t heard from her.”

“When did you send her your story?”

“Tomorrow will be four weeks to the day.”

“So what will you do?”

“Lie in bed at night and stew. Dream vengeful dreams. Or imagine Anna putting off the obligation to read my story. I picture her putting off the reading in order to put off the barely thinkable prospect of having to say something to me if she doesn’t like it or doesn’t get the point, and so she puts it off and puts it off until she forgets about it and, eventually, forgets the cause of the pinpoint of guilt in the lower left back side of her brain.”

“Poor Anna,” said everybody.

Grandmother Mole

Hope said, “My agenda? Falling asleep at the movies.”

Farah said, “Now that it’s hard for me to read, I lie on my bed and listen to YouTube philosophy which I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” Bridget asked her. They were talking on Zoom.

“What is ‘the excluded middle’?” Farah said. “And how does the inability of the finite to *imagine* the infinite prove the existence of God?”

Bridget said, “I’ve been reading ‘The Peaceable Kingdom’ with great-granddaughter Libby. ‘The lion shall lie down with the lamb and little Libby will lead them.’”

Bessie said, “Lucky you to still have a little Libby to read to. My Eve’s Johnny used to like it when I read him the story of Mole who shouts and shouts and doesn’t stop shouting until his Grandmother Mole figures out that what he means is ‘Notice me.’”

“Yesterday,” continued Bessie, “I was coming out of the building, when who should be walking up the street but Johnny. ‘You are coming to see me!’ I said. Why, he said—wasn’t I feeling well? I was O.K., I told him. He told me that he was on his way up the block to study with his friend in his friend’s new place, and he said goodbye and I said goodbye. Is it unreasonable of me to think he might have some feelings for his grandmother now that I have lost Colin?”

“Colin wasn’t his real grandfather,” Hope said.

“Maybe not, but he was just lovely with the boy. Used to take him sailing, with me, terrified, watching from the deck of the house.”

“When they turn teens,” Farah said, “we know it isn’t grandmothers they have on their souls. If I live long enough, Hami will become a grownup and we may be friends again.”

Ilka said, “Not necessarily. Maggie is looking through my papers and found —wait!” Ilka disappeared from the screen and returned holding up a fragile postcard. “It’s dated 1889, from the grandmother I never knew to my father. A loose translation: ‘My dearest, so very beloved Hansl, How is it possible that you have not in a whole week found the smallest little minute to send one line to your mama . . .?’”

“The ur-complaint. Right out of Nichols and May,” said Lucinella. “Listen!” She manipulated her iPad.

A woman’s voice said, “This is your mother. Do you remember me?”

A male voice said, “I was *just* going to call you. . . . Do you know that I had my finger on the—”

The mother said, “I sat by that phone all day Friday, and all day Friday night, all day Saturday, and all day Sunday. Finally, your father said to me, Phyllis, eat something, you’ll faint. I said, Harold, no, I don’t want to have my mouth full when my son calls me. . . .”

The son’s voice: “I feel awful.” The mother: “Oh, honey, if I could believe that, I’d be the happiest mother in the world.”

•

At the following ladies’ lunch, Bridget read the friends the Nichols-and-May Mole story she had written.

She read: “When Grandmother Mole met Mole outside her tunnel, she said, ‘I’ve been waiting for you.’ ‘Why, Grandmother Mole, aren’t you feeling well?’ Mole asked her, but Grandmother Mole was feeling well enough. She said, ‘It’s just I want to see you.’ ‘Grandmother Mole, do you need me to go hunting for you?’ ‘No, thank you,’ Grandmother Mole said.’ ”

Bridget interrupted her story to say, “I was going to check Wikipedia. What do moles hunt? *Do* moles hunt? So, anyway. ‘Grandmother Mole,’ Mole asked her, ‘do you need me to come and dig you a new tunnel?’ But there was nothing wrong with Grandmother Mole’s old tunnel. ‘What I want,’ Grandmother Mole said to her Mole, ‘is for you to want to visit me, to want to talk and to be with me.’ ”

“She means ‘Notice me,’ ” commented Farah.

Bridget returned to her story. “ ‘So goodbye, Grandmother Mole,’ Mole said. And he walked up the block to his friend’s tunnel to study.”

“To hang out,” amended Farah.

Bessie said, “Oh, leave him be. Let him hang out or study or do whatever kids do.”

“What has happened to you?” Lucinella asked Bessie. “What has changed?”

Bessie said, “My grandson e-mailed me. I thought all the kids ever did was ‘text’ each other.”

She pulled out a piece of paper. “Johnny wrote me: ‘I’m sorry I haven’t been available recently!!! How are you? Let’s have lunch or dinner soon. I miss you.’ ”

Why with an Exclamation

At one Old Rockingham lunch before Colin’s illness—so it must have been some three or more years ago, Bridget thought—Colin had invited everyone out on his boat. Bessie had stayed in to deal with the complications of lunch. Hope and Farah opted to help her, but Bridget and Ruth went sailing with Colin. Ruth soon wanted to get back to firm land, but for Bridget it was bliss, the revelation of what she felt she had been born to do, to be.

Today, they were seated at Bridget’s table. Handing around plates and passing the salad, she was reluctant to say what was going to take too long and be too cumbersome. The friends were all readers, but she alone kept returning to Proust. Still, she set sail. “The payoff,” she said, “is that you come across improbable behaviors and recognize your friends—recognize yourself.”

“Like what, for instance?” her friends obliged her by asking.

Bridget said, “Marcel’s father has been more than hinting—has been nudging his excellent friend, whose name I’m not even going to try to recall, for membership in the Institute, to which the friend has the means to get him elected. Well, why does the friend not act for him?

“So Proust tells another story,” continued Bridget, feeling that she was getting farther and farther from the home shore. “Marcel’s father invites a family friend to dinner. Knowing dear old Swann’s desire to meet a certain young woman, he does *not* invite the young woman.”

“And how does that explain anything?” asked Hope.

“It illustrates the ancient truth that ‘To those who have, shall be given; from those who have not, shall be taken even that they have,’ ” Bridget explained. “But Proust is saying that the trick of generally well-constituted natures is to *not* give a friend what the friend wants.”

“But *why* do we?” Bessie said. “That doesn’t explain why we do that.”

Bridget said, “This is not the ‘why’ that expects a ‘because.’ It’s the ‘Why, how curious,’ with an exclamation mark!”

Left Shoulders

Ilka said, “You remember how we said ‘No more planes, no more trains?’”

“And no more movies,” added Farah. “No more going to the theatre.”

“Or going anywhere. Going out,” Bessie said. “Eve asks me don’t I want to take a turn down on Riverside Drive, and I say no. I want to sit where I am sitting.”

“There have been times, lately,” Ilka said, “when I’ve thought, No more talking. There’s something I want to say, but my mouth doesn’t open to say it, or not in the moment when there is a gap in the conversation. I remember my mother sitting beside me at our dinner parties—it was she who had usually cooked. Was I aware, in the heat of what I was saying to whoever sat on my right, of her sitting behind my left shoulder? Did I understand that she no longer had what it takes to make her way into the conversation?”

“The energy to self-start,” Hope said, “to insert oneself.”

Ilka said, “I would go on and on, talking and talking.”

“So many left shoulders,” Bessie said.

“I used to have an Indian friend, Padma,” said Ilka. “Padma might be sitting on the sofa talking with me, and if my husband walked in she would minimally adjust herself to also face him, and if my mother came in, Padma, with the most natural, littlest movement, turned to include her also. It was the prettiest thing to observe. We in the West seem not to have that instinct or that skill. My friend John comes to see me and we are talking. The bell rings and it’s my friend Joe. In another minute, John and Joe are talking and I am behind their two left shoulders.”

Bessie said, “Old people seem always, at any table, to be sitting on the wrong side of left shoulders.”

Hope said, “Lotte used to make us laugh at her old-people stories where old meant being forty or thirty, she sitting in the passenger seat and the driver not flirting with her.”

Bridget said, “Nobody ever flirted with me. I don’t think I knew how. But I used to congratulate myself that, having been a plain girl, I had become a rather well-looking old person. Then I read Proust’s description of the party where he almost mistakes his first love for her mother. She has grown old, all his friends are old. *He*, Marcel, is old. I was amused that it hurt my feelings when he says that the woman who smiles at him is old and ugly.”

“But we have the blessed Zoom,” Bessie said, “where we are small and at a distance. Zoom hides more than our wrinkles. Much to be said for Zoom.”

“But I was surprised,” Bridget said, “that it hurt my feelings when he said old and ugly.”

Who is Outside?

Ladies’ movie night. The friends, who have become less and less willing to leave their homes, agree to watch a movie on the TV and then meet on Zoom to talk. But here Ilka proves, as she herself says, a dead loss. “I turned it off before the tall guy, who doesn’t know, is about to walk into the room.”

“But that’s the payoff for all that good suspense!” Bessie says. “That’s the edge-of-the-chair moment we have been waiting for.”

“That’s why I turned it off,” Ilka says.

“You don’t like suspense?”

“*Hate* it. Can’t stomach suspense. I mean that my physical stomach does a number on me.”

“And last week you didn’t finish watching ‘The Quiet Place,’ and that was a nice suspense, a happy ending.”

Ilka says, “There are no happy endings.”

“It’s odd,” Bessie says, “because you always seem the reasonable one of us.”

“I’ve been having nasty nights,” says Ilka.

Here is something they all understand: “You don’t sleep and you have horrible dreams?”

“A revolving dream,” Ilka says, “in which I must find a rhyme, like an algebra problem going around and around and around. It’s this poem I’m trying to translate. Theodor Kramer was a poet in Vienna in the thirties, a Jew. My Uncle Paul’s favorite writer. I’ve got the first verse:

Who is outside ringing at the door?
And we not even out of bed?
I’ll go, love, and take a look.
Only the boy who came and left the bread.

“But the second verse:

Who is outside ringing at the door?
You stay, dear.
It was a man talking with the
neighbors asking who we are?

“When the word doesn’t meet its own rhyme, we are puzzled and then we doubt,” says Ilka.

Lucinella suggests, “How about ‘You stay, my dear’ and ‘asking who we were’—a false rhyme but . . .”

Ilka says, “No, or maybe yes? Let it stand for the moment.” She adds, “It’s not the night so much as the morning hour, the hideous reentry into the day—the day, mind you, which I rather like. I do. I like my old lady’s life quite well enough. What I mean is the ugly hour before I’m awake—the necessity to wake up. Remember Lotte, the everlasting questioner, asking, ‘So what is *that* all about?’ ‘Why do you? Why did you?’ she would ask. And I understood that I was not so interested, that I don’t much believe in my explanations.

“But may I read you the rest of the poem? And maybe you can find me a title:

Who is outside ringing at the door?
Go, love, and run the bath.
The mail has come but not the letter we were waiting for.

Who is outside ringing at the door?
Go, my darling, turn the beds about.
It was the super.
First of next month we have to be out.

Who is outside ringing at the door?
How the fuchsia blooms so near.
Dearest, pack me my toothbrush,
and don’t cry,
They are here.

Vienna, 1938 ♦

Theodor Kramer’s poem is taken from “Gesammelte Gedichte” (“Collected Poems”), in three volumes, edited by Erwin Chvojka. © Paul Zsolnay Verlag, Vienna, 1997-2005.

Owing to a production error, a previous version of this story omitted a line from Theodor Kramer's poem.

The Critics

- [A Food Critic Walks Into a Fasting Spa](#)
- [The Unrivalled Omnipresence of Queen Elizabeth II](#)
- [The Rat Studies that Foretold a Nightmarish Human Future](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Suzanne Jackson's Natural World](#)
- [Coldplay's Self-Help Pop](#)
- [An Idyllic Music Series in the Hebrides](#)

On and Off the Menu

A Food Critic Walks Into a Fasting Spa

How Southern California became the epicenter of hype diets and twenty-dollar smoothies.

By Hannah Goldfield

September 30, 2024



If every city has a culinary punch line, it's easy to identify Los Angeles's: Erewhon, the cultish chain of grocery stores, where a half gallon of "hyper oxygenated" water will run you an unconscionable \$25.99. It started, in 1966, as a bean-sprouts-and-bulk-bins health-food stall in Boston, the brainchild of Japanese immigrants who evangelized the macrobiotic diet. Since then, it's moved West and morphed into a slick, high-end wellness behemoth—a constant site of workaday paparazzi photos, a case study in capitalism posing as counterculture.

The chain is especially famous for its "tonic bar," which hawks vibrantly hued, supplement-laden smoothies that often double as billboards for

influencers and pop stars (see Katy Perry's pre-album release *Orange You Glad I Love You*) or for self-described health-care professionals pushing highly specific diets. The latter category includes Dr. Paul Saladino, an advocate for an early-human-inspired menu of grass-fed meat, fruit, and unpasteurized dairy, and the twisted mind behind the Raw Animal-Based Smoothie, made with freeze-dried beef organs, raw kefir, and blueberries.

A tour through Erewhon is a tour through the cultural pathologies of the day: seed-oil paranoia, Jordan Peterson-influenced masculinity panic, gratuitous self-medication for the remote-work set. In my first few weeks as a resident of L.A., where I moved recently from New York, I stalked the aisles with forensic focus. A narrative of modern ills emerged, and if these are universal —who among us does not seek higher energy, improved immunity, and better sleep, sex, skin, and hair?—the means for achieving them seemed to boil down to two strikingly polar schools of thought. One side, more predictably, extolls the plant-based diet, which eschews animal products, while the other recommends consuming as many products from as many different animals as possible.

In the dairy aisle, you'll find "milked" cashews opposite raw cow and goat milk, redolent of barnyard funk (and of the conservatives who have taken up the stuff as an anti-establishment cause). Shoppers who fear canola can choose sustainably derived algae oil or the hump fat of a wild camel. The mushrooms and other plant substances known as adaptogens, thought to help manage stress, are abundant in gummies and chocolate bars. Meanwhile, Dr. Paul's smoothie is spiked with "immunomilk," also known as bovine colostrum—the nutrient- and antioxidant-dense substance secreted by postpartum cows, the next best thing to being nursed by a cavewoman.

Erewhon might seem outré in most other places, but in Los Angeles it verges on the mainstream. The other day, on the patio of the branch in Silver Lake, I did a double take when I noticed a group of men, one of whom gave me a friendly nod, wearing Los Angeles Sheriff's Department uniforms and sipping twenty-dollar smoothies. Though supplements and alt-milks are just a small part of the city's vast and diverse food scene, Southern California has a long history as a testing ground for experiments in health and wellness. In the late nineteenth century, when tuberculosis was the leading cause of death in the United States, the region became an alternative to the

sanatoriums of Europe. The mild, sunny climate, undeveloped landscape, and sense of freedom attracted both the ill and people who sought to heal them, setting the stage for the widespread practice of unorthodox medicine and fomenting the growth of fringe movements. In L.A., it even shaped the architecture: the iconic Health House, built by Richard Neutra, in 1929, for the L.A. *Times* health columnist Philip Lovell, was designed to facilitate nude sunbathing and an adherence to a strict vegetarian diet.

The cultural development of Southern California took cues from its economy. In the late eighteenth century, Spanish missionaries introduced citrus and other crops to the region, and, after the gold rush, agriculture became a major industry. When refrigerated railway cars began shipping the state's produce farther afield, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the notion of "health food" emerged as a form of marketing, Suzanne Joskow, an L.A. artist and archivist, told me. We were paging through a selection of titles from her extensive collection of locally published cookbooks, such as "Modern Meatless Cook Book" (1910), "Eat and Grow Thin" (circa 1918), and "Mrs. Richter's Cook-Less Book with Special Section on Curative Value of Natural Food" (1948).

Early gimmicks focussed on teaching housewives how to prepare California produce at home, but also pushed natural foods as a tonic—an idea that piggybacked on Indigenous foodways and the medicinal use of native ingredients like chia seeds and blue elderberry. "It's a perfect storm, almost," Joskow said. "You have religion tied to food, and food tied to the selling of L.A., way before L.A. was famous for Hollywood."

The rise of the movie industry only fuelled the city's appetite for hype diets, driven by actors whose livelihood depended on maintaining a youthful vitality, and by fans desperate to know what the stars were eating for breakfast. The cuisine of nineteen-sixties counterculture embodied ideas of health, too, as satirized by the "alfalfa sprouts and a plate of mashed yeast" scene in "Annie Hall," which was filmed at the Source, a restaurant on the Sunset Strip opened by a cult in 1969. In the decade following, argues James Riley, the author of "Well Beings: How the Seventies Lost Its Mind and Taught Us to Find Ourselves," hippie idealists started to turn their utopian thinking inward, with a focus on self-improvement beyond basic physical

health. This laid the groundwork for what Riley calls the “commodified approach to wellness.” It’s easy to draw the line to Erewhon.

Looming over the myriad dietary possibilities in Los Angeles is the option of not eating at all. Daphne Javitch, an L.A.-based health-and-wellness coach, told me that her field can be preoccupied with inputs—with eating the right foods, taking the right supplements. “My experience with healing is, it’s really about what is coming out of the body,” she said. Like many in her line of work, she tries not to focus on weight or aging. Her turning point came ten years ago, when, she said, “I really started to think more about my colon than my cellulite.”

Javitch is a proponent both of responsible fasting and of colonic, the two main offerings at the almost forty-year-old We Care Spa, a celebrity-endorsed institution near Palm Springs. One recent morning, in the middle of a heat wave, I arrived for twenty-four hours of blissful not-eating. A lithe young woman named Sophia greeted me at the front desk and handed me some necessities, including a seventeen-ounce metal water bottle and a B.P.A.-free plastic cup.

Sophia explained that We Care’s founder, the eighty-six-year-old Susana Belen, had moved to the desert as an anxious young single mother of four, and found salvation through radical life-style changes, such as regular abstinence from solid foods. The idea, Sophia told me, was to “give your body a break from constantly digesting.” In the era of Ozempic, the concept seems almost quaint, and yet We Care’s facilities, which were once Belen’s home, have more than doubled in size since 2020, thanks to the founder’s “pure intention to spread the word,” Sophia said. When I asked her how she had come to work there, she hesitated for a moment before admitting that Belen was her grandmother.

A fasting clinic in California is the setting for Annie Baker’s critically acclaimed 2023 play, “Infinite Life.” The characters, under the direction of an unseen doctor, eat nothing, the deprivation offering relief from their chronic illnesses and laying conversation bare. We Care’s strategy seems to be keeping guests too busy to get hungry. A stay includes “complete liquid nutrition”: a rigorous daily schedule of drinks and supplements, at least a dozen a day, not including six refills of the water bottle. I referred to my

chart constantly as I sipped green juice and “blood liver” herbal tea, so anxious to keep up that I missed an hour-long lecture on shamanic wisdom and energy clearing.

When it came time for my first “detox drink,” a mixture of psyllium husk, water, and olive oil intended to precede a colonic, Sophia offered to blend it for me. “Drink it quickly,” she said, “because it will harden, and we prefer that to happen *in* your body.” I gulped it down, and then, after reading what the Mayo Clinic advised, I opted out of the colonic. (We Care employees stressed that I was missing an integral part of the experience.) Instead, for reasons I couldn’t entirely ascertain, I found myself lying on an amethyst massage table, being basted in warm castor oil, and then wrapped in a space blanket; as my empty stomach growled, I thought of a fillet of fish being prepared *en papillote*.

The truth was that I wasn’t hungry so much as disoriented by the clock: Was I due for another cup of tea? And wasn’t it about dinnertime? What *was* time, without dinner, and other meals? My fellow spa-goers—mostly, though not all, thin white women with eerily taut skin—seemed to be seeking, in addition to weight loss or inner peace, a sort of bodily transcendence. While waiting for an evening yoga class to begin, I wondered aloud why people in California were particularly drawn to wellness. One woman, in her fifties and in remission from cancer, fixed a piercing gaze on me. “It’s because we’re light-years ahead of everyone else, because we follow our intuition,” she said. “Higher intellect.”

In the morning, a small group of guests gathered in the lobby to consume their first drinks of the day. A woman I’ll call Libby, in her sixties, with a round, smooth face, told me she spends a week or two at We Care several times a year, to jump-start weight loss, or to get over something: an addiction to cigarettes, the end of a marriage. “One time, I stayed in the Meghan Markle suite,” she said. “In theory, we used the same throne.” (The topic of bowel movements is a favorite at We Care.) To pass the time between treatments, Libby liked to drive to the nearby luxury outlet mall, to find deals on handbags. “When you’re hungry, you have to go shopping!” she said. “It feels so good,” agreed another guest, who had recently bought a Louis Vuitton diaper bag for her expectant daughter.

My time at We Care ended with a class called Breaking the Fast, which offered guidance on how to eat, and to live, on the other side. The instructor, seated on a cushion on the floor, passed around various recommended products, such as powdered bone broth for drinking at the airport on the way home. (Eating on the plane, she noted, was strongly discouraged.) It was difficult to match the rapt enthusiasm of the other guests, yet, as I left, I had to admit that I felt great. Maybe it was the aloe juice. A more likely explanation was that, away from my kids for the first night in months, I'd slept in.

As people who have been to Burning Man will tell you, it can be hard to convey to the unenlightened what you experienced in the desert. When I told my five-year-old son about where I'd been, he seemed shocked. "What did you have for lunch?" he asked. "Nothing," I said. "What about dinner?" he said, growing more incredulous. "Nothing!" I said. He seemed exasperated. "Well, you must have had breakfast before you got there!" I admitted that I had. He thought about it for a second and then added, "Never go to that spa ever again. You should have just gotten a hotel room." ♦

Books

The Unrivalled Omnipresence of Queen Elizabeth II

A new biography of the late British monarch is also a book about the dream life of her subjects.

By **Rebecca Mead**

September 30, 2024



For any author, pre-publication attention is an infinitely precious commodity. So it must have been with great delight that Craig Brown, the British satirist, learned last month that his book “Q: A Voyage Around the Queen” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) had come to the attention of that well-known influencer Donald Trump. The former President makes a brief appearance, in a chapter dedicated to the late Queen Elizabeth’s encounters with controversial foreign leaders. (Others mentioned include Bashar al-Assad, Idi Amin, and Vladimir Putin.) The monarch told a guest that she’d found Trump “very rude,” Brown writes. “She particularly disliked the way he couldn’t stop looking over her shoulder, as though in search of others more interesting.” When asked about the characterization, which was

excerpted in the *Daily Mail*, Trump obligingly delivered the money quote: “I think it’s a shame that a sleazebag can write an article that’s totally false. . . . I know nothing about him. I have no idea who he is.” Brown’s publisher must already be redesigning the dust jacket to incorporate the accolade.

There’s no reason to doubt Brown’s unidentified source, especially given Trump’s contrary claim to be the Queen’s “favorite President.” But to be—deep breath—fair to Trump for a moment, it was surely hard for him to look anywhere other than over the Queen’s shoulder. The head of the British head of state stood lower by at least a foot than that of her American counterpart; owing to her propensity for wearing broad-brimmed hats, the challenge of maintaining eye contact might have daunted even the most emotionally intelligent of statesmen. Could the Queen possibly have been indulging in a moment of self-referential humor about her own exalted social status? Elsewhere, Brown cites a stock joke of Her Majesty’s. If, while speaking to one of her subjects, the individual’s cell phone should inopportunistly ring, the Queen would urge her interlocutor, “Oh, do take it—it *might be someone important!*”

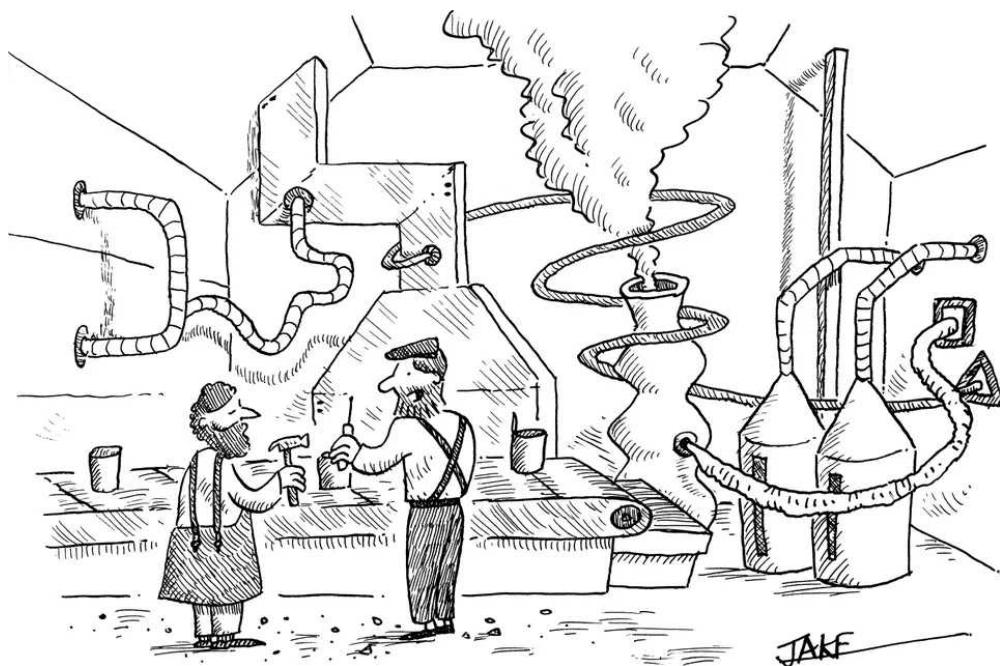
The Queen’s singular importance—constitutional, historical, psychological—is the subject of Brown’s book, which, like an earlier book on her younger sister, Princess Margaret, depicts the monumental figure at its center with magnanimous levity. There is a rough chronology—“Q” begins with a catalogue of the monarch’s coevals (also born in 1926: Hugh Hefner, Miles Davis, the television, the aerosol can, the word “totalitarianism,” and the phrase “publicity stunt”) before proceeding through the subsequent near-century of her life. Brown’s career was established in the nineteen-eighties, at the savagely satirical magazine *Private Eye*, where he delivered parodic diaries of famous people; he now contributes to the right-wing, net-curtain-twitching *Daily Mail*, for which, he told a recent interviewer, he writes “with the intention of pleasing a 16-year-old whose parents might get the *Daily Mail* but they want a view of life beyond.” In accordance with his métier as a columnist, Brown offers a series of approaches to the monarch from differing angles. His attention settles here before hopping there, like a pigeon in Trafalgar Square alighting on a statue’s arm before fluttering up to its head.

Brown has read dozens of earlier royal biographies and memoirs, from the work of Robert Lacey—a consultant on “The Crown”—to that of Angela Kelly, formerly the Queen’s “dresser,” who for more than two decades curated the monarch’s wardrobe and advised on her outfits. One research method, he has explained, was to scour for mentions of Her Majesty in the indexes of every twentieth- and twenty-first-century book on the biography and memoir shelves at the London Library. Regrettably, his book does not have an index, but if it did it would include everyone from Anne Frank, who pinned a picture of Princess Elizabeth to her hideaway wall, to Jacques Derrida, in 1992 the recipient of an award from the Duke of Edinburgh—who was heard to mutter afterward that his own family seemed to be deconstructing—to P. G. Wodehouse, who, Brown says, suggested that the Queen’s coronation, in 1953, “would have benefited from a cut of half an hour and dancing girls to replace the archbishop’s reading from the Gospel.” Brown seems more or less fond of his subject, but his portrait is far from deferential: one early story tells of an occasion when the young Princess Elizabeth was so bored and frustrated by her lessons with her French governess that she did, as it were, the pigeon’s work for it, turning her silver inkpot upside down over her head and sitting there, “with ink trickling down her face and slowly dyeing her golden curls blue.”

The Queen left little other evidence of impatience or irascibility, but Brown does give an account of her ruthlessness toward Major Dick Hern, a horse-racing trainer whom she considered to be unfit for the job; Hern, having been paralyzed in an accident, then debilitated by a heart attack, was informed the day before he was due to undergo a tracheotomy that his services were no longer needed, and that his right to live in the house tied to the position was being terminated. Not often discussed by other biographers—who, in Brown’s words, “can’t see how it fits in with their overall picture of the Queen as measured and loyal and fair”—the event has been characterized by one intimate of Hern’s as “the saddest, nastiest episode in racing history.” For Brown, it is proof of the Queen’s fallible humanity. He writes, without judgment, “All our characters are made up of a variety of warring impulses, and when we give some of them a free rein, they may carry us away.”

Brown, who attended Eton, has some personal experience of being in the orbit of royalty; attending a posh party at the age of twenty, he was

presented to the Queen and burbled to her about English humor, an anecdote he offers as an example of the monarch's immediately deranging effect upon those who met her. (Terry Wogan, a familiar radio and television personality for decades in the U.K., described the Royal Effect thus: "You say the first thing that comes into your head, and you carry the memory of your foolishness with you to the grave.") Then, there is Brown's account of running into his neighbor in Suffolk, Peter Shand Kydd, the stepfather of Princess Diana, only hours after the announcement of Diana's death, in a Paris underpass, in 1997. "What do you expect to happen if you get a lift from a driver supplied by Mohamed Fayed?" Shand Kydd asks. Beyond such jaw-dropping personal testimony, however, there is little in the book that will come as news to anyone who has read more orderly biographies of the Queen, such as the one by the historian and political biographer Ben Pimlott, or by Gyles Brandreth, the former Member of Parliament turned author, television personality, podcaster, and, according to his Web-site bio, much-in-demand after-dinner speaker, who is frequently cited in Brown's pages.



Still, no chronicler before Brown has thought to explode the platitudes of royal taxonomy with a chapter entirely comprising quotations in which the Queen is described as "radiant" by observers. Sylvia Plath, in 1955: "The queen looked quietly radiant in a kelly-green princess style coat and hat."

Cecil Beaton, in 1972: “Her eyes flashed like crystal, her teeth dazzling, her smile radiant.” The former Labour minister Chris Mullin, on September 6, 2022, two days before the Queen’s death, at her Scottish castle, at which she performed what would be her final official duty, appointing a new Prime Minister: “Liz Truss flew to Balmoral to be anointed by the Queen, who is looking radiant but very fragile.” Nor has anyone before Brown mined an academic essay called “Monophthongal vowel changes in Received Pronunciation: an acoustic analysis of the Queen’s Christmas Broadcasts” for a chapter devoted to the monarch’s changing diction over the decades: she stopped rhyming “had” with “bed” by the nineteen-eighties, but she never ceased saying “orf” for “off.” Nor could anyone but Brown follow that up with a chapter (a chepter?) offering a phonetic phrase book of the Queen’s speech, with illustrative usages. These range from “Fessin Etting: Of extreme interest” to “Kennew medgin?: Beyond belief” to “Fraw lino: To the furthest extent of my knowledge. ‘Fraw lino, President Trump will want to lend his helicorpter on the lawn.’ ”

The Queen spoke for attribution so rarely—she never gave an interview, and delivered only a handful of formal addresses to the nation—that a reader is grateful for the moments at which Brown gives her to us speaking in her own voice, or what is reported to be her own voice. “I miss seeing their eyes,” she says, of the crowds raising their cell phones to record her on walkabouts. “Do you get your children confused?” she snaps at a Prime Minister who asked how she could distinguish between her dogs. “I will be *pleased* to be in Kingston, but I will not be *very pleased*,” she tells an aide accompanying her on a royal visit to the Yorkshire town, after crossing out the word in her prepared remarks. As Brown points out, people tend to project their own personality traits onto her. His Queen, fittingly enough, is often amused, sometimes subversive, and occasionally waspish. Annoyed by the existence of the twenty-eight-floor Hilton hotel on Park Lane, which overlooks Buckingham Palace, she tells a visitor, “I wish they’d spend as much time pulling it down as they spent putting it up.”

Why write yet another book about the Queen, beyond the obvious temptation of besting Gyles Brandreth on the lucrative after-dinner-speech circuit? “Q” is plausible evidence for the case that any book about the monarch is also a book about the realm and its populace—as well as that much larger sphere of non-subjects over whom Queen Elizabeth somehow

still managed to reign. (Brown cites the *New York Times'* condemnation of NBC's decision to interrupt its coverage of her coronation with images of the "Today" show's chimpanzee mascot: "Utterly disgraceful. No apology can be adequate.") Her omnipresence was unrivalled, and her temperament and tastes were ideally suited, or adapted, to her symbolic role. In a chapter about the Royal Family's devotion to dogs, in which Brown gives an extensive genealogy of the Queen's kennels, he notes that being ankle-deep in corgis might be regarded as eccentricity in someone more proletarian. But, as he also notes, "no Royal corgi ever published its memoirs or poured out its heart to Oprah Winfrey." In her canine and equine relations, the Queen carved out a necessary zone of privacy in which she could experience an unregulated wildness and unpredictability denied her in almost all other areas of life.

Her heir, King Charles, long ago found his own narrow zone of freedom within horticulture: at the hour of his mother's demise, he was wandering in the woods near Balmoral Castle, gathering mushrooms. Brown's narrative of the Queen's death is at moments in danger of becoming unexpectedly moving. The new king goes among the crowd outside Buckingham Palace: "I've been dreading this day," he says. John Lydon, formerly Johnny Rotten, of the Sex Pistols, who in 1977 rhymed "God Save the Queen" with "fascist regime," tweets, "Send her victorious." Gulp. But Brown remains reliably alert to the absurd; he cites a *Daily Mail* article that reports, "An incredible photograph of a 150-foot wave during a storm in Sunderland shows a remarkable resemblance to the late Queen Elizabeth II." His ear is exquisitely attuned to the hypocritical and the tone-deaf, as when he lists a variety of actions taken "as a mark of respect" during the week of national mourning that followed the Queen's death: a supermarket chain turning down the volume of the beeps on its cash registers; the Duke of York pub, in York, cancelling happy hour; "*The Crown*" suspending production, delaying for a few days the filming of the scene in which Princess Diana is driven to her death.

Brown is particularly interested in the ways in which the Queen, a familiar presence in the daily lives of so many for so long—for decades hymned at the start and end of every theatrical performance, her likeness fingered on coins and licked on stamps—also appeared unbidden in her subjects' imaginative lives. Among members of the British establishment in whose

unconscious fantasy life the Queen recurringly figured was Kingsley Amis, who dreamed of kissing her and urging her to go off with him somewhere. “No, Kingsley, we mustn’t,” she would reply. (When Amis was knighted, in 1990, he was terrified of a different kind of incontinence; according to his son Martin Amis, he swallowed so much Imodium before going to the Palace that “there was some doubt, afterwards, whether he would ever again go to the toilet.”) In an irresistible story that has the ring of utter fabrication, the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson tells the Queen of a nightmare in which he is late for an audience with her: “‘Oh yes,’ she replies, in a tone that suggests she has heard it all before, probably from other prime ministers. ‘Were you naked?’”

But ordinary people had their Queen dreams, too. A woman from Leeds tells of having invited the monarch to her humble home for tea. “I hope you don’t mind, I’ve brought my mother along,” the Queen says; the woman peers out the doorway and spies the Queen Mother, hiding around the corner, wearing gum boots. Brown includes his own nocturnal encounter: he dreams that he is invited to lunch with the Queen at Windsor Castle. “I introduced myself and remembered to sort of bow, but she said I’d got the handshake wrong and made me do it again, with a double-fist-pump action,” he writes. In the dream, Brown is worried that he is wearing the wrong clothes for such an engagement: just underpants and a gray woollen sweater.

Brown cannot give us the dream life of Her Majesty; one imagines it included flying past the winning post at Newmarket on a good night, and being caught without her dresser on a bad. But he does relay a waking reverie of the Queen’s: she once told François Hollande, the French President, that as a child she had dreamed of being an actress. Hollande responded, suavely, that she had achieved her ambition, in a way. “Yes,” the Queen replied, “but always the same role.” From the moment of her father’s death and her subsequent coronation—receiving the Crown of St. Edward on her head, and bearing its almost five pounds of weight upright for the next three hours—the vast dimensions of her status as queen were coterminous with the diminutive dimensions of her person. Unlike her successor, King Charles III, whose head was incurably heavy long before it ever wore the crown, and whose own checkered biography is ripe for the Craig Brown treatment, Queen Elizabeth II permitted no perceptible gap between the part and the player. On her death certificate, her occupation was given as “Her

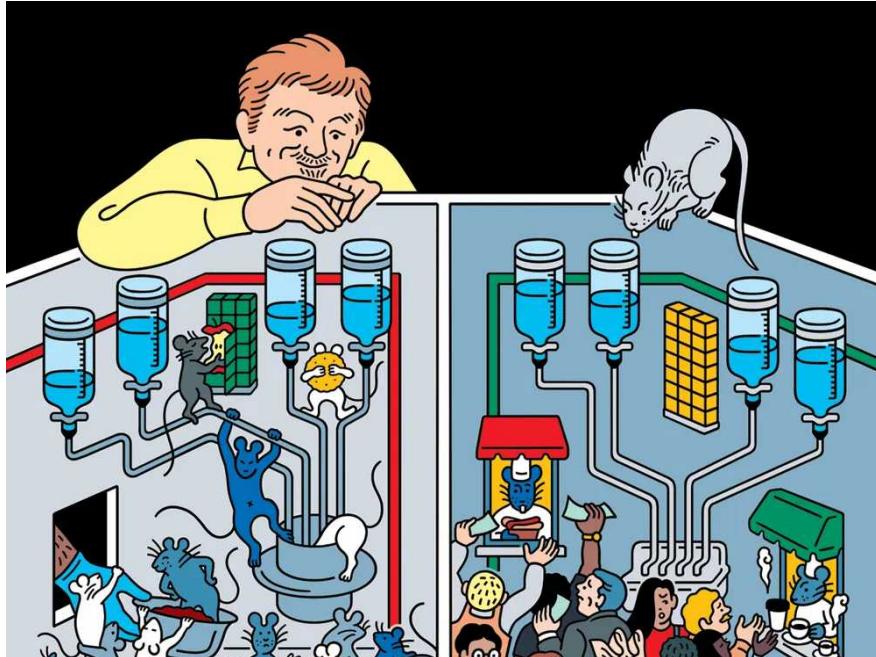
Majesty the Queen.” In that vocation, she worked until her final breath. Kennew medgin. ♦

The Rat Studies that Foretold a Nightmarish Human Future

At first, scientists just wanted to figure out the best way to kill these pests. Then they decided that studying rat society could reveal the future of our own.

By Elizabeth Kolbert

September 30, 2024



Rats can't vomit. This may be a function of their anatomy—their stomachs are “not well structured for moving contents towards the esophagus” is how one study delicately put it—or it may have something to do with their brain circuitry, or it may be a combination of the two. Whatever the cause, the result is that rats, contrary to their popular (or unpopular) image, are fussy eaters. Even as they pick through the trash, they’re hesitant to try new foods. This makes poisoning them complicated; quite often—and quite literally—they won’t take the bait.

In 1942, a Johns Hopkins biologist named Curt Richter discovered a new poison that rats apparently couldn't taste. His breakthrough caught the attention of the United States Office of Scientific Research and Development, the Second World War equivalent of *DARPA*. The agency, among its many worries, feared that the Axis powers were at work on biological weapons that would use rats as vectors. (In fact, the Japanese did try to spread plague during the war, with some success.) The O.S.R.D. had the poison—alpha-naphthyl thiourea, or *ANTU* for short—tested in the back alleys of Baltimore. The city was so pleased with the resulting carnage that it appointed Richter to lead a new rodent-control office, based in City Hall. By 1946, *ANTU*-laced corn had been spread over more than fifty-five hundred blocks and, according to Richter, “well over a million rats” had been killed.

By that point, however, *ANTU* was starting to lose its efficacy. Apparently, rats were learning to associate adulterated corn with unpleasant consequences and becoming bait-shy. New measures, it was realized, would be needed, and an even more ambitious research effort was born—the Rodent Ecology Project.

The project was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, which tapped another Johns Hopkins professor, David E. Davis, to lead it. Davis thought that the best way to control rats was to understand their habits. He set about studying how Baltimore’s rats spent their days, or, really, nights, since the animals in question—Norway rats, which actually come from Asia—are nocturnal. He and his assistants trapped rats on the streets and marked them, usually by clipping off some of their toes. They released the digit-poor rodents back onto the streets, then tried to recapture them. In dry weather, they put out food infused with blue dye and tracked the tinted droppings that resulted.

These labor-intensive routines revealed that rats live in small groups of about fifteen individuals. They tend to stick close to home, and they don’t like to cross roads. Davis’s team also found that rat numbers were remarkably stable. About ten groups, or a hundred and fifty individuals, lived on an average block. If some of the rats on a block were killed, either by *ANTU* or by predators, the population quickly rebounded, levelling off again at about a hundred and fifty rats.

Such stability was hard to explain. Clearly, the rats' numbers were not limited by resources, as there was always more garbage to be plundered. So why didn't some blocks have a whole lot more rodent residents? One of Davis's assistants, a young ecologist named John B. Calhoun, suggested an experiment. What if additional rats were introduced on a street? Would the population increase? Calhoun trapped more than a hundred rats, marked them, and released them on one particular block. When he and his colleagues tried to recapture the imported rats, they couldn't find any. Meanwhile, it seemed, the block's original rat population had declined. As one account of the experiment put it, "It looked like the most effective rat killer was more rats."

Both Richter and Davis eventually moved on from the study of street rats to pursue other projects. But Calhoun was hooked. He would spend the rest of his life investigating what controlled rats' numbers, with results that many experts interpreted as ominous for humanity.

Two new books take up the subject of Calhoun and his rats. The authors of the first, "[Rat City: Overcrowding and Urban Derangement in the Rodent Universes of John B. Calhoun](#)" (Melville House), are a pair of British researchers, Edmund Ramsden and Jon Adams, who for a time both taught at the London School of Economics. The second, "[Dr. Calhoun's Mousery: The Strange Tale of a Celebrated Scientist, a Rodent Dystopia, and the Future of Humanity](#)" (University of Chicago), is by Lee Alan Dugatkin, a historian of science at the University of Louisville. Both books cast Calhoun as a visionary. Both also portray him as eccentric to the point of crankdom.

Calhoun, who went by the nickname Jack, was born in 1917 in rural Tennessee. His father was a school administrator and his mother a teacher. As a child, he was passionately interested in nature, particularly in birds. In 1933, his father lost his job, a development that might have prevented Calhoun from attending college, had ornithology not intervened. One day that summer, while visiting the University of Virginia, Calhoun ran into a dean who happened to be an avid birder. After just a few minutes of conversation, the dean offered him a scholarship to U.V.A. In 1943, Calhoun completed a Ph.D. at Northwestern University; a few years after that, he landed the position with the Rodent Ecology Project.

Calhoun's translocation experiment convinced him that there was still a lot to learn about the social lives of rats. But, he decided, he could no longer work on the streets of Baltimore; there were too many variables he couldn't control. Nor did it make sense to work with lab rats; their lives were too artificial. What he needed, Calhoun thought, was an urban setting only he had access to. With the blessing of the Rodent Ecology Project, he constructed a simulacrum of a city block on an empty lot in Towson, Maryland, about ten miles north of Baltimore. (Though it was smaller than an actual block, the setup replicated the typical layout of Baltimore's back yards and alleyways.) To keep the rats in and predators out, he erected an elaborate series of fences around his SimCity, and, to monitor the goings on there, he built himself a little observation tower. He placed ten wild rats—five males and five females—inside the fences, and then, for two years, he watched.

The Towson experiment produced reams and reams of data. Every six weeks, Calhoun would conduct a census of the enclosure's population by capturing every rat. (Individual rats were marked with metal ear tags.) Sometimes, before releasing the rats, he would anesthetize them so that he could record their size, their weight, and the number of their wounds. He tried to register every birth in the enclosure, and every death. In the process of all this, Ramsden and Adams write, Calhoun came to know "more about the behavior of the Norway rat than anyone else alive."

The Towson rats were supplied with essentially limitless food, and for a while they took advantage of this by increasing their numbers. At the end of a year, ten rats had become thirty. By the eighteen-month point, there were a hundred and fifty in the enclosure. Then the population abruptly levelled off. For the last six months of the experiment, it never rose above a hundred and eighty.

Having observed the rats so closely, Calhoun now had a pretty good idea of what was limiting growth. The rats had divided themselves into eleven clans. Four had burrows conveniently located at the center of the enclosure, near where Calhoun had placed the food bins. In these privileged clans, a few dominant male rats mated with (and protected) a larger number of females. Although the high-status mothers successfully raised many pups,

this wasn't enough to offset the losses in a population that was aging and, increasingly, brawling.

The rats from the *banlieues*, for their part, lived under constant stress. When they attempted to get to the food bins, the fat rats in the middle tried—often successfully—to repulse them. Along the edges of the enclosure, packs of low-ranking males roamed from burrow to burrow, harassing the females. The outer-burrow females were so exhausted that they rarely conceived, and, when they did give birth, they often abandoned their pups.

Calhoun published his results in a two-hundred-and-eighty-eight-page monograph, “The Ecology and Sociology of Norway Rats.” As Ramsden and Adams point out, the use of the word “sociology” in the title was daring, as this term is normally reserved for the study of humans. Toward the end of the volume, Calhoun made explicit his intention. “Animal subjects,” he wrote, “may be of value in elucidating some of the social problems which confront man today.”

Calhoun’s Rodent Ecology Project contract ended in 1949. It took him almost a decade to get another major rat study up and running, but, when he did, it was an extravaganza. The new experiment was financed by the National Institute of Mental Health, which had just been created. At a cost of a hundred thousand dollars—more than a million dollars in today’s money—Calhoun had a ten-foot-tall rat enclosure constructed in a barn in Gaithersburg, Maryland. The enclosure was divided into six rooms, each of which was further divided into four cells. This time around, Calhoun planned to control the enclosure’s population himself, by removing pups when there were more than eighty rats per room.

The experiment got under way in January, 1958. For the first few months, the rats seemed content in their apartment-like dwellings. But then, once again, things took a dystopic turn. Calhoun had laid out the rooms asymmetrically. The two cells in the center each had two entrances; those on the ends had just one. Dominant males assumed control of the easier-to-defend cells and allowed only a select group of females to enter them. This forced the other rats into the central cells, where order gradually broke down. Dispensing with the courtship rituals that usually precede mating, mid-cell male rats took to simply trying to mount females, or even other

males. Aggression increased; at times, Calhoun wrote, “it was impossible to enter a room without observing fresh blood splattered about.” Central-cell females basically gave up on mothering. They built inadequate nests or none at all. When disturbed, they would start to move their babies, only to then abandon them. The pup mortality rate in the crowded cells rose to as high as ninety-six per cent. Calhoun came up with a new term to describe the process he had witnessed. The rats, he said, had fallen into a “behavioral sink.”

With the barn experiment, Calhoun again cast his work as a form of sociology. In an article he published in *Scientific American*, in 1962, he observed that research like his could, “in time,” offer insights into “analogous problems confronting the human species.” He didn’t specify what the analogous problems were, but he didn’t have to. In the early nineteen-sixties, fears of overpopulation and urban decay were rampant. At about the time Calhoun wrote his article, a group of researchers at the University of Illinois decided to calculate what would happen if the number of people on the globe continued to increase along the trajectory it had followed for the previous two millennia. The researchers concluded, with a mathematical version of tongue-in-cheek, that the population would approach infinity on November 13, 2026. In the meantime, the planet would become so crowded that there would be no room to move. “Our great-great-grandchildren will not starve to death,” they wrote in *Science*. “They will be squeezed to death.”

Soon Calhoun’s work was picked up by the popular press. In 1964, the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Daily News* both ran stories on it. “The world’s population has been growing so fast that social scientists have been studying overcrowded rats for clues to the future behavior of mankind,” the *Daily News* said. An influential anthropologist named Edward T. Hall became interested enough in Calhoun’s work to pay him a visit. In 1966, the author Tom Wolfe spent a couple of days with Hall. The resulting essay, titled “O Rotten Gotham—Sliding Down into the Behavioral Sink,” appeared in the Sunday-magazine section of the *World Journal Tribune* (a short-lived successor to the *Herald Tribune*). It described Calhoun’s rat experiment at length, and took Wolfe-ish delight in describing people in ratlike terms. Grand Central at rush hour, Wolfe wrote, was filled with “poor white humans, running around, dodging, blinking their eyes.”

When Hunter S. Thompson read the essay, he mistakenly concluded that Wolfe had invented the phrase “behavioral sink” and dashed off a congratulatory note. The term is “a flat-out winner, no question about it,” Thompson wrote. “Every now and then I stumble on a word-jewel; they have a special dimension.” References to Calhoun’s work kept popping up, both in the press and in academic journals. “Today, one can hardly pick up a newspaper without reading about a new study on the effects of crowding,” Hall observed in 1968.

It is estimated that, in the year 1600, there were half a billion people on the planet. It took another two centuries for the number to reach a billion, then just a little more than a century for it to double again, to two billion. By the late nineteen-sixties, it was approaching four billion. This pattern of growth is what led the University of Illinois researchers to predict “doomsday” on November 13, 2026, which happens to be a Friday. (The global population has, by now, doubled again, to eight billion, though the rate of growth has slowed.)

Calhoun was deeply influenced by the “doomsday” paper; according to Dugatkin, he “read and reread” it. And he was convinced that his rats were issuing a dire warning. At the same time, he was dismayed by the gloomy tone of the conversation his work had helped inspire. In 1969, he attended a conference on population, the environment, and human well-being. The conference minutes note that Calhoun tried to disassociate himself “from the attitude of pessimism which he felt pervaded our meeting.”

Population growth wasn’t the only development in human history that attracted Calhoun’s attention. As towns and cities had become more crowded, people had discovered, in his words, “a new kind of space” they could move into. This was the space of ideas. Calhoun viewed the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution as a series of conceptual reorientations that had occurred at progressively shorter intervals. What was needed next—and fast—was a “communication-electronic revolution” that would open up more creative real estate. After that would come a “compassionate revolution,” which would usher in an era of peaceful population decline. The two revolutions, Calhoun believed, were related. The conceptual space required for the compassionate revolution was so great that human brains would need electronic assistance. Calhoun

imagined “thinking prostheses” that would connect “more and more individuals in a common communication network.” When the compassionate revolution came, he wrote, it would “mark the termination of the past 50,000-year epic of evolution.”

Another big influence on Calhoun was [The Structure of Scientific Revolutions](#), by Thomas Kuhn. In the book, which appeared in 1962, Kuhn divided science—and, by implication, scientists—into two types. There was “normal science,” which extended and refined some established theory, or, in Kuhn’s terminology, paradigm. Then there was revolutionary science, which overturned a paradigm. Calhoun clearly aspired to participate in the second sort. He took to calling himself an Rxevolutionist, which, he explained, was “a new type of ‘revolutionary,’ where Rx is the prescription for, or design of, evolution.” He decided to try to engineer the “conceptual evolution” of rats with an experimental setup that would force the animals to coöperate to get at food and water. The collaborative rodents would, he thought, become smarter—“I propose to make an ape out of a rat,” he wrote—and this would help them counteract the deleterious effects of crowding.

In 1974, Calhoun took a sabbatical from the National Institute of Mental Health, where he had worked for the previous two decades. During his time off, he decided to attempt a “frontal attack” on the development of a thinking prosthesis. For the “communication-electronic revolution,” he realized, new ways of retrieving data would be needed. He pored over stacks of academic articles he had collected, trying to come up with a way to index them. This turned out to be more difficult than he had anticipated. Meanwhile, of course, computers were improving apace.

When Calhoun returned to the N.I.M.H., he found that support for his ideas was waning. The agency had been restructured and had a new focus on practical results. It cut his funding and eventually evicted him from his rat-experiment space. Calhoun resigned from the agency in bitterness in 1986. He died in 1995, while travelling with his wife in New Hampshire.

What did all this amount to? Neither “Rat City” nor “Dr. Calhoun’s Mousery” seems quite sure. In the preface to the former, Ramsden and Adams explicitly say that they are not going to “evaluate the merit” of Calhoun’s work. In the epilogue to the latter, Dugatkin tries to explain why

this work has “fallen off the map.” His explanation largely has to do with shifting norms in academia. The study of population dynamics and behavior, he writes, has “changed radically since Calhoun undertook his experiments.”

Then there’s the question of what Calhoun was actually observing. The pathological behavior of his rats was, it seems, a product less of their natural tendencies than of his experimental design. “No evidence” for behavioral sinks has ever “been found in wild populations of animals—rat, mouse, or otherwise,” Dugatkin writes.

And, even if Calhoun’s experiments did reveal something real about rodents, it’s unclear what relevance this would have had for humanity. A textbook titled [“Forty Studies that Changed Psychology,”](#) by Roger R. Hock, contains a section on Calhoun’s work. It cautions, “We must always be careful in applying animal research to humans.” In 1975, the textbook reports, researchers attempted to “replicate with people some of Calhoun’s findings” by analyzing statistics like birth rates and mental-hospital admissions among New Yorkers: “No significant relationships were found between population density and any form of social pathology.”

As for Calhoun’s “revolutions,” the one involving electronics and communications has by now, it seems, occurred. Whether or not Calhoun proposed “an early version of the world wide web,” as Dugatkin claims, the Internet has certainly linked “more and more individuals in a common communication network.” And, it could be argued, our increasingly intelligent laptops and cell phones count as “thinking prostheses.” But where, oh where is the compassion?

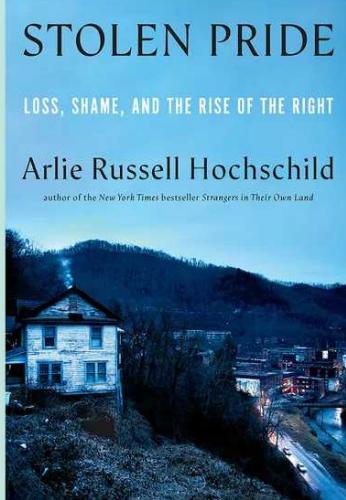
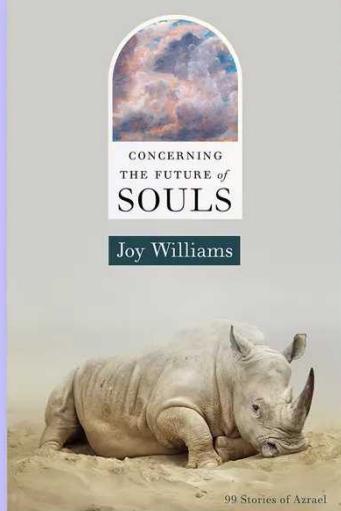
Facebook, Yik Yak, Twitter, Twitch—each had a sunny, expansive phase, followed by a descent into flaming, catfishing, and troll wars. To the extent that Calhoun’s rats have any sociological relevance, it would seem to be in the mirror world of the Web. What, after all, could be a better description of X these days than a “behavioral sink”? ♦

Books

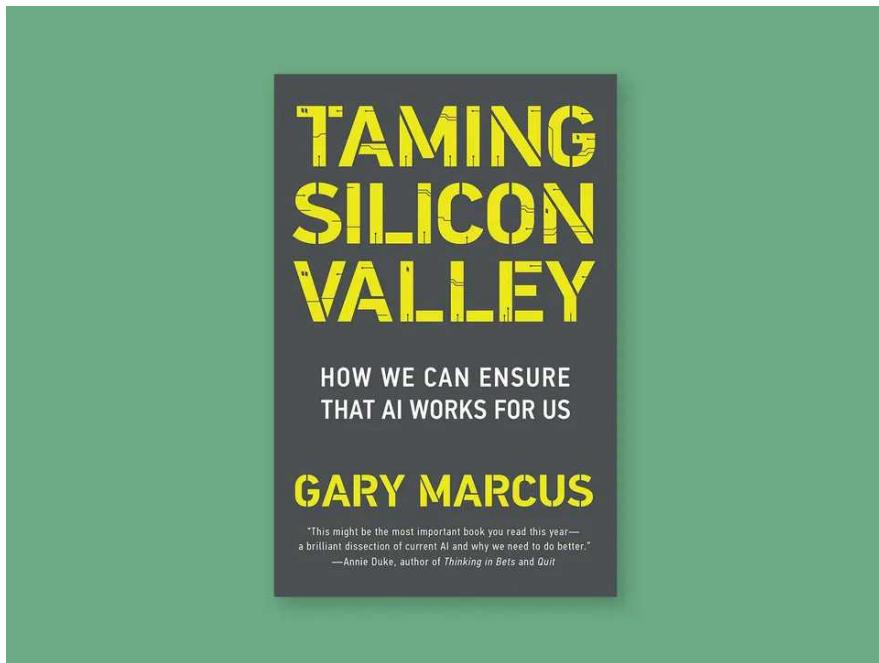
Briefly Noted

“Stolen Pride,” “Taming Silicon Valley,” “Concerning the Future of Souls,” and “Elevator in Sài Gòn.”

September 30, 2024

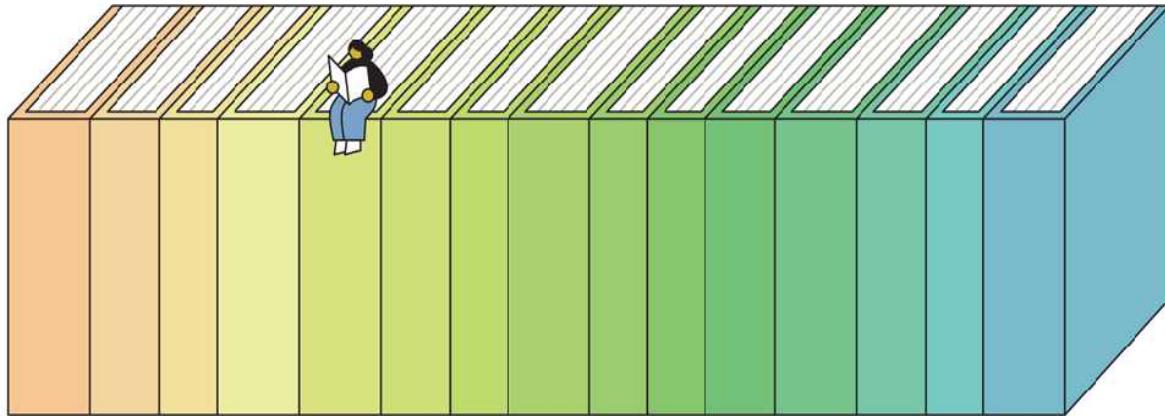


Stolen Pride, by Arlie Russell Hochschild (*New Press*). A deeply researched account of the rightward turn in Appalachia, this study focusses on Pikeville, Kentucky, a small city once flush with coal-mining jobs that sits in what is now America’s “whitest and second-poorest congressional district.” Hochschild, a sociologist, posits that Pikeville’s politics are shaped by grief about “stolen pride” and feelings of shame prompted by the region’s decline. She interviews a range of residents—including a mayor, prisoners, and recovering drug addicts—to understand each person’s relationship to these feelings. Some of her subjects experience “bootstrap pride”; others, like Matthew Heimbach, a co-founder of the neo-Nazi Traditionalist Workers Party, fashion themselves as moral outlaws.

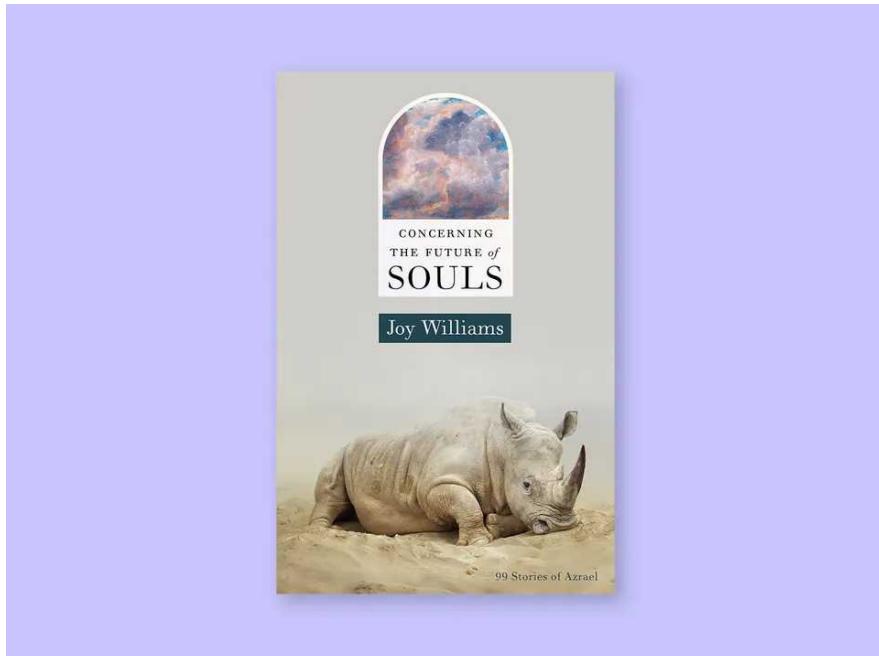


Taming Silicon Valley, by Gary Marcus (*M.I.T.*). This polemic, by a cognitive scientist and startup founder, calls for stricter regulation of A.I. It begins with problems posed by generative A.I. (the kind that spits out text, images, and other data, and which currently fuels the largest A.I. companies’ businesses). These include misinformation, pornographic deepfakes, impersonation scams, and the use of publicly available material as training data, which Marcus equates to a “land grab.” His warnings are framed by critiques of A.I. development’s current direction, which has privileged deep learning over potentially more fruitful methods, and of what he argues is the tech industry’s moral decline.

What We're Reading

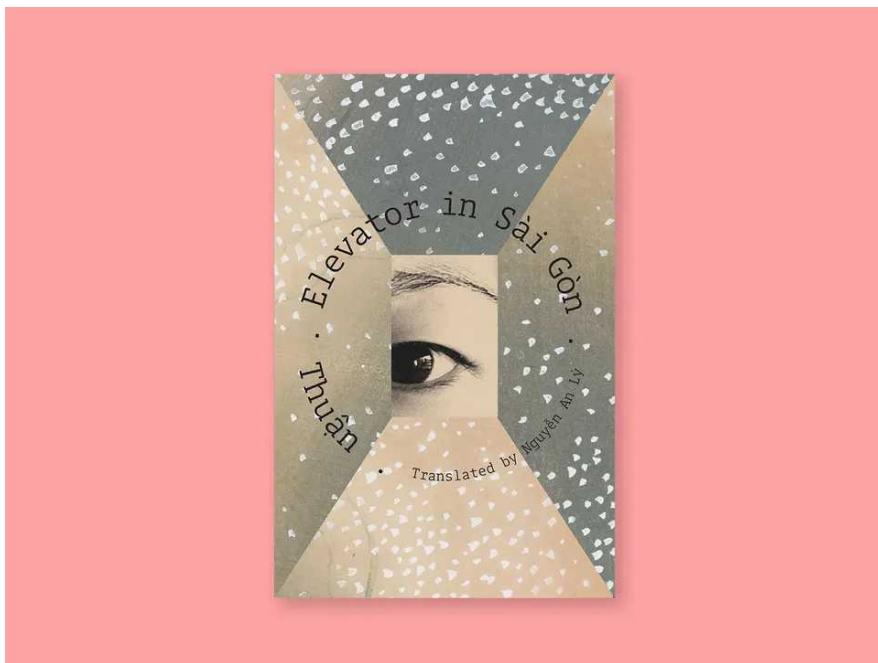


Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Concerning the Future of Souls, by Joy Williams (*Tin House*). In this collection of vignettes centered on the angel Azrael, Williams flits through

the moments before and after death. The young Azrael meets souls at the moment of their passing and shepherds them to what lies beyond. As he grapples with the nature of his trade and endures gentle ribbing from the older, more worldly-wise Devil, his earnest metaphysical musings create a current that charges Williams's glittering, piecemeal requiem. The book is filled with humor, canny allusion, beauty, and a profundity born of glimpsing fleeting human lives from the outside—through eyes that have seen epochs yet nonetheless remain befuddled.



Elevator in Sài Gòn, by *Thuận*, translated from the Vietnamese by *Nguyễn An Lý* (*New Directions*). The narrator of this ruminative novel, set in the early two-thousands, is a Vietnamese-language teacher living in Paris who returns to Vietnam for her mother's funeral, where she discovers a photograph of a Frenchman in a hidden notebook. Searching for the man, she learns that her mother may have first met him in 1954, when she, a Communist, was captured by the French and he was among her interrogators. Threaded with observations about the nature of Vietnam's colonial history and its aftermath, the novel is also an appraisal of memory and elision. As one character says, “cracks in our memory,” left untended, can “yawn open into abysses that devour all we once swore would be forever cherished in our mind.”

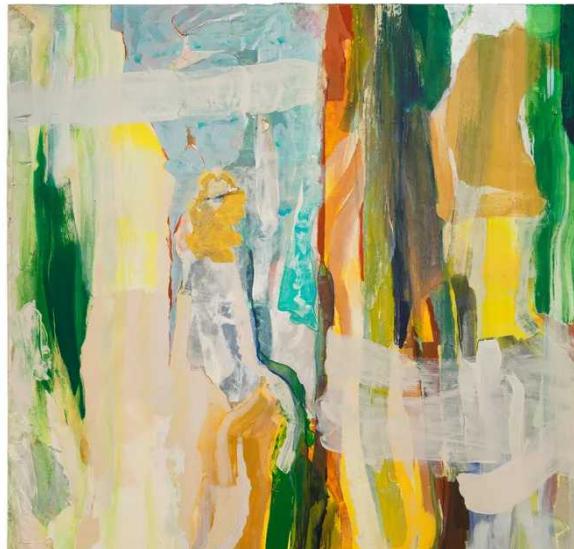
The Art World

Suzanne Jackson's Natural World

The artist captures the ephemeral and transformative power of light.

By Hilton Als

September 30, 2024



“[South of Pico](#),” by Kellie Jones—a 2017 book about a circle of Black artists in Los Angeles in the nineteen-sixties and seventies—is a landmark work and a great gift to contemporary art history. Among the many things I admire about Jones’s text is what she *doesn’t* do in it: obscure the fascinating and vital works and lives she examines with fashionable but ultimately draining theoryspeak. Instead, like a latter-day Vasari, Jones creates a tangible world in which her subjects—the spellbinding [Senga Nengudi](#), Alonzo Davis, and Maren Hassinger among them—display the energy and purpose of creators whose activism is expressed through their work, and who believe in community, artistic and otherwise. One of the artists Jones’s book introduced me to was the inventive and spiritually astute Suzanne Jackson, whose uplifting show “Light and Paper” (at Ortuzar Projects) has little to do with oppressive power structures and everything to do with the joy of making and the transformative power of light.



Jackson, who is eighty, came of age as an artist in a Los Angeles that was far from the center of the art-world grid, and you can see, in some of the earlier works in the show, how the area's expansive landscape and desert skies influenced her practice. There are eleven pieces on display at Ortuzar, all produced between 1984 and 2024, and there isn't one that doesn't revolve around light and how to represent it or capture its ephemeral nature. A lesson learned or remembered when looking at Jackson's work: natural light does not sit still, and whenever your eye tries to rest on it—in the corner of a room, in a garden, on the pages of a book—it shifts and changes, changing your perspective, too.

Light suffuses "Blooming" (1984), for instance, an acrylic wash on paper. It enters not through a portal in the picture—there is none—but through the artist's imagination. And you can tell, from the soft way it envelops the flower at the center of the image, that it won't be around forever—and nor will the bloom. Here, Jackson's hand moves with great delicacy, but without being precious—she always pulls herself back from outright cuteness. The flower's strong, curving stem makes the work not so much forceful as definitive. But the stem is also just a line. That's the thing about Jackson's art: the moment you notice a distinguishing shape or gesture, like light it turns into something else.

Jackson has always followed the sun, actually and metaphorically. Born in St. Louis in 1944, she grew up in San Francisco, where her parents moved during the Great Migration, and then in Fairbanks, where her entrepreneurial father bought property when Alaska was still a territory. After high school, Jackson studied painting and theatre at San Francisco State College, and dance at the Pacific Ballet. She performed in a music circus in California and went on a musical-theatre tour of Latin America. (I think the word “irrepressible” was invented for people like Jackson.) In the late sixties, she moved to Los Angeles, where she worked a variety of jobs to keep herself afloat, and took drawing classes with Charles White, at the Otis Art Institute, which was where she first met her fellow Black artists [David Hammons](#) and Dan Concholar. Soon, she decided to turn part of her own studio into a gallery for artists like these who had few opportunities to show their work. At Gallery 32, Jackson staged the now historic exhibition “The Sapphire Show,” which presented Black female artists, including Nengudi and [Betye Saar](#). She also showed the Black Panther minister of culture Emory Douglas’s portraits of other Panther leaders. Jackson wasn’t very concerned with her gallery’s financial success; what interested her was getting the Black community involved. Despite her efforts, though, the Panthers accused her of a lack of didacticism and purpose. Jackson later addressed the criticism in a poem, “Statement: 1971”: “you say / the people have / no capacity / for filling in / or for making / new images / within their own / minds when / they look at / art— . . . / that the / people should / not be allowed / to delve / into fantasies / which might relate / to their own / reality, more / than to yours.”

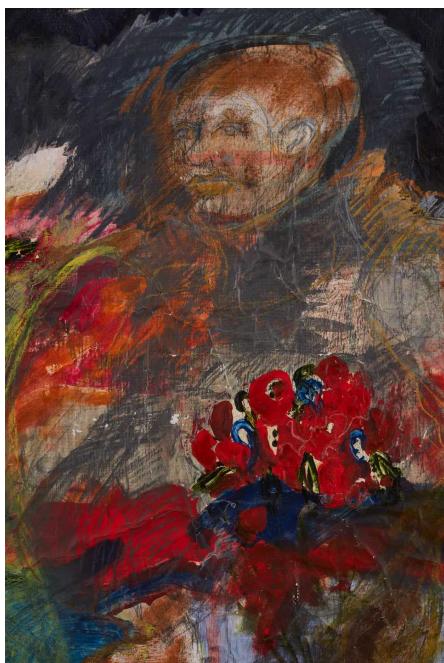


Carrying a gallery was exhausting, though, and, in 1970, Jackson closed it down in order to focus on her own work, which was attracting notice. Eventually, at forty-three, she enrolled in a graduate program in theatre design at Yale. After getting her M.F.A., she worked as a freelance set designer, and that experience contributed to her practice, too. Her larger pieces are themselves stage pictures; looking at them, you become a character in Jackson's visual drama. She began teaching set design, in 1994, and, two years later, became a professor of painting at the Savannah College of Art and Design, in Georgia, where she still lives part time since her retirement, in 2009.

As Jackson told the Black Panthers, thinking is not a collective activity; it's the work of the individual. Jackson lives fully in her artistry. Her back yard in Savannah is full of snakes, raccoons, turtles, and other creatures—nature's great doers and undoers—and her very individual response to the environment, and to the politics that inform its place in our lives, is a hallmark of her style, her way of being. Jackson Pollock famously responded to the suggestion that he didn't paint from nature with "I am nature." Jackson makes no such declaration. She's humble in her relationship to what the living world can do and to the grace of the light that lets us witness it. (A 2015 show was titled "Suggestions from Nature.") Throughout her career, she has worked with both boldness and hesitancy.

Maybe I mean not hesitancy but restraint—even when a piece is bursting with color.

In 2019, at seventy-five, Jackson had her first solo show in New York, “*NEWS!*,” at Ortuzar. Some of the pieces in that show were described as “anti-canvases”—layers of acrylic structured with netting, rods, and paper fragments. In other words, the acrylic itself was the canvas. To these surfaces Jackson affixed bamboo, peanut shells, seeds, and other elements. Entering the show was like entering a kind of fairyland, or the memory of one that you dreamed up as a child. In several pieces, abstraction mixed with the figurative, much as it does in dreams—faces and birds suddenly emerged from swaths of color delicately placed. I was particularly taken with “*Silencing Tides, Voices Whispering*” (2017), a nearly translucent work that measures eighty-four inches by seventy-six by four, and hangs from a wooden rod. The “canvas” contains vertical shapes, some wide and some thin, made from pieces of cloth she collected. Fabric scraps, the netting from bags that may have once held tangerines—all this *stuff* Jackson synthesized into a whole that owes nothing to Rauschenberg’s assemblages or to the Arte Povera movement but grew out of the art of making do.



In the current exhibition, Jackson handles paper—shapes it—the way she shaped those “anti-canvases”: with a strong hand that loves the materiality

of her surfaces. But in “Frozen Elsie” (2000), one of two masterpieces in the show, she leaves the surface alone; without the texture of a feather here or a flower there, your eyes can settle on the whole in a way that allows you to appreciate Jackson’s authority as a painter. “Frozen Elsie” is a beautiful piece that would be cloying, as a Howard Hodgkin painting can be, if she didn’t disrupt its prettiness with seemingly careless, watery-pink horizontal marks, which don’t get in the way of the wobbly vertical forms rendered in orange, yellow, green, and blue—like the colors you see when squinting at a landscape through a wall of sunlight.

The other masterpiece in the current show is “9, Billie, Mingus, Monk’s” (2003). In Jackson’s universe, nothing is wasted, and you marvel at the solidity of this exquisite, multicolored work made of acrylic, flax paper, burlap, netting, and other materials—it’s like a costume shaped by joy, a garment for a wise shaman—while seeing that it also expresses something fragile. Would it float away if you breathed on it, the way Billie Holiday’s voice floats like a voice you hear on the edge of sleep, or Charles Mingus’s and Thelonious Monk’s playing comes from so deep inside them that it sounds like something more than jazz? Like that music, Jackson’s work exists in the liminal space between a thing that has been made and a thing that you didn’t know could be made. ♦

Pop Music

Coldplay's Self-Help Pop

Chris Martin, the band's front man, discusses reading Rumi, making music like an apple tree grows apples, and the band's new album, "Moon Music."

By Amanda Petrusich

September 30, 2024



On a recent afternoon in Malibu, Chris Martin, the front man of Coldplay, was enjoying a brief pause between tour dates. "We have breaks, but only in the way that Serena Williams has a banana between sets," he said, pulling his bare feet up under him. Martin, who is forty-seven, was wearing an emerald-green sweater featuring a picture of the earth, affixed with a tiny white button that said "*LOVE*." Later on, when he took the sweater off, he revealed a blue T-shirt with the same button. I wondered, but did not ask, how many of them he owned. It felt indicative of Martin's quintessence at this particular moment: *LOVE*, layered ad infinitum.

Martin was in the midst of converting an old property into a studio and the de-facto Coldplay HQ. The complex was beset by scrubby clay slopes dotted with sagebrush, California aster, evergreen oaks. Martin likes to send

visitors home with unlabelled jars of fresh honey from an apiary nearby. We sat at a picnic table overlooking a meadow. In conversation, Martin is engaging, magnetic. When I apologized for putting my sunglasses on—the light had suddenly shifted—he grinned: “No, I love it. It sort of flips the script. We’ll talk about your album in a minute.” We’d been discussing the gurgling anxiety inherent to any romantic entanglement—the fear of starting to need someone. It’s an idea that arises in “*feelslikeimfallinginlove*,” the swooning first single from “*Moon Music*,” the band’s tenth record, which comes out in October. “I know that this could feel like that / But I just can’t stop / Let my defenses drop,” Martin sings in the opening verse.

“There are two methods that humans use to survive,” Martin said. “One is calcification and sequestering and separating: my stuff, my tribe, my this, my that. And then the other half is so open to everything. Those people fall in love a lot more, but they also have a lot more heartbreak.” I guessed that he was in the latter camp. “I’m so open it’s ridiculous,” he said. “But, if you’re not afraid of rejection, it’s the most liberating thing in the world.” Well, sure—but who’s not afraid of rejection? “Of course,” Martin said, laughing. “To tell someone you love them, or to release an album, or to write a book, or to make a cake, or to cook your wife a meal—it’s terrifying. But if I tell this person I love them and they don’t love me back, I still gave them the gift of knowing someone loves them.” Martin noticed a slightly stricken look on my face. “I’m giving this advice to myself, too,” he added. “Don’t think I’ve got it mastered.”

Coldplay, which formed in 1997, in London, has sold more than a hundred million records. (Besides Martin, the band includes the guitarist Jonny Buckland, the bassist Guy Berryman, and the drummer Will Champion.) The ongoing tour for “*Music of the Spheres*,” the band’s prior release, has sold ten million tickets and made close to a billion dollars, becoming the highest-grossing rock tour of the past forty years. It has broken attendance records in countries including Romania, Singapore, Brazil, Colombia, the Netherlands, Chile, Portugal, Sweden, France, Indonesia, Italy, and Greece. (When I brought this up, Martin was quick to note how colonialism has enabled his success: “We’re only able to play in so many countries because people who spoke English did such terrible things all around the world.”)

“Moon Music” was produced by Max Martin, the Swedish hitmaker behind twenty-seven No. 1 singles. Martin described Max Martin’s technique as “a mix of mathematics and fluidity, of real structure and being totally open,” adding, with a kind of proud certainty, “He’s our producer now.” Martin also confirmed that Coldplay will make two more albums and then stop recording, though the band will continue to tour. “Yesterday, I went to see the L.A. Philharmonic. All those songs were released two hundred years ago,” he said. “It still felt extremely vibrant. So perhaps there’s a point where new material is not essential to make an amazing show.”

Martin, like many successful songwriters, explains the work as a kind of divine channelling: a song appears and he receives it. “If you’re lucky enough to have the space to let the music talk to you, and through you, then you can relax a bit,” he told me. “I’m just sort of doing what I’m told, the way an apple tree grows apples.” He said that establishing the Coldplay catalogue as finite has been liberating for the band: “By knowing there’s an end point, nobody is phoning it in. We only have two more chances. And most of the songs already exist, in a skeletal form.” I asked if that last day in the studio might be sad for him—a final take, the feeling of knowing that something is over. I find ending things so excruciating, I told him, I’d often rather just go down with the ship. He gave me a sympathetic look. “I think it will feel amazing,” he said.

At some point, Coldplay became—how else do I say it?—*motivational*. In recent years, it has felt less like a band than like an engine of unrelenting positivity, a high-grade confetti cannon straight to the face. The shift started around 2014, with the release of “Ghost Stories,” which contained little rancor or moodiness, fewer nods to Echo and the Bunnymen, less audible guitar. Coldplay, once skewered by critics for being too plaintive and self-pitying, was now broadcasting the opposite message: everything is magic. It reminded me, in some circuitous way, of “Attitude,” the punk band Bad Brains’ one-minute opus from 1982, in which the vocalist H.R. barks, “Hey, we got that P.M.A.!”—a reference to “positive mental attitude,” a phrase coined in 1937 by the author and probable con man Napoleon Hill. He was peddling a notion that we today refer to as manifestation: “Anything the human mind can believe, the human mind can achieve.” But Bad Brains still had fury, bite, edge. For whatever reason, Coldplay had willfully neutralized itself.

In Malibu, when I needled Martin about that change—what happened, exactly, to the yearning and discord of “Parachutes” or “A Rush of Blood to the Head,” the band’s first two releases?—he attributed it both to a burgeoning interest in Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, and to his experience working with the visionary electronic musician Brian Eno, who produced “Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends,” Coldplay’s fourth album. Martin said that Eno’s purity and sense of wonder had helped him “completely abandon the concept of trying to be cool. He came in with the enthusiasm of a nine-year-old for everything.” Mostly, though, Martin sees the change as incremental, organic. “It’s not like it was black-and-white, and then became color,” he said. “The first song on the first album is called ‘Don’t Panic.’ There’s also a song called ‘Everything’s Not Lost,’ which is exactly the same message that we’re singing now. Just sung by a slightly less experienced, more insecure, younger person.”

Though he likely wouldn’t frame it this way, Martin appears motivated by a kind of vocational mandate. He occupies a rarefied position, insofar as it’s actually possible for him to make the world a little less fractured, for a couple of hours, seventy-five thousand people at a time. This requires obliterating his ego, and accepting that a lot of people will find what he’s doing—bouncing around a stage covered with rainbows, singing lines such as “In the end it’s just love,” as he does on “One World,” which closes “Moon Music”—unbearably corny. In a way, the messaging has to be flat to translate so widely. On “Clocks,” a lush and tumbling track from “A Rush of Blood to the Head,” Martin sings about grappling with his own fallibility and bafflement, of trying his best to be of service in the world: “Am I part of the cure, or am I part of the disease?” His voice swoons, flutters, dissipates. “You are,” he answers. It’s a strange lyric, but I’ve always appreciated its strangeness: cure, disease, good, bad, hurtful, benevolent. You are.

These days, Martin describes the band’s message as “No one is more or less special than anyone else.” He went on, “The reason I’m able to say that is because we’re one of the few groups of people who get to actually see it. We travel everywhere. What Ryszard Kapuściński would call ‘the Other’ is not real.” I asked him what it felt like to stand onstage in, say, Kuala Lumpur, or Helsinki, or Tokyo, and hear the crowd bellowing his lyrics back to him, to one another, to themselves, to the air. “It feels like the answer,” he said. “It feels like: This is where humans actually work. It has nothing to do with us

as a band. There are points where, hopefully, nothing exists except ‘We’re all just singing this together.’”

Ultimately, Martin hopes that by providing solace, and a place to unify, Coldplay can actualize some change in the world. I thought this sounded idealistic, even quixotic, until I considered all the ways in which I had been made better by songs. “If you’re able to live as yourself and understand who you are, whatever that might mean in terms of your gender or sexuality or what you like to eat or where you like to live or whether you like table tennis or riding donkeys . . . if you’re allowed to be yourself, would the world be as aggressive as it is?” Martin asked. “My feeling is no, I don’t think it would. I think much of the violence and conflict comes from repression, suppression, unreleased damage.”

Eventually, the air started to cool. Martin brought me a sweatshirt. Our conversation wound toward more existential matters: people we’d lost, what it meant, what it didn’t mean. “Death is in our songs a lot,” Martin said. “Maybe as a way of encouraging living. And also faith—the idea that, well, it’s O.K. It’s all O.K., isn’t it? I’m sure that’s crossed your mind.” The sun was beginning to ease into the Pacific. We sat for a moment in the hazy yellow pre-dusk. The air was parched, salty, soft. “Everything is perfect, of course,” Martin said. “Everything’s as it’s supposed to be.” ♦

Musical Events

An Idyllic Music Series in the Hebrides

Mendelssohn on Mull celebrates chamber music away from urban pressures.

By Alex Ross

September 30, 2024



On August 7, 1829, Felix Mendelssohn took a steamer from the Scottish mainland to the grandly rugged island of Mull, in the Inner Hebrides. Later that day, the composer wrote to his sister Fanny, “To illustrate how strangely the Hebrides affected me, the following just occurred to me there.” He then set down twenty-one bars of music in B minor, with indications for orchestration: a downward-eddying theme in the violas and cellos, silvery chords in the violins and winds. From that sketch emerged the “Hebrides” Overture, which is sometimes called “Fingal’s Cave,” although Mendelssohn didn’t see that landmark until the next day.

I listened to “The Hebrides” countless times when I was a kid, its surging lines and sea-spray climaxes conjuring Turner-esque pictures in my mind. When, in September, I visited Mull for the first time, the island lived up to its musical archetype, looming out of the mist like a mass of gray shrouds

thrown onto the ocean. Appropriately, I was on my way to see a chamber-music series called Mendelssohn on Mull, which has been running since 1988. It was founded by the London-born violinist Leonard Friedman, who wished to lead master classes in an atmosphere free of urban pressures. In recent years, Mendelssohn on Mull has had a quartet-in-residence, which gives concerts while providing guidance to younger musicians. This year, the Maxwell Quartet, a mostly Scottish ensemble, took over from the Doric Quartet.

It's not a Mendelssohn festival. Only three of the composer's pieces appeared in the programs, amid works by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Dvořák, and Glazunov. Listeners were left to decide for themselves how this largely Central European repertory related to the edge-of-the-world terrain around them. Certainly, the chamber-music classics are suited to the intimacy of the island's venues—small churches and village halls—and to the informal conviviality of the audience. There's something to be said for having to wait for an octet of sheep to move grudgingly out of your way as you drive to hear a Haydn quartet. Time slows, noise recedes, and the music comes into focus.

The Maxwell Quartet formed in 2010, when its members were studying at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Bearded and flannel-clad, they have the affect of a pub band. The cellist Duncan Strachan and the violinist George Smith, the group's founding members, both grew up playing traditional Scottish music alongside classical fare. (In 2005, Smith took second prize in the Glenfiddich Fiddle Championship.) Later, the violinist Colin Scobie and the violist Elliott Perks joined the group. Both, as it happens, had trained at Mendelssohn on Mull. Perks is the lone Englishman.

One thing that sets the Maxwells apart—and aligns them with the lost-in-time aura of Mull—is their habit of incorporating Scottish reels, jigs, and laments into their programs. They devise the arrangements themselves. Strachan told me, “At first, we played them as encores. But then we thought we could really integrate them into our performances, just to see what kinds of nice confluences could emerge, given how much folk music there is in the core repertory.” Indeed, pieces like “Gregor’s Lament” and “McIntosh’s Lament,” with their desolate melodies and spectral drones, hold their own next to Haydn and Beethoven.

The Maxwells' folk background also influences how they approach a score like Dvořák's Quartet No. 13 in G, which they played at a concert in Salen Church. As Strachan explained before the performance—the members take turns talking to the audience, all showing a flair for communicative chat—Dvořák wrote the work after his sojourn in the United States, seeming to wallow happily in a return to a Czech milieu. At the same time, the quartet is a sophisticated, idiosyncratic construction, with tricky rhythmical layering and semi-impressionistic harmony. The Maxwells' account was sensationally persuasive. The slashing up-and-down motto of the first movement had the rough finish of a Bartók ostinato. Scobie brought off the contrasting triplet-powered theme with a spontaneous lilt; later, Perks gave it a more ruminative feel. Sustained harmonies were sometimes delivered without vibrato, so that they had a raw, ripe power—as in the bagpipe-like drone of “McIntosh’s Lament,” which came next.

The resident quartet, however, isn’t the focus of Mendelssohn on Mull. Only two out of eight programs featured the Maxwells together; at the others, the members split off from one another and formed ad-hoc quartets with younger artists—eight in all—who had come to Mull for an immersion in chamber-music practice. Some were still students; others had already embarked on professional careers. I sat in on a couple of rehearsals to see what messages the Maxwells were imparting. Before getting into details, they often brought up an issue that bedevils conservatory graduates: How do you move beyond technical command to a more personal involvement with the music? Perks, in a rehearsal of Glazunov’s Third Quartet at Dervaig Village Hall, spoke of the “danger of just playing correctly, whereas what we need to do is have fun with it.” Smith, working with three players on Mozart’s “Hunt” Quartet at Tobermory Parish Church, wanted more definition of character. “To me, these phrases sound like hunting calls that are growing louder, coming from the hills,” he said. “Think of the gesture over all, less of your own part.”

Strachan later told me, “When we first arrived, a lot of them were very, like, ‘I’ve practiced my part, I’m going to play my part.’ It took a few days to get past that, and we wouldn’t even necessarily take credit. It’s something about the atmosphere, being on an island, being a stranger to everyone. The funny thing is, Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatory—he is sort of the

father of the modern conservatoire. And yet Mendelssohn on Mull is this brilliant liberation from the conservatoire.”

Other than the tour-de-force Dvořák, the most striking event I saw at Mendelssohn on Mull was a midday concert at the Village Hall on the Isle of Iona, off the southwestern tip of Mull. The Irish monk Columba settled on Iona in the sixth century and founded an abbey that became a center of Gaelic Christianity. The ruins of the Iona nunnery were visible from one window of the hall. Through another window, you saw hills, water, gulls, and sky.

Tickets aren’t sold in advance for Mendelssohn on Mull; the series operates on a pay-what-you-want basis. On Iona, nearly two hundred people showed up—more than the population of Iona itself. Richard Jeffcoat, the series’ affable and tireless general manager, started setting up extra chairs. He told me that, unlike many British musical institutions, Mendelssohn on Mull depends largely on private donations. “This means a lot of extra work,” he said. “But it also gives us the freedom to do things our way, without worrying about government bureaucracy.”

What impressed me most was the naturalness of the music-making. The prize was Haydn’s Quartet Opus 77, No. 2, in which Strachan was joined by the violinists Scott Bryant and Kenza Stamselberg and the violist Jemimah Quick. The group had played the piece the day before, in Tobermory; there, it had been characterful but jittery. Bryant had improvised two mini-cadenzas in the Minuet, yet he’d seemed hesitant about them. This time, everything fell into place. Bryant led with confidence, his cadenzas as breezy as the air coming off the Sound of Iona. Stamselberg echoed Bryant’s energy and extended it. Quick, who is only nineteen, exuded mellow authority.

Mendelssohn on Mull veterans were buzzing over what the quartet had achieved. Jeffcoat announced that the Maxwells had already been offered a return engagement. As they greeted new fans—they met locals who specialized in “waulking songs,” traditional melodies that women sang as they beat the cloth—I set out for the other side of the island, to watch the B-minor crash of the waves on the rocks. Mendelssohn never returned to Mull, but, in a sense, he never left. ♦

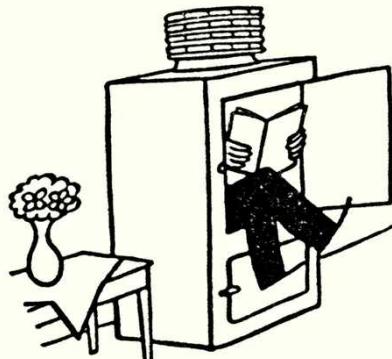
Poems

- [Under the Rubble](#)
- [Gloria Patri](#)

Under the Rubble

By Mosab Abu Toha

September 30, 2024



She slept on her bed,
never woke up again.
Her bed has become her grave,
a tomb beneath the ceiling of her room,
the ceiling a cenotaph.
No name, no year of birth,
no year of death, no epitaph.
Only blood and a smashed
picture frame in ruin
next to her.

•

In Jabalia camp, a mother collects her daughter's
flesh in a piggy bank,

hoping to buy her a plot
on a river in a faraway land.

•

A group of mute people
were talking sign.
When a bomb fell,
they fell silent.

•

It rained again last night.
The new plant looked for
an umbrella in the garage.
The bombing got intense
and our house looked for
a shelter in the neighborhood.

•

I leave the door to my room open, so the words in my books,
the titles, and names of authors and publishers,
could flee when they hear the bombs.

•

I became homeless once but
the rubble of my city
covered the streets.

•

They could not find a stretcher
to carry your body. They put
you on a wooden door they found
under the rubble:

Your neighbors: a moving wall.

•

The scars on our children's faces
will look for you.
Our children's amputated legs
will run after you.

•

He left the house to buy some bread for his kids.
News of his death made it home,
but not the bread.
No bread.
Death sits to eat whoever remains of the kids.
No need for a table, no need for bread.

•

A father wakes up at night, sees
the random colors on the walls
drawn by his four-year-old daughter.

The colors are about four feet high.
Next year, they would be five.
But the painter has died
in an air strike.

There are no colors anymore.
There are no walls.

•

I changed the order of my books on the shelves.
Two days later, the war broke out.
Beware of changing the order of your books!

•

What are you thinking?

What thinking?

What you?

You?

Is there still you?

You there?

•

Where should people go? Should they
build a big ladder and go up?

But heaven has been blocked by the drones
and F-16s and the smoke of death.

•

My son asks me whether,
when we return to Gaza,
I could get him a puppy.
I say, “I promise, if we can find any.”

I ask my son if he wishes to become
a pilot when he grows up.
He says he won’t wish
to drop bombs on people and houses.

•

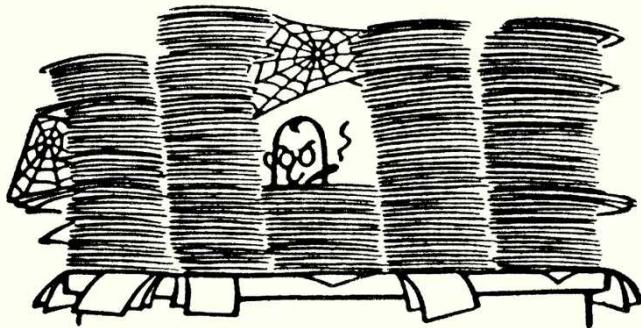
When we die, our souls leave our bodies,
take with them everything they loved
in our bedrooms: the perfume bottles,
the makeup, the necklaces, and the pens.
In Gaza, our bodies and rooms get crushed.
Nothing remains for the soul.
Even our souls,
they get stuck under the rubble for weeks.

This is drawn from “[Forest of Noise](#).”

Gloria Patri

By Virginia Konchan

September 30, 2024



Glory be to god for septic tanks, drainage pipes:
for conversions thermodynamic and of the soul.
Glory be to god for this quiet, cheap hotel room:
only music the mini-fridge's vibratory drone,
creaky plumbing groaning through the walls.
We underestimate the perfect peace of objects.
Before me was another traveller: after I leave,
hundreds of others will arrive, anonymously,
drink sink water from disposable plastic cups,
recline on bleached sheets, stare into the void
of a generic landscape painting across the bed
while contemplating the disaster of their lives.
And, when the alarm wails hours before dawn,
human cusses of angry protest join the chorus
of budget appliances failing before their time.

Why even look at a clock? It's never good news.
It takes the time it takes, my estimated deadline,
which is likely why no employer would trust me.
I'm at an age where everyone around me is dying.
I'm at an age when the recited script isn't enough.
Glory be to god for logjams, the antediluvian dark,
for being a supply of goodness outpacing demand
because so many prefer their egos' endless ranting
to the suggestion of a different narrator or narrative.
Me, I am so clearly incapable of leading a brigade.
I'm glad to accept help in whatever form it comes:
hour of privacy within these semen-sprayed walls,
deadbolt securing my safety from the chaos outside
and the strivings of the people which are everywhere.
I can't point to you on a map: don't know your name
or from whence you came. But flames lick the canvas
and I acknowledge my poverty of being and my need.
Glory be to god for this unforgiving mirror, this soap,
this Gideon Bible tucked away in the bedside drawer:
whoever dwells in the secret place of the most High
will abide under the shadow of the Almighty, I read.
A freely given gift whose only precondition is belief,
it was put there for safekeeping, for salesmen like me.

This is drawn from “Requiem.”

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, September 24, 2024](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, September 24, 2024

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Paolo Pasco

September 24, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Judith Thurman's essay about Simone Weil and Maggie Doherty's review of a volume of Seamus Heaney's letters.

September 30, 2024

Mass of Contradictions

Judith Thurman's article about my aunt, Simone Weil, repeats half-truths, exaggerations, and fantasies that have circulated for decades ([Books](#), September 9th). The fantasy about my aunt's "privileged" childhood is a favorite. My grandmother was not an "heiress"; rather than a "successful internist," my grandfather was a beloved and generous G.P. The Weil children's "luxury" childhood consisted in following their father to the different places where he was stationed as an Army physician, from 1914 to 1919. Simone's "cross-dressing" is another fantasy, inspired, I suppose, by the pictures of Simone proudly wearing her uniform during the Spanish Civil War, but she did, in fact, wear skirts, even if she did not follow feminine fashions.

Simone's attitude toward Judaism became a Rorschach test for scholars and critics to project their own feelings onto my aunt and her family. Referring to Selma, my grandmother, Thurman writes, "Her father wrote poetry in Hebrew, though she herself, according to Simone's niece, Sylvie, was 'frightfully liberated.' " This quote, from my book "At Home with André and Simone Weil," refers to a relative's remark about an unruly seven-year-old Selma. After the Second World War, when the Holocaust became a topic, my aunt's supposed "rabid hatred" of everything Jewish led to a chorus of accusations. Much has been written on the subject of her letter to Xavier Vallat, the Commissioner-General for Jewish Questions. Thurman writes that Simone "denied being Jewish in a sardonic letter to the Vichy authorities after they rejected her application for a teaching job on the basis of the newly enacted race laws." The letter was a philosophical one, questioning the definition of who was a Jew, pointing out its absurdity, as

well as the absurdity of the so-called Jewish Laws. The time was poorly chosen for philosophical questions. But it was in no way an attempt to save her own skin, much less her job. My aunt knew she might be deported and killed. Nowhere did she express the hope or the expectation to escape the fate awaiting her fellow-Jews. Thurman concludes with a sensitive account of the contradiction between Simone Weil's powerful intellect and her dependence on her parents. But is it really surprising that one who died so young left behind a trail of contradictions?

*Sylvie Weil
New York City*

Heaney's Verse

Although Seamus Heaney did state in a 1972 essay that “Poetry is out of the quarrel with ourselves and the quarrel with others is rhetoric,” Maggie Doherty, in her review of a volume of Heaney’s letters, overlooks the fact that he is paraphrasing Yeats’s influential aphorism “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” ([Books](#), September 9th). The line must have caught Heaney’s keen ear, as it recurs throughout his reviews in the nineteen-seventies, and he explicitly acknowledged “W. B. Yeats’s famous phrase” in a 1992 introduction.

*Scott Newstok
Memphis, Tenn.*

I was impressed by Doherty’s essay on Heaney’s life, his poetry, and the conflicts arising from his role as a poet who sought creative solitude amid political and social upheaval. I have only one small editorial suggestion. In separating lines from some of his most moving and beautiful poems (the sonnet sequence for his mother, for example) with slashes rather than setting them in their original form, the article diminishes the deep power of the lines that recall folding linen with his mother.

*Eugene Clasby
Miami, Fla.*

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

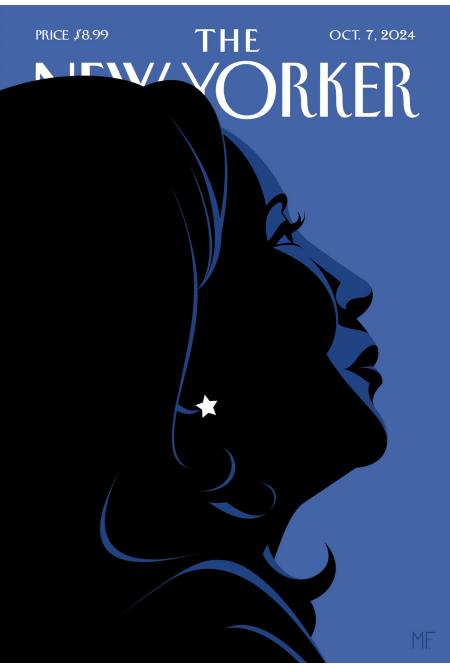


Table of Contents

Goings On

[Richard Brody's New York Film Festival Picks](#)
[Three New Classic Cookies](#)

The Talk of the Town

[Kamala Harris for President](#)

Reporting & Essays

[Is a Chat with a Bot a Conversation?](#)
[Can Harris Stop Blue-Collar Workers from Defecting to Donald Trump?](#)
[Has Social Media Fuelled a Teen-Suicide Crisis?](#)
[Ras Baraka, Reasonable Radical](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

[Waiting for Paddington](#)

Fiction

[Stories About Us](#)

The Critics

[A Food Critic Walks Into a Fasting Spa](#)
[The Unrivalled Omnipresence of Queen Elizabeth II](#)
[The Rat Studies that Foretold a Nightmarish Human Future](#)
[Briefly Noted](#)
[Suzanne Jackson's Natural World](#)
[Coldplay's Self-Help Pop](#)
[An Idyllic Music Series in the Hebrides](#)

Poems

[Under the Rubble](#)
[Gloria Patri](#)

Puzzles & Games

[The Crossword: Tuesday, September 24, 2024](#)

The Mail

[Letters from Our Readers](#)