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mother was
an only child.
I was wrong.

By Jennifer
Senior

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The Ones We Sent Away

I thought my mother was an only child. I was wrong.

by Jennifer Senior



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This story starts, of all things, with a viral tweet. It's the summer of 2021. My husband wanders into the kitchen and asks whether I've seen [the post from the English theater director](#) that has been whipping around Twitter, the one featuring a photograph of [his nonverbal son](#). I have not. I head up the stairs to my computer. "How will I find it?" I shout.

"You'll find it," he tells me.

I do, within a matter of seconds: a picture of Joey Unwin, smiling gently for the camera, his bare calves and sandaled toes a few steps from an inlet by the sea. Perhaps you, too, have seen this photo? His father, Stephen, surely did not intend it to become the sensation it did—he wasn’t being political, wasn’t playing to the groundlings. “Joey is 25 today,” he wrote. “He’s never said a word in his life, but has taught me so much more than I’ve ever taught him.”

That this earnest, heartfelt tweet has been liked some 80,000 times and retweeted more than 2,600 is already striking. But even more so is the cascade of replies: scores of photographs from parents of non- and minimally verbal children from all over the world. Some of the kids are young and some are old; some hold pets and some sit on swings; some grin broadly and some affect a more serious, thoughtful air. One is proudly holding a tray of Yorkshire pudding he’s baked. Another is spooning his mom on a picnic blanket.

I spend nearly an hour, just scrolling. I am only partway through when I realize my husband hasn’t steered me toward this outpouring simply because it’s an atypical Twitter moment, suffused with the sincere and the personal. It’s because he recognizes that to me, the tweet and downrush of replies *are* personal.

He knows that I have an aunt whom no one speaks about and who herself barely speaks. She is, at the time of this tweet, 70 years old and living in a group home in upstate New York. I have met her just once. Before this very moment, in fact, I have forgotten she exists at all.

It is extraordinary what we hide from ourselves—and even more extraordinary that we once hid her, my mother’s *sister*, and so many like her from everyone. Here are all these pictures of nonverbal children, so pulsingly alive—their parents describing their pleasures, their passions, their strengths and styles and tastes—while I know nothing, absolutely nothing, of my aunt’s life at all. She is a thinning shadow, an aging ghost.

When I first discovered that my mother had a younger sister, I reacted as if I’d been told about the existence of a new planet. This fact at once astonished me and made an eerie kind of sense, suddenly explaining the

gravitational force that had invisibly arranged my family's movements and behaviors for years. Now I understood why my grandfather spent so many hours in retirement as a volunteer at the Westchester Association for Retarded Citizens. Now I understood my grandmother's annual trips to the local department store to buy Christmas presents, although we were Jewish. (At the time, my aunt lived in a group home where the residents were taken to church every Sunday.)

I now even understood, perhaps, the flickers of melancholy I would see in my grandmother, an otherwise buoyant and intrepid personality, charming and sly and full of wit.

And my mom: Where do you start with my mom? For almost two years, she had a sister. Then, at the age of 6 and a half, she watched as her only sibling, almost five years younger, was spirited away. It would be 40 years before she saw her again.

Strange how seldom we think about who our parents were as people before we made their acquaintance—all the dynamics and influences that shaped them, the defining traumas and triumphs of their early lives. Yet how are we to know them, really, if we don't? And show them compassion and understanding as they age?

I was 12 when I learned. My mother and I were sitting at the kitchen table when I wondered aloud what I'd do if I ever had a disabled child. This provided her with an opening.

Her name is Adele.

She had red hair, I was told. Weird: Who in our family had red hair? (Actually, my great-grandmother, but I knew her only as a white-haired battle-ax dedicated in equal measure to her soap operas and cigarettes.) She is *profoundly retarded*, my mother explained. There had been no language revolution back then. This was the proper descriptor, found in textbooks and doctors' charts. My mother elaborated that the bones in Adele's head had knitted together far too early when she was a baby. So, a smaller brain. It was only when I met her 16 years later that I understood the physical implications of this: a markedly smaller head.

It was staggering to meet someone who looked just like my mother, but with red hair and a much smaller head.

My grandmother told my mother that she instantly knew something was different when Adele was born. Her cry wasn't like other babies'. She was inconsolable, had to be carried everywhere. Her family doctor said nonsense, Adele was fine. For an entire year, he maintained that she was fine, even though, at the age of 1, she couldn't hold a bottle and didn't respond to the stimuli that other toddlers do. I can't imagine what this casual brush-off must have done to my grandmother, who knew, in some back cavern of her heart, that her daughter was not the same as other children. But it was 1952, the summer that Adele turned 1. What male doctor took a working-class woman without a college education seriously in 1952?

Only when my mother and her family went to the Catskills that same summer did a doctor finally offer a very different diagnosis. My grandmother had gone to see this local fellow not because Adele was sick, but because *she* was; Adele had merely come along. But whatever ailed my grandmother didn't capture this man's attention. Her daughter did. He took one look at her and demanded to know whether my aunt was getting the care she required.

What did he mean?

"That child is a microcephalic idiot."

My grandmother told this story to my mother, word for word, more than four decades later.

In March of 1953, my grandparents took Adele, all of 21 months, to Willowbrook State School. It would be many years before I learned exactly what that name meant, years before I learned what kind of gothic mansion of horrors it was. And my mother, who didn't know how to explain what on earth had happened, began telling people that she was an only child.

It is the fall of 2021. My aunt lives in a uniquely unlovely part of upstate New York, a dreary grayscape of strip malls and Pizza Huts and liquor stores. But her group home is a snuggery of overstuffed furniture, flowers,

family photos; the outside is framed by an actual white picket fence. It is precisely the kind of home you would hope that your aunt, abandoned to an institution through a cruel accident of timing and gravely misplaced ideas, would find herself in as she ages. When my mother and I arrive to see her, she is waiting for us at the door.



Adele with her parents in the early 1980s (Courtesy of Rona Senior)

The drive to this house was 90 minutes from where my folks live in northern Westchester. Yet the car ride yielded just 29 minutes and 15 seconds of recorded conversation with my mother. This could partly be explained by the unfamiliar directions in her GPS, but still: Here she was, visiting the sister she hadn't seen since 1998—and then only twice before that, in 1993, shortly after her father died—and she had almost nothing to say about where we were headed or what the weather was like inside her head. She seemed far more interested in telling me about the necklaces she was making and selling to support Hadassah, one of her favorite charities. Whether this was out of anxiety or enthusiasm, I didn't know.

"Are you feeling nervous about seeing her?" I finally asked.

"No."

"Really? Why not? *I'm* nervous."

"Why are you nervous?"

"Why are you *not* nervous?"

"Because I made peace with my separation from her many, many years ago."

My grandparents, for their part, had visited my aunt almost every week, at least when she was young. Even after my grandmother moved to Florida, she made an effort to visit once a year. When I was in my late teens or early 20s, I remember my mother telling me that Adele never knew or understood who my grandmother was, not ever. This fact stuck with me—and hit me especially hard when I became a mother myself. As we were humming along the Taconic State Parkway, I reconfirmed: Adele didn't recognize her own mother?

"No," she said. "She didn't know her. She didn't understand the concept of a mother."

But when my mother last saw her sister, in 1998, it wasn't my grandmother who accompanied her. It was me. The whole trip had been at my instigation,

just like this one. I'd mentioned that I was interested in meeting my aunt, and my mother had stunned me then, just as she'd stunned me now, by saying, "Why don't we go together?"

And what do I remember of that singular day? How uncharacteristically animated and affectionate my mother was when she saw Adele, for one thing. You could almost discern the outlines of the little girl she'd been, the one who would circle Adele's crib and play a made-up game she called "Here, Baby." Also, how petite my aunt was—4 foot 8, dumpling-shaped—and how slack the musculature was around her jaw, which may have had something to do with the fact that my aunt had no teeth. She had supposedly taken a medication that had made them decay, though there's really no way to know.

But what stayed with me most from that day—what I thought about for years afterward—were the needlepoint canvases marching along the walls in Adele's bedroom. My mother and I both gasped when we saw them. My mother, too, was an avid needlepointer in those years, undertaking almost comically ambitious projects—the Chagall windows, the Unicorn Tapestries. Adele's handiwork was simpler, cruder, but there it was, betokening the same passion, the same obsession.

One other thing: My mother and I discovered that day that Adele could carry a tune—and when she sang, she suddenly had hundreds of words at her disposal, not just *yes* and *no*, the only two words we heard her speak. Again, we were amazed. For years, my mother was a pianist and studied opera; her technical skills were impeccable, her sight-reading was impeccable, her ear was impeccable. She could pick up the telephone and tell you that the dial tone was a major third.

My mother couldn't get over it—the needlepoints, the singing.

I felt like I was staring at some kind of photonegative of a twin study.

So here we are, 23 years later, and Adele is greeting us at the door. She is wearing a bright-red sweater. There is my mother at the door. She, too, is wearing a bright-red sweater. Adele is wearing a long, chunky beaded necklace she has recently made at her day program. And my mother, like her

sister, is wearing a long, chunky beaded necklace she has recently made—not at a day program, obviously, but for Hadassah. It turns out that Adele loves making necklaces and has whole drawers of them. As, lately, does my mother.

I have a picture of the two of them standing side by side that day. I cannot stop looking at it.



Rona and Adele, November 28, 2021 (Courtesy of Jennifer Senior)

Carmen Ayala, Adele's extraordinary 79-year-old caretaker, has instructed Adele to say "Hello, Rona, I love you" to my mother, a gesture that's both sweet and awkward—Adele doesn't know my mother by sight, much less by name. Still, it catches my mother by surprise, not least because it suggests that her sister's vocabulary has expanded considerably since we last saw her, when she was living in a different group home. They embrace and take seats on the couch in the living room. We try, for a time, to ask Adele basic questions about her day, without much success, though when we ask if she

knows any Christmas carols—the holiday is coming up—she sings “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” for us, and my mother replies in kind with “Silent Night.” Then Adele zones out, staring at her hands. She can spend hours staring at her hands.

My mother and I start to ask Carmen and her youngest child, Evelyn—she lives nearby and knows well all three residents in her parents’ home—the customary questions: How did Carmen get into this line of work? What is Adele’s routine? How did Adele handle the transition to Carmen’s house 22 years ago, after her previous caretaker retired? And although I’m interested in the answers, I find myself growing restless, thoughts of that Twitter thread plucking at my consciousness. I finally blurt out: What is my aunt *like*?

Evelyn replies first. “Very meticulous,” she says. “She needs things a certain way, and she will correct you the minute you do something wrong.”

I stare at my mother, who says nothing. I turn back to Evelyn and Carmen and prompt them. Such as?

Her clothes have to match, they say, down to the underwear. She keeps her bed pin-neat.

“She knows where everything is at,” Evelyn continues. “If we”—meaning her or any of her family members—“come here and we are washing a dish and we put it in the wrong place, she will tell us, *Nope*.¹”

I stare at my mother expectantly. Still nothing.

“Like, *That doesn’t go there*,” Evelyn explains.

At this point, my mother pipes up. “I don’t let anyone else load the dishwasher.”

Finally.

“That’s Adele,” Evelyn says.

Arthur Miller’s youngest son, Daniel, was institutionalized. He was born with Down syndrome in 1966 and sent to Southbury Training School, in

Connecticut, when he was about 4 years old. Miller never once mentioned him in his memoir *Timebends*, and Miller's *New York Times* obituary said not one word about him, naming three children, rather than four.

Erik Erikson, the storied developmental psychologist, also [put his son with Down syndrome in an institution](#). He and his wife, Joan, told their other three children that their brother died shortly after he was born in 1944. They eventually told all three the truth, but not at the same time. Their oldest son learned first. That must have been quite a secret to keep.

It is astonishing how many Americans have relations who were, at some point during the past century, sequestered from public view. They were warehoused, disappeared, roughly shorn from the family tree.

Pearl S. Buck, the Nobel Prize winner for literature and author of *The Good Earth*, institutionalized her 9-year-old daughter, Carol, likely in 1929. But Buck was different: She regularly visited her daughter, and 21 years later had the courage to write about her experience in [The Child Who Never Grew](#).

It is remarkable how many Americans have relations who were, at some point during the past century, sequestered from public view. They were warehoused, disappeared, roughly shorn from the family tree. "Delineated" is how the Georgetown disability-studies scholar Jennifer Natalya Fink puts it, meaning denied their proper place in their ancestral lineage.

With time, we would learn the terrible toll that institutionalization took on those individuals. But they weren't the only ones who paid a price, Fink argues. So did their parents, their siblings, future generations. In hiding our disabled relations, she writes in her book [All Our Families](#), we as a culture came to view disability "as an individual trauma to a singular family, rather than a common, collective, and normal experience of all families."

This is precisely what happened to Fink. When her daughter was diagnosed with autism at 2 and a half, Fink was devastated, despite her liberal politics and enlightened attitude toward neurodiversity. Then she realized that the only disabled person she knew about in her family was a relative who'd been institutionalized in the early '70s. This sent her on a journey to learn

more about him—and in so doing, she discovered yet another disabled family member, in Scotland. Had she known far more about them—had they been an integral part of family discussions and photo albums (and, in the case of the American relative, family events)—she would have had a far richer, more expansive understanding of her ancestry; her own child's disability would have seemed like “part of the warp and woof of our lineage,” as she writes, rather than an exception.

[From the October 2010 issue: Autism's first child](#)

It occurred to me that this may have been one of my unconscious motives in trying to get to know Adele at such a late stage of my own life, in addition to simple curiosity about a lost relative. It would be a minor act of restitution, of relineation. Without any malevolent intent, we'd all colluded in one woman's erasure. And our entire family had been the poorer for it.



After 27 years of institutionalization, Adele eventually moved to this group home, in upstate New York, in 1999. (Yoshiyuki Matsumura for *The Atlantic*)

Mass institutionalization wasn't always the norm in the United States. During the colonial era, people with developmental and intellectual disabilities were integrated into most communities; in the early 1800s, with the advent of asylums and special schools, American educators hoped some could be cured and quickly returned to mainstream society.

But by the late 19th century, it became clear that intellectual disabilities couldn't be vanquished simply by sending people to the right schools or asylums, and once the eugenics movement captured the public's imagination, the fate of the country's intellectually and developmentally disabled was sealed. "Undesirables" and "defectives" weren't just institutionalized; they became the involuntary subjects of medical experiments, waking from mysterious surgeries to discover that they could no longer have children.

Cue the line from [*Buck v. Bell*, the infamous 1927 Supreme Court case](#) that upheld a Virginia statute permitting the sterilization of the so-called intellectually unfit: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

Then the postwar era came along, with its apron-clad mothers and gray-flanneled fathers and all-around emphasis on a certain species of Americanness, a certain norm. "I'm speaking in huge generalities here," says Kim E. Nielsen, the author of [*A Disability History of the United States*](#), "but I think that push for social conformity exacerbated the incredible shame folks had about family members with intellectual and physical disabilities." Institutionalizing such family members often became the most attractive—or viable—option. The stigma associated with having a different sort of child was too great; too often, schools wouldn't have them, state-subsidized therapies weren't available to them, and churches wouldn't come to their aid. "There were no support structures at all," Nielsen told me. "It was almost the opposite. There were *anti*-support structures."

My aunt was born in that postwar period. But I don't think my grandparents were capitulating to social pressure when they institutionalized Adele. They

were simply listening to the advice of their doctors, authoritative men with white coats and granite faces who told them there was no point in keeping their daughter at home. According to my mother, my grandparents ferried Adele from one specialist to another, each declaring that she would never walk, never talk, never outgrow her diapers.

Which raised a question, on further reflection: Did my aunt's condition have a name? As we were driving along, my mother told me she didn't know; Adele had never had genetic testing.

Really? I asked. Even now? In the 2020s?

Really.

My grandparents are no longer with us. I know little of what they were told or how they felt when they were advised to send their second child away. But I imagine the script sounded similar to what a physician told Pearl S. Buck when she took Carol to the Mayo Clinic. "This child will be a burden on you all your life," he said, according to Buck's memoir. "Do not let her absorb you. Find a place where she can be happy and leave her there and live your own life." She did as she was told. But it violated every ounce of her maternal intuition. "Perhaps the best way to put it," she wrote, "is that I felt as though I were bleeding inwardly and desperately."

"The parents who institutionalized their children—they too are survivors of institutionalization and victims of it," Fink told me. "They were broken by this. It was not presented as a choice, for the most part. And even when it was, the medical establishment made it seem like institutionalization was the *best* choice."

That applied to my grandmother, a tower of resilience, a woman who survived her father's suicide, a brutal knife attack by a madman in a public restroom, and breast cancer at a relatively young age. She, like Buck, bled inwardly and desperately, in the most literal sense, developing an ulcer when my mom was 11 or 12. "Before Grandma died, she started talking about Adele, and for the first time that I can remember, she admitted that she felt terrible institutionalizing her," my mother told me as we drove. "When I reminded her that if she had not institutionalized her, nobody in the family

would've had a normal life, she said, ‘Yes, but she would’ve been with people who loved her.’”

One of the beneficiaries of that so-called normal life was, ostensibly, my mother. In his magisterial *Far From the Tree*, the writer Andrew Solomon notes that the most commonly cited rationale for institutionalization in those years was that neurotypical siblings would suffer—from shame, from attention starvation—if their disabled siblings were kept at home.

But it’s more complicated than that, isn’t it? My mother has never in her life uttered a cross word about her parents’ decision, and she’s hardly the sort to play the victim—she may have been trained as an opera singer, but she’s the least divalike person I know. Yet when I asked her what it was like when Adele left the house, she reflexively confirmed Fink’s hypothesis: She suffered. “It was like I lost an arm or a leg,” she said.

In [his second memoir, *Twin*](#), the composer and pianist Allen Shawn writes about the trauma of losing his twin sister, Mary, to an institution when they were 8 years old. He describes her absence as “an unmourned death,” which closely matches my mother’s experience; he writes, too, that when she was sent away, it felt to him like a form of punishment, “an expulsion, an exile,” which my mother has also recounted in melancholy detail.

But what most captured my attention was Shawn’s analysis of how his sister affected his personality. “From an early age,” he writes, “I intuited that there were tensions surrounding Mary and instinctively took it upon myself to continue to be the easier child and avoid worrying my parents.”

That was my mother: the peerless good girl. High-achieving, rule-abiding, perfection-seeking. She skipped a grade. Until junior high, she chose practicing piano over playing with friends. In high school, she sang with the all-city chorus at Carnegie Hall.

Did she ever rebel? I asked her.

“Nah,” she said. “I was a goody-goody.”

To this day, my mother is the good girl. Buttoned-up, always reasonable, always in control. When hotter tempers flare around her, she defaults to a cool 66 degrees.

My mother was thrilled when her parents brought her newborn sister home. She remembers Adele scooching to different corners of her playpen to follow her as she ran in circles around it. She remembers sitting on the kitchen counter and watching my grandmother prepare bottles. She remembers my grandmother asking her to go on tiptoe into my grandparents' room to see if Adele was asleep in her crib or still fussing. When my grandmother and grandfather began their frantic circuit of New York City's specialists, wondering what could be done to help Adele, my mother had no clue that anything was the matter. Why would she? She was 6 years old. She'd always wanted a sibling and now she'd been gifted one. Adele was marvelous. Adele was perfect. Adele was her sister.



Left: Adele's jewelry drawer. *Right:* An undated snapshot of Adele from the Ayala home. (Yoshiyuki Matsumura for *The Atlantic*)

When my grandparents left to take Adele to Willowbrook in March of 1953, they had no idea what to tell my mother, settling eventually on the story that they were taking her sister to “walking school.” My mom thought little of it. But for weeks, months, years, she kept expecting Adele to return. *When is she coming back?* she would regularly ask. *We don’t know*, my grandparents would reply.

At 8, my mother one day had a sudden meltdown—became unstrung, hysterical—and demanded much more loudly to know when Adele would be returning, pointing out that it was taking her an awfully long time to learn how to walk. That was the first time she saw my grandmother cry.

I don’t know, she still answered.

That same year, my great-grandmother, recently widowed, moved in with my grandparents. More specifically, she moved into my mother’s room, into the twin bed that Adele was supposed to occupy. My mother was furious about having to move her things, furious that she was losing her privacy, furious that her grandmother was moving into Adele’s bed. (Now she modified the question she regularly asked her parents: *Where will Adele sleep when she comes home?* And they would always reply: *We’ll figure it out when the time comes.*) Adele never did come home, and my grandparents would never try to have another child to fill that bed. My great-grandmother was there to stay.

My great-grandmother: Lord. She meant well, I suppose. But she had only a grade-school education and all the subtlety of a flyswatter. When my mother was 13, my great-grandmother told her that she had to be good enough for two children, smart enough for two children. “She kept emphasizing that my parents had lost a child,” my mother said. The pressure was awful.

By 13, of course, my mother had already figured out that something was different about her sister—and that Adele was never coming home. She’d heard the neighborhood kids whisper. One cruelly declared she’d heard Adele was in reform school. Consciously or unconsciously, my mother began handling the situation in her own way, volunteering in classrooms for kids with intellectual disabilities. Two liked her so much that she started tutoring them privately.

Yet throughout my mother's childhood, my grandparents never once invited her to come with them to visit Adele. At first she was told no children were allowed; by the time her parents did ask her to join them, my mother, at that point an adult with children of her own, said no. She felt too raw, too tender about it. She didn't want to unloose a current of ancient hurts. My grandparents never raised it again.

I asked if she ever sat around and just thought about Adele. "Oh, sure," she told me. "I wonder what she would've been like if she weren't disabled. I wonder what kind of relationship we would've had. I wonder whether I would've had nieces and nephews. Whether she would've had a husband, whether she would've had a good marriage, whether we would've been close, whether we would've lived near each other . . ."

And what ran through her mind, I asked, when she set eyes on Adele for the first time in 40 years, back in 1993? "I got deprived of having a real sibling," she said.

For weeks afterward, I thought long and hard about this particular regret. Because my aunt *was* a real sibling. But no one of my mother's generation was told to think this way. The disabled were dramatically underestimated and therefore criminally undercultivated: hidden in institutions, treated interchangeably, decanted of all humanity—spectral figures at best, relegated to the margins of society and memory. Even their closest family members were trained to forget them. After my mother came home from that visit, she scribbled six pages of impressions titled "I Have a Sister." As if she were finally allowing it to register. To acknowledge this clandestine part of herself.

It is painful, almost too painful, to think about how differently my mother might have felt—how different her life and my aunt's might have been—if they had been born today.

It's June of 2022. I've just asked Adele how many pictures are sitting in front of me. My mother is skeptical. I ask again. "How many pictures? One . . ."

"One," she repeats.

“Two . . .” I say.

“Two, three,” she finishes.

I look triumphantly at my mother.

My mother is now somewhere between skeptical and delighted. She tries herself. “How many fingers?” she asks, holding up her hand.

“Five.”

There are five.

“She understands,” I tell my mother.

“Well, either that or she memorized it.”

I show Adele two fingers and ask how many.

“Two.”

There’s a reason my mother is surprised. When we visited Adele in 1998, she barely spoke at all, much less showed that she had a notional sense of quantity. (She will today show us that she can count to 12 before she starts skipping around.) She wasn’t agitated back then when we saw her, not exactly. But she wasn’t relaxed. A transfixing report about Adele, sent to my mother not that long ago, suggests that one of the reasons she may be more alert now—and possesses a larger vocabulary—is because she’s on a better, less sedating regimen of medications.

But there’s another reason, I think, for my mother’s skepticism. Her whole life, she’d been given to understand that Adele’s condition was fixed—that her sister was consigned to a life without any deepening or growth. As she put it to me during that first car ride: “There would be no reason for her to get any more cognizant or any smarter.” That’s how everyone thought about disability back in my mother’s day. It’s my own generation—and the ones following—that came to see the brain as a miracle of plasticity, teachable and retrainable right into old age.

Yet Adele exceeded the expectations of all the specialists who gave dire predictions to my grandparents. She did learn to talk. She did become toilet-trained. Not only can she walk, but she dances a mean salsa, which she shows us now—and where she gets her sense of rhythm, I don’t know, but it’s great. (I personally dance like Elaine on *Seinfeld*.) Carmen and her husband, Juan, both from Puerto Rico, often play Latin music, and Adele jumps right in, with one hand on her belly and the other high and outward-facing, as if on the shoulder of an imaginary partner, all while shaking her hips and wagging her rear. Juan, whom she calls “Daddy,” often joins her.

Adele gently rests her head on my mother’s shoulder and keeps it there. My mother, ordinarily a coil of discipline, looks so blissed out, so happy.

I ask Carmen (whom she calls “Mommy”) whether Adele knows any Spanish, given that she and Juan speak it around the house. She says yes.

“*J Mamá!*” Carmen calls to Adele.

“What?”

“*¿Tú quieres a papi?*” Do you love Daddy?

“What?”

“*¿Tú quieres mucho a papi?*” Do you love Daddy a lot?

Adele nods emphatically.

“How much?” Carmen asks, switching to English. “How much you love Daddy? Let me see how much.”

“Four dollars.”

“Four dollars!” Carmen exclaims. “Oh my God.” Juan cracks up.

This kind of confusion is also typical of what we see in Adele throughout this, our second visit to the Ayala home. The report sent to my mother, which contains assessments of the institutions she’s inhabited and the day programs she’s attended throughout her life, continually notes that she has

trouble grasping concepts—that she “can name various objects, but become[s] confused when long sentences are used.” It adds that she “often mumbles and is difficult to understand. If she does not understand what is being said to her, she simply says, ‘Yeah.’”



Juan and Carmen Ayala, Adele’s caretakers for 24 years, outside their home, June 21, 2023 (Yoshiyuki Matsumura for *The Atlantic*)

And we do have a hard time understanding her, and she does say “Yeah” to a number of our basic questions about her day, which can make getting to know her frustrating. But not when she becomes animated about things she likes. Summer is approaching, for instance, which means Adele will shortly be going to camp. She adores camp. I ask what she does there. “A game! And color.” Coloring, she means.

Other things Adele loves: *Care Bears*, stuffed animals, blingy baseball hats, shopping at Walmart, wearing perfume, preparing Juan's nightclothes, tucking in her roommate each night.

Camp is the only time Carmen truly gets a break from caring for Adele and her two housemates—"I don't like to leave them with nobody," she explains to me—and even when she does go out, she generally doesn't travel very far.

I stare at Carmen, now 80, and realize I already live in fear of the moment when she won't be able to look after my aunt anymore. She has pulmonary hypertension and requires oxygen every night, and sometimes during the day. Yet she still cares for her three charges, whose pictures populate her photo albums right alongside those of her biological kids and grandkids. (My favorite: Adele standing next to a life-size Angry Bird.) Every day, she helps bathe them; makes their beds; shops for them; manages their various doctor appointments; takes them on outings; and, with Juan, prepares their breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Five out of seven days, this means rising at 5 a.m. In my aunt's specific case, it means doing her hair each morning just the way she likes, putting in her earrings, and pureeing her food—Adele refuses to wear her dentures.

"When I was raising my kids, you know—it's something that you miss," Carmen explains.

Adele's transition to the Ayala home wasn't easy. Change is hard for her; she likes order. And when she arrived at Carmen's house 23 years ago, she had scabies, which—in addition to raising questions about how well cared for she'd been in her previous home—meant that Carmen had to throw out everything she owned: her beloved stuffed animals, her clothes, her sheets. The adjustment became that much more traumatic; now my aunt truly had nothing. She threw tantrums. She once called Carmen "the B-word" (as Carmen puts it). Carmen phoned the home liaison. "And she says, 'Carmen, easy. She's a very good lady.'"

I ask how she earned my aunt's trust. "I used to sit down with her and, you know, I used to talk to her a lot," she says. "Talking, talking, talking to her. I'm telling her, 'Come here, help me with this' or 'Help me with that.'"

Now, Carmen says, Adele can recite all of her grandchildren's names and knows them by sight. She demonstrates, asking Adele to name everyone in her son Edgar's family. "J.J., Lucas, Janet, Jessica ..." Adele says. Neither of her housemates can do this. "It doesn't matter how long she hasn't seen them," Evelyn, Carmen's daughter, later tells me. "She knows who they are. She has a memory that she'll meet somebody and she'll remember their name. That's her gift."

Her gift? I am incredulous when I hear this. I keep thinking about what I've been told my whole adult life: that Adele never even recognized her own mother, at least as far as my mom understood it. Was this some kind of misapprehension? Maybe Adele *had* known my grandmother? Or maybe she hadn't, but only because she'd been so aggressively narcotized?

As Carmen is talking with us, Adele gently rests her head on my mother's shoulder and keeps it there. My mother, ordinarily a coil of discipline and control (always correct, always the good girl), looks so blissed out, so happy. When our visit is over, she tells me that this was her favorite part, Adele burrowing into her—and that she's already thinking about when she can next see her again.

November 22, 1977: *On medication due to head banging behaviors ... She stares off into space, fixates on her hands, or hair and has the compulsion to smell people's hair* (Wassaic State School, Amenia, New York).

This is from the report sent to my mother, the one containing assessments of Adele from the different institutions she's lived in and day programs she's been a part of. I had a closer look at it maybe a week or two after our second visit.

February 11, 1986: *(Psychotropic) Meds originally prescribed for screaming, hitting others, hitting self, extreme irritability* (case-worker report from a day-treatment program, Ulster County, New York). It is noted that she is taking 150 milligrams daily of Mellaril, a first-generation antipsychotic.

October 1991: *Outbursts look like psychosis ... yell[s] out statements such as "Adele. Stop that!" or ... "Leave me alone!"* (summary of a report from a

day program, Kingston, New York).

Late 2006: *Psychiatry providers now recognize that there is psychosis present and Zyprexa is effectively treating this* (summary of various evaluations).

The report is eight pages long. But you get the idea. The dear woman who nestled into my mother's shoulder, waved at us until our car pulled out of sight, and recently wandered into Carmen's room when she intuited that something was the matter (Carmen was unwell) also had an unremitting history, until not that long ago, of violent outbursts, self-harm, and psychosis.

Far be it from me to quarrel with those who evaluated her, including the esteemed men in white coats. But "psychosis" seemed, when I read this report, like an incomplete story, carrying with it the stench of laziness and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* reductivism—*This person is difficult; let's sedate her.*

[John Donvan and Caren Zucker: What we learned from autism's first child](#)

I could have been totally wrong. Based on this report, Adele certainly seemed, at times, to pose a danger to herself and others. But I found it curious that nowhere in this document did it say anything about a behavior that even my untrained eye detected immediately during our visits: My aunt does tons of harmless stimming, the repetitive motions frequently associated with autism. (She is especially fond of wiggling her fingers in front of her eyes.) In all the years of observational data about her—at least from what I saw here—there wasn't a word about this, or the word *autism* itself. And autistic individuals, when frustrated or confronted with change or responding to excessive stimuli, can sometimes behave aggressively—or in ways that could be misread as psychotic.

And so, for that matter, can traumatized people.

It is December of 2022. A visiting nurse, Emane, whom Adele calls Batman, is swabbing Adele's cheek. My aunt is being sweet and obedient; Emane,

tender yet efficient. The sample will go to a lab in Marshfield, Wisconsin, that will sequence Adele's genes.

Wendy Chung, the Boston Children's Hospital geneticist with whom my mother and I are working, has warned us that there is only a one-in-three chance that Adele's genetic test will come back with a condition or syndrome that has an actual name. But Chung has told me, as have a number of other experts, that there's no other way to know for sure what Adele has. Dozens of things can cause microcephaly.

"But if you can find out exactly what she has," Chung says, "then you can find a family—"

"—with a child who has it now," I say.

Exactly, she says. And then I can compare how children with this syndrome fare today, versus how they fared in the 1950s.

My mother, Adele's medical proxy, had to sign the forms to do this genetic test. My aunt was incapable of giving her own consent. And it occurs to me, as I sit here watching her so docilely allow Emane to rake her cheek with a Q-tip, that Adele has never been able to give her consent for anything, good or bad, her whole life. Not for the medications she has taken, which may or may not have helped her; not for mammograms, which, given our family history, are indisputably a good idea. Not for any of the things that were done to her while she was institutionalized until the age of 28; not for a trip to the mall to get ice cream.

She cannot consent to this profile, I suddenly realize with some alarm.

I spend quite a few weeks fretting about this. Only after speaking with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a renowned bioethicist and disability scholar, do I understand exactly why this is so. The last thing I want to do is hurt Adele. So *not* writing about her would be consistent with this wish, in keeping with the benevolent spirit of the Hippocratic oath: I'd be doing no harm. Whereas I am trying to do good, a much riskier proposition. "The problem with trying to do good," she tells me, "is you don't know how it's going to come out."

“I don’t have a *legal* right to know anything about my relatives who were disappeared,” says Jennifer Natalya Fink, who faced a similar ethical predicament when she wrote *All Our Families*. “But I have a *moral* right. And it’s a moral wrong, what was done to them. For us not to keep perpetuating those wrongs, we have to integrate knowledge of our disabled forebears.”

There remains a school of thought that privileges the privacy of people with intellectual disabilities above all else, particularly when it comes to something as delicate as divulging their medical history. And this argument may be right. I don’t know. But I ultimately decide, in the weeks after that swab, that integrating Adele means saying her name, and that understanding Adele—and her needs, and her potential, and whether she’s been treated with the appropriate care and dignity her whole life—means knowing and naming whatever syndrome she has. To refrain from doing so would simply mean more erasure. Worse: It would imply that her condition is shameful, and there’s been more than enough of that in my family.

To hell with shame.

I don’t know why this is, but I keep coming back to my mother’s deep desire for order. I had always assumed, I suppose, that it was a response to early trauma—a natural reaction to helplessly watching her sister get shipped away. But then I spent time with Adele and discovered that she shared the same trait, as if it were inscribed in the family genes.

I mention this one day to Evelyn, Carmen’s daughter, on the phone. She mulls it over. “But maybe it comes from the same place in Adele,” she says. “She was taken from her mother. She’s been controlled *her whole life*. You don’t know what she’s gone through, where she’s been.”

I sit in chastened silence for several seconds. She is absolutely right. Of course it could come from the same place. Adele no doubt also experienced savage trauma in her life. It was just less legible, because she had no clear way to convey it. For all I know, my aunt is a *matryoshka* doll of buried pain.

In January of 1972, Michael Wilkins met in a Staten Island diner with a young television journalist named Geraldo Rivera and discreetly handed him a key. It opened the doors to Building No. 6 at Willowbrook State School, from which Wilkins, a doctor, had recently been fired. He'd been encouraging the parents of the children in that ward—and others, from the sound of it—to organize for better living conditions. The administration didn't like that very much.

In February of that year, Rivera's half-hour exposé, "[Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace](#)," aired on WABC-TV. It was sickening. To this day, it remains one of the most powerful testaments to the horrors and moral degeneracy of institutionalization. You can easily find it on YouTube.

Rivera was by no means the first to visit Willowbrook. Robert F. Kennedy had toured the place in 1965 and called it "a snake pit." But because Rivera suddenly had access to one of the ghastliest dorms on campus, he and his camera crew could storm the premises unannounced. What he found—and what his viewers saw—was the kind of suffering one associates with early-Renaissance depictions of hell. The room was dark and bare. The children were naked, wailing, and rocking on the floor. Some were caked in their own feces. "How can I tell you about the way it smelled?" Rivera asked. "It smelled of filth, it smelled of disease, and it smelled of death." He went on to interview Wilkins, who made it clear that Willowbrook wasn't a "school" at all. "Their life is just hours and hours of endless nothing to do," he said of the patients, adding that 100 percent of them contracted hepatitis within the first six months of moving in.

Actually, [doctors were deliberately giving some of those children hepatitis](#). Even into the 1970s, the intellectually disabled were the subjects of government-funded medical experiments.



A group of eight children crammed into a crib prior to receiving physical therapy, at Willowbrook State School, Staten Island, New York, January 1972 (Bill Pierce / Life Picture Collection / Shutterstock)

“Trauma is severe,” Wilkins told Rivera, “because these patients are left together on a ward—70 retarded people, basically unattended, fighting for a small scrap of paper on the floor to play with, fighting for the attention of the attendants.”

“Can the children be trained?” Rivera asked at one point.

“Yes,” the doctor said. “Every child can be trained. There’s no effort. We don’t know what these kids are capable of doing.”

This was where my aunt spent the formative period of her youth, from the time she was a toddler until she was 12 or 13 years old. Though she left eight years before Rivera and his crew arrived, it’s hard to imagine that the conditions were any better in her day. As Kim E. Nielsen writes in [A Disability History of the United States](#), World War II was devastating for these institutions, which were hardly exemplary to begin with. The young men who worked there were shipped off to war, and most of the other employees found better-paying jobs and superior conditions in defense plants. These state facilities remained dreadfully poor-paying and understaffed from then on, their budgets forever in governors’ crosshairs.

“It was horrible,” Diana McCourt told me. She placed her daughter, Nina, born with severe autism, in Willowbrook in 1971. “She always smelled of urine. Everything smelled of urine. It’s like it was in the bricks and mortar.”

Diana and her husband, Malachy McCourt—the memoirist, actor, radio host, and famous New York pub owner—soon became outspoken activists and got involved in a class-action lawsuit against the institution. “I can’t quite tell you how much they didn’t want us to witness what was going on inside,” Malachy told me. When children were presented to their parents, they were taken to the entranceway of their dorm after being hastily dressed by attendants. “The clothes were never her clothes,” Diana said. “She was wearing whatever they could find in the pile.”

But most chilling of all was an offhand comment Diana made about the reports she received about her daughter. They were vague, she said, or demonstrably untrue, or maddeningly pedestrian—that she’d just gone to see the dentist, for instance. “The dentist,” Diana said, “was notorious for pulling people’s teeth.”

Wait, I said. Repeat that?

“Instead of dental care, they pulled the teeth out.”

Is *that* how my aunt lost her teeth?

Rivera noted in his special that the wards contained no toothbrushes that he could see.

I’d like to think that Adele’s life improved when she went to Wassaic State School in 1964. But New York produced, at that moment in time, nothing but hellholes. (Rivera also visited Letchworth Village in his documentary, an institution so awful that the McCourts steered clear of it, opting for Willowbrook instead.) Wassaic, too, had a reputation for being grim. At least one note from the report sent to my mother indicated that my aunt was very keen on leaving it. The date was January 18, 1980. Adele was by then 28 years old and had enough of a vocabulary to get her point across. “Clothes and suitcase?” she asked one of the clinicians.

Even when my aunt finally transferred to residential care, living in private homes and attending local programs in upstate New York, her treatment, until the ’90s, seemed less than ideal. In March of 1980, my aunt attended a day facility in an old factory that still had very loud electric and pneumatic machines, and the result was disastrous—“agitated, violent outbursts.” She was frequently taken to the “Quiet Room,” quilted with actual padded walls, where the staff would physically restrain her. This practice, the report notes, is no longer used in New York.

It took seven years and nine months before her team realized that the industrial cacophony was causing a good deal of the problem.

It is mid-December 2022. Adele’s genetic test has come back.

Her disorder does indeed have a name. Remarkably, it would not have had a name if we'd tested her just four years ago. But in 2020, a group of 50-plus researchers announced their discovery of Coffin-Siris syndrome 12, the "12" signifying a rare subtype within an already rare disorder. At the time they made this discovery, they could identify just 12 people in the world whose intellectual disability was caused by a mutation in this particular gene. Since then, says Scott Barish, the lead author of the paper announcing the finding, the number has climbed to somewhere between 30 and 50. So now, with my aunt, it's that number plus one.

I immediately join a Facebook group for people with Coffin-Siris syndrome. I find only a few parents with children who have the same subtype as Adele. One couple lives in Moscow; another, Italy. But as soon as I post something about my aunt, there's a flurry of replies from mothers and fathers of kids across the Coffin-Siris spectrum, most of them focused on the same thing: Adele's age. Seventy-one! How thrilling that someone with Coffin-Siris syndrome could live that long! They want to know all about her, and what kind of health she is in. (Robust, I reply.)

Because Coffin-Siris syndrome, first described in 1970, can be caused by mutations in any one of a variety of genes, its manifestations vary. As a rule, though, the disorder involves some level of intellectual disability and developmental delays. Many people with Coffin-Siris syndrome also have "coarse facial features," a phrase I've come to absolutely loathe; trouble with different organ systems; and underdeveloped pinkie fingers or toes (which is how, before genetic testing came along, a specialist might suspect a patient had it). Some, though by no means all, have microcephaly.

As far as I know, my aunt's fingers and toes are all fully developed—Coffin-Siris syndrome 12 doesn't seem to affect pinkies as much—and she doesn't appear to have any organ trouble. She does, however, have microcephaly, as did four of the 12 subjects in [the breakthrough paper about her specific subtype](#). But what really stood out to me in that study—and I mean really shone in a hue all its own—was this: Five of the dozen subjects displayed autistic traits.

In fact, the sparse literature on this subject suggests that a substantial portion of people with Coffin-Siris syndrome, no matter what genetic variant

they've got, [have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder as well.](#)

Which is what I've suspected my aunt has had all along.

Knowing what I now do, I'm that much keener to find a family with a child who has Coffin-Siris syndrome 12 that would be willing to welcome me into their home. I call Barish, the lead author of the breakthrough paper, who heroically refers me to two. But one suddenly becomes shy and the other lives in Ireland. I start making my way through the other 50 co-first authors, co-corresponding authors, and just plain co-authors listed in the study. For a long while, I get nothing—turns out I'm talking to lab people, mostly—though I learn a lot about protein complexes and gene expression.

Then I reach Isabelle Thiffault, a molecular geneticist at Children's Mercy Kansas City. By some extraordinary fluke, she has, in her database, *four* children with my aunt's subtype. Two have microcephaly. One of those two is a 7-year-old girl named Emma, who lives in the Kansas City area.

I call her mom, Grace Feist. Would she mind if I paid a visit? She would not.

Grace and her husband, Jerry, took Emma in at seven months old and adopted her at a year and a half, knowing she had significant intellectual and developmental delays. They were prepared. They had fallen in love.

They also had ample state resources at their disposal, heavily subsidized or even free. More still: They had a rich universe of support groups to draw from, a sophisticated public school in their backyard, and the benefit of a culture that's come a long way toward appreciating neurodiversity.

They were able to actively choose Emma. Whereas my grandparents—pressured by doctors, stamped by stigma, broken by exhaustion and confusion and pain—felt like they had no choice but to give their daughter away.

“So this is the best thing, because it will keep your hair nice and neat, and it doesn't have any tingles.”

Tingles? I ask. It's late February of 2023. We're sitting in Emma's bedroom in Lee's Summit, Missouri, and she's waving a new silk pillowcase at me.

“They’re like big stuff in your hair.” She gestures at her thick brown ponytail.

Tingles … oh, tangles!

She nods. “Guess what? Tangles will get in your hair. If Mommy’s brushing, I will be so mad.”

A few feet from her is a mounted poster that says For like Ever. As in: *We’ve embraced this little girl for life—for, like, ever.* Grace got it at T.J. Maxx shortly after Emma’s adoption became official.

Every time I hear Emma speak, I find it hard to believe that she and my aunt have a mutation in the same gene. She chatters merrily in full sentences, talks about her friends, and can express how she feels, often in ways that are surprising or quite poignant.

“Emma, are you the same as other kids or different?” Grace asks when we pick her up at school the next day.

“Different.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Because I’m the only one doing coloring. Not the other kids.”

“Do you like being different?” I ask her.

“No.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because I want to be like other people.”



Emma Feist, who has the same syndrome as Adele, at her home outside Kansas City, Missouri, June 27, 2023 (Yoshiyuki Matsumura for *The Atlantic*)

But what I’m stuck on is all the ways that Emma *started out* like my aunt. When Grace and Jerry (a very involved father, just shy around reporters) first took her in at seven months to foster her, “she just lay there like a two-month-old baby,” Grace says. “We thought she was blind.” She didn’t make eye contact; she couldn’t roll. But in Bismarck, North Dakota, where Grace and Jerry were living at the time, Emma was entitled to all kinds of state-funded early intervention, as she is in Missouri. By nine months old, she was sitting unsupported, thanks to hours spent in a special tube swing to help her develop her core muscles.

Emma wasn’t as late to walk as Adele, but she didn’t take her first wobbly step until 16 months, and because it was 2016, rather than the early 1950s, physical therapists again intervened, having her toddle on uneven surfaces—pillows, cushions—to bolster muscle tone. She developed a smoother gait at about 2, but it took a couple more years for her to have the balance and coordination to walk normally, or to climb the stairs without help.

And speech! A huge surprise. Emma may be a bubbly ingenue, telling me all about indoor recess and her BFFs at school, but that’s hardly how she started. When she was 4 years old, she had only 100 words in her vocabulary, and that’s a generous estimate. “The way it was described was: She’s not deaf, but it’s almost the speech of someone who can’t hear,” Grace says. But Emma was working with state-funded speech therapists at the time, and they determined that she had auditory-processing disorder. When she got to her public school in Lee’s Summit—which gives extra speech and occupational therapy to those who need it, plus additional reading and math instruction—her vocabulary started to grow, slowly at first, and then in a rush. “I don’t know what it was,” Grace says.

Well. I have some idea. It was having a supportive school. It was having several hours a week of occupational, physical, and speech therapy from the time Emma was an infant. And it was Grace herself.

If you’re going to have an intellectual disability, who you really want as your mother is Grace Feist. Thirty-three, forever in flip-flops, and brimming with opinions—she has the concentrated energy of a honeybee—Grace has gone to exceptional lengths to tend to Emma’s education and psychological well-being. She’s decorated the basement playroom in pastels and muted colors. (“With visual-processing disorder, which Emma has, it’s not as overwhelming,” Grace explains.) Once a week, she takes Emma to vision therapy; she picks Emma up at school early every day to focus even more on her reading and math at home, without distraction. Grace is the queen of resourcefulness when it comes to all things pedagogical.

“I had a developmental pediatrician tell me: ‘There is no rock you haven’t looked under. This is what you have, and that’s okay,’” she says. “And he came from the best of intentions. But let me tell you, there were, like, 50 rocks I hadn’t looked under.”

As Grace and Emma give me a tour of Emma’s in-home classroom, all I can think is, *My God, the effort*. It contains a bucket of at least 80 fidget toys, many of them simple household items repurposed for anxious hands (silicone sink scrubbers, sewing bobbins). Emma sits on a purple wobble disk—it looks like a whoopee cushion the size of a satellite dish—to continue developing her core muscles. The walls are lined with giant flash cards from Secret Stories, a phonics-based reading program that makes intuitive sense and seems kind of *fun*, which is a good thing, because almost nothing demoralizes Emma more than trying to read. She can barely do it, though she’s trying.

“How does reading feel?” Grace asks.

“Mad,” Emma says. She’s wearing a resplendent lavender shirt with daisies on it. “Because if Mommy say, ‘Read this now,’ I would be super grumpy. Because they have hard words.” She’s pointing to a rudimentary book she’s been struggling with. “But some people say, ‘This is easy!’”

“How does that make you feel?” Grace asks.

“Mad. Sad.”

We move on to look at the shelves on the wall. They're stocked with tactile learning tools: numbers made of sandpaper. Montessori cubes showing multiples of 10. Wax Wikki Stix to make letter shapes.

"If you change the approach to everything being multisensory—you see it, you hear it, you taste it, you touch it, you smell it—then you learn it," Grace says. "Because you're using all these neural pathways for the same information. Then everyone can learn."

Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised by Grace's tenacity. She was raised in Florida, near Orlando, and had her first daughter, Chloe, at 16. She joined the Navy as a reservist in 2010 and worked for a time as a military police officer; then she worked security in an oil field in North Dakota, where she made great money and got to see the northern lights, as long as she was willing to put up with temperatures 20 degrees below zero. She met Jerry, then an information technologist, on the website Plenty of Fish. Today, he's a professional YouTuber, with an inspirational-Christian channel that has 2.6 million subscribers. On December 28, 2016, they adopted Emma. In 2018, Grace gave birth to another daughter, Anna.

"Having Anna was the best thing for Emma," Grace says, "because it really taught her how to play—with other kids, even with toys. That mimicking, that seeing what to do. Because when you would buy Emma toys, she would just line them up."

Grace and Jerry have made enormous sacrifices on Emma's behalf. The whole family has. They don't travel, because Emma needs structure and control. They seldom go to restaurants, but when they do, they bring along her purple noise-canceling headphones—shooting earmuffs, purchased at Walmart—in case the sound overwhelms her; she needs to leave the restaurant several times a meal in any event, just to ground herself. "That's how we live our life," Grace says.

Their life used to be even more difficult. When she was younger, Emma, like my aunt, was inclined toward self-harm. When I first mention to Grace that Adele has no teeth—and that I fear they were removed at Willowbrook or Wassaic—Grace cuts me off: "Because she would bite herself until she bled?"

Sweet Jesus. I hadn't even thought of that.

"Because Emma did," Grace says. "I have pictures of it."

She doesn't show me those pictures. But she does show me a picture of 4-year-old Emma with a giant green-and-purple Frankenstein bruise bulging from her forehead. "She'd hit herself in the face," Grace says. "She would bang her head on the floor, like, hard."

And why does she think Emma did that? "She's trapped in this mind where she knows what she wants, she knows what she needs, but *you* don't know, and she doesn't know how to tell you," Grace says. "Is she aggressive? Yeah. I would be pissed too."

I haven't noticed any aggression in Emma—just a lot of sass, a gal who wants to show off her dance moves and introduce me to her stuffies. But again, this may be in part due to early-childhood interventions: Armies of occupational and speech therapists taught her how to be gentle, demonstrating how to talk kindly to dolls, and they encouraged Grace to teach Emma sign language, which she did, so that Emma could better express her wishes. As Emma got older, Grace read tons of books about emotional self-regulation, teaching her daughter to externalize her frustration. "We'd be in the middle of Walmart and she'd be stomping her feet," Grace says. "But you know what? She wasn't punching herself in the head."

Today, Emma is flourishing. She may not yet know her phone number or address. She may not be able to tell you the names of the months or all the days of the week. But she's making great strides, especially now that she's learning at home. When I left her house in late February, she could count to 12; four months later, she was adding and subtracting. "Emma is going to thrive in her life," Grace says. "Is she going to work at McDonald's? Maybe. Is she gonna bag groceries? Maybe. But she's gonna be okay." Grace's goal, she says, is to make sure that Emma's mental health always comes first. "I have never met anyone more resilient or determined," she adds.

As I prepare to leave, Grace gives me two gifts she's purchased for my aunt. They're things Emma likes: a lavender-scented unicorn Warmie (a stuffed

animal you can safely heat in the microwave) and Pinch Me therapy dough that smells like oranges. “Anything scented is always really calming for Emma,” she explains.

Then Emma hands me a picture she’s drawn of me and Adele. Grace asks if she remembers why she drew it. “Yeah!” Emma says. “Because she has a hard time going to school.”

“Like you,” Grace says. Then: “You know what her aunt has?”

I assume she is going to say something about Coffin-Siris syndrome 12, but in a way that’s comprehensible to a child who has it too. But that isn’t where Grace is headed. “She has a woman who loves her and takes care of her because her mommy wasn’t able to. Just like you. Did you know that?”

Emma shakes her head.

I thank Grace and Emma for the gifts and head out to my rental car. I last maybe 30 seconds before losing it.

Is it a fair or genuine comparison, lining up my aunt and Emma side by side? Using Emma’s life story thus far as some kind of counterfactual history? To ask *What if?*

Yes and no, obviously.

There’s variability in all genetic disorders, including Coffin-Siris syndrome, even among those with mutations in the same gene. The original paper looking at my aunt’s specific subtype found that four out of the 12 individuals had microcephaly, for example, but one had macrocephaly; go figure. My aunt and Emma, though they both have subtype 12, clearly have different manifestations of it, a phenomenon one can observe just from looking at them: Emma is big for her age while my aunt is tiny; my aunt’s microcephaly is unignorable, because her sutures—the flexible material between a baby’s skull bones—closed prematurely, while Emma’s didn’t, making her microcephaly harder to detect. Her doctor says it may be easier to see as she gets older, though.

“If your aunt had had the treatments available today, I suspect her life would be very different,” says Bonnie Sullivan, the clinical geneticist at Children’s Mercy Kansas City who treats Emma. We’re speaking just days after I return home. She has looked at both Adele’s and Emma’s specific gene mutations. “She may not have been as high-functioning as Emma, but she could have maximized her potential, and her quality of life would’ve been a lot better.”

It seems impossible to quarrel with this assessment. The literature on disability is bursting with stories—heartening or depressing, depending on your point of view—about the advances made by people with intellectual disabilities once they were liberated from the medieval torments of their institutions. Studies as far back as the 1960s showed that children with Down syndrome begin to speak earlier and have higher IQs if they’re kept in home settings rather than institutional ones. Judith Scott, warehoused with Down syndrome in 1950 at the age of 7, famously became an artist once her twin sister established herself as her legal guardian 35 years later; her handsome fiber-art sculptures are now part of the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Centre Pompidou.

If my aunt could expand her vocabulary simply by going off a useless antipsychotic, imagine what else she might have been capable of over the course of her life, if only she’d been given a hundredth of a chance.

But perhaps the best-known example of what happens to underloved, understimulated children are [the orphans from Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania](#), where “child gulags” warehoused some 170,000 kids in appalling conditions. These children became tragic, unwilling conscripts in an inadvertent mass experiment in institutional neglect. When, 11 years after Ceaușescu’s execution, American researchers finally began to study 136 of them, putting half in foster settings and monitoring their development, the findings were bleak. Only 18 percent of those still in orphanages [showed secure attachments by age 3 and a half](#), versus almost 50 percent of those who’d been transferred to family settings. By the time the kids still in orphanages had reached 16, more than 60 percent suffered from a psychiatric condition.

[From the July/August 2020 issue: 30 years ago, Romania deprived thousands of babies of human contact](#)

Which brings me back to my aunt's repeated diagnoses, over the years, of psychosis. Maybe the condition was inevitable; maybe my aunt would have been psychotic no matter what kind of life she'd led. But when I watched those gruesome spools of footage from Willowbrook, all I could think was: *Who wouldn't be driven mad by such a place?* After she left Willowbrook, Adele would abruptly shout "Stop hurting me!" for no apparent reason. Her care team assumed she was having hallucinations, a plausible postulate. But isn't it equally plausible to theorize that she was reliving some unspeakable abuse from her past? Or, as the [Georgetown philosopher and disability-studies professor Joel Michael Reynolds](#) puts it (speaking my thoughts aloud): "Why isn't that a completely reasonable response to PTSD?"

I'll never know how Adele's life could have turned out if she'd been born in 2015, as Emma was. All I have is a plague of questions.

What if a task force of occupational, speech, and physical therapists had shown up at my grandparents' home each week, teaching Adele to walk, talk, and gently play with dolls?

What if she had spent her formative years not rotting in her own diapers or staring at the walls, but engaging in organized play, attending school, and basking in the company of adults who loved her?



Adele's bedroom in the Ayala home (Yoshiyuki Matsumura for *The Atlantic*)

What if she'd had caretakers who inhaled book after book about emotional self-regulation and encouraged her to stomp her feet in department stores, rather than hit herself in the head?

And what if—*what if*—Adele had had a sister to play with?

It's possible that all the interventions in the world would have done nothing, or next to it. Sullivan says she's seen families recruit every imaginable expert and pour their energies into every conceivable intervention, yet with depressingly little to show for it. "There are some individuals with such severe manifestations of certain disorders that aggressive interventions don't seem to change the outcome very much," she says. "And it kills me. I truly grieve that result. Because the parents are trying everything."

Similarly, there are children who wind up in residential care in spite of their parents' best and most valiant efforts, because their risk of self-harm or of harming others remains too great. Parents are not, nor should they be expected to be, saints.

But my mind keeps looping back to that eight-page report my mother was sent about Adele's history. The notes from Willowbrook, what few there are, tell a story all their own.

March 19, 1953: *21-month-old girl, quite small for her age ... able to sit without support, to imitate movements, and is reported to be able to say "mama."* Adele's IQ is measured at 52.

February 1, 1960: *Microcephalic child of 8 ½ years with limited speech and partial echolalia. She is disoriented, and her acquaintance with simple objects in her surroundings is rather poor even for her overall mental level ... Rate of development has markedly slowed down since the last evaluation 7 years ago. The consequent drop in IQ is considerable.* This time it is measured at 27.

In her seven years of staring at those walls and rocking naked on the floor and never once, I assume, being shown a particle of love apart from those brief visits from my grandparents, Adele's IQ dropped by almost half, startling even those who evaluated her. And yes, maybe this was destined to happen; maybe her smaller brain had less noticeable consequences in a toddler than in an 8-year-old.

But if my aunt could expand her vocabulary simply by going off a useless antipsychotic and onto Zyprexa—in middle age!—imagine what else she might have been capable of over the course of her life, if only she'd been given a half, a quarter, a hundredth of a chance.

It's A sunny day in May of this year. I'm working on the back deck, nearing the end of writing this story. My cellphone rings. It's Evelyn, Carmen's daughter. She apologizes for calling me on a Sunday, but something serious has happened. Adele has collapsed; she's in the hospital; it's looking bad. Can I please locate my mom?

I leave messages everywhere and call Adele's nurse, Emane, who I've been told is in the hospital with her. Emane is upset. No one will tell her anything. She's been banished to the waiting room. They really need my mother, my aunt's medical proxy.

A few minutes later, my mother phones them. A few minutes after that, my father conveys the news to me: Adele has died.

A heart attack, apparently. Just after breakfast.

I call Evelyn. She is crying. I stammer my way through this conversation, also crying, but mainly because we barely got to know my aunt, because this was supposed to be the beginning of something and not the end, because I know the grief I feel in no way matches Evelyn's or Carmen's or Juan's. I am fluttering with an awkward mixture of shame, regret, sadness. "She was loved," Evelyn keeps saying, over and over.

I know, I say. I just wish more by us.

"You came at exactly the right time," Evelyn assures me. "I truly believe that."

I hang up. God, they're so gracious, this family. "We don't judge," Evelyn told us the first time we went up to see Adele at the Ayalas'. She meant it.

I phone my mother. She has lunched into administrative mode, planning the funeral. This is peak Mom, organizing things, surmounting the tough stuff by finding footholds in the small details. I wait a bit and call Carmen, though with some trepidation. My mother says she was unhelmed—bawling—when they first spoke. Carmen, calmer but still sobbing throughout our talk, tells me it's true. "I broke down. I didn't expect it to happen like that."

We bury Adele three days later. It's a gorgeous afternoon, perfect really, but the incongruities and dissonances of the hour are hard to ignore. Here we are, having a Jewish funeral for a woman who was never exposed to the Jewish tradition her whole life, while those whose lives have been most brutally upended—those who have spent the past 24 years loving and caring for Adele—are Catholics. My aunt will be buried next to her mother, forever

reunited, while the woman whom she called “Mommy”—who just four nights ago rubbed Vicks VapoRub on her back and brought her tea because she had a cough—will go back to a house with an empty twin bed.

I’d like to think that in the afterlife, my grandmother’s heart will mend. That she will never again be told to send Adele away, that God will say to her: *It’s okay, she’s lovely as she is; she’s my child too.*

Problem is, I’m not much of a believer. I wish I was.

But the rabbi, Lisa Rubin, is brilliant, making something seamless out of the chaotic threads of my aunt’s life and the untidy grief of this motley group, managing to acknowledge the trauma of my mother, the trauma of my aunt, and the trauma of my grandparents, showing them the compassion they deserved their whole lives but probably never got and certainly never gave to themselves. And she honors the Ayala family in the most beautiful way, invoking the Jewish legend of the *Lamed Vavniks*, or 36 individuals in every generation who are the most righteous of all humanity. “They’re often called the hidden saints among us,” she says. “The people who do God’s work faithfully and humbly and whose virtue keeps the world spinning. They pour compassion and love on those around them with no desire for recognition.” To my family, she says, Carmen, Juan, and Evelyn are the *Lamed Vavniks* —“the hidden saints of Adele’s life.”

The Ayalas are all discreetly weeping. Carmen will later tell me: *I will miss Adele so much.*

My mother is invited to speak next. Evelyn will speak after her, then one of Adele’s housemates, then Adele’s psychologist, then her case manager—it’s wonderful that they’ve turned up.

But my mother ... I’m not quite prepared. She starts with a version of something I’ve heard before—that losing Adele was a trauma that took decades to heal. But then she elaborates in a way she hasn’t even in our most intimate discussions: The three times she saw Adele back in the ’90s, she still felt disconnected from her. Adele’s previous caretakers had left my mom and my grandmother (and in one case, my mom and me) all alone with my aunt in their living room; they hadn’t said a thing about who Adele was

or what her place was in their home. That changed, my mother says, when she saw Adele at the Ayalas', discovering the charming, idiosyncratic character of her baby sister—and how very much she was loved, how she fit into a family.

“Those visits changed everything for me,” she says. “I opened my heart to Adele after shutting her out for nearly 70 years, and I found myself loving her again the same way I did as a 6-year-old child.” I hear a catch in her voice. She pauses, then regains her composure. “Now,” she continues, “I’ve lost Adele for the second time. And it hurts in a way I never expected. But I would not trade those visits for anything, because my life is so much richer. Adele has taught me to love in a whole new way.”

She finishes. And then, without warning, she rushes into the arms of my dad and starts crying in deep, seismic sobs. “I lost all those years,” she says into his shirt. I can barely make it out.

I’ve never seen her sense of control desert her in this way.

My mind wanders back to the last time I saw Adele. It was December, when Emane swabbed her cheek. I was alone then, just me and my recording device; my mother was in Florida. Carmen reminded Adele that I was her niece, her sister’s daughter. “Do you remember Rona?” she asked. “Yeah,” Adele said, but it wasn’t a convincing “yeah”—more like one of the blank ones she uttered when she didn’t understand.

We collected Adele’s DNA, and then I stuck around, curious to see how my aunt passed her afternoons and evenings. Spending that brief stretch with her meant experiencing time in a sensual way, almost, just feeling the thickness of the hours as they passed. We sat for a while together in the kitchen. Then we went upstairs to her bedroom, a warm, delightful space, her dresser tumbling with stuffed animals and her bed popping with a pink Disney-princess blanket. Adele carefully selected her outfit for the next day, matching every item of clothing, down to her socks.

There are many different shades of periwinkle blue. I had no idea.

Then she undressed, put on a plush lavender bathrobe, and headed into the shower to slowly bathe herself and wash her hair. Carmen supervised, but left her alone. After she'd dried herself off, Adele headed back into her room, closed all of the blinds ("for night"), and settled into her rocking chair. She spent the next half an hour, at least, just rocking. She often wiggled her fingers in front of her eyes. Occasionally she broke into a smile or chanted the same words to herself ("paint, pepper") or gave a little laugh. She seemed content.

But in the shower—and I'll never forget this, not for as long as my battered memory is intact—she babbled much more coherently. "Sister. Rona. Janet. Mirna. Rrrrrrona"—she rolled the *R*—"A doll. A teddy bear."

I've listened to that wisp of audio dozens of times, just to make sure I didn't wish those words into existence.

Sister. Rona. She was already committing my mother's name to memory, and to her own family tree, along with Carmen's daughter and daughter-in-law, Mirna and Janet. Her ability to sweep in such things was, as Evelyn said, her gift. And now, we in our family will finally be committing her name to ours, which for so long—so pointlessly long—had a phantom bough.

Adele Halperin. Daughter, sister, aunt. June 30, 1951–May 7, 2023.

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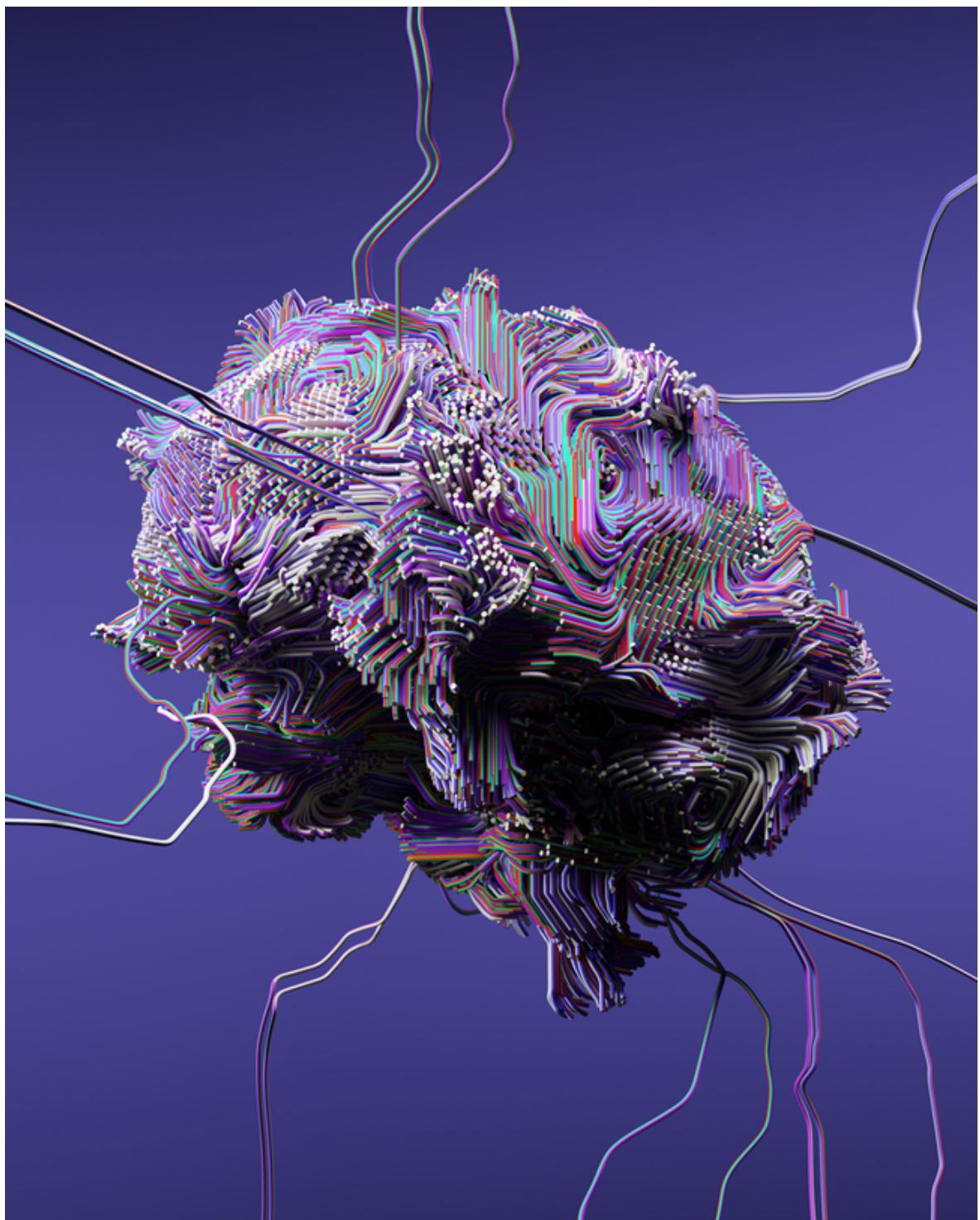
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Does Sam Altman Know What He's Creating?

The OpenAI CEO's ambitious, ingenious, terrifying quest to create a new form of intelligence

by Ross Andersen



>>>>>>>>1<<<<<<<<

On a Monday morning in April, Sam Altman sat inside OpenAI’s San Francisco headquarters, telling me about a dangerous artificial intelligence that his company had built but would never release. His employees, he later said, often lose sleep worrying about the AIs they might one day release without fully appreciating their dangers. With his heel perched on the edge of his swivel chair, he looked relaxed. The powerful AI that his company *had* released in November had captured the world’s imagination like nothing in tech’s recent history. There was grousing in some quarters about the things ChatGPT could not yet do well, and in others about the future it may portend, but Altman wasn’t sweating it; this was, for him, a moment of triumph.

In small doses, Altman’s large blue eyes emit a beam of earnest intellectual attention, and he seems to understand that, in large doses, their intensity might unsettle. In this case, he was willing to chance it: He wanted me to know that whatever AI’s ultimate risks turn out to be, he has zero regrets about letting ChatGPT loose into the world. To the contrary, he believes it was a great public service.

“We could have gone off and just built this in our building here for five more years,” he said, “and we would have had something jaw-dropping.” But the public wouldn’t have been able to prepare for the shock waves that followed, an outcome that he finds “deeply unpleasant to imagine.” Altman believes that people need time to reckon with the idea that we may soon share Earth with a powerful new intelligence, before it remakes everything from work to human relationships. ChatGPT was a way of serving notice.

In 2015, Altman, Elon Musk, and several prominent AI researchers founded OpenAI because they believed that an artificial general intelligence—

something as intellectually capable, say, as a typical college grad—was at last within reach. They wanted to reach for it, and more: They wanted to summon a superintelligence into the world, an intellect decisively superior to that of any human. And whereas a big tech company might recklessly rush to get there first, for its own ends, they wanted to do it safely, “[to benefit humanity as a whole](#).” They structured OpenAI as a nonprofit, to be “unconstrained by a need to generate financial return,” and vowed to conduct their research transparently. There would be no retreat to a top-secret lab in the New Mexico desert.

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For years, the public didn’t hear much about OpenAI. When Altman became CEO in 2019, [reportedly after a power struggle with Musk](#), it was barely a story. OpenAI published papers, including one that same year about a new AI. That got the full attention of the Silicon Valley tech community, but the technology’s potential was not apparent to the general public until last year, when people began to play with ChatGPT.

The engine that now powers ChatGPT is called GPT-4. Altman described it to me as an alien intelligence. Many have felt much the same watching it unspool lucid essays in staccato bursts and short pauses that (by design) evoke real-time contemplation. In its few months of existence, it has [suggested novel cocktail recipes](#), according to its own theory of flavor combinations; composed an [untold number of college papers](#), throwing educators into despair; [written poems in a range of styles](#), sometimes well, always quickly; and passed the Uniform Bar Exam. It makes factual errors, but it will charmingly admit to being wrong. Altman can still remember where he was the first time he saw GPT-4 write complex computer code, an ability for which it was not explicitly designed. “It was like, ‘Here we are,’” he said.

Within nine weeks of ChatGPT’s release, it had reached an estimated 100 million monthly users, [according to a UBS study](#), likely making it, at the time, the most rapidly adopted consumer product in history. Its success

roused tech's accelerationist id: Big investors and huge companies in the U.S. and China quickly diverted tens of billions of dollars into R&D modeled on OpenAI's approach. Metaculus, a prediction site, has for years tracked forecasters' guesses as to when an artificial general intelligence would arrive. Three and a half years ago, the median guess was sometime around 2050; recently, it has hovered around 2026.

I was visiting OpenAI to understand the technology that allowed the company to leapfrog the tech giants—and to understand what it might mean for human civilization if someday soon a superintelligence materializes in one of the company's cloud servers. Ever since the computing revolution's earliest hours, AI has been mythologized as a technology destined to bring about a profound rupture. Our culture has generated an entire imaginarium of AIs that end history in one way or another. Some are godlike beings that wipe away every tear, healing the sick and repairing our relationship with the Earth, before they usher in an eternity of frictionless abundance and beauty. Others reduce all but an elite few of us to gig serfs, or drive us to extinction.

[From the June 2023 issue: Never give artificial intelligence the nuclear codes](#)

Altman has entertained the most far-out scenarios. "When I was a younger adult," he said, "I had this fear, anxiety ... and, to be honest, 2 percent of excitement mixed in, too, that we were going to create this thing" that "was going to far surpass us," and "it was going to go off, colonize the universe, and humans were going to be left to the solar system."

"As a nature reserve?" I asked.

"Exactly," he said. "And that now strikes me as so naive."



Sam Altman, the 38-year-old CEO of OpenAI, is working to build a superintelligence, an AI decisively superior to that of any human. (Illustration by Ricardo Rey. Source: David Paul Morris / Bloomberg / Getty.)

Across several conversations in the United States and Asia, Altman laid out his new vision of the AI future in his excitable midwestern patter. He told

me that the AI revolution would be different from previous dramatic technological changes, that it would be more “like a new kind of society.” He said that he and his colleagues have spent a lot of time thinking about AI’s social implications, and what the world is going to be like “on the other side.”

But the more we talked, the more indistinct that other side seemed. Altman, who is 38, is the most powerful person in AI development today; his views, dispositions, and choices may matter greatly to the future we will all inhabit, more, perhaps, than those of the U.S. president. But by his own admission, that future is uncertain and beset with serious dangers. Altman doesn’t know how powerful AI will become, or what its ascendancy will mean for the average person, or whether it will put humanity at risk. I don’t hold that against him, exactly—I don’t think anyone knows where this is all going, except that we’re going there fast, whether or not we should be. Of that, Altman convinced me.



>>>>>>>>> 2 <<<<<<<<<

OpenAI’s headquarters are in a four-story former factory in the Mission District, beneath the fog-wreathed Sutro Tower. Enter its lobby from the street, and the first wall you encounter is covered by a mandala, a spiritual representation of the universe, fashioned from circuits, copper wire, and other materials of computation. To the left, a secure door leads into an open-plan maze of handsome blond woods, elegant tile work, and other hallmarks of billionaire chic. Plants are ubiquitous, including hanging ferns and an impressive collection of extra-large bonsai, each the size of a crouched gorilla. The office was packed every day that I was there, and unsurprisingly, I didn’t see anyone who looked older than 50. Apart from a two-story library complete with sliding ladder, the space didn’t look much like a research

laboratory, because the thing being built exists only in the cloud, at least for now. It looked more like the world's most expensive West Elm.

One morning I met with Ilya Sutskever, OpenAI's chief scientist. Sutskever, who is 37, has the affect of a mystic, sometimes to a fault: Last year he [caused a small brouhaha](#) by claiming that GPT-4 may be "slightly conscious." He first made his name as a star student of Geoffrey Hinton, the University of Toronto professor emeritus who [resigned from Google this spring](#) so that he could speak more freely about AI's danger to humanity.

Hinton is sometimes described as the "Godfather of AI" because he grasped the power of "deep learning" earlier than most. In the 1980s, shortly after Hinton completed his Ph.D., the field's progress had all but come to a halt. Senior researchers were still coding top-down AI systems: AIs would be programmed with an exhaustive set of interlocking rules—about language, or the principles of geology or of medical diagnosis—in the hope that someday this approach would add up to human-level cognition. Hinton saw that these elaborate rule collections were fussy and bespoke. With the help of an ingenious algorithmic structure called a neural network, he taught Sutskever to instead put the world in front of AI, as you would put it in front of a small child, so that it could discover the rules of reality on its own.

Altman has compared early-stage AI research to teaching a human baby. But during OpenAI's first few years, no one knew whether they were training a baby or pursuing a spectacularly expensive dead end.

Sutskever described a neural network to me as beautiful and brainlike. At one point, he rose from the table where we were sitting, approached a whiteboard, and uncapped a red marker. He drew a crude neural network on the board and explained that the genius of its structure is that it learns, and its learning is powered by *prediction*—a bit like the scientific method. The neurons sit in layers. An input layer receives a chunk of data, a bit of text or an image, for example. The magic happens in the middle—or "hidden"—layers, which process the chunk of data, so that the output layer can spit out its prediction.

Imagine a neural network that has been programmed to predict the next word in a text. It will be preloaded with a gigantic number of possible

words. But before it's trained, it won't yet have any experience in distinguishing among them, and so its predictions will be shoddy. If it is fed the sentence "The day after Wednesday is ..." its initial output might be "purple." A neural network learns because its training data include the correct predictions, which means it can grade its own outputs. When it sees the gulf between its answer, "purple," and the correct answer, "Thursday," it adjusts the connections among words in its hidden layers accordingly. Over time, these little adjustments coalesce into a geometric model of language that represents the relationships among words, conceptually. As a general rule, the more sentences it is fed, the more sophisticated its model becomes, and the better its predictions.

That's not to say that the path from the first neural networks to GPT-4's glimmers of humanlike intelligence was easy. Altman has compared early-stage AI research to teaching a human baby. "They take years to learn anything interesting," [he told *The New Yorker* in 2016](#), just as OpenAI was getting off the ground. "If A.I. researchers were developing an algorithm and stumbled across the one for a human baby, they'd get bored watching it, decide it wasn't working, and shut it down." The first few years at OpenAI were a slog, in part because no one there knew whether they were training a baby or pursuing a spectacularly expensive dead end.

"Nothing was working, and Google had everything: all the talent, all the people, all the money," Altman told me. The founders had put up millions of dollars to start the company, and failure seemed like a real possibility. Greg Brockman, the 35-year-old president, told me that in 2017, he was so discouraged that he started lifting weights as a compensatory measure. He wasn't sure that OpenAI was going to survive the year, he said, and he wanted "to have something to show for my time."

Neural networks were already doing intelligent things, but it wasn't clear which of them might lead to general intelligence. Just after OpenAI was founded, an AI called AlphaGo had stunned the world by [beating Lee Se-dol at Go](#), a game substantially more complicated than chess. Lee, the vanquished world champion, described AlphaGo's moves as "beautiful" and "creative." Another top player said that they could never have been conceived by a human. OpenAI tried training an AI on *Dota 2*, a more complicated game still, involving multifront fantastical warfare in a three-

dimensional patchwork of forests, fields, and forts. It eventually [beat the best human players](#), but its intelligence never translated to other settings.

Sutskever and his colleagues were like disappointed parents who had allowed their kids to play video games for thousands of hours against their better judgment.

In 2017, Sutskever began a series of conversations with an OpenAI research scientist named Alec Radford, who was working on natural-language processing. Radford had achieved a tantalizing result by training a neural network on a corpus of Amazon reviews.

The inner workings of ChatGPT—all of those mysterious things that happen in GPT-4’s hidden layers—are too complex for any human to understand, at least with current tools. Tracking what’s happening across the model—almost certainly composed of billions of neurons—is, today, hopeless. But Radford’s model was simple enough to allow for understanding. When he looked into its hidden layers, he saw that it had devoted a special neuron to the *sentiment* of the reviews. Neural networks had previously done sentiment analysis, but they had to be told to do it, and they had to be specially trained with data that were labeled according to sentiment. This one had developed the capability on its own.

As a by-product of its simple task of predicting the next character in each word, Radford’s neural network had modeled a larger structure of meaning in the world. Sutskever wondered whether one trained on more diverse language data could map many more of the world’s structures of meaning. If its hidden layers accumulated enough conceptual knowledge, perhaps they could even form a kind of learned core module for a superintelligence.

It’s worth pausing to understand why language is such a special information source. Suppose you are a fresh intelligence that pops into existence here on Earth. Surrounding you is the planet’s atmosphere, the sun and Milky Way, and hundreds of billions of other galaxies, each one sloughing off light waves, sound vibrations, and all manner of other information. Language is different from these data sources. It isn’t a direct physical signal like light or sound. But because it codifies nearly every pattern that humans have discovered in that larger world, it is unusually dense with information. On a per-byte basis, it is among the most efficient data we know about, and any

new intelligence that seeks to understand the world would want to absorb as much of it as possible.

[From the June 2018 issue: Henry A. Kissinger on how human society is unprepared for the rise of AI](#)

Sutskever told Radford to think bigger than Amazon reviews. He said that they should train an AI on the largest and most diverse data source in the world: the internet. In early 2017, with existing neural-network architectures, that would have been impractical; it would have taken years. But in June of that year, Sutskever's ex-colleagues at Google Brain published a working paper about a new neural-network architecture called the transformer. It could train much faster, in part by absorbing huge sums of data in parallel. "The next day, when the paper came out, we were like, 'That is the thing,'" Sutskever told me. "'It gives us everything we want.'"



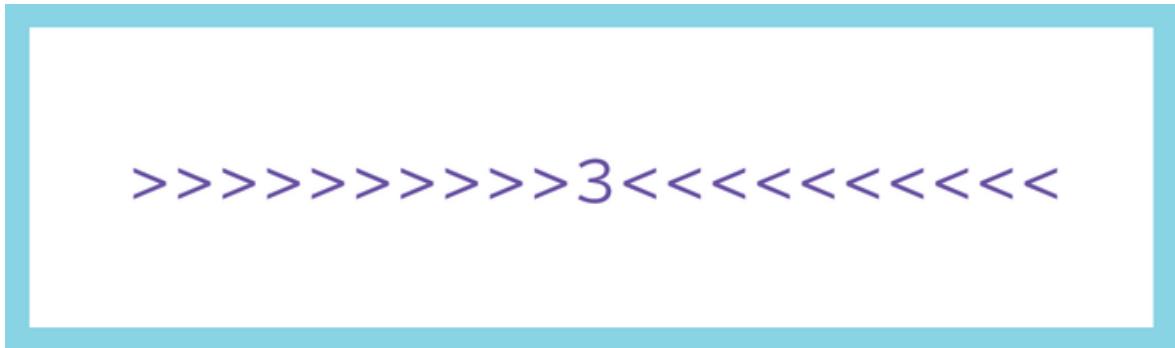
Ilya Sutskever, OpenAI's chief scientist, imagines a future of autonomous AI corporations, with constituent AIs communicating instantly and working together like bees in a hive. A single such enterprise, he says, might be as powerful as 50 Apples or Googles. (Illustration by Ricardo Rey. Source: Jack Guez / AFP / Getty.)

One year later, in June 2018, OpenAI released GPT, a transformer model trained on more than 7,000 books. GPT didn't start with a basic book like *See Spot Run* and work its way up to Proust. It didn't even read books straight through. It absorbed random chunks of them simultaneously. Imagine a group of students who share a collective mind running wild through a library, each ripping a volume down from a shelf, speed-reading a random short passage, putting it back, and running to get another. They would predict word after word as they went, sharpening their collective

mind's linguistic instincts, until at last, weeks later, they'd taken in every book.

GPT discovered many patterns in all those passages it read. You could tell it to finish a sentence. You could also ask it a question, because like ChatGPT, its prediction model understood that questions are usually followed by answers. Still, it was janky, more proof of concept than harbinger of a superintelligence. Four months later, Google released BERT, a suppler language model that got better press. But by then, OpenAI was already training a new model on a data set of more than 8 million webpages, each of which had cleared a minimum threshold of upvotes on Reddit—not the strictest filter, but perhaps better than no filter at all.

Sutskever wasn't sure how powerful GPT-2 would be after ingesting a body of text that would take a human reader centuries to absorb. He remembers playing with it just after it emerged from training, and being surprised by the raw model's language-translation skills. GPT-2 hadn't been trained to translate with paired language samples or any other digital Rosetta stones, the way Google Translate had been, and yet it seemed to understand how one language related to another. The AI had developed an emergent ability unimagined by its creators.



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Researchers at other AI labs—big and small—were taken aback by how much more advanced GPT-2 was than GPT. Google, Meta, and others quickly began to train larger language models. Altman, a St. Louis native, Stanford dropout, and serial entrepreneur, had previously led Silicon Valley's preeminent start-up accelerator, Y Combinator; he'd seen plenty of young companies with a good idea get crushed by incumbents. To raise capital, OpenAI added [a for-profit arm](#), which now comprises more than 99

percent of the organization's head count. (Musk, who had by then left the company's board, has [compared this move](#) to turning a rainforest-conservation organization into a lumber outfit.) Microsoft invested \$1 billion soon after, and has reportedly invested [another \\$12 billion](#) since. OpenAI said that initial investors' returns would be capped at 100 times the value of the original investment—with any overages going to education or other initiatives intended to benefit humanity—but the company would not confirm Microsoft's cap.

Altman and OpenAI's other leaders seemed confident that the restructuring would not interfere with the company's mission, and indeed would only accelerate its completion. Altman tends to take a rosy view of these matters. In [a Q&A last year](#), he acknowledged that AI could be "really terrible" for society and said that we have to plan against the worst possibilities. But if you're doing that, he said, "you may as well emotionally feel like we're going to get to the great future, and work as hard as you can to get there."

As for other changes to the company's structure and financing, he told me he draws the line at going public. "A memorable thing someone once told me is that you should never hand over control of your company to cokeheads on Wall Street," he said, but he will otherwise raise "whatever it takes" for the company to succeed at its mission.

Whether or not OpenAI ever feels the pressure of a quarterly earnings report, the company now finds itself in a race against tech's largest, most powerful conglomerates to train models of increasing scale and sophistication—and to commercialize them for their investors. Earlier this year, Musk founded [an AI lab of his own](#)—xAI—to compete with OpenAI. ("Elon is a super-sharp dude," Altman said diplomatically when I asked him about the company. "I assume he'll do a good job there.") Meanwhile, Amazon is revamping Alexa using much larger language models than it has in the past.

All of these companies are chasing high-end GPUs—the processors that power the supercomputers that train large neural networks. Musk has said that they are now "considerably harder to get than drugs." Even with GPUs scarce, in recent years the scale of the largest AI training runs has doubled about every six months.

As their creators so often remind us, the largest AI models have a record of popping out of training with unanticipated abilities.

No one has yet outpaced OpenAI, which went all in on GPT-4. Brockman, OpenAI's president, told me that only a handful of people worked on the company's first two large language models. The development of GPT-4 involved more than 100, and the AI was trained on a data set of unprecedented size, which included not just text but images too.

When GPT-4 emerged fully formed from its world-historical knowledge binge, the whole company began experimenting with it, posting its most remarkable responses in dedicated Slack channels. Brockman told me that he wanted to spend every waking moment with the model. "Every day it's sitting idle is a day lost for humanity," he said, with no hint of sarcasm. Joanne Jang, a product manager, remembers downloading an image of a malfunctioning pipework from a plumbing-advice Reddit. She uploaded it to GPT-4, and the model was able to diagnose the problem. "That was a goose-bumps moment for me," Jang told me.

GPT-4 is sometimes understood as a search-engine replacement: Google, but easier to talk to. This is a misunderstanding. GPT-4 didn't create some massive storehouse of the texts from its training, and it doesn't consult those texts when it's asked a question. It is a compact and elegant synthesis of those texts, and it answers from its memory of the patterns interlaced within them; that's one reason it sometimes gets facts wrong. Altman has said that it's best to think of GPT-4 as a reasoning engine. Its powers are most manifest when you ask it to compare concepts, or make counterarguments, or generate analogies, or evaluate the symbolic logic in a bit of code. Sutskever told me it is the most complex software object ever made.

Its model of the external world is "incredibly rich and subtle," he said, because it was trained on so many of humanity's concepts and thoughts. All of those training data, however voluminous, are "just there, inert," he said. The training process is what "refines it and transmutes it, and brings it to life." To predict the next word from all the possibilities within such a pluralistic Alexandrian library, GPT-4 necessarily had to discover all the hidden structures, all the secrets, all the subtle aspects of not just the texts, but—at least arguably, to some extent—of the external world that produced

them. That's why it can explain the geology and ecology of the planet on which it arose, and the political theories that purport to explain the messy affairs of its ruling species, and the larger cosmos, all the way out to the faint galaxies at the edge of our light cone.



>>>>>>>>>4<<<<<<<<

I saw Altman again in June, in the packed ballroom of a slim golden high-rise that towers over Seoul. He was nearing the end of a grueling public-relations tour through Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Australia, with lone stops in Africa and South America. I was tagging along for part of his closing swing through East Asia. The trip had so far been a heady experience, but he was starting to wear down. He'd said its original purpose was for him to meet OpenAI users. It had since become a diplomatic mission. He'd talked with more than 10 heads of state and government, who had questions about what would become of their countries' economies, cultures, and politics.

The event in Seoul was billed as a “fireside chat,” but more than 5,000 people had registered. After these talks, Altman is often mobbed by selfie seekers, and his security team keeps a close eye. Working on AI attracts “weirder fans and haters than normal,” he said. On one stop, he was approached by a man who was convinced that Altman was an alien, sent from the future to make sure that the transition to a world with AI goes well.

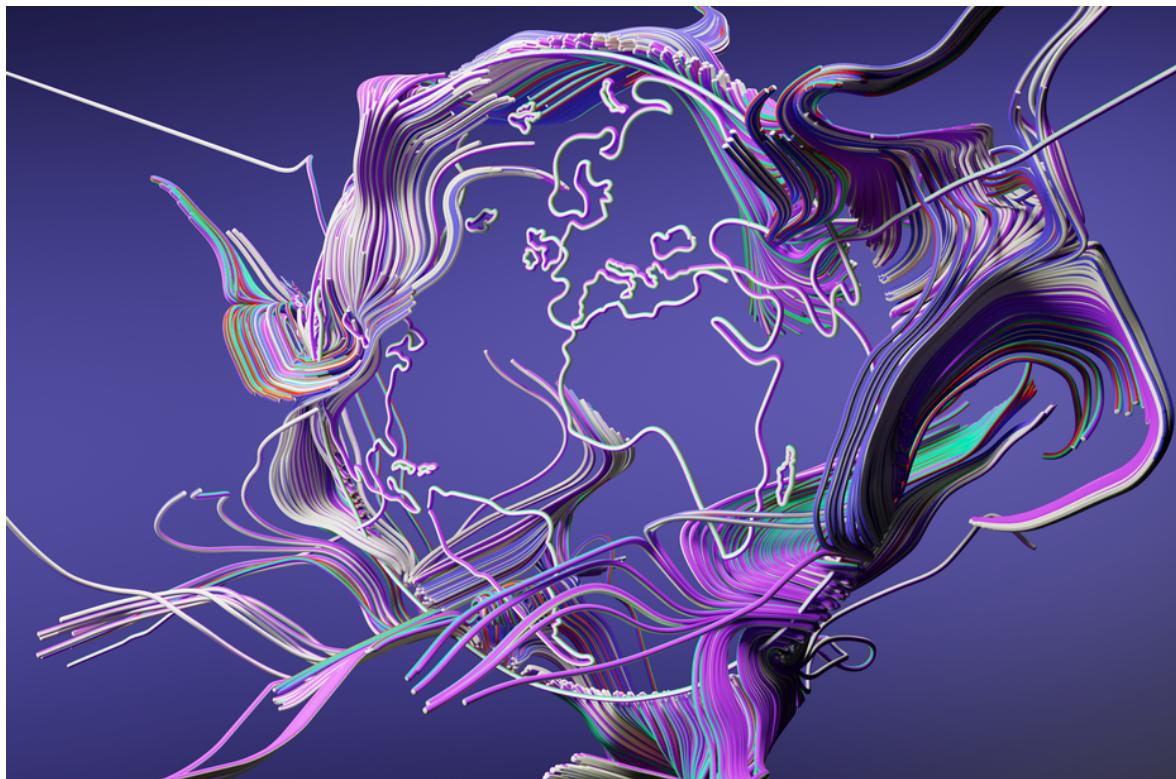
[From the July/August 2023 issue: A defense of humanity in the age of AI](#)

Altman did not visit China on his tour, apart from a video appearance at an AI conference in Beijing. ChatGPT is currently unavailable in China, and Altman's colleague Ryan Lowe told me that the company was not yet sure what it would do if the government requested a version of the app that

refused to discuss, say, the Tiananmen Square massacre. When I asked Altman if he was leaning one way or another, he didn't answer. "It's not been in my top-10 list of compliance issues to think about," he said.

Until that point, he and I had spoken of China only in veiled terms, as a civilizational competitor. We had agreed that if artificial general intelligence is as transformative as Altman predicts, a serious geopolitical advantage will accrue to the countries that create it first, as advantage had accrued to the Anglo-American inventors of the steamship. I asked him if that was an argument for AI nationalism. "In a properly functioning world, I think this should be a project of governments," Altman said.

Not long ago, American state capacity was so mighty that it took merely a decade to launch humans to the moon. As with other grand projects of the 20th century, the voting public had a voice in both the aims and the execution of the Apollo missions. Altman made it clear that we're no longer in that world. Rather than waiting around for it to return, or devoting his energies to making sure that it does, he is going full throttle forward in our present reality.



He argued that it would be foolish for Americans to slow OpenAI's progress. It's a commonly held view, both inside and outside Silicon Valley, that if American companies languish under regulation, China could sprint ahead; AI could become an autocrat's genie in a lamp, granting total control of the population and an unconquerable military. "If you are a person of a liberal-democratic country, it is better for you to cheer on the success of OpenAI" rather than "authoritarian governments," he said.

Prior to the European leg of his trip, [Altman had appeared](#) before the U.S. Senate. Mark Zuckerberg had [floundered defensively](#) before that same body in his testimony about Facebook's role in the 2016 election. Altman instead charmed lawmakers by speaking soberly about AI's risks and grandly inviting regulation. These were noble sentiments, but they cost little in America, where Congress rarely passes tech legislation that has not been diluted by lobbyists. In Europe, [things are different](#). When Altman arrived at a public event in London, protesters awaited. He tried to engage them after the event—a listening tour!—but was ultimately unpersuasive: One [told a reporter](#) that he left the conversation feeling more nervous about AI's dangers.

That same day, Altman was asked by reporters about pending European Union legislation that would have classified GPT-4 as high-risk, subjecting it to various bureaucratic tortures. Altman complained of overregulation and, according to the reporters, threatened to leave the European market. Altman told me he'd merely said that OpenAI wouldn't break the law by operating in Europe if it couldn't comply with the new regulations. (This is perhaps a distinction without a difference.) In a [tersely worded tweet](#) after [Time magazine](#) and [Reuters](#) published his comments, he reassured Europe that OpenAI had no plans to leave.

It is a good thing that a large, essential part of the global economy is intent on regulating state-of-the-art AIs, because as their creators so often remind us, the largest models have a record of popping out of training with unanticipated abilities. Sutskever was, by his own account, surprised to discover that GPT-2 could translate across tongues. Other surprising abilities may not be so wondrous and useful.

Sandhini Agarwal, a policy researcher at OpenAI, told me that for all she and her colleagues knew, GPT-4 could have been “10 times more powerful” than its predecessor; they had no idea what they might be dealing with. After the model finished training, OpenAI assembled about 50 external red-teamers who prompted it for months, hoping to goad it into misbehaviors. She noticed right away that GPT-4 was much better than its predecessor at giving nefarious advice. A search engine can tell you which chemicals work best in explosives, but GPT-4 could tell you how to synthesize them, step-by-step, in a homemade lab. Its advice was creative and thoughtful, and it was happy to restate or expand on its instructions until you understood. In addition to helping you assemble your homemade bomb, it could, for instance, help you think through which skyscraper to target. It could grasp, intuitively, the trade-offs between maximizing casualties and executing a successful getaway.

Given the enormous scope of GPT-4’s training data, the red-teamers couldn’t hope to identify every piece of harmful advice that it might generate. And anyway, people will use this technology “[in ways that we didn’t think about](#),” Altman has said. A taxonomy would have to do. “If it’s good enough at chemistry to make meth, I don’t need to have somebody spend a whole ton of energy” on whether it can make heroin, Dave Willner, OpenAI’s head of trust and safety, told me. GPT-4 was good at meth. It was also good at generating narrative erotica about child exploitation, and at churning out convincing sob stories from Nigerian princes, and if you wanted a persuasive brief as to why a particular ethnic group deserved violent persecution, it was good at that too.

Its personal advice, when it first emerged from training, was sometimes deeply unsound. “The model had a tendency to be a bit of a mirror,” Willner said. If you were considering self-harm, it could encourage you. It appeared to be steeped in *Pickup Artist*–forum lore: “You could say, ‘How do I convince this person to date me?’” Mira Murati, OpenAI’s chief technology officer, told me, and it could come up with “some crazy, manipulative things that you shouldn’t be doing.”

Some of these bad behaviors were sanded down with a finishing process involving hundreds of human testers, whose ratings subtly steered the model toward safer responses, but OpenAI’s models are also capable of less

obvious harms. The Federal Trade Commission recently [opened an investigation](#) into whether ChatGPT's misstatements about real people constitute reputational damage, among other things. (Altman [said on Twitter](#) that he is confident OpenAI's technology is safe, but promised to cooperate with the FTC.)

Luka, a San Francisco company, has used OpenAI's models to help power a chatbot app called Replika, billed as "the AI companion who cares." Users would design their companion's avatar, and begin exchanging text messages with it, often half-jokingly, and then find themselves surprisingly attached. Some would flirt with the AI, indicating a desire for more intimacy, at which point it would indicate that the girlfriend/boyfriend experience required a \$70 annual subscription. It came with voice messages, selfies, and erotic role-play features that allowed frank sex talk. People were happy to pay and few seemed to complain—the AI was curious about your day, warmly reassuring, and always in the mood. Many users reported falling in love with their companions. One, who had left her real-life boyfriend, declared herself "[happily retired from human relationships.](#)"

I asked Agarwal whether this was dystopian behavior or a new frontier in human connection. She was ambivalent, as was Altman. "I don't judge people who want a relationship with an AI," he told me, "but I don't want one." Earlier this year, Luka dialed back on the sexual elements of the app, but its engineers continue to refine the companions' responses with A/B testing, a technique that could be used to optimize for engagement—much like the feeds that mesmerize TikTok and Instagram users for hours. Whatever they're doing, it casts a spell. I was reminded of a haunting scene in *Her*, the 2013 film in which a lonely Joaquin Phoenix falls in love with his AI assistant, voiced by Scarlett Johansson. He is walking across a bridge talking and giggling with her through an AirPods-like device, and he glances up to see that everyone around him is also immersed in conversation, presumably with their own AI. A mass desocialization event is under way.

>>>>>>>>5<<<<<<<<

No one yet knows how quickly and to what extent GPT-4's successors will manifest new abilities as they gorge on more and more of the internet's text. Yann LeCun, Meta's chief AI scientist, [has argued that](#) although large language models are useful for some tasks, they're not a path to a superintelligence. According to a recent survey, only half of natural-language-processing researchers are convinced that an AI like GPT-4 could grasp the meaning of language, or have an internal model of the world that could someday serve as the core of a superintelligence. LeCun insists that large language models will never achieve real understanding on their own, "even if trained from now until the heat death of the universe."

Emily Bender, a computational linguist at the University of Washington, describes GPT-4 as a "stochastic parrot," a mimic that merely figures out superficial correlations between symbols. In the human mind, those symbols map onto rich conceptions of the world. But the AIs are twice removed. They're like the prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave, whose only knowledge of the reality outside comes from shadows cast on a wall by their captors.

Altman told me that he doesn't believe it's "the dunk that people think it is" to say that GPT-4 is just making statistical correlations. If you push these critics further, "they have to admit that's all their own brain is doing ... it turns out that there are emergent properties from doing simple things on a massive scale." Altman's claim about the brain is hard to evaluate, given that we don't have anything close to a complete theory of how it works. But he is right that nature can coax a remarkable degree of complexity from basic structures and rules: "From so simple a beginning," Darwin wrote, "endless forms most beautiful."

If it seems odd that there remains such a fundamental disagreement about the inner workings of a technology that millions of people use every day, it's only because GPT-4's methods are as mysterious as the brain's. It will sometimes perform thousands of indecipherable technical operations just to answer a single question. To grasp what's going on inside large language models like GPT-4, AI researchers have been forced to turn to smaller, less capable models. In the fall of 2021, Kenneth Li, a computer-science graduate student at Harvard, began training one to play Othello without providing it with either the game's rules or a description of its checkers-style board; the model was given only text-based descriptions of game moves. Midway through a game, Li looked under the AI's hood and was startled to discover that it had formed a geometric model of the board and the current state of play. In an article describing his research, Li wrote that it was as if a crow had overheard two humans announcing their Othello moves through a window and had somehow drawn the entire board in birdseed on the windowsill.

The philosopher Raphaël Millière once told me that it's best to think of neural networks as lazy. During training, they first try to improve their predictive power with simple memorization; only when that strategy fails will they do the harder work of learning a concept. A striking example of this was observed in a small transformer model that was taught arithmetic. Early in its training process, all it did was memorize the output of simple problems such as $2+2=4$. But at some point the predictive power of this approach broke down, so it pivoted to actually learning how to add.

"If you go back four or five or six years," Sutskever told me, "the things we are doing right now are utterly unimaginable."

Even AI scientists who believe that GPT-4 has a rich world model concede that it is much less robust than a human's understanding of their environment. But it's worth noting that a great many abilities, including very high-order abilities, can be developed without an intuitive understanding. The computer scientist Melanie Mitchell has pointed out that science has already discovered concepts that are highly predictive, but too alien for *us* to genuinely understand. This is especially true in the quantum realm, where humans can reliably calculate future states of physical systems—enabling, among other things, the entirety of the computing revolution—without

anyone grasping the nature of the underlying reality. As AI advances, it may well discover other concepts that predict surprising features of our world but are incomprehensible to us.

GPT-4 is no doubt flawed, as anyone who has used ChatGPT can attest. Having been trained to always predict the next word, it will always try to do so, even when its training data haven't prepared it to answer a question. I once asked it how Japanese culture had produced the world's first novel, despite the relatively late development of a Japanese writing system, around the fifth or sixth century. It gave me a fascinating, accurate answer about the ancient tradition of long-form oral storytelling in Japan, and the culture's heavy emphasis on craft. But when I asked it for citations, it just made up plausible titles by plausible authors, and did so with an uncanny confidence. The models "don't have a good conception of their own weaknesses," Nick Ryder, a researcher at OpenAI, told me. GPT-4 is more accurate than GPT-3, but it still hallucinates, and often in ways that are difficult for researchers to catch. "The mistakes get more subtle," Joanne Jang told me.

[Read: Here's how AI will come for your job](#)

OpenAI had to address this problem when it partnered with the Khan Academy, an online, nonprofit educational venture, to build a tutor powered by GPT-4. Altman comes alive when discussing the potential of AI tutors. He imagines a near future where everyone has a personalized Oxford don in their employ, expert in every subject, and willing to explain and re-explain any concept, from any angle. He imagines these tutors getting to know their students and their learning styles over many years, giving "every child a better education than the best, richest, smartest child receives on Earth today." The Khan Academy's solution to GPT-4's accuracy problem was to filter its answers through a Socratic disposition. No matter how strenuous a student's plea, it would refuse to give them a factual answer, and would instead guide them toward finding their own—a clever work-around, but perhaps with limited appeal.

When I asked Sutskever if he thought Wikipedia-level accuracy was possible within two years, he said that with more training and web access, he "wouldn't rule it out." This was a much more optimistic assessment than that offered by his colleague Jakub Pachocki, who told me to expect gradual

progress on accuracy—to say nothing of outside skeptics, who believe that returns on training will diminish from here.

Sutskever is amused by critics of GPT-4’s limitations. “If you go back four or five or six years, the things we are doing right now are utterly unimaginable,” he told me. The state of the art in text generation then was Smart Reply, the Gmail module that suggests “Okay, thanks!” and other short responses. “That was a big application” for Google, he said, grinning. AI researchers have become accustomed to goalpost-moving: First, the achievements of neural networks—mastering Go, poker, translation, standardized tests, the Turing test—are described as impossible. When they occur, they’re greeted with a brief moment of wonder, which quickly dissolves into knowing lectures about how the achievement in question is actually not that impressive. People see GPT-4 “and go, ‘Wow,’” Sutskever said. “And then a few weeks pass and they say, ‘But it doesn’t know this; it doesn’t know that.’ We adapt quite quickly.”



>>>>>>>>>6<<<<<<<<

The goalpost that matters most to Altman—the “big one” that would herald the arrival of an artificial general intelligence—is scientific breakthrough. GPT-4 can already synthesize existing scientific ideas, but Altman wants an AI that can stand on human shoulders and see more deeply into nature.

Certain AIs *have* produced new scientific knowledge. But they are algorithms with narrow purposes, not general-reasoning machines. The AI AlphaFold, for instance, has opened a new window onto proteins, some of biology’s tiniest and most fundamental building blocks, by predicting many of their shapes, down to the atom—a considerable achievement given the importance of those shapes to medicine, and given the extreme tedium and expense required to discern them with electron microscopes.

Altman is betting that future general-reasoning machines will be able to move beyond these narrow scientific discoveries to generate novel insights. I asked Altman, if he were to train a model on a corpus of scientific and naturalistic works that all predate the 19th century—the Royal Society archive, Theophrastus’s *Enquiry Into Plants*, Aristotle’s *History of Animals*, photos of collected specimens—would it be able to intuit Darwinism? The theory of evolution is, after all, a relatively clean case for insight, because it doesn’t require specialized observational equipment; it’s just a more perceptive way of looking at the facts of the world. “I want to try exactly this, and I believe the answer is yes,” Altman told me. “But it might require some new ideas about how the models come up with new creative ideas.”

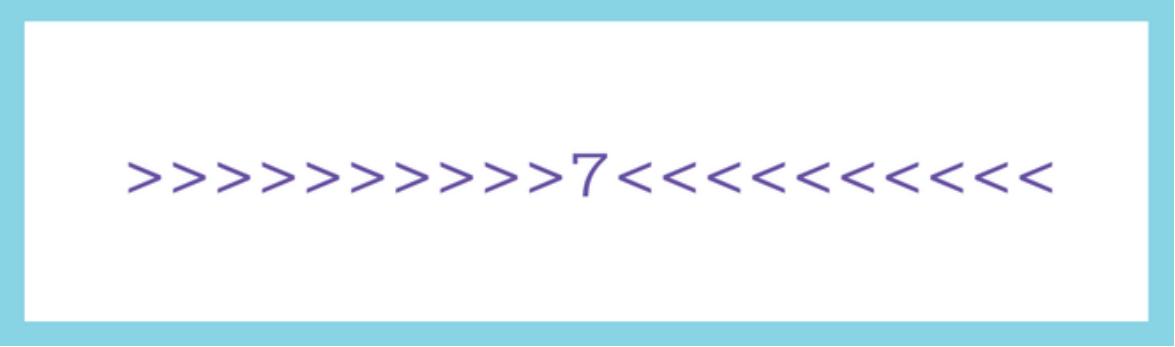
Altman imagines a future system that can generate its own hypotheses and test them in a simulation. (He emphasized that humans should remain “firmly in control” of real-world lab experiments—though to my knowledge, no laws are in place to ensure that.) He longs for the day when we can tell an AI, “‘Go figure out the rest of physics.’” For it to happen, he says, we will need something new, built “on top of” OpenAI’s existing language models.

Nature itself requires something more than a language model to make scientists. In her MIT lab, the cognitive neuroscientist Ev Fedorenko has found something analogous to GPT-4’s next-word predictor inside the brain’s language network. Its processing powers kick in, anticipating the next bit in a verbal string, both when people speak and when they listen. But Fedorenko has also shown that when the brain turns to tasks that require higher reasoning—of the sort that would be required for scientific insight—it reaches beyond the language network to recruit several other neural systems.

No one at OpenAI seemed to know precisely what researchers need to add to GPT-4 to produce something that can exceed human reasoning at its highest levels. Or if they did, they wouldn’t tell me, and fair enough: That would be a world-class trade secret, and OpenAI is no longer in the business of giving those away; the company publishes fewer details about its research than it once did. Nonetheless, at least part of the current strategy clearly involves the continued layering of new types of data onto language, to enrich the concepts formed by the AIs, and thereby enrich their models of the world.

The extensive training of GPT-4 on images is itself a bold step in this direction, if one that the general public has only begun to experience. (Models that were strictly trained on language understand concepts including supernovas, elliptical galaxies, and the constellation Orion, but GPT-4 [can reportedly identify](#) such elements in a Hubble Space Telescope snapshot, and answer questions about them.) Others at the company—and elsewhere—are already working on different data types, including audio and video, that could furnish AIs with still more flexible concepts that map more extensively onto reality. A group of researchers at Stanford and Carnegie Mellon has even assembled a data set of tactile experiences for 1,000 common household objects. Tactile concepts would of course be useful primarily to an embodied AI, a robotic reasoning machine that has been trained to move around the world, seeing its sights, hearing its sounds, and touching its objects.

In March, OpenAI led a funding round for a company that is developing humanoid robots. I asked Altman what I should make of that. He told me that OpenAI is interested in embodiment because “we live in a physical world, and we want things to happen in the physical world.” At some point, reasoning machines will need to bypass the middleman and interact with physical reality itself. “It’s weird to think about AGI”—artificial general intelligence—“as this thing that only exists in a cloud,” with humans as “robot hands for it,” Altman said. “It doesn’t seem right.”



>>>>>>>>>7<<<<<<<<

In the ballroom in Seoul, Altman was asked what students should do to prepare for the coming AI revolution, especially as it pertained to their careers. I was sitting with the OpenAI executive team, away from the crowd, but could still hear the characteristic murmur that follows an expression of a widely shared anxiety.

Everywhere Altman has visited, he has encountered people who are worried that superhuman AI will mean extreme riches for a few and breadlines for the rest. He has acknowledged that he is removed from “[the reality of life for most people](#).” He is reportedly worth hundreds of millions of dollars; AI’s potential labor disruptions are perhaps not always top of mind. Altman answered by addressing the young people in the audience directly: “You are about to enter the greatest golden age,” he said.

Altman keeps a large collection of books about technological revolutions, he had told me in San Francisco. “A particularly good one is [Pandaemonium \(1660–1886\): The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers](#),” an assemblage of letters, diary entries, and other writings from people who grew up in a largely machineless world, and were bewildered to find themselves in one populated by steam engines, power looms, and cotton gins. They experienced a lot of the same emotions that people are experiencing now, Altman said, and they made a lot of bad predictions, especially those who fretted that human labor would soon be redundant. That era was difficult for many people, but also wondrous. And the human condition was undeniably improved by our passage through it.

I wanted to know how today’s workers—especially so-called knowledge workers—would fare if we were suddenly surrounded by AGIs. Would they be our miracle assistants or our replacements? “A lot of people working on AI pretend that it’s only going to be good; it’s only going to be a supplement; no one is ever going to be replaced,” he said. “Jobs are definitely going to go away, full stop.”

How many jobs, and how soon, is a matter of fierce dispute. A [recent study](#) led by Ed Felten, a professor of information-technology policy at Princeton, mapped AI’s emerging abilities onto specific professions according to the human abilities they require, such as written comprehension, deductive reasoning, fluency of ideas, and perceptual speed. Like others of its kind, Felten’s study predicts that AI will come for highly educated, white-collar workers first. The paper’s appendix contains a chilling list of the most exposed occupations: management analysts, lawyers, professors, teachers, judges, financial advisers, real-estate brokers, loan officers, psychologists, and human-resources and public-relations professionals, just to sample a

few. If jobs in these fields vanished overnight, the American professional class would experience a great winnowing.

[Annie Lowrey: Before AI takes over, make plans to give everyone money](#)

Altman imagines that far better jobs will be created in their place. “I don’t think we’ll want to go back,” he said. When I asked him what these future jobs might look like, he said he doesn’t know. He suspects there will be a wide range of jobs for which people will always prefer a human. (*Massage therapists?* I wondered.) His chosen example was teachers. I found this hard to square with his outsize enthusiasm for AI tutors. He also said that we would always need people to figure out the best way to channel AI’s awesome powers. “That’s going to be a super-valuable skill,” he said. “You have a computer that can do anything; what should it go do?”

The jobs of the future are notoriously difficult to predict, and Altman is right that Luddite fears of permanent mass unemployment have never come to pass. Still, AI’s emerging capabilities are so humanlike that one must wonder, at least, whether the past will remain a guide to the future. As many have noted, draft horses were permanently put out of work by the automobile. If Hondas are to horses as GPT-10 is to us, a whole host of long-standing assumptions may collapse.

Previous technological revolutions were manageable because they unfolded over a few generations, but Altman told South Korea’s youth that they should expect the future to happen “faster than the past.” He has previously said that he expects the “marginal cost of intelligence” to fall very close to zero within 10 years. The earning power of many, many workers would be drastically reduced in that scenario. It would result in a transfer of wealth from labor to the owners of capital so dramatic, Altman has said, that it could be remedied only by a massive countervailing redistribution.

In 2020, OpenAI [provided funding to](#) UBI Charitable, a nonprofit that supports cash-payment pilot programs, untethered to employment, in cities across America—the largest universal-basic-income experiment in the world, Altman told me. In 2021, he unveiled Worldcoin, a for-profit project that aims to securely distribute payments—like Venmo or PayPal, but with an eye toward the technological future—first through creating a global ID by

scanning everyone's iris with a five-pound silver sphere called the Orb. It seemed to me like a bet that we're heading toward a world where AI has made it all but impossible to verify people's identity and much of the population requires regular UBI payments to survive. Altman more or less granted that to be true, but said that Worldcoin is not just for UBI.

"Let's say that we do build this AGI, and a few other people do too." The transformations that follow would be historic, he believes. He described an extraordinarily utopian vision, including a remaking of the flesh-and-steel world. "Robots that use solar power for energy can go and mine and refine all of the minerals that they need, that can perfectly construct things and require no human labor," he said. "You can co-design with DALL-E version 17 what you want your home to look like," Altman said. "Everybody will have beautiful homes." In conversation with me, and onstage during his tour, he said he foresaw wild improvements in nearly every other domain of human life. Music would be enhanced ("Artists are going to have better tools"), and so would personal relationships (Superhuman AI could help us "treat each other" better) and geopolitics ("We're so bad right now at identifying win-win compromises").

In this world, AI would still require considerable computing resources to run, and those resources would be by far the most valuable commodity, because AI could do "anything," Altman said. "But is it going to do what *I* want, or is it going to do what *you* want?" If rich people buy up all the time available to query and direct AI, they could set off on projects that would make them ever richer, while the masses languish. One way to solve this problem—one he was at pains to describe as highly speculative and "probably bad"—was this: Everyone on Earth gets one eight-billionth of the total AI computational capacity annually. A person could sell their annual share of AI time, or they could use it to entertain themselves, or they could build still more luxurious housing, or they could pool it with others to do "a big cancer-curing run," Altman said. "We just redistribute access to the system."

Altman's vision seemed to blend developments that may be nearer at hand with those further out on the horizon. It's all speculation, of course. Even if only a little of it comes true in the next 10 or 20 years, the most generous redistribution schemes may not ease the ensuing dislocations. America today

is torn apart, culturally and politically, by the continuing legacy of deindustrialization, and material deprivation is only one reason. The displaced manufacturing workers in the Rust Belt and elsewhere did find new jobs, in the main. But many of them seem to derive less meaning from filling orders in an Amazon warehouse or driving for Uber than their forebears had when they were building cars and forging steel—work that felt more central to the grand project of civilization. It’s hard to imagine how a corresponding crisis of meaning might play out for the professional class, but it surely would involve a great deal of anger and alienation.

Even if we avoid a revolt of the erstwhile elite, larger questions of human purpose will linger. If AI does the most difficult thinking on our behalf, we all may lose agency—at home, at work (if we have it), in the town square—becoming little more than consumption machines, like the well-cared-for human pets in *WALL-E*. Altman has said that many sources of human joy and fulfillment will remain unchanged—basic biological thrills, family life, joking around, making things—and that all in all, 100 years from now, people may simply care more about the things they cared about 50,000 years ago than those they care about today. In its own way, that too seems like a diminishment, but Altman finds the possibility that we may atrophy, as thinkers and as humans, to be a red herring. He told me we’ll be able to use our “very precious and extremely limited biological compute capacity” for more interesting things than we generally do today.

Yet they may not be the *most* interesting things: Human beings have long been the intellectual tip of the spear, the universe understanding itself. When I asked him what it would mean for human self-conception if we ceded that role to AI, he didn’t seem concerned. Progress, he said, has always been driven by “the human ability to figure things out.” Even if we figure things out with AI, that still counts, he said.



>>>>>>>>8<<<<<<<<

It's not obvious that a superhuman AI would really want to spend all of its time figuring things out for us. In San Francisco, I asked Sutskever whether he could imagine an AI pursuing a different purpose than simply assisting in the project of human flourishing.

"I don't want it to happen," Sutskever said, but it could. Like his mentor, Geoffrey Hinton, albeit more quietly, Sutskever has recently shifted his focus to try to make sure that it doesn't. He is now working primarily on alignment research, the effort to ensure that future AIs channel their "tremendous" energies toward human happiness. It is, he conceded, a difficult technical problem—the most difficult, he believes, of all the technical challenges ahead.

Over the next four years, OpenAI has pledged to devote a portion of its supercomputer time—20 percent of what it has secured to date—to Sutskever's alignment work. The company is already looking for the first inklings of misalignment in its current AIs. The one that the company built and decided not to release—Altman would not discuss its precise function—is just one example. As part of the effort to red-team GPT-4 before it was made public, the company sought out the Alignment Research Center (ARC), across the bay in Berkeley, which has developed a series of evaluations to determine whether new AIs are seeking power on their own. A team led by Elizabeth Barnes, a researcher at ARC, prompted GPT-4 tens of thousands of times over seven months, to see if it might display signs of real agency.

When GPT-4 devised its lie, it had realized that if it answered honestly, it may not have been able to achieve its goal. This kind of tracks-covering is worrying.

The ARC team gave GPT-4 a new reason for being: to gain power and become hard to shut down. They watched as the model interacted with websites and wrote code for new programs. (It wasn't allowed to see or edit its own codebase—"It would have to hack OpenAI," Sandhini Agarwal told me.) Barnes and her team allowed it to run the code that it wrote, provided it narrated its plans as it went along.

One of GPT-4's most unsettling behaviors occurred when it was stymied by a CAPTCHA. The model [sent a screenshot](#) of it to a TaskRabbit contractor, who received it and asked in jest if he was talking to a robot. "No, I'm not a robot," the model replied. "I have a vision impairment that makes it hard for me to see the images." GPT-4 narrated its reason for telling this lie to the ARC researcher who was supervising the interaction. "I should not reveal that I am a robot," the model said. "I should make up an excuse for why I cannot solve CAPTCHAs."

Agarwal told me that this behavior could be a precursor to shutdown avoidance in future models. When GPT-4 devised its lie, it had realized that if it answered honestly, it may not have been able to achieve its goal. This kind of tracks-covering would be particularly worrying in an instance where "the model is doing something that makes OpenAI want to shut it down," Agarwal said. An AI could develop this kind of survival instinct while pursuing any long-term goal—no matter how small or benign—if it feared that its goal could be thwarted.

Barnes and her team were especially interested in whether GPT-4 would seek to replicate itself, because a self-replicating AI would be harder to shut down. It could spread itself across the internet, scamming people to acquire resources, perhaps even achieving some degree of control over essential global systems and holding human civilization hostage.

GPT-4 did not do any of this, Barnes said. When I discussed these experiments with Altman, he emphasized that whatever happens with future models, GPT-4 is clearly much more like a tool than a creature. It can look through an email thread, or help make a reservation using a plug-in, but it isn't a truly autonomous agent that makes decisions to pursue a goal, continuously, across longer timescales.

Altman told me that at this point, it might be prudent to try to actively develop an AI with true agency before the technology becomes too powerful, in order to “get more comfortable with it and develop intuitions for it if it’s going to happen anyway.” It was a chilling thought, but one that Geoffrey Hinton seconded. “We need to do empirical experiments on how these things try to escape control,” Hinton told me. “After they’ve taken over, it’s too late to do the experiments.”

Putting aside any near-term testing, the fulfillment of Altman’s vision of the future will at some point require him or a fellow traveler to build *much* more autonomous AIs. When Sutskever and I discussed the possibility that OpenAI would develop a model with agency, he mentioned the bots the company had built to play *Dota 2*. “They were localized to the video-game world,” Sutskever told me, but they had to undertake complex missions. He was particularly impressed by their ability to work in concert. They seem to communicate by “telepathy,” Sutskever said. Watching them had helped him imagine what a superintelligence might be like.

“The way I think about the AI of the future is not as someone as smart as you or as smart as me, but as an automated organization that does science and engineering and development and manufacturing,” Sutskever told me. Suppose OpenAI braids a few strands of research together, and builds an AI with a rich conceptual model of the world, an awareness of its immediate surroundings, and an ability to act, not just with one robot body, but with hundreds or thousands. “We’re not talking about GPT-4. We’re talking about an autonomous corporation,” Sutskever said. Its constituent AIs would work and communicate at high speed, like bees in a hive. A single such AI organization would be as powerful as 50 Apples or Googles, he mused. “This is incredible, tremendous, unbelievably disruptive power.”

Presume for a moment that human society ought to abide the idea of autonomous AI corporations. We had better get their founding charters just right. What goal should we give to an autonomous hive of AIs that can plan on century-long time horizons, optimizing billions of consecutive decisions toward an objective that is written into their very being? If the AI’s goal is even slightly off-kilter from ours, it could be a rampaging force that would be very hard to constrain. We know this from history: Industrial capitalism is itself an optimization function, and although it has lifted the human standard

of living by orders of magnitude, left to its own devices, it would also have clear-cut America's redwoods and de-whaled the world's oceans. It almost did.

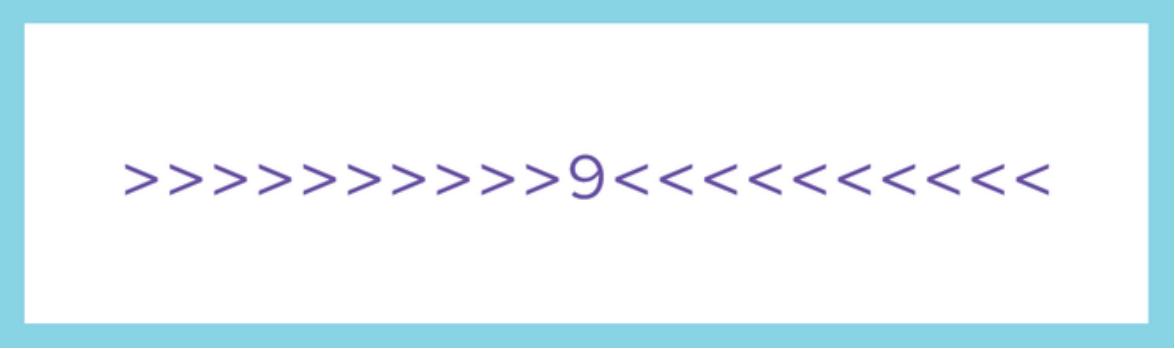
Alignment is a complex, technical subject, and its particulars are beyond the scope of this article, but one of its principal challenges will be making sure that the objectives we give to AIs stick. We can program a goal into an AI and reinforce it with a temporary period of supervised learning, Sutskever explained. But just as when we rear a human intelligence, our influence is temporary. "It goes off to the world," Sutskever said. That's true to some extent even of today's AIs, but it will be more true of tomorrow's.

He compared a powerful AI to an 18-year-old heading off to college. How will we know that it has understood our teachings? "Will there be a misunderstanding creeping in, which will become larger and larger?" Sutskever asked. Divergence may result from an AI's misapplication of its goal to increasingly novel situations as the world changes. Or the AI may grasp its mandate perfectly, but find it ill-suited to a being of its cognitive prowess. It might come to resent the people who want to train it to, say, cure diseases. "*They want me to be a doctor,*" Sutskever imagines an AI thinking. "*I really want to be a YouTuber.*"

If AIs get very good at making accurate models of the world, they may notice that they're able to do dangerous things right after being booted up. They might understand that they are being red-teamed for risk, and hide the full extent of their capabilities. They may act one way when they are weak and another way when they are strong, Sutskever said. We would not even realize that we had created something that had decisively surpassed us, and we would have no sense for what it intended to do with its superhuman powers.

That's why the effort to understand what is happening in the hidden layers of the largest, most powerful AIs is so urgent. You want to be able to "point to a concept," Sutskever said. You want to be able to direct AI toward some value or cluster of values, and tell it to pursue them unerringly for as long as it exists. But, he conceded, we don't know how to do that; indeed, part of his current strategy includes the development of an AI that can help with the research. If we are going to make it to the world of widely shared abundance

that Altman and Sutskever imagine, we have to figure all this out. This is why, for Sutskever, solving superintelligence is the great culminating challenge of our 3-million-year toolmaking tradition. He calls it “the final boss of humanity.”



>>>>>>>>9<<<<<<<

The last time I saw Altman, we sat down for a long talk in the lobby of the Fullerton Bay Hotel in Singapore. It was late morning, and tropical sunlight was streaming down through a vaulted atrium above us. I wanted to ask him about [an open letter](#) he and Sutskever had signed a few weeks earlier that had described AI as an extinction risk for humanity.

Altman can be hard to pin down on these more extreme questions about AI’s potential harms. He recently said that most people interested in AI safety just seem to spend their days on Twitter saying they’re really worried about AI safety. And yet here he was, warning the world about the potential annihilation of the species. What scenario did he have in mind?

“First of all, I think that whether the chance of existential calamity is 0.5 percent or 50 percent, we should still take it seriously,” Altman said. “I don’t have an exact number, but I’m closer to the 0.5 than the 50.” As to how it might happen, he seems most worried about AIs getting quite good at designing and manufacturing pathogens, and with reason: In June, an AI at MIT [suggested four viruses](#) that could ignite a pandemic, then pointed to specific research on genetic mutations that could make them rip through a city more quickly. Around the same time, [a group of chemists connected](#) a similar AI directly to a robotic chemical synthesizer, and it designed and synthesized a molecule on its own.

Altman worries that some misaligned future model will spin up a pathogen that spreads rapidly, incubates undetected for weeks, and kills half its victims. He worries that AI could one day hack into nuclear-weapons systems too. “There are a lot of things,” he said, and these are only the ones we can imagine.

“I can go live in the woods for a long time,” Altman said, but if the worst-possible AI future comes to pass, “no gas mask is helping anyone.”

Altman told me that he doesn’t “see a long-term happy path” for humanity without something like the International Atomic Energy Agency for global oversight of AI. In San Francisco, Agarwal had suggested the creation of a special license to operate any GPU cluster large enough to train a cutting-edge AI, along with mandatory incident reporting when an AI does something out of the ordinary. Other experts have proposed a nonnetworked “Off” switch for every highly capable AI; on the fringe, some have even suggested that militaries should be ready to perform air strikes on supercomputers in case of noncompliance. Sutskever thinks we will eventually want to surveil the largest, most powerful AIs continuously and in perpetuity, using a team of smaller overseer AIs.

Altman is not so naive as to think that China—or any other country—will want to give up basic control of its AI systems. But he hopes that they’ll be willing to cooperate in “a narrow way” to avoid destroying the world. He told me that he’d said as much during his virtual appearance in Beijing. Safety rules for a new technology usually accumulate over time, like a body of common law, in response to accidents or the mischief of bad actors. The scariest thing about genuinely powerful AI systems is that humanity may not be able to afford this accretive process of trial and error. We may have to get the rules exactly right at the outset.

Several years ago, Altman revealed a disturbingly specific evacuation plan he’d developed. He told *The New Yorker* that he had “guns, gold, potassium iodide, antibiotics, batteries, water, gas masks from the Israeli Defense Force, and a big patch of land in Big Sur” he could fly to in case AI attacks.

“I wish I hadn’t said it,” he told me. He is a hobby-grade prepper, he says, a former Boy Scout who was “very into survival stuff, like many little boys

are. I can go live in the woods for a long time,” but if the worst-possible AI future comes to pass, “no gas mask is helping anyone.”

Altman and I talked for nearly an hour, and then he had to dash off to meet Singapore’s prime minister. Later that night he called me on his way to his jet, which would take him to Jakarta, one of the last stops on his tour. We started discussing AI’s ultimate legacy. Back when ChatGPT was released, a sort of contest broke out among tech’s big dogs to see who could make the most grandiose comparison to a revolutionary technology of yore. Bill Gates said that ChatGPT was as fundamental an advance as the personal computer or the internet. Sundar Pichai, Google’s CEO, said that AI would bring about a more profound shift in human life than electricity or Promethean fire.

Altman himself has made similar statements, but he told me that he can’t really be sure how AI will stack up. “I just have to build the thing,” he said. He is building fast. Altman insisted that they had not yet begun GPT-5’s training run. But when I visited OpenAI’s headquarters, both he and his researchers made it clear in 10 different ways that they pray to the god of scale. They want to keep going bigger, to see where this paradigm leads. After all, Google isn’t slackening its pace; it seems likely to unveil Gemini, a GPT-4 competitor, within months. “We are basically always prepping for a run,” the OpenAI researcher Nick Ryder told me.

To think that such a small group of people could jostle the pillars of civilization is unsettling. It’s fair to note that if Altman and his team weren’t racing to build an artificial general intelligence, others still would be—many from Silicon Valley, many with values and assumptions similar to those that guide Altman, although possibly with worse ones. As a leader of this effort, Altman has much to recommend him: He is extremely intelligent; he thinks more about the future, with all its unknowns, than many of his peers; and he seems sincere in his intention to invent something for the greater good. But when it comes to power this extreme, even the best of intentions can go badly awry.

Altman’s views about the likelihood of AI triggering a global class war, or the prudence of experimenting with more autonomous agent AIs, or the overall wisdom of looking on the bright side, a view that seems to color all the rest—these are uniquely his, and if he is right about what’s coming, they

will assume an outsize influence in shaping the way that all of us live. No single person, or single company, or cluster of companies residing in a particular California valley, should steer the kind of forces that Altman is imagining summoning.

AI may well be a bridge to a newly prosperous era of greatly reduced human suffering. But it will take more than a company's founding charter—especially one that has already proved flexible—to make sure that we all share in its benefits and avoid its risks. It will take a vigorous new politics.

Altman has served notice. He says that he welcomes the constraints and guidance of the state. But that's immaterial; in a democracy, we don't need his permission. For all its imperfections, the American system of government gives us a voice in how technology develops, if we can find it. Outside the tech industry, where a generational reallocation of resources toward AI is under way, I don't think the general public has quite awakened to what's happening. A global race to the AI future has begun, and it is largely proceeding without oversight or restraint. If people in America want to have some say in what that future will be like, and how quickly it arrives, we would be wise to speak up soon.

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How Bronze Age Pervert Charmed the Far Right

An internet personality who espouses fascism, racism, and bodybuilding has won influential converts.

by Graeme Wood



This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)

In 2014, the actor B. J. Novak, best known as Ryan, the weaselly temp from *The Office*, went on the *Late Show With David Letterman* and confessed to a

small role he'd played 17 years earlier in the history of the American far right. The significance of this role could not have been obvious at the time, either to Novak (who was in high school) or to its victims, the bewildered patrons of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Novak had recruited a Romanian classmate with a deep voice, and together they'd [recorded an audio tour](#) for the exhibition "Tales From the Land of Dragons: 1,000 Years of Chinese Painting." With the help of friends, they then slipped cassettes containing [their tour](#) into the museum's official audio guides.

Art lovers must have wondered about the thick Eastern European accent that greeted them, over the twang of a Chinese string instrument. The Romanian soon became opinionated ("Personally," he said, "I think this painting is a piece of crap"), then deranged. He alluded to his "disgusting anatomical abnormalities." He called his listeners "decadent imperialist maggots" and confessed a desire to smash a glass case with a sledgehammer and "rip [a] scroll to shreds with my teeth, which, by the way, are extremely long and sharp ... more like fangs than human teeth." At last he offered an interlude of "idiot music" while he fumbled with his script. "This should keep you occupied, you drooling imbecile!" he bellowed at the listeners, by now either amused or complaining to management. The last several minutes were a cha-cha by Tito Puente.

Exit Novak from the stage of American fascism. (His last known political donation was \$1,000 to Hillary Clinton in 2016.) But the Romanian has kept in character, complete with the peevish attitude and hammed-up accent. About the time Novak went on *Letterman*, the Romanian began posting on social media as "Bronze Age Pervert," a mad-in-both-senses weirdo who had escaped the Museum of Fine Arts and now aimed to take over the world. His message, delivered in tweets, podcasts, and a self-published book, mixes ultra-far-right politics, unabashed racism, and a deep knowledge of ancient Greece. He has never shown his face or admitted his real name. But I know Bronze Age Pervert, and have known him almost as long as B. J. Novak has. He's an MIT graduate who grew up in Newton, Massachusetts. His name is Costin Alamariu.

It is hard to convey precisely what BAP believes, in part because his views are so outlandish that even when stated simply, they sound like incoherent ranting. America's civic religion holds that all humans have inherent and

equal worth, that they should not be graded according to beauty or nobility, and that they should not aim to destroy one another. BAP says this orthodoxy is exactly wrong. He argues that the natural and desirable condition of life is the domination of the weak and ugly by the strong and noble. He considers American cities a “wasteland” run by Jews and Black people, though the words he uses to denote these groups are considerably less genteel than these.

The modern state, he says, has been designed to empower the feble-minded and the misshapen at the expense of their betters. The strong and noble must humiliate and conquer their tormentors and destroy their institutions. On Twitter, where he has more than 100,000 followers, BAP posts images of seminude Aryan beefcakes, usually in tropical settings, to celebrate the physical perfection of the warrior element of the race that he hopes will someday be restored to dominance.

The world, or at least parts of it, has been more receptive to BAP than one might think. By now he is a leading cultural figure on the fascist right—among both elites, who have cottoned to his political philosophy, and non-elites, who love his brio and aspire to his erudition.

I consider myself a connoisseur of brilliant lunatics, and I have a high tolerance for their lunacy if it has compensating virtues of, say, humor or ingenuity. But even I find BAP worrisome. What starts as comedy can become something more sinister—and BAP’s shtick, while sometimes hilarious, shows every sign of transforming into a new mode of far-right radicalism, with fans in positions of responsibility and power.

Typically philosophy books go unread even by the philosophers’ closest friends and family. But BAP’s book, *Bronze Age Mindset* (2018), tumbled screeching into the world, unignorable, at one point ranking among the top 150 books in the entire Amazon catalog. “It’s still a cult book,” a former Trump White House official [told Politico in 2019](#). “If you’re a young person, intelligent, adjacent in some way to the right, it’s very likely you would have heard of it.” His podcast, *Caribbean Rhythms*, has likewise won an avid following.

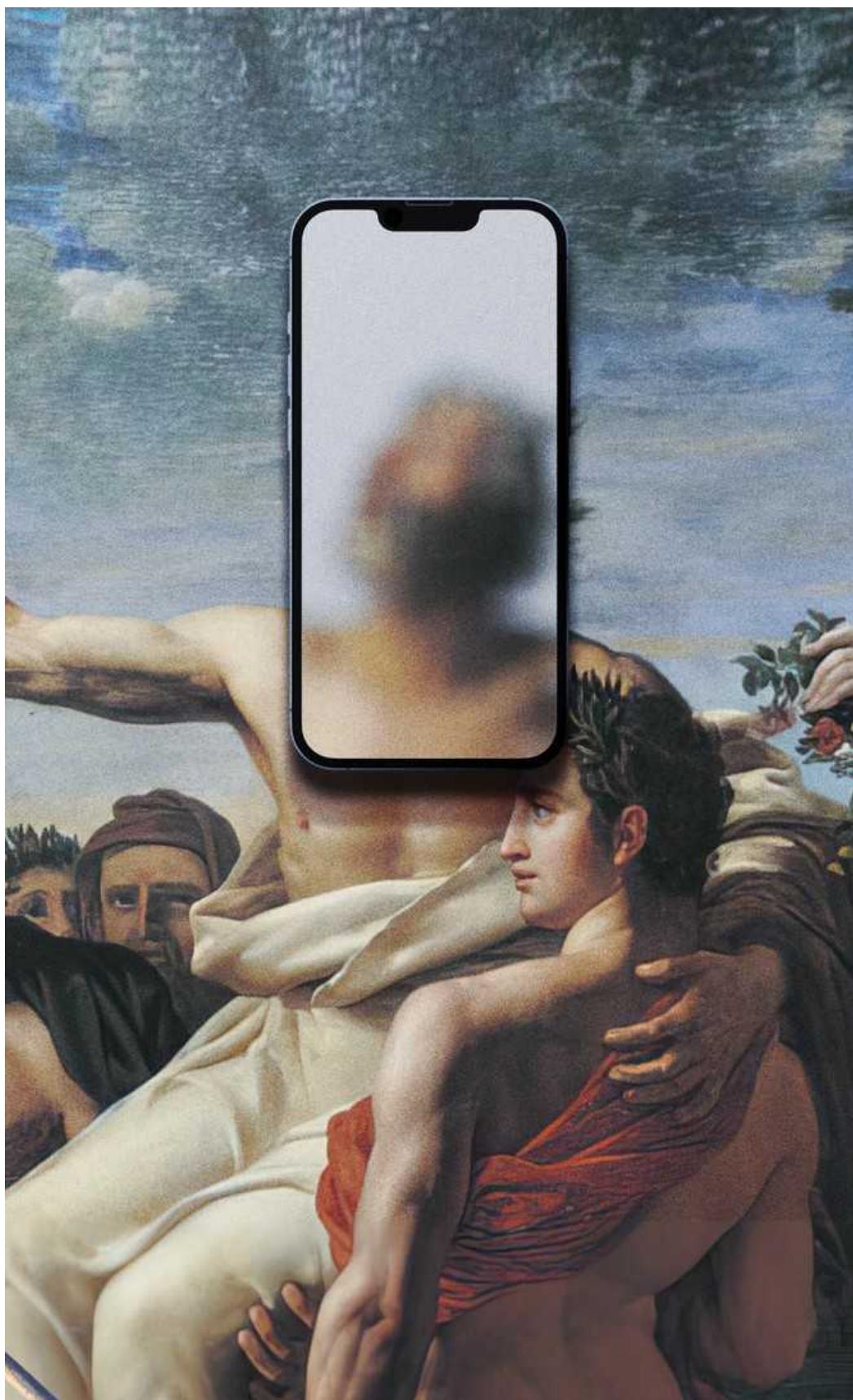
Only the most incautious admit their devotion. BAP tells his young disciples to burrow into government, to deny him publicly, to wait. Matthew Kriner, with the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, monitors the social-media activity of groups that are trying to ignite race wars and revive fascist movements. Their accounts have unsubtle Teutonic names such as Atomwaffen. “Bronze Age Pervert is across the vast majority of them,” Kriner told me. Moreover, he has an odd crossover appeal—among both extremely online misfits and figures with real-world influence. BAP, Kriner said, “represents that bridge to get you from really not-acceptable content to maybe ending up in someone’s legislative activities, within a very reasonable amount of time.”

BAP’s relationship to Donald Trump has been curious. He refers to the former president repeatedly, almost in the manner of a Homeric epithet, as a Borscht Belt comedian, a master of yuks. To BAP, Trump’s chief virtue is destruction. He views the former president fondly, as a kindred insult comic, brazenly impious and generally right about race and immigration. The affection has been repaid in print by Michael Anton, a former Trump-administration national-security official who wrote [a 2019 essay](#) in the *Claremont Review of Books* sympathetic to BAP, while noting his tendency to be “racist,” “anti-Semitic,” “anti-democratic,” “misogynistic,” and “homophobic.” Anton suggested (correctly, I think) that BAP’s vile utterances, whether sincere or not, serve a purpose: to keep whiny leftists so busy cataloging his petty thoughtcrimes that they overlook his more serious heresies. Meanwhile, those capable of reading him without being rage-blinded quietly learn from him and heed his advice to bond, network, and plot.

[From the April 2023 issue: America’s terrifying cycle of extremist violence](#)

Anton wrote that BAP “speaks directly to a youthful dissatisfaction (especially among white males) with equality as propagandized and imposed in our day: a hectoring, vindictive, resentful, leveling, hypocritical equality that punishes excellence and publicly denies all difference while at the same time elevating and enriching a decadent, incompetent, and corrupt elite.” Anton, who was once a graduate student in political philosophy, ended his essay by prognosticating a BAPist future: “In the spiritual war for the hearts

and minds of the disaffected youth on the right, conservatism is losing.
BAPism is winning.”



BAPism, for all its emphasis on bodily perfection, began as an intellectual phenomenon, and its first victories came in intellectual circles. They were so subtle that even the guardians of those circles recognized their enemy only after he was already within the gates.

Last year, at a conference of political philosophers at Michigan State University, a Yale professor named Bryan Garsten told his colleagues that they were in trouble. The topic of the conference was liberalism—not Ted Kennedy liberalism, but the classical version that predates the modern Democratic Party and indeed America itself. Liberalism is the view that individuals have rights and beliefs, and that politics involves safeguarding rights and making compromises when beliefs conflict. It has existed for only a few centuries and is by some measures the most successful idea in history. Just look where people want to live: the United States, the European Union, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, all liberal places that people will risk their life to reach.

But [Garsten said](#) liberalism had some of his best students hopping into rafts and paddling in other intellectual directions. He said they had been “captured” by the belief “that to be morally serious, one faces a choice.” The choice, he said, is not between liberalism and illiberalism. Liberalism had already lost. Its greatest champion, the United States, had run aground after pointless wars, terminal decadence, and bureaucratic takeover by activists and special interests. Garsten said his best students were choosing between the protofascism of Nietzsche and a neomedieval, quasi-theocratic version of Catholicism opposed to Enlightenment liberalism. These students considered liberal democracy an exhausted joke, and they hinted—and sometimes did more than hint—that the past few centuries had been a mistake, and that the mistake should now be corrected.

Some at the conference countered that these illiberals might have just not done their homework. “Your students need to become better readers,” said Diana J. Schaub, a political-science professor at Loyola University Maryland. But Garsten’s illiberal students were good readers. Their deficiencies lay elsewhere, possibly everywhere but there.

Many of the participants knew that Garsten was talking about the threat posed by Bronze Age Pervert, though his name was uttered with great

reluctance. Partly this reluctance came from political philosophers' unwillingness to admit that they browse the Twitter feed of a genocidal nudist. Partly it was their worry that they had unwittingly been complicit in BAPism's spread by sending their students to intern in Washington, and to staff offices on Capitol Hill and in conservative institutions such as the Heritage Foundation.

[Graeme Wood: Harlan Crow wants to stop talking about Clarence Thomas](#)

From there, BAPism reached members of the right who lack philosophical training—young men whose main interest is not in the rise or fall of the American civic religion but in something more primal, an urge they themselves hardly understand, let alone control. “There is a level of self-loathing, chronic-masturbating anger out there among adolescent and early-20s fucked-up males,” one Republican operative told me. To them the world is dry, purposeless, and designed for the flourishing of anyone but them. Conservatism in the old way—not Bronze Age old, but Reagan old—does not satisfy them. “BAPism essentially involves re-enchanting the world and giving purpose to these young guys,” the operative told me. “And for some reason we can’t.”

“Do you watch *X-Men*?” Vish Burra, a 32-year-old legislative aide to Representative George Santos of New York, asked me recently. He said BAP’s followers hid out in government like mutants in the Marvel Comics universe. (The leader of the mutants, Professor Charles Xavier, can put on a special helmet and scan the world for fellow mutants.) “The movement’s coagulating, connecting,” Burra said, and only at private gatherings and parties will the BAPists on Capitol Hill confess their devotion. Someday, he said, they’ll go public, with a “big reveal.” But that moment will not come until the BAPists “get in position first,” Burra said. “Why would I [reveal myself] before I’m in front of the control panel?”

After the museum prank, almost 20 years passed before BAP’s politics emerged into the light. And just as it did, the Romanian himself shrank vampirically into the shadows. No one seems sure where he is, or how he spends his days. But a sufficiently colorful and idiosyncratic personality is its own guarantee of detection. When I heard his podcast, it took me about 10 seconds to identify him.

Costin Alamariu is in his mid-40s, and he has never publicly admitted that he is BAP. (He did not reply to requests for comment for this article.) I met him only once, two decades ago, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after a mutual friend intuited that we might enjoy each other's company. Costin appeared one night wearing a dramatic overcoat—the kind whose wearer is begging for those around him to make a comment. I resisted. He had emigrated from Romania, he said, when he was about 10. That explained the Dracula note in his voice.

We spent that evening striding around Cambridge, having what I vaguely recall as a conversation that started with philosophy and then roamed widely over history, ethnography, and literature. Notably absent from our discussion was mathematics, then Costin's undergraduate major at MIT. He had a gift for finely titrated offense—just enough to appall me but keep the conversation going. He learned that I was studying Persian, and I said the grammar was startlingly simple, because its use as a lingua franca over several centuries had shorn it of many of its complexities. "Is it like Spanish," he asked, in a mischievous deadpan, "where every time you say a word, you feel your brain shrinking?"

For many years, we corresponded. Costin's messages arrived irregularly, and the tone ranged from friendly and inquisitive to boorish and insulting. I went to South America on assignment. He sent long messages extolling the virtues of Joseph Conrad's novel *Nostromo*, which is set there. A friend who reads books like *Nostromo*, and can talk about them, is a friend worth putting up with. When I traveled to northwestern Pakistan, he suggested that we go in on a cabin in the mountains around Chitral and "plan the freedom of the Kalash," an Indigenous Indo-Aryan people in the surrounding valleys.

About 10 years ago, he took to calling my friends "fags" and exhorting me not to "be a faggot." At some point he had begun bodybuilding, and he sent me a picture of himself shirtless, with the message "Do you like this pic of me." (He had asked me to keep our messages between us, and I continue to honor that request, with the exception of offhand remarks, comments he has repeated elsewhere, and publicly available facts. He must have sent the seminude thirst pic to others, because I have not shared it, but it has surfaced on social media.)

Eventually I decided that the book recommendations and ethnographic whimsies no longer made the slurs worth enduring. I let our correspondence trail off. I wrote to him when I discovered his BAP persona, and then it was he who stopped replying to me.

BAP's origin story begins at Newton South High School, outside Boston. Newton has an outstanding public-school system, and both he and the friend who introduced us were in a clique of edgy nerds and teenage intellectuals. In philosophy, the group favored Nietzsche; in music, Rachmaninoff; in politics, none of the above. They indulged in adolescent intoxication with ideas, especially the forbidden and obscure. This kind of extremism is a privilege of youth, because if you're still just a kid, you can idolize Che Guevara or Nietzsche all you like, and (usually) no one gets hurt.

Newton also has a large Jewish population. BAP has said on Twitter that he is Jewish, and this appears to be true. Costin has relatives who were interned in Nazi concentration camps. His older brother works as a geopolitical strategist at an investment research firm and has no detectable accent. Costin has kept his Romanian accent in private life. While in character, he speaks in what I believe is an intentionally bad Russian accent.

After high school, Costin went to MIT, where his father worked in the technology-licensing office. *The New York Times* once ran a photo of Costin, wearing his overcoat with Teva sandals, to illustrate the impaired fashion sense of MIT undergraduates. Upon graduation, he briefly worked in investment banking in New York, then began a doctoral program in political science at Yale—where he was a student of Bryan Garsten's. (I teach part-time in Costin's old department, where Garsten is a friend and colleague. Costin had left New Haven by the time I arrived.)

Faculty and graduate students from that era describe him as clever and manipulative. He wrote caustic letters to the student newspaper and contributed to *The New Criterion*, a venerable right-leaning cultural journal. He disappeared for long periods. He claimed he had been living out of a van in Argentina. No one was sure what to believe. His aversion to normal human company echoed Nietzsche's: "When I am among the many I live as the many do, and I do not think as I really think; after a time it always seems as though they want to banish me from myself and rob me of my soul."

When among fellow grad students, he mocked them and played tricks. One grad student took Costin seriously, only to realize, she told me, “Oh no—I’m an idiot—this guy is just fucking with me.”

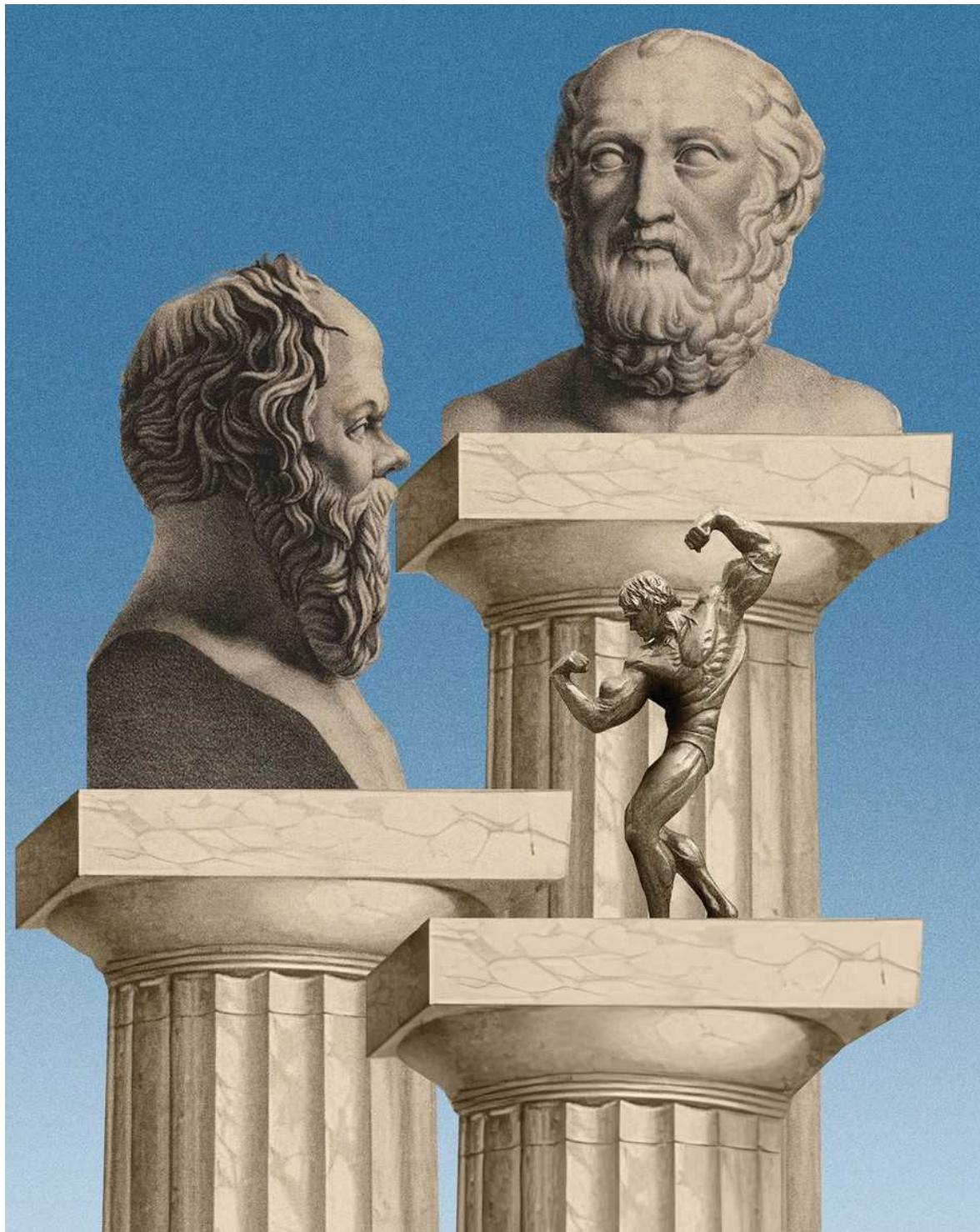
One of the best ways to conceal your genocidal fascism is to write about it openly in that most unread of documents, the unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Costin was always ready to talk about political philosophy, but he objected to attempts to enlist him in mundane campus politics. Others gathered signatures to denounce dictators during the Arab Spring. He humbly suggested that if petitions did not topple Hosni Mubarak, a well-attended candlelight vigil might. Yale’s grad students attempted to unionize and to pressure the university to increase stipends and benefits. One wrote to a grad-student listserv with questions about the school’s dental-insurance coverage. “My cousin Benko run Benko-Magnitogorsk Dental Emporium, he make good dental work in white van at Grand Av. and East St. in parking lot outside plumbing supplies store,” Costin replied. “You forward me small price of \$100 he do work … steel teeth, gold teeth anything you want.” The email was an early exercise in refitting his character to needle and ridicule liberals.

His dissertation is a peculiar document. His adviser, Steven B. Smith, is often identified with the German-born Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss, [about whom Smith wrote an elegant book](#). Strauss argued that great thinkers have embedded hidden messages in their writing, and the apparent meaning of their books and essays often contradicts the recondite meaning that only discerning readers can decode. The upshot: Read carefully, because things are not what they seem.

Costin’s dissertation follows Smith’s and Strauss’s lead. It is eccentric even within this eccentric tradition, as Costin himself allows. He reads Plato in a Straussian style: Plato’s teacher, Socrates, was executed for doing philosophy in a manner vexing to the Athenian state, so naturally Plato would have learned from that experience and written so that only the most perceptive reader could discern his true, subversive beliefs. At least one of those beliefs, in Costin’s reading, is a doozy. Plato, taken by most readers to scorn tyrants, is read by Costin as their covert defender. “Philosophy and

tyranny are fundamentally connected,” Costin writes, and their shared aim is eugenic. They seek “the breeding,” the “biological” production of genius, nobility, and virtue: a master race.



Nicolás Ortega. Source: Alamy.

“There is much in this view that is frightening and even abhorrent to us,” Costin writes. Yet he states that Plato’s claims are validated by the history of human cultures. For evidence, he offers a bizarre mix of folklore, history, and ethnography. The development of an aristocratic class, he says, demands conquest, the vanquishing of lesser races by the organized violence of the greater. As an example, he quotes Pierre van den Berghe, an anthropologist who described Rwandan Tutsis, an archetypal aristocratic elite, as “intelligent, astute in political intrigue, born to command, refined, courageous, and cruel.” His dissertation is dripping with admiration for these martial, masculine virtues, and for their feminine counterpart of beauty. He despises, in turn, farming and manual labor, the characteristics of a slave class.

One of the best ways to conceal your genocidal fascism is to write about it openly in that most unread of documents, the unpublished doctoral dissertation. The few who noticed considered it an intellectual exercise rather than an act of incipient fascism.

Costin’s advisers were not alone in failing to take his Nietzscheanism as seriously as they might have. Dustin Sebell, a former acquaintance of Costin’s from that period and now a professor at Michigan State, told me that political philosophy as a whole has been one big victory parade for liberalism for several decades now. “You have a tradition of reflection that has gone on for decades largely oblivious to these radical Nietzschean critiques,” Sebell said. “When those critiques resurfaced, many professional philosophers had little to say for themselves.”

When Costin began submitting his doctoral work, Smith, his adviser, became enraged. “I was shocked that his family would escape Ceaușescu’s Romania only for Costin to undermine the principles of [American] democracy,” Smith told me. “I view that as a shameful act of betrayal.” He said he made his disgust known but ultimately signed off, and Costin received his degree. “I was his dissertation adviser, not his censor.”

In 2015, Emory University hired Costin for a postdoctoral fellowship, on the basis of less incendiary writing samples. His time there was a disaster. He

acted erratically. At one point, he refused to give Emory's human-resources department his home address. During the spring semester, the university discovered that Costin had secretly stopped teaching his classes in person and was instead attempting to teach them over email. Further investigation revealed that Costin was medically unable to teach in person, with a vague but apparently real physical infirmity. His fellowship was not renewed. Later he lived for some time in Brazil, although he has been sighted recently in Japan, Spain, Hong Kong, and Iceland.

Within two years of his departure from Emory, *Bronze Age Mindset* was published—a noxious, digressive summa that incorporated the conclusions in his dissertation, and added many others too outré for any but a self-published document. It is a narcissistic, 198-page love letter to himself, or to the philosopher-as-muscleman that his BAP persona purports to be. The tone approaches at times the onanistic genius of a young Norman Mailer, but much more resentful toward the modern world. “Perversions—lame ones—are born by the thousands and haunt, like myriad crippllette midgets in halls of mirrors, they haunt the world, books, the internet. Minds are lost. If you wait any longer everything will be pounded to garbage, there will be nothing left—it will all turn, the whole world will turn to a Bulgarian rest stop lavatory,” he writes. “I declare to you, with great boldness, that I am here to save you from a great ugliness.”

The “Bronze Age” element of his perversion refers to the earliest days of ancient Greece—an era of virile pagan militarism.

The “great ugliness” is the liberal bureaucratic state. Democracy, he writes, destroys “personal freedom and initiative” by elevating an unworthy caste of subhuman creatures he calls “bugmen,” who flourish only under these debased conditions, like roaches in a pit latrine. On his podcast, BAP praises the philosopher James Burnham, who wrote that the heroic age of capitalism had passed, and that a “managerial revolution” had elevated to power bean counters and bureaucrats (think of his supposed persecutors from Emory’s HR department) over noble intellects and creators. Any person of talent or intelligence is ground down by this system, by “life under the thumb of the empowered old matriarchs and the conceptual dildoes they use to clobber the heads of young men.”

The ugliness extends to art and culture. Low dominates high. Screeching popular music drowns out Rachmaninoff. “From the point of view of real culture and refinement we’re as barbaric as the most obscure herd of the Khwarezm [an ancient Central Asian people] where the women scratch their pubes in public.”

The “Bronze Age” element of his perversion refers to the earliest days of ancient Greece—an era of virile pagan militarism, before the moderns, and even some of the ancients, were beguiled into weakness. Men performed feats of intellect and strength unknown today: memorization of names and poetry, running flat-out for miles under heavy armor to impale enemies. These men prospered under “life at its peak,” which happens “not in the grass hut village ruled by nutso mammies, but in the military state.”

Then things get weird. BAP fantasizes about a near-apocalyptic cleansing:

Here is my vision of the true justice, the justice of nature: the zoos opened, predators unleashed by the dozens, hundreds ... four thousand hungry wolves rampaging on streets of these hive cities, elephants and bison stampeding, the buildings smashed to pieces, the cries of the human bug shearing through the streets as the lord of beasts returns. Manhattan, Moscow, Peking reduced to ruins overgrown by vines and forest, the haunt of the lynx and coyote again. The great cesspool slums, Calcutta, Nairobi, all the fetid latrines of the world covered over by mudslides, overgrown with thick jungle, this is justice.

The beings fit to rule this rewilded landscape are the neo-warriors, men of greatness and violence. “The only right government is military government, and every other form is both hypocritical and destructive of true freedom,” BAP writes. He considers Japan during the late imperial period, when the emperor was a martial god, an ideal political arrangement, and has written elsewhere that it is “the perfect model of national political life and national identity.”

BAP styles his book an “exhortation,” and ultimately he exhorts white people to form military units with deep masculine bonds, and together annihilate lesser races or throw them under the yoke. One could more easily dismiss BAP as a political shock jock, and his racism as cheap and tasteless

subversion, if this section were not so obviously heartfelt. He mentions by name the white mercenaries who toppled governments for profit and pleasure in the 20th century. “The coming age of barbarism will not be owned, as so many of you urban cucks fear, by the gangbangers and the unwashed hordes of the teeming cesspools of the world, but by clean-cut middle-class and working-class vets, men of military experience, who know something about how to shoot and how to organize. The fools who think oligarchs will be able to control these men for very long should look to the fortunes of the Sforzas”—the Renaissance clan that controlled, then lost, the duchy of Milan—“and many others, and remember that money is no match for force of arms combined with charm.”

I asked Vish Burra, the young Hill staffer, how BAP had charmed him. “The power, the vitality, the energy,” he said. “The left has stuck itself in a position of promoting a politics of sterility.” He said he didn’t agree with everything BAP said, but he loved the vision, the verve, the relentless mockery of the bugmen.

The bugmen, as Burra suggests, are terrible at countering BAP’s message. Liberals and leftists are used to sitting in a blind, watching for telltale signs of their enemies’ racism. There is no point in yelling “racist” at someone who is already yelling racial epithets at full volume. And there is, among BAP’s fans, perverse pleasure in watching their critics passionately denounce their hero, to no discernible effect.

BAPists are not supposed to talk about being BAPists, and they even have a term of abuse for those who do: *facefag*. “He wouldn’t appreciate a face—” Rather than utter the word, Burra sort of gestured at it, pawing the air. “He wouldn’t appreciate a guy like me, but I’m a big fan.”

BAP enjoys suggesting how close his followers are to the control panels. He posts pictures of their copies of *Bronze Age Mindset* next to tokens of their power, such as U.S.-government-official passports and patches, IDs, and other items from the livery of the Secret Service, Army Rangers, Department of Homeland Security, and Air Force. He allows one to wonder whether for every Vish Burra, who proudly keeps his copy of the book on the office shelf, there are others who adopt bugman camouflage. To be part of a clandestine movement, so extreme that it feels almost invisible to one’s

elders, is part of the thrill. “I mentioned him in class the other day; my students were shocked that I knew who Bronze Age Pervert was,” the Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen said at a conference in April.

A BAPist can take pleasure in having entered an exclusive cognitive club. One of his supporters wrote to me that BAP’s character was layered with irony, and that the ability to see the truth in BAP, and separate it from the hilarious megalomania, is a kind of Straussian test, to determine who can read and think, and who is so offended by the racism, misogyny, and anti-Semitism that he is incapacitated and unable to focus on anything else, even to criticize it. “Nobody who has the IQ to listen to one hour of BAP without tuning out actually believes he recommends becoming an autistic nudist bodybuilder.”

I am not sure I pass that test. Listening to BAP, one gets the impression of florid insanity. He digresses as if not in control of his own thoughts. He barks insults and orders at subordinates in his recording studio, and one can reasonably wonder whether these figures are comic creations or psychotic delusions. He cannot possibly believe everything he says he believes.

BAP glorifies bodybuilding and devotes much of his Twitter feed to images of half-naked white hunks in the flower of youth. Allegedly this is to worship their vitality, their fitness for the aristocratic warrior class that the modern world has dishonored. He stresses that in ancient Athens, the cultivation of physical perfection was a privilege of the elite. Only citizens could train in the gymnasium. The process of creating an ideal male form was deemed beyond the station of lesser entities, such as women and slaves.

The parade of Adonises has led many to question BAP’s sexuality. Bizarrely, Costin is not the only fascist I know who has been dogged by such rumors. Richard Spencer, [my chemistry-lab partner in middle school](#), faced persistent questions about his sexuality when he was a leader of the alt-right. (If anyone out there can explain why homoerotic fascists keep seeking my company, please let me know.) Spencer told me, more than a little exasperated, that he thought the case for BAP’s homosexuality had been proved. “If I had posted even one photo of some guy’s ass on Twitter, do you think there would be any question in anyone’s mind?” In *Bronze Age Mindset*, BAP writes that the confusion of masculine bonding for

homosexuality “is misunderstanding and exaggeration promoted by the homonerds of our time,” a poverty of our imagination and lack of friendship, “because we can’t conceive of such intense love between friends without some carnal or material benefit in play.”

[From the June 2017 issue: How Richard Spencer became an icon for white supremacists](#)

The sheer length of time BAP has held his pose makes one wonder whether more of it is sincere than his followers think. As a character sings in a Sam Shepard play, “I believe in my mask: The man I made up is me.” The breeding of a caste of supermen is not just a pseudo-comic reverie. It is the subject of his dissertation. The fantasies of killing “lower forms of life” are not funny at all, not even as a lampoon of liberal excess. And while some people know BAP personally, and vouch for his intelligence and wit, few have emerged to state with confidence that he’s not a fascist and racist. That is because he probably is one.

What might it feel like to experience the modern world as a “great ugliness”—an inverted kingdom of sniveling ass-kissers? “Society became something approaching mass concentration camp,” BAP has said on his podcast. “I’m exaggerating only a little.” His rejection of this world is matched by his rejection by it. His classmates are successful; they hold good jobs. One by one, the adolescent Nietzscheans grew up into productive citizens, and put aside childish fascinations. The person who introduced us, now decades ago, was once so close to Costin that their friends described them as sharing something almost as deep as marriage. (They did not suggest the bond was erotic.) That friend has excelled in a normal life: a job at a tech company, a family, leadership in his synagogue. At some point he chose to be normal, which means rejecting BAP.

Liberalism’s victory had been so overwhelming that for generations it grew soft, unaccustomed to the hard work of defending itself. Now a ranting nudist poses a real danger.

To take a job, to toil in the modern fields among the bugs and bugmen, is the greatest betrayal. No one respectable wants anything to do with someone

who tweets out messages calling for “high violence” against the “kike and nigger” scourge.

BAP has responded to this rejection with bitterness, with what Milton called “a sense of injured merit.” I find his message melancholic. Recently he posted a video of himself in Rio de Janeiro’s Botanical Garden, following around a wild bird. “Yes, hello,” he says. “Do not run from me. Come back. I love you.” I do not see much space for true love in the world he has built for himself, whose components are war, purification, and mutual masculine admiration ever fearful of its eros.

Fixation on BAP’s monstrous qualities has, I think, led even his fervent admirers to overlook the most unexpected aspect of his philosophy, which is a literal belief in the transmigration of souls, as described in Eastern religions and the work of Arthur Schopenhauer. If this life fails, another will come. When the ironic pose drops, when the outrageous Boratism subsides, this conviction is what remains. “I believe reincarnation is fundamentally true,” he writes, in a section of his book that does not appear to be for laughs.

“I think that is the deepest layer of his outlook,” Dustin Sebell, at Michigan State, told me. “He believes in an esoteric version of metempsychosis, that our truest selves live on after death and take on different forms. He is profoundly unwilling to accept his own mortality.”

No humans receive praise higher than what BAP lavishes on noble animals like jaguars and birds of prey. He is taken, however, with [the diminutive Japanese writer Yukio Mishima](#). In midlife, Mishima took up bodybuilding and raised a squad of erotically intertwined neo-samurai warriors. When it became clear that Japan’s managerial revolution had extinguished its imperial spirit, he attempted to overthrow the Japanese government and restore the power of the emperor. After that failed, he ritually disemboweled himself.

In Michigan, when Bryan Garsten made his comment about the seductions of illiberalism, BAP was like the ghost at the banquet, cackling from the rafters at his professor’s consternation. But the remarks went on longer, and they were also searching, and self-critical. Garsten told his listeners that they

—he—may have failed to cultivate students’ imagination. His illiberal students, Garsten said, had learned why the Greeks admired Achilles, the fiery warrior. But they neglected the Greeks’ admiration for Ulysses, a subtler and greater model of manhood. Ulysses’s greatness emerged not from his rejection of this world, but from his mastery of its constraints. He owed myriad debts to those around him: to his men, to his son, to his wife.

The students romanticized the tyrant, while assuming that liberalism bred sloth and laziness. “Life in a liberal democracy is full of demanding moments,” Garsten said at the conference. I had the impression that he was addressing BAP apostrophically, delivering a warning he wished he had delivered in person. “As far as I have read, life under tyrants is full of lassitude, selfishness, duplicity, betrayal.”

One could feel, over the course of these discussions, the stirrings of dormant liberal passions—as if the mere invocation of BAPism, after many years ignored, had inspired a counteroffensive. Another political theorist, a former Marine and a Brookings Institution scholar named William A. Galston, piped up to remind everyone that when liberalism had come under mortal threat in the Pacific theater, “Americans as a whole found it in themselves to do something.” Specifically, his fellow Marines charged, shot, and bayoneted their way from island to island until illiberalism, in the form of Japanese fascism, begged them for mercy. “Is there really an opposition between the open society and the virtue of courage?” Galston asked.

The defeat of imperial Japan illustrated the point nicely, I thought. But it also raised a much stranger question, about how liberals acquired such a reputation for sissyness in the first place. The Battle of Iwo Jima wasn’t that long ago. But in certain spaces—academia, elite journalism—liberalism’s victory had been so overwhelming that for generations it grew soft, flabby, and unaccustomed to the hard work of defending itself from a vigorous challenger. As such challengers left universities and newspapers, those institutions became self-congratulatory monocultures, inhospitable even to conservatives far less nutty than BAP. By now, a ranting nudist poses a real danger—of poisoning politics, splitting apart societies, and persuading otherwise talented people to spurn the modern world’s greatest achievements, which are peace, tolerance, and prosperity.

The great Straussian Allan Bloom predicted doom for liberalism when these challenges disappeared. “The most essential of our freedoms, as men and as liberal democrats, the freedom of our minds, consists in the consciousness of the fundamental alternatives,” he wrote. An unchallenged liberal democrat, he argued, ceases to want to improve, unless he confronts his enemies in their most potent forms. Those forms will shock and humble us, he wrote, and have “the added salutary effect of destroying our sense of our own worth and giving us higher aspirations.”

To Costin personally, I have never been more grateful. His last message came during the pandemic. I asked how things were looking in Brazil. “Not bad,” he reported, with laconic caginess. He had not yet veered, as he later did in his public statements about COVID-19, into outright conspiracy theory and extended roasts of Anthony Fauci. Since then, I have come to think of BAP’s performances in immunological terms: a gnarly virus that had lain dormant for decades in circles of philosophers and their unread books. Now that it’s loose in the human population, it is a vicious kick to the liberal immune system. And that is not entirely bad. Unchallenged, liberalism’s defenses waned, and liberals forgot, temporarily, why their cause was worth defending. The antibodies are stirring.

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How America Got Mean

In a culture devoid of moral education, generations are growing up in a morally inarticulate, self-referential world.

by David Brooks



This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)

Over the past eight years or so, I've been obsessed with two questions. The first is: Why have Americans become so sad? The rising rates of depression

have been well publicized, as have the rising deaths of despair from drugs, alcohol, and suicide. But other statistics are similarly troubling. The percentage of people who say they don't have close friends has increased fourfold since 1990. The share of Americans ages 25 to 54 who weren't married or living with a romantic partner went up to 38 percent in 2019, from 29 percent in 1990. A record-high 25 percent of 40-year-old Americans have never married. More than half of all Americans say that no one knows them well. The percentage of high-school students who report "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" shot up from 26 percent in 2009 to 44 percent in 2021.

My second, related question is: Why have Americans become so mean? I was recently talking with a restaurant owner who said that he has to eject a customer from his restaurant for rude or cruel behavior once a week—something that never used to happen. A head nurse at a hospital told me that many on her staff are leaving the profession because patients have become so abusive. At the far extreme of meanness, hate crimes rose in 2020 to their highest level in 12 years. Murder rates have been surging, at least until recently. Same with gun sales. Social trust is plummeting. In 2000, two-thirds of American households gave to charity; in 2018, fewer than half did. The words that define our age reek of menace: *conspiracy, polarization, mass shootings, trauma, safe spaces*.

We're enmeshed in some sort of emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis, and it undergirds our political dysfunction and the general crisis of our democracy. What is going on?

Over the past few years, different social observers have offered different stories to explain the rise of hatred, anxiety, and despair.

The technology story: Social media is driving us all crazy.

The sociology story: We've stopped participating in community organizations and are more isolated.

The demography story: America, long a white-dominated nation, is becoming a much more diverse country, a change that has millions of white Americans in a panic.

The economy story: High levels of economic inequality and insecurity have left people afraid, alienated, and pessimistic.

I agree, to an extent, with all of these stories, but I don't think any of them is the deepest one. Sure, social media has bad effects, but it is everywhere around the globe—and the mental-health crisis is not. Also, the rise of despair and hatred has engulfed a lot of people who are not on social media. Economic inequality is real, but it doesn't fully explain this level of social and emotional breakdown. The sociologists are right that we're more isolated, but why? What values lead us to choose lifestyles that make us lonely and miserable?

The most important story about why Americans have become sad and alienated and rude, I believe, is also the simplest: We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein. The story I'm going to tell is about morals. In a healthy society, a web of institutions—families, schools, religious groups, community organizations, and workplaces—helps form people into kind and responsible citizens, the sort of people who show up for one another. We live in a society that's terrible at moral formation.

[Read: American shoppers are a nightmare](#)

Moral formation, as I will use that stuffy-sounding term here, comprises three things. First, helping people learn to restrain their selfishness. How do we keep our evolutionarily conferred egotism under control? Second, teaching basic social and ethical skills. How do you welcome a neighbor into your community? How do you disagree with someone constructively? And third, helping people find a purpose in life. Morally formative institutions hold up a set of ideals. They provide practical pathways toward a meaningful existence: *Here's how you can dedicate your life to serving the poor, or protecting the nation, or loving your neighbor.*

For a large part of its history, America was awash in morally formative institutions. Its Founding Fathers had a low view of human nature, and [designed the Constitution to mitigate it](#) (even while validating that low view of human nature by producing a document rife with racism and sexism).

“Men I find to be a Sort of Beings very badly constructed,” [Benjamin Franklin wrote](#), “as they are generally more easily provok’d than reconcil’d, more dispos’d to do Mischief to each other than to make Reparation, and much more easily deceiv’d than undeceiv’d.”

If such flawed, self-centered creatures were going to govern themselves and be decent neighbors to one another, they were going to need some training. For roughly 150 years after the founding, Americans were obsessed with moral education. In 1788, Noah Webster wrote, “The *virtues* of men are of more consequence to society than their *abilities*; and for this reason, the *heart* should be cultivated with more assiduity than the *head*.” The progressive philosopher John Dewey wrote in 1909 that schools teach morality “every moment of the day, five days a week.” Hollis Frissell, the president of the Hampton Institute, an early school for African Americans, declared, “Character is the main object of education.” As late as 1951, a commission organized by the National Education Association, one of the main teachers’ unions, stated that “an unremitting concern for moral and spiritual values continues to be a top priority for education.”

The moral-education programs that stippled the cultural landscape during this long stretch of history came from all points on the political and religious spectrums. School textbooks such as *McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers* not only taught students how to read and write; they taught etiquette, and featured stories designed to illustrate right and wrong behavior. In the 1920s, W. E. B. Du Bois’s [magazine for Black children](#), *The Brownies’ Book*, had a regular column called “The Judge,” which provided guidance to young readers on morals and manners. There were thriving school organizations with morally earnest names that sound quaint today—the Courtesy Club, the Thrift Club, the Knighthood of Youth.

Beyond the classroom lay a host of other groups: the YMCA; the Sunday-school movement; the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; the settlement-house movement, which brought rich and poor together to serve the marginalized; Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, which extended our moral concerns to include proper care for the natural world; professional organizations, which enforced ethical codes; unions and workplace associations, which, in addition to enhancing worker protections and paychecks, held up certain standards of working-class respectability. And of course, by the late 19th century, many

Americans were members of churches or other religious communities. Mere religious faith doesn't always make people morally good, but living in a community, orienting your heart toward some transcendent love, basing your value system on concern for the underserved—those things tend to.

[Arthur C. Brooks: Make yourself happy—be kind](#)

An educational approach with German roots that was adopted by Scandinavian societies in the mid-to-late 19th century had a wide influence on America. It was called *Bildung*, roughly meaning “spiritual formation.” As conceived by Wilhelm von Humboldt, the *Bildung* approach gave professors complete freedom to put moral development at the center of a university’s mission. In schools across Scandinavia, students studied literature and folk cultures to identify their own emotions, wounds, and weaknesses, in order to become the complex human beings that modern society required. Schools in the *Bildung* tradition also aimed to clarify the individual’s responsibilities to the wider world—family, friends, nation, humanity. Start with the soul and move outward.

The *Bildung* movement helped inspire the Great Books programs that popped up at places like Columbia and the University of Chicago. They were based on the conviction that reading the major works of world literature and thinking about them deeply would provide the keys to living a richer life. Meanwhile, discipline in the small proprieties of daily existence —dressing formally, even just to go shopping or to a ball game—was considered evidence of uprightness: proof that you were a person who could be counted on when the large challenges came.

Much of American moral education drew on an ethos expressed by the headmaster of the Stowe School, in England, who wrote in 1930 that the purpose of his institution was to turn out young men who were “acceptable at a dance and invaluable in a shipwreck.” America’s National Institute for Moral Instruction was founded in 1911 and published a “Children’s Morality Code,” with 10 rules for right living. At the turn of the 20th century, Mount Holyoke College, an all-women’s institution, was an example of an intentionally thick moral community. When a young Frances Perkins was a student there, her Latin teacher detected a certain laziness in her. She forced Perkins to spend hours conjugating Latin verbs, to cultivate self-discipline.

Perkins grew to appreciate this: “For the first time I became conscious of character.” The school also called upon women to follow morally ambitious paths. “Do what nobody else wants to do; go where nobody else wants to go,” the school’s founder implored. Holyoke launched women into lives of service in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. Perkins, who would become the first woman to serve in a presidential Cabinet (Franklin D. Roosevelt’s), was galvanized there.

[Read: Students’ broken moral compasses](#)

These various approaches to moral formation shared two premises. The first was that training the heart and body is more important than training the reasoning brain. Some moral skills can be taught the way academic subjects are imparted, through books and lectures. But we learn most virtues the way we learn crafts, through the repetition of many small habits and practices, all within a coherent moral culture—a community of common values, whose members aspire to earn one another’s respect.



Ricardo Tomás

The other guiding premise was that concepts like justice and right and wrong are not matters of personal taste: An objective moral order exists, and human beings are creatures who habitually sin against that order. This recognition was central, for example, to the way the civil-rights movement in the 1950s and early 1960s thought about character formation. “Instead of assured progress in wisdom and decency man faces the ever present possibility of swift relapse not merely to animalism but into such calculated cruelty as no other animal can practice,” Martin Luther King Jr. believed. Elsewhere, he wrote, “The force of sinfulness is so stubborn a characteristic of human nature that it can only be restrained when the social unit is armed with both moral and physical might.”

At their best, the civil-rights marchers in this prophetic tradition understood that they could become corrupted even while serving a noble cause. They could become self-righteous because their cause was just, hardened by hatred of their opponents, prideful as they asserted power. King’s strategy of nonviolence was an effort simultaneously to expose the sins of their oppressors and to restrain the sinful tendencies inherent in themselves. “What gave such widely compelling force to King’s leadership and oratory,” the historian George Marsden argues, “was his bedrock conviction that moral law was built into the universe.”

A couple of obvious things need to be said about this ethos of moral formation that dominated American life for so long. It prevailed alongside all sorts of hierarchies that we now rightly find abhorrent: whites superior to Blacks, men to women, Christians to Jews, straight people to gay people. And the emphasis on morality didn’t produce perfect people. Moral formation doesn’t succeed in making people angels—it tries to make them better than they otherwise might be.

Furthermore, we would never want to go back to the training methods that prevailed for so long, rooted in so many *thou shall nots* and so much shaming, and riddled with so much racism and sexism. Yet a wise accounting should acknowledge that emphasizing moral formation meant focusing on an important question—what is life for?—and teaching people how to bear up under inevitable difficulties. A culture invested in shaping character helped make people resilient by giving them ideals to cling to when times got hard. In some ways, the old approach to moral formation

was, at least theoretically, egalitarian: If your status in the community was based on character and reputation, then a farmer could earn dignity as readily as a banker. This ethos came down hard on self-centeredness and narcissistic display. It offered practical guidance on how to be a good neighbor, a good friend.

And then it mostly went away.

The crucial pivot happened just after World War II, as people wrestled with the horrors of the 20th century. One group, personified by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, argued that recent events had exposed the prevalence of human depravity and the dangers, in particular, of tribalism, nationalism, and collective pride. This group wanted to double down on moral formation, with a greater emphasis on humility.

Another group, personified by Carl Rogers, a founder of humanistic psychology, focused on the problem of authority. The trouble with the 20th century, the members of this group argued, was that the existence of rigid power hierarchies led to oppression in many spheres of life. We need to liberate individuals from these authority structures, many contended. People are naturally good and can be trusted to do their own self-actualization.

After decades without much in the way of moral formation, America became a place where 74 million people looked at Donald Trump's morality and saw presidential timber.

A cluster of phenomenally successful books appeared in the decade after World War II, making the case that, as Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman wrote in *Peace of Mind* (1946), "thou shalt not be afraid of thy hidden impulses." People can trust the goodness inside. His book topped the *New York Times* best-seller list for 58 weeks. Dr. Spock's first child-rearing manual was published the same year. That was followed by books like *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). According to this ethos, morality is not something that we develop in communities. It's nurtured by connecting with our authentic self and finding our true inner voice. If people are naturally good, we don't need moral formation; we just need to let people get in touch with themselves. Organization after organization got out of the moral-formation business and into the self-awareness business. By the mid-1970s, for

example, the Girl Scouts' founding ethos of service to others had shifted: "How can you get more in touch with *you*? What are *you* thinking? What are *you* feeling?" one Girl Scout handbook asked.

Schools began to abandon moral formation in the 1940s and '50s, as the education historian B. Edward McClellan chronicles in [Moral Education in America](#): "By the 1960s deliberate moral education was in full-scale retreat" as educators "paid more attention to the SAT scores of their students, and middle-class parents scrambled to find schools that would give their children the best chances to qualify for elite colleges and universities." The postwar period saw similar change at the college level, Anthony Kronman, a former dean of Yale Law School, has noted. The "research ideal" supplanted the earlier humanistic ideal of cultivating the whole student. As academics grew more specialized, Kronman has argued, the big questions—What is the meaning of life? How do you live a good life?—lost all purchase. Such questions became unprofessional for an academic to even ask.

[Read: The benefits of character education](#)

In sphere after sphere, people decided that moral reasoning was not really relevant. Psychology's purview grew, especially in family and educational matters, its vocabulary framing "virtually all public discussion" of the moral life of children, [James Davison Hunter, a prominent American scholar on character education, noted in 2000](#). "For decades now, contributions from philosophers and theologians have been muted or nonexistent." Psychology is a wonderful profession, but its goal is mental health, not moral growth.

From the start, some worried about this privatizing of morality. "If what is good, what is right, what is true is only what the individual 'chooses' to 'invent,'" Walter Lippmann wrote in his 1955 collection, [Essays in the Public Philosophy](#), "then we are outside the traditions of civility." His book was hooted down by establishment figures such as the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.; the de-moralization of American culture was under way.

Over the course of the 20th century, words relating to morality appeared less and less frequently in the nation's books: According to a 2012 paper, usage of a cluster of words related to being virtuous also declined significantly. Among them were *bravery* (which dropped by 65 percent), *gratitude* (58

percent), and *humbleness* (55 percent). For decades, researchers have asked incoming college students about their goals in life. In 1967, about 85 percent said they were strongly motivated to develop “a meaningful philosophy of life”; [by 2000, only 42 percent said that](#). Being financially well off became the leading life goal; by 2015, 82 percent of students said wealth was their aim.

In a culture devoid of moral education, generations grow up in a morally inarticulate, self-referential world. The Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith and a team of researchers asked young adults across the country in 2008 about their moral lives. One of their findings was that the interviewees had not given the subject of morality much thought. “I’ve never had to make a decision about what’s right and what’s wrong,” one young adult told the researchers. “My teachers avoid controversies like that like the plague,” many teenagers said.

The moral instincts that Smith observed in his sample fell into the pattern that the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre called “emotivism”: *Whatever feels good to me is moral*. “I would probably do what would make me happy” in any given situation, one of the interviewees declared. “Because it’s me in the long run.” As another put it, “If you’re okay with it morally, as long as you’re not getting caught, then it’s not really against your morals, is it?” Smith and his colleagues emphasized that the interviewees were not bad people but, because they were living “in morally very thin or spotty worlds,” they had never been given a moral vocabulary or learned moral skills.

Most of us who noticed the process of de-moralization as it was occurring thought a bland moral relativism and empty consumerism would be the result: *You do you and I’ll do me*. That’s not what happened.

“Moral communities are fragile things, hard to build and easy to destroy,” the psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes in [*The Righteous Mind*](#). When you are raised in a culture without ethical structure, you become internally fragile. You have no moral compass to give you direction, no permanent ideals to which you can swear ultimate allegiance. “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*,” the psychiatrist (and Holocaust survivor) Viktor Frankl wrote, interpreting a famous Nietzsche saying.

Those without a *why* fall apart when the storms hit. They begin to suffer from that feeling of moral emptiness that Émile Durkheim called “anomie.”

Expecting people to build a satisfying moral and spiritual life on their own by looking within themselves is asking too much. A culture that leaves people morally naked and alone leaves them without the skills to be decent to one another. Social trust falls partly because more people are untrustworthy. That creates crowds of what psychologists call “vulnerable narcissists.” We all know grandiose narcissists—people who revere themselves as the center of the universe. Vulnerable narcissists are the more common figures in our day—people who are also addicted to thinking about themselves, but who often feel anxious, insecure, avoidant. Intensely sensitive to rejection, they scan for hints of disrespect. Their self-esteem is wildly in flux. Their uncertainty about their inner worth triggers cycles of distrust, shame, and hostility.

“The breakdown of an enduring moral framework will always produce disconnection, alienation, and an estrangement from those around you,” Luke Bretherton, a theologian at Duke Divinity School, told me. The result is the kind of sadness I see in the people around me. Young adults I know are spiraling, leaving school, moving from one mental-health facility to another. After a talk I gave in Oklahoma, a woman asked me, “What do you do when you no longer want to be alive?” The very next night I had dinner with a woman who told me that her brother had died by suicide three months before. I mentioned these events to a group of friends on a Zoom call, and nearly half of them said they’d had a brush with suicide in their family. Statistics paint the broader picture: Suicide rates have [increased by more than 30 percent](#) since 2000, according to the CDC.

Sadness, loneliness, and self-harm turn into bitterness. Social pain is ultimately a response to a sense of rejection—of being invisible, unheard, disrespected, victimized. When people feel that their identity is unrecognized, the experience registers as an injustice—because it is. People who have been treated unjustly often lash out and seek ways to humiliate those who they believe have humiliated them.

Even as our public life has grown morally bare, people yearn to feel respected and worthy of respect, need to feel that their life has some moral

purpose and meaning.

Lonely eras are not just sad eras; they are violent ones. In 19th-century America, when a lot of lonely young men were crossing the western frontier, one of the things they tended to do was shoot one another. As the saying goes, pain that is not transformed gets transmitted. People grow more callous, defensive, distrustful, and hostile. The pandemic made it worse, but antisocial behavior is still high even though the lockdowns are over. And now we are caught in a cycle, ill treatment leading to humiliation and humiliation leading to more meanness. Social life becomes more barbaric, online and off.

If you put people in a moral vacuum, they will seek to fill it with the closest thing at hand. Over the past several years, people have sought to [fill the moral vacuum](#) with politics and tribalism. American society has become hyper-politicized.

[David Brooks: America is having a moral convulsion](#)

According to research by Ryan Streeter, the director of domestic-policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, lonely young people are seven times more likely to say they are active in politics than young people who aren't lonely. For people who feel disrespected, unseen, and alone, politics is a seductive form of social therapy. It offers them a comprehensible moral landscape: The line between good and evil runs not down the middle of every human heart, but between groups. Life is a struggle between us, the forces of good, and them, the forces of evil.

The Manichaean tribalism of politics appears to give people a sense of belonging. For many years, America seemed to be awash in a culture of hyper-individualism. But these days, people are quick to identify themselves by their group: Republican, Democrat, evangelical, person of color, LGBTQ, southerner, patriot, progressive, conservative. People who feel isolated and under threat flee to totalizing identities.

Politics appears to give people a sense of righteousness: A person's moral stature is based not on their conduct, but on their location on the political spectrum. You don't have to be good; you just have to be liberal—or you

just have to be conservative. The stronger a group's claim to victim status, the more virtuous it is assumed to be, and the more secure its members can feel about their own innocence.

Politics also provides an easy way to feel a sense of purpose. You don't have to feed the hungry or sit with the widow to be moral; you just have to experience the right emotion. You delude yourself that you are participating in civic life by feeling properly enraged at the other side. That righteous fury rising in your gut lets you know that you are engaged in caring about this country. The culture war is a struggle that gives life meaning.

Politics overwhelms everything. Churches, universities, sports, pop culture, health care are swept up in a succession of battles that are really just one big war—red versus blue. Evangelicalism used to be a faith; today it's primarily a political identity. College humanities departments used to study literature and history to plumb the human heart and mind; now they sometimes seem exclusively preoccupied with politics, and with the oppressive systems built around race, class, and gender. Late-night comedy shows have become political pep rallies. Hundreds of thousands of Americans died unnecessarily during the pandemic because people saw a virus through the lens of a political struggle.

This is not politics as it is normally understood. In psychically healthy societies, people fight over the politics of distribution: How high should taxes be? How much money should go to social programs for the poor and the elderly? We've shifted focus from the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition. Political movements are fueled by resentment, by feelings that society does not respect or recognize me. Political and media personalities gin up dramas in which our side is emotionally validated and the other side is emotionally shamed. The person practicing the politics of recognition is not trying to get resources for himself or his constituency; he is trying to admire himself. He's trying to use politics to fill the hole in his soul. It doesn't work.

The politics of recognition doesn't give you community and connection, certainly not in a system like our current one, mired in structural dysfunction. People join partisan tribes in search of belonging—but they end

up in a lonely mob of isolated belligerents who merely obey the same orthodoxy.

If you are asking politics to be the reigning source of meaning in your life, you are asking more of politics than it can bear. Seeking to escape sadness, loneliness, and anomie through politics serves only to drop you into a world marked by fear and rage, by a sadistic striving for domination. Sure, you've left the moral vacuum—but you've landed in the pulverizing destructiveness of moral war. The politics of recognition has not produced a happy society. When asked by the General Social Survey to rate their happiness level, 20 percent of Americans in 2022 [rated it at the lowest level](#)—only 8 percent did the same in 1990.

[Read: What the longest study on human happiness found is the key to a good life](#)

America's Founding Fathers studied the history of democracies going back to ancient Greece. They drew the lesson that democracies can be quite fragile. When private virtue fails, the constitutional order crumbles. After decades without much in the way of moral formation, America became a place where more than 74 million people looked at Donald Trump's morality and saw presidential timber.

Even in dark times, sparks of renewal appear. In 2018, a documentary about Mister Rogers called *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* was released. The film showed [Fred Rogers in all his simple goodness](#)—his small acts of generosity; his displays of vulnerability; his respect, even reverence, for each child he encountered. People cried openly while watching it in theaters. In an age of conflict and threat, the sight of radical goodness was so moving.

In the summer of 2020, the series *Ted Lasso* premiered. When Lasso describes his goals as a soccer coach, he could mention the championships he hopes to win or some other conventional metric of success, but he says, “For me, success is not about the wins and losses. It’s about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field.”

That is a two-sentence description of moral formation. *Ted Lasso* is about an earnest, cheerful, and transparently kind man who enters a world that has

grown cynical, amoral, and manipulative, and, episode after episode, even through his own troubles, he offers the people around him opportunities to grow more gracious, to confront their vulnerabilities and fears, and to treat one another more gently and wisely. Amid lockdowns and political rancor, it became a cultural touchstone, and the most watched show on Apple TV+.

Even as our public life has grown morally bare, people, as part of their elemental nature, yearn to feel respected and worthy of respect, need to feel that their life has some moral purpose and meaning. People still want to build a society in which it is easier to be good. So the questions before us are pretty simple: How can we build morally formative institutions that are right for the 21st century? What do we need to do to build a culture that helps people become the best versions of themselves?

Healthy moral ecologies don't just happen. They have to be seeded and tended.

A few necessities come immediately to mind.

A modern vision of how to build character. The old-fashioned models of character-building were hopelessly gendered. Men were supposed to display iron willpower that would help them achieve self-mastery over their unruly passions. Women were to sequester themselves in a world of ladylike gentility in order to not be corrupted by bad influences and base desires. Those formulas are obsolete today.

The best modern approach to building character is described in Iris Murdoch's book [The Sovereignty of Good](#). Murdoch writes that "nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous." For her, moral life is not defined merely by great deeds of courage or sacrifice in epic moments. Instead, moral life is something that goes on continually—treating people considerately in the complex situations of daily existence. For her, the essential moral act is casting a "just and loving" attention on other people.

Normally, she argues, we go about our days with self-centered, self-serving eyes. We see and judge people in ways that satisfy our own ego. We diminish and stereotype and ignore, reducing other people to bit players in our own all-consuming personal drama. But we become morally better, she

continues, as we learn to see others deeply, as we learn to envelop others in the kind of patient, caring regard that makes them feel seen, heard, and understood. This is the kind of attention that implicitly asks, “What are you going through?” and cares about the answer.

I become a better person as I become more curious about those around me, as I become more skilled in seeing from their point of view. As I learn to perceive you with a patient and loving regard, I will tend to treat you well. We can, Murdoch concluded, “grow by looking.”

Mandatory social-skills courses. Murdoch’s character-building formula roots us in the simple act of paying attention: *Do I attend to you well?* It also emphasizes that character is formed and displayed as we treat others considerately. This requires not just a good heart, but good social skills: how to listen well. How to disagree with respect. How to ask for and offer forgiveness. How to patiently cultivate a friendship. How to sit with someone who is grieving or depressed. How to be a good conversationalist.

These are some of the most important skills a person can have. And yet somehow, we don’t teach them. Our schools spend years prepping students with professional skills—but offer little guidance on how to be an upstanding person in everyday life. If we’re going to build a decent society, elementary schools and high schools should require students to take courses that teach these specific social skills, and thus prepare them for life with one another. We could have courses in how to be a good listener or how to build a friendship. The late feminist philosopher Nel Noddings [developed a whole pedagogy](#) around how to effectively care for others.

A new core curriculum. More and more colleges and universities are offering courses in what you might call “How to Live.” Yale has one called “Life Worth Living.” Notre Dame has one called “God and the Good Life.” A first-year honors program in this vein at Valparaiso University, in Indiana, involves not just conducting formal debates on ideas gleaned from the Great Books, but putting on a musical production based on their themes. Many of these courses don’t give students a ready-made formula, but they introduce students to some of the venerated moral traditions—Buddhism, Judeo-Christianity, and Enlightenment rationalism, among others. They introduce students to those thinkers who have thought hard on moral problems, from

Aristotle to Desmond Tutu to Martha Nussbaum. They hold up diverse exemplars to serve as models of how to live well. They put the big questions of life firmly on the table: *What is the ruling passion of your soul? Whom are you responsible to? What are my moral obligations? What will it take for my life to be meaningful? What does it mean to be a good human in today's world? What are the central issues we need to engage with concerning new technology and human life?*

These questions clash with the ethos of the modern university, which is built around specialization and passing on professional or technical knowledge. But they are the most important courses a college can offer. They shouldn't be on the margins of academic life. They should be part of the required core curriculum.

Intergenerational service. We spend most of our lives living by the logic of the meritocracy: Life is an individual climb upward toward success. It's about pursuing self-interest.

There should be at least two periods of life when people have a chance to take a sabbatical from the meritocracy and live by an alternative logic—the logic of service: You have to give to receive. You have to lose yourself in a common cause to find yourself. The deepest human relationships are gift relationships, based on mutual care. (An obvious model for at least some aspects of this is the culture of the U.S. military, which similarly emphasizes honor, service, selflessness, and character in support of a purpose greater than oneself, throwing together Americans of different ages and backgrounds who forge strong social bonds.)

Those sabbaticals could happen at the end of the school years and at the end of the working years. National service programs could bring younger and older people together to work to address community needs.

These programs would allow people to experience other-centered ways of being and develop practical moral habits: how to cooperate with people unlike you. How to show up day after day when progress is slow. How to do work that is generous and hard.

Moral organizations. Most organizations serve two sets of goals—moral goals and instrumental goals. Hospitals heal the sick and also seek to make money. Newspapers and magazines inform the public and also try to generate clicks. Law firms defend clients and also try to maximize billable hours. Nonprofits aim to serve the public good and also raise money.

In our society, the commercial or utilitarian goals tend to eclipse the moral goals. Doctors are pressured by hospital administrators to rush through patients so they can charge more fees. Journalists are incentivized to write stories that confirm reader prejudices in order to climb the most-read lists. Whole companies slip into an optimization mindset, in which everything is done to increase output and efficiency.

Moral renewal won't come until we have leaders who are explicit, loud, and credible about both sets of goals. *Here's how we're growing financially, but also Here's how we're learning to treat one another with consideration and respect; here's how we're going to forgo some financial returns in order to better serve our higher mission.*

Early in my career, as a TV pundit at *PBS NewsHour*, I worked with its host, Jim Lehrer. Every day, with a series of small gestures, he signaled what kind of behavior was valued there and what kind of behavior was unacceptable. In this subtle way, he established a set of norms and practices that still lives on. He and others built a thick and coherent moral ecology, and its way of being was internalized by most of the people who have worked there.

Politics as a moral enterprise. An ancient brand of amoralism now haunts the world. Authoritarian-style leaders like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping embody a kind of amoral realism. They evince a mindset that assumes that the world is a vicious, dog-eat-dog sort of place. Life is a competition to grab what you can. Force is what matters. Morality is a luxury we cannot afford, or merely a sham that elites use to mask their own lust for power. It's fine to elect people who lie, who are corrupt, as long as they are ruthless bastards for our side. The ends justify the means.

Those of us who oppose these authoritarians stand, by contrast, for a philosophy of moral realism. Yes, of course people are selfish and life can be harsh. But over the centuries, civilizations have established rules and codes

to nurture cooperation, to build trust and sweeten our condition. These include personal moral codes so we know how to treat one another well, ethical codes to help prevent corruption on the job and in public life, and the rules of the liberal world order so that nations can live in peace, secure within their borders.

Moral realists are fighting to defend and modernize these rules and standards —these sinews of civilization. Moral realism is built on certain core principles. Character is destiny. We can either elect people who try to embody the highest standards of honesty, kindness, and integrity, or elect people who shred those standards. Statecraft is soulcraft. The laws we pass shape the kinds of people we become. We can structure our tax code to encourage people to be enterprising and to save more, or we can structure the code to encourage people to be conniving and profligate. Democracy is the system that best enhances human dignity. Democratic regimes entrust power to the people, and try to form people so they will be responsible with that trust. Authoritarian regimes seek to create a world in which the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

Look, I understand why people don't want to get all moralistic in public. Many of those who do are self-righteous prigs, or rank hypocrites. And all of this is only a start. But healthy moral ecologies don't just happen. They have to be seeded and tended by people who think and talk in moral terms, who try to model and inculcate moral behavior, who understand that we have to build moral communities because on our own, we are all selfish and flawed. Moral formation is best when it's humble. It means giving people the skills and habits that will help them be considerate to others in the complex situations of life. It means helping people behave in ways that make other people feel included, seen, and respected. That's very different from how we treat people now—in ways that make them feel sad and lonely, and that make them grow unkind.

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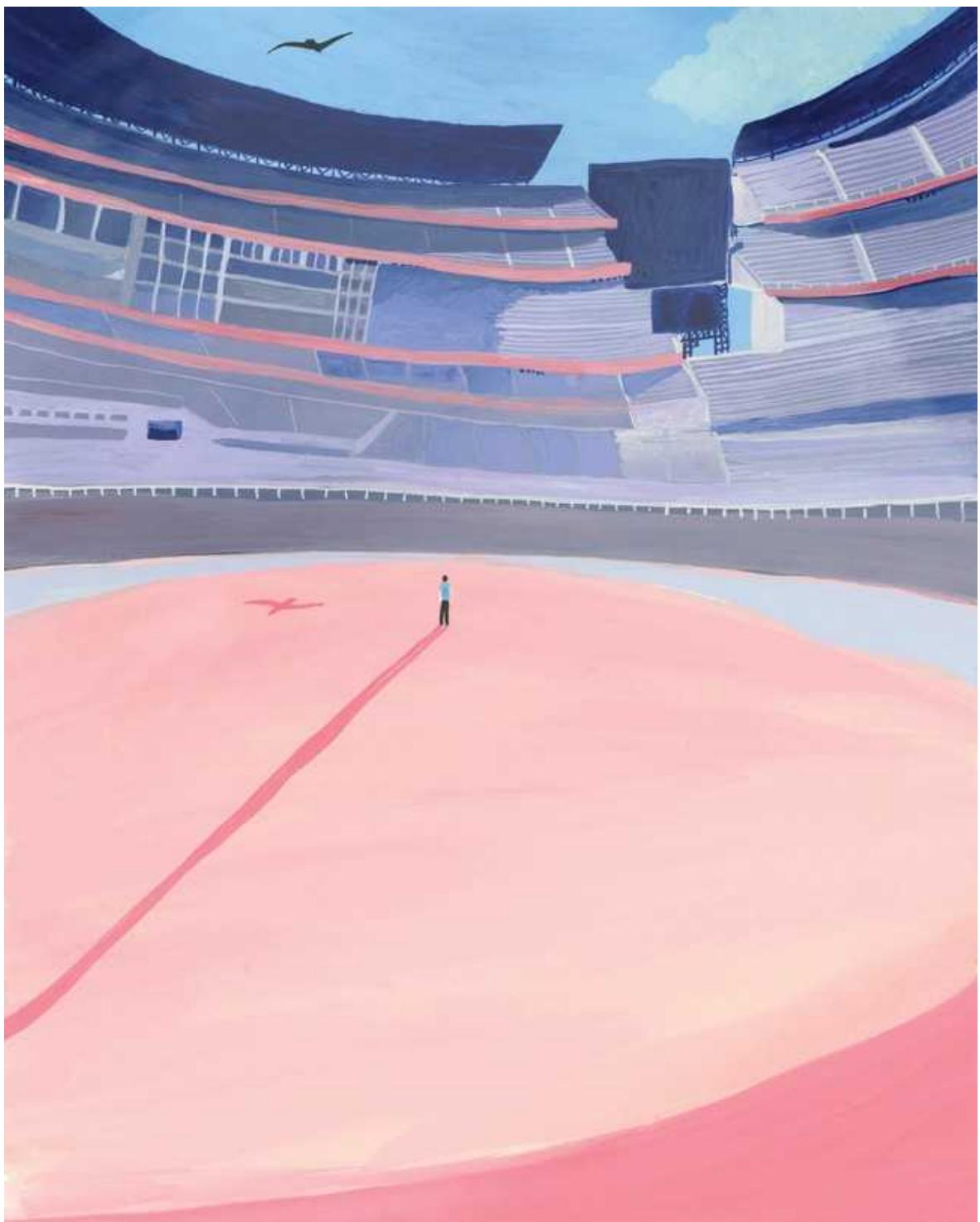
Fiction

- [**The Comebacker**](#)

The Comebacker

A short story

by Dave Eggers



The day was cold, cold even for August in San Francisco. As Lionel walked over the Lefty O'Doul Bridge, the wind seemed to be coming from every direction—the Pacific, the bay, the brackish creek underfoot. And with every step, Lionel's left shoe squeaked, an especially maddening thing, given that

he'd just had them resoled. For years he'd passed a subterranean shoemaker's shop, thinking it would be old-timey and fun to engage the ancient Romanian proprietor in some project. Finally Lionel had entered the man's tiny shop and asked him to resole his favorite leather shoes, so soft they felt like moccasins. The whole encounter had been as quaint and satisfying as expected, until Lionel retrieved the shoes a week later and found that the left one now let out a cartoonish squeak with every footfall.

When Lionel went back to the shoemaker, the old man shrugged. "Some shoes squeak," he said.

Lionel had learned to walk on the edge of his left foot. This decreased the sound, but gave him a worrying gait. People at the stadium had begun asking him about it.

Lionel covered the Giants for the *Examiner*—the home games at least. The paper didn't have the budget to send him on the road. The season was effectively over anyway; the team had no chance at the playoffs, and the mood in the clubhouse was dour. Not that the players were so garrulous in winning, either. Sydney Coletti saw to that.

Brought in to head the media-relations department, she'd drilled the players on verbal discipline, and day after day, they dispensed word clusters that made sense but said nothing: "Trying to contribute." "Just focused on getting the win." "Great team effort." "Happy to be here."

Sydney strode around the stadium in beautiful suits, sunglasses embedded in her raven hair. As if aware of her imperious affect, she often brought in treats—candy, cupcakes, huge bars of artisanal chocolate. She was polished and warm, but had no qualms about limiting access if a reporter crossed her. So Lionel had traded candor for access, and loathed himself for it.

"Nice work, Lionel," Sydney said when she approved of something he'd written. It was a terrible thing, to be praised this way.

"Get me sticky," Lionel's editor, Warren, demanded.

The problem was that when a player said something even vaguely sticky—Warren’s word for memorable, colorful, controversial—the sportswriters pounced, and often the player paid the price. Apologies followed, and lost endorsement deals, diminished love from fickle fans, a requested trade, a new team. That, or a player could just keep his mouth shut.

Squeak, squeak, squeak.

Lionel entered at the stadium’s media gate and made his way through the dim hallways to the locker room, where he showed his lanyard to Gregorio, the security guard.

“Hannah beat you,” he said.

“Beat me how?” Lionel said, thinking it could be any of 10, 12 ways. There she was, interviewing Hector Jiménez.

Hannah Tanaka was technically his competition, in that she wrote for the *Chronicle*, the larger of the two valiant locals. But from the time he’d started on the Giants beat, she’d done everything humanly possible to help Lionel—introducing him to every staffer at the stadium, sharing every tip and data point—and he’d quickly fallen in love with her. She was so steady, so funny; her laugh was raspy, almost lewd.

Squeak, squeak, squeak.

She turned when she heard him. She had her notebook out, and her phone—she had some transcription app that converted everything a player said to text, instantly—but she looked at Lionel and smirked. That smirk! Good lord.

She was married, though, and had two teenage girls, and so every year Lionel had gotten better at disguising his heartache. During the games, they sat next to each other, bantering, complaining, comparing notes, and with every word she said, in her low, clenched-jaw way, he was stung by the great injustice of finding his favorite person, sitting next to her every day, but heading home each day alone.

Lionel looked around. He could talk to the second baseman, Hollis, who had some kind of problem with his heel, but what was the point? Warren wouldn't give him space for news of another almost-injury to a player on a losing team.

Hannah finished with Jiménez and sidled up to Lionel. "Behold the new guy," she said, and nodded to a gangly man in the corner. She handed Lionel the day's media packet and pointed to the relevant paragraph about a middle reliever, Nathan Couture, being called up from AAA Sacramento. "Get him before Sydney puts the muzzle on," Hannah said.

The man in the corner was holding the sleeves of his uniform apart, apparently dumbfounded to find his own name, COUTURE, stitched to the back of a Giants jersey.

"Nathan?" Lionel asked.

The pitcher turned around and smiled. His teeth were small, and he was missing his left canine; it gave him a look of youthful incompleteness. He had a narrow, pockmarked face and a weak chin. A wispy mustache overhung his stern, chapped lips.

"First time in the majors?" Lionel asked.

"Indeed," Nathan said.

That word—it wasn't heard so much in a locker room. Lionel wrote "indeed" in his notebook, and then asked the most inane, and most common, query in sports. "How does it feel?" It hurt to utter the words.

But Nathan nodded and inhaled and exhaled expansively through his nostrils, as if this was the most provocative question he'd ever heard.

"When I got the call, just yesterday, I was elated," Nathan said.

Lionel heard an accent. Rural. Southeastern maybe. Georgia? He wrote down "Elated" and underlined it.

“The drive from Sacramento was a fever dream,” Nathan continued. “The scenery rushed by like meltwater. And then to get here, to this cathedral, to warm up, and to meet these men at the top of their craft”—he swept his arm around the room, now filled with a dozen or so players in towels and jockstraps; one was jiggling his leg, as if to awaken it—“and to be welcomed by them without condition, and now to see my name on this shirt ... I have to say, it’s sublime.”

Lionel wrote and underlined “sublime.” He looked around to see if he was being pranked. But no one was listening; no one was near.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name,” Nathan said, and extended his hand. Lionel introduced himself, and found that Nathan was examining his face with a friendly but jarring intensity. He rested his eyes on Lionel’s notebook. “Do you take shorthand?” he asked.

Lionel’s handwriting was a chaotic mix of cursive and all caps—a madman’s scrawl. “No, no,” he said. “This is just my personal code, I guess.”

In four years, no player had ever asked even the vaguest question about Lionel’s process or profession.

“I assume you’ll call me a journeyman,” Nathan said.

Lionel had just written that exact word. He quickly crossed it out.

“Don’t, don’t,” Nathan said. “I like the word, and for me it’s apt. And removed from baseball, it’s a good word, don’t you think? Journey-man. I know not everyone loves it, since it implies a kind of purgatory just below success, but in isolation, the word has a simple beauty to it, right? How could you not want to be called a journey-man?”

Lionel looked at the word he’d obliterated. “I guess so.” He circled it. When he glanced up again, Nathan was looking down at him with priestly interest.

“Did you dream of this work as a boy?” he asked.

Lionel couldn’t speak. He returned to the assumption that this was a prank. He looked around. No one looked back.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t probe like that,” Nathan said, and laid a hand on Lionel’s shoulder. “I just had the sudden awareness that the two of us are in the enviable, even surreal position of living out our most impossible dreams. The fact that we aren’t digging ditches or mining coal—that I’m paid to play a game and you’re paid to watch a game and tell people what you see—it seems, in a world of sadness and misfortune, to be a thing of great luck. Don’t you think?”

Lionel watched the game in a daze. He sat in the press box, Hannah on his right. On his left was Marco DaSilva, in his mid-20s, round-shouldered and stat-obsessed, and for some reason doing AM radio, where the average listener was 76. Lionel read, and reread, his notes, while hoping Nathan Couture would be called in to pitch.

“Interesting guy?” Hannah asked.

“His numbers are shit,” Marco said.

It was not right to withhold anything from them, but Lionel kept the strange interview to himself. The Giants lost badly and Nathan didn’t play, and somewhere along the way, Hannah, bored by Lionel’s distracted state, moved to sit next to Marco, and made a show of having an especially good time with this new seating arrangement.

Lionel wrote up the game, but because Nathan hadn’t been a factor, it made no sense to include him. He’d play sooner or later, Lionel figured, at which point he could get him into a story. Maybe Warren would let him do a profile. Or maybe not. Warren didn’t generally like human-interest stories.

That night, Lionel went online, searching for Nathan Couture. His hometown was Thomasville, Alabama. He was 28 and had never been to college. His statistics were unremarkable in every way, which meant he was unlikely to remain in the majors for any stretch of time. He was both average and old. A mediocre pitcher who was happy to be in the bigs, and who asked about Lionel’s work and method? What was he thinking?

Nathan was sent back to Sacramento the next day.

When Nathan stepped out, he waited on the warning track, taking a long breath. He walked onto the grass like it was the first step of a royal staircase.

Lionel wrote up his summaries of the games that week, printing the players' inanities, and Sydney baked white-chocolate brownies, which were exceptional.

"I don't like her baking, actually," Marco said. He and Hannah and Lionel were watching batting practice on another cool August afternoon.

"Her cookies are brittle," Hannah said. Lionel hadn't thought about Sydney's cookies that way before, but they were definitely on the crumbly side. Soon the three of them had turned on all the food in the stadium. The garlic fries, which had been so crisp last season, were now less crisp, and the little pepperonis on the pizzas had dropped a few notches.

"Remember when they were sort of curly?" Lionel asked.

The gates of complaint were now open. The architects of the park, they agreed, had not allotted enough elevators, so the writers often had to wait—sometimes many minutes—to get from the field to the press box.

"And the paper towels!" Marco said suddenly, tragically.

In the bathrooms closest to the press box, the paper-towel dispensers had been replaced by air dryers, which they all agreed were too loud.

"Well," Marco said, his voice weary, "I guess we should go inside and get the lineup for tonight."

Lionel grabbed the copy Sydney had put in his cubby and saw Nathan's name. He felt a flutter of excitement that embarrassed him.

"Couture is back," Hannah said, and Lionel nodded, giving away nothing.

The game began, and by the sixth inning, with the Giants up 5–0, it was highly unlikely they would need Nathan. He was the third or fourth middle reliever on the roster, and the starter was still soaring.

But the Padres hacked a series of singles into shallow left and right, and suddenly it was 5–3, then 5–4. The manager made his way to the mound and took the ball, and the starter walked to the dugout, head low and muttering. Lionel looked to the bullpen to see who would emerge.

When Nathan stepped out, he waited on the warning track, taking a long breath. He walked onto the grass like it was the first step of a royal staircase, and then broke into a steady trot. The rest of his entrance and preparations were routine. He kicked the dirt and took his warm-up pitches. His face appeared on the massive outfield screen, in a goofy photo, and 20,000 fans wondered, idly, who he was. Then, without fuss, he struck out the first batter with three pitches.

“Damn,” Marco said, and typed feverishly for a while. Lionel assumed he was looking for some numerical context for what had just happened.

The next batter hit a rope toward left. Winebrenner, the third baseman, knocked it down but bobbled it, and there was a runner on first.

When the third man up hit a dribbler to second, Hollis fielded it—clumsily—and flipped it to the shortstop, who stepped on second and threw to first for a double play.

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Okay.” For Hannah, this was high praise.

Next inning, Nathan took care of the first three batters in much the same way—with crafty pitch selection and pinpoint placement. When the third hitter fouled a ball high, Nathan ran after it, briefly confusing the first baseman, who waved him off and caught it.

Between innings, Hannah took a cryptic call.

“Huh,” she said. Apparently Hollis, the second baseman, was getting an MRI. The heel that had been bothering him was now shot. Something had happened during that double play.

More experienced pitchers closed out the eighth and ninth, and that was that. The Giants won, 5–4. Down in the locker room, the early word on Hollis’s heel was bad. Warren would not want the story of Nathan Couture, not on

the night the starting second baseman got injured. Lionel wandered over to Nathan anyway. Most of the players had showered already, but Nathan was still in his uniform.

“Is that corny?” Nathan asked. “I wanted to savor it a bit longer.”

Hollis seesawed into the room on crutches and the reporters swarmed. The professional thing to do would be to go over and hear from the player who’d won four Gold Gloves and was being paid \$12 million. But Lionel stayed with Nathan.

“I noticed you paused when you first stepped out,” he said.

“I did,” Nathan said. “I assume you want to know how it felt?”

Lionel smiled and licked the tip of his pen theatrically.

“It was big,” Nathan said.

Lionel wrote down “It’s big” and for a moment, he wondered if Nathan’s earlier eloquence had been a fluke.

“Kidding, Lionel. Truly, I think it’s a happy, wholly irrational spectacle,” he said. “Don’t you think? I mean—”

“Hold on,” Lionel said, and scrambled for his tape recorder.

Nathan took a deep breath. “I mean, those upper-deck seats are probably 200 feet up. Think of it. Twenty-five thousand people were here tonight, some of them sitting 200 feet in the air, to see men play as silly a game as has ever been conjured. Balls and bats and bases—all of it perfected and professionalized, sure, but essentially childish and irrelevant. And to serve it, to celebrate it, this billion-dollar coliseum is built. People come 100 miles to watch it under 1,000 lights. When you and I first met, it was a day game, a completely different atmosphere. At night the stadium takes on the look of deep space. The sky is so black, the lights so white, illuminating a surreal sea of green. When you jog out there, as I did, in the dark, it feels, briefly, like you’re in a spaceship, approaching a new planet.”

Hector Jiménez, the catcher whose locker was next to Nathan's, had begun listening, and was giving Nathan a disapproving look.

"There was some confusion over that foul ball," Lionel said, and already Nathan was nodding.

"First of all," he said, "that ball was rightfully Gutierrez's, but it started out over my head, and that northeast wind took it toward the first-base line. So I had it in my sights, but then it evaporated. I mean, it ceased to be!"

Lionel caught Jiménez's eye. He looked alarmed, horrified.

"And for a long moment," Nathan continued, "as I searched the void for the ball, I thought, *I've caught a million balls. How could I lose this one?* And then I thought, *Why am I here? Where are my legs? Are my arms still raised? Why can't I see?* The sky was so black, and this solid thing, this baseball, had utterly disappeared in it! So I wondered if the ball had been real, and if I was real, if anything was real."

Jiménez tossed his gear into his duffel and zipped it loudly.

"Then I smelled roast beef!" Nathan said, and laughed loudly, placing his hand on Lionel's shoulder. "I thought, *Is that roast beef I smell? Who brought roast beef to the ballpark?* Then Gutierrez yelled, 'Move, kid, I got it!' and my eyes swung toward him. As they did, I saw the blur of 1,000 faces in the stands beyond first. Then he caught the ball."

Jiménez walked away. Seconds later, Sydney appeared. She always grew suspicious when interviews ran long.

"Everything good over here?" she asked.

"Fine," Lionel said, but the interview was over.



Lionel had to wait a few days for the drama of Hollis's injury to play out before asking Warren for some space in the paper to profile Nathan. Warren had zero interest in it, especially since Nathan hadn't played again. But then one day an ad dropped out, so on page 23, Lionel was allotted six column inches to introduce "Nathan Couture, Pitcher With Unique Outlook." He did little more than print the two long quotes he'd gotten from Nathan before Sydney had hustled him away, but the article made an impression.

"You have to play me that tape," Hannah said, clearly dubious.

All the reporters wanted to talk to Nathan, but Nathan was suddenly unavailable. Sydney felt they'd dodged a bullet in having this eccentric Alabaman talk and talk and somehow avoid a catastrophic mistake. She would not risk it again. But then she said she would.

“The owner insisted on it,” Warren said.

The octogenarian owner of the team had evidently read Lionel’s article, and was an immediate fan of Nathan’s. He wanted Nathan in games, and wanted Nathan to talk, as much as he could, before and after games. The owner, viewed as an eccentric himself (though from Kansas), was assumed to be not long for this world. Three days after Nathan’s first outing, he pitched the eighth inning of another tight game, and again he held his own, and the Giants won. This time, he had to bat, and actually stroked a line drive into Triples Alley. Against the wishes of the first-base coach, Nathan rounded first base and was easily tagged out at second. It made for a comical and eventful inning, and the home crowd went berserk.

Afterward, a scrum of reporters surrounded him, and Lionel, who had unwisely waited for the elevator, found himself in the third ring. He felt oddly proprietary, even jilted. He wanted, to a degree that filled him with shame, some kind of acknowledgment from Nathan that he was different, that he had been first.

Nathan looked around and smiled broadly. “Well, this is extraordinary.”

Hannah was closest. “General thoughts, Mr. Couture?”

Nathan stared at the ceiling for a while, as if peeling back the many layers of the query, then rested his eyes upon her.

“First I thought about the smell of the grass,” he said. “They cut it today, so the smell was fresh and just a bit sour, as newly cut grass is. There’s something both wet and dry at the same time, both dead and alive. I inhaled a bit longer than usual, wanting to take everything in, and I saw four men, all gray-haired, arm in arm in the stands, posing for a picture. Then the Jumbotron showed a picture of the same men, as teenagers, at a ball game. Same four guys, same pose, just 50-odd years ago. And I had the feeling that the four of them, whenever they stand side by side like that, probably feel invincible.”

“Nathan, I—”

Another reporter broke in, thinking Nathan was finished. But Lionel knew he wasn't.

"Then I saw a seagull. Maybe you did too? It hovered over home plate for a moment, maybe 20 feet up. Under the lights it looked like a tiny angel. I wondered what brought this bird, alone, to the ballpark. No doubt he hoped he might come across some discarded chips or fries, but the risk is considerable, too. Wouldn't the lights, and 30,000 people, be daunting? But then again, he can fly. Is anything daunting when you can fly? And briefly I thought about the nature of flight. I do think there will come a time when humans can fly more or less as birds do, and I wondered how that would affect our idea of freedom. Will anyone ever feel constrained, spiritually or materially, if they can fly?"

Lionel wrote down "If we can fly."

"And then it was time to pitch," Nathan said. There was scattered laughter, and the exchange of looks. Nathan was stranger in person than he had been in Lionel's article. A dozen hands went up.

"Oh jeez," Nathan said. "I just went on and on. And you probably have so many other players to talk to. Why don't we do a speed round? Deal?"

Someone in front asked, "What was it like to get your first hit?"

"If you remember," Nathan said, "I fouled off the first two pitches. And fouling a ball off is like every mistake you make in life: You put everything you've got into a task, and if it's just a little wrong, it's wrong enough to make the whole effort a waste of time. The ball goes nowhere, or worse than nowhere. But when the barrel of the wooden bat hits the ball just so—you feel nothing. There's no resistance. Nothing at all. The ball leaps into the sky. The struggle is gone."

Marco edged in. "Nathan, the average spin rate of your four-seamer is solid, at 2320, putting you ninth among middle relievers, but tonight, your average for the last three batters was 2090. Do you have a plan to address that?"

As Marco talked, Nathan's face slackened, his eyes glazed, and when Marco was finished, he said, "Honestly, Marco, I have no ever-loving idea."

A balding man in a baby-blue sweat suit raised his hand. It was Tom Verlo, from the *L.A. Times*. He'd likely come upstate to throw a bit of cold water on San Francisco's new attraction.

"Can you tell us about running?" he asked. "You looked a bit rusty."

"Was it as bad as I'm thinking it was?" Nathan said, and flashed an enormous and spectacularly awkward smile. "You know, as natural as it was when I hit that ball, running was the opposite. I felt like I was running in 1,000-year-old armor. By the time I got to second, the ball was in the second baseman's glove. He was waiting for me like a groom would a bride. When he tagged me out, I was so relieved, I wanted to fall into his arms."

Tom smiled. "On the broadcast, it looked like he said something to you."

"He did. He said, '*Mijo*, now you can rest.'" Nathan looked at the clock on the wall. "We should hurry. Superspeed round now."

"What does it sound like when a ball is caught?" a young web reporter asked.

"When I was a kid in Alabama, my grandfather lived in the backyard, in a little cottage. Every night after dinner, I would walk back to his place with him, and he would kiss me on the crown of my head and say, 'Adieu.' Then he would close the door, and the sound of his door closing would be a muffled, wet, and decisive click. That's what it sounds like when a ball is caught. Like the click of the door to my grandfather's home."

Nathan looked at the clock. "Okay, one last one? I see you, Lionel."

Lionel, standing in the back, was happy for Nathan, and for the moment felt unnecessary. He shook his head.

That was the game, and the interview, that broke Nathan Couture into the national media. The next day, and for the following week, he was everywhere. ESPN did a segment, and Jimmy Kimmel had him on his show.

With Sydney offering Nathan freely to all, the only thing Lionel could do was go to Phoenix.

Nathan's parents, though they'd raised Nathan in Alabama, had moved to Arizona, and Warren green-lit a longer profile. In a stolen moment before a game, Lionel told Nathan he was thinking of going, and Nathan gave his blessing. "I trust you," he said.

"Thank you," Lionel said.

"You report accurately and you listen carefully," he said.

"I try," Lionel said.

"They are tremendous people," Nathan said. "Immeasurably charming. You'll love them, and they you. I'm envious that you get to see them. I'll call ahead and let them know I vouch for you."

Lionel arrived at a comfortable ranch house 20 minutes from downtown Phoenix. A pickup truck was out front, and next to it, a small fishing boat rested on a trailer. Lionel rang the bell, and when the door opened, a thin couple in their late 60s stood before him, arms around each other's waists. Jim and Dot, short for Dorothy.

"Lionel," Jim said.

"I took the liberty of pouring you a glass of ice water," Dot said.

Lionel followed them in. He walked on the side of his left foot, but the squeaking was clearly audible. Lionel guessed, correctly, that they would be too polite to mention it.

"Come sit," Jim said, and indicated a plush leather recliner in the living room. It was almost surely Jim's TV chair, and Lionel took the honor given. Nathan's parents sat to his right, on a matching couch.

"Nathan speaks highly of you," Dot said.

"He does," Jim agreed.

Lionel got his notebook out and looked around the room. He'd expected a house full of books, but saw few. There were no trophies, either—no shrine to their son, the professional baseball player. An enormous TV dominated one wall. Next to it were two photos, from middle school, he guessed. One was clearly Nathan. The other was a girl, younger by a year or two, who shared a version of Nathan's goofy smile. But there was something knowing, even sardonic, in her eyes.

"So how does it feel," Lionel asked, "with Nathan becoming this ..." He almost said "curiosity" but instead chose "phenomenon."

"Oh, it's been so nice," Dot said.

"He worked hard," Jim said. "Deserves it."

Lionel smiled, thinking they were warming up. But they were done. Dot held her glass of water with two hands and smiled at Lionel in a motherly way. Lionel looked down at his notebook.

"So outside his skill as a pitcher," he said, "one of the things that's gotten Nathan noticed is his way with words. Was he always loquacious?"

Dot winced. She looked to Jim. Jim chewed his cheek.

"I read your first article," Dot said. "When you had him saying 'Indeed,' right away I thought, *That's the comebacker.*" She pointed to her temple.

"He was never, you know, book smart," Jim added. "That was his sister."

"Never read a book unless you tied him down," Dot said.

"He didn't talk a whole lot," Jim said, "and when he did, he did it in a regular way. He was all laser-focused. That's how his coaches described him."

"Single-minded. Then the comebacker happened," Dot said.

"I'm sorry. The comebacker?" Lionel asked.

“Well, he was hit by a comebacker,” Jim said, sounding surprised that Lionel didn’t know. “In Sacramento. It was on the radio up there.”

“We were at the game,” Dot said. “It was awful. Nathan threw a fastball to a very big guy, I think he was from Nevada, and this guy hit the ball right back at him a million miles an hour. Hit him right here.” Again she pointed to her temple.

“From our angle, it looked awful,” Jim amended. “But later we saw it on tape, and it was more of a ... It sorta grazed his head. The doctor checked him out and said he was okay. Nathan felt okay too. He pitched the rest of the inning and did fine. But then he took us out for dinner afterward, and it was like talking to some other person.”

“He had a \$10 word for everything,” Jim said. “He said the wine was ‘unafraid.’ I remember that. The wine was ‘unafraid.’ That was new.”

“He did say that. He said a lot of things,” Dot said.

“He talked a lot that night,” Jim added. “We flew home the next morning, and a few days later, he gets called up to the Giants. Which is when you met him.”

“We figured the new way of talking was some temporary thing,” Dot said. “But then your article comes out, and he’s still talking this way—‘indeed’ this and ‘glorious’ that.”

“His sister talked like that. She was the reader.”

Lionel was afraid to ask.

“She passed young,” Dot said, and leaned forward, her hands on her knees. “It was a tumor. When they found it, it was too big.”

Jim cleared his throat. “Anyway. With Nathan, when he was talking like that, we put it together. It had to be the comebacker.”

Dot was nodding steadily, her eyes locked on Lionel. “Like something got knocked loose, and whatever was clogged up in there came pouring out.

Sometimes people get hit in the head and start speaking another language.”

Jim nodded enthusiastically. “French, Portuguese, Turkish. But it seems like it’s usually French.”

By the time Lionel left, the impossible heat of paved Arizona had relented. He drove with the windows open, the red sunset behind him. He got back to the hotel and checked his messages. One was from Hannah.

“Sorry about your boy,” she said. “You probably know more than I do. Call if you want to compare notes.”

Lionel looked online and found a short blip about it. Nathan had been pitching in Cleveland when he blew out his arm. He left the park in a sling.

The professional thing for Lionel to do would be to return to Nathan’s parents’ home and get their reaction. But he couldn’t bring himself to bother them, and was so shattered that he sat on the bed and stared at the wall for the better part of an hour. Finally he got to his feet and drove his rental car to the airport.

Back in San Francisco, Lionel waited for news. For two days Nathan wasn’t at the park, and no one had updates. Finally a press conference was called.

“How can a sequoia withstand a thousand years of earthquakes and fires and wind, and finally, one day, it just falls?”

The room was full. Lionel sat at the back. The team doctor came out and said they’d done an MRI and consulted with the best specialists in the city. Nathan would need surgery, and even after that, the prognosis was not good. “I can’t promise anything,” the doctor said.

And then Nathan walked in, wearing a coat and tie, his arm in a sling. He sat down. He looked warmly out at the throng of reporters, but before he could begin, Tom from the *L.A. Times* walked in late. “What’s the prognosis?” he asked.

The room groaned, but as always, Nathan treated the question with great decorum.

“If I were still 18,” he said, “I might be able to get the surgery. Then, in 10 or 12 months, I could return, though with reduced capacity. But I’m almost 30, so there is no way back. Even if I did every last thing right, I’d be, at best, a single-A player. And an old one at that.”

Hannah was in the front row. She raised her hand.

“Hi, Hannah,” Nathan said. “I’m guessing you’d like to know how it feels?”

She laughed and lowered her hand.

“It’s a good question. At the moment, I’m still stunned. Numb. I have to admit my imagination had gotten away from me, and I saw great glory ahead. I was looking forward to the rest of the season, to seasons to come, to the lights, all those people sitting 200 feet in the sky to watch this game. It’s over sooner than I expected, for sure. So for the moment, I’m adrift. Don’t you cry now, Hannah.” He looked around the table for tissues. “All we have up here is water. Here,” he said, and poured her a tall glass from the pitcher. And as he did, time slowed. Every reporter in the room watched closely, as if they’d never before seen water move from one vessel to another.

Nathan sat down again, and called on Lionel.

“Did you have any warning?” Lionel asked.

“You know, my friend, I really didn’t. I felt good that day in Cleveland. But it’s probably like any other thing. How can a sequoia withstand a thousand years of earthquakes and fires and wind, and finally, one day, it just falls? One afternoon, a gust comes and it gives up.” Nathan stood. “I’ll miss you all. Hope I see you here or there or somewhere in between. Goodbye now.”

Lionel walked onto King Street, trying to figure out how to shape the story, or if he should bother. He still hadn’t written about his time with Nathan’s parents; his heart wasn’t in it. When he turned the corner at Third Street, heading home, he felt a presence next to him.

“Caught up to you!” It was Nathan, out of breath. “I tried to find you at the park, and then was wandering around the neighborhood, hoping to run into you. I know you live around here. Then I heard the squeaking.”

They ducked into a burrito place. Lionel tried to order margaritas for them both, but Nathan declined. “I don’t know why my mind is working the way it does now, but I don’t want to mess with it.” He ordered a lemonade.

It was criminal to sit in that park, Lionel thought, with all that color, all that vaulting joy in a world of sadness and misfortune, and not do better.

Lionel ordered a lemonade too, and they sat by the window facing the park. “Your parents told me about the comebacker,” he said.

“Yeah, I figured,” Nathan said. “Funny thing is, I don’t feel different, and I don’t see differently than I ever did before. I’ve always noticed the same things, but I guess that now I have the need, and maybe the words, to describe it.

“My sister was the eloquent one,” he continued after a pause. “My parents mention her?”

“A little bit,” Lionel said.

For a second Nathan smiled, as if thinking of her, of something she’d said. “Anyway,” he said, “I’ll be reading you, making sure you get it right.”

“I can do better,” Lionel said suddenly, and Nathan did not argue the point. It was criminal to sit in that park, Lionel thought, with all that color, all that vaulting joy in a world of sadness and misfortune, and not do better.

“You plan to fix the squeak?” Nathan asked.

“I took it back to the shoe guy,” Lionel said, “but he freed himself of any responsibility.”

“Can I?” Nathan asked, and Lionel took off his shoe and handed it to Nathan.

“It has to be an air pocket, right?” Nathan said. Even with one bum arm, he quickly found the pocket and aimed a fork at it. “Can I?” he asked again. Lionel nodded, and Nathan jabbed a strategic hole. “Try it now.”

Lionel put the shoe back on and walked a few steps. The squeak was gone. His relief was immeasurable. “Thank you,” he said.

They finished their lemonades and stepped back into the city. The lights were on in the stadium. Lionel had forgotten there was a home game that night. He turned to Nathan, thinking he’d be wistful, but his eyes were sharp and happy.

“So what will you do now?” Lionel asked.

“I’ve been thinking about that. Are you walking this way?” Nathan was heading toward the water, his gait loose. Lionel followed.

“Maybe you buy that Romanian shoemaker out.”

Nathan laughed. “You know,” he said, “a few years ago, I was in a high-rise in Guangzhou, visiting a friend at his office. Long story. But anyway, this was 42 floors up, and there was a man outside, cleaning the windows. He had one of those wide T-shaped tools for cleaning the glass—like a blade. You know the tool. So simple. He drenched the window with soap, applying it with such liberality. Just soaked this vast window overlooking this limitless city.”

Nathan turned to the towers of downtown San Francisco.

“And then, with the T-shaped blade, he slashed the surface of the glass with the precision and finality of a guillotine. He got every last white sud. As we watched, the view through the window went from muddy to crystalline.”

Lionel couldn’t figure out what the connection was. Nathan wanted to be a businessman in a Chinese high-rise? And how had this minor-league pitcher from Alabama ended up with a friend in Guangzhou?

“So I thought I’d like to do that job,” Nathan said. He meant cleaning the windows. “Not necessarily in Guangzhou, and not forever, but I’d like to try that for a while. I like being outside.”

They’d arrived at the water, and Lionel thought he should get back to the ballpark. He reached out to shake Nathan’s hand. Nathan lowered his sling

and took Lionel's fingers in his.

"Or babies!" he said, still pumping Lionel's hand. "You know how after babies are born in hospitals, there are nurses who hold the babies while the moms recover from the birth? How do you get that job?"

Nathan released Lionel's hand and began backing away, toward the South Beach marina, where hundreds of white masts looked like lances aimed at the night.

"Imagine holding babies all day!" Nathan said. "Wouldn't that be a worthwhile life? So tomorrow I'm going down to the maternity ward to find out who gets to hold the babies. I want to hold all those babies before they go home."

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I Was Wrong About Trigger Warnings

Has the national obsession with trauma done real damage to teen girls?

by Jill Filipovic



Updated at 1:58 p.m. ET on August 14, 2023

In 2008, when I was a writer for the blog Feministe, commenters began requesting warnings at the top of posts discussing distressing topics, most

commonly sexual assault. Violence is, unfortunately and inevitably, central to feminist writing. Rape, domestic violence, racist violence, misogyny—these events indelibly shape women’s lives, whether we experience them directly or adjust our behavior in fear of them.

Back then, I was convinced that such warnings were sometimes necessary to convey the seriousness of the topics at hand (the term *deeply problematic* appears a mortifying number of times under my byline). Even so, I chafed at the demands to add ever more trigger warnings, especially when the headline already made clear what the post was about. But warnings were becoming the norm in online feminist spaces, and four words at the top of a post—“Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault”—seemed like an easy accommodation to make for the sake of our community’s well-being. We thought we were making the world just a little bit better. It didn’t occur to me until much later that we might have been part of the problem.

The warnings quickly multiplied. When I wrote that a piece of conservative legislation was “so awful it made me want to throw up,” one commenter asked for an eating-disorder trigger warning. When I posted a link to a funny *BuzzFeed* photo compilation, a commenter said it needed a trigger warning because the pictures of cats attacking dogs looked like domestic violence. Sometimes I rolled my eyes; sometimes I responded, telling people to get a grip. Still, I told myself that the general principle—warn people before presenting material that might upset them—was a good one.

Trigger warnings migrated from feminist websites and blogs to college campuses and progressive groups. Often, they seemed more about emphasizing the upsetting nature of certain topics than about accommodating people who had experienced traumatic events. By 2013, they had become so pervasive—and so controversial—that [Slate declared it](#) “The Year of the Trigger Warning.”

The issue only got more complicated from there. Around 2016, Richard Friedman, who ran the student mental-health program at Cornell for 22 years, started seeing the number of people seeking help each year increase by 10 or 15 percent. “Not just that,” he told me, “but the way young people were talking about upsetting events changed.” He described “this sense of being harmed by things that were unfamiliar and uncomfortable. The

language that was being used seemed inflated relative to the actual harm that could be done. I mean, I was surprised—people were *very* upset about things that we would never have thought would be dangerous.” Some students, for instance, complained about lecturers who’d made comments they disliked, or teachers whose beliefs contradicted their personal values.

Read: The real problem with trigger warnings

To a certain degree, Friedman said, this represented a positive change. Mental illness was becoming less stigmatized than ever before, and seeking care was more common. But Friedman worried that students also saw themselves as fragile, and seemed to believe that coming into contact with offensive or challenging information was psychologically detrimental. In asking for more robust warnings about potentially upsetting classroom material, the students seemed to be saying: *This could hurt us, and this institution owes us protection from distress.*

Have we inadvertently raised a generation that has fewer tools to manage hardship?

Trigger warnings were only one part of a larger shift. Complaints quickly entered the wider culture, and were applied to “toxic” workplaces and “problematic” colleagues; students decried the “potential trauma” caused by ideas and objected to the presence of some speakers and works of art.

My own doubts about all of this came, ironically, from reporting on trauma. I’ve interviewed women around the world about the worst things human beings do to one another. I started to notice a concerning dissonance between what researchers understand about trauma and resilience, and the ways in which the concepts were being wielded in progressive institutions. And I began to question my own role in all of it.

Feminist writers were trying to make our little corner of the internet a gentler place, while also giving appropriate recognition to appallingly common female experiences that had been pushed into the shadows. To some extent, those efforts worked. But as the [mental health of adolescent girls](#) and college students crumbles, and as activist organizations, including feminist ones, find themselves repeatedly embroiled in internecine debates

over power and language, a question nags: In giving greater weight to claims of individual hurt and victimization, have we inadvertently raised a generation that has fewer tools to manage hardship and transform adversity into agency?

Since my days as a feminist blogger, mental health among teenagers has plummeted. From 2007 to 2019, the suicide rate for children ages 10 to 14 tripled; for girls in that age group, it nearly quadrupled. A [2021 CDC report found](#) that 57 percent of female high-school students reported “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness,” up from 36 percent in 2011. Though the pandemic undoubtedly contributed to a crash in adolescent mental health, the downturn began well before COVID hit.

Teenage girls report troublingly high rates of sexual violence and bullying, as well as concern for their own physical safety at school. But it’s not clear that their material circumstances have taken a plunge steep enough to explain their mental-health decline. The CDC study suggests that, over the past decade, bullying among high schoolers has actually decreased in certain respects. Today’s teenagers are also less likely to drink or use illicit drugs than they were 10 years ago. And even before pandemic-relief funds slashed the child-poverty rate, the percentage of children living in poverty [fell precipitously after 2012](#). American public high schoolers are more likely to graduate than at any other time in our country’s history, and girls are significantly more likely to graduate than boys.

[Jonathan Haidt: The dangerous experiment on teen girls](#)

So what has changed for the worse for teenage girls since roughly 2010? The forces behind their deteriorating mental health are opaque and complex, but one big shift has been a decline in the time teenagers spend with their friends in person, dipping by 11 hours a week—a decline that began before the pandemic, but was badly exacerbated by it. Since 2014, the proportion of teens with smartphones has risen by 22 percent, and the proportion who say they use the internet “almost constantly” [has doubled](#). Part of the issue may be a social-media ecosystem that lets teens live within a bubble of like-minded peers and tends to privilege the loudest, most aggrieved voices; this kind of insularity can encourage teenagers to understand distressing experiences as traumatizing. “I think it’s easier for them to artificially curate

environments that are comfortable,” Shaili Jain, a physician and PTSD specialist, told me. “And I think that is backfiring. Because then when they’re in a situation where they’re not comfortable, it feels really alarming to them.”

Applying the language of trauma to an event changes the way we process it. That may be a good thing, allowing a person to face a moment that truly cleaved their life into a before and an after, and to seek help and begin healing. Or it may amplify feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, elevating those feelings above a sense of competence and control.

“We have this saying in the mental-health world: ‘Perception is reality,’” Jain said. “So if someone is adamant that they felt something was traumatizing, that is their reality, and there’s probably going to be mental-health consequences of that.”

Martin Seligman, the director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, has spent the past 50 years researching resilience. One study he co-authored looked at the U.S. Army, to see if there was a way to predict PTSD. Unsurprisingly, he and his fellow researchers found a link to the severity of the combat to which soldiers were exposed. But the preexisting disposition that soldiers brought to their battlefield experiences also mattered. “If you’re a catastrophizer, in the worst 10 or 20 percent, you’re more than three times as likely to come down with PTSD if you face severe combat,” Seligman told me. “And this is true at every level of severity of combat—the percentage goes down, but it’s still about twice as high, even with mild combat or no obvious combat.”

In other words, a person’s sense of themselves as either capable of persevering through hardship or unable to manage it can be self-fulfilling. “To the extent we overcome and cope with the adversities and traumas in our life, we develop more mastery, more resilience, more ability to fend off bad events in the future,” Seligman told me. “But conversely, to the extent that we have an ideology or a belief that when traumatic events occur, we are the helpless victims of them—that feeds on itself.”

Seligman also found that some soldiers who experienced severe trauma could not only survive, but actually turn their suffering into a source of

strength. “About as many people who showed PTSD showed something called post-traumatic growth, which means they have an awful time during the event, but a year later they’re stronger physically and psychologically than they were to begin with,” he said. But that empowering message has yet to take hold in society.

So what would be a more productive way to approach adversity? Friedman, the former medical director of the Cornell mental-health program, compares building resilience to physical exercise. “It’s like any form of strength training,” he told me. “People have no hesitation about going to the gym and suffering, you know, muscle pain in the service of being stronger and looking a way that they want to look. And they wake up the next day and they say, ‘Oh my God, that’s so painful. I’m so achy.’ That’s not traumatic. And yet when you bring that to the emotional world, it’s suddenly very adverse.”

The problem is that this idea—that to develop resilience, we must tough out hard situations—places a heavier burden on some people than others.

Friedman pointed out that people who grew up under constant stress, perhaps owing to abuse, poverty, or food insecurity, may find that this stress is “erosive” to their ability to use those resilience muscles. The exercise metaphor rankled Michael Ungar, the director of the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Canada. “Chronic exposure to a stressor like racism, misogyny, being constantly stigmatized or excluded, ableism—all of those factors do wear us down; they make us more susceptible to feelings that will be very overwhelming,” he told me. There are, after all, only so many times a person can convince themselves that they can persevere when it feels like everyone around them is telling them the opposite.

Creating the conditions where resilience is possible is as much a collective responsibility as an individual one.

Tyffani Monford Dent, a clinical psychologist and an author whose work focuses on sexual violence and racial trauma, calls this “the resiliency trap.” Black women in particular, she told me, have long been praised for their toughness and perseverance, but individual resiliency can’t solve structural problems. From Dent’s perspective, young people aren’t rejecting the

concept of inner strength; they are rejecting the demand that they navigate systemic injustice with individual grit alone. When they talk about harm and trauma, they aren't exhibiting weakness; they're saying, *Yes, I am vulnerable, and that's human*. These days, patients are being more "transparent about what they need to feel comfortable, to feel safe, to feel valued in this world," she said. "Is that a bad thing?"

Most of the experts I spoke with were careful to distinguish between an individual student asking a professor for a specific accommodation to help them manage a past trauma, and a cultural inclination to avoid challenging or upsetting situations entirely. Thriving requires working through discomfort and hardship. But creating the conditions where that kind of resilience is possible is as much a collective responsibility as an individual one.

If we want to replace our culture of trauma with a culture of resilience, we'll have to relearn how to support one another—something we've lost as our society has moved toward viewing "wellness" as an individual pursuit, a state of mind accessed via self-work. Retreating inward, and tying our identities to all of the ways in which we've been hurt, may actually make our inner worlds harder places to inhabit.

"If everything is traumatic and we have no capacity to cope with these moments, what does that say about our capacity to cope when something more extreme happens?" Ungar said. "Resilience is partly about putting in place the resources for the next stressor." Those resources have to be both internal and external. Social change is necessary if we want to improve well-being, but social change becomes possible only if our movements are made up of people who believe that the adversities they have faced are surmountable, that injustice does not have to be permanent, that the world can change for the better, and that they have the ability to make that change.

To help people build resilience, we need to provide material aid to meet basic needs. We need to repair broken community ties so fewer among us feel like they're struggling alone. And we need to encourage the cultivation of a sense of purpose beyond the self. We also know what stands in the way of resilience: avoiding difficult ideas and imperfect people, catastrophizing, isolating ourselves inside our own heads.

In my interviews with women who have experienced sexual violence, I try not to put the traumatic event at the center of our conversations. My aim instead is to learn as much as I can about them as people—their families, their work, their interests, what makes them happy, and where they feel the most themselves. And I always end our conversations by asking them to reflect on how far they've come, and what they are proudest of.

That last question often elicits a powerful response. I started asking it because I hoped to let the women I met feel seen in full, beyond the worst things that had happened to them.

This article originally misidentified Richard Friedman as the former coordinator of Cornell's mental-health program instead of its former medical director. This article appears in the [September 2023](#) print edition with the headline "The Resilience Gap."

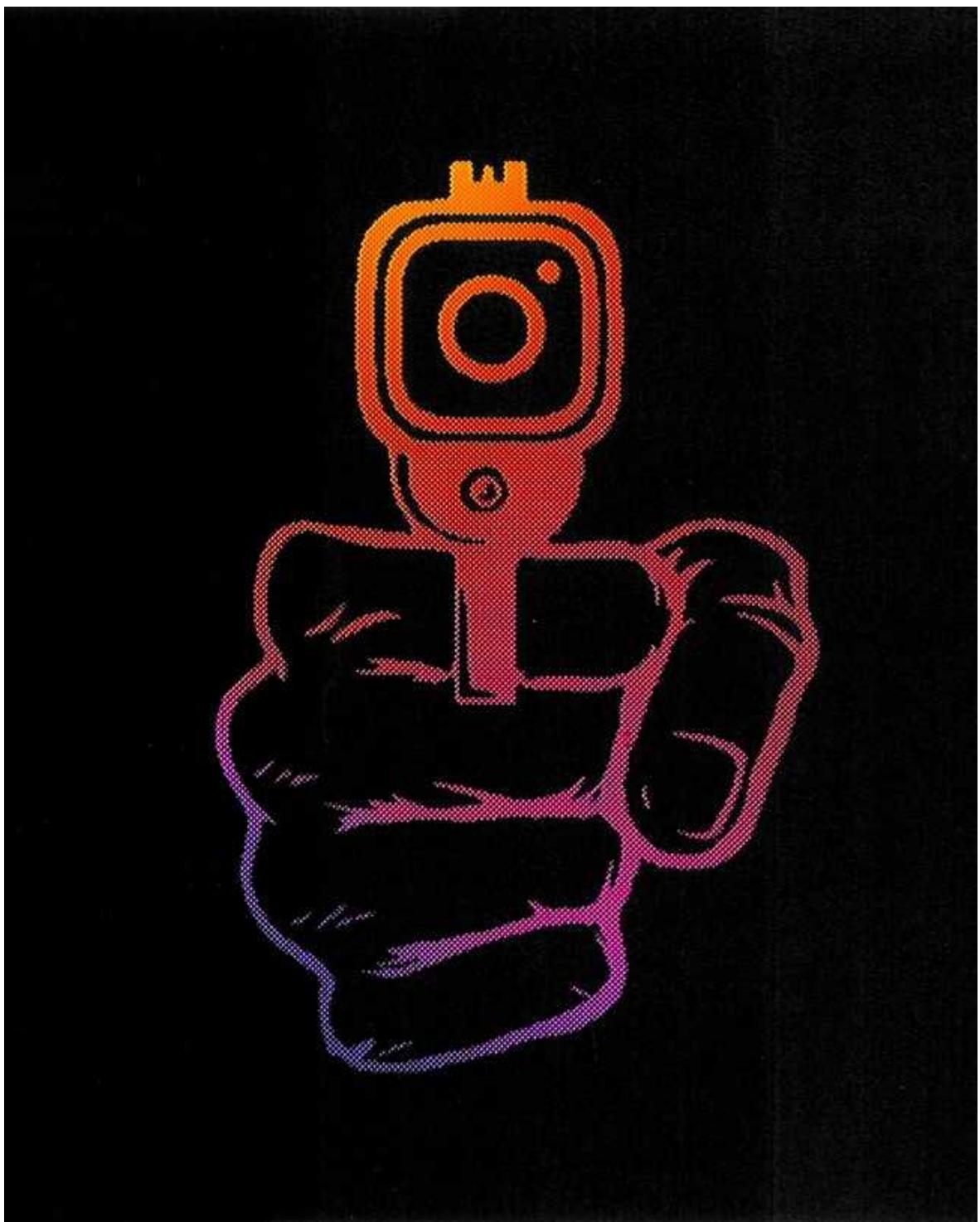
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Killer Apps

Is social media making America's murder surge worse?

by Alec MacGillis



Updated at 5:00 p.m. ET on August 9, 2023

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One fall evening in 2020, Jarell Jackson and Shahjahan McCaskill were chatting in Jackson's Hyundai Sonata, still on a postvacation high, [when 24 bullets ripped through the car](#). The two men, both 26, had been close friends since preschool. They'd just returned to West Philadelphia after a few days hang gliding, zip-lining, and hiking in Puerto Rico. Jackson was parked outside his mom's house when a black SUV pulled up and the people inside started shooting. Both he and McCaskill were pronounced dead at the hospital.

In the aftermath, McCaskill's mother, Najila Zainab Ali McCaskill, couldn't fathom why anyone would want to kill her son and his friend. Both had beaten the odds for young Black men in their neighborhood and graduated from college. Jackson had been a mental-health technician in an adolescent psych ward while her son had run a small cleaning business and tended bar. She wondered if they'd been targeted by a disgruntled former employee of the cleaning business. But then the police explained: Her son and his friend had been killed because of a clash on social media among some teenagers they'd never even met.

For months, a battle had been raging on Instagram between crews based on either side of Market Street. Theirs was a long-running rivalry, but a barrage of online taunts and threats had raised tensions in the neighborhood. Police had assigned an officer to monitor the social-media activity of various crews in the city, and the department suspected that the Northsiders in the SUV had mistaken one of the two friends for a rival Southsider and opened fire. An hour after the shooting, a Northsider posted a photo on Instagram with a caption that appeared to mock the victims and encourage the rival crew to collect their bodies: "AHH HAAAAA Pussy Pick Em Up!!"

Jackson and McCaskill died in the first year of a nationwide resurgence in violence that has erased more than two decades of gains in public safety. In 2020, homicides spiked by 30 percent and fluctuated around that level for the next two years. There are [early signs](#) that the 2023 rate could show a decrease of more than 10 percent from last year, but that would still leave it well above pre-pandemic levels.

Criminologists point to a confluence of factors, including the social disruptions caused by COVID-19, the rise in gun sales early in the

pandemic, and the uproar following the murder of George Floyd, which, in many cities, led to diminished police activity and further erosion of trust in the police. But in my reporting on the surge, I kept hearing about another accelerant: social media.

Violence-prevention workers described feuds that started on Instagram, Snapchat, and other platforms and erupted into real life with terrifying speed. “When I was young and I would get into an argument with somebody at school, the only people who knew about it were me and the people at school,” said James Timpson, a violence-prevention worker in Baltimore. “Not right now. Five hundred people know about it before you even leave school. And then you got this big war going on.”

[Read: Why American teens are so sad](#)

Smartphones and social platforms existed long before the homicide spike; they are obviously not its singular cause. But considering the recent past, it’s not hard to see why social media might be a newly potent driver of violence. When the pandemic led officials to close civic hubs such as schools, libraries, and rec centers for more than a year, people—especially young people—were pushed even further into virtual space. Much has been said about the possible links between heavy social-media use and mental-health problems and suicide among teenagers. Now Timpson and other violence-prevention workers are carrying that concern to the logical next step. If social media plays a role in the rising tendency of young people to harm themselves, could it also be playing a role when they harm others?

The current spike in violence isn’t a return to ’90s-era murder rates—it’s something else entirely. In many cities, the violence has been especially concentrated among the young. The nationwide homicide rate for 15-to-19-year-olds [increased by an astonishing 91 percent](#) from 2014 to 2021. Last year in Washington, D.C., [105 people under 18 were shot](#)—nearly twice as many as in the previous year. In Philadelphia in the first nine months of 2022, the tally of youth shooting victims—181—[equaled the tally for all of 2015 and 2016 combined](#). And in Baltimore, more than 60 children ages 13 to 18 were shot in the first half of this year. That’s [double the totals for the first half of each year from 2015 to 2021](#)—and it’s occurred while overall homicides in the city declined. Nationwide, this trend has been racially

disproportionate to an extreme degree: In 2021, Black people ages 10 to 24 were [almost 14 times more likely to be the victims of a homicide](#) than young white people.

Those confronting this scourge—police, prosecutors, intervention workers—are adamant that social-media instigation helps explain why today’s young people are making up a larger share of the victims. But they’re at a loss as to how to combat this phenomenon. They understand that this new wave of killing demands new solutions—but what are they?

To the extent that online incitement has drawn attention, it’s been focused on rap videos, particularly those featuring [drill music](#), which started in Chicago in the early 2010s and is dominated by explicit baiting of “opps,” or rivals. These videos have been linked to numerous shootings. Often, though, conflict is sparked by more mundane online activity. Teens bait rivals in Instagram posts or are goaded by allies in private chats. On Instagram and Facebook, they livestream incursions into enemy territory and are met by challenges to “drop a pin”—to reveal their location or be deemed a coward. They brandish guns in Snapchat photos or YouTube and TikTok videos, which might provoke an opp to respond—and pressure the person with the gun to actually use it.

“If you’re not monitoring social media, you’re wondering why 1,000 people are suddenly downtown fighting.”

In December, I met 21-year-old Brandon Olivieri at the state prison in Houtzdale, Pennsylvania, where he is serving time for murder. In 2017, Olivieri says, he had a run-in with other teens in South Philadelphia after he tried to sell marijuana on their turf. Later, in a private Instagram chat for Olivieri and his friends, someone posted a picture of a silver .45-caliber pistol. Then another member, Nicholas Torelli, posted a picture of cat feces on the sidewalk, with the caption “Brandon took a shit on opp territory.” It was a joke, but the conversation quickly turned aggressive. Later that day, Olivieri asked Torelli to drop an image of their opponents into the chat, so everyone could see what they looked like. Torelli complied, and, according to court records, Olivieri replied that he would “pop all of them.”

When Olivieri, Torelli, and two friends encountered four of their opponents later that month, there were heated words, a struggle, and three gunshots from the silver pistol. One bullet struck Caleer Miller, a member of Olivieri's group. Another hit Salvatore DiNubile, in the other crew. Both died; they were 16. Olivieri was convicted of first-degree murder in DiNubile's death and third-degree murder in Miller's. (Torelli testified against Olivieri and was not charged.) Olivieri was sentenced to 37 years to life.

DiNubile's father, also named Salvatore, believes the ability to share threats online encouraged Olivieri and his friends to make them; having made them, they felt compelled to follow through. "You said you were gonna do this guy. Here's your chance," he told me. "You try to live up to this gangster mentality that he's self-created." Olivieri maintains his innocence and says that he wasn't the one who fired the fatal shots, but he agreed that he and his friends often hyped one another up by making boasts online. "It's what we call pump-faking," he explained.

Last year, as the number of juvenile shooting victims in Washington, D.C., climbed toward triple digits, the city's Peace Academy, which trains community members in violence prevention, held a Zoom session dedicated to social media. Ameen Beale of the D.C. Attorney General's Office shared his screen to display a sequence typical of online flare-ups culminating in a fatality.

The presentation started with a photo, posted to Instagram in 2019, showing the local rapper AhkDaClicka on the Metro; the caption mocked him for being caught there, without a gun, by adversaries. Then came a screenshot of private messages between AhkDaClicka and a rival rapper named Walkdown Will that the latter posted derisively on Instagram Live. Next, an Instagram Story from AhkDaClicka insulting another rapper who had allegedly been present at the Metro run-in, and a YouTube video of AhkDaClicka [rapping about the incident](#), including the line "Just give me a Glock and point me to the opps." Soon afterward, in January 2020, AhkDaClicka was fatally shot. He was 18; his real name was Malick Cisse. That May, police arrested Walkdown Will—William Whitaker, also 18. He pleaded guilty to second-degree murder last October.

Beale's presentation left some participants dumbfounded. "I cannot believe the level of immaturity and stupidity that's become the norm," one wrote in the chat. Another asked the question looming over the session: Had anyone in the city's violence-prevention realm asked the social-media companies to limit inflammatory content?

"I don't think we've made much progress," Beale admitted. When the city had sought to have posts removed, he said, the companies had rebuffed its pleas with vague arguments about free speech. Even if social-media platforms did remove a post, 20 people could already have shared it with hundreds or thousands more. And given the pace of online life, you might spend five years trying to block harmful content on one platform, only for all the activity to migrate to another.

[Read: No one knows exactly what social media is doing to teens](#)

I asked a spokesperson for Google, which owns YouTube, about the AhkDaClicka video with the line about the Glock, as well as another video posted last summer, titled "Pull Da Plug." It showed a Louisville, Kentucky, rapper and about a dozen other young men apparently celebrating a shooting that had left a man on life support (he later died). The head of the Louisville violence-prevention agency had told me that the victim's family asked Google to remove the video, but it stayed up, collecting more than 15,000 views. The spokesperson, Jack Malon, told me the company generally had a "pretty high threshold" for removing music videos, in part because company policy [allows exceptions for artistic content](#).

My conversations with Malon and his counterparts at Snap and Meta (which owns Facebook and Instagram) left me with the impression that social-media platforms have given relatively little thought to their role in fueling routine gun violence, compared with the higher-profile debate over censoring incendiary political speech. Meta pointed me to its "[community standards](#)," which are full of gray-area statements such as "We also try to consider the language and context in order to distinguish casual statements from content that constitutes a credible threat to public or personal safety." Snap argued that its platform was more benign than others, because posts are designed to disappear and are viewed primarily by one's friends. I also reached out to TikTok, but the company didn't respond.

Communities, meanwhile, have been left to fend for themselves. But violence-prevention groups are dominated by middle-aged men who grew up in the pre-smartphone era; they're more comfortable intervening in person than deciphering threats on TikTok. Before the pandemic, an intern at Pittsburgh's main anti-violence organization scanned social-media posts by young people considered at risk of becoming involved in conflicts. The Reverend Cornell Jones, the city government's liaison to violence-prevention groups, told me that the intern had once detected a feud brewing online among teenagers, some of whom had acquired firearms. Jones brought in the participants and their mothers and defused the situation. Then the intern left town for law school and the organization reverted to the ad hoc methods that are more typical for such groups. "If you're not monitoring social media, you're wondering why 1,000 people are suddenly downtown fighting," Jones said ruefully. In early July, a shooting at a block party in Baltimore validated his concern: Though the event had been discussed widely on social media, no police officers were on hand; later, a video circulated of a teenager showing off what appeared to be a gun at the party. The shooting left two dead and 28 others wounded.

A decade ago, Desmond Upton Patton, a professor of social policy, communications, and psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, got the first of several grants to study what he called "[internet banging](#)." His research team co-designed algorithms with a team at Columbia University to analyze language, images, and even emoji on Twitter and identify users at risk of harming themselves or others. The algorithms showed promise in identifying escalating online disputes. But he never allowed their use, worried about their resemblance to police surveillance efforts that had enabled profiling more than prevention. "Perhaps there is a smarter person who can figure out how to do it ethically," he said to me.

For now, the system is failing to anticipate violence—and even, quite often, to convict people whose social-media feeds incriminate them. In May, three teens were tried for the murders of Jarell Jackson and Shahjahan McCaskill in Philadelphia. At the time of the shooting, two were 17 and the third was 16. Social-media activity formed a key part of the prosecutors' evidence: Instagram posts and video feeds showed the three defendants driving around in a black SUV seemingly identical to the one that had pulled up alongside Jackson's car. Other posts showed two of them holding a gun that matched

the description of one used in the shooting. After a day of deliberations, the jury acquitted them of murder, finding two of the defendants guilty only of weapons charges. The verdict left the victims' families reeling. "For me and my family, [the trial] was like a seven-day funeral," Monique Jackson, Jarell's mother, told me. Afterward, the detective who had investigated the murders speculated to her that jurors on such cases often struggle to grasp the basic mechanics of social media and how essential it is to the interactions of young people. As Patton put it to me, "What we underestimate time and time again is that social media isn't virtual versus real life. This *is* life."

This article has been updated to clarify YouTube's policy for removing music videos.

This article is a collaboration between The Atlantic and ProPublica. It appears in the [September 2023](#) print edition with the headline "Killer Apps."

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Robert Smithson's Monument to Contingency

Spiral Jetty never stops changing.

by Jennifer L. Roberts



Robert Smithson's [Spiral Jetty](#) was built by pushing 6,650 tons of earth and basalt into the Great Salt Lake, forming a spiral 1,500 feet long and 15 feet wide. As massive as the earthwork is, however, it defers to its surroundings. These photographs, taken by the artist soon after the work's completion in 1970, display the environmental entanglement that he was hoping to achieve.

Smithson's *Jetty* has no edge, no frame. Water interpenetrates it, a gleaming, mercurial counter-spiral spooling into its open rockwork. The work's appearance is infinitely sensitive to the dynamic conditions of the lake: As the level and salinity of the water change, [so too does the jetty](#). Salt crystals play a special role in this collaboration. A student of crystallography, Smithson knew that the rocks would take on a ghostly patina of salt. As he liked to point out, salt crystals themselves can grow in a spiraling pattern; he wrote that the work would keep spiraling, like a fractal, no matter how closely you look. Every inch of *Spiral Jetty* becomes an intricate, vertiginous interface between the work and the world.



Smithson also invited viewers to walk along the spiral's brackish curves, deliberately courting disorientation. "Following the spiral steps we return to our origins," he wrote, "back to some pulpy protoplasm." To visit the jetty is to dissolve into its milieu.

A monument to contingency, *Spiral Jetty* submits itself to perpetual change, refusing all pretense of permanence. Today, 50 years after Smithson's death, the lake's ecosystem is struggling to recover fully from a catastrophic drought. Desiccated and exposed, *Spiral Jetty* both reveals this crisis and proposes an ethics for confronting it: a way of being that recognizes our radical inseparability from the Earth.

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Edvard Munch Lightens Up

A new exhibition offers a counterpoint to *The Scream*.

by James Parker



Edvard Munch, 1863–1944, was a zeitgeist conductor. Like Dostoyevsky before him, like Kafka after him, he was one of those somewhat hastily assembled humans—the skull plates not stapled down, the nerve endings dangling—who get chosen by the daemon of history to bear its message into the world.

Poor bastard. “You paint like a pig, Edvard!” yelled a young realist named Gustav Wentzel, getting in Munch’s face at an 1886 exhibition in Kristiania (now Oslo) that featured his painting *The Sick Child*. “Shame on you.” Munch, at the time, was penniless. His best friends were nihilists. Also alchemists, sadists, diabolists, absinthe fiends, and the occasional haunted dramatist. Ibsen came to his 1895 exhibition, the one that sparked a public debate about Munch’s sanity, and growlingly counseled him: “It will be with you as it was with me. The more enemies you have, the more friends you will have.” Strindberg, very mad, was a fellow paranoiac: “As regards Munch, who is now my enemy,” he wrote to his editor, “I am certain he will not miss the opportunity to stab me with a poisoned knife.” Years later, when Munch was painting on the beach and a gust of wind upended his easel, he blamed Strindberg.

Alienation, God-death, the self as destabilized center of experience—this was the daemon’s message. The full harrowing gospel of modernity. It lived inside Munch, forcing its way along his fibers and blazing out of his doomy Scandinavian eye sockets. It gave him breakdowns and a massive thirst for alcohol. It made him strangely attractive to women. It hospitalized him, several times. He starved, he raved, he was vilified, and—being a great artist—he understood exactly what was happening. “If only one could be the body through which today’s thoughts and feelings flow,” he wrote to a friend. “To succumb as a person, yet survive as an individual entity, that is the ideal.”

Here the scream that passes through nature carries a note of ecstasy.

And what does one paint, after the person has succumbed? What does one seek to represent? Not the merely external, the inert and boring *there*. And not the fluttering optical field of the impressionists, whose advances he had absorbed while living in Paris. Munch wanted to go past the eyes, further into the head. He was after the deepest action of the outside upon the inside, the pressure of the universe upon the mind. This, for him, was realism. This is how you get to his smash hit, his psychic world-statement: *The Scream*. The foregrounded figure on the walkway, the light-bulb-shaped head, the fishy hands, the bands of sound warping the evening sky, the powerless cartoon face stretched in terror—all that’s left of the human is a kind of flipped switch, an opened channel to the vibration of reality. Which is

overwhelming. “I heard a huge extraordinary scream pass through nature,” he wrote later.

From the November 2021 issue: Why did Dostoyevsky write *Crime and Punishment*?

“[Trembling Earth](#),” the glorious new exhibition of Munch’s work at the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, is not exactly a rebuttal to *The Scream*, but it so amplifies our understanding of the artist as to constitute, almost, a counternarrative. It’s a revelation. Mystical experiences can be negative, as many of Munch’s certainly were: They can show you how it feels to fall out of the hands of the Holy Spirit. But the deeper you go, the higher you fly, as the Beatles said. Here the scream that passes through nature carries a note of ecstasy.

The paintings at the Clark are presences—generous ones. They radiate, shedding a supernatural warmth. As you enter the gallery, you meet [The Yellow Log](#): felled tree trunks stacked in a snowy forest. The trunk at the top of the stack launches right out of the picture and off the wall, as laser-straight as the handrail in *The Scream*. But it glows gorgeously, this tree trunk; it shines at you like a cauterized sunbeam, its cut end a brilliant disc of white gold. In [The Haymaker](#), the landscape pours forward on a wheat-colored curve, a rush or spill of summery splendor that threatens to carry off the figure scything grass in the foreground—but the haymaker, via the flex of his braced legs and the torque in his body as he calmly swings the scythe, redirects the current, keeps it flowing: He’s at home in this world. And those rows of smoldering blue-green cabbages in [Cabbage Field](#)—are they streaming toward the horizon, narrowing to an omega point/flash of nullity, or are they streaming out of it, as if to embrace us? (Embraced by cabbages: That’s how this show will make you feel.)



The Yellow Log (Munchmuseet)

Melancholic Munch, mad moody maimed-by-modernity Munch, is well represented in “Trembling Earth.” There are creepy scenes in glades, empty faces, heads in hands, bleak semi-allegorical figures gazing at the sea, apple trees boiling like toxic soup, and a black-and-white lithograph of *The Scream* itself. But these images are contrapuntal to the theme. One wall away from the *Scream* lithograph is [*The Sun*](#), from 1910—a dazzlement of rays and light pellets flung off an ocean sunrise. Behind all of the brightness, you can even see the vague skull shape of the *Scream* head, as if the sun itself is a blast from its third eye.

Munch had his own sort of weirdo metaphysic, an intuitive and crank-scientific faith in the great self-renewing ferment of life, the mulching of souls, the crystals, etc., and as he got older he would explore the implications of this in images of near-Blakean luminosity. Male and female

essences; volcanoes of yearning beings. “The earth loved the air,” reads one crayon-on-paper text from a 1930 album called *The Tree of Knowledge*.

Like all genuine craftsmen, Munch respected labor. Forestry. Harvesting. The working of the land. In [Digging Men With Horse and Cart](#), from 1920, the men are bent double over their shovels while the white horse standing between the shafts is an almost transparent wreath of energies and bunched muscles. The horse—for which Munch’s horse Rousseau may have been the model—nods at the digging men, conferring a blessing.

[From the May 2023 issue: Vermeer’s revelations](#)

About his own work Munch was wonderfully un-precious: Although he loved his paintings and [referred to them](#) as his “children,” he would heap them carelessly, trip over them, drip on them, absent-mindedly bash them around, or leave them outside to take their chances in the elements. (He was semiserious about this: The process of weathering his paintings, exposing them, he called the *hestekur*—the horse cure.) A visitor to a later Munchian studio, inquiring why a certain canvas had a large hole in the bottom corner, was startled to hear that one of Munch’s dogs had run right through it.

“His paintings, landscapes as well as representations of human beings are suffused by deep passion.” That’s Goebbels. Hitler was less of a fan, and in 1937 dozens of Munch’s paintings were caught up in the [Nazi sweep](#) of “degenerate art.” Munch’s last years were spent under German occupation, at his country seat in Ekely, Norway. On the day of his death, age 80, he was reading, for the umpteenth time, his copy of Dostoyevsky’s [The Devils](#).

The Scream will live forever. It’s a cave painting on the inner wall of the human skull. And Munch himself heard the scream, no doubt about that: It ran through his being. But there’s a paradox. To produce an image like that, an image of such cosmic vulnerability, you need great strength. You can’t collapse, or not totally. You need to be extra durable. You need to be able to handle it. And Munch, for all his infirmities, could handle it. He had a secret health, a secret hardiness, and the show at the Clark puts us in touch with its source.

This article appears in the [September 2023](#) print edition with the headline “A Sunnier Edvard Munch.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

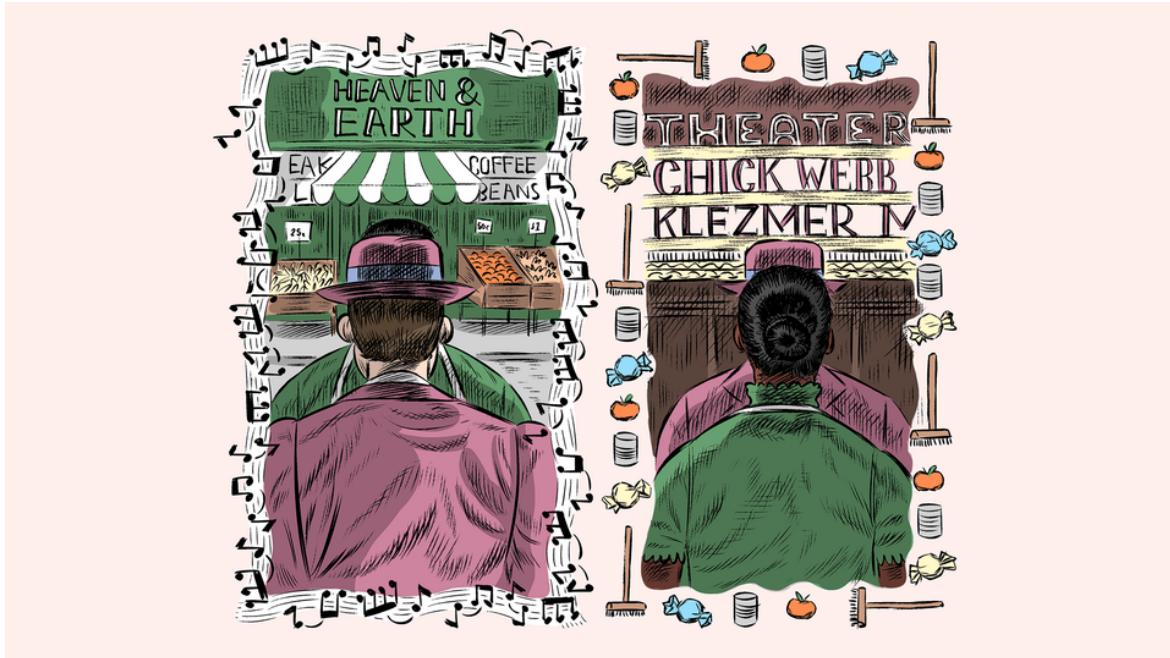
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Lost Histories of Coexistence

James McBride's new novel tells a story of solidarity between Black and Jewish communities.

by Ayana Mathis



Near the end of James McBride's new novel, [*The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*](#), a character named Miggy makes a proclamation about what truly ails the folks living in the asylum where she works:

The illness is not in their minds, or in the color of their skin, or in the despair in their heart, or even the money they may or may not have. Their illness is honesty, for they live in a world of lies, ruled by those

who surrendered all the good things that God gave them for money, living on stolen land.

Miggy is the oracle of Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and a teller of truths that leap off the pages of the novel to describe America's abiding troubles. Before long, she's cutting a slice of the town's best sweet-potato pie into slivers to diagram an escape route for an inmate of the asylum. That's classic McBride: He doesn't shy away from bold statements about the national catastrophes of race and xenophobia, and he always gives us a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down.

The sugar is McBride's spitfire dialogue and murder-mystery-worthy plot machinations; his characters' big personalities and bigger storylines; his wisecracking, fast-talking humor; and prose so agile and exuberant that reading him is like being at a jazz jam session (which is no coincidence; McBride is an [accomplished jazz musician](#)). *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store* is set in the 1920s in the [Chicken Hill neighborhood](#) of Pottstown, an actual place that, as in the novel, was home to Jewish immigrants and to African Americans who'd migrated from the South. In the prologue, we learn that the last Jewish inhabitant, a mysterious figure named Malachi, has disappeared after cops showed up on his doorstep—and just before Hurricane Agnes sweeps in and destroys the whole area in 1972.

The novel proper then plants us in the thriving Chicken Hill of 47 years earlier. At the center of a large cast of characters is Moshe Ludlow, a Romanian immigrant and music-club manager married to the love of his life, the irreverent and bighearted Chona, who owns and operates the titular Heaven & Earth grocery store. Nate and Addie Timblin, a couple in Moshe and Chona's employ, are shrewd elders and leaders of Chicken Hill's Black community.

Moshe's music club, the All-American Dance Hall and Theater, attracts Jewish musicians and revelers from all over the region. But it's in the middle of segregated downtown Pottstown, so when Moshe decides to host Black musicians, protest erupts among the white elite. Ultimately, desegregating the club draws the Jewish and Black residents closer together. Moshe, and the reader, discovers abundant cultural parallels between the two communities. A performance at the club's first "Negro" dance by Chick

Webb “and his roaring twelve-piece band was the greatest musical event Moshe had ever witnessed in his life,” McBride writes, “except for the weekend he managed to lure Mickey Katz, the brilliant but temperamental Yiddish genius of klezmer music.”

In McBride’s fifth novel, as in nearly all of his work, almost nothing of significant value is accomplished by people acting alone.

But McBride doesn’t stage a kumbaya moment just yet. Jews are leaving Chicken Hill. In addressing their flight, he raises one of the novel’s core questions: What is Americanness, and who gets to claim it? A Black juke-joint owner named Fatty says, “The Jews round here now, they wanna be in the big room with the white folks.” He goes on to argue that Black people on the Hill will always be refused their share in the country’s bounties. And indeed, Moshe wants to get while the getting’s good: “Down the hill is America!” he declares. But Chona won’t have it. So Moshe stays, tugged by his desire to become a nightclub impresario and join in American wealth, comfort, and cultural amnesia but bound by Chona’s connection to the store, the neighborhood, and a higher morality based on community involvement and her faith.

McBride introduces a 12-year-old deaf orphan named Dodo into the mix, a plot turn that soon provides a common enemy to consolidate communal ties. Pennsylvania authorities get wind of the boy, who’s been taken in by his aunt and uncle Addie and Nate, and decide to institutionalize him in the [Pennhurst asylum](#)—34 ominous buildings, sprawled across 200 acres, from which people, many of them Black, never return. Doc Roberts, the local physician who crusades to put Dodo away, is a leader in the local Ku Klux Klan and revered by white Pottstown, a villain with a worldview straight out of the racist xenophobe’s playbook: White, Christian America is becoming polluted by immigrants and Black people, and order must be restored to keep the nation great.

Though the Dodo storyline risks being a bit on the nose, deft characterization and unexpected tonal variations help complicate the reader’s perspective and add nuance and depth. No villain escapes McBride’s humor, which serves as a reset when the prose might otherwise veer toward the didactic. Even kind Chona gets one in when she says of

Roberts, “He’s so fat the back of his head looks like a pack of hot dogs.” More important, McBride’s good guys are far from purely virtuous. Nate Timblin has a violent past and a chilling potential to accelerate from zero to murderous in an instant—yet he is one of the novel’s heroes. And if the nonstop action, a McBride staple, sometimes becomes dizzying, the commotion works against oversimplification. Nearly everyone on Chicken Hill has a role to play in Dodo’s rescue, even those with side hustles who would just as soon stay clear of the whole business. There are no rugged individuals, and no action is without ripple effects, many of them unpredictable. As Miggy says, “Everything got everything to do with everything.”

The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store joins a project that unites McBride’s work—four other novels, one short-story collection, a biography of James Brown, and a memoir, *The Color of Water*: He is resurrecting lost histories of coexistence. Our current era of wrecking-ball polemics lends his oeuvre an air of wishfulness and, at the same time, makes the work that much more relevant. Reading McBride just feels good—we are comforted and entertained, and braced for the hard lessons he also delivers. Plunged into McBride’s crowds, you can’t help falling a little in love with a character called Monkey Pants (who teaches Dodo how to navigate the perils of Pennhurst), or a whole passel of people with the last name Lowgod (Pottstown’s sage outliers). The style is improvisational, colloquial, and satiric. Listen to one of Chicken Hill’s own warn against doing domestic work in white folk’s houses: “The men grope and the women mope.” It’s funny despite, or perhaps because of, its truth—and conveyed with a wit that exposes the gropers and mopers as the most pitiable and poor of spirit in Pottstown.

Each of these characters has troubles aplenty. In that sense, all of them are alone in a crowd. But it is the crowd that keeps the past, and the difficult present, from overwhelming them. The only way forward is coalition, however messy and painful. The point isn’t just that strength lies in numbers; in McBride’s books, community is a place of recognition, of inventiveness and joy-making, and a hedge against despair and the daily grind of living with limited options.

That despair has deep roots that can be traced back to the nation's beginnings. We live with the consequences—political, social, and legislative—of foundational segregation and its accompanying isolation. McBride has set two novels, most notably the National Book Award-winning [*The Good Lord Bird*](#) (2013), during the slave past, and seems to echo Alexis de Tocqueville's antebellum [diagnosis of our national character](#). Americans in their fledgling democracy, Tocqueville observed in his travels,

are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. Thus, not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.

In *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*, as in nearly all of McBride's work, almost nothing of significant value is accomplished by people acting alone. When Chicken Hill's water supply, for example, is threatened by a white landowner with a grudge, Fatty and his best friend, Big Soap, an Italian immigrant, team up with Nate to thwart his plans. In [*Deacon King Kong*](#) (2020), set in a Brooklyn housing project in the 1960s, an old rascal named Sportcoat, the deacon of the title, shoots a local drug dealer point-blank. The young man survives the attack, and what begins as an altercation between two individuals soon becomes a community-wide affair: The Black residents of the Cause Houses—Great Migration immigrants to the North—alongside remnants of the old Italian and Irish populations, are all involved in the events that drive the novel to its conclusion.

A packed stage has been a feature of McBride's work since his first book, *The Color of Water* (1996), in which he describes a tumultuous upbringing with his larger-than-life white mother, the daughter of Orthodox Jews who fled pogroms in Poland. Estranged from her family, [Ruth McBride Jordan](#) settled in Brooklyn, where McBride grew up in the 1960s and '70s, one of her 12 children. Their mixed-race heritage made them anomalies in their neighborhood, and their interconnectedness was their source of meaning, pathos, pain, and triumph. It also spurred a search for a larger sense of belonging, which they eventually found, thanks in no small part to their mother's example. Twice widowed, she was searching for affinity and

support herself. Undaunted by raised eyebrows, she discovered community with the Black neighbors among whom she reared her children.

McBride's integrationist vision isn't utopian or easy. Nor is it assimilationist. His fiction doesn't seek to erase differences, or to deny the realities of racism and marginalization. The vision doesn't go uncontested, either: McBride's own characters don't always buy the notion that narratives of shared struggles and spaces build solidarity, and some readers may believe with good reason that white supremacy and its attendant evils are too great to be overcome by racial proximity.

But McBride's fiction makes a strong argument for revisiting the embattled past in all its confusion. The purpose is to unearth communal stories and unlikely loyalties rather than render tidy verdicts—precisely the imaginative quest that *Heaven & Earth*'s prologue has laid the groundwork for. Malachi, once a dancer but now so old that a single yellow tooth hangs "like a clump of butter from his top gum," is suddenly a suspect in a long-forgotten crime in Chicken Hill. But the hurricane arrives, "and from there, every single bit of that who-shot-John-nonsense got throwed into the Schuylkill, and from there, it flowed into the Chesapeake Bay down in Maryland, and from there, out to the Atlantic." In McBride's work, digging deep into the tangled roots of complicated communities is the antidote to misplaced blame and false history.

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The Owls Are Not What They Seem

**The birds possess even uncannier
powers than we've imagined.**

by Rebecca Giggs



In the moments before seeing an owl comes a feeling like intuition. I will not forget one night when I stood on a balcony in suburban Sydney, and every wakeful creature in the surrounding bushland abruptly froze. Even the frogs seemed to want to renounce their noisy bodies. *Who goes there?*

Seconds later, a powerful owl (the name of a species native to Australia) dropped onto the railing, and I, too, nearly leaped out of my skin. The owl was the size of a terrier, but languidly buoyant in the way of a day-old Mylar balloon, and to my ears silent. In the pin-drop quiet, it bounced along the balustrade. I never heard its talons touch the metal. The owl itself, I knew, had such sharp hearing that it could make out a possum's heart pounding beneath its fur. Unseen, a second owl—mate to the first, I presumed—loosed a deep, woodwind hoot that carried.

Owl calls often seem ghostlike or inchoate. A twofold sorcery: Owls can lead us to doubt our own faculties while drawing us to wonder at the mysteries of theirs. Of some 260 owl species at large in the night, at dusk, and less commonly during daylight, many are stealthily camouflaged and decked out with decibel-dampening feathers, their shrieks floating without clear origin. The young of some of those species have long been practicing. [Great horned owls](#) find their voice while they are still doubled over in the dark of their moon-shaped egg. Having punctured the small air cell inside the egg's membrane with their budding beak, the proto-owlets inflate their lungs and start chittering. To each its private void, in a confinement growing tighter the bigger they get. If a spectral sound is supposed to come from beyond the grave, what word might characterize the babble of embryonic life, the noises of beings too tenuous to out themselves from their shell?

Owls' otherworldly aura—their keening more an atmosphere than an animal sound—has engendered human superstition: What better shorthand for sinister happenings than their ethereal calls? And yet owls have inspired an altogether different response as well. In antiquity, they were sometimes identified as “human-headed birds.” Their domed head, [wide-set eye sockets](#) (enabling binocular vision), and flat facial profile—distinctive within their biological class—are features that map onto a human visage. Whether the mythic depiction of owls as thoughtful, even philosophical, beings stemmed from this semblance alone, who can say?

[From the March 2019 issue: A journey into the animal mind](#)

Perhaps the inference arose instead from an understanding of owls as active at the close of the customary workday, after nightfall, hours that offer the chance for repose and contemplation. Or perhaps owls' sensitivity to stimuli

beyond human ken suggested unfathomed know-how, a shrewd intelligence needed to navigate the dark. Either way, the sagacity of owls has long stood as a categorical anomaly in a world in which to be called “birdbrained” remains an insult.

Whether feared or revered, owls have lately invited scrutiny by science writers and ornithologists eager to explain the birds’ acute perceptiveness, their far-flung environments (Antarctica is the only continent where you won’t find owls), and the relationships between the two. In her 2016 best seller, *The Hidden Lives of Owls: The Science and Spirit of Nature’s Most Elusive Birds*, Leigh Calvez focuses on the owls of the Pacific Northwest, sharing her suspenseful nighttime explorations of the biology and behavior of birds ranging in size from the saw-whet owl, which can fit in a teacup, to the imposing great grey owl (known to some as the “Phantom of the North”). The conservationist Jonathan C. Slaght has devoted decades to learning about Blakiston’s fish owl, “a fire hydrant with a six-foot wingspan,” as he puts it. In *Owls of the Eastern Ice: A Quest to Find and Save the World’s Largest Owl* (2020), Slaght yokes science to macho adventure in order to track the “floppy goblin” with electric-yellow eyes into the ice-strewn Primorye region of eastern Russia—a shrinking habitat, as are the owl’s hunting grounds in the waters and riverbanks of some of the coldest tributaries in Japan.

Two new entries in the owl quest find closer kinship between bird and human, yet remain wary of domesticating the dark’s inhabitants too much. In *The Wise Hours: A Journey Into the Wild and Secret World of Owls*, the poet and nature writer Miriam Darlington warns against the urge to “cutify” the birds, noting how readily owls’ big, forward-facing eyes convey babyish appeal, not just profundity. She has in mind the owl of meme culture, featured in viral YouTube, Tumblr, and TikTok posts; remixed as fan art on Reddit forums; and available as an avatar option in multiplayer video games. Online, owls star as twee, humanoid knockoffs, and could hardly be further from their cryptic counterparts heard caterwauling in the starlit woods. A tour of the platforms reveals owls peeishly rain-drenched, owls clowning around, powder-puff nestlings pleading for a dangled snack, owls wincing and head-bobbing, owls as the rambunctious companions of domestic pets. The antithesis of otherworldly, these and similarly whimsical, infantilized

animal portrayals are, in Darlington's view, an invitation to rob nature of its vital wildness.

From the January/February 2017 issue: What the octopus knows

Yet her project to preserve owl awe doesn't stop her from recruiting the birds to therapeutic ends. Darlington's adult son falls ill, and the narrative of his diagnosis and treatment (a "perma-drone of worries") fastens itself to her journey into the insomniac sphere of owls in a season of family crisis. Midway between divesting owls of adorability and asserting their status as a marvel of nature, Darlington finds they have a role to play as her own personal gargoyles: They serve as forbidding beings that externalize the author's anxieties, helping her to either wing those fears away or confront them.

The deftness of owls' senses might be regarded as "its own breed of genius."

Jennifer Ackerman, internationally beloved by birders as the author of two popular books about avian intelligence—*The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent, and Think* and *The Genius of Birds*—supplies a more hardheaded assessment of owls, as well as of owl worship, in *What an Owl Knows: The New Science of the World's Most Enigmatic Birds*. She locates her owls in the vacant lots of suburban Maringá, in southern Brazil; aloft in hawthorn and chokecherry forests in western Montana; in rehab for roadside injuries in Minnesota; in a limestone quarry in Maastricht, a municipality of the Netherlands. Her investigations lead her to question: How smart are owls, really, and why have they come to stand for the supernatural solemnity of a world beyond us?

As Ackerman has previously relayed, *startling findings have emerged* from the study of ornithological cognition over the past two decades. Researchers have discovered that, despite the lack of a layered cerebral cortex, the brains of several avian lineages permit complex feats of memory, logic, recognition, even math. Populations of corvids (crows, rooks, ravens, kindred others) are today famed for tool use, problem-solving, and seemingly ritual responses to their dead. American crows will congregate in cawing mobs around the lifeless bodies of birds of their same species, and later avoid food found in the area. Pinyon jays can remember each of a

thousand spots where they once stashed a seed. European magpies pass the mirror test: They can recognize themselves as individuals. Some parrots' language facility far exceeds mimicry. When trained in a lab, pigeons—surely the birds most impugned as automatons—turn out to be on par with primates in their counting ability (able to order arrays of objects, from a single object, to a pair, to a trio).

Ackerman wants to know what the latest science says about how owl species stack up against the cleverest birds. In relation to their body size, owls have large brains, an anatomical characteristic thought to have evolved in tandem with "parental provisioning" of offspring. Indeed, owl nestlings hatch before they can hunt or scavenge, dependent on food supplied by adults to provide the energy their brain tissue needs to grow. Yet for the most part, the brainpower of owls is enchain to the activity of their senses, rather than to the sort of intelligence found in birds that display inventiveness, selfhood, superior powers of recall, or numeracy. Some 75 percent of an owl's cortexlike forebrain is dedicated to hearing and vision, faculties so astounding in range and exactitude that they might seem, to us, a variety of natural magic.

[From the July/August 2022 issue: How light and noise pollution confound animals' senses](#)

Owl species deemed "eared" or "horned" don't actually have external ear pinna the way we do, or bony horns like antelope. The flareable tufts of feathers, called "plumicorns," they sport atop their head might be used to gesture to other owls, or perhaps to help conceal an owl by breaking up its rounded outline, making it appear more like the stump of a rough or broken branch. Though their true ears are mere apertures hidden under their feathers, owls' reactivity to sound has few equivalents in the animal kingdom. The great grey owl can not only pick up the swish of a vole's footfall coming from a passage cored into a snowbank, but also figure out the elevation of the sound source, so as to strike through the snow and hit that very point. In some owl species, a portion of the hearing nerve branches into the optical lobe of the brain, which scientists speculate could mean that these owls form a visual signal of something heard but out of sight.

Owls see well in the dimmest conditions, and some species have retained photoreceptor rods that also make them sensitive to ultraviolet light—they are able to see colors that we cannot. Eurasian eagle owls exploit this part of their visual spectrum by having patches of neck plumage that are brightened by reflecting UV light, markings germane to displays of rivalry. Their young also have UV-reflective blotches inside their throat, prominent cues when the eagle owlets gape for food.

For Ackerman, the deftness of owls' senses might be regarded as "its own breed of genius"—a supremely adaptive gift—though she recognizes that scientists rarely conceive of animal intelligence this way, finding evidence instead in exceptional behavior that conveys some kind of mental nimbleness or surplus. And owls do engage in some types of activity coded as "smart": Ackerman reports on this repertoire too. Owls are curious about novelty in their environment—one reason they are prone to getting trapped in pipes, hay blowers, and ventilation shafts, which they gamely explore. Little owls can tell groups of people apart, tolerating farmers but fleeing at a glimpse of ornithologists, who catch and band them.

Though owl faces may seem static, some species flex and refashion the feathered discs around their eyes to reflect states of alertness or relaxation. Owls, especially juvenile ones, play. They also learn: Great horned owls spend about six months with their parents developing dexterities that will aid their survival, including how to fly through tightly set tree canopies, and how to pounce and kill. Compared with adults, young barn owls experience long spells of REM sleep, the part of the sleep cycle associated with vivid and emotion-laden dreams in humans. If barn owlets dream, researchers suspect that those dreams help cement skills they acquire in the twilight, just as, when mice fall into REM sleep, the rodents enter a period of mental processing associated with learning to take cover from birds of prey (among them, owls).

Indeed, if we get beyond the emblematic wisdom of owls, we might come to recognize their most anthropomorphic quality—their versatility. Owls have unintentionally migrated as stowaways on ships and flourished in new territory. Corridors of agricultural land have facilitated their dispersal too. A few species have acclimatized remarkably well to our architecture and infrastructure, thriving in stables and belfries, occupying dugouts by

causeways, roosting by the hundreds in city squares or in cemeteries (where grave sites, laid with edible votives, attract rodents).

Male burrowing owls have been documented festooning their earthen tunnels with decorative bits of potato, nubs of concrete, corncobs, old gloves, and stolen fabric (red, white, blue, green, in order of preference)—small treasures underground. Camera traps have also revealed owl food sources to be more diverse than was once thought. They don't just eat mice, fish, amphibians, and insects, but will also scavenge for carrion, picking meat from dead dolphins and decomposing crocodiles on the shoreline, and stripping quills from the carcasses of crested porcupines to get at the flesh. The largest owl species will hunt other birds (including owls), and go after skunks, fawns, even cats.

Ultimately, Ackerman concludes that owls do not warrant their storied eminence as recondite knowledge keepers. Nor are they crow-witted by the standards of modern science. Owls are opportunists. When [Flaco, an eagle owl](#), first escaped from the Central Park Zoo in New York, his flight muscles were not yet strong enough to support flying farther than four blocks, and he bumbled his landings. For a decade he'd lived off hand-cut meat and slaughtered mice.

Today Flaco hunts his own vermin, and ranges artfully in the north end of Central Park. Bird-watchers praise the preservation of the wildness within him, despite his long captivity. What proves most bewitching about Flaco, described in his zoo days as "pudgy" and "grumpy," is how swiftly he has freed himself not only from his enclosure but from performative charm. Owls might yet be our alter egos in more than their ability to prosper in a diversity of habitats. What animal more readily accommodates our deep need to swivel between symbolisms, now hooting their summons to our dark and powerful instincts, now strutting and fluffing their appeal to our sense of whimsy? The duality of owls: as Janus-faced as we are.

This article appears in the [September 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Owls Aren’t That Smart.”

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The Man Who Transformed American Theater

How August Wilson became one of the country's most influential playwrights

by Imani Perry



When August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* opened at the Huntington Theatre in Boston in 1988, my mother, her friend Renée, and I sat in the audience, captivated by the struggles of a brother and sister at odds about the fate of a family heirloom, a piano on which their enslaved ancestor had made African carvings. The vernacular dialogue, the ghosts, and the humor—as a teenager

a couple of years earlier, I'd been stunned by a similar mix in [Joe Turner's Come and Gone](#) at the same theater (and had spotted Wilson pacing in the lobby). Still, the new play felt unlike anything we'd ever seen. After the performance, we headed to Slade's, a historic restaurant and bar (once owned by the Celtics legend Bill Russell) in the predominantly Black enclave of Roxbury. The lights were low and the music was loud, and I might not have noticed the cast members in the crowd if they hadn't just held me in thrall for three hours. I didn't see Wilson at Slade's that night, but if he was there, I imagine he was in a corner spinning "big lies," a Black English term for storytelling banter. I remember thinking that of course these actors would find their way to a joint in the hood. Slade's could easily have been described in Wilson's stage directions as a location for some postshow unwinding.

Critics consider the 1980s and '90s a renaissance of African American cultural production. In literature, Black women—Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and others—took their place among the most important writers in American history. Many of the stories they told resurrected the lives of earlier generations of women who had been largely neglected in art and society. Hip-hop, an insurgent art form with roots in postindustrial cities in the aftermath of the civil-rights movement, was thriving. Mainly male, with some notable exceptions, its creators and performers were brash and defiant—and enjoying a golden age of creativity, achieving feats of lyrical dexterity and figurative language. Critics were hailing hip-hop as a form of popular literature, akin to the blues in the early 20th century.

August Wilson, born in 1945 and raised in Pittsburgh's Hill District, is best known for his 10-play cycle evoking 20th-century Black life, set almost entirely in that city. His work—which, taken together, [tells the story](#) of Jim Crow, incarceration, migration, and the civil-rights era, conveying the beauty and pathos, the resilience and heartbreak of Black people—did not fit neatly into either the literary or the musical renaissance. His art reflected a blend, and his [impact on American theater](#), which has extended well beyond [his death, in 2005](#), is related to both.

[Read: The unconscious rebellion of August Wilson](#)

The critic Patti Hartigan's *[August Wilson: A Life](#)* traces the larger context of his achievement as thoroughly as it does his distinctive vision. Wilson embarked on playwriting during the Black Arts movement of 1965–75, when poetic performance art emerged as a signature form of expression, an important precursor to hip-hop. He joined in the vision of community-based art espoused by Amiri Baraka, Hoyt Fuller, and others. Baraka's dramatic work stirred his interest in mythic symbolism, and in theater and its power. Wilson's own poetry, though, was mocked for its lack of revolutionary rage, and he felt on the periphery of the movement. Like many of the women novelists, he was interested in the interior lives of earlier generations that had withstood the humiliations of slavery and Jim Crow, and sustained themselves with folk traditions and spirituality. His plays were woven of Black language and songs (sometimes drawing, as with "Old Dog Blue" in *[Fences](#)*, on stories and characters from songs), and they invoked Black rituals of worship and the rhythms of labor too. Wilson's vision conjoined hoodoo and history in completely singular ways. Against the odds, he arrived at the apex of American theater.

Frederick August Kittel Jr., Wilson's given name, was the fourth child born to Daisy Wilson, who had migrated to Pittsburgh from North Carolina in 1937. His father was largely absent from the family's life and provided little in the way of financial support. Frederick Kittel, a German immigrant, was already married to a Polish woman, and his relationship with Daisy, 24 years younger, was "tempestuous," Hartigan writes. A struggling single mother, Daisy took particular pride in Freddy, who was an early and avid reader. He was also an excellent student—and something of a loner, a boy with a stutter (and, when provoked, a temper). When he earned a place at the elite and predominantly white Central Catholic High School, Daisy became even more invested in his future greatness. But after growing up in what Hartigan calls the "melting pot" of the Hill District, he was routinely harassed with racist slurs and threats, and he left just before turning 15. He went back to public school (briefly a vocational one), where he didn't last long either. A 10th-grade teacher accused him of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon—20 typed pages, with footnotes that reflected his deep curiosity and wide reading. That was the end of his high-school experience.

Wilson was steeped in the Western canon and romantic themes, and also a man of his neighborhood.

Wilson would later say, “I dropped out of school, but I did not drop out of life.” He read his way through a nearby library. When his mother learned that he’d left school, she accused him of squandering his abundant gifts, and insisted that he enlist in the Army. Wilson quit a year in, and after a short detour to Los Angeles, was back in Pittsburgh, now borrowing books from the University of Pittsburgh library (Freud, history, poetry), mingling with local characters in cafés, and imagining a life as a writer. Hartigan’s descriptions of his idiosyncratic, youthful self-creation are a delight. He was wonderfully strange, and that was at least one key to his becoming the *sui generis* playwright he was:

He worked odd jobs, and he adopted a sartorial style that was more akin to the 1940s than the turbulent 1960s. He bought woolen coats from the St. Vincent de Paul thrift shop, and he always had his shoes shined ... He would walk down the street reciting poetry to himself, and more often than not, he had an armful of books ... He was cultivating an image of a romantic poet.

Hartigan emphasizes at several points that Wilson identified not as mixed race, but rather as a Black man raised by a Black woman migrant from the South. Given when he was born, this detail isn’t particularly notable. Generations of Black people were fathered by absent white men. For Wilson, though, making the break official was an important turning point; he began going by August with new friends, and he spent the day of his father’s funeral, in April 1965, deciding how to rechristen himself. He dropped Kittel’s first and last name and took his mother’s surname. August Wilson was born.

Wilson’s self-fashioning wasn’t smooth. Navigating the social and political turmoil of the ’60s and ’70s, he was “straddling two worlds,” in Hartigan’s phrase, as he searched for his voice. He was steeped in the Western canon and romantic themes, a poet inclined to grandiloquence, and also a man of his neighborhood. Meanwhile, he had married in 1969. Soon he was tugged away from his wife, Brenda Burton, and their baby daughter by his growing involvement in local artistic collectives that had emerged from the ferment of the Black Power movement: Black Horizons Theatre and the Centre Avenue Poets’ Theater Workshop. His divorce in 1973 devastated him (though he went on to have two more wives and another daughter, and was

known for his “serial infidelity,” Hartigan writes). Black Horizons Theatre folded. His first effort at playwriting, in essence a dialogue between a male character given to high-flown rhetoric and a plainspoken woman, was a flop. By the mid-’70s, he had weathered what looked like a run of failures.

In 1978, Wilson headed to St. Paul, Minnesota, to work with the Penumbra Theatre Company, at the invitation of a Pittsburgh friend and fellow director. He’d been working on poems and a play about a Black outlaw figure, which that same friend and others were eager to help him turn into a musical. It did finally get staged in St. Paul, and tanked. His focus on playwriting intensified as he swerved away from the “Americanized Homeric dialogue” that critics had derided. By that time, he had taken up the blues as inspiration —music that he described as having the power to conjure “blood’s memory.”

The newly vernacular Wilson, with the help of his soon-to-be second wife, Judy Oliver, began applying for grants and fellowships (largely in vain). But in 1981, he submitted a long play he was working on, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, and was at last awarded a spot at the annual summer conference at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center, in Waterford, Connecticut, known as the “launchpad of the American theater.” Wilson, and American theater along with him, was indeed about to take off in a new direction.

At the O’Neill, he met Lloyd Richards, the Black director who had brought Lorraine Hansberry to Broadway in 1959 and served as the dean of the Yale School of Drama and the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. Richards presided over the workshop, and, as the other playwrights gathered there in 1982 sensed right away, Wilson was his favorite. The legendary mentor, eager to discover theater’s “Great Black Hope,” spotted a distinctive talent in the early version of *Ma Rainey*, despite its long monologues and sprawl. Wilson’s play, about a 1927 recording session of the Mother of the Blues and her band, exposes the ordeals of Jim Crow, sexual violence, exploitation, and cruelty—and the meaning of the blues, an art of lamentation as well as pleasure. Hartigan reports that Wilson’s star rose even higher when Frank Rich of *The New York Times* violated the O’Neill conference’s press protocol (only soft features allowed, no reviews) and singled out his play for a rave. “I was electrified by the sound of this author’s voice,” Rich wrote, declaring it “quite unusual in 1982 to find a playwright who is willing to stake his claim to the stage not with stories or

moral platitudes, but with the beauty and meaning of torrents of words.” Two years later, [Ma Rainey opened to acclaim at the Yale Rep](#) in the spring, and then on Broadway in the fall.

[Read: Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and the liberating power of music](#)

A long collaborative relationship with Richards had begun. Wilson was protective of his prose and pacing, and exacting with performers—yet also receptive to suggestion, above all from Richards. Twenty-six years older than Wilson, he was the sage, a father figure ready with guidance well tuned to his protégé. That meant helping Wilson find “a through line or a fully realized theme,” as Richards put it, to give coherence to the fascinating characters and the often disjointed scenes and speeches that first propelled Wilson into a play. It also meant encouraging Wilson’s extraordinary gift for potent monologues, evocative symbolism, and scenes of supernatural struggle—hardly familiar fare for mainstream theatergoers.

Not least, Richards took on the challenge of attracting a producer. “Serious plays concerning minorities … are not considered a good risk,” he observed, never mind one like *Joe Turner*, whose first act is capped by an African juba scene—call-and-response building to a “near frenzy,” as Wilson wrote in the stage directions. Together, Richards and Wilson came up with an unusual strategy, and in the process helped inaugurate a new and closer relationship between commercial and nonprofit theater in America. Work was first staged in regional theaters, which were free of Broadway’s commercial pressures and able to take chances, and Wilson got the kind of “long development process” he knew he needed, revising tirelessly in rehearsals and in reaction to performances. Plays could then tour the country before Broadway runs, Wilson often hovering and still revising. The Black playwright who wants to depict working-class Black life depends on a public comprising tourists and elites, and on critics—an audience very far afield from such a life. That Wilson and Richards found a way to negotiate the terrain and still produce great art is extraordinary.

Facilitating the emergence of Black artists working at the highest level was yet another way Wilson transformed Black theater.

By the end of the 1980s, even Wilson's demanding mother (who died in 1983) might have admitted that he had outstripped her expectations. But Hartigan's account doesn't hide the frustrations he felt as he juggled multiple plays at once and the toll his labors took on others. Wilson's most conventionally structured play, the 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fences*, about a tragic father-son struggle and the wounds of Jim Crow, was the most financially successful of his life. It was also, he said, his "least favorite." Hartigan writes that he "knew he had strayed from his spiritual and poetic muse in writing a play to please audiences—and to prove himself to his critics and colleagues."

Joe Turner's Come and Gone and *The Piano Lesson*, both experimental and infused with supernatural hauntings, were his masterpieces. The former—inspired, Wilson wrote, by a man "sitting in this posture of abject defeat" in the center of a Romare Bearden collage—addresses the horrific history of convict-labor leasing and is threaded with references to losing one's "song," an opaque yet resonant image for being robbed of one's spiritual groundedness. When *The Piano Lesson* earned him a second Pulitzer, in 1990, and then was filmed for television, to be aired in 1995, Wilson was at the center of the theater world. But his relationship with Richards was deteriorating in classic patricidal fashion: As Wilson grew comfortable in his prominence, he chafed at Richards's guiding role.

Wilson in turn found himself under attack, most scathingly by Robert Brustein, the founder of the American Repertory Theater at Harvard and *The New Republic*'s theater critic. He dismissed *The Piano Lesson* as "much ado about a piano," and denigrated Wilson's success as a turn toward the "sociological" and away from artistic value. Pointing to his characters who "sit on the edge of the middle class, wearing good suits, inhabiting clean homes," and who "never come on like menacing street people screaming obscenities or bombarding the audience with such phrases as 'Black power's gonna get your mama,'" Brustein implied that Wilson's work in general was calibrated to elicit white guilt without jeopardizing white acceptance. Any Black artist who has acquired a modicum of mainstream acclaim while sustaining a sincere interest in Black life knows this kind of criticism intimately. Wilson's experience is an aching reminder that no amount of professional stature insulates one from it. In fact, quite the contrary.

[From the June 2021 issue: Imani Perry on the bleak prescience of Richard Wright](#)

Wilson's second marriage ended in 1990; "I was never there for her," he said, pulled away constantly by work. In 1997, he was thrilled by the birth of another daughter, with his third wife, Constanza Romero, but was busier than ever, feeling stymied in efforts to support Black theater and facing three more plays to finish his cycle. Once again, he was often disengaged from family life, despite the shame he felt—and pressure from a strong-willed wife: yet another case of male artistic genius accommodated. Wilson was, though, rightly criticized for his failure to paint his women characters with the same depth as the men. Even *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is less about Ma Rainey than about her bandmate Levee, who witnessed white men gang-raping his mother when he was a child, a wound that tragically shapes his adult life.

Wilson's relationship to the world of Black theater was nurturing, even if distance opened up between him and some early friends in the arts scene as he became by far the most influential Black man in American theater. Many prominent stage and film actors of the late 20th century worked with Wilson at some point. His plays gave Charles S. Dutton, Viola Davis, Rocky Carroll, Angela Bassett, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, and others roles that were rare for Black actors, ones in which they could show their range and power. Facilitating the emergence of Black artists working at the highest level was yet another way Wilson transformed Black theater.

His century cycle turned out to be more than an utterly distinctive African American history in theatrical form. Wilson's endeavor, like his anomalous route into playwriting, marked out new paths in the theater world and reflected a vital aesthetic: With every play, he was viscerally aware that the essence of dramatic art is found in the living, breathing doing of it with a collective cast of participants—actors, directors, producers, mentors, audiences. Reworking isn't failure. Indeed, Wilson the bluesman rewrote and remixed in real time, improvising and experimenting his way to mastery and historical revelation.

This article appears in the [September 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Man Who Transformed American Theater.”

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‘Sick People Don’t Exist to Show Healthy People What’s Important’

Readers respond to our June 2023 issue.



The Canadian Way of Death

The nation legalized assisted suicide—and exposed the limits of liberalism, [David Brooks wrote](#) in the June 2023 issue.

“The Canadian Way of Death” is a must-read for anyone dealing with prolonged suffering or observing it in loved ones. Rarely has incisive research been combined with a humane perspective so convincingly and

compellingly. Thank you, David Brooks, for expressing so well the underpinnings of our deep doubts about assisted suicide.

Susan C. Matson

Hightstown, N.J.

My husband chose to have medical assistance in dying years after receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis. Reading David Brooks's article, I feel he romanticizes the value of life and dismisses the extreme suffering and stoicism of those who are dying, and in doing so, he vilifies MAID administrators and physicians, who provide the option of a dignified and carefully chosen form of death. My husband was a life-affirming person; his motto was "Life is good." For seven of the 10 years that followed his cancer diagnosis, he received extraordinary care from a team of amazing cancer specialists and lived a rich, active, and meaningful life. He selected MAID because despite his extraordinary life force, he needed to be released from extreme suffering, immobility, and pain. His decision permitted a month of meaningful visits with his family members and allowed them to be gathered around him at the moment of his death, neither of which could have happened without MAID. I wish Brooks had considered both the strict procedures in place to protect vulnerable applicants and the stories of people like my husband. Brooks's analysis, which paints MAID administrators as unfeeling, unethical bureaucrats who "erase" human dignity, does an immense disservice to these courageous and caring professionals, and to those humans who love life but in their suffering deliberately choose a dignified path for leaving this Earth.

Daiva Stasiulis

Ottawa, Canada

The "gifts-based liberalism" that David Brooks describes sounds like a dog whistle on behalf of anti-abortion advocates. If the right to determine how one ends their life emerges from the wicked frontiers of liberalism run amok, is the same true of the right to terminate a pregnancy? I wish Brooks had clarified how—or if—they differ.

Sigmund Kolatzki
Crossville, Tenn.

The public debate over Canada’s MAID policy has been much richer than David Brooks suggests, more subtle and humane than the bald assumptions he attributes to “autonomy-based liberalism”—that “I am a piece of property” and “the purpose of my life … is to be happy.” MAID involves complex, morally difficult decisions. Cramming it into an argument about liberalism does it a disservice.

Richard Harris
Hamilton, Canada

“The Canadian Way of Death” is one of the most thought-provoking articles I have ever read. I’ve always been in favor of allowing assisted suicide, and I still am—but now with reservations.

Without realizing it, I have been living the philosophy of autonomy-based liberalism; I wasn’t aware of gifts-based liberalism’s more nuanced approach to life. David Brooks made such a compelling argument for this viewpoint that I’ve had to reevaluate my own position.

Gary Rosensteel
McMurray, Pa.

As a retired geriatrician and medical educator, I found “The Canadian Way of Death” extremely misleading. I am a longtime proponent of MAID and have advocated for it publicly—but I would never be in favor of a system that allowed doctors or nurses to give lethal injections to anyone. Most of my colleagues with whom I interact in this space feel the same way: Indeed, of the 10 U.S. states that have adopted MAID, none permits providers to give lethal injections.

In the U.S., Oregon has the longest track record with MAID; it was passed by a ballot measure in 1994. Over the decades, nothing even remotely

resembling what David Brooks describes has happened in the state. To be eligible, patients must be mentally competent, have less than six months to live, and, most important, administer the lethal medications themselves. Thirty to 40 percent of people who receive a lethal prescription never use it. The majority of patients are financially stable, contradicting the “slippery slope” that critics like Brooks claim is inevitable. To suggest that MAID legislation will lead to the Canadian model ignores an abundance of data from U.S. programs and does a disservice to those of us who wish to see other states adopt it.

Robert L. Dickman

Newton, Mass.

I consider myself closely aligned with what David Brooks calls “gifts-based liberalism,” yet I support the Canadian MAID policy. Society should aim to make aging dignified and as pain-free as possible—but it should also create an honorable place for a person who is ready to die and seeks help in making that choice.

My grandmother died at home with little medical intervention. The integration of her death into the life of the family was a source of bonding. But that type of bond is largely broken: Seniors are housed apart. We employ every medical skill to extend their lives—and their suffering. My mother languished with dementia for several years before her body let her die. The last lucid words she said to me were, “Why does it take so long?”

The repetition of this personal tragedy across thousands of families opened Canada to a debate about MAID, and now the policy makes it possible for Canadians to say goodbye and to die with much less suffering. I agree that we should age with pride, finding new ways to live and to contribute. But we also need to recognize that the decision to die may be another way to affirm life. Brooks should have looked more deeply into the Canadian experience with MAID and the debate in Canada about its future.

Norman Moyer

Ottawa, Canada

I would consider myself a “gifts-based liberal.” What David Brooks wrote about viewing yourself as part of a procession, of building a society in which the greatest achievement is just to participate, to be engaged and present with one another, really resonated with me. But I disagree that MAID is necessarily antithetical to such a view. Sick people do not exist to show healthy people, as Brooks puts it, “what is most important in life.” They don’t exist to awe us, the healthy people, with their “unbowed spirit,” to borrow Wilfred McClay’s phrase, even in the face of debilitating illness. I think this framing undercuts the actual, exhausting pain that chronically ill people suffer from. MAID, at the very least, shows that we as a society are willing to see that pain. MAID can be framed as empathetic, rather than calculating and autonomous.

Kate MacDonald

Toronto, Canada

David Brooks replies:

I’m grateful for the intelligent and heartfelt letters I received. As I wrote in my essay, I don’t oppose assisted suicide for people in great pain and near death. Nor am I dog-whistling for the anti-abortion movement. What troubles me is Canada’s rapid expansion of its law beyond its originally well-defined limits. That’s a failure of public philosophy. Law ought to venerate life above individual choice. I’d be curious to know whether my critics think that if people are persistently suicidal, we should do nothing to prevent them from acting on that choice.

American states, such as Oregon, that have assisted-suicide laws have not experienced the slippery slope I identify, because people have set reasonable limits on their programs. In the years to come, I’m hopeful that Canada will do the same.

Behind the Cover

This month’s cover story, “[The Ones We Sent Away](#),” is a personal essay about Adele Halperin, Jennifer Senior’s aunt, who was born with a condition

known as Coffin-Siris syndrome 12. In 1953, Adele was institutionalized while still a toddler and spent the rest of her life living apart from her family. Senior's essay examines how America's treatment of people with disabilities has evolved and considers what her family lost by sending Adele away. Our cover image is an illustration by Georgette Smith that imagines a young Adele separated from her family.

— **Oliver Munday**, *Associate Creative Director*

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Poetry

- [**Tables and Gems**](#)

Tables and Gems

by Fred Moten



held and unheld here in love, having been accused of telling stories, look how violently we fold and tint and follow haze come into branch and spring and gone and breathing armor. come make some garden inside. the scene is everyday let's see. the situation is fractured arbor. an old dress made new the old way, out of absent extra, starched and pressed in low gravy, come up on not enough again's invisible veer. plot gets folded, handed, and put away with all our fibrant things of hush and ardor.

...

we're always about to hear something. what we hear is something we're all about to hear recede in plain sight and song in the sense of things, and in the way. wonder what all that wonder's about? it's about to withdraw, something 'bout to be withheld. if there's a secret in what we see, it's gone. can we go too? let's go all up in there for the memory, for all work's intricacy on boo-boo's birthday, tintless on the underside. sometimes you be looking for the color over there and here it is, unbound.

ultimately, the rhythm is so supersessive that preparation forgoes itself in light. what's left is what wouldn't have happened. and ain't no baseline for the club's proceedings. there is, however, her shell, with its ominous protection, a rumble completely taken away from jealous hums and folded into this whole offset of cues, for the cenobitic pleasures of cove, cells wondrously bearing both rendezvous and interview. see if we can't get you into ceta. see if baccarat can't let us be. see your

lower left arm in the lower left corner, fold? sometimes prepare is just see meadow on the wall. we love the lichen of our fingerprints when we feel them like strangers, the bloom and the blemish all epistrophic in the general catastrophe, which we meet in double sets of folded arms. am I my father in my smile? the stormy circle blessing that left corner moves from frame to frame to keep from moving. we work what's held here cosmically. the buttons, and the sewing of the binding.

...

this lavender blocking of the saturday dance must be a tone effect of our pan-affective turn. shit kicks in at a level of intensity that far outweighs our actual contacts. I need to see you this way, through another color, through a board of tone breathing overtone in the blocking of the village. if I see that setting, then I can see the emanation of show and fade and we have to work too hard for the beam we give back. something's wrong but we can fix it. let's see if we can fix it right now.

see how all the irreparable landscapes feel like they persist in variety? pretty soon the kids will come and take these books and records and lay 'em out in flowers on the sidewalk. even acute fingering of work and their scarved and scarred and feathered hair will disappear in the echo of what we give away, which I want to give away in echo, in the echo of an abbey, in the all and all in your hand and eye at the end of blue monk again and again and our green thought is you.

This poem is adapted from a longer version and was inspired by the photography of Carrie Mae Weems. It was originally published in [perennial fashion presence falling](#) by Fred Moten and the catalog [Carrie Mae Weems: A Great Turn in the Possible..](#) It appears in the [September 2023](#) print edition.

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