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The Mother Who Never Stopped Believing Her Son Was Still There

For decades, Eve Baer remained convinced that her son, unresponsive after a severe brain injury, was still conscious. Science eventually proved her right.

by Sarah Zhang



Ian Berg and his mother, Eve Baer, in February 2025

The Toyota pickup hit the tree that May morning with enough explosive force to leave a gash that is still visible on its trunk 39 years later. Inside the

truck, the bodies of three teenage boys hurled forward, each with terrible velocity.

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One boy died instantly; a second was found alive outside the car. The third boy, Ian Berg, remained pinned in the driver's seat, a bruise blooming on the right side of his forehead. He had smacked it hard—much harder than one might have guessed from the bruise alone—which caused the soft mass of his brain to slam against the rigid confines of his skull. Where brain met bone, brain gave way. The matter of his mind stretched and twisted, tore and burst.

When the jaws of life freed him from the wreckage, Ian was still alive, but unconscious. “Please don’t die. Please don’t die. Please don’t die,” his mother, Eve Baer, pleaded over him at the hospital. She imagined throwing a golden lasso around his foot to keep him from floating away.

And Ian didn’t die. After 17 days in a coma, he finally opened his eyes, but they flicked wildly around the room, unable to sync or track. He could not speak. He could not control his limbs. The severe brain injury he’d suffered, doctors said, had put him in a vegetative state. He was alive, but assumed to be cognitively gone—devoid of thought, of feeling, of consciousness.

Eve hated that term, *vegetative*—an “unhuman-type classification,” she thought. If you had asked her then, in 1986, she would have said she expected her 17-year-old son to fully recover. Ian had been handsome, popular, in love with a new girlfriend—the kind of golden boy upon whom fortune smiles. At school, he was known as the kid who greeted everyone, teachers included, with a hug. He and his two friends in the car belonged to a tight-knit group of seniors. But on the day he would have graduated that June, Ian was still lying in a hospital bed, his big achievement being that he’d finally made a bowel movement.

“What kind of life is that?” Ian’s brother Geoff remembers thinking. When he first arrived at the hospital, he had looked around the room for a plug to

pull. The two brothers had talked about scenarios like this before, Geoff told me: “*If anything ever happens to me and I can’t wipe my ass, make sure you kill me.*” Angry that their mother was keeping his brother alive, Geoff fled, moving for a time to St. Thomas.

Three months after the accident, when doctors at the hospital could do no more for Ian, Eve took him home. She was adamant that he live with family, rather than under the impersonal care of a nursing home. That she had ample space for Ian and all of his specialized equipment was fortuitous. A few weeks before the accident, Eve’s husband, Marshall, had stumbled upon the Rainbow Lodge, an old hotel for hunters and fishers, for sale near Woodstock, New York. He loved the idea of a compound for their big blended family—his two grown children plus nieces and nephews, as well as Eve’s four kids, of whom Ian is the youngest. The sale was finalized while Ian was in the hospital.

At the lodge, Eve and a rotating cast of caretakers kept Ian alive: bathing him, pureeing home-cooked meals for his feeding tube, changing the urine bag that drained his catheter. She also devised a busy schedule of therapies, anchored by up to six hours a day of psychomotor “patterning”—an exercise program she’d read about in which a team of volunteers took each of Ian’s limbs and moved them in a pattern that mimicked an infant learning to crawl. Friends and acquaintances came to help with patterning; some started living in the lodge’s guest rooms, staying for months or even years. They formed a kind of unconventional extended family, with Ian at the center. Every Sunday, Eve cooked big dinners for the crowd.



The tree Ian struck with a pickup truck in 1986 still bears a scar from the accident. (Sarah Blesener for *The Atlantic*)

The patterning exercises, which are not based on science, ultimately did not really help Ian. But his mother didn't dwell on this. She made regular calls to the National Institutes of Health to inquire about the latest brain-injury research. And where mainstream medicine failed, Eve—who had moved to Woodstock in the '60s as a “wannabe bohemian slash beatnik”—turned enthusiastically to alternatives. Ian was treated by the spiritual guru Ram Dass; a “magic man” with a pendulum; a craniosacral therapist; a Buddhist monk; Filipino “psychic surgeons”; and a healer in Chandigarh, India. Eve and Marshall took him on the 7,000-mile journey to India themselves, pushing him in a rented collapsible wheelchair. When, after all of this, Ian's condition still did not improve, Eve became angry. It was one of the rare times that she allowed disappointment to puncture her relentless optimism.

Still, like so many other family members of vegetative patients, she held on to a mother's belief that Ian could understand everything around him. She took care, when shaving him, to leave the wispy mustache he had been trying to grow. When his high-school friends went to see the Grateful Dead, she brought him along in his wheelchair and a tie-dyed shirt. She kept believing for herself as much as for Ian: If her son was aware, it would mean her gestures of love were not unseen, her words not unheard.

Science would take decades to catch up with Eve, but she turned out to be right in one crucial respect: Ian is still aware. Doctors now agree that he can see, he can hear, and he can understand, at least in some ways, the people around him.

Over the past 20 years, the science of consciousness has undergone a reckoning as researchers have used new tools to peer inside the brains of people once thought to lack any cognitive function. Ian is part of [a landmark study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* last year](#), which found that 25 percent of unresponsive brain-injury patients show signs of awareness, based on their brain activity. The finding suggests that there could be tens of thousands of people like Ian in the United States—many in nursing homes where caretakers might have no clue that their patients silently understand and think and feel. These patients live in a profound

isolation, their conscious minds trapped inside unresponsive bodies. Doctors are just beginning to grasp what it might take to help them.

For Ian, the signs were there, if not right at the beginning, at least early on. Three years after the accident, he began to laugh.

Eve was in the kitchen with him, idly singing the *Jeopardy* theme song in a silly falsetto when she heard it: “Ha!” Laughter? Laughter! “Other than a cough, it was the first sound I heard from him in three years,” she told me. In time, Ian started laughing at other things too: stories Eve made up about a cantankerous Russian named Boris, the word *debris*, pots clanging, keys jangling. Fart and poop jokes were a perennial favorite; his brain seemed to have preserved a 17-year-old’s sense of humor. His friends and family took that to mean the Ian they knew was still in there. What else might he be thinking?

At the time, Ian was not regularly seeing a neurologist. But even if he had been, most neurologists in the ’80s would not have known what to make of his laughter; it flew in the face of conventional wisdom.

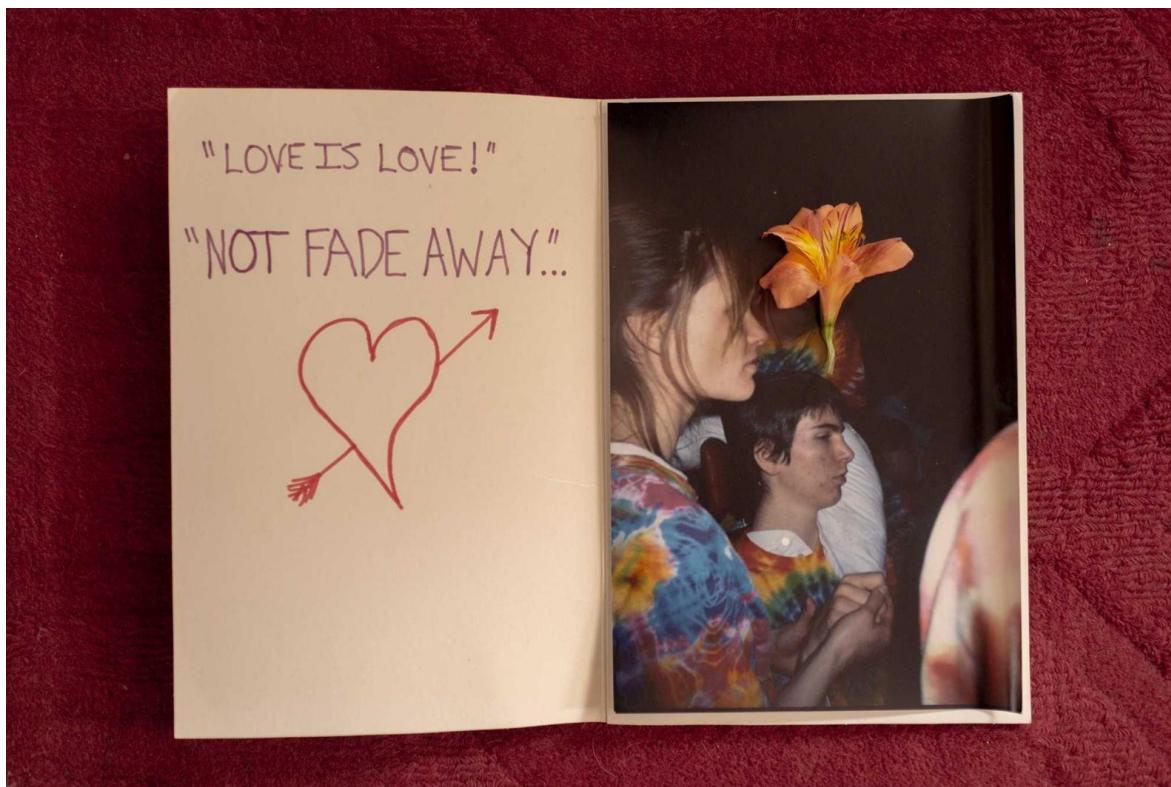
Doctors first [defined the condition of the persistent vegetative state](#) in 1972, less than a decade and a half before Ian’s accident. Fred Plum and Bryan Jennett coined the term to describe a perplexing new class of patients—people who, thanks to advances in medical care, were surviving brain injuries that used to be fatal, but were still left stranded somewhere short of consciousness. This condition is distinct from coma, a temporary state in which the eyes are closed. Vegetative patients are awake; their eyes are open, and they may be neither silent nor still. They can moan and move their limbs, just without purpose or control. And while their bodies continue to breathe, sleep, wake, and digest, they seem to have no connection to the outside world. Today, experts sometimes refer to the vegetative state as “unresponsive wakefulness syndrome.”

Back then, the two doctors also distinguished it from locked-in syndrome, which Plum had helped name a few years prior. Locked-in patients are fully conscious though immobile, except for typically their eyes. (Jean-Dominique Bauby wrote [his famous 1997 memoir about locked-in syndrome, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*](#), by blinking out one letter at a

time.) In contrast, Plum and Jennett considered the vegetative state “mindless,” with no cognitive function intact.

What, then, could the laughter mean? By the ’90s, some of the most prominent experts on consciousness—including Plum and Jennett themselves—had begun to realize that they had perhaps too categorically or hastily dismissed patients diagnosed as vegetative. Researchers were documenting flickers of potential consciousness in some supposedly vegetative patients. These patients could utter occasional words, grasp for an object every now and then, or seem to answer the odd question with a gesture—suggesting that they were at least sometimes aware of their surroundings. They seemed to be neither vegetative nor fully conscious, but fluctuating on a continuum.

This in-between space became formally recognized in 2002 as the “minimally conscious state,” in an effort led by Joseph Giacino, a neuropsychologist who specializes in rehabilitation after brain injury. (*Coma, vegetative, and minimally conscious* are sometimes collectively called “disorders of consciousness.”)



One day in spring 2007, Marshall, Ian's stepfather, slipped on a mossy stone and fractured his hip. As he and Eve waited for an ambulance, the phone rang. Giacino had heard about Eve's NIH inquiries, and he was interested in meeting Ian—he wondered if the minimally conscious diagnosis might apply to him. If so, Ian could qualify for a new experimental trial.

Giacino didn't make any promises. Still, after all those years, Eve told me, "he was the first voice of positive possibility that I heard." So even as Marshall lay next to her with his broken hip, neither of them dared hang up the phone.

Around this time, [in 2006, an astonishing case report came out from researchers](#) led by Adrian Owen, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Cambridge; it suggested that even vegetative patients could retain some awareness. Owen found a 23-year-old woman who had been in a car accident. Months later, she still had no response on behavioral exams. But in an fMRI machine, her brain looked surprisingly active: When she was asked to imagine playing tennis, blood flowed to her brain's supplementary motor area, a region that helps coordinate movement. When she was asked to imagine visiting the rooms of her house, blood flowed to different parts of her brain, including the parahippocampal gyrus, a strip of cortex crucial for spatial navigation. And when she was told to rest, these patterns of brain activity ceased. Based on the limited window of an fMRI scan, at least, she seemed to understand everything she was being asked to do.

"Unsettling and disturbing" is how one neurologist described the implications of the study to me. Also: controversial. Another doctor recounted a scientific meeting soon after where the speakers were split 50–50 on whether to accept the results. Was the fMRI finding just a fluke? Owen did not inform the woman's family of what he found, because the study's ethical protocol was ambiguous about how much information he could share. He wishes he could have. The woman died in 2011, without her family ever being told that she might have been aware.

[Read: I know the secret to the quiet mind. I wish I'd never learned it.](#)

Over time, Owen and his group identified more patients with what they came to call "covert awareness." Some were vegetative, while others were

considered minimally conscious, based on behaviors such as eye tracking and command following. The researchers found that outward response and inner awareness were not always correlated: The most physically responsive patients were not necessarily the ones with the clearest signs of brain activity when asked to imagine the tasks. Covert awareness, then, can be detected only using tools that peer at a brain's inner workings, such as fMRI.

In 2010, one of Owen's collaborators, the Belgian neurologist Steven Laureys, [asked a minimally conscious patient](#), a 22-year-old man, a series of five yes-or-no questions while he was in an fMRI machine, covering topics such as his father's name and the last vacation he took prior to his motorcycle accident. To answer yes, the patient would imagine playing tennis for 30 seconds; to answer no, he would imagine walking through his house. The researchers ran through the questions only once, but he got them all right, the appropriate region of his brain lighting up each time.

It is hard to say what experience of human consciousness some colored pixels on a brain scan really depict. To answer intentionally, the patient would have had to understand language. He would also have needed to store the questions in his working memory and retrieve the answers from his long-term memory. In my conversations with neurologists, this was the study they cited again and again as the most compelling evidence of covert awareness.

A few years later, using the same yes-or-no method, Owen found a vegetative patient who seemed to know about his niece, born after his brain injury. To Owen, this suggested that the man was laying down new memories, that life was not simply passing him by. In yet another case, [Owen used fMRI not just to quiz a 38-year-old vegetative man](#), but to actually ask about the quality of his life 12 years post-injury: Was he in pain right now? No. Did he still enjoy watching hockey on TV, as he had before his accident? Yes.

Most researchers I spoke with were reluctant to speculate about the inner life of these brain-injury patients, because the answer lies beyond any known science. The brains of minimally conscious patients do activate in response to pain or music, Laureys told me, but their experience of pain or music is likely different from yours or mine. Their state of consciousness may resemble the twilight zone of drifting in and out of sleep; it almost certainly

differs from person to person. Owen believes that some of his vegetative patients may actually be “completely conscious,” akin to a locked-in person who is fully aware, but cannot move even their eyes. Until that is proved otherwise, he sees no reason not to extend them the benefit of the doubt.

Several months after the phone call from Giacino’s office, Ian’s family made the trip to New Jersey to meet the researcher. In the exam room, Giacino put Ian through an intense battery of tests. He found that Ian could intermittently reach on command for a red ball. He laughed at loud noises, such as keys jangling, which Giacino said could be a simple response to the sound. But Ian also laughed appropriately at jokes, especially adolescent ones, as if he understood humor and intent. These behaviors were enough to qualify Ian for a brand-new diagnosis two decades after his accident: not vegetative, but minimally conscious.

Giacino’s collaborators were eager to put Ian in an fMRI machine, to see what might be happening inside his brain. On a separate trip, this time to an fMRI facility in New York City, his family met Nicholas Schiff, a neurologist at Weill Cornell and a protégé of Fred Plum’s. Schiff, too, was intrigued by Ian’s laughter, and the possibility that he understood more than he could physically let on. Schiff’s team showed Ian pictures and played voices—to see whether his brain could process faces and speech—and asked him to imagine tasks such as walking around his house.

Ian’s brother Geoff was also at this scan, having by then returned to New York. Crammed into the small fMRI control room with all the scientists peering at Ian’s brain, he remembers being incredulous at the things they wanted his brother to imagine. “You really think he can understand you?” he asked.

The scientists did. They believed Ian still retained some kind of consciousness. They also thought there was a chance, with luck and the right tools, of unlocking more. This had happened before. In some extraordinary patients, the line between conscious and unconscious is more permeable than one might expect.

In 2003, Terry Wallis, in Arkansas, suddenly uttered “Mom!” [after 19 years as a vegetative patient](#) in a nursing home. Then he said “Pepsi”—his favorite

soft drink. After that, his mother took him home. Wallis couldn't move below his neck and he struggled with his memory and impulse control, but he began to speak in short sentences, recognized his family, and continued to request Pepsis. In retrospect, he probably had not been vegetative at all, but minimally conscious during those first 19 years. His mom had seen signs that others at the nursing home had not: Wallis occasionally tracked objects with his eyes, and he became agitated after witnessing the death of his roommate with dementia.

[Read: How people with dementia make sense of the world](#)

Slowly, over time, Wallis's brain had recovered to the point of regaining speech. When Schiff and his colleagues later scanned him, they found changes that suggested neuronal connections were being formed and pruned decades after his injury. "Terry changed what we thought about what might be possible," Schiff told Ian's family.

There was also Louis Viljoen, in South Africa, who in 1999 began speaking when put on zolpidem, better known as Ambien, a sedative that was, ironically, supposed to put him to sleep. He, too, had been declared vegetative—a "cabbage," according to one doctor—after being hit by a truck. Within 25 minutes of taking zolpidem, his mother recalled, he started making his first sounds, and when she spoke, he responded, "Hello, Mummy." Then the effects of the drug faded as rapidly as they'd come on.

Viljoen would continue taking zolpidem every day; he eventually recovered enough to be conscious even without the drug, but a daily dose reanimated him further. "After nine minutes the grey pallor disappears and his face flushes. He starts smiling and laughing. After 10 minutes he begins asking questions," [a reporter who met him in 2006 wrote](#). Several other drugs, including amantadine and apomorphine, can have similarly arousing effects, though none has worked in more than a tiny sliver of patients. In certain people, for reasons still not understood, they might activate a damaged brain just enough to kick it into gear, "like catching a ride on a wave," Schiff, who has studied patients on Ambien, told me.

The most important takeaway, researchers say, is simply this: People with covert awareness exist, and they are not exceedingly rare.

Greg Pearson, in New Jersey, had electrodes implanted in his thalamus in 2005 [as part of a study by Schiff and Giacino](#). The thalamus is a walnut-size region of the brain that sits above the opening at the bottom of the skull, where the spinal cord meets the brain, a position that makes it particularly vulnerable during injury: When a bruised brain swells, it has nowhere to go but down, putting tremendous pressure on the thalamus. Because the thalamus usually regulates arousal—Schiff likens it to a pacemaker for the brain—damage to this region can induce disorders of consciousness. Schiff wondered if stimulating the thalamus could restore some of its function. And indeed, when the electrodes were turned on during surgery, Pearson blurted out his first word in many years: “Yup.” He was eventually able to recite the first 16 words of the Pledge of Allegiance and tell his mother, “I love you.”

A damaged brain, in some cases, might be more like a flickering lamp with faulty wiring than a lamp that has had its wiring ripped out. If so, that circuitry can be manipulated. The neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield realized this decades ago, when he discovered that he could make a conscious patient fall unconscious by gently pressing on a certain area of the brain.

That our consciousness might actually be dynamic, that it can be dialed up and down, is not so strange if you consider what happens every day. We become unconscious when we sleep at night, only to reanimate the next day. Could this dialing back up be artificially controlled when the brain is too damaged to do so itself?

After the publication of the study on Pearson, in 2007, Schiff couldn’t keep up with all the calls to his office. He and his colleagues were now looking for more patients, including people who were even less responsive initially than Pearson—people whose condition would test the extent of what deep-brain stimulation using electrodes could do.

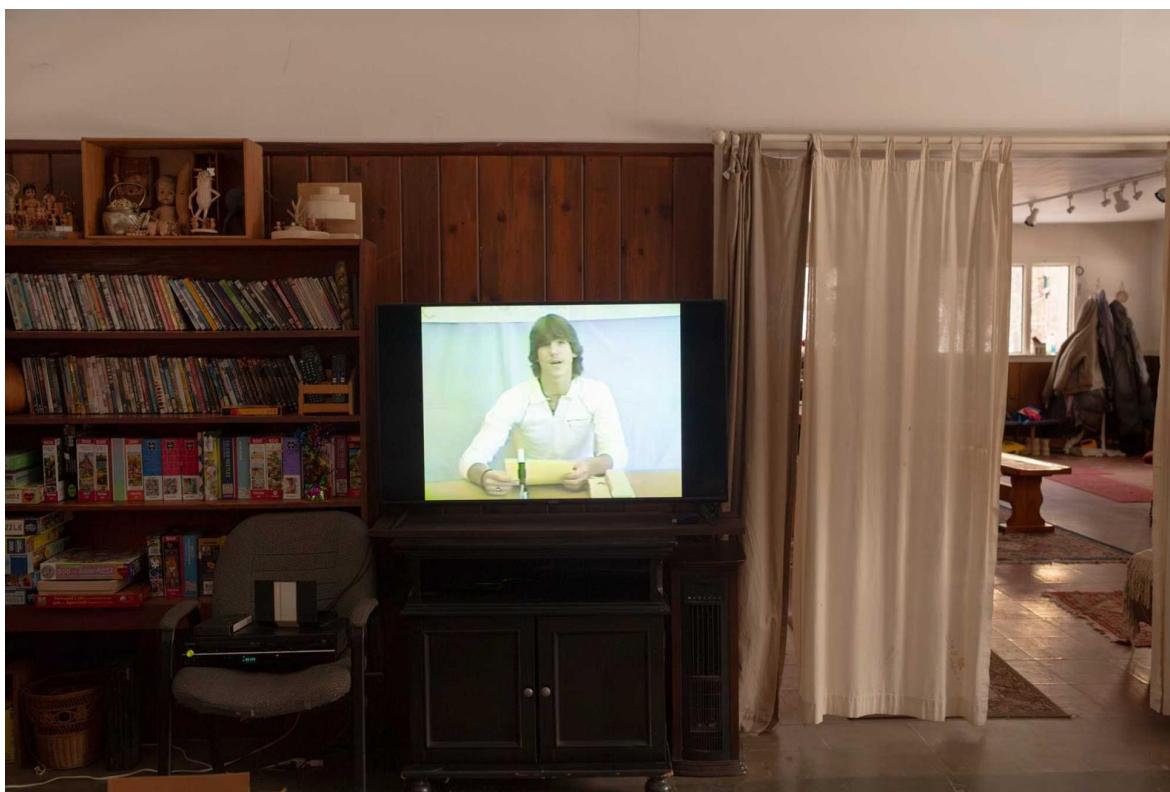
Given his limited but still discernible responses, Ian seemed like the perfect candidate. The researchers were careful not to make guarantees. But Eve harbored hope that Ian could one day tell her, “I love you.” His family agreed to join the trial.

I’ll cut to the chase: Ian’s deep-brain stimulation did not work. At one point during the surgery to implant the electrodes, he said the only intelligible

word he's uttered since 1986—"Down," in response to being asked, "What is the opposite of up?" Then he lapsed into silence once again. In the months that followed, therapists spent hours and hours asking Ian to move his arm or respond to questions, to no avail.

Geoff, who worked in video production at the time, captured the process on film. He had intended to make a documentary about what he hoped would be his brother's recovery. In addition to filming Ian in the trial, he'd taped interviews with family members, asking what hearing Ian speak again would mean to them.

He never did make the documentary. Without a miraculous recovery, he felt, the story was just too sad. This past winter, Geoff dug up the old camcorder tapes, and we watched the footage together on the living-room TV. He hadn't seen it since he filmed it nearly 20 years ago. "Tough to watch," he said more than once.



At the time of his accident, Ian—seen here in a video from a high-school class—was a month away from graduation. (Sarah Blesener for *The Atlantic*)

After Ian went home, life at the Rainbow Lodge went on largely as it had before. Something did change, though—specifically for Geoff. Knowing that scientists now believed Ian retained some awareness transformed how he related to his younger brother. He started spending more time with Ian, and the two regained a brotherly intimacy. “Ian, are you conscious or are you a vegetable?” Geoff teased during one of my visits. “I think you’re a vegetable. I think you look like a kumquat.”

Geoff eventually took on more and more of Ian’s care; he is now paid through Medicaid as a part-time caregiver, helping Eve, who is 86. Geoff is the one who puts Ian to bed every evening, smoothing out the sheets to make sure he does not lie on a wrinkle all night long. He tucks an extra pillow on Ian’s left side, as his head has a tendency to droop that way.

For Eve, caregiving came naturally; she told me her ambition in life was always to be a mother. She had married at 18 and had three children in quick succession. When their marriage became strained, she and her first husband decided to try an open relationship. In 1964, Eve got a job waitressing at a Woodstock café whose owners let a singer named Bob Dylan live upstairs. She flirted with men. She flirted with Dylan, who took her to play pool and showed her pages of his book in progress, *Tarantula*. (“Bob was much cuter,” she says of Timothée Chalamet, who starred in [the recent Dylan biopic](#).) Eventually she got divorced; her second husband was Ian’s father. Her third, Marshall, was an artist with a successful marketing career in New York City. Eve and Marshall planned to spend more time there after Ian graduated. The car crash upended everything.

Afterward, Eve threw herself back into the role of devoted mother. (Marshall helped take care of Ian until his death in 2011.) Even now, with Geoff and two nurses who cover five days a week, Eve has certain tasks she insists on carrying out herself. She trims Ian’s nails and hair, now thinning on top to reveal the faint scars from his deep-brain-stimulation surgery. She shaves him. When she speaks to her son, she leans over close, their matching Roman noses almost touching. In these moments, Ian will vocalize —“Aaaaaahh ahhhhh”—like he is trying to talk with his mother.



Ian's stepfather, Marshall, cared for him alongside Eve until his death in 2011. (Sarah Blesener for *The Atlantic*; Courtesy of the Baer family)

"I think Ian lived for my mom," Geoff told me at one point, thinking back to the hospital, where Eve pleaded over his unconscious body, holding on to Ian with her imagined golden lasso. She had promised Ian then that she would do anything for him if he lived—hence the healers, the studies, and her devotion to him for the past 39 years.

While Ian was recovering from the deep-brain-stimulation surgery, Eve came across [a poem](#) by E. E. Cummings that affected her so deeply, she took to reading it aloud to him in a morning ritual. The second stanza goes:

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

Schiff kept probing the outer limits of consciousness in patients with severe brain injuries. Last year, he, along with Owen, Laureys, and other

researchers in the field, published the largest and most comprehensive study yet of covert awareness. This is the *New England Journal of Medicine* study that included Ian, and found one in four vegetative or minimally conscious brain-injury patients to have covert awareness. (Schiff prefers the term *cognitive motor disassociation*, to highlight the disconnect between the patients' mental and physical abilities.) "Our experience was *Wow, it's not so hard to find these people,*" Schiff told me.

The researchers do not believe that everyone with a disorder of consciousness is somehow cognitively intact—a majority are probably not, according to this study. The most important takeaway, researchers say, is simply this: People with covert awareness exist, and they are not exceedingly rare.

From the June 2015 issue: Hacking the brain

These findings raise profound questions about our ethical obligation to people with severe brain injuries. In [his 2015 book, *Rights Come to Mind*](#), Joseph Fins, a medical ethicist at Cornell who frequently collaborates with Schiff, argues that such patients deserve better than to be "cast aside by an indifferent health care system," or left to languish as mere bodies to feed and clean. "For so long, I'd been stripped of any identity," one brain-injury patient, Julia Tavalaro, wrote in her memoir, [*Look Up for Yes*](#). "I had begun to think of myself as less than an animal." She was able to write the book after a particularly observant speech therapist finally noticed, six years after her injury, that she could communicate with her eyes. But too often, Fins told me, patients are shunted into long-term-care homes that cannot provide the attention and rehab that could uncover subtle signs of consciousness.

These patients are also especially vulnerable to abuse. In 2019, staff at a facility in Phoenix called 911 in a panic after a patient—who was reportedly vegetative but may have been minimally conscious—unexpectedly gave birth. No one at the facility, where she had lived for years, even knew she was pregnant until a nurse saw the baby's head. She had been raped by a male nurse.

In some cases, patients with covert awareness may never make it to long-term care—they simply die when life support is withdrawn at the hospital.

“If you went back 15, 20 years, there was a tremendous amount of nihilism” among doctors, says Kevin Sheth, a neurologist at Yale. Even as medicine has become less fatalistic about brain injury, hospitals still rarely look for covert awareness using fMRI. ICU patients may be too fragile to be moved to an fMRI machine, and the technology is too cumbersome and expensive to bring into the ICU.

Varina Boerwinkle, a neurocritical-care specialist now at the University of North Carolina, believes the technology should be routinely used with brain-injury patients. She told me about a 6-year-old boy she treated at a previous job in 2021, who had been in a car crash. Her initial impression was that he would not survive, and his first fMRI scan showed no signs of awareness. Boerwinkle began to wonder if doctors were prolonging his suffering. But the team repeated the test on day 10, in anticipation of discussing withdrawal of care with the boy’s parents. To Boerwinkle’s astonishment, his brain was now active: He could respond when asked to perform specific mental tasks in the fMRI.

Brain implants are already helping certain paralyzed patients control cursors with their mind or speak via a computer-generated voice.

At first, Boerwinkle wasn’t sure what to say to the boy’s family about the fMRI. Though it implied that he still had cognitive function, it did not guarantee that he would ever recover enough to respond physically or verbally. Her colleagues have seen families struggle to care for a child with a severe brain injury, Boerwinkle told me, and everyone was wary of providing false hope.

The doctors ultimately did inform the boy’s parents about their findings; his mother told me the fMRI gave them the confidence to agree to another surgery. It worked. Four years later, the boy is back in school. He uses an eye-gaze device to communicate and zoom around in his wheelchair, and his reading and math skills are on par with those of other kids his age.

Scientists are now looking for simpler tools to test for covert awareness. Patients who show signs of awareness early on, it seems, tend to have better recoveries than those who don’t. Owen, now based at the University of Western Ontario, recently published a study using functional near-infrared

spectroscopy, which shines a light through the skull. A group at Columbia University, led by Jan Claassen, [is experimenting with EEG electrodes](#) that sit on the head.

But even after 20 years of research, little has changed in terms of what doctors can do to help patients found to have covert awareness long after their injury—which is still, in most cases, nothing. On his office wall, Schiff has taped the brain scans of five patients to remind him of the human stakes of his work. He is now exploring brain implants, which are already helping certain paralyzed patients control cursors with their mind or speak via a computer-generated voice. The next several years could prove crucial, as a crop of well-funded companies tests new ways of interfacing with the brain: [Elon Musk's Neuralink](#), perhaps the best-known of these, uses filaments implanted by a sewing-machine-like robot; Precision Neuroscience's thin film floats atop the cortex; and Synchron's implant is threaded up to the brain through the jugular vein.

Getting any of these implants to work in people with severe injuries like Ian's will be particularly challenging. Ian's age and the electrodes already implanted in his brain also make him an unlikely early candidate. This technology—if it ever works for people like him—may arrive too late for Ian.

Even in 1972, when Plum and Jennett first described the vegetative state, the doctors foresaw that they were barreling toward a “problem with humanitarian and socioeconomic implications.” The vegetative patients they described could now be kept alive indefinitely—but should they be? At what cost? Who's to decide? Soon enough, Plum himself was asked to weigh in on the life of a 21-year-old woman.

In 1975, Plum became the lead witness in the case of Karen Ann Quinlan, who'd recently fallen into a vegetative state. [She had collapsed after taking Valium mixed with alcohol](#), which temporarily starved her brain of oxygen. Her parents wanted her ventilator removed. Her doctors refused. In the ensuing legal battle, Quinlan's family and friends testified that she had said, in conversations about people with cancer, that she wouldn't want to be “kept alive by machines.” But there was no way to know what Quinlan wanted in her current condition. Plum categorically pronounced that she “no

longer has any cognitive function"; [another doctor likened her, in his court testimony, to an “anencephalic monster.”](#)

In the end, a court granted her parents' request to remove Quinlan's ventilator. The controversy surrounding her case fueled interest in then-novel advance directives, which allow people to spell out if and at what point they want to die in the event of future incapacitation. In recognizing that life might not always be worth living, the court's ruling also inspired a nascent "right to die" movement in the U.S.

By the time [Terri Schiavo, in Florida, made national news in the early 2000s,](#) resurfacing many of the same legal and ethical questions, the science had become more complicated. Schiavo had also been diagnosed as vegetative after she collapsed—from cardiac arrest, in her case. When her condition did not improve after eight years, her husband sought to have her feeding tube removed. Her parents fought back, fiercely. Although most experts found her to be vegetative, those aligned with her parents seized on the newly defined minimally conscious state to argue that Schiavo was still aware. The family released video clips purporting to show her responding to her mother's voice or tracking a Mickey Mouse balloon with her eyes. If she was still conscious, they argued, she should not be made to die.

Schiavo became [a cause célèbre for the religious right](#), and opinions hardened. Where one side saw parents honoring their daughter's life, the other saw them clinging to illusory hope. Giacino told me that because of his key role in defining the minimally conscious state, he was asked to examine Schiavo by the office of Jeb Bush, then Florida's governor. The behavioral exam he planned to perform, Giacino said, could have helped discern whether Schiavo's responses were real or random. He never did go to Florida, though, because a court proceeding made another exam moot.

Schiavo eventually died when her feeding tube was removed in 2005. The general consensus now holds that she likely was vegetative—an autopsy later found that her brain had atrophied to half its normal size—but Giacino still wonders how that correlated with her level of consciousness. Because he never examined her himself, he personally reserved judgment.

If Schiavo—or let's say a hypothetical patient diagnosed as vegetative, like her—were in fact minimally conscious or covertly aware, would that tip the calculus of keeping her alive one way or the other? Which way? On one hand is the horrifying proposition of snuffing out a human consciousness. On the other hand is what some might consider a fate worse than death, of living imprisoned in a body entirely without choice, without freedom. In memoirs and interviews, brain-injury patients who regained communication —Tavalaro among them—speak of despair, of abuse, and of sheer, uninterrupted boredom. They could not even turn their head to stare at a different patch of wall paint. One young man described the particular agony of being placed carelessly in a wheelchair and forced to sit for hours atop his testicles. Some have tried to end their life by holding their breath, which turns out to be physically impossible. The classical notion of a totally mindless vegetative state offered at least meager solace: a person devoid of consciousness would not experience pain or suffering.

One-third of locked-in patients, who can communicate only using their eyes, have thought of suicide often or occasionally, [according to a survey of 65 people conducted by Laureys](#), the Belgian neurologist. But a majority of these patients have never contemplated suicide. They say they are happy, and those who have been locked in longer report being happier, which squares with other research showing that people with disabilities are in fact quite adaptable in the long term. Of course, those who responded to the survey are not entirely representative of everyone with a brain injury; for one thing, they could still communicate, albeit with difficulty.

What about covertly aware patients, with total loss of communication—are they happy to be alive? As far as I know, only one such person has ever had the opportunity to answer this question. In the 2010 study, after the 22-year-old man answered five consecutive yes-or-no questions correctly, Laureys decided to pose a last question, one to which he did not already know the answer: Do you want to die?

Where the man's previous responses were clear, this one was ambiguous. The scan suggested that he was imagining neither tennis nor his house. He seemed to be thinking neither yes nor no, but something more complicated —exactly what, we will never know.

I posed a version of this question to the researchers who have devoted their career to understanding disorders of consciousness. Would you choose to live? “If no one was coming to the rescue, if help was not on the way, I wouldn’t want to be in any of these situations,” said Schiff, who has a practical eye toward brain-implant research that could one day help these patients.

Owen was more philosophical. He told me that when people learn about his research, many say they would prefer to die; even his wife says that. But he is less certain. He does not have an advance directive. Perhaps the only thing worse than wanting to die and being forced to live, he said, is to watch everyone let you die when you have decided, in the moment of truth, that you actually want to live.

On one of my trips to the Rainbow Lodge this past winter, Geoff rigged up Ian’s foot switch—one of countless assistive devices his family has tried—to play a prerecorded message for me. “Hey, Sarah, thanks for coming!” it went in Geoff’s singsong voice. “I’m glad to see ya.” His family had hoped, at one point, that Ian’s left foot, which waves back and forth, unlike his permanently fixed right one, could become a mode of communication. But Ian has never been able to push the switch reliably on command. Still, occasionally, he hits the big green button just hard enough to set it off.



Ian's brother Geoff has become one of his caregivers, despite his earlier misgivings about their mother's decision to keep Ian alive. (Sarah Blesener for *The Atlantic*)

I cannot know to what extent, if any, this movement is voluntary. But Ian's foot is certainly more active at some times than others. While his family and I chatted over lunch at the kitchen table one day, it went *tap, tap*. "Hey, Sarah, thanks for coming!" Was he trying to join the conversation? "Hey, Sarah, thanks for coming!" If so, what did he want to say?

There was one other instance when I saw his foot moving that much—during a previous visit, when we spoke in detail about Ian's car crash for the first time. The crash took place in the early morning, after the boys had been together all night. Ian was driving. When Eve was asked to identify the body of the boy who died, Sam, she recognized the white shell necklace Ian had brought back for him from a recent trip to Florida. The third boy—the one who survived—eventually stopped keeping in touch with high-school friends, a disappearance they attributed to survivor's guilt.

I wondered if our conversation would distress Ian, if we should be replaying these events in front of him. To me, it seemed as though his face had turned especially tense. His foot was going *tap, tap, tap*. Or was I projecting my own thoughts, as it is so easy to do with someone who cannot respond? "Ian knows he killed his best friend," Geoff said at one point that night. "By accident."

The next day, Ian was grinding his teeth. It happens sometimes, Eve told me. Perhaps something hurt. Or his stomach was upset. Or an eyelash was stuck in his eye. They tried to rule out causes one by one, but it's always a guessing game. I thought back to our conversation the night before, and wondered whether the presence of a stranger probing the traumatic events of his life might have agitated him.

Ian could not walk away from a conversation he did not want to have, nor could he correct the record of what we got wrong. If his memories and cognition are more intact than not, then he has had time—so much time—to live inside his own thoughts. Has he come to his own reckoning over his friend's death? Does he feel his own survivor's guilt? Does he ever wish for

the fate of one of his friends in the car over the one he was actually dealt? Perhaps being incapable of these thoughts would be a mercy in itself.

At one point, Geoff decided to reprogram Ian's foot switch, in part to cheer up Molly Holm, one of Ian's nurses since 2008, who had bruised her ribs slipping on ice. Molly had known Ian back in high school; he was friends with her older brother. She started coming to patterning sessions at the Rainbow Lodge after the accident, taking a position at Ian's right hand. She later became a nurse. Her first job was at a head-trauma center, where she looked after young men with injuries like Ian's. In some of the vegetative patients, she would see flashes of what seemed like awareness. But who was she, a very green nurse, to question a doctor's diagnosis? Some of the men at this facility rarely had visitors, Molly says, their isolation so unlike the warmth of Ian's home.

[From the April 2024 issue: Sarah Zhang on the cystic-fibrosis breakthrough that changed everything](#)

That's what originally drew her, a deeply unhappy 14-year-old, to the Rainbow Lodge all those years ago. (Okay, she admits, she'd also had a huge crush on Ian before the crash.) It drew other people too, including those who temporarily moved into the lodge's guest rooms during the patterning days: Ian's girlfriend, Valerie Cashen; a friend of Geoff's, Karen McKenna, who was 21 and pregnant, and had recently split from her boyfriend; and, perhaps most unexpectedly, the mother of the boy killed in the car crash, Renee Montana. Eve had overheard her primal scream of grief in the hospital, and when they later met, the mothers felt connected rather than divided by their respective tragedies.



Ian, Eve, Geoff, and Geoff's partner, Molly—also one of Ian's nurses—gather for cards after dinner at the Rainbow Lodge. (Sarah Blesener for *The Atlantic*)

Valerie, Karen, and Renee all arrived at the Rainbow Lodge overwhelmed by their own life circumstances. The two younger women stayed for a year or two and became close friends. Karen hadn't known Ian at all before his injury. She first came to the hospital as a friend of the family; she offered to watch over Ian for Eve because, well, she didn't have much else to do. She gave birth to her baby while living at the lodge, Eve by her side as her Lamaze coach. Karen's time caring for Ian helped inspire her to enroll in nursing school, and she eventually became a nurse at the very ICU where she first met Ian.

Renee stayed for a few years. She did not blame Ian for Sam's death, though she knew that others did. When I asked her if she ever thought about what might have happened if their fates had been switched, she had an immediate answer: "My poor boy would have been institutionalized."

She didn't have the means to care for him at home; she didn't have the Rainbow Lodge. She was a single mom, living with a boyfriend in a disintegrating relationship. Eve and Marshall's welcoming her into their community kept her from going adrift. "They just saved my life," she said. Her life took an unexpected turn there too: Renee ended up having another child—her daughter, Morganne—born in 1988, after Renee had a brief affair with Eve's brother.

Out of these chaotic circumstances, Eve and Renee found their bond as new friends cemented into that of family. Eve was present at this birth as well; she cut Morganne's umbilical cord. Back at the lodge, they put the newborn girl in Ian's lap, letting him hold a new life that would not exist had his own not been thrown off course. Morganne, now 37, told me that her earliest memories are of curling up at Ian's feet to watch TV.

Reflecting on life after Ian's accident, Eve prefers to speak not of loss but of gains: a new niece, lifelong friends, the entire Rainbow Lodge community. She decided long ago that she could carry others forward—Ian most of all—on her brute optimism. And in our hours of conversation, I never heard her linger on a negative note.

In this respect, Geoff does not take after his mother. "*Geoff's more like, I see your suffering, brother,*" Molly told me. He and Ian have a different kind of bond, she added, "because Geoff recognizes that, sometimes, this sucks."

"No, I mean, it definitely sucks, right?" Geoff said. "Not to be able to communicate sucks."

Geoff's coping mechanism is humor, at times dark, at times juvenile. It helps that Ian's most reliable response is laughter. When he really gets going, his chuckle turns into a full chest shake. Geoff still dreams about the technology that might help his brother communicate. For now, they have the foot switch.

The message Geoff recorded after Molly's fall was meant to make her, and everyone else, laugh: He blew a fart noise, scattered objects on the ground, and shouted, "Oh my God! What happened there?" Then he slipped the switch under Ian's left foot.



Molly and Geoff care for Ian together, and will continue to do so after Eve is gone. (Sarah Blesener for *The Atlantic*)

Geoff was so keen to lift Molly's spirits because they are a couple, together since 2000. Over the course of their relationship, Geoff had grown close to another of her patients, a spunky boy who eventually died of epidermolysis bullosa, also known as butterfly-skin syndrome, in his 20s. They don't have children of their own but they had become a caretaking unit, their relationship deepening over their shared love for the boy. Now they care for Ian together, and they will continue to care for him when Eve is gone.

When I was leaving the Rainbow Lodge for the last time, Eve impressed upon me what she hoped people would take away from Ian's life: "It's not a sad story." On this, Molly concurred. Yes, it sucks sometimes. But Ian has been continuously surrounded by people who love him, people who took that love and made something of it.

As if on cue, Ian's foot switch went off. *Fart noise. Objects scattering.* "Oh my God! What happened there?" Maybe it was just a random movement of his foot. Maybe he wanted to disagree with his mother's assessment. Or

maybe he agreed that his is not a sad story. If only he could tell us in his own words.

This article appears in the [June 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Is Ian Still In There?” 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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My Shipwreck Story

On my first time out as a commercial fisherman, my boat sank, my captain died, and I was left adrift and alone in the Pacific.

by Alec Frydman



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The Evening was small in the shadow of the other boats. When I arrived at the dock, it was well past midnight, and a misty rain was falling—the edge of a storm far out at sea. Mick, the captain, was blunt and salty; not old, but

weathered. He led me on board and pointed down the ladder to the hull, where I immediately got into bed and fell asleep. When I woke up, Mick had gone into town, and I began to look around in the mute light of the overcast morning.

Our plan that October was to fish for albacore off the coast of Washington State. These would be short trips—four or five days at a time—to train me up for the summer, when I'd join Mick for a real voyage. I'd taken a Coast Guard course at a community college and had my Merchant Mariner certificate, but I'd never worked on a fishing boat before. In the daylight, the Evening looked ramshackle, as if it had survived 80 years in the northern Pacific more by luck than design. I found a few photos of Mick's family, and the Evening's Coast Guard certificate. "Constructed 1941, 43 feet, commercial (uninspected)." On deck, fishing lines were tangled with seaweed. Scattered everywhere were about a dozen rubber doormats stamped with the words Thankful, Grateful, and Blessed. On a workbench stood a statue of the Virgin Mary.

We spent a few days waiting for the weather to clear. Mick did paperwork and chores and I tidied the boat. One day we took the catch he had stored in the hold's briny ice to a cannery on a spit of land between the ocean and Grays Harbor. Water from the Chehalis River flowed into the harbor, forming a standing wave where the two bodies met. I watched a ship leaving the harbor. When it crossed the river bar, it pitched and rolled. Mick and I would be taking the same route in a few days, but the Evening was half the size of that ship, old, and made of wood. The wave looked large enough to swallow us.

That afternoon, Mick suggested that we "take her out for a little spin." Days of stormy weather had turned the water brown. Bobbing under the surface, barely visible, were entire trees that had washed down the Chehalis. Mick made sure I knew how to use the radio, and reminded me that the Coast Guard was on Channel 16. He pointed out the white canister on one wall that held the emergency radio beacon, which would go off automatically if submerged. The life raft, he explained, would release on its own.

The forecast finally showed minimal wind, minimal swell. We'd leave Thursday, October 12, 2023, and be back Sunday or Monday. On

Wednesday night, I went out for a cheeseburger and called my mom. When she asked if I was excited, I said yes.

My parents thought I was throwing my life away. I was 27, and since graduating from the University of Virginia five years earlier, I'd been living in California, where I spent my time working at the counter of a surf shop, running cocktails to tourists on the ferry to Catalina Island, and surfing. In college, I'd talked about going to law school, or taking the Foreign Service exam. But as graduation approached, I began to look down the line at the rest of my life, and I knew I didn't want that kind of career. I wasn't sure I wanted any career at all.

I'd read *East of Eden* and *Barbarian Days*, and imagined California as a place where I could get far away from my East Coast upbringing, the collar-and-tie of my Episcopal-school childhood. I didn't break the news to my parents until a week before my departure.

[From the April 2025 issue: Graydon Carter on how six months working on the railroad changed his life](#)

They said I hadn't thought it through, that it didn't sound like I had a plan. The lack of a plan was the point, I told them: "I'll bus tables or whatever—I can find a job when I get there." I could tell they thought the whole thing was ridiculous. In the end, I blew up at them. I told them I didn't want the life they had chosen for me. I told them that they didn't understand me, that I hadn't asked for and didn't want the blessings they'd given me.

After I left, I'd call home about once a month. They'd ask how I was doing; I'd tell them I was "figuring things out just fine."

I bounced around—San Diego, Santa Cruz, Newport Beach—making friends and surfing as much as possible: daily, twice daily, sometimes all day long. But by the summer of 2023, I was restless. I would never have admitted it to my parents, but my job at the surf shop was getting old. Even surfing itself was beginning to feel rote—the same breaks, the same people, the same wave.

I wanted to get out of California, at least for a little while. I'd go to Australia for a year-long surfing bender. Maybe I'd meet some Australian girl—no, I definitely would—and never come back. I got a work visa. All I needed was enough money to make the trip.

Some of my friends had worked on fishing boats. One of them had spent a few seasons on a salmon boat in Alaska. He had shown me photos and told me the pay was good. In three months, I could earn enough to live on for a year. The idea of being out in deep waters appealed to me. Surf breaks are, by their nature, near shore, and even on my board, I couldn't seem to escape the sounds of traffic on the Pacific Coast Highway. Bobbing at the ocean's edge, waiting for waves that had started their lives as swells hundreds if not thousands of miles away, I began to wonder, *What's it like out there?*

Another friend put me in touch with his old captain, a man named Michael Diamond. He introduced himself as Mick when we talked briefly over the phone. I'd do the practice runs with him in the fall to prepare for a three-month voyage over the summer. Then, Australia. He texted to confirm: "2 trips then you trained for next year." "We can fish til they are gone and quit biting!"

We longlined for albacore that first day. We had some luck, bringing in maybe two or three dozen fish. It was hard work, but exhilarating, and the more we caught, the more I liked it. We fished until sunset, and ate rib eye for dinner. I climbed down to my bunk and fell asleep.

The second day, I woke at sunrise. The Evening was rocking from side to side, and it was harder to climb the ladder than it had been to go down it the night before. On the main deck, Mick had already gotten to work, setting up the lines on the boat's starboard side.

The day before, we could see the horizon in all directions; now we had only a few hundred yards of visibility, and the boat pitched in the rising swells. We brought in two or three fish. By noon, Mick had called me off the deck to take cover from the wind and rain in the wheelhouse, where he lit a cigar.

The combination of the rolling boat and the smoke made my stomach turn. I needed fresh air. I went back outside. Waves were breaking over the bow,

soaking my clothes, but I remained on the deck, bracing myself on the rails, for nearly an hour. When I couldn't handle the cold anymore, I went back into the wheelhouse and found Mick resting in his berth—the rough seas had gotten to him, too. The *Evening* was on autopilot, on course back to the harbor.

I sat in the captain's seat and tried to keep watch through the windshield, but I could barely see the waves before they slammed into the glass. The boat was rolling and pitching. As Mick slept, I watched our progress on the electronic chart: The boat was a small black triangle in a field of gray. We were maybe 20 miles offshore, and at our speed, it would be hours, well after sunset, before we reached the harbor. I was dizzy and nauseated and anxious, but watching our path in two simplified dimensions on-screen, I felt sure we'd make it.

Mick was frozen in the seat, gripping the armrests, looking straight through me. I shouted to him to come outside, but he didn't move. Then I fell into the sea.

But the storm kept picking up. An hour passed, then another, and we were still far from land. I half-crawled to the back of the wheelhouse and looked out the porthole. Waves began washing over the rails. A cooler was swept out to sea. There went our sandwiches. An even bigger wave pushed the stern underwater. I could feel the *Evening*'s center of gravity shift past the point of rebalancing. It was like leaning too far back in a chair.

I walked with one foot on the floor and the other on the wall to reach Mick. I shook him awake. "I think we need to get off *now*," I told him. I reached for the radio and sent out a Mayday.

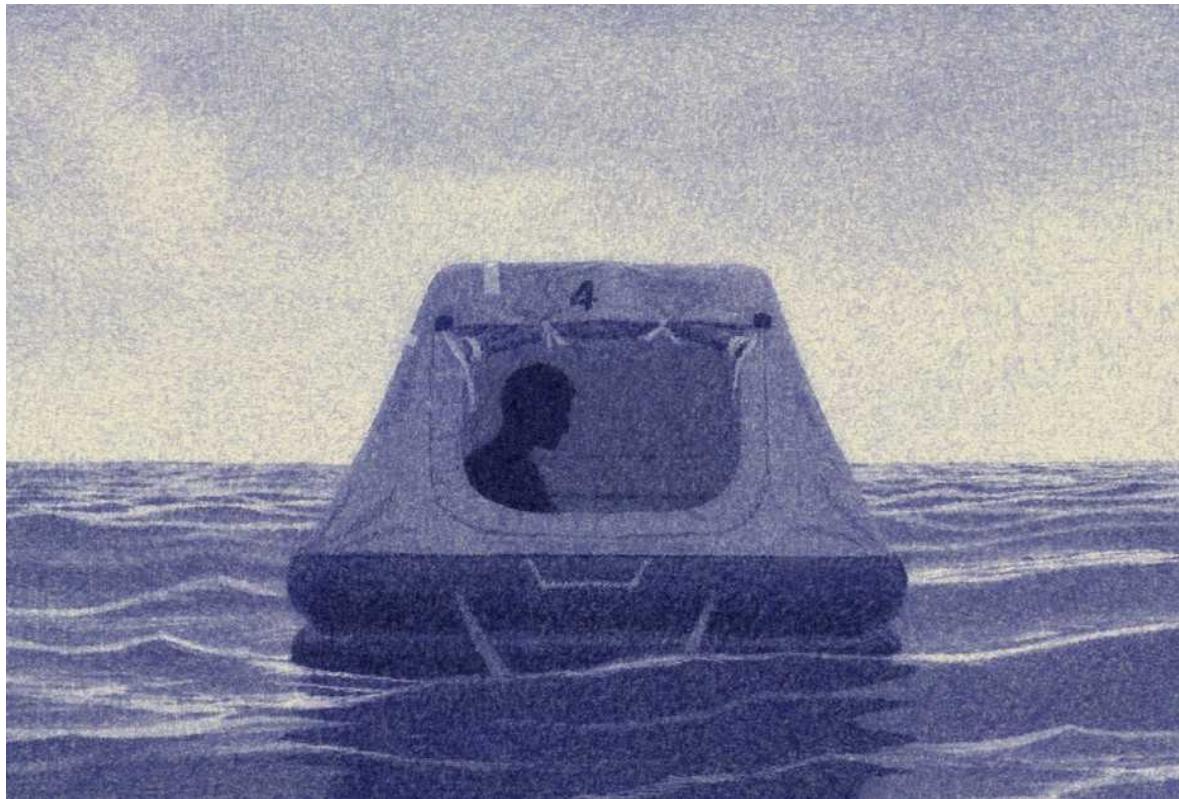
Mick opened his eyes but didn't seem to understand. I pulled him out of bed and helped him into the seat behind the wheel. I couldn't tell what was wrong with him. I could see seawater against the wheelhouse windows. We had to get out. I was sure Mick would follow, but when I turned around, he was frozen in the seat, gripping the armrests, looking straight through me. I shouted to him to come outside, but he didn't move. Then I fell into the sea.

I was too shocked to feel cold. I could see the lines coming off the now-submerged masts and prayed I wouldn't get tangled in one and be dragged down with the boat. I found the lid of the fishhold—a piece of wood insulated with foam—floating nearby and pulled myself on top of it. I was sure the Mayday had been transmitted. A helicopter would appear in no time to save us. I needed to stay afloat for half an hour, an hour at most. Then I saw the lifeboat, undeployed, floating in its canister a few feet away. I swam over and yanked the rip cord, and the raft inflated. I climbed in.

Gasping and shaking in the raft, I searched for Mick but couldn't see him. The Evening had rolled onto its port side and was almost completely submerged. Then the bow rose suddenly upward and broke the surface. A plume of exhaust rushed out of the exposed pipe on the wheelhouse roof and the ship sank quickly. No more than five minutes had passed since I'd woken the captain.

The life raft was small but sheltered, like a kiddie pool but sturdier, and with a camping tent on top. The sides shuddered in the wind and rain, but I felt relatively safe inside. Certain that rescue was coming and exhausted by shock, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, the storm was still raging. I opened the flap for a moment, and saw the sun low in the sky. I didn't know how much time had passed since I'd fallen asleep—maybe an hour, maybe an entire night. I needed to find some way to situate myself in this strange new reality, and began by taking inventory.



I had the clothes on my back: wool cap, flannel shirt, pants, boots, and a sweater, a Christmas gift from my grandmother. I had my phone (destroyed) and my wallet. On the raft, I found a collapsible oar, a first-aid kit, a small fishing kit, two emergency blankets, and an assortment of signals: four hand flares, three rocket flares, and three cans of orange smoke. I had food—a box of maybe a dozen emergency rations, which looked like beige bars of soap and tasted like oily shortbread—and two liters' worth of drinking water, in individual packages.

The oar was useless in the rough seas, and I had no clue which way to row. I immediately wasted two flares, firing them into the air in the deluded hope that an approaching rescuer would see them. In the fishing kit was a razor blade, intended for filleting a hooked fish, though it seemed to invite another use. I thought of throwing it overboard, but instead stashed it away.

[From the May 2004 issue: William Langewiesche on the sinking of the ferry Estonia](#)

I tried not to worry. Getting a helicopter airborne probably took a little time, especially in a storm. Worst case—if our Mayday hadn't been heard—

someone would figure out we were missing and come looking. We were supposed to be gone for only four or five days, and if we didn't return as planned, someone would notice—the harbormaster, or another captain, or our families. We'd left on Thursday and the ship had gone down on Friday. At the very latest, I figured I'd be rescued by Monday or Tuesday. I didn't worry, at first, about my food or water running out. I just had to wait.

I thought a lot about Mick, wondering if I could have done more to save him, wondering why he'd been catatonic as the boat sank. I hadn't seen any alcohol or drugs on the boat. Had he been seasick? Paralyzed by fear? Either way, I felt furious with him, and then guilty for my fury.

My first three or four days on the raft, the sky was so dark with storm clouds that I could barely see the sun move from east to west. With nothing to mark the hours, each day felt like it contained far more than 24. I remembered reading about Franciscan monks and how they ordered their days around work and prayer, and I decided I needed to devise my own routine, starting with a regular lookout.

Every morning, and then periodically throughout the day, I unzipped the flap that kept the wind and water out of the raft and checked to see if anything was out there—land, or a boat, or a plane. I bailed out water and wiped off the condensation that had accumulated inside the raft from my breath. I removed my clothes, one piece at a time, and hung them up on an interior bar of the shelter to dry, though they never fully did. I added new tasks when the need arose, such as blowing into a valve to reinflate the raft when it began to sag, and organizing and reorganizing my water, food, and flares.

The life I'd chosen had put me in this situation. I had thought I could figure everything out on my own, and now I was going to lose my life and my parents were going to lose their son.

Tossed by the waves, I could never sleep more than an hour or two at a time. I hadn't been dry, not completely, since I'd fallen into the ocean. Soon the emergency blankets were worn to shreds. The silver foil deteriorated, exposing a sharp plastic mesh that cut into my waterlogged fingers. I tossed the scraps overboard, and from then on, I used the dry bag—a small rubber rucksack—as a blanket. It was hardly bigger than a pillowcase, but by

ripping one of its seams and pulling my knees tight against my chest and my arms against my sides, I was able to cover myself nearly up to my collarbone. Desperate for any bit of warmth, I ignored the cramping discomfort it caused.

I prayed often, always aloud. At first, pleas for rescue. Over and over, I asked God to save me—not my soul, but my physical self. After days of praying the same prayer, I tried offering God something in return. First, I apologized for every past transgression I could remember. Any injustice or sin I feared I may have committed, I tried to atone for, so God would listen to my prayers. I used what I could recall of the Ten Commandments to accuse myself. I hadn't honored the Sabbath in years; I had lied; I had coveted; I had stolen. Worst of all, I hadn't honored my mother and father. I asked God to forgive me for the way I had treated my parents.

The life I'd chosen had put me in this situation. All the self-assurance I'd had that I could figure everything out on my own had led me here, and now I was going to lose my life and my parents were going to lose their son. Their doubts about my decision rose up in my mind and became my own doubts. I saw that my mom and dad had tried to discourage me not because they wanted to control me, but because they loved me. I wished I could tell them that I understood them now. I told God that I was sorry, for everything, and that if he gave me the chance, I'd do my best to make everything right.

I saw my first ship after five or maybe six days of drifting. I launched a flare into the sky. The ship was so close, I had no doubt the crew would spot me. I could see the containers it was carrying; the company's name, Hapag-Lloyd, was painted on the side. As the rocket arced through the air, I imagined being lifted up out of the ocean. Someone would give me dry clothes and a hot meal, and they'd let me call my mom and dad on a satellite phone. I'd tell my parents what had happened and that I was all right. Then the ship would drop me off at its next port of call, and I'd fly back to California, and my life would return to normal—a happy, beautiful normal. I'd sit in traffic on the 55 with a smile on my face.

But as the flare rose, and fell, and was extinguished in the ocean, the ship kept going. Soon it disappeared over the horizon.

I'd been rationing my water, never consuming more than the equivalent of a small glass every 24 hours. But by the end of my first week on the raft, I knew that my distress signal would never be answered, that the emergency positioning beacon had failed to transmit. I was alone, and I was terribly, terribly thirsty.

What sense was there in suffering if all it meant was postponing the inevitable? I drank as much as I could stomach and closed my eyes. The next morning, I saw that no water was left.

I had strange, vivid dreams. Then I didn't dream at all so much as hallucinate. As my eyes would begin to close, I'd hear splashing, like the breaching of a school of big fish, and then suddenly I'd feel that the raft was being propelled forward, as if on a towline, over the surface of the water. But every morning, I always seemed to be in the same place, at the center of the jumbled swells—rising, falling, sometimes breaking.

One night I dreamed that the life raft had washed ashore, on the bank of a pond. I stepped into the reeds, and then onto a road that led me to a small house. My friend Jack was sitting on the porch. He waved; he had been expecting me. But I was embarrassed—my clothes were wet and dirty, my hair tangled, my face covered with a patchy beard. I made an excuse. I told him my car had broken down and I was on my way into town to get a screwdriver. I'd be a little late for our appointment. "Don't worry, take your time," Jack told me. "Take all the time you need." I walked back to the pond, climbed onto the life raft, and fell asleep. When I woke up for real, I opened the flap and found myself once again—still—in the middle of the ocean.

Even when I was awake, I had experiences that I couldn't explain. One day, I sensed that I wasn't alone in the life raft. I couldn't see a figure or hear a voice, but I knew they were there, and I knew their name. It was the I.O.B. I said it to myself: "Eye-Oh-Bee."

Was I losing my mind? I laughed at myself. Only a sane person would be able to laugh at himself, right? But I couldn't shake the thought of the I.O.B. And I didn't want to.



The I.O.B. brought me a sense of peace I hadn't ever felt on the life raft. It wasn't great company—it was silent and invisible, after all—but for the first time I felt like something, someone, was there to witness my continued existence, my choice to stay alive. I had often thought that if I died, and my body was never recovered, no one would ever know how desperately I had clung to life, how I'd fought to live even when despair felt absolute and overpowering. My parents wouldn't know; my friends wouldn't know. But the I.O.B. knew.

[From the April 2015 issue: The science of near-death experiences](#)

Not long after the I.O.B. appeared, I decided to open the flap, just a little, to see if anything was visible. In the eddy was a sunfish—a large, flat, primordial-looking bony fish—just a few feet from me. Its long, narrow dorsal fin broke the surface, oscillating gently, as if it were waving. I waved back.

By now I had lost track of time completely. The sea grew calm. One night, before the last of the clouds cleared, I was able to collect some rainwater to drink. It tasted cold and sweet. I even managed to catch a small fish. I bled it

with the razor blade, and ate it to the bone. I threw the line back in the water, but didn't catch another. Sometimes I could see land on the horizon, and I tried to row toward it, counting my strokes, into the hundreds, the thousands, but I never made it any closer.

I'd seen maybe five or six ships by then, most so far off that they'd looked like two-dimensional paper cutouts pasted on the horizon. I wasted my last rocket on them, and lit the hand flares, and popped canisters of thick orange smoke. For days I prayed that God would send more ships, but each time one passed and didn't stop, I was left so bereft, so gutted by the brush with hope, that I began to feel that I would rather never see another. Now I had only one flare left. Holding on to it felt like holding on to life itself.

With the clearing of the storm, the temperature had dropped. During the day, the sun hitting the side of the raft was enough to keep me warm, but when night came, the cold set into my damp clothes and skin, and I shivered so violently, I couldn't sleep. I was out of food, out of water. I knew I would not survive much longer. But even as my hope for rescue began to evaporate, so did my despair.

I was going to die. I didn't look forward to it. I wanted to see my mom and dad again, my brother and sister, my friends. There was so much I still wanted to do. I fantasized about the smallest, most mundane things—waking up in bed, getting in my car, waiting at a red light, grabbing coffee, working. I wanted to do it all again, every day, forever and ever. But the idea of getting off the raft was becoming a distant hope, like winning the lottery—it would be really nice if it happened, but I didn't expect it to, and I wasn't going to tear myself up about it.

A peace I hadn't known to look for found me. Where before I'd dreaded sunsets—the precursors to cold nights and strange dreams, and the mark of yet another day lost to the raft—now they were only sunsets, and sometimes I found them beautiful.

Yet another freezing, trembling night. At last the sun rose. Its light hit the side of the life raft, and I could feel it warming up, as if someone had lit a woodstove in the corner. Maybe now I could finally get some sleep. I pulled my hat down over my eyes and tried to let myself doze off, but I couldn't—I

couldn't neglect my morning ritual, the first duties of my watch. I compromised with myself: I would do the morning lookout, and then get to sleep.

When I crawled across the raft and opened the flap, I saw it immediately—a boat, close enough that it actually looked real, and coming closer. I turned to get the flare, which I'd wedged into a corner. I hesitated. This was my last one.

Before I lit it, I began to scream at the very top of my lungs. I screamed until I felt as if my lungs were imploding, and kept going. When the boat was as close as it was going to get, I finally lit the flare.

The flame burned to the base, and when it reached my hand, I dropped the flare in the water, where the hot, burning metals cooled and groaned. I kept screaming, waving my hands over my head. I looked and sounded like a madman. When at last I ran out of breath, I fell silent. And in the silence, I heard someone answer me.

“We see you, we’re coming, we see you.”

I watched the boat change its course toward me, and the crew lowered a ladder and helped me aboard. The captain cooked me warm food, and a deckhand gave me dry clothes. I ate, and cried, and thanked them. It turned out that I'd drifted far from the harbor. The land I'd seen over the horizon was Vancouver Island, some 150 miles away from where the voyage had begun. The captain said he'd seen life rafts on the ocean before, but they'd always been empty. He asked me how long I'd been in the raft. I asked him for the date.

It had been 13 days.

The Canadian Coast Guard brought me ashore at Tofino, where I was taken to the hospital. Doctors worried that, after days of dehydration and deprivation, my kidneys or heart might fail. They took some blood, ran some tests, and, miraculously, I was fine. I could go home. A nurse brought me fresh clothes and led me to a shower. When I stripped out of my hospital

gown, I was shocked by how thin I was—it was as if I could see all the bones and veins beneath my skin.

Two Mounties came to the hospital to take me to the border, and I walked across, back into the United States. Officials kept me there for a few hours, asking questions about the accident. At last they let me go, and a border agent helped me onto a bus to Seattle, where I caught a plane to Baltimore. My parents picked me up. A Welcome Home banner was hanging from the cherry tree in the front yard.

It was nearly November—a month of many birthdays for my family, including my own—and, with Thanksgiving right around the corner, I decided to stay awhile. My brother and sister came home from New York, and for a couple of weeks, the house was full. It was like we were observing a strange holiday that none of us knew how to celebrate. We negotiated the awkwardness by trying to act normal, but of course nothing felt normal. A few days earlier, I had thought I would never walk the dogs with my dad again, or sit in the kitchen drinking coffee with my mom, but there I was doing just that. I wanted to tell everyone how blessed I felt, but whatever words I considered felt far too small. I suspect they felt the same.

A few days after Thanksgiving, I left for California. When I was at the airport, waiting for my flight, I unfolded from my wallet a poem that my dad had written for me. My dad will be the first to say he isn't much of a poet, and the poem relied heavily on an old Irish toast, but the last words, I'm certain, were his own: "Now carry on."

Mick's body was never recovered. In the spring, I drove to San Diego for his memorial. His son told a story about a trip they'd once taken to Hawaii. He and his friend were surfing while Mick fished, waist-deep in the water. A large set rolled in, knocking Mick off his feet. When his son found him washed up on the beach, he was soaked, but he was still holding on to his cigar, and it was still, somehow, lit.

When the memorial was over, Mick's daughter gave me a hug, and told me she was happy I had come. But I felt guilty—that it was wrong that I was there when their dad was gone.

I'm grateful that I survived, but I don't know why I did, or what it means. I still have no idea what I want to do with my life. When you're lost at sea, certain you're going to die in a life raft, you ask, *Why me?* and receive no answer. When you're rescued and restored to life, you ask, *Why me?* and still there is no answer.

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Is This the Worst-Ever Era of American Pop Culture?

An emerging critical consensus argues that we've entered a cultural dark age. I'm not so sure.

by Spencer Kornhaber



Last year, I visited the music historian Ted Gioia to talk about the death of civilization.

He welcomed me into his suburban-Texas home and showed me to a sunlit library. At the center of the room, arranged neatly on a countertop, stood 41

books. These, he said, were the books I needed to read.

The display included all seven volumes of Edward Gibbon's 18th-century opus, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; both volumes of Oswald Spengler's World War I-era tract, *The Decline of the West*; and a 2,500-year-old account of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides, who "was the first historian to look at his own culture, Greece, and say, *I'm going to tell you the story of how stupid we were*," Gioia explained.

Gioia's contributions to this lineage of doomsaying have made him into something of an internet celebrity. For most of his career, he was best-known for writing about jazz. But with his Substack newsletter, [The Honest Broker](#), he's attracted a large and avid readership by taking on contemporary culture—and arguing that it's terrible. America's "creative energy" has been sapped, he told me, and the results can be seen in the diminished quality of arts and entertainment, with knock-on effects to the country's happiness and even its political stability.

He's not alone in fearing that we've entered a cultural dark age. According to [a recent YouGov poll](#), Americans rate the 2020s as the worst decade in a century for music, movies, fashion, TV, and sports. A 2023 story in *The New York Times Magazine* declared that we're in the "least innovative, least transformative, least pioneering century for culture since the invention of the printing press." An art critic for *The Guardian* [recently proclaimed](#) that "the avant garde is dead."

What's so jarring about these declarations of malaise is that we should, logically, be in a renaissance. The internet has caused a Cambrian explosion of creative expression by allowing artists to execute and distribute their visions with unprecedented ease. More than 500 scripted TV shows get made every year; streaming services reportedly add about 100,000 songs every day. We have podcasts that cater to every niche passion and video games of novelistic sophistication. Technology companies like to say that they've democratized the arts, enabling exciting collisions of ideas from unlikely talents. Yet no one seems very happy about the results.

To a certain extent, such negativity may simply reflect an innate human tendency to fret about decline. Some of the most liberating developments in

history have first triggered fears of social stultification. The advent of the printing press caused 15th-century thinkers to complain of mass distraction. In 1964, *The Atlantic* [published an essay](#) predicting, not unpersuasively, that rock and roll would only foster conformity and consumerism in young Americans.

From the August 1964 issue: What do they get from rock 'n' roll?

For as long as I have been a critic at this magazine, I've tried to cut against the declinist impulse. The year I started the job, 2011, was a turning point of sorts: Spotify launched in America that July; Netflix debuted its first original series soon after. The brainy rock bands that I'd grown up loving—Radiohead, Wilco—were starting to fade in importance, but pop, hip-hop, and electronic music were cross-pollinating in fascinating ways. Understanding change, and appreciating how human creativity flourishes anew in each era, always seemed to be the point of the job.

Yet the 2020s have tested my optimism. The chaos of TikTok, the disruption of the pandemic, and the threat of AI have destabilized any coherent story of progress driving the arts forward. In its place, a narrative of decay has taken hold, evangelized by critics such as Gioia. They're citing very real problems: Hollywood's regurgitation of intellectual property; partisan culture wars hijacking actual culture; unsustainable economic conditions for artists; the addicting, distracting effects of modern technology.

I wanted to meet with some of the most articulate pessimists to test the validity of their ideas, and to see whether a story other than decline might yet be told. Previous periods of change have yielded great artistic breakthroughs: Industrialization begat Romanticism; World War I awakened the modernists. Either something similar is happening now and we're not yet able to see it, or we really have, at last, slid into the wasteland.

Stagnation

In 312 C.E., the Roman Senate ordered the construction of a gaudy monument called the Arch of Constantine. It incorporated pieces from older monuments, built in more glorious times for the empire, which had begun its centuries-long decline.

The Arch is one of Gioia's favorite metaphors for modern culture. The TV and film industry is enamored of reboots, spin-offs, and formulaic genre fare. Broadway theaters subsist on stunt-cast revivals of old warhorses; book publishers rely disproportionately on backlist sales. Entertainment companies have long understood the power of giving people more of what they already like, but recommendation algorithms take that logic to a new extreme, keeping us swiping endlessly for slight variations on our favorite things. In every sector of society, Gioia told me, "we're facing powerful forces that want to impose stagnation on us."

If Bach were alive today, "he'd spend a few weeks trying to break into the L.A. music scene and say 'Ah, I'll be a hedge-fund manager instead.'"

The problem is particularly acute in music. In 2024, new releases accounted for a little more than a quarter of the albums consumed in the U.S.; every year, a greater and greater percentage of the albums streamed online is "[catalog music](#)," meaning it is at least 18 months old. Hoping to remonetize the classics, record labels and private-equity firms have spent billions of dollars to acquire artists' publishing rights. The reemergence of Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill" on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in 2022, 37 years after its release, seemed to signal that this was a good bet. A brief placement in a popular TV show (Netflix's *Stranger Things*, itself a pastiche of 1980s movie tropes) could, it turned out, cause an old hit to outcompete most of the newer songs in the world.



The music historian Ted Gioia at his home in Texas. Gioia touts the classics while arguing that contemporary culture stifles new ideas. (Ariana Gomez for *The Atlantic*)

“Music is turning into a rights-management business,” Gioia said. “There are vested interests now that don’t want new music to flourish. The private-equity funds just want you to listen to the same songs over and over again, because they own them.” The ultimate effect, he thinks, is to discourage true, daring artistry. If Bach were alive today, “he’d spend a few weeks trying to break into the L.A. music scene and say, ‘Ah, I’ll be a hedge-fund manager instead.’”

Gioia, 67, knows something about greatness thwarted. He started his career as a consultant, working for Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey. But he moonlighted as a jazz pianist, releasing two albums and gigging around the world. At one point in our conversation, he pulled up a recording of himself playing piano in 1986—before he suffered a debilitating case of arthritis in his 30s. “These arpeggios, I can’t do this anymore,” he said. “I always felt that if you give me another nine, 12, 18 months, I can be as good as anybody in the world.”

Gioia’s background as both an aesthete and a quant gives his criticism its distinctive edge. He’s able to deliver clear, hardheaded analysis of an art form frequently discussed in soft abstractions. I’ve often found myself swept away by the force of his convictions. Still, I nursed some doubts about his claim that the arts are frozen in amber.

In a viral 2022 Substack post titled “Is Old Music Killing New Music?” ([later republished by *The Atlantic*](#)), Gioia described omens of stagnation in everyday life, such as when he encountered a “youngster” singing along to the Police’s “Message in a Bottle.” The example stung a bit: The Police broke up before I was born, yet I’ve been humming their songs my whole life. Of course, when I was listening to my parents’ records in the ’90s, no one was measuring the replaying of old music. Today, by contrast, every Spotify play is monitored and monetized.

So might Gioia be overinterpreting data showing listening habits that have long existed? He didn’t think so. “In my generation,” he said, “nobody I

know listened to their parents' music.”

Gioia’s generation is the Baby Boomers, which, more than any since, conceived of itself as revolutionary. The rock-and-roll movement gave Boomers a fresh, elders-offending sound to call their own, and as they aged, they witnessed other breakthroughs: punk, hip-hop, electronic music. Gioia asked me to compare that dynamism with what’s happened—or, rather, not happened—in the 21st century. “The music today doesn’t sound that much different from 20 years ago,” Gioia said.

I turned that assertion over in my head. The radio does play new music that feels old, such as Sabrina Carpenter’s disco bop “Espresso” and Benson Boone’s classic-rock-flavored anthem “Beautiful Things.” But it also plays musicians who seem firmly planted in the present. Billie Eilish’s blend of jazz and electronic music diverges from the work of any pop star before her. Shaboozey combines country music and rap in a way that, perhaps for the first time in history, doesn’t feel like a joke. Reggaeton, Afrobeats, and K-pop now reach English-speaking audiences to an extent that was unthinkable when traditional gatekeepers—major labels, drive-time DJs, *Rolling Stone*—held more sway. These developments may not be quite as paradigm-shifting as rock and roll was, but they do suggest a culture that is still actively evolving.

Gioia acknowledged some bright spots for culture—he’s not entirely fatalistic about the status quo. He tends to view culture as moving in predictable cycles: When malaise and mediocrity reach an extreme, a revolution is likely to mount, upending the old order and installing a new one.

“Most people fundamentally want to have cultural experiences that are mind-expanding and broaden their world,” he said. “If the corporations that control our culture refuse to deliver that, they will find a way around it and there will be a rebirth. We will have a new counterculture.” He predicted a wave of “new romanticism” (emphasizing humanity over technology) and “new maximalism” (art made with unbridled ambition).

Gioia himself is trying to help bring a revolution about, albeit in small ways. Every day, he listens to hours of new music, searching for gems that the

algorithms have ignored.

He showed me a draft of a post recommending nine new albums to his Substack readers. The lead image was of a young woman in a bonnet and stockings, sitting on a bed strewn with stuffed animals. This was Mei Semones, who sings dreamy bossa nova songs in English and Japanese. Gioia noted that three weeks after her album's release, she had only 8,700 plays on YouTube. "I sometimes recommend albums that have less than 100 views," he said.

To Gioia, the low listenership was evidence of the record industry's efforts to smother new talents. But as I sat watching him pull up exciting find after exciting find, I started to feel oddly reassured about society's creative energy. Today's corporate behemoths may be powerful, and very often craven, but they're reckoning with a force more destabilizing than *Sgt. Pepper's* and *London Calling* ever were: a fractured global audience using technology to chase their obsessions, both familiar and novel.

Gioia went to YouTube and loaded another video, of the Australian band Glass Beams. Its members wore jeweled masks over their faces while playing intricate surf-rock grooves. "This band is great, and nobody's heard it," he said. "How many plays has it got?"

He scrolled down to the answer: nearly 1 million.

Gioia winced. "So it's not as big a secret as I was making it out to be," he said.

A few months later, I revisited the same video and saw that the play count had reached more than 6 million. The top comment read, "[Praise to the algorithms for this!](#)"

Cynicism

The title of the show was "Transcendence." On the second floor of the prestigious Pace Gallery in Manhattan hung white-on-white abstract paintings and what appeared to be line drawings of rocks. Wall text explained that this was the first-ever U.S. solo exhibition for the 79-year-old

artist Huong Dodinh. One painting was inspired by the first snowfall she ever witnessed, as a child, after the First Indochina War forced her family to move from Vietnam to France in 1953. The art critic Dean Kissick, wearing a baggy pink polo shirt and short athletic shorts, rushed through the room, barely glancing at the art. “I don’t think I can do this,” he whispered to me, stifling a giggle.

Kissick, 42, is a writer known in large part for his annoyance at the state of the art world. He believes we’ve been stuck in “the long 2017”: a period in which anxieties related to Donald Trump and Brexit have smothered culture with moralism, navel-gazing, and conformity. Although transcendence—achieved through beauty, originality, and skill—should be the primary goal, art has “become much more about messaging, raising awareness, or a kind of ambient healing of the world,” he told me. In other words, whereas Gioia awaits a revolution, Kissick thinks we’ve recently lived through one—and it’s made everything drearier.

We’d met up so Kissick could take me on a tour of the gallery scene in Chelsea. The Dodinh show, he explained, demonstrated a typical tactic among dealers these days: find a relatively obscure figure from an underrepresented group and try to sell his or her work, at least in part, on the basis of identity. The blander the art, the better for serving rich people looking to furnish tastefully understated homes. “This is just, like, sofas,” he said, gesturing toward Dodinh’s soothingly serene canvases. “Curtains.”

We stepped into an elevator, and I asked him whether he at least felt a sense of justice at seeing someone like Dodinh exhibited at one of the most exclusive galleries in the world. “I always like to see older Asian women doing well, because they remind me of my mother,” said Kissick, whose mother is a Japanese immigrant to the U.K. “But no—I don’t see justice.”

Last year, Kissick published [a cover story in Harper’s](#) arguing that politics had all but destroyed contemporary art. Museums and galleries were blending “all forms of oppression” into “one universal grief,” he wrote. “We are bombarded with identities until they become meaningless. When everyone’s tossed together into the big salad of marginalization, otherness is made banal and abstract.”

The essay opened with a shocking scene: In May 2024, on her way to see a show at London’s Barbican Art Gallery, Kissick’s mother was struck by a bus, an accident that resulted in the amputation of both of her legs. Kissick flew from New York to London to visit her in the hospital. Later, as she recuperated, he checked out the show she’d been on the way to see. Titled “Unravel,” it featured textile art, primarily by artists from historically marginalized communities. As Kissick noted, the curators further “proposed that textiles themselves had also been marginalized, having been gendered as feminine and regarded as ‘craft’ rather than ‘fine art.’ The show’s introductory text asked, ‘What does it mean to imagine a needle, a loom or a garment as a tool of resistance?’”

Kissick’s assessment was withering:

It was the most depressing exhibition I had ever seen at the gallery, hardly worth a visit, let alone losing one’s legs. While *Unravel* pretended to be politically radical—even revolutionary—it didn’t seem to stand for much beyond liberal orthodoxy and feel-good ambient diversity. It offered fantasies of resistance, but had little to offer in terms of genuine, substantive social change or artistic experimentation.

Critiquing progressive pieties in this fashion may simply sound conservative. Indeed, Kissick’s complaints are now reflected in the anti-DEI wave that has swept the federal government—and rippled through American corporate, cultural, and academic institutions. But Kissick insists he’s not ideologically motivated. “I just don’t care that much if people are very woke or very anti-woke,” he told me. “The conversation itself just takes up way too much space.”



The critic Dean Kissick contends that the art world has come to prioritize identity politics over originality and skill. (Ana Flores for *The Atlantic*)

That conversation has been as impossible to avoid in pop culture as it has been in high culture. Proponents of the theory that “representation matters”—meaning that more inclusive media will create a more inclusive society—have cheered diversely cast remakes of films such as *The Little Mermaid*, body-positivity choruses sung by artists like Lizzo, and reckonings with perceived cultural appropriation in the literary world. Conservatives, in turn, have organized a backlash, attempting to score ideological points by racking up streams and downloads. When Jason Aldean’s 2023 song “Try That in a Small Town” was criticized by some on the left for tacitly endorsing lynching, a right-wing campaign to support the track resulted in Aldean hitting No. 1 on the Hot 100. Similar campaigns boosted the box-office prominence of films such as the anti-DEI mockumentary *Am I Racist?* Even the most escapist forms of entertainment—blockbusters, pop concerts, children’s TV—are now treated like political battlegrounds, though you rarely hear about anyone’s opinions being changed in the skirmishes.

In the world of fine art, Kissick feels overwhelmed by what he sees as cynicism masquerading as idealism. He mentioned the example of Amoako Boafo, an in-demand Ghanaian painter who was [hired to adorn the nose cone](#) of one of Jeff Bezos's rockets in 2021. At the time, a statement by Blue Origin, Bezos's spaceflight company, announced, "His stunning portraits capture Black joy and the kind of shared future we hope to create for us all in space: vibrant, beautiful, and full of wonder." One could be forgiven, however, for thinking the commission was motivated less by Black joy than by PR concerns around a controversial billionaire's vanity project. (One could likewise be forgiven, judging by Bezos's actions since Trump's reelection, for wondering whether future nose cones will be similarly adorned.)

To some extent, I sympathize with Kissick's complaints. Mediocre art really does get overrated on account of its politics. Any working critic knows how factional and reflexive audiences have become: Pan a woman, and many readers will call you sexist; champion one, and you risk being dismissed as a beta cuck. Such reactions don't just represent the persistence of prejudice; they reflect an awareness of the way that "culture," a supposedly binding force, has come to feel more and more like an embittered sports rivalry.

But any working critic will also tell you that topicality and identity have inspired incredible work in previous eras (just listen to Nina Simone) and recently (watch the post-#MeToo masterpiece *Tár*, about a lesbian orchestra conductor accused of misconduct). Even Kissick acknowledges this. He gushed to me about the artist Arthur Jafa's 2021 video installation *AGHDRA*; its depiction of an ominous, undulating seascape evokes, as the artist told *ARTnews*, the feeling of "being chained in a slave ship." Kissick even had kind words for Salman Toor, [a much-hyped Pakistani artist](#) based in New York who makes green-gray, impressionistic smudges of queer guys hanging out in bars or apartments. Toor typifies one of Kissick's least favorite pairings—old-school technique with a 21st-century, identity-related twist—but at least, Kissick said, "he can really paint."

"The culture we have is so obsessed with ourselves, with people's identities and personalities."

As we hustled from gallery to gallery, popping in for mere minutes and then leaving, I began to get the sense that Kissick's grudge against the art world goes deeper than politics. He deemed a colorful painting of motocross riders "rubbish." A huge, haunting sculpture of a half-dressed woman with blurred features, as if rendered by rudimentary CGI, received just a murmured "Cool." At one point, he acknowledged his jadedness.

"You can probably tell—I've seen too many white-cube shows of paintings in my life," he said. "There's too much art."



This problem, if it can be called one, has escalated since around the time Kissick graduated from art school, in 2010. Back then, he felt, visual art was crossing over to become a mainstream cultural phenomenon—Jay-Z was rapping about collecting Basquiats, and Louis Vuitton was making handbags with the Japanese visual artist Takashi Murakami. The internet, it appeared, was encouraging audiences beyond the walls of galleries and museums to develop an interest in art. But hope for technologically enabled creative flourishing gave way to oversaturation and numbness. So-called zombie formalism—rehashed abstract expressionism optimized for Instagram shareability—became a fad. Minimalism, a presumed antidote to the chaos of online life, became the default aesthetic in art, fashion, and consumer-product design. “It’s been clear for a while that art’s running out of ideas,” Kissick declared in a 2021 column for *The Spectator*. The overvaluing of stale, activism-scented art is a symptom of all this burnout: If stylistic innovation can no longer break through the noise, we’re only left to argue over subject matter.

What would a better direction be? Kissick’s cagey on this question, but he has a few ideas. Art should capture its era, he said, but the culture wars are not the only important thing about the 2020s. Rather, he wants art to address the internet’s more ineffable consequences: rendering our thought processes glitchy, destabilizing our sense of self. He thinks artists should find new ways to use time-honored techniques, while also being open to experimenting with emerging tools, including AI. “The experience of being alive, this century, has changed dramatically,” he said. “We should engage with the times we live in, and then maybe we’d feel less hopeless about everything.”

What he really seems to be yearning for is a paradigm shift: some sort of formal leap forward combined with a spiritual reawakening. “The culture we have is so obsessed with ourselves, with people’s identities and personalities,” he said. “Perhaps we’ll be able to transcend that somehow. Perhaps we will get over this deeply individualistic, deeply self-obsessed moment.” He paused. “But I don’t know how that would happen.”

Isolation

KMUN-FM 91.9, a public radio station for the coastal town of Astoria, Oregon, broadcasts from a 133-year-old Victorian cottage with burgundy eaves and stained-glass windows. One rainy day last spring, I was greeted there by the 41-year-old musician and writer Jaime Brooks, who wore a tweed jacket over a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan Foresight Prevents Blindness. She introduced me to a variety of friendly station volunteers working in studios cluttered with stacks of vinyl records, spindles of CDs, and well-worn instruments and mixing boards. On one wall hung a hand-drawn map of the station's broadcasting area.

It was a strikingly analog setting in which to meet an artist who once embodied the internet's futuristic potential. Best-known for her work under the aliases Elite Gymnastics and Default Genders, Brooks has long been a "bedroom musician": someone who uses a home computer to make high-quality recordings. In the early 2010s, as a 20-something immersed in the hipster party scene in Minneapolis, Brooks collaborated with a friend to release a few ethereal dance songs that drew the acclaim of music bloggers. She was soon dating the similarly buzzy artist Grimes and living in Los Angeles, getting a close-up look at the modern pop ecosystem.

But these days, her mics and guitar are packed up in boxes, gathering dust. Spending time working on new songs just doesn't feel right given her belief, articulated in widely circulated tweets and essays, that the music industry is doomed. Like Gioia, Brooks feels that tech and business interests are strangling the arts; like Kissick, she believes that most of the new work that gets made today just flat-out isn't good. But Brooks's view is even darker than either of theirs, and more explicitly personal. She described the future of music to me in one word: *wreckage*.

Many musicians believe that Spotify's business model is predatory, forcing artists to participate in a system in which they make only a fraction of a penny whenever a song is played. Brooks agrees, but her concern runs deeper than the money itself; she argues that music's role in society has been corrupted. Streaming encourages artists to play an enervating game of scale: The more songs they release, the more chance they have of going viral and turning pittances into real income. Artists are thus motivated to record as quickly and cheaply as possible. All of this, Brooks believes, has led to a glut of music—both popular and obscure—that is plainly bad: less distinct,

less soulful, and less skillfully made than the minimal standards of previous eras. “Nobody can get the resources to develop their craft,” she said.

This decline in quality has created the conditions for what Brooks fears will come next: a flood of AI-generated songs that further devalue music as an art form and an economic enterprise. Already, streaming platforms have inculcated a huge demand for “utility” music, such as white noise to fall asleep to and “chill beats” to study to. Cheap AI tools can now conjure credible versions of such music, and over time they’ll only get better at imitating other styles. Listeners’ standards have become so diminished that they won’t be able to tell the difference.

Brooks saw the early stages of this catastrophe unfolding during her time in Los Angeles. While we chatted, she casually mentioned being on set at a Lady Gaga video shoot, and watching Ezra Koenig of Vampire Weekend play songs in his backyard. But to hear her describe it, her L.A. years were mostly disillusioning. “I didn’t really see a lot of success that I thought seemed desirable,” she said. “It’s, like, a lot of people sitting in rooms by themselves, ordering fucking Uber Eats.”

What she meant is that the ethos of the bedroom musician, once an indie phenomenon enabling outsiders to gain a foothold, quickly became the record-industry default. Producers can skip the studio to work on their devices at home, commissioning instrumentalists and beat makers who live time zones away. Music is now widely made much in the manner that it is consumed: by people who are alone, encased in their headphones.

This state of affairs, Brooks thinks, is antithetical to music’s purpose. Listening to songs once meant getting a window into specific, communal circumstances—into the churches where R&B evolved from gospel, into the block parties where hip-hop fermented, into the clubs where rock bands jammed. Now most music is shaped by and tailored to a fake place, an intangible scene: the internet. It only feeds the broader trends of cultural fracturing and personal solitude that are now clearly depressing people’s sense of well-being.



According to the musician and writer Jaime Brooks, the rise of streaming has led to a glut of plainly bad music. (Kristina Barker for *The Atlantic*)

I share the feeling that the mundanity of streaming has made music feel smaller, less important, than it used to—but I see plenty of signs that the art form still serves a social function. One of the biggest stories in the record industry in the 2020s has been the boom of country music, a style that's rooted in a sense of place and shared identity. New stars such as Zach Bryan and Lainey Wilson have been drawing droves not just to stream songs, but to sell out their tour dates and tailgate in the parking lot. New honky-tonks have been popping up across the nation, even in blue states.

“There’s still human culture that is being mined there,” Brooks said when we got to talking about country music. She pointed out that Taylor Swift’s success owes a lot to her having come up in Nashville, writing on guitar with seasoned songwriters, thus giving her skills that feel rarer with each passing year. But Brooks sees the country renaissance as a mere side effect of the genre being late to technological adoption, which isn’t the same as defying it. “Streaming is taking longer to eat it,” she said. “But streaming will destroy it.”

Eventual destruction is, in her view, the fate of most everything good about music and the broader artistic landscape. Gioia's boom-and-bust trend forecasts, Kissick's pining for creative reinvention—both sound naive in Brooks's analysis. "When people use this language, 'Oh, it all moves in cycles; it's been going this way since time immemorial'—no, it hasn't," she said. "Like, in Joe Biden's lifetime, the sheet-music industry was completely replaced by the record industry. And in our lifetime already, the practice of buying copies of records has been replaced by the concept of renting access to them."

In other words: Great things don't just change; they die, and what they're replaced with may well be worse—if they're replaced at all. As she [wrote on Substack in 2023](#):

The history of the record business is not a story about rejuvenating cycles of natural death and destined rebirth. It's a story about old, outmoded tech companies chasing diminishing returns. The path we're on is a spiral, not a circle, and it's getting smaller and narrower as we get closer to the end.

Hearing all of this made me particularly sad, because Brooks's own music always seemed like an example of how to defy modern alienation. She left Los Angeles in 2018—around the time that Grimes started dating Elon Musk—and recorded three excellent albums about searching for connection in a world made cold by technology, greed, and, to quote one lyric, "crypto dipshits." The music was electronic yet felt handcrafted, and Brooks, singing through a warbly vocal filter, sounded like a human trying to escape being turned into a machine.

For now, though, Brooks has put her music career on hold. The process of moving notes around on a computer screen, alone, started to feel "masturbatory." A successful new album would "generate a bunch of value for Apple, for Spotify, for whatever other companies are taking pieces," she said. "And I don't feel good about that." Now she's been spending her days hanging out at KMUN, learning about the seemingly outmoded technology of terrestrial radio, which she thinks will gain a kind of "postapocalyptic" usefulness to humanity as the internet is overrun with AI slop.

Still, Brooks can't stop dreaming of new music she wants to make. She described one song idea that's been rattling around in her head lately: "It's got horn solos, and it's got, like, Andrews Sisters backing vocals in the chorus." I suggested to her that she might benefit from a new record deal to bring that vision to life.

"Well, no," Brooks replied. What she's lacking is collaborators—real-life bandmates, bonded by shared experiences, with physical instruments and the skills to use them. "I need people. I need people who care."

Acceleration

Each declinist I spoke with made a convincing case that large, inexorable forces were wearing culture down. But they also left me clinging to scattered counterexamples that might tell another story. I'd seen the omens of death; I needed to make an effort to find signs of life.

Which is how I ended up sweating in a poorly ventilated indoor skate park in Brooklyn one summer night. I was there for a concert thrown by [No Bells](#), a hip-hop-focused blog that bills itself as "a hub of the wider internet underground." Young people sat on either side of a half-pipe, looking like members of a very eclectic tribunal. They wore jorts and crop tops; or strappy, S&M-influenced getups; or pajamas emblazoned with cartoons. They fiddled with phones, lighters, Nintendo DSes, and, in one case, a unicycle. At the bottom of the half-pipe, a mosh pit swirled around a small stage. Two rappers shouted over a beat that paired incessant synthetic clapping with a sample of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" played on ukulele.

Within the scrum by the stage was Kieran Press-Reynolds, a 25-year-old journalist who seems like he should be a declinist, but isn't. His father, the music critic Simon Reynolds, wrote the 2011 book [*Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*](#), which puzzled over [the abundance of remixes, remakes, and revivals in the 2000s](#) and made an early version of the stagnation argument now espoused by Gioia and others. Press-Reynolds himself has made a budding career out of chronicling internet subcultures that seem symptomatic of a society in crisis. When we met, he'd recently reported a story for *The New York Times* about a video game that satirizes

online influencers by making players experience horrific things for content. For *GQ*, he'd delved into [the “looksmaxxing” community](#): young men who, among other techniques for optimizing their physical attractiveness, try to alter their faces by clenching their jaw for hours a day, egged on by internet forums that are, he wrote, “cesspits of insecurities.”

And yet, Press-Reynolds is energized by the culture right now. “Maybe there aren’t amazing macro-trends at the moment,” he told me, but if you scratch the surface of the mainstream, “people are cooking.” As a critic, he feels an obligation to spread the good news. “Every young person deserves something to champion,” he said. “Something to get really feverishly excited about.”

Press-Reynolds keeps his brown hair long and scraggly; his voice is hoarse and giddy. He described his own artistic obsessions in terms such as “fried” and “anarchic.” In music, on TikTok, and even in web-design trends, he sees a turn toward an aesthetic he called “max stimuli,” which pushes the bounds of speed, dissonance, and silliness while recombining bits of old culture into something new. “It feels like how our brains feel now: infested and congested with so much stuff,” he said.



The journalist and critic Kieran Press-Reynolds says that beneath the surface of mainstream culture, “people are cooking.” (Paris Benson for *The Atlantic*)

He’s particularly captivated by the hip-hop underground: a constellation of subgenres such as “rage rap” (which takes after the unintelligible lyrics and glitchy beats of the cult hero Playboi Carti) and “pluggnb” (a woozy, melodic version of trap). A global community of producers, swapping beats and software plug-ins online, is twisting hip-hop’s conventions to create sound sculptures that, Press-Reynolds thinks, “really could not have come out 10 years ago.” He mentioned a recent SoundCloud “micro-hit” called “fragged aht” by an artist named wakeups. The song “makes you think of a human expanding and deflating like an accordion,” Press-Reynolds said. I pulled up the track after we talked. A heavily filtered voice ululated about money and guns for two minutes over a swell of digital sound. The effect was weirdly beautiful; it gave me goose bumps.

Other genres are also getting scrambled in disorienting, playful ways. I’ve been fascinated by hyperpop, a loose term for the punkish, noisy spin that bedroom electronic musicians put on bubblegum tropes. In 2024, hyperpop had its commercial breakthrough with Charli XCX’s album *Brat*, whose frenzied rhythms became popular enough to be adopted by the official memes of Kamala Harris’s presidential campaign.

Brooks had warned me not to put much stock in internet-native music scenes; she dismissed most hyperpop as “regurgitated video-game soundtracks” made by and for people who have “never been to clubs.” This had struck me as uncharitable, though in talking with Press-Reynolds, I realized it wasn’t entirely untrue. He traced his own teenage musical awakening to playing *Minecraft* while listening to hip-hop set to anime montages on YouTube. His culture-critic parents (his mother is the writer Joy Press) would play the slick beats of Daft Punk around the house, but he gravitated toward the blown-out distortion of angsty rappers such as XXXTentacion. When the pandemic lockdown came, he burrowed even deeper into the digital wilds.

Being so online, Press-Reynolds joked, had inflicted him with “brain rot.” He makes no apologies for being a music critic who “almost can’t bear” to listen to full albums; sometimes he’ll just play a song for 30 seconds to “feel

that texture.” This admission pained me a bit. I’ve felt my own attention span decaying in recent years, but I still cling to the idea that transcendent art—and transcendent experiences with art—requires sustained focus. In many ways, the problems that Gioia, Kissick, and Brooks spelled out were problems of terminally distracted audiences preferring junk (recycled IP, political bait, wallpaper music) to quality. What are we going to do about brain rot?

At the skate-park concert, it occurred to me that art itself might be the answer. The headliner was a trio—the rappers Polo Perks and AyooLii with the rapper-producer FearDorian, who hailed, respectively, from New York, Milwaukee, and Atlanta, but had linked up online and developed in-person friendships. Their songs deployed samples—emo rock, M.I.A., gaming music—with a kind of elegant dizziness, as if multiple browser tabs playing random audio were harmonizing together. A thwack on every eighth note, the signature beat of the recently ascendant Milwaukee rap scene, created a sense of Energizer Bunny propulsion. Sweating at the bottom of the half-pipe, pressed up against the crowd, I felt the music meet my own sense of distraction and supplant it. These artists had burst from the internet to convey feelings about friendship, partying, and hustling—the classic hip-hop rush, delivered with a sound that suits its times.

Afterward, I thought of the concerts in the 1981 documentary *The Decline of Western Civilization*, which followed the grungy, anti-establishment scene forming around hardcore-punk bands such as Black Flag. Its title evoked Oswald Spengler—and played as a joke about the way that elders often disdain cultural developments they don’t understand.

The 62-year-old Simon Reynolds sometimes feels like one of those baffled elders. He told me that much of the music his son champions is “too gnarly” for his ears. Still, seeing Press-Reynolds “chasing the latest convolution, the latest mutant” in music was a thrill: It’s what he used to do. His heyday of exploration was the ’90s, when the rise of electronica—techno, drum and bass, and, yes, Daft Punk—seemed as exciting to a young Reynolds as rock and roll had to the Boomers. Then he got older, the 2000s came around, and his generation of ravers started to lose steam. No comparable new scene seemed to be taking their place. So he wrote *Retromania*, about the feeling that culture had become too backward-looking. (Soon after, one of his good

friends, the late Mark Fisher, wrote a similarly themed essay, “The Slow Cancellation of the Future,” that has become one of the 21st century’s most influential statements of cultural pessimism.)

But some of Reynolds’s bleakest theories, he told me, started to “crumble a bit” once they were published. Technologies such as streaming and social media began to upend the culture; Press-Reynolds kept discovering interesting oddities online. He realized that he’d been thinking of artistic evolution too narrowly. Innovation was happening; it just wasn’t the kind he’d been looking for. “I was very, very fixated in that book on sound,” he told me. He now believes music is about more than sound. It—and culture in general—is a “messy hybrid” of images, ideas, delivery methods, and so much else.



From that perspective, this decade's culture is plenty dynamic. The great media of the 20th century—the art-pop album, the feature-length film, the gallery show, the literary novel—may be fighting for their life, but that's because of competition from new forms defined by a sense of immediacy: short-form video, chatty podcasts, video games, memes. Like the old media, these forms foster tons of mediocrity. But they also invite surprising excellence: the minute-long songs of PinkPantheress, which glitter with detail and emotion; the writing of Honor Levy, who weaves lurid short stories out of internet slang. “It’s more of an aphoristic culture than an essayist culture, isn’t it?” Reynolds said. “You can say quite clever, profound things in just a few sentences.”

That sensibility emerged from the warrens of the internet, but it’s bleeding into the mainstream—and, in the best cases, energizing it. When Press-Reynolds described his idea of “max stimuli” to me, I thought back to a term Gioia had used: “new maximalism.” In Gioia’s analysis, the greats of his lifetime—Brian Wilson, Stephen Sondheim, Joni Mitchell—have been maximalists, translating grand ambitions into pop symphonies, stage spectacles, or emotionally dense story-songs. The cultural triumphs of this decade fit that model. Audiences still want storytelling they can chew on—they just want it in a form that’s attuned to the accelerated ways we now consume information. Artists are playing with tempo, intensity, and scale to tame the modern attention span, offer smart social commentary, and foster a feeling of connection in an era of isolation.

Think back to the summer of 2023, when *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* both accomplished what the pandemic had seemingly made impossible: selling out movie theaters, and not for a superhero sequel. These could have been emblems of Hollywood’s intellectual bankruptcy, representing a glorified toy ad and yet another Oscar-baiting biopic. Yet the movies connected in large part because of their daring use of rhythm—visual rhythm, emotional rhythm, narrative rhythm. With hyperpop-ish glee, *Barbie* veered between musical, slapstick comedy, and melodrama. Its pursuit of constant stimulation didn’t just keep audiences rapt; the movie breezily conveyed weighty ideas about gender, consumerism, and even the meaning of life. *Oppenheimer*, about the father of the atomic bomb, was more quietly radical: The director, Christopher Nolan, told a complex story by montaging

lots of vignette-like, TikTok-length scenes. Here was a sober, stately Best Picture winner whose hummingbird pulse felt stylish and modern.

Across culture, identity—Kissick’s bugbear—remains central, but its role may be changing: Forward-thinking, maximalist 2020s art is less about sorting people into tribes than about deconstructing now-familiar labels. The [joyfully chaotic 2022 action-comedy hit](#) *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—about a dimension-hopping Chinese American family—used a sci-fi concept to complicate the category of “immigrant,” reminding viewers that any of us could have lived a million different lives. Meanwhile, Beyoncé has been making the boldest music of her career—which is saying a lot—by trying to expand popular ideas about Black music: first with the 2022 album *Renaissance*, a collage of beats linking hip-hop, Afrobeats, and house music, and then with 2024’s *Cowboy Carter*, a twisty-turny odyssey into country and rock. If audiences have become numb to moralistic messaging, they seem excited by works that use formal experimentation to capture messy truths.

The technologically induced isolation that Brooks worries about is also driving humanistic countermovements. The art of confessional songwriting is flourishing thanks to a wave of artists—Chappell Roan, Olivia Rodrigo, SZA—whose lyrical candor creates an intense sense of closeness between listener and artist. Together, these artists constitute an idea of “pop” that’s anything but generic; rather, it’s witty, specific, and vulnerable.

The leader of this class is, of course, Taylor Swift, who’s been pioneering a futuristic form of storytelling: every verse and every public utterance links together an intricate web of “lore,” which brings fans together for puzzle-solving and reinterpretation. Gioia, hardly the stereotype of a Swiftie, told me he watched the concert film about her records-smashing Eras tour three times. “I take some comfort in the fact that the biggest musical event of the last year was Taylor Swift, going on the road, playing real songs for real people in concert,” Gioia said. AI may be able to imitate Swift’s voice, but it can’t forge social bonds like she can.

A maximalist wave naturally favors the well resourced, and an actual renaissance won’t be possible until the economics of streaming are reformed or upended. Even so, indie artists are still releasing fantastical concept

albums whose worlds spill out into music videos, TikToks, and other online channels (check out Magdalena Bay or underscores), and indie filmmakers are finding audiences for uncompromising visions (see [the recent Oscars race](#) between *The Brutalist* and *Anora*). Even seemingly brain-rotted content can sustain big ideas through inventive means: Internet comedians such as Psyconic use costumes and visual filters to conjure bizarro characters that pop up in your social feeds, creating long-form satire out of snackable moments.

When I'm locked in and enjoying such highlights of 2020s culture, I'm grateful: Most of this work couldn't or wouldn't have existed before now. That doesn't mean I'm immune to the dread that plagues the declinists. They're really talking about forces deeper than culture: technological, political, economic, and social problems that require technological, political, economic, and social answers. The same YouGov survey that found Americans to be so unhappy with the state of movies, TV, and music found that people also generally feel that this is the decade with the worst economy, the least moral society, the least close-knit communities, and the most political division.

What art can do is remind us that our lives are not simply shaped by systems—they're also a product of our own thoughts, inspirations, and relations. My favorite new TV show of this decade is [HBO's *Fantasma*s](#), a comedy created by the former *Saturday Night Live* writer Julio Torres. It's a magical-realist depiction of a near future in which people live with bumbling AI assistant bots in housing complexes owned by corporations such as Bank of America. Torres's character wants to make surreal films about animals, but is being pressured to cash in on his backstory as a gay immigrant. (A streaming service run by Zappos—yes, the shoe company—commissions a screenplay called *How I Came Out to My Abuela*.) This subject matter asks, quite darkly, whether the artistic spirit can survive modern life. But the imaginative way the show is rendered—in a dreamscape of interconnected skits, featuring handcrafted set decoration, performed by talents from today's offbeat comedy world—offers a hopeful answer.

[Read: *Fantasma*s understands the absurdity of modern existence](#)

Culture is not just a map of the structures and forces that order our society. It's what people make on top of, in between, in opposition to, and in collaboration with those things. We all have the power to listen more curiously, look more closely, and treat the present with the same sense of generosity that we extend to the golden ages of the past. When you tune in to the creativity that is still pulsing in these disorienting times, you can hear the story that most needs telling: Keep going.

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When William F. Buckley Jr. Met James Baldwin

In 1965, the two intellectual giants squared off in a debate at Cambridge. It didn't go quite as Buckley hoped.

by Sam Tanenhaus



In February 1965, three months after Barry Goldwater had been trounced by Lyndon B. Johnson in the presidential election, one of the Republican candidate's most forceful advocates, William F. Buckley Jr., had an important event on his calendar. Taking a break from his annual ski vacation

in Switzerland with his wife, Pat, he made his way to England for a debate at the Cambridge Union with one of the most celebrated writers alive, the novelist, memoirist, critic, and essayist James Baldwin. Buckley had been paying attention to Baldwin. He had read and admired his novel *Another Country*, which subtly explored complex gay and racial themes. But he disliked Baldwin's journalism and his profuse commentary on race. Baldwin, he had written, "celebrates his bitterness against the white community mostly in journals of the far political left," which suggested complicity—or was it cowardice?—on the part of guilt-ridden white editors.

Baldwin's presence in England was itself an event. He was there to promote the paperback edition of *Another Country* and to discuss a screenplay with a filmmaker. He also made himself available to journalists and students. And there was the debate with Buckley at the Cambridge Union—a debate on the subject of race in America.

Baldwin's numerous venues were not, as it happened, limited to those of the left. His arguments, moreover, were original and unorthodox, and at times even paralleled Buckley's own. Baldwin, too, was skeptical of liberal programs and the meliorist principles they rested on. When he observed that the "mountain of sociological investigations, committee reports, and plans for recreational centers have failed to change the face of Harlem," a conservative could agree.

The difference came in the conclusions Baldwin drew. The true lessons of race in America, he argued, began in what had been revealed about its white population. "The interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man," he wrote as early as 1953; "it has created a new white man, too." This was a year before the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawing segregation in public schools, and two years before the Montgomery bus boycott. Yet Baldwin understood that the white monopoly on racial discourse was already weakening. What that new white man seemed unable to understand, much less accept, was that "this world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."

It would never be so, because "white power has been broken," Baldwin had said in a debate with Malcolm X in 1961. "And this means, among other things, that it is no longer possible for an Englishman to describe an African

and make the African believe it. It's no longer possible for a white man in this country to tell a Negro who he is, and make the Negro believe this."

In the 1964 election, Johnson, the incumbent, had tagged Goldwater as an extremist, and had coasted to one of the most overwhelming victories in history, winning 44 states and the District of Columbia. And the extremist charge had a sound basis. Goldwater had been one of only six Republicans to vote against the landmark Civil Rights Act when the Senate passed it in June 1964. At the GOP's nominating convention in San Francisco a month later, a desperate attempt by New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller to add an anti-extremism plank to the party platform had been thunderously rejected. Five of the six states that Goldwater won in November—all but his own Arizona—were in the Deep South. The journalist Robert Novak observed that Goldwater and his allies had completed their makeover of the GOP into "the White Man's Party."

Buckley was the right's undisputed intellectual leader, who as a speaker, a columnist, and an author made his case with remarkable fluency and wit.

And a primary shaper of that new party was Bill Buckley. In the pages of *National Review*, the political fortnightly he had founded in 1955 and still edited, he and his colleagues continued to support segregation in the South, a decade *after* the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown*. In his writing, he referred to the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and others in the civil-rights movement as lawbreakers and agitators.

Buckley had become, at age 39, the right's undisputed intellectual leader, who as a speaker, a columnist, and an author made his case with remarkable fluency and wit. Goldwater "has near him at least one man who can think," the novelist and Syracuse University professor George P. Elliott had warned. Commenting on an address Buckley had given to a college audience, Elliott judged him "an all-or-none theocratic zealot of the most dangerous kind," partly because "his criticism of the faults of the liberal rulers of the nation was incisive and accurate; his forensic power and control were by far the greatest I have heard in an American speaker." Now, as Republican strategists struggled to move forward, Buckley's forensic talents were among the few assets they could count on.

For years, Buckley had wanted to debate Baldwin. He was all the more eager to do so after the publication of Baldwin's polemic *The Fire Next Time*, in 1963. With this small, powerful book, Baldwin became a different writer: no longer a witness to racial injustice but a prophet of racial reckoning.

[Read: The famous Baldwin-Buckley debate still matters today](#)

Most of the book had been [first published as a long article in The New Yorker](#) in November 1962, and Buckley had read it during his preparation for a two-week visit to South Africa and Mozambique as a guest of their respective governments. Buckley was especially impressed by South Africa's prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, the principal creator of apartheid in 1948. To Buckley, apartheid—literally racial “separatehood” in Afrikaans—was more than defensible. It was a kind of ideal system in a caste-divided society, what Jim Crow might have become if only its architects had been more systematic in their thinking and had embraced the concept of fully developed separate nations, Black and white.

Despite Verwoerd's valiant efforts, Buckley reported in *National Review*, South Africa was beset with peril. The threat came from the “beady eyes of the Communist propaganda machine,” which was cynically stirring the embers of “black racism.” In Buckley's view, this left Verwoerd only one sensible option: cracking down on dissidents. For “in such an eutectic situation it is necessary to maintain very firm control. Relentless vigilance” and “relentless order” were required “because the eudaemonic era has not yet come to Africa.” *Eutectic, eudaemonic*: Buckley had a weakness for arcane words, which he deployed as weapons. The more fragile his argument, the more syllables he used: “preemptive obfuscations,” as one of his protégés, the novelist and critic John Leonard, called them. But in this instance, the tongue twisters could not obscure raw facts; 70 percent of South Africa's population was Black, and eventually that majority would assert itself and challenge white dominance—just what was happening in the American South.

Baldwin also had things to say about South Africa and Verwoerd. *The Fire Next Time* included a bold assertion about the origins of radical evil over the past two millennia. “Whatever white people do not know about Negroes

reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves,” Baldwin wrote.

White Christians have also forgotten several elementary historical details. They have forgotten that the religion that is now identified with their virtue and their power—“God is on our side,” says Dr. Verwoerd—came out of a rocky piece of ground in what is now known as the Middle East before color was invented, and that in order for the Christian church to be established, Christ had to be put to death, by Rome, and that the real architect of the Christian church was not the disreputable, sun-baked Hebrew who gave it his name but the mercilessly fanatical and self-righteous St. Paul.

Baldwin did not pause to analyze. He did not allow the emotion to cool. He saw in Paul a zealous convert and proselytizer, and he also saw the intolerance, extremism, prejudice, and persecution that would come in the name of faith. The Christian world, he wrote, “has revealed itself as morally bankrupt and politically unstable.” With the Church’s long history of anti-Semitism in the background, he stated bluntly: “The fact of the Third Reich alone makes obsolete forever any question of Christian superiority.” The Holocaust—the most radical instance of modern evil—was thus not truly surprising to him and other Black Americans. Just as Christians had monstrously mistreated Jews, so “white men in America do not behave toward black men the way they behave toward each other. When a white man faces a black man, especially if the black man is helpless, terrible things are revealed.”

Buckley had been affronted by the line Baldwin drew from Saint Paul to the gas chambers. But he was also well aware that Baldwin was steeped in Church history and teaching, and knew scripture far better than Buckley himself. The stepson of a Pentecostal minister, Baldwin had been a teenage preacher before abandoning what his book called “the church racket”—the phrase all but calculated to stir the wellspring of Buckley rage. Nothing defined Buckley so fully as his Catholicism. He had been raised in the Church and as a teenager had talked of joining the priesthood. As recently as 1961, he had told an admirer, “If I am ever persuaded that my attachment to conservatism gets in the way of my attachment to the Catholic Church, I shall promptly forsake the former.” At the same time, Buckley knew how

deft Baldwin's glancing reference to Verwoerd had been. During the Second World War, Verwoerd had been enthusiastic in his support for Nazi Germany, and openly anti-Semitic.

But Buckley was, among many other things, a first-rate editor. He recognized that Baldwin had written a major statement and must be met on his own ground. One *National Review* contributor had the intellectual and literary gifts to do it, a young critic whom Buckley esteemed above all others—Garry Wills.

In 1958, when Wills had applied to Harvard's Ph.D. program in classics after a summer working at *NR*, Buckley had written a recommendation saying, "There simply is no doubt in my mind that twenty-five years hence he will be conceded one of the nation's top critics and literary craftsmen." (Wills had gone instead to Yale, which offered a better fellowship.) He was now teaching at Johns Hopkins and writing prolifically for *NR*. He could handle almost any subject—history, literature, philosophy, politics, religion. Better still, he had spent six years preparing for the priesthood, as a Jesuit, before being released from his vows so he could enjoy a secular life of marriage and family and pursue a literary career. Up to now, Wills had written very little on race, but what he had written was less ideological than most other *NR* commentary on the subject. Wills made no defense of segregation and was dismissive (like Buckley) of white racists who argued for their own biological superiority.

[From the July 2002 issue: The loyal Catholic](#)

What Buckley did not know was how formative race had been for Wills. He had grown up in the Midwest, but his family came from the South and were typical white southerners of the time. Once, "on a family visit to Louisville," Wills later recalled, "my grandmother took me to Sunday Mass and a Black priest came out from the sacristy. My grandmother snatched me by the hand and hauled me outside. When I asked her why, she—who would never go without Mass on Sunday—said she could not stand to see a 'nigger' at the altar. I observed that she had Black women help her bake loaves of bread for sale in her kitchen, but she answered: 'A nigger does not deserve the dignity of the priesthood.'"

At Wills's Jesuit seminary near St. Louis, his training included orderly service in a hospital. Most of the patients were Black. He and other seminarians “[gave the men their baths, rubbed cream on to prevent bedsores, and washed the bodies of those who died.](#)” Wills’s best friend in the seminary was Black and “told me of the obstacles the order had put in the way of his joining—he was bluntly told that Southerners in the novitiate would resent his presence.”

This resistance was one reason, Wills believed, that meeting “the demands (even legitimate demands) of some” to outlaw segregation might “bend the permanent structure of our society permanently out of shape” and “sacrifice the peace of all of us.” To that extent, Wills could sympathize with white southerners. But they must also respond humanely. This was the test being failed time and again.

The permanent structure of society was Baldwin’s theme too, only he was making the opposite case: The structure itself was rotten and awaited the match that would set it ablaze. Here Wills was ready to meet Baldwin. Unlike Buckley, who read just enough of books he disliked to collect ammunition for disparaging them, Wills brought Jesuitical thoroughness and precision to his reading. He read not only *The Fire Next Time*, but just about everything else Baldwin had published, and he was overwhelmed by its artistry and power.

Wills had agonized over the assignment, he told Buckley in the winter of 1963. “But after tearing up many attempts at the thing, I send this off immediately, before I decide to tear it up.” He still was afraid he had not risen to the task, because refuting Baldwin required “new arguments for civilization”—and, Wills confessed, “I don’t know any.” There were only the old arguments, and under the pressure of Baldwin’s impassioned language, they seemed to wilt. “There is virtuosity, even a dark gaiety in his anger,” Wills wrote in his article. Baldwin, he went on, had an “uncanny way of writing to a background music that somehow gets transmitted along with the words.”

And his account of America’s racial history was accurate. “We have been cruel to the Negro,” Wills wrote. “We have, more than we know; more than we want to know.” But Baldwin did not limit his attack to white America

alone. He condemned the system of belief from which the entirety of Western civilization arose. “He does not attack us for not living up to our ideals, for lapsing, for sinning, for being bad Christians,” Wills went on. “He says we do not *have* any ideals: we do not believe in any of the things our religion, our civilization, our country stand for. It is all an elaborate lie whose sole and original function is to fortify privilege.”

Baldwin’s sweeping denunciation ignored the saving virtues of the Western tradition—its humanism, its ideas of justice and human dignity, its embrace of charity as a defining principle—the same ideals that informed his own writing. Yet reviewers seemed uninterested in pointing out this rather obvious omission. Why? This was the question Wills’s essay asked and tried to answer. What looked like sympathy for Baldwin, he concluded, was in reality a condescending refusal to take him seriously—arrant hypocrisy that Baldwin himself exposed by “attacking all our so-called beliefs, then standing back and observing that no one defends them. In fact, everyone rushes to defend *him*.¹”

Instead, Wills wrote,

somebody should take Baldwin’s charges seriously enough to ask, not whether they are moving, or beautiful, or important, or sincerely meant —they are obviously all these, and there has been enough repetition of the obvious—but whether they are *true*.

In depicting white evil in absolute terms, Wills believed, Baldwin foreclosed the possibility of redemption—this despite an evident history of moral growth and improvement. Wills acknowledged the discomfort of defending the existence and importance of ideals so brutally violated by the race to which one belonged, but insisted on its necessity. “We must have the courage to defend the ideals we have, perhaps, not lived up to, but only known to be true. It takes a special courage to bear witness in this way; to be wrong, yet defend what was right; to be what one is, yet continue to fight for what one should have been; to oppose a better man than oneself in the service of a better creed than his.”

[From the July/August 2009 issue: Garry Wills on the daredevil William F. Buckley](#)

Nothing like this had ever been published in *National Review*. Even as Wills disagreed with Baldwin, he ceded him high authority as an artist and praised in exalted terms what the magazine's chief political theorist, James Burnham, in his book *Suicide of the West*, was soon to call "the abusive writings of a disoriented Negro homosexual." Another respected *NR* elder—its books editor Frank Meyer, Wills's mentor at the magazine—pleaded with Buckley not to publish the essay. But Buckley was captivated. What Wills had written was quite possibly *National Review*'s "finest hour," he later said.

Overruling Meyer, Buckley edited the essay himself; printed it at eight full pages under the title Wills had chosen, "What Color Is God?"; and made it the cover story. It appeared in May 1963 just after the historic civil-rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama. Americans watched televised footage of firefighters as they aimed fire hoses at children who were then slammed to the pavement, the pressure of the hoses turned so high, [The New York Times reported](#), that the spray "skinned bark off trees."

At the time, Buckley also efficiently drew on Wills's argument in his own writing about Baldwin. One column restated the argument so closely that it "suggests some interesting reflections on your conception of editing and/or plagiarism," Wills protested. But Buckley also honed Wills's nuanced words into the sharp blade of accusation. *The Fire Next Time*, Buckley wrote, was a violently racist tract—"A Call to Lynch the White God."

None of this deterred Baldwin from agreeing to debate Buckley in early 1965. "It will be a tough one," Buckley wrote to a friend. And he had made it no easier by taunting Baldwin in a column only weeks beforehand, calling him the "Number-1 America-hater."

Buckley had no idea what to expect from the audience he would face at the Cambridge Union. For a recent debate on the Labour Party's "hypocritical attitude on immigration," one Labour member of Parliament after another declined to come. The union had held the event anyway, and 200 demonstrators had marched through campus, many carrying banners and placards saying the Conservative speaker was a racist. Forty police officers had been brought in to protect him. American civil-rights leaders, by contrast, had been warmly received in England. In December, when King, en route to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, had stopped over in London

to give a sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral—"the first non-Anglican ever allowed in the pulpit" there, according to King's biographer Taylor Branch—some 4,000 people had turned out to hear him, more than the great church could seat.

Cambridge Union debates were held in the evening, preceded by a dinner, with the student leaders as hosts and the invited guests seated on either side of the union's president. Not this time. Baldwin had instead requested to be seated as far as possible from Buckley. He wanted no pre-debate pleasantries. Buckley respected this. He also disliked forced geniality with strong adversaries; it made going after them harder.

Baldwin's words were as much sermon as argument. The audience was stunned into silence. Hardly anyone stirred. When Baldwin finished, after almost half an hour, the ovation lasted a full minute.

The union hall that night—Thursday, February 18—was filled to capacity and beyond. "By eight o'clock, the hall was so jam-packed with students that officials had to set up crash barriers," the political scientist Nicholas Buccola writes in his 2019 account of the debate, *The Fire Is Upon Us*. All the benches were taken, and many students sat on the floor. Buckley and Baldwin had to pick their way past them as they were led to the long table at the front of the room. Buckley had two British companions with him—his close friend, the journalist and historian Alistair Horne, and the film star James Mason, who sat high above in the gallery. Baldwin's small entourage sat there too. Hundreds more viewers gathered in nearby rooms with TV screens, making the total audience about 1,000.

The BBC had sent a crew for a broadcast. "I don't think I've ever seen the union so well attended," [said the Tory MP Norman St. John-Stevas](#), who was there as the station's commentator. To a home audience that had never heard of William F. Buckley, St. John-Stevas explained that he was "very well known as a conservative in the United States," smiling as he added, "I must stress, a conservative in the American sense"—closer, in British terms, to a Manchester-school classical liberal—and "one of the early supporters of Senator Goldwater."

The topic of the debate called to mind an especially provocative sentence in *The Fire Next Time*: “The Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power,” Baldwin had written, “but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream.” The motion put up for debate was this: “The American dream is at the expense of the American Negro.” The phrase *American dream* was one that Buckley seldom, if ever, used except ironically, but he would now be forced to defend it.

Baldwin began by saying that, in terms of the Black experience, *American dream* was an all but meaningless expression. “Let me put it this way,” he said in what became the most famous words spoken that evening:

From a very literal point of view, the harbors and the ports, and the railroads of the country—the economy, especially of the southern states, could not conceivably be what it has become if they had not had, and do not still have, indeed and for so long, for many generations, cheap labor. I am stating very seriously, and this is not an overstatement, that I picked the cotton, and I carried it to the market, and I built the railroads under someone else’s whip for nothing, for nothing.

The custom at Cambridge Union debates was for audience members to address questions to the speaker, even interrupting to demand a reply. But Baldwin’s words were as much sermon as argument—“a highly refined version of soapbox speech,” one of Baldwin’s biographers later wrote—even as his description of the capitalist uses of slavery was grounded in historical fact. In 1965, structural racism was a new idea, certainly for this audience, which had been stunned into silence. Hardly anyone stirred. When Baldwin finished, after almost half an hour, the ovation lasted a full minute. “The whole of the union standing and applauding this magnificent speech of James Baldwin,” St. John-Stevens excitedly told the BBC audience. “Never seen this happen before.”

All the while, Buckley had been sitting by, writing notes on his yellow pad, thinking, as he later recalled, “Boy, tonight is a *lost cause*.” For years to come, he would maintain that the debate had contrasted his exercise in high logic with Baldwin’s emotionalism. But many present that day thought

otherwise. Baldwin had been careful not to say a word about Buckley, not even to utter his name. He had stood at the podium and spoken as if in a kind of reverie. But Buckley, when his turn came, “stalked the center debating table like a panther,” *The New York Times* reported. “He began in a low monotone, almost a snarl.”

From the April 1968 issue: What makes Bill Buckley run

And the snarling words were distinctly ad hominem, a direct attack on Baldwin himself and the hypocrisy of his admirers. Baldwin’s writings constituted a bitter catalog of American sins, yet no one challenged him. Instead he was “treated from coast to coast in the United States with a kind of unctuous servitude, which, in point of fact, goes beyond anything that was ever expected from the most servile Negro creature by a southern family.”

Baldwin’s indictment of America was so sweeping, Buckley continued, that it deserved to be met head-on, which meant granting him no special favors. Baldwin could not be engaged squarely in debate

unless one is prepared to deal with him as a white man. Unless one is prepared to say to him, “The fact that your skin is black is utterly irrelevant to the arguments that you raise.” The fact that you sit here, as is your rhetorical device, and lay the entire weight of the Negro ordeal on your own shoulders is irrelevant to the argument that we are here to discuss.

But it was Buckley who seemed disconnected from the larger context. Wills was soon to denounce (in his new column in the *National Catholic Reporter*) “the savage policemen of Mississippi and Alabama” who had been brutalizing people seeking only their constitutional right to vote. Buckley simply reverted to the two-year-old argument from “What Color Is God?,” which he repeated almost verbatim. “The gravamen of Mr. Baldwin’s charges against America,” Buckley said, is “not so much that our civilization has failed him and his people, that our ideals are insufficient, but that we have no ideals.” Baldwin had written this in *The Fire Next Time* and asserted it again in the union, only “he didn’t, in writing that book, speak with the British accents that he used exclusively tonight.”

Up to that moment, Baldwin had been almost impassive as Buckley spoke. The BBC camera now captured his look of angry surprise. There was nothing “British” in Baldwin’s accents. He was a practiced and polished speaker, who had gone before many audiences and spoken exactly as he had on this occasion, in elevated tones steeped, like his prose, in the vocabulary and cadences of the King James Bible. Buckley had insinuated that it was a kind of minstrel performance worked up for this British audience. Murmurs of disapproval and loud hissing rose in the hall.

Buckley, always attentive to his audiences and their responses, realized he had erred. He tried to recover. He took this debate seriously. He took all debates seriously, often writing out his major statement in advance. Tonight, as always, he had a case to make. He rightly pointed to the logical error, the “soritic” leap, by which Baldwin connected the “fanatic” teachings of Paul to the genocide at Dachau. He accurately remarked that other countries had histories of persecution no better than America’s.

But other realities seemed lost on him. When he acknowledged “those psychic humiliations which I join Mr. Baldwin in believing are the worst aspects of discrimination,” he cited an incident in *The Fire Next Time*, when the 13-year-old Baldwin had been walking along Fifth Avenue on his way to the public library, and a policeman had said, “Why don’t you niggers stay uptown where you belong?” But Buckley said nothing about Baldwin’s recollection of having been accosted at age 10 by two white police officers, who “amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying) speculations concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem’s empty lots.” Flat on his back. This wasn’t merely psychic humiliation; it was physical intimidation and threat. “I have been carried into precinct basements often enough,” Baldwin wrote,

and I have seen and heard and endured the secrets of desperate white men and women, which they knew were safe with me, because even if I should speak, no one would believe me. And they would not believe me precisely because they would know that what I said was true.

Those secrets were the secrets of violence committed with impunity. Even now, Buckley seemed unable to grasp this reality of America’s racial history

—very much alive in the winter of 1965. On the same day that Buckley and Baldwin met in debate, voting-rights demonstrators who'd assembled peacefully in a downtown square in Marion, Alabama, had been sadistically beaten by state troopers. The victims included a Black minister whose skull had been cracked as he knelt in prayer. The police had also attacked an 82-year-old man and his 50-year-old daughter. Both had been hospitalized. When a third member of the family had leaped at the officer beating his mother, the officer had shot him in the stomach. (He died eight days later.) These were the facts putting the promise of the American dream to the test.

When the debate ballots were counted, the motion carried 544 to 164, a lopsided defeat for Buckley. “Baldwin worsted Bill,” Buckley’s friend Alistair Horne recalled in 2013. “He was electric, so wonderfully articulate, and—this is what I think shook Bill—so highly entertaining.”

This last would have stung most of all. Buckley had been not just outdebated but outperformed. Soon after, Buckley opened *The New York Times* and saw almost the entire transcript of the debate printed without permission in the newspaper’s magazine. The two combatants now found common cause. Baldwin’s lawyer let Buckley know so both could lodge a protest. *Playboy* had reportedly offered Baldwin as much as \$10,000 to publish his remarks. Eventually he and Buckley received token payments of \$400 each. The *Times* article appeared in print on March 7, the day of the voting-rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Bloody Sunday.

The Cambridge fiasco might have permanently damaged Buckley’s reputation—except there was a second debate with Baldwin, under very different conditions. It happened in New York in late May 1965 on *Open End*, a talk show moderated by the TV personality and producer David Susskind. The subject was police brutality in big cities. In the South, the violence was plain for all to see—the beatings and killings of people seeking the right to vote. But in the North, the issue was more complex, especially in places such as New York, where rising crime was inextricably bound up with the emergence of white “backlash politics.”

Open End’s format was more favorable to Buckley than the formal Cambridge proceedings had been. The three men were seated and went back and forth for nearly two hours. One columnist described Buckley this time

as “cool, detached, confident,” and in command as he warned that the talented Baldwin was also “destructive and sullen,” and on a course that would ultimately harm Black people. “The best fight in town,” the columnist wrote. Less than two weeks later, Buckley called a press conference and confirmed the rumor that had been building for weeks: The “one man who can think” in the conservative movement declared himself a candidate for mayor of New York City.

Buckley lost the election, but it made him a household name—and fed an ambition to reach a broader audience and become a facilitator of discussion rather than a mere combatant. He launched his own TV debate program, *Firing Line*, in 1966; the guests eventually included the Black Panthers Eldridge Cleaver and Huey P. Newton. “Amazingly, a PBS public affairs program designed to convert Americans to conservatism,” [the media historian Heather Hendershot later wrote](#), was broadcasting “some of the most comprehensive representations of Black Power” of that era. *National Review* had praised Malcolm X’s doctrine of self-reliance, and Buckley’s own enthusiasm for “black capitalism” was one reason the National Urban League invited him to join a group of other journalists it sent on a tour of eight cities in 1969. Buckley was impressed by the leaders he met, in particular by a young Chicago organizer, Jesse Jackson. The next year Buckley, who came to see *The Fire Next Time* as a “spectacular essay,” wrote an article for *Look* magazine titled, “[Why We Need a Black President in 1980](#).” He knew that it would happen eventually and almost lived to see it. Buckley died at age 82 on February 27, 2008, three months before Barack Obama clinched the Democratic nomination.

This article was adapted from Sam Tanenhaus’s new book, [Buckley: The Life and the Revolution That Changed America](#). It appears in the [June 2025](#) print edition with the headline “When Buckley Met Baldwin.”

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The Coming Economic Nightmare

Trump's tariffs could cause stagflation for the first time in decades. It may go on for a long, long time.

by David Frum



I remember the little stickers on restaurant menus.

In the 1970s, it cost much more to print a menu than it does today.
Restaurants did not change them often. When prices rose, they'd retain their

old menu—but affix little stickers with the new, handwritten prices atop the previous ones. When prices rose especially rapidly, the stickers accumulated in stubby columns rising up from the menu. A bored child might scratch off all the stickers with a fingernail—and, like a young archaeologist, reveal a lost world.

The term that came into use to describe the era was *stagflation*: *stagnation* plus *inflation*. Until recently, it seemed a relic of the disco era, but the economic chaos of Donald Trump’s second presidency has resurfaced the old word. Stock markets are [warning of a recession](#). Bond markets are [anticipating inflation](#). Perhaps one market is wrong, or the other, or both. More likely, they portend the return of a half-forgotten nightmare.

From 1969 to 1982—just 13 years—the United States suffered four recessions. Three were severe. Two were both severe and protracted. Recoveries were comparatively feeble. Even during the recessions, prices kept rising.

The era’s economic turmoil unnerved Americans. Mass-market best sellers such as [The Late Great Planet Earth](#) prophesied the imminent end of the world in a biblical apocalypse. Americans absorbed a secular version of the end-of-the-world obsession from books such as *The Limits to Growth*, which claimed that humankind was overconsuming almost every natural resource and had no choice but to strictly ration the pitiful remains.

In his [famous 1979 speech](#), which came to be known as the “malaise” address, President Jimmy Carter warned: “The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.” Conversation everywhere, the historian Theodore White wrote, was “stained and drenched in money talk, by what it cost to live or what it cost to enjoy life.” Especially outside the upper classes, people “winced and ached. Some mysterious power was hollowing their hopes and dreams, their plans for a house or their children’s college education.” What could they do? How could they recover? “Faith in one’s own planning was dissolving—all across the nation,” White wrote. “The bedrock was heaving.”

Trump’s tariffs are like a hundred self-inflicted oil shocks, all arriving at the same time.

The unease destabilized American politics. Carter lost his reelection bid in 1980; his predecessor, Gerald Ford, likewise had been voted out in 1976. Richard Nixon [might well have survived Watergate](#) (as Trump has survived his many scandals) had the investigation not unfolded during the most miserable American economy since the Great Depression. In House elections, the party of the president suffered unusually heavy losses: 49 seats in 1974; 26 in 1982.

[David Frum: Sorry, Richard Nixon](#)

Finally, the stagflation was choked to an end in the fourth and climactic recession of 1981–82. In late 1983 and '84, the U.S. economy rebounded powerfully—and this time, the inflation did not return. Stagflation vanished into history. The economy has seen its share of tumult in the 21st century: the Great Recession, a recent bout of high inflation. But it's been a very long time since Americans have felt recession and inflation at once.

In January, President Trump inherited an economy that was growing strongly. Unemployment was low. Inflation had been restrained below 3 percent. If the new Trump administration had just left well enough alone, his second presidency could have coasted to economic success.

Instead, Trump single-handedly plunged the economy into chaos. In the '70s, the economy was disrupted because the price of oil surged, a result of the major oil producers' coordinated restriction of supply. Trump's tariffs are like a hundred self-inflicted oil shocks, all arriving at the same time. Unless Trump changes course immediately, everything will soon cost more, possibly a lot more: groceries and automobiles, industrial magnets and tableware, mobile phones and children's shoes.

Trump and his surrogates promise that from this upheaval will emerge a new era of American industry. Tariffs on foreign products will induce investors to build factories in America. Even if this promise came true, the result would still be a bad bargain. Tariff-sheltered industries tend to produce inferior goods at higher prices, and have little incentive to do otherwise. If the goods were competitive, after all, no tariff would be needed or wanted.

But Trump's tariffs will not induce much factory-building. Who'd invest in a factory to produce made-in-America goods at higher-in-America prices unless assured that foreign competition would be excluded for a long time, if not forever? Trump's tariffs are [here today, gone tomorrow](#), maybe back the day after that, maybe not. On some days, Trump vows to keep his tariffs in place permanently; on others, he speculates about trading them away for hypothetical future deals. Disadvantages and uncertainties compound: The tariff-protected American car of the future Trump fancies, for instance, will be assembled from steel, glass, plastic, fabric, and electronics, all of them tariffed too: at 10 or 20 or 125 percent, or whatever other random number pops up on Trump's Truth Social feed that morning.

No American business—no business that serves the American market—will commit to any capital expenditure under these conditions. If Trump's tariffs last for any length of time, the result will be a vast disinvestment instead. The worst of the pain may not be felt immediately. Trump advertised the tariffs many weeks in advance, opening an opportunity for businesses to stockpile inventories. Sooner or later, however, those stockpiles will dwindle. Consumers will face higher prices or outright shortages. Businesses will suffer diminished demand. Workers will be laid off.

The only early hope is that the president who set the maelstrom going will panic and try to stop the wreckage. But he seems just as likely, perhaps more so, to make that damage worse. The presidents of the '70s desperately gambled with extreme measures of state control to stop inflation without aggravating unemployment. Nixon imposed wage and price freezes in 1971 and '73; in 1977, Carter proposed an elaborate scheme of controls, taxes, and subsidies across the energy sector. These experiments sometimes delivered a short bump in the polls—but quickly presented their authors with a dilemma: State control begets economic distortions, which demand more state control. Either the would-be controller advances toward ever greater political command of the economy—or the would-be controller is quickly forced to retreat in failure and embarrassment.

The grim fact about stagflation is that—once stumbled into—it is very hard to escape.

Donald Trump has no grasp of history. The people around him are afraid to teach it to him. So Trump's trade war could well lead him, as the economy sinks, to ever more interventionism of his own: [subsidies and tariff exemptions](#) for favored companies; [payouts to farmers](#) and other constituencies; [political warfare against the independence of the Federal Reserve](#).

The most dangerous temptation that Trump may face is to impose some form of capital controls to stop investors from dumping dollar assets. Trump's trade war has driven a sell-off of U.S. Treasury bonds, which raised interest rates in the United States. Regimes moving toward protectionism sometimes try to block investors from rushing to the exits. The United States has more capacity than most to try such measures. Among their many costs, they dissuade investors from ever trusting your country again.

The grim fact about stagflation is that—once stumbled into—it is very hard to escape. Raise interest rates to curb the inflation, and the stagnation gets worse. Rev the economy to overcome stagnation, and the inflation gets worse. Policy makers find themselves in the predicament of a motorist trying to execute a three-point turn in a too-narrow roadway: They can never back up or advance far enough to make any progress.

The whole incomprehensible system that Trump is building—haphazard, anti-market, punishing to consumers and businesses alike—will have to be rewritten by the next president, or maybe junked by the next Congress if it has the votes to override Trump's veto and reclaim the legislature's constitutional power over tariffs and trade.

But whenever the government gets serious about repair and recovery, Americans will face more difficulties emerging from their tariff-caused stagflation than their oil-shocked predecessors did half a century ago. Impose a tariff on bananas: The price will rise; demand will drop. As the drop in demand is felt, investment will decline in the boats and warehouses that bring the bananas to market. Fewer banana trees will be planted; the people who work on banana plantations will find other jobs; the capital committed to banana production will be redeployed.

Lift the tariff on bananas, and the process will not immediately reverse. The memory of the arbitrary tariff will shape behavior for some time afterward. Recommitting the capital, rehiring workers, replanting trees, reinvesting in warehouses and boats—none of that will be instant. Banana prices may remain elevated in the tariff-imposing country for some while after it mends its ways. And as it goes with individual commodities, so it goes with the entire global system of production and trade.

The economic crisis of 2025 started in the mind of one man, but Trump's tariffs are dislocating planet-wide networks of trade. The dislocation has already sliced trillions of dollars from the value of U.S. corporations. Even if Trump ceased his trade actions tomorrow, the possibility that he could resume them would depress the value of almost every U.S. and international company.

Foreign governments, faced with Trump's bullying, have retaliated in ways that dislocate trade further. They may or may not end their retaliation when Trump has had enough. By then, many of them will have formed new trading arrangements that bypass the United States.

Trump will demand cheaper money from the Federal Reserve. He has already threatened to fire the Fed chairman, Jerome Powell, for recently declining to lower interest rates. Potential politicization of the Fed will frighten bondholders and push interest rates up—depressing the value of stocks, discouraging new investment, and raising the cost of mortgages, auto loans, and student debt.

Ultimately, the end of the crisis will depend on the actions of hundreds of millions of people across dozens of trading nations. Only if and when they recover their trust in the United States will the U.S. and world economies fully recover from the breach of trust Trump has created. How long will it take? No one knows.

As a businessman, Trump was notorious for operating in bad faith. He has been accused of deceiving customers, employees, investors, and creditors. Before he pivoted to politics, his bank of choice was one [known for its relationship with Russian oligarchs and alleged money launderers](#). He

repeatedly drove his properties into bankruptcy, leaving creditors, investors, and employees to bear the costs of his failure.

As a politician, Trump vowed to “make America great again” with the same predatory methods he used in business. He does not appear to believe in mutually beneficial transactions. The only way he feels confident that he prevailed is if the other party suffers. His plan for enriching America was predicated on dominating and wronging others. Plans like that seldom work even at the start, and never work for long.

Good faith is the beginning of success for nations as well as individuals. Trump’s bad faith and poor choices once ruined only those who made the voluntary personal or corporate decision to do business with him. But no one can choose to sit out Trump’s trade war. The casualties are already accumulating.

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The Golden Age of the Fried-Chicken Sandwich

The sun is setting on burger dominance.

by Ellen Cushing



You would have been forgiven, in 2019, for thinking that America could not possibly get more fanatical about fried-chicken sandwiches. This was the year Popeyes—a fast-food company previously known for bone-in chicken—lost the bones, added a bun (and some pickles and mayo), and set off a

complete frenzy. Within days, Popeyes sold out of the sandwiches; after the chain reintroduced them permanently, its sales increased 42 percent compared with the same period of the previous year. Plenty of other restaurants had offered fried-chicken sandwiches before, but I remember this one like it was the Super Bowl, or a natural disaster: massive, bad for traffic, all anyone seemed to be talking about. That December, *The Washington Post* declared 2019 the Year of the Chicken Sandwich, [which the paper translated into Latin](#)—*anno pulli*—presumably so time travelers from the past could understand what was going on here. As a society, we had reached peak fried-chicken sandwich.

LOL. Not even close. If, six years ago, the fried-chicken sandwich was a novelty worth standing in line for, today it is a fact of eating in America. From 2019 to 2024, fried-chicken-sandwich consumption increased 19 percent at American restaurants, while burger consumption dropped 3 percent, according to industry analysis firm Circana. Over that same period, some 2,800 fast-food and fast-casual spots devoted to chicken cropped up across the country—and about 1,200 burger joints disappeared.

This is a challenge to the hierarchy that has ruled American fast food since it was invented: Burgers were the core product, and when fried chicken was available at all, such as at KFC, it tended to come bone-in, or as nuggets or tenders or “popcorn.” Nick Wiger, who with Mike Mitchell hosts a comedy podcast about fast food called [Doughboys](#), doesn’t remember eating many fried-chicken sandwiches when he was growing up in Southern California, in the ’80s and ’90s. To the degree that he did, he told me, they “were like the add-on sandwich, the bonus sandwich”—the sideshow to the main event, which was usually a hamburger.

That started to change when Chick-fil-A—the Atlanta-based chain that, for years, claimed to have invented the fried-chicken sandwich—began to expand nationwide. People really loved what Chick-fil-A was selling: In 2019, it became the third-largest restaurant chain in the country by sales, even without operating on Sundays. In July 2019, before the Popeyes craze, a group representing McDonald’s [franchisees argued in a letter](#) that the company needed a superior fried-chicken sandwich. “JFK called for a man on the moon,” it wrote. “Our call should be a category leading chicken sandwich.”

Read: As American as fried chicken

McDonald's released the McCrispy in 2021, and now sells at least a billion dollars' worth of it annually. Burger King offers five different fried-chicken sandwiches; Wendy's has nine. Wingstop, which had previously been so known for a different form of chicken that it's right there in the name, also now sells a fried-chicken sandwich.

Fried-chicken mania may have been set off by the major fast-food chains, but it has gone wide. When Wiger visited a slice shop in Los Angeles recently, he was surprised—but not that surprised—to see a fried-chicken sandwich on the menu. “It’s now become an expectation that any place you can get solid food in America will have a fried-chicken sandwich,” he told me.



Indeed, chefs—including those who are better known for Michelin stars or James Beard Awards—have turned the fried-chicken sandwich into something elevated and even a little winking. They've smothered it in Kaluga caviar, cloaked it in salted duck-egg yolk, and [sold it with a claw](#)

[still attached to the meat](#) for \$19 a pop. For decades, the fried-chicken sandwich was an also-ran, and then it was a meme, and now it is America's favorite thing to do with meat and bread.

Chick-fil-A did not, to be clear, invent the fried-chicken sandwich. One popular theory holds that fried chicken was brought to the U.S. by Scottish immigrants; enslaved people, and later free Black cooks, perfected the seasoning and preparation of the dish. Much more recently, fried chicken was put between a bun by some unknown genius, popularized by enterprising businesspeople, reimagined by a polyglot food culture, and made ubiquitous by the collision of a few significant trends in American dining.

[Read: Better than southern fried chicken?](#)

Fried-chicken sandwiches are particularly well suited to the ways Americans like to eat—in general, but especially recently. Eating in one's car has become far more common than it used to be, and sandwiches are car food. We tend to be pretty squicked-out by bones, Paul Freedman, the author of [American Cuisine: And How It Got This Way](#), told me, and we love crunch. (This is in notable contrast with, for example, parts of East Asia, [which go nuts for chewiness.](#))

We also really love chicken. During the second half of the 20th century, per capita chicken consumption in the United States quadrupled. Emerging wisdom about the dangers of fat and cholesterol, and the ascendancy of diet culture, pushed health-conscious Americans away from beef and pork and toward poultry. New breeding techniques (and abysmal living conditions) for chickens made the meat less expensive. The world was also becoming aware of climate change, and chicken is significantly less resource-intensive than beef. (I don't think it's a coincidence that Generation Z, the cohort that analysts told me is driving the fried-chicken-sandwich boom, has never not known climate dread.) By the time Popeyes released its sandwich, chicken consumption outstripped that of beef. Even when it is prepared in a way that is not, by any stretch, healthy, and even though eating animals is not good for the planet, full stop, chicken was—is—now our default meat.

And here's the thing about fried-chicken sandwiches: They taste amazing. Here's the other thing: They are highly annoying to cook at home—splattery, stinky, stressful for the uninitiated, impractical to make in small amounts. Fried-chicken sandwiches are just much better suited for restaurant kitchens, with their economies of scale; their giant, ever-bubbling deep fryers; and their cooks' hardy, pre-scarred forearms. They're smart business, too. Pound for pound, a decent fried-chicken sandwich is much less expensive to make in a restaurant than a hamburger. Chicken is (for now) cheap, or at least cheaper than beef, and breading and frying make even low-quality meat taste pretty good.

[From the May 1982 issue: Roy Blount Jr. on chickens](#)

So does sauce. American eaters have become accustomed to, and expectant of, the opportunity to customize everything. This is why ordering from Starbucks [feels like taking the MCAT](#), and another reason fried chicken is so appealing—it's a relatively bland meat that takes well to being dressed a gazillion different ways. Case in point: Wingstop's crispy chicken sandwich is available with a choice of 14 sauces, plus four dips. When it first came out in 2022, the chain sold more than a million sandwiches in six days.

This, really, is the key to fried chicken: It is an ideal blank slate for a novelty-obsessed food culture. Although fried chicken can be an absolute party, texturally speaking, it doesn't have much to offer, flavorally speaking, at least not without additions. This isn't a weakness; it's a strength.

"Americans are ornament-, garnish-, kick-it-up-a-notch-oriented," Freedman told me. (We have become less spice-averse in the past generation or so.) Fried chicken works with all manner of trend and cuisine. Right now you can find a Bolivian fried-chicken sandwich, marinated in South American beer and served with serrano-habanero-chili vinegar, in New York City; a Cambodian one with pickled papaya and long beans in Chicago; and a Thai-inspired one served with your choice of Southeast Asian-style sauces in Glendale, Arizona.

The fried-chicken sandwich is one of the great American inventions—a holy mash-up of tradition and newness, convenience and indulgence, crunchy and soft. It is the perfect food for this culinary moment. But wherever we trend

next, it will be there, too, because the fried-chicken sandwich can be whatever we want it to be.

This article appears in the [June 2025](#) print edition with the headline “How the Chicken Sandwich Conquered America.” 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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How the Most Remote Community in America Gets Its Mail

Transporting letters and packages to the village of Supai requires a feat of logistics, horsemanship, and carefully placed hooves.

by Sarah Yager



Nate Chamberlain begins the journey down from the southern rim of the Grand Canyon.

Just after 8 o'clock one spring morning, 2,000 feet below the rim of the Grand Canyon, Nate Chamberlain, wearing chaps and cowboy boots, emerged from the post office in Supai, Arizona, with the last of the morning mail. He tucked a Priority Mail envelope into a plastic U.S. Postal Service crate lashed to one of the six mules waiting outside. Then he climbed into the saddle on the lead mule, gave a kick of his spurs, and set off down the dirt road leading out of the village.

It was the beginning of what may be the country's most unusual USPS route —the [very last to deliver mail by mule](#). The mule train would travel eight miles along a creek lined with cottonwoods, through a narrow gorge, and up a switchbacking trail carved into the cliffside to reach a hitching post at the top of the canyon, where a sign reads US MAIL DELIVERY ZONE. There, Chamberlain would drop off the outgoing mail with a driver—who would take it another 68 miles to the next post office, in the town of Peach Springs—and pick up the incoming mail to deliver back to the village.

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Supai, the only village on the reservation of the Havasupai Tribe, is one of the most remote communities in the country. It is accessible only by foot, and by helicopter when the weather allows. The mule train, which makes the 16-mile, six-hour loop up and down the canyon five days a week, is perhaps the most extreme manifestation of the USPS mandate to “render postal services to all communities.” Mail delivery in Supai involves a feat of logistics, horsemanship, and carefully placed hooves. It is slow and drudging work—starting at 3 a.m., when Chamberlain rises to feed the pack string, and continuing to sundown as fences are fixed and horseshoes are replaced—that belies an era of instant delivery, optimized everything, and “government efficiency.” It also offers a glimpse into what the Postal Service can mean for rural America, at a moment when [the agency’s future is uncertain](#).





Top: Nate Chamberlain and his mules descend 2,000 feet to reach Supai.
Bottom: In addition to letters and packages, the mules have delivered lab work, and even mini fridges for Supai's tourist lodge. (Elliot Ross for *The Atlantic*)

For centuries, the Havasupai Tribe ranged across the southern rim of the Grand Canyon, hunting and foraging along the plateau in the fall and winter, and descending into the canyon in the spring and summer to grow corn, beans, melons, and sunflowers along Havasu Creek. But that changed as America pushed westward. In 1882, President Chester A. Arthur signed an executive order restricting the tribe to 518 acres at the bottom of the canyon.

Just over a decade later, the federal government established a school in the village—aimed, like others of the era, at assimilating Native children. With it grew demand for better connection to the outside world. Rufus Bauer, the first teacher sent to Supai, wrote in [an 1896 report to the commissioner of Indian Affairs](#) that getting the mail required the Havasupai to make “a horseback ride of 60 miles over a stony, grassless desert, where there is not one drop of water for man or horse.” He added, perhaps unnecessarily, “They do not exactly enjoy the trip.”

Philip F. Rubio: Save the Postal Service

The Supai post office was established later the same year. At the time, rural postal delivery was expanding across the country. The postal system is older than the Declaration of Independence; it was founded in 1775 to allow consistent communication across the colonies—uniting America even before there was a federal government. As the nation grew, Congress gave the organization a monopoly over letter delivery as a way of ensuring affordable access to mail for all Americans—not just those who lived along profitable urban routes.

Over time, Supai would come to depend on the post office. With the loss of the tribe's hunting grounds and much of its farmland, the traditional Havasupai way of life started to disappear, and pretty much everything the village needed—groceries, household goods, medicine—arrived there on the back of a USPS mule.

“That old saying, you ever look that up?” Charlie Chamberlain asked me when we met at a café near the post office in Peach Springs. “I used to know it by heart, the old saying, that we deliver mail in all kinds of weather.” He pulled out his phone to search for it: *Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.* “That’s not a false statement, for what we do.”

Chamberlain moved to Supai with his wife, a member of the Havasupai Tribe, back in 1973. Her uncle had delivered the mail there for many years, and offered to train Chamberlain.

From the January 1875 issue: The American post-office

The route involves risks not listed in the unofficial USPS motto. In the winter, ice can accumulate on the narrow switchbacks, which drop 1,000 feet in the first two miles. Temperatures in the summertime can exceed 110 degrees. Mules (and horses, which are sometimes used in the pack string) can get spooked by blowing debris and the occasional rattlesnake. During monsoon season, rainwater rushing down the canyon walls can turn the desert floor into a surging river within minutes.

Mail delivery in Supai involves a feat of logistics, horsemanship, and carefully placed hooves.

Chamberlain recalled once taking shelter with 11 of his animals at a high point above the trail as floodwater rose below them. He could hear boulders crashing against one another in the water. When he rode back up the trail the next day, the marks left by the water were higher than his head, even on horseback. Staying out of trouble means learning to watch the sky, he told me—and beyond that, having “a real strong faith in God.”

Chamberlain still holds a contract with USPS for delivery to Supai but no longer rides the route himself; after 25 years on the trail, he and his wife, who was ill, left Supai to be closer to a hospital. He now employs Nate—his nephew—and other locals to handle the deliveries.

[Read: Why we all have a stake in the U.S. Postal Service](#)

Nate Chamberlain told me he has broken bones and taken spills that have required hundreds of stitches. Last summer, he had to spend the night under a rock overhang with his mules after a severe flash flood raised the creek some seven feet in 15 minutes, washing out the trail. In the worst scenarios, animals have died. (Charlie and the packers who work for him rotate their animals on a regular schedule to prevent them from getting worn down.)

Supai is home to about 200 people, according to the latest census, though some estimates range much higher. (The Havasupai tribal council, which tracks tribal enrollment, declined to participate in this story.) For residents of the small village, the mule train helps set the rhythm of daily life. Lynanne and Scott Palmer told me that when they moved to Supai, in the late 1970s, the arrival of the mail in the afternoons was a social event: Residents would gather outside the post office as their letters and packages were unloaded, along with food and other supplies to restock the small village store.

This has changed somewhat over the years, as the tourism industry has grown. Tens of thousands of visitors now pass through Supai each year to see the waterfalls that cascade down Havasu Creek to the confluence with the Colorado River. Helicopters run several days a week during the high season, carrying tourists from the canyon rim to the village. The helicopters

also bring in some supplies, and carry residents out of the canyon to go on weekend shopping trips in the cities of Kingman and Flagstaff, hours from the rim.

But the helicopter schedule is seasonal, and weather-dependent: High winds can easily blow the aircraft against the sandstone cliffs. Mules are still the most reliable form of transport—bringing with them, as Charlie described it, “everything that you can put a stamp on.” Besides letters and packages for community members (including lots of Amazon orders), the USPS mule train transports medicine and lab work for the village clinic. Supai doesn’t have a traditional bank, so the post office supports an informal financial system, bringing in cash for the tribe’s use and letting residents send and receive money orders. The tourism industry, now the main source of income for the tribe, also relies on the mule train: Nate told me that the supplies for the lodge where tourists stay—linens, even mini fridges—come through the mail.

Even now in Supai, as Lynanne Palmer put it, “Life runs around the post office.”



Tens of thousands of tourists pass through Supai each year to visit the canyon's waterfalls. (Elliot Ross for *The Atlantic*)

In late March, while the mules continued their work in Supai, [demonstrators gathered in 150 cities across the United States](#) to speak out against an anticipated “hostile takeover” of the Postal Service.

President Donald Trump has, in recent months, mused about a major reorganization of USPS, which he describes as a “tremendous loser for this country.” He has said he is considering merging the independent agency with the Commerce Department. Trump suggested that such a move would help the Postal Service—which has been losing billions of dollars a year, amid declining mail volume and rising operating costs—turn around its fortunes. But many see the proposal as a prelude to privatization, an idea Trump floated during his first term and raised again just before taking office a second time.

Read: What happens if Trump comes for the mail?

Experts believe that even partially outsourcing delivery to companies such as Amazon and FedEx would disproportionately affect rural America, where longer distances and fewer consumers mean that many postal routes operate at a loss. Brian Renfroe, the president of the National Association of Letter Carriers, told me that without the USPS's universal-service obligation, consumers in rural areas could expect higher prices or even to lose service altogether. "I can assure you a private delivery company is not going to have any interest in delivering mail by mules," he said.

The reason the mule train has persisted for more than a century, Charlie Chamberlain told me, is that it's the most cost-effective way to deliver the mail to Supai. "We can do it cheaper than they can in a helicopter," he said. "When it's time to bid on a new contract, I can outbid them." As a contractor, he doesn't collect benefits. "I never have taken a vacation in all the years I've done this," Chamberlain said. "There's no such thing." The route may seem like the opposite of government efficiency. But that's true only if you don't accept the premise that the post office should be for everyone.

The Postal Service reflects the nation's founding vision: to create a country both expansive and united. Supai has seen the worst of that vision. But the mules, unbothered by politics as they trod up and down the canyon, still carry with them a reminder of what America promised to be.

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-

Return of the Shaman

How visionary healers became a fixture of contemporary American culture and politics

by James Parker



Manvir Singh's new *[Shamanism: The Timeless Religion](#)* ranges widely, introducing us to all sorts of shamans and neo-shamans and proto-shamans. We meet the cigarette-loving tribal healers among the Mentawai people of Indonesia, whom Singh, an anthropologist, has studied since 2014. We meet

the psychiatry and medicine professor at Johns Hopkins who reckons that his clinical interventions and against-the-odds healings are the stuff of classic shamanic practice. And we meet the money managers and “hedge wizards” who traffic quasi-shamanically with the capricious spirits of the global market.

It’s a panoramic survey: Singh has done the fieldwork, the legwork, and the drugwork. (“Then, with the immediacy of waking up, my trip ended. I became aware of my surroundings. People were watching us through the doorway. Vomit was everywhere.”) But his book lacks something I need—namely, an account of how neo-shamanism and its visionary baggage have looped around into conspiracy theory and burn-it-down far-rightism. It doesn’t, in other words, quite take us up to the present American minute.

So who or what is a shaman? Singh gives us a handy definition: “A shaman is a specialist who, through non-ordinary states, engages with unseen realities and provides services like healing and divination.” You can achieve a non-ordinary or altered state with drugs, drumming, dancing, fasting, meditation, whatever floats your boat—floats it into the beyond, that is. Once there, you might battle with demons, fly across the sky, plunge into the underworld, enlist the help of power-animals, or commune with the souls of the dead. You might undergo a terrible supernatural ordeal, a violent unmaking or scattering of the self. Crucially, though, you come back stronger. You return from the other realm remade, with strange new capabilities. You can heal. You can prophesy. (I have a certain resistance to Singh’s characterization of Jesus as a shaman—one of the things I like about Jesus is how un-esoterically he distributes his message, how dazzlingly straightforward and inclusive it is—but I get it: “By interacting with a powerful spirit being, he cured, exorcized, and foretold the future.”)

The shaman’s progress is archetypal, of course: It’s the hero’s journey, complete with thrills and spills. “Candidate shamans,” the religion scholar Mircea Eliade wrote in his pioneering 1951 study, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, “sometimes find themselves in apparently desperate situations. They must go ‘where night and day meet,’ or find a gate in the wall, or go up to the sky through a passage that opens but for an instant.” Which makes me think of Luke Skywalker, celestially steered by the Force, putting two proton torpedoes right up the thermal exhaust port—the passage

fleetingly revealed—of the otherwise impregnable Death Star. After an experience with yopo, a “hallucinogenic snuff” (its main psychoactive compound seems to be bufotenine, unfamiliar outside South America), Singh is told about a similarly evanescent moment of danger and opportunity, a split second in the trip when “you need to concentrate on your goal.” “The transition point is fast,” he is advised by a seasoned user, “and if you do not focus, yopo will carry you off.”

You return from the other realm remade, with strange new capabilities. You can heal. You can prophesy.

Ultimately, though, Singh is less interested in the specific contents of trance states, or in a psychic map of shamanic otherness, than in shamanism as a world-historical phenomenon, popping up all over, almost a function of human consciousness. It starts, for him, in the same place that religion starts: in the wobbly conditions of life, in the dicey nature of our contract with existence. He calls it “a compelling technology for dealing with uncertainty.” Against a welter of contingency and fucked-up stuff that won’t stop happening, the shaman intercedes on our behalf; he can negotiate with chaos because he’s plugged in to the invisible grid behind it.

You can see where all of this might link up with conspiracy theory and—one short step further—psychosis. Hovering beyond our day-to-dayness is another order of reality, fiery and supercharged and copiously populated with entities. The shaman has gotten the coordinates. He has wrangled, or been wrangled by, the monsters of this zone and its tutelary spirits. So he has power. He can change the weather. He can suck out the infection. He can reverse the curse and erase the malaise.

To connect to the paranoid side of neo-shamanism, try listening to *The Occult Apocalypse Show*, a podcast from 2023 hosted by [Jacob Chansley, the QAnon Shaman](#). In an episode called “D.C. Deep State,” Chansley and his co-host explore/abhor “the current occult culture in the deep state.” Here, in a rushing monologue, are the most baroque trappings of conspiracy theory: the adrenochrome, the golden owls, the 33rd-degree Freemasons. In this telling, the ruling class has been infested with demons from the beginning. “It actually goes all the way back,” Chansley says, “to ancient occultic rituals in places like Sumer, Egypt, Babylon, the Canaanites, the

Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and, yes, the Aztecs, and even the English in England.”

A healthier way to fight the war of the spirits is with art. Anyone who saw the D.C. punk rockers Bad Brains in their prime, for example, knows that the front man, H.R., was a shaman: a mouthpiece for divinity, a bringer of celestial heat. For Ted Hughes, [a devoted reader of Mircea Eliade](#), there were shamanic capacities—capacities, that is, for healing and prophecy, derived from a special consciousness—in great poetry. “In a shamanizing society,” Hughes wrote, “[*Venus and Adonis*](#), some of Keats’ longer poems, [*The Wanderings of Oisin*](#), [*Ash Wednesday*](#), would all qualify their authors for the magic drum.” Hughes saw William Butler Yeats, in his inspired public aspect, as shamanic: “His outspoken political statements all glow at some point into a shamanic flame.” T. S. Eliot, too, responding to the “tribal disaster” of modernity, was a less eager but perhaps more powerful shaman; he was “able to contain within himself, more fully than any of his contemporaries,” Hughes felt, “the spiritual tragedy of his epoch.”

Neo-shamanism in America came bobbing up, like so much other stuff, in the general pagan churn of the ’60s and ’70s. Carlos Castaneda’s mega-selling [*The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*](#)—one of his “[Is it anthropology or is it a novel?](#)” creations—was published in 1968.

Michael Harner’s [*The Way of the Shaman*](#) arrived in 1980: a how-to guide for apprentice shamans in which the harrowing shamanic voyages relayed by Eliade—with their blindings and dismemberments and organ replacements—were swapped out for a program that one could follow in one’s living room, Jane Fonda-style. (“Without stopping, increase your rattle-shaking to approximately 180 times per minute.”) Singh goes to Burning Man to check out the healing sessions at the Shamandome and is struck by the shift in focus: the individual rather than the tribe, mental states rather than bodily ailments. “Trauma and harmful patterns of thinking,” he writes, “have usurped the position often filled by witchcraft, taboo violations, and resentful spirits.”

Is this the endgame for shamanism—absorption by the therapeutic Western self? Or is the teeming otherworld of the shaman simply finding new containers, new metaphors? Harner’s *The Way of the Shaman* draws a useful distinction between the Shamanic State of Consciousness and the Ordinary

State of Consciousness: The shaman can toggle between the two; he can go up Jack’s beanstalk and come back down again. The rest of us, these days, tend to get stuck either here or there. Look at our politics. Look at the state of our brains. Divergent realities, untranslatable, incompatible. Castaneda, coming down from his first peyote trip in *The Teachings of Don Juan*, found himself deeply dismayed by his return to sanity: “The sadness of such an irreconcilable situation,” he wrote, “was so intense that I wept.” It’s going to take some very nimble shamans to guide us out of this one.

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What Is Alison Bechdel's Secret?

The cartoonist has spent a lifetime worrying. In a new graphic novel, she finds something like solace.

by Hanna Rosin



Holly (*left*) and Alison (*right*) in *Spent*, busy doing their work at home in Vermont (Courtesy of Mariner Books*)

In the opening scene of *Spent*, billed on its cover as a “comic novel,” Alison Bechdel’s cartoon avatar, also named Alison, has rearranged her sock drawer in an effort to stave off “the feeling of impending doom.” Ever since she was born on the page four decades ago, Bechdel’s fictional self has regularly journeyed between insecure and panicked, conveyed by the artist through subtle downturns in her tiny dash of a mouth. She perseverates about impending nuclear war, environmental disaster, “patriarchal death culture,” girlfriends cheating on her, the local gay bookstore where she works closing down.

For fans who have followed Bechdel from underground lesbian cartoonist in the 1980s to best-selling author of *Fun Home: A Family Tragikomic*, and then watched with amazement as her life on the page went 3-D in a multiple-Tony Award-winning musical, the doom-tinged update in *Spent* will not come as a shock: She can still get pretty freaked out.

Bechdel’s latest title refers to late-stage capitalism, the semi-facetious frame for the book (which is broken into “episodes” titled “The Commodity,” “The Process of Exchange,” and so on), but like almost everything else in her graphic storytelling, the title is also self-referential: It describes her age and her state of exhaustion, and perhaps hints at a concern that aging lesbians might not command much of an audience. Cartoon Alison now has lines under her eyes and graying hair, though otherwise she looks more or less as she did 40 years ago: butch haircut, eyes wide and worried, hunched shoulders, and, even in her 60s, the air of a teenage boy who does and doesn’t want to be picked for the team.

So imagine my surprise when, toward the end of *Spent*, after Alison has suffered through months of writer’s block, a public-speaking flop, an awkward trip to Hollywood, an encounter with her Donald Trump-loving sister, and a couple of anxiety dreams, I came to this caption (spoiler alert): “Alison experiences an unfamiliar sensation. Could it be … happiness?”

The last scene, a full double-page drawing, finds Alison sitting on the grass at sunset outside her Vermont house, watching a bird do loops in the sky. If you look closely at the reclining figure, you can see that her mouth is unmistakably upturned. Over the decades, I’ve come to know the many moods of Bechdel’s avatar, and not all are dark. There’s also sardonic, horny,

intellectually lit up. But relaxed? That brand of happiness feels new, and now? Signs of real-world doom crop up everywhere in *Spent*, including in Alison's dreams. Yet as the novel winds down, a palpable calm arrives.

Bechdel's gift as an artist is evoking the spirit of the moment through expressions, gestures, the way two bodies lean subtly toward or away from each other. More often than not, her scenes feel too claustrophobic to linger on. But this one is a wide and soothing expanse of tamed nature, and I studied it closely for clues. Up the hill stands a barn, sturdy and welcoming, and nearby, playful goats are happily entertaining themselves. The birds are chirping ("twittertwittertwitter," "peent!," "twitter"). The reeds in the foreground look like they're dancing. Alison is with her girlfriend, Holly, surrounded by friends. I felt at first confused, then seduced, and ultimately ... jealous? What does Alison Bechdel know that we don't? And how, for all these years, in a remote corner of Vermont and mostly stuck in her own head, has she figured out just what to say to the rest of us?

Bechdel began publishing her comic series *Dykes to Watch Out For* in the '80s, the same decade that Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* appeared. *Graphic novel* was just emerging as a term (Moore dismissed it as pompous marketing-speak for "Big Expensive Comics"). The men were writing and drawing about war and murder; Bechdel wanted to focus on her friends. She has given several explanations over the years for why she landed on *DTWOF*, all of them personal: Comics still had something of an outsider aura that resonated with the lesbian separatist crowd she hung out with. Also, comics did *not* resonate with her highbrow mother, an English teacher and a talented amateur pianist. But mostly Bechdel talks about being unable to find her own quotidian queerness reflected in any artistic form, so she created one.

Bechdel achieved the alchemy of memoir at its best, making her singular experience so specific and vivid that it became generalizable.

The strip, which was serialized in more than 50 alternative newspapers for 25 years, could be as soapy as *Friends* and *Sex and the City*, but with a lot fewer men and meat products, and almost no shopping. The Alison character, the neurotic hub of the collective, went by "Mo." Coming of age in an unnamed midwestern city, she and her activist friends had sex, broke

up, ate Szechuan vegetable pulp, and complained about the “Republican lynch mob.” When Mo would have panic attacks, her friends would suggest that she “cut back on the Earl Grey.” In “[The Rule](#),” which ran in 1985 and soon inspired a cultural trope, two women discuss what movie to see, and one lists [her three requirements](#): It has to feature at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man. This became known as the Bechdel Test, and no matter how many times Bechdel says that the list was a joke, Reddit still loves it. (In the strip, by the way, the pair can’t find such a movie, so they go home.)



Excerpted from the book *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Courtesy of Mariner Books¹)

By the end of *Dykes to Watch Out For*'s run, in 2008, a gay character was the lead in one of the aughts' most popular network sitcoms, and gay marriage had been legalized in two states. For decades, Bechdel had captured queer life with pitch-perfect mocking-insider's affection, and then she made a career turn that might have seemed a cultural retreat of sorts: She decided to let Mo morph into "Alison," the protagonist of a pair of family memoirs. But the more Bechdel turned inward, the more famous she got, and along the way, fame gave her something new to feel ambivalent, even panicked, about.

[Read: Call it the 'Bechdel-Wallace Test'](#)

Nothing about the central, bewildering tragedy in Bechdel's 2006 breakout, *Fun Home*, suggests an obvious mainstream hit: In 1980, months after 19-year-old Alison came out as a lesbian to her parents, her father, who'd been sleeping with men but hiding it, got hit by a truck—or, Bechdel intimates, put himself in the path of a truck. But Bechdel achieved the alchemy of memoir at its best, making her singular experience so specific and vivid that it became generalizable.

FOR A WILD MOMENT I ENTERTAINED THE IDEA THAT MY FATHER HAD TIMED HIS DEATH WITH THIS IN MIND, AS SOME SORT OF DERANGED TRIBUTE.



BUT THAT WOULD ONLY CONFIRM THAT HIS DEATH WAS NOT MY FAULT. THAT, IN FACT, IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH ME AT ALL.

AND I'M RELUCTANT TO LET GO OF THAT LAST, TENUOUS BOND.



Alison and her father in *Fun Home*, drawing and reading in the family's Gothic Revival house (Courtesy of Mariner Books²)

Although she didn't call it that, her subject was emotional neglect. Early on, we learn that her father was "monomaniacal" in his dedication to restoring the old Gothic Revival house they lived in. If one of the children couldn't hold up a mirror or a giant Christmas tree long enough to suit their decorator father, he might hit them. "I grew to resent the way my father treated his furniture like children, and his children like furniture," Bechdel wrote. She portrayed a man besieged by his own demons, and then, in *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), a mother who couldn't be bothered to pay attention. And who among us can't relate to some version of parental dysfunction? A bit later, her sometimes-exhausting internal monologues arrived on Broadway in song form, which aired out the neurosis. The effect was to turn *Fun Home* into a gentler story of self-discovery.

Spent is not technically autobiographical, although I've come to think of it loosely as the third in a trio of memoirs: Moving beyond Bechdel's biological family, it revolves around her chosen family, which feels genuinely more fun and more like home. The main character is, again, Alison. Her girlfriend shares the name Holly with Bechdel's real-life partner (Holly Rae Taylor), and the setting is Vermont, where they actually live. But Holly's job has been tweaked, and their friend circle consists of various fictional characters from *DTWOF*—older now, some saddled with jobs and progeny, all as libidinous as ever—who live together in a group house as part of a "longitudinal study on communal living" (invented, as far as I know, but perfectly plausible in Vermont).

While the group house cycles through comic sexual and domestic dramas, Alison is nearby nursing her most recent anxiety—her growing fame. Bechdel isn't purely making this up: Taylor has remarked in the past that Bechdel craves fame, even as she finds that craving pathetic—and she's astute enough to know that famous people lamenting the burdens of fame are insufferable. So in this latest version of her avatar, she's created an Alison whose dilemma parodies contemporary celebrity culture, while also parodying herself, the author.

[Read: Alison Bechdel's sad, funny, sprawling memoir *Are You My Mother?*](#)

In the novel version, her memoir hasn't been turned into a brilliant Broadway musical but has instead become a schlocky TV series controlled by a showrunner who loves explosions and dragons. Alison's friends at the group house invite her over to watch episodes together ("Hollywood in da house!"), and she sits cross-armed on the couch, looking miserable. In the meantime, Holly (an artist and the owner of a composting-bin company in real life) is getting ever more famous through her viral wood-chopping videos, which both annoys Alison and makes her jealous, particularly as people in their Vermont town start to recognize Holly first. (The caption of Alison's dream one night: "Must ... generate ... content ...")

To escape the pain of having her name linked to commodified junk, Alison decides to write her own television series, and lands on the idea of a reality-TV approach to showing "people how to free themselves from the grip of consumer capitalism and live a more ethical life!" Out in Hollywood, her pitch to all the major networks initially seems to be a hit, and the grip of the entertainment complex only tightens. Over at the group house, the queers continue to protest and organize, all the while still obsessing over sexual arrangements that we now call bisexual polycules.

Which one of these worlds—the capitalist vortex or the polycule-friendly group house—is more real? Life at the house seems more entertaining, but is that just a foolish fantasy designed to trick us into thinking that there is safe harbor somewhere? Or even worse, a dangerous fantasy at a time when funding a longitudinal study on communal living could get your whole university canceled? I started to wonder where Bechdel was leading us. Read too much news and you're in the vortex. Retreat too much and you're lost in a bubble. Or maybe that's just black-and-white thinking, as therapists like to say. Maybe what she has learned over time, which many of us haven't quite, is that although you can never outrun your own anxiety, you'll never be sorry about taking a break from your own head to indulge in some friend drama next door.

Four decades ago, Bechdel stumbled into chronicling an outsider niche during the Reagan era, and she has since grown into a lesbian icon on a national stage. She weathered the AIDS crisis, has witnessed the *Obergefell v. Hodges* watershed and the mainstreaming of RuPaul, and now finds herself in a country where state lawmakers are trying to undo gay marriage.

In *Spent*, she shows Alison alone at her desk trying to work on her next book, but instead obsessively Googling *marauding militias, monkeypox, Musk*. Meanwhile, at the group house, they take turns weighing in on the train wreck that is modern politics while playing a rollicking game of cards. “I see your abortion pill ban . . .” says one player, “and I raise you armed white supremacists protesting drag queen story hour in Ohio!”

Maybe if you and your friends have been worrying and talking about the patriarchal death spiral for decades, you’ve built up more stamina than the average person. You’ve probably learned by your 60s that you can’t stop the spiral, or stop fretting about it either. You have, though, discovered that solidarity can really help (even if you’re not the most sociable person)—and that you can show the rest of us that working the worry into a game of cards with old friends once in a while is more than fine.

“Where had her youthful idealism gone?” Alison asks herself at one point, a question in the air these days. Bechdel’s trajectory suggests an answer: Idealism is still simmering, especially in a rich life lived among others, and it’s still there partly because it isn’t necessarily a drop-everything call to gear up for crisis. Even as Bechdel gets more famous, and the world keeps spinning forward and backward, her real life hasn’t changed much. She has remained a semi-loner who sticks to a rigid routine in rural Vermont, which includes making morning coffee for Holly; tirelessly photographing herself in positions she intends to draw; working long hours at her desk, only sometimes productively—and watching her world.

From the July/August 2014 issue: Why are all the cartoon mothers dead?

A graphic novelist, unlike a regular novelist, has to leave room for the pictures. The neurotic inner monologue can take up only so much of the page. The cartoon Alison is situated in a space outside herself, with Holly, and goats, and neighbors. On that last, restful page of *Spent*, the caption reads: “And she knows that whatever happens in those coming days, she will get by with a little help from her annoying, tenderhearted, and utterly luminous friends.” Mind you, these are not Bechdel’s real friends. They are creations she’s lived with for decades. In that way, though, they are just as concrete as her actual friends, and still standing after all these years, just like the trees, the reeds, and the birds. Still standing.

* Lead image: Excerpted from the book Spent, provided courtesy of Mariner Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. © 2025 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission.

Image 1: Excerpted from the book Dykes to Watch Out For, provided courtesy of Mariner Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. © 1983 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission.

Image 2: Excerpted from the book Fun Home, provided courtesy of Mariner Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission.

This article appears in the [June 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Secret to Happiness.”

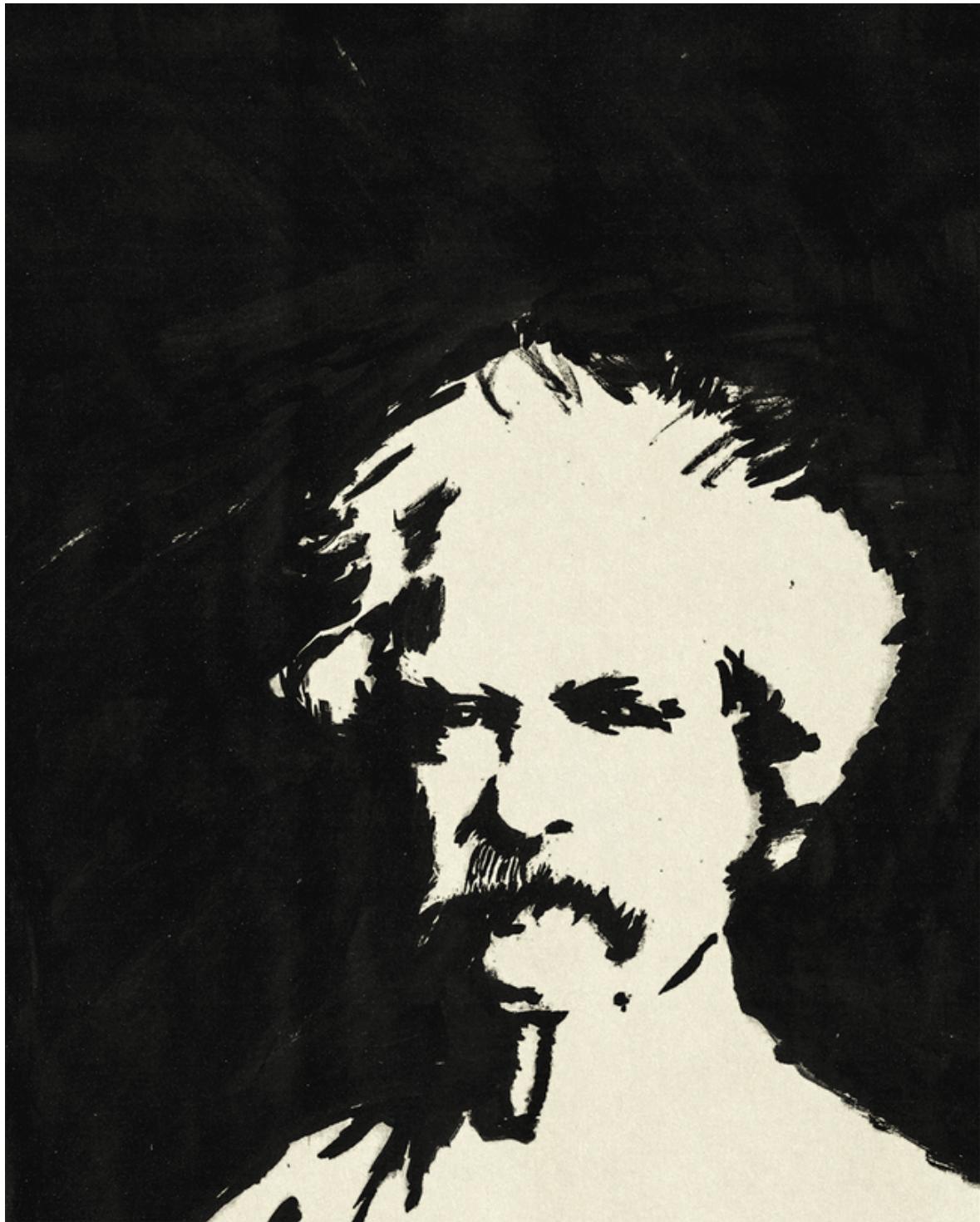
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The Not-at-All-Funny Life of Mark Twain

Ron Chernow's biography dwells more on the wreck of a man than on his sublimely comic work.

by Graeme Wood



In his last, most pathetic years, Mark Twain threw himself behind the crackpot theory that the true author of Shakespeare's plays may have been Francis Bacon. The penultimate book that Twain published in his lifetime, [Is Shakespeare Dead?](#) (1909), asked his readers to consider how few solid

biographical details existed about Shakespeare the man, and how much critics had inferred from so little. They had built, Twain wrote, “an Eiffel Tower of artificialities rising sky-high from a very flat and very thin foundation of inconsequential facts.” The literary critic Northrop Frye, who dismissed the Bacon theory, nevertheless had a wry aside of his own about extrapolating too freely from scattered biographical details and the unflattering portrait that is the only surviving image of Shakespeare. “We know nothing about Shakespeare,” Frye wrote, “except a signature or two, a few addresses, a will, a baptismal register, and the picture of a man who is clearly an idiot.”

Ron Chernow’s [Mark Twain](#) forces a similar conclusion about its subject: clearly an idiot, and a born sucker. This conclusion will shock anyone who knows Twain only through his writing, in which the author is wise and witty and, above all, devastating in his portrayal of frauds, cretins, and sententious bores. In life, Twain (1835–1910) was quite different. He was gullible, emotionally immature, and prone to shoveling money into obvious scams. Twain therefore presents a tantalizing challenge for literary biography: to explain how someone able to spot and depict frailties of conscience, character, and judgment in others could be so powerless to correct them in himself. Forced to choose, [as Yeats wrote](#), “perfection of the life, or of the work,” Twain left the former a total shambles—and then for good measure was struck by a series of family tragedies that would have been unbearable even for a much less self-destructive man.

Twain bequeathed to history much more than “a signature or two.” In addition to a whole archive of notebooks, articles, and unpublished or unfinished manuscripts, he dictated half a million words of autobiography, and he appeared in public so often that even if he’d never written or dictated anything, many thousands of others could have supplied accounts of his existence. Chernow is the latest in a long line of biographers undaunted by this surplus of Twainiana (a line so long, in fact, that he is [not even the only recent biographer named Ron](#)).

Chernow is not a literary scholar—he is best known for his lives of American political, military, and business figures—which may explain his relative neglect of Twain’s literary output (more than 30 books published in his lifetime, and thousands of additional pages to keep the printers busy

more than a century later). The biography contains no new interpretations of Twain's novels, nor much to explain the splendid originality of his travel writing. Instead, Chernow devotes a hefty portion of his 1,039 pages (excluding notes) to Twain's personal tribulations, a depressing series of bungles and calamities starting in the author's middle age.

Twain's exposure to bad ideas had begun much earlier. His father, the lawyer and judge John Marshall Clemens, had sunk the family's money into land in Tennessee, and though the plan went nowhere, the impulse toward wild speculation seems to have imprinted on young Samuel Langhorne Clemens. Later Sam was, Chernow says, "blinded by greed," and convinced beyond evidence and reason that his schemes would eventually succeed. In fact, the Clemens family, having settled in Hannibal, Missouri, grew poorer. Perhaps more important, Twain's childhood unfolded in a part of the country soon to be defeated and never to recover fully during his lifetime.

[Read: Mark Twain's work from *The Atlantic*'s archive](#)

The four years of his early 20s that he spent as a steamboat captain on the Mississippi were nevertheless an idyll. "The older and more famous he became and the grander his horizons," Chernow says, "the more he pined for the vanished paradise of his early years." An occupational hazard of writing about Twain is that the subject always finds a way to preempt his biographer and say it better himself. Even if Twain cannot be bested, he can still be quoted, and Chernow does so liberally. On a brief return to the river in 1882, Twain wrote that he indulged in the "dream that the years had not slipped away; that there had been no war, no mining days, no literary adventures; that I was still a pilot, happy and care-free as I had been twenty years before."

Twain's journalism eventually brought him riches. Happiness was permanently elusive. The most remarkable aspect of his southern youth is how decisively he abandoned it, first at the age of 25, to go out West as a newspaperman in Nevada, and later to reside in New York, Connecticut, and Europe as an established writer. The Mark Twain closely associated with Hannibal rarely returned to it.

By the time Twain began writing *Huckleberry Finn*, he had given up on the South and transformed from barefoot Missouri rascal into rich and famous New Englander.

At 34, for love and money, Twain married into a wealthy abolitionist family and settled in Hartford. “I never saw any place where morality and huckleberries flourished as they do here,” he said. (According to Michael Patrick Hearn’s magisterial annotated 2001 edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain never saw a huckleberry until he moved to Hartford. Huckleberries and morality are equally scarce there today.) His newlywed days, Chernow writes, were “the happiest period of his life.” With money, part of it his wife’s, Twain began to live “like a mogul,” Chernow notes, “without the slightest trace of guilt.”

Twain’s first big success, [*The Innocents Abroad*](#) (1869), was written while accompanying American pilgrims to Europe and the Holy Land. It is the seminal and unsurpassed work of American travel writing. The country had declared its political independence in 1776, and Ralph Waldo Emerson had [declared its intellectual independence](#) in 1837. *The Innocents Abroad* is written with a new curiosity and sass, unburdened by any lingering sense of inferiority to Europe. It is also, in its treatment of Twain’s fellow passengers (“philistine killjoys,” Chernow calls them), freighted with the question of who these newly independent people are, and what—if not vassals of the Old World—they should be. The book sold better than anything else Twain wrote, and it established a steady revenue stream from the lecture circuit for the rest of his life.

Twain needed to leave a place in order to come back to it, and the greatest case of productive exile was [*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*](#) (1884). It was written over seven years. The main value of learning about Twain’s life during its composition is the discovery of just how estranged from his youth he had become. He wrote his memoir [*Life on the Mississippi*](#) (1883) during the same period, and the two books gestated together as fraternal twins. Twain had found that the romance of the river had dissipated, and could be summoned only in memory and dreams. In *Huckleberry Finn*, what appears to be romantic nostalgia is in fact the death of the romantic instinct and shedding of defunct fantasies. By the time he began writing the novel, Twain had given up on the South and transformed permanently from barefoot

Missouri rascal into rich and famous New Englander. The glorious opening of Chapter 19, about the Mississippi passing by “so quiet and smooth and lovely,” is a poetic vision evoked only so that Twain can then evoke its loss: not passing by so much as passing away. The end of that illusion had left Twain spiritually homeless, just as it left Huck’s conscience untethered, and the boy himself adrift with the fugitive slave Jim.

Chernow at times seems almost afraid of applying too much interpretation to Twain’s writing—as if aware that literary criticism is not his sport, and that he is better off when recounting names, dates, locations, and events. He is, however, unsparing when Twain evades hard questions. Twain’s transformation from southerner to northerner was never complete. He married a northerner and settled in the North. But Chernow shows that the extent of his former prejudice, as a product of the South, was greater than one might presume, given Twain’s later eminence as an opponent of racism. Twain’s early writing and private letters and diaries contain vile language and sentiments. “For all the progress Twain made in his racial awareness, he never achieved perfection,” Chernow writes. “Racial epithets could still pop up in his letters with dismaying frequency.”

[From the April 2024 issue: A bloody retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*](#)

During the Civil War, Twain saw brief, ineffectual combat in a Confederate militia. He atoned for this service by making grand gestures of solidarity with the Union he’d once fought. He became such a friend of the North that he was “the speaker of choice for many Union army reunions.” Chernow doesn’t doubt the sincerity of Twain’s conversion, but he sees where Twain’s humor can be a form of deflection. When he wrote about his war record in “[The Private History of a Campaign That Failed](#)” (1885), he ridiculed himself and mocked war in general. But the self-deprecation avoided a full reckoning with the moral abomination of the Confederacy—about which he says nothing specific. Chernow calls this deflection “the sure sign of an unresolved conflict” in Twain, and deems the essay “unsatisfying because it is devoid of any political or ideological content.”

Twain grew up hankering for money, but the money arrived when he could take little satisfaction from it. He is the funniest writer America has ever produced, and Chernow has an awful task as a biographer, which is to

portray him from midlife onward as a suffering wreck. “What any biography of Mark Twain demands is his inimitable voice,” he writes. The Twain of the printed page is irreverent and quotable, but the private Twain is petulant, self-pitying, narcissistic, and afflicted with tragedy and misery of his own making and of God’s. *Mark Twain* is funny. *Mark Twain* is funny the way the Book of Job is funny.

If the life of William S. Burroughs is the sum of his addictions, and the life of Norman Mailer the sum of his quarrels, then the life of Mark Twain could be told by listing what Chernow calls his “lifelong fantasies of king-size wealth and countless schemes to attain it.” These schemes nearly all tanked, and often ended in recrimination. Twain was “insanely litigious” in his efforts to seek recompense when he imagined himself wronged, as he often did, including in petty disputes with his own publishers. The late 19th century was a boom time for mad inventors, scam artists, and fast-talking salesmen. Twain was defenseless before the promises of these types.

His credulity led to misadventures the details of which are so picayune that Chernow’s emphasis on them can be maddening. Only when one realizes how much time and energy Twain himself devoted to the boondoggles does the emphasis feel merited. Twain invented ridiculous devices that no one wanted (“a bed clamp that would prevent children from kicking off their blankets; a vest that would require no suspenders”). He created awful board games. “*Mark Twain’s Memory-Builder*” was meant to help the player remember dates, using pegs in a cribbage-like board. “The forbidding-looking board,” Chernow writes, “had all the allure of a railway schedule.” Chernow quotes such thrilling details as Twain’s specifications for the proper depths of the peg holes (“about a quarter of an inch”). Twain’s quest to get the peg depth right distracted him from the timely completion of *Huckleberry Finn*.

From the April 1897 issue: Mark Twain as an interpreter of American character

Twain’s biggest blunder was an investment in [the Paige Compositor](#), a typesetting machine that he thought would become the industry standard. Starting in 1880, he slowly blew his family’s savings on it. He relentlessly hyped it to investors as “the most marvelous invention ever contrived by

man,” and its creator, James W. Paige, as “the Shakespeare of mechanical invention.” His judgment about this mechanical Shakespeare was as impaired as his later judgment of the actual Shakespeare. The machine never worked—at one point it was declared functional, but on closer inspection it could not typeset a period at the end of a sentence—and this failure provoked constant stress. Twain and his loved ones became, Chernow writes, financial “captives of the monstrous machine.” Even upon realizing that one scheme had come to nothing, Twain would promptly embark on another. He begged Andrew Carnegie to invest in a drink called Plasmon—little more than reconstituted skim milk—and claimed that a pound of Plasmon powder “contains the nutriment of 16 pounds of the best beef.”

The world tour that became the basis for Twain’s second-best travel book, *Following the Equator* (1897), was undertaken to settle debts due to the failure of the Paige Compositor investment. But mostly the financial hardship did not spur him to write more. Instead it drained his morale and delayed or diminished his work. It is as if Philip Roth cut back on writing novels during the 1990s to devote himself to selling SlimFast and creating an alternative to Microsoft Word. Twain knew that his schemes had become a problem. Everyone knew. Chernow quotes a *Washington Post* article suggesting that a sane investor should watch Twain, and do the opposite—but he was incorrigible. “I quite understand that I am confessing myself a fool,” he wrote, when recounting the Paige Compositor scheme. “But that is no matter, the reader would find it out anyway, as I go along.”

Twain said that life is “a tragedy; with a dash of comedy distributed through it, here and there, to heighten the pain and magnify it, by contrast.”

Reading this narrative, I cringed plenty but laughed out loud only once. In the early 1890s, Twain visited the scientific workshop of the Serbian eccentric Nikola Tesla. Tesla had built a platform that “shook with pleasing vibrations” and allegedly offered therapeutic effects as well as (he warned) occasional involuntary laxative ones. “After Twain had stood on the platform awhile, Tesla discreetly nudged him to dismount,” Chernow writes. Twain, having much too good a time, repeatedly declined, “then stiffened with sudden alarm.” If there is a more wonderful literary anecdote than Twain—let us imagine him wearing his trademark white serge suit—jiggle in a mad scientist’s lab while soiling his pants, I have yet to read it.

Would that all life could be filled with such tomfoolery. Twain's final decades were his Job years, the opposite of quiet and smooth and lovely. Twain's wife, Olivia Langdon, bore him four children, only one of whom escaped a wretched end. Throughout their marriage, Olivia was intermittently bedridden, with a nervous illness that Chernow and other biographers suggest was psychosomatic. Twain's only son died of diphtheria at 18 months, and Twain unfairly blamed himself. (He had taken the boy on a carriage ride in cold weather.) His daughter Susy died at 24 of meningitis. Olivia died in 1904. Their daughter Jean suffered from chronic epileptic seizures, for which Twain tirelessly sought, and never found, effective treatment. In 1909, Jean was found dead in a cold bath at 29.

"He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune," Francis Bacon wrote, under his own name, with Twainian pith. These agonizing deaths were made, if anything, worse by Twain's fame and money problems. Olivia's family's wealth gave him not one but two fortunes to squander, and her family's religious conservatism made the possibility of bankruptcy a moral as well as fiscal event. In 1891, the family's accounts had so declined that they had to move out of their Hartford mansion. They spent more than a decade traveling in Europe, seeking cures for their illnesses and hoping for a reversal of luck that never came. In 1906, when dictating his autobiography and commenting on a friend's death, Twain said that life is "a tragedy; with a dash of comedy distributed through it, here and there, to heighten the pain and magnify it, by contrast."

These final years are sometimes treated as a lost period, because Twain's writing grew bitter and cynical and unpalatable to those more interested in pleasing escapades. "Mark Twain had given the world laughter and now had gotten only misery in return," Chernow writes. Twain has long been accused of giving *Huck Finn* an overly pat, comic ending. His later work does not suffer from this problem. Even *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), which starts like an adolescent adventure, ends with its hero, Hank Morgan, broken and demoralized, and his family lost.

Yet the morbid final phase of Twain's writing, though always less popular (in part because much of it was unpublished during his life), is to my taste still sublime. Chernow follows the pattern of most biographers in giving this work less attention than the more chipper earlier books—which is a pity,

because the later work also reflects the Twain best illuminated by Chernow's biography and its emphasis on Twain's most forlorn years.

"I have no special regard for Satan," Chernow quotes Twain remarking, "but I can at least claim that I have no prejudice against him. It may even be that I lean a little his way, on account of his not having a fair show." By then Twain had several reasons to believe that both his favor toward Satan and Olivia's favor toward God were unreciprocated. Nearly all the gifts showered upon them had morphed into curses: The wealth vanished, the children were struck dead, and the fame transformed into shame. After Susy died suddenly in 1896, Twain wrote an essay, quoted at length by Chernow, about the sick trickery of the Almighty. "He never does a kindness. When He seems to do one, it is a trap which He is setting," Twain writes. "He gives you riches, merely as a trap; it is to quadruple the bitterness of the poverty which He has planned for you."

From the August 1966 issue: Arthur Schlesinger Jr. on Mark Twain

This streak of anti-theodicy is the engine of Twain's posthumous novel, *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916). Twain had abandoned in manuscript several chilling tales, later stitched together by his official biographer, Albert Paine. Set hundreds of years ago in Austria, they involve encounters between children and a wandering figure who reveals himself, nonchalantly, as Satan. Satan is a lover of strangeness and coincidence—of exposing the happiness of humans as a prelude to their misery, and sometimes their misery as a prelude to happiness. With a shrug, he will grant wishes or cause misfortune. Those who meet him achieve an unwanted enlightenment about their place in the world.

Twain concludes one version of the story with the mortal narrator's recognition that the contradictions of existence are so "frankly and hysterically insane" that the world must be amiss. How "strange," Satan tells the narrator, that he could believe in a God "who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body"—and not see that the only world that could accommodate these discrepancies is "a grotesque and foolish dream." Then Satan vanishes, abandoning the narrator in a measureless ocean of space and time. He "left

me appalled,” the book ends, “for I knew, and realized, that all he had said was true.”

This exchange forms a disorienting end to a disorienting book—and indeed a disorienting life. Chernow claims that *The Mysterious Stranger* “ultimately sags beneath the weight of Twain’s grievances, obsessions, and dogmatic opinions.” But Chernow’s own book is evidence that Twain earned his grievances, obsessions, and dogmatic opinions. It is cruelly ironic that Twain, the foremost American dealer in irony, would himself be tortured by ironies: blessings that turn out to be curses, curses that turn out to be blessings; Cassandra-like ability to see stupidity in others, but failure to detect the same in himself.

This article appears in the [June 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Not at All Funny Life of Mark Twain.”

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Why Do Collaborators Do It?

In a new novel, Daniel Kehlmann considers why the director G. W. Pabst worked with the Nazis.

by Gal Beckerman



Daniel Kehlmann in Berlin, April 2025 (Photograph by Julia Sellmann for The Atlantic)

“I don’t know what I would have done.” When the novelist Daniel Kehlmann hears Germans talk about the Nazi era, that is what many of them say. We were sitting in a Manhattan café at the end of February, discussing his latest book, *The Director*, about the Austrian filmmaker G. W. Pabst’s collaboration with the Third Reich. Kehlmann, himself born in Germany and raised in Austria, wasn’t about to dispute the truth of the sentiment. But he sensed a cop-out in this confession—an anticipation that compromise is possible, even probable. “It’s kind of a moral capitulation that masks as being humble.”

The idea that complicity is not a line that one jumps across, but rather an accumulation of rationalizations, fascinates Kehlmann: the wishful thinking that the threat is sure to end soon; the worries about how best to keep one’s children safe; the need to continue working; the self-protective modesty of telling oneself, *What difference could I possibly make?* Yet whenever he considered depicting the Nazi period, he was deterred by the limitations of conventional storytelling: The “easy way of writing about victims—they’re in a terrible situation, and bad stuff happens to them, and then they either escape or they don’t”—struck him as boring, especially given the firsthand family memories he’d grown up with as the son of a Jewish father who had survived the war years in Vienna. What seemed far more interesting was the question of what happens in the gray zone between victim and perpetrator.

Kehlmann never intended to focus on historical fiction, and he has written a number of contemporary novels as well as plays and television shows. But seeking out figures from the past who allow him to explore ideas became something of a trademark almost two decades ago, after the unexpected mega-success, in 2005, of *Measuring the World*. For that novel, he fictionalized the lives of two early-19th-century German men of science, the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt and the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss, both obsessed in a cultlike way by a drive to capture nature in all its dimensions. The book sold more than 2.3 million copies in Germany, making Kehlmann a literary celebrity there and bumping *Harry Potter* from the top of the best-seller list.

Great art might warrant “moral compromise,” Kehlmann said. “But how far do you go?”

Half a dozen novels later, *The Director* draws on history closer to home. Kehlmann's father—who survived the war because his parents used false documents that classified them as half Jewish, and paid bribes—would describe daily life under the Nazis for his son, such as the neighbor who welcomed her husband home from work with a “Heil Hitler, Papi!” He also described seeing “people beaten to death with metal sticks,” Kehlmann told me: His father spent three months at the Maria Lanzendorf concentration camp after being rounded up in a raid on a party of Viennese resistance activists, and was released only when the parents of a fellow prisoner resorted to a bribe. This living history left Kehlmann aware of how moral crevasses, narrow and wide, can form. “In a dictatorship,” he said, “corruption is actually often your savior.”

Pabst’s story, which he came across while researching silent films of the time, offered just the kind of ambiguity he sought. In 1933, Pabst fled Germany, like most of the country’s creative class. But then, improbably, shockingly, he returned to the Third Reich in 1939, directing films during the war—including one pretty good one, *Paracelsus*—under the supervision of Joseph Goebbels’s ministry of propaganda. What brought Pabst back and why he allowed himself to be co-opted by the Nazis, though, remain a mystery. In a report for the occupying Americans about Germany’s cultural figures, the playwright Carl Zuckmayer concluded his brief on Pabst by admitting, “I have no key for unlocking his behavior.” The gaps in Pabst’s story provided Kehlmann with the chance to ask a compelling question. Great art might warrant “moral compromise,” he told me. “But how far do you go?”

The German title of Kehlmann’s novel is *Lichtspiel*, an old-fashioned synonym for *cinema* that literally translates to “play of light,” and brings to mind the swift flicker between right and wrong. “Every single step he takes is kind of defensible, but he still gets to a place that’s completely unacceptable” is how Kehlmann described his idea of Pabst’s odyssey to me. Working with a biography that needed much filling in, Kehlmann decided, in each instance, to make his Pabst a man who never actively chooses to embrace his Nazi benefactors. Instead, he allows his resistance to them to steadily erode. Even to describe how he lands in the Reich, Kehlmann took from his research the most benign interpretation: Pabst had made a quick trip

back to Austria to check on an aging relative and then found himself trapped.

The Nazi world Pabst enters is rendered on the page in the expressionist tones of the German silent movies that Pabst, alongside his fellow German auteurs Fritz Lang and F. W. Murnau, transformed into high art in the 1920s. Kehlmann moves among his characters' points of view as if he were manning a roving camera; he even brings in the perspectives of two women whom Pabst made stars, Greta Garbo and the flapper beauty Louise Brooks (the latter cast in what is perhaps his most famous and accomplished film, *Pandora's Box*).

Kehlmann wanted the book to feel in some ways like those emotionally heightened films, with their exaggerated, dramatic effects. In the pivotal scene where Pabst is first offered his Faustian bargain (whatever he needs to make films as long as he does so under Nazi supervision), Goebbels's office seems to elongate at one point, and time loops inexplicably: The minister enters, sits down, and then enters again, and "the two men became one man." Horror and comedy also become one. The pair of government agents who come to seize Pabst's screenwriter, Kurt Heuser, are full of the bumbling wit of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

"What's this about?" Heuser asks.
"Everyone asks that," says Karsunke.
"Always," says Basler.
"Always, always, always," says Karsunke.
"And yet we never answer that."

Kehlmann's ridiculous Nazis, he told me, are inspired by those in Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* and, more recently, [Taika Waititi's Jojo Rabbit](#). His protagonist's moral dilemma, though, never becomes a joke.

Leni Riefenstahl, the director whose propaganda masterpieces for Hitler included *Triumph of the Will*, appears in *The Director* as a comic-book incarnation of evil ("the villainous monster that I think she was," Kehlmann said). But her machinations also serve as an extreme example of complicity against which Pabst's more subtly evolving behavior can be measured. He's enlisted as a consultant on her film *Lowlands* and discovers, in addition to

her imperiousness and narcissism, that she is using concentration-camp inmates as extras—[something that Riefenstahl actually did](#), and that Pabst may have witnessed during the few days he worked with her on the film. Kehlmann has Pabst realize who they are only after he has given the group of emaciated, thirsty men acting instructions. His assistant, an invented character named Franz Wilzek, informs him that they've been brought from Maxglan, a concentration camp that held Roma prisoners. "There's nothing we can do," Wilzek tells him. "We didn't make it happen. We can't keep it from happening. It has nothing to do with us."

Pabst wanted to say something, but his voice failed him. He saw the gaunt faces in front of him, the wide eyes, the mouths. He heard the instructions he had given: look over there, raise your head, things like that, and what else had he said? Suddenly it was unbearable to remember.

"We have to keep going."

Pabst didn't move.

"Come on," Wilzek said gently. He put his hand on Pabst's shoulder. Ordinarily, Pabst should not have tolerated such a gesture, but at that moment he was grateful.

"Nothing can be done," said Wilzek.

"No," said Pabst. "I guess not." He managed to stand up.

The last of the three films that Pabst made under the Nazis, *The Molander Case*, was lost. Kehlmann told me that he has read Pabst's notes, but [no reel has ever been found](#). We do know that it was shot in Prague just as the Russian army was approaching. As *The Director* is winding down, Kehlmann offers his own version of *Molander*'s production and adds a detail that reveals Pabst to have become no better than Riefenstahl: He, too, uses extras from a nearby camp.

The scene finds him in something like a dissociative state, desperate to finish his film before the Red Army arrives, but needing 750 extras, and strongly hinting, without saying the words, where they can be found. The sequence to be filmed takes place in a concert hall, and when the inmates arrive, they play the audience, row after row of spectators costumed in evening wear—"an old man with shrewd, piercing eyes, next to him a woman of indeterminate age wearing a silk headscarf, probably to cover a

shaved head.” This is a quiet atrocity. “No one,” Pabst murmurs to himself. “Not a single person. Will be harmed because of us. No one has been ... The film must be finished.”

The fact that *Molander* is lost was a big help, Kehlmann told me, because he needed to imagine it as a masterpiece, though Pabst’s notes on the film suggest that it probably wasn’t. In *The Director*, one imperative allows Pabst to avoid facing the moral gravity of what he is doing, even when it is staring at him through 750 pairs of eyes: the need to make his art. Kehlmann said that inventing the detail about Pabst using concentration-camp inmates as extras (he had Theresienstadt in mind, he told me) gave him pause; he was, after all, using the name and story of a real person. But then he began to consider the widespread use of forced labor in the wartime Reich, including in the film industry. The big studios, such as Barrandov and Babelsberg, were surrounded by barracks packed with imprisoned Eastern Europeans, including children as young as 10, who would build sets, carry cables, and do other menial work. Pabst must have made use of them too, Kehlmann said. The leap to imagining him bringing in extras from Theresienstadt would not be that great.

As a novelist, and as someone who could understand the pull of the creative support the Nazis offered Pabst—in an art form like film, which is possible only with resources and infrastructure—Kehlmann felt that he could fairly represent Pabst, even with all his flaws. The incremental ways that Pabst moved toward that final travesty, and his muddled sense of how far he was going, perceiving his own actions at certain moments as if through a camera’s lens, all seemed somehow comprehensible. Which merely reinforced Kehlmann’s awareness of how easily one slips into moral compromise. He is leery of claiming that novels teach readers anything, he said, but if he learned a lesson from Pabst’s story, it was that “the best way to avoid all these gray areas of complicity is to not enter the gray area at all if you can.” As a counterexample, Kehlmann pointed to Thomas Mann. Here was a writer who insisted as early as 1933 that no matter the inducements, or how strong the nostalgia, “I cannot return to Germany until justice and freedom have preceded me there.”

[From the December 2024 issue: George Packer on Thomas Mann’s startlingly relevant novel](#)

But Kehlmann did want to grant Pabst a glimmer of artistic redemption, or at least the possibility of it. He sent me a YouTube link to Pabst's 1943 film, *Paracelsus*, the one pretty good film in his wartime oeuvre, and wanted to make sure that I noticed one scene in particular. The movie is about a famous Renaissance-era alchemist who was ahead of his time in his holistic and herbal approach to medicine. In the film, Paracelsus confronts the local authorities as a plague approaches, demanding that they lock the gates to the town. The cinematic style is naturalistic and conventional, except for what happens at the 45-minute mark.

The plague has arrived, represented by a jester figure who is infected with it. He begins to dance—strange, jerky movements—and soon everyone around him is following along, as if entranced. Their eyes go vacant, their arms flail, and they begin a frantic parade of death. The whole sequence looks like the zombie dance in Michael Jackson's "Thriller," as interpreted by Martha Graham. It is eerie and beautiful, and then, on Paracelsus's command, it all stops. "Have we come to the madhouse?" he asks. He identifies the jester as the bringer of the plague; we hear the sound of a scythe being sharpened and we see, for a second, the face of death, a skull for a head, appear on the screen. And then the film returns to its normal mode.

In *The Director*, a character modeled on the British writer P. G. Wodehouse, who was also for a time trapped in Nazi Germany, attends the 1943 premiere of *Paracelsus* in Salzburg and is dumbfounded by the scene. "For a moment I doubted whether this was something I had actually seen—could I have dreamed it? How dark it had been, how bizarre and masterly—how German, really." I, too, couldn't help but wonder whether Pabst had intended it to be subversive: people possessed by a sick jester who leads them to death? Watching this surreal swerve, I suddenly realized that the movie had come out the same year that the German army was defeated at Stalingrad and the Warsaw Ghetto uprising took place.

The Wodehouse character couldn't say for certain that Pabst was trying to include a message to his Third Reich viewers. Nor can Kehlmann. "The thing about subversiveness in a real dictatorship is it has to be so ambiguous that it's not even clear it's subversive," he told me. *The Director* is full of such inconclusiveness. The timing of Kehlmann's U.S. book release, though, almost inevitably invites a quest for a subtext (and he did start thinking

about Pabst during the first Trump administration). Kehlmann was a little overwhelmed by the connections. “I mean, I like that my books are relevant,” he said, “but I would prefer it to be less relevant in the current situation in America.”

Still, I couldn’t resist asking him, somewhat desperately, how one should approach the test of life under totalitarianism, if the verdict that “I don’t know what I would have done” signals moral resignation. The only correct answer to this intellectual exercise, Kehlmann replied, is to say instead, quite simply, “I hope I would have done the right thing.”

This article appears in the [June 2025](#) print edition with the headline “From Hollywood to Hitler.”

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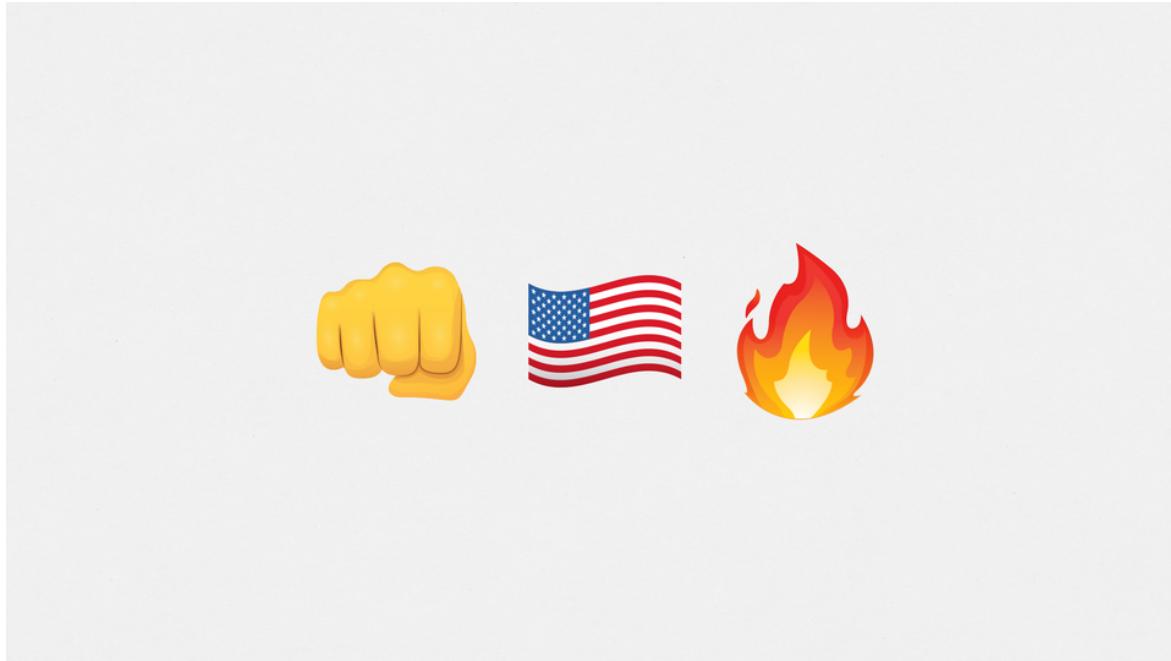
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Signalgate, Trump, and The Atlantic

Denial and attack have worked exceedingly well for the president. But there are limits.

by Jeffrey Goldberg



This month's cover story is written by two of our newest reporters, Ashley Parker and Michael Scherer. Both came to *The Atlantic* from *The Washington Post*, where they covered the White House and national politics. As one might expect, they have developed complicated and intriguing ideas about the brain of Donald Trump and the nature of Trumpism.

A simple question animates their story: How did Trump rise from political ruin in 2021 to seize the commanding heights of government and the world economy? One is not required to admire Trump to acknowledge that he has become the most consequential American political figure of the 21st century, and that we all live inside a reality he has made—and makes anew each day. As you will read, Trump himself has a capacious understanding of his power. “The first time, I had two things to do—run the country and survive; I had all these crooked guys,” he told Michael and Ashley. He was referring, it seems, to anyone who’d investigated him. “And the second time,” he added, “I run the country and the world.”

[From the June 2025 issue: Ashley Parker and Michael Scherer on Donald Trump’s plan to change America forever](#)

Covering Trump is a challenge for White House reporters. It is true that he never stops talking, and so he provides the press with limitless fodder. But it is also true that he tries to intimidate reporters—and, crucially, the people who own news organizations—in ways that are clearly dangerous to democracy. I reported on the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and though some stories displeased them and periodically made them angry, they responded with the self-restraint one traditionally associates with the presidency. Trump, by contrast, makes his feelings known in visceral and cutting ways, with the intent to humiliate and intimidate.

Except when he doesn’t. I recently joined Michael and Ashley in the Oval Office for a meeting with the president. The odd circumstances of this interview are described in their cover story (also described: the new decor of the Oval Office). What I found in this particular meeting was a Trump who was low-key, attentive, and eager to convince us that he is good at his job and good for the country. It isn’t easy to escape the tractor beam of his charisma, but somehow we managed, and we asked him what needed to be asked. But squaring Trump the Charmer with the Orcish Trump we more frequently see is difficult. Ashley and Michael describe, in sometimes amusing detail, their encounters with Trump, and I will spoil nothing more here. But at one point in the reporting process, Trump posted on the social-media platform he owns that Ashley is a “Radical Left Lunatic” (she is not)

and that Michael “has never written a fair story about me, only negative, and virtually always LIES” (also false).

It is our task at *The Atlantic* not to be bullied by these sorts of attacks. No one here is scared of Trump—and, in any case, we have a job to do. The president first called *The Atlantic* a “failing magazine” nearly five years ago, after I reported that he had slandered veterans and fallen soldiers as “suckers” and “losers.” (I will note for posterity that *The Atlantic* was not profitable then, but is now, and has doubled its number of subscribers in the intervening years.)

Recently, Trump made this same sort of attack after I was inadvertently included in a Signal group chat with senior administration officials. The chat, which focused on upcoming military strikes against terrorists in Yemen, included the vice president, the CIA director, and much of the president’s Cabinet. The outlandish details of this episode—labeled, inevitably, Signalgate—are well known. What interests me about Signalgate as much as its inherent absurdity is the administration’s response to the controversy.

[Read: The Trump administration accidentally texted me its war plans](#)

In our cover story (reported as the Signal controversy was unfolding), Ashley and Michael describe in absorbing detail Trump’s belief, acquired in his four-year Joe Biden-induced exile, that no stove is too hot to touch, and also his conviction, refined after much experimentation, that normative reality does not exist.

This second notion governs Trump’s answer to anyone who challenges him. A different sort of president would have responded to the revelations of Signalgate, in which his national-security team did just about the stupidest thing imaginable, by fixing the problem directly and quickly. First, acknowledge the mistake. Then, apologize, promise to investigate, and offer a plan to keep something like this from happening again. End of story.

Not so with Signalgate, or anything else. The administration responded immediately, resuscitating its “failing magazine” line of attack. Trump said of me, “I’ve known him for a long time, and he is truly a sleazeball”;

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth called me a “deceitful and highly discredited so-called journalist,” and Michael Waltz, the national security adviser (who was the one who mistakenly included me in the chat), said that I was “the bottom scum of journalists” and a “loser.” (The episode called to mind an earlier moment, when Trump described me as a “horrible, radical-left lunatic,” and one of my children noted, with some amusement, “You’re not left-wing.”) Waltz, whom I previously knew to be a smart person, also alleged that I had “sucked” my number into his phone. The name-calling matters less than the fact that Trump and his coterie argued, against all available evidence, that they had revealed no secrets and done nothing wrong.

Denial and attack have worked exceedingly well for Trump. As Michael and Ashley note in their story, Trump’s decision to foment the January 6 insurrection would normally have ended his political career, but it didn’t. Trump called the insurrection a “day of love,” and his decision, at the outset of his second term, to pardon or commute the sentences of the insurrectionists—transforming even those who assaulted police officers into victims of malignant prosecutors—only made him more powerful.

But there are limits. The limits come when people choose steadfastness over cowardice. Too many Republican senators live in fear of Trump. There are [media companies that have paid obeisance to his administration](#) (Jeff Bezos’s *Post* among them), and law firms and corporations and even universities. These institutions are making strange and bad choices. After we published our first story on the Signal controversy, the Trump administration accused us of lying; it said we were trafficking in falsehoods, that there was nothing sensitive or secret about the material its members had transmitted.

The administration’s knee-jerk response [forced us to release the Signal chat](#), which showed conclusively that Waltz, Hegseth, and others were doing all sorts of things that serious national-security professionals would never do.

The point of journalism is to hold the powerful to account. By encouraging our journalists to go where the truth takes them (and by hiring stellar reporters such as Ashley and Michael), I believe that we are fulfilling *The Atlantic*’s mission.

Our colleague Caitlin Flanagan often says that the truth bats last. I believe she is right.

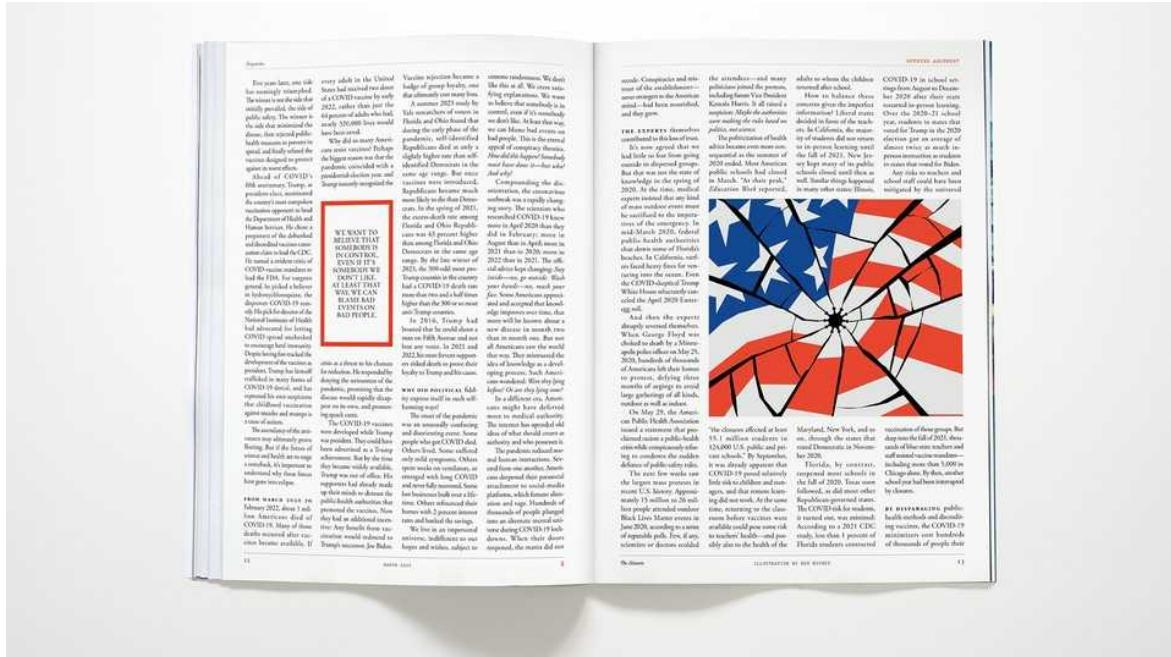
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The Power of a Good Suit

Readers respond to our March issue and more.



Why the COVID Deniers Won

In the March issue, [David Frum considered lessons from the pandemic and its aftermath.](#)

David Frum asks why so many Americans resisted vaccines, and finds his answer in political strife, misinformation, and irrational responses. But rational mistrust of the health-care system also lay behind that resistance.

COVID came on the heels of the opioid crisis. Many people, especially in red states, were suffering from an addiction to a class of medicines once promoted as cutting-edge science. The opioid crisis is but one example of ethical failings in American health care. The essence of the Hippocratic oath —to place patient welfare over every other motive—has been assailed by incentives to both over- and undertreat, costing citizens time, blood, and money. Although I hope, with Frum, that the future belongs to those who help their country, we need to first agree that it is dead wrong for anyone, in any way, to profit from hurting people.

Sarah M. Brownsberger
Bellingham, Wash.

I really appreciate David Frum's writing, but I think this article brushed over valid skepticism of the government in a moment of crisis. The official advice was always presented as an edict. I didn't appreciate being told not to ask questions. Similarly, I understood why some were nervous about receiving rushed vaccines with brand-new mRNA technology. I would love to see both sides of this debate conduct an open postmortem. That would be good for all of us.

Mike Bergman
Minneapolis, Minn.

Thank you to David Frum for his analysis of why the COVID deniers won. But as a physician, I believe Frum missed one of the major reasons denying COVID paid off for Donald Trump. This factor is medical, not social, and if we are to avoid an even bigger disaster during the next pandemic, it's crucial that we understand it.

Trump lucked out in part because of the nature of the coronavirus, which was relatively less lethal than other viral species. Most deaths occurred in patients who were old, chronically ill, or suffering from other preexisting conditions. As a result, the pandemic, tragic as it was, lacked the element of horror that might accompany one caused by more inherently lethal viruses. No wonder people ended up sneering at masks and school closures. Right-

wing media could spin COVID denial into a sensible response to what they presented as an epidemiological nonevent.

Unfortunately, Trump may not be so lucky next time. And a potential killer virus may be lurking just beyond the horizon: avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu. The World Health Organization views this virus with great alarm, because, having slashed through the poultry industry and many dairy herds, it is only a few mutations away from being able to pass from human to human. The death rate for bird flu is about 50 percent. Young people are not spared.

Any risks to the U.S. population would be magnified dramatically by President Trump's appointments and policies. The chances of quickly developing a vaccine, should bird flu begin infecting significant numbers of humans, appear small. It's not just the anti-vaxxers who will paralyze us: Our biomedical-research capabilities have been devastated by cuts to the National Institutes of Health's budget.

If an avian-influenza pandemic does hit, Trump could pull out the old COVID-19 playbook. Why not? It worked the last time. But the viral character of the next pandemic could make it difficult for him to evade responsibility for the nightmare that may follow.

Brad Stuart, M.D.
Forestville, Calif.

David Frum replies:

In the first weeks after the coronavirus struck, many decisions had to be made quickly based on imperfect information. Unsurprisingly, many of those decisions now look wrong.

But the most lethal of all the bad decisions was the effort to discourage conservative-leaning Americans from receiving COVID vaccines. Tens of thousands of people died unnecessarily because they followed advice from leaders they trusted.

Lockdowns were too draconian. Masking was mostly useless. Blue-state schools should have reopened faster. But those mistakes all shrink in gravity compared with the malicious effort to disparage vaccination. So, yes, let's criticize the errors of the overzealous. But right now, the people who hold government power in the United States are those with the deadliest record—and no conscience.

Behold My Suit!

In the March issue, [Gary Shteyngart wrote about](#) his quest to end a lifetime of fashion misery.

Gary Shteyngart looks indescribably cool and writerly in his new suit! I'd offer to marry Gary based solely on how he looks in that suit, walking those New York streets like he owns them. Boston ladies love a man in a good suit.

Ruth Morss

Cambridge, Mass.

Reading “Behold My Suit!” was gratifying on many levels. I wholly agree that women should not have all the fun with clothes. Some people dress to impress others, and some people dress to please themselves; perfection is reached when you can do both at once. I envy Shteyngart for hitting the bull’s-eye.

Not that I would ever dream of claiming greater shoe expertise than Yohei Fukuda—but brown suede shoes with a blue suit? Brown shoes with a dark-blue suit are acceptable, but not preferred. Plus, the world’s most elegant suede shoes are still informal. I’d never drop \$3,000 on a pair of suede shoes, even if they had diamonds on their soles. And one final tip to the young men out there considering upping their fashion game: You can make even a \$10,000 suit irrelevant if you don’t bother to get a shave.

Allen Michie
Austin, Texas

The Last Great Yiddish Novel

In the April issue, [Judith Shulevitz considered](#) how Chaim Grade's Sons and Daughters rescues a destroyed world.

I translated four of Chaim Grade's books and placed them with U.S. publishers in the 1970s. I had a wonderful personal relationship with Grade, a kind of uncle-nephew bond. I'm proud to have helped put him on the map: When I finished translating Grade's two-volume masterwork, *The Yeshiva*, I found a home for it with the venerable Bobbs-Merrill, a more famous publisher than those that had issued my earlier translations. It also published my first novel, *The Yemenite Girl*.

Many ultra-Orthodox Jews read Grade's work, including Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the leader of the worldwide Chabad organization. Grade told me that Schneerson once called him to ask how he was feeling, somehow sensing that he was ill.

"Rebbe, how did you know I was not well?" Grade asked.

"Because for two weeks I did not see your weekly chapter of *The Yeshiva* in the *Morgn-Journal*," the Rebbe answered. "So I thought something must be the matter." The *Morgn-Journal* was a Yiddish daily to which Grade contributed fiction.

Shulevitz is right to note that, aside from his Holocaust memoir, *The Seven Little Lanes*, Grade did not mention the Holocaust in his work. But if you read carefully the last page of *The Yeshiva*, where the two protagonists stand on a platform full of people awaiting the arrival of a train, one cannot help but feel in Grade's elegiac tone a recognition that other trains will soon be coming.

Curt Leviant

Edison, N.J.

Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "[Donald Trump Is Enjoying This](#)," Ashley Parker and Michael Scherer offer a definitive account of the president's political comeback. They discussed with Trump how he is using his power, and drawing on the lessons of his first term, to run the country (and, in his words, "the world"). For our cover image, the illustrator Dale Stephanos rendered in pencil a photograph of Trump taken in North Las Vegas last fall.

— **Paul Spella**, *Senior Art Director*

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"I RUN THE COUNTRY AND THE WORLD"

Donald Trump explains his victory, and his plan.

By Ashley Parker and Michael Scherer

PLUS:

Spencer Kornhaber on bad art

Sarah Yager on mail by mule

Sarah Zhang on consciousness

Jeffrey Goldberg on Signalgate



Corrections

“Growing Up Murdoch” (April) originally stated that a line in *King Lear* was directed at Cordelia. In fact, it was directed at Goneril. “Turtleboy Will Not Be Stopped” (April) misstated the number of nights Karen Read has spent in jail. She has spent two nights in jail, not one. “The Cranky Visionary” (April) originally stated that the Barnes Foundation was effectively America’s first museum of modern art. In fact, it was among the first.

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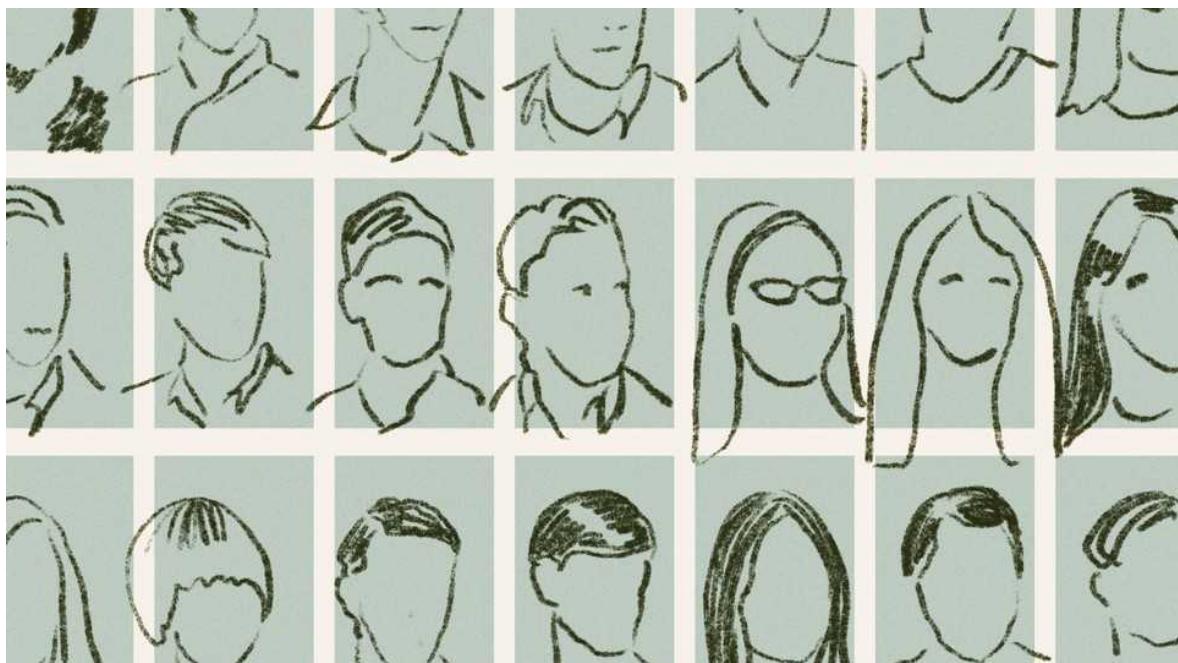
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Poetry

- [**Old News**](#)
-

Old News

by Robert Pinsky



I'm more at home in The Past, want though I may
To live in this lonesome place The Present Moment.

I share a stack of magazines with someone
Who reads the new ones from the top. The bottom,

Salted with gilded ephemera, outspent ads
And failing or faded fads, is just my meat.

Praying that I don't blind myself to horrors
I study the Times online to behold the face

Of fascism and its disregarding hand.
I keep on thinking about it as I retreat

To scan a home screen of my high school class,
Our posted shades of mortal veils and marrows.

The conversation floats down tunnels of fortune
To the ninth grade, Joe Cittadino expelled

For setting a fire in the Chattle Building attic.
Joe died a while ago, did people know it?

Instead of hiding as always before in silent
Anonymity, I allow myself the homely

Civic pleasure of having something to say,
Posting: Joe told me back then it wasn't him,

He took the blame to impress a girl, her brother
Was Frankie Quinn who really set the fire.

And thank you, Junior Genovese, for writing:
You are right Robert, it was Frankie Quinn.

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