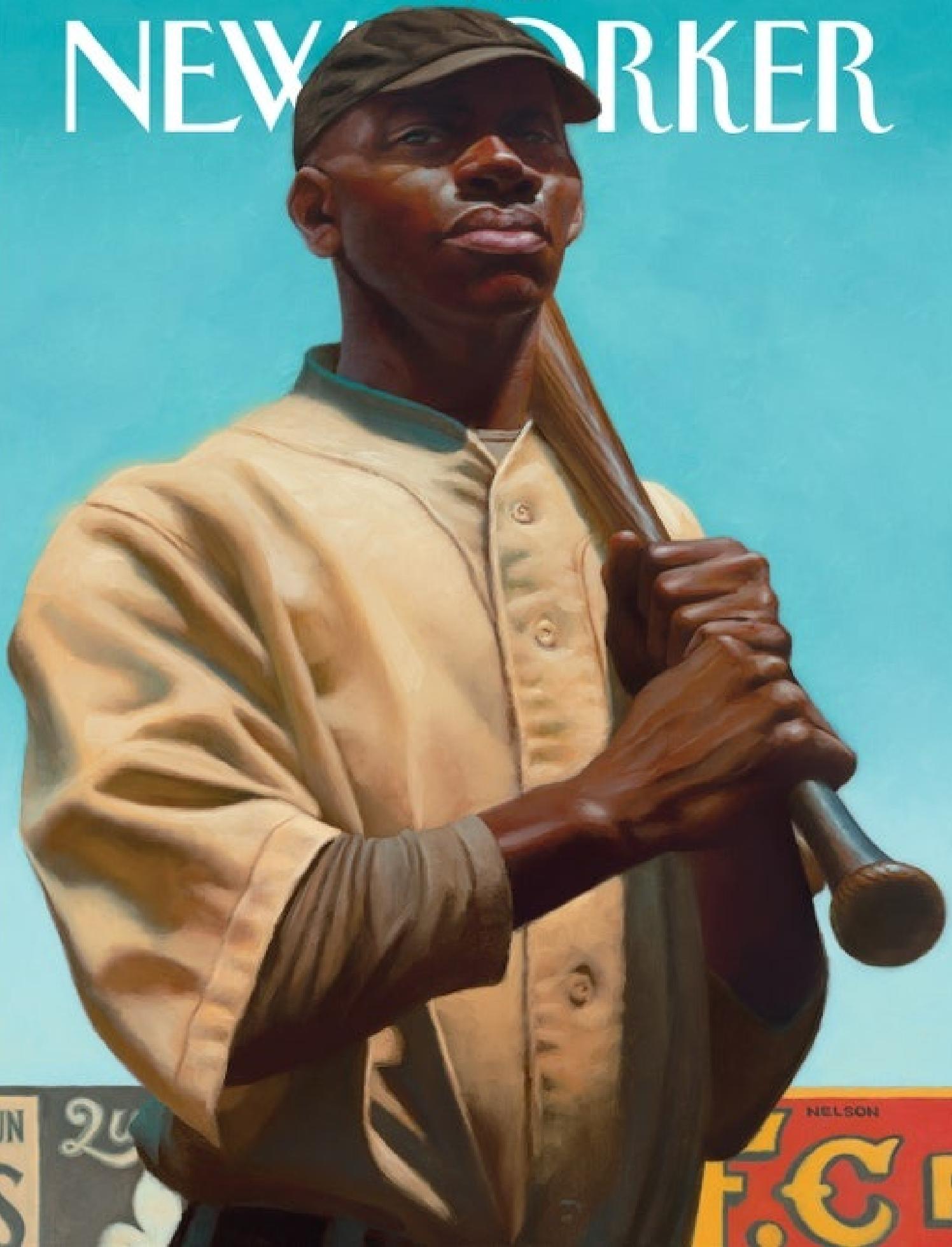


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# A Reporter at Large

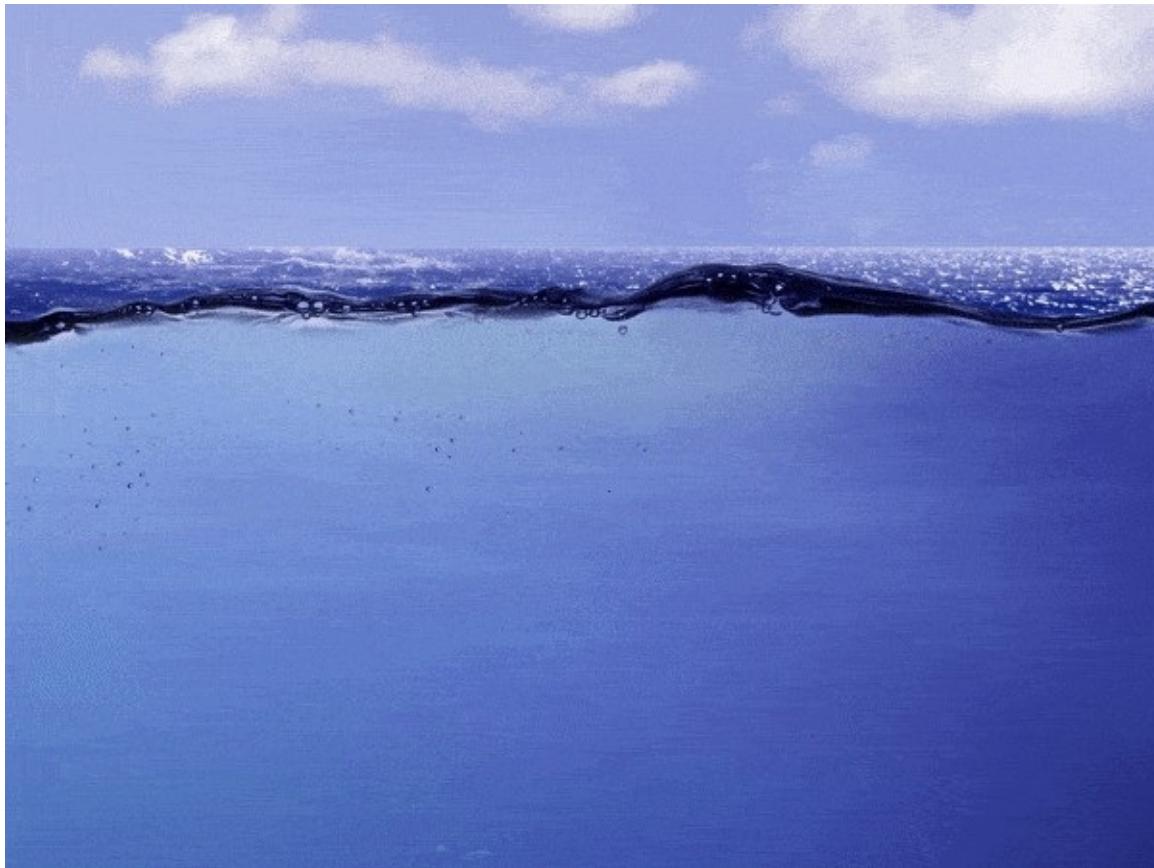
- [Why Facebook Can't Fix Itself](#)

# Why Facebook Can't Fix Itself

The platform is overrun with hate speech and disinformation. Does it actually want to solve the problem?

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

October 12, 2020



When [Facebook](#) was founded, in 2004, the company had few codified rules about what was allowed on the platform and what was not. Charlotte Willner joined three years later, as one of the company's first employees to moderate content on the site. At the time, she said, the written guidelines were about a page long; around the office, they were often summarized as, "If something makes you feel bad in your gut, take it down." Her husband, Dave, was hired the following year, becoming one of twelve full-time content moderators. He later became the company's head of content policy. The guidelines, he told me, "were just a bunch of examples, with no one articulating the reasoning behind them. 'We delete nudity.' 'People aren't allowed to say nice things about Hitler.' It was

a list, not a framework.” So he wrote a framework. He called the document the Abuse Standards. A few years later, it was given a more innocuous-sounding title: the Implementation Standards.

These days, the Implementation Standards comprise an ever-changing wiki, roughly twelve thousand words long, with twenty-four headings—“Hate Speech,” “Bullying,” “Harassment,” and so on—each of which contains dozens of subcategories, technical definitions, and links to supplementary materials. These are located on an internal software system that only content moderators and select employees can access. The document available to Facebook’s users, the Community Standards, is a condensed, sanitized version of the guidelines. The rule about graphic content, for example, begins, “We remove content that glorifies violence.” The internal version, by contrast, enumerates several dozen types of graphic images—“charred or burning human beings”; “the detachment of non-generating body parts”; “toddlers smoking”—that content moderators are instructed to mark as “disturbing,” but not to remove.

Facebook’s stated mission is to “bring the world closer together.” It considers itself a neutral platform, not a publisher, and so has resisted censoring its users’ speech, even when that speech is ugly or unpopular. In its early years, Facebook weathered periodic waves of bad press, usually occasioned by incidents of bullying or violence on the platform. Yet none of this seemed to cause lasting damage to the company’s reputation, or to its valuation. Facebook’s representatives repeatedly claimed that they took the spread of harmful content seriously, indicating that they could manage the problem if they were only given more time. Rashad Robinson, the president of the racial-justice group Color of Change, told me, “I don’t want to sound naïve, but until recently I was willing to believe that they were committed to making real progress. But then the hate speech and the toxicity keeps multiplying, and at a certain point you go, Oh, maybe, despite what they say, getting rid of this stuff just isn’t a priority for them.”

There are reportedly more than five hundred full-time employees working in Facebook’s P.R. department. These days, their primary job is to insist that Facebook is a fun place to share baby photos and sell old couches, not a vector for hate speech, misinformation, and violent extremist propaganda. In July, [Nick Clegg](#), a former Deputy Prime Minister of the U.K. who is now a top flack at Facebook, published a piece on AdAge.com and on the company’s official blog titled “Facebook Does Not Benefit from Hate,” in which he wrote, “There is no

incentive for us to do anything but remove it.” The previous week, Guy Rosen, whose job title is vice-president for integrity, had written, “We don’t allow hate speech on Facebook. While we recognize we have more to do . . . we are moving in the right direction.”

It would be more accurate to say that the company is moving in several contradictory directions at once. In theory, no one is allowed to post hate speech on Facebook. Yet many world leaders—[Rodrigo Duterte](#), of the Philippines; [Narendra Modi](#), of India; [Donald Trump](#); and others—routinely spread hate speech and disinformation, on Facebook and elsewhere. The company could apply the same standards to demagogues as it does to everyone else, banning them from the platform when necessary, but this would be financially risky. (If Facebook were to ban Trump, he would surely try to retaliate with onerous regulations; he might also encourage his supporters to boycott the company.) Instead, again and again, Facebook has erred on the side of allowing politicians to post whatever they want, even when this has led the company to weaken its own rules, to apply them selectively, to creatively reinterpret them, or to ignore them altogether.

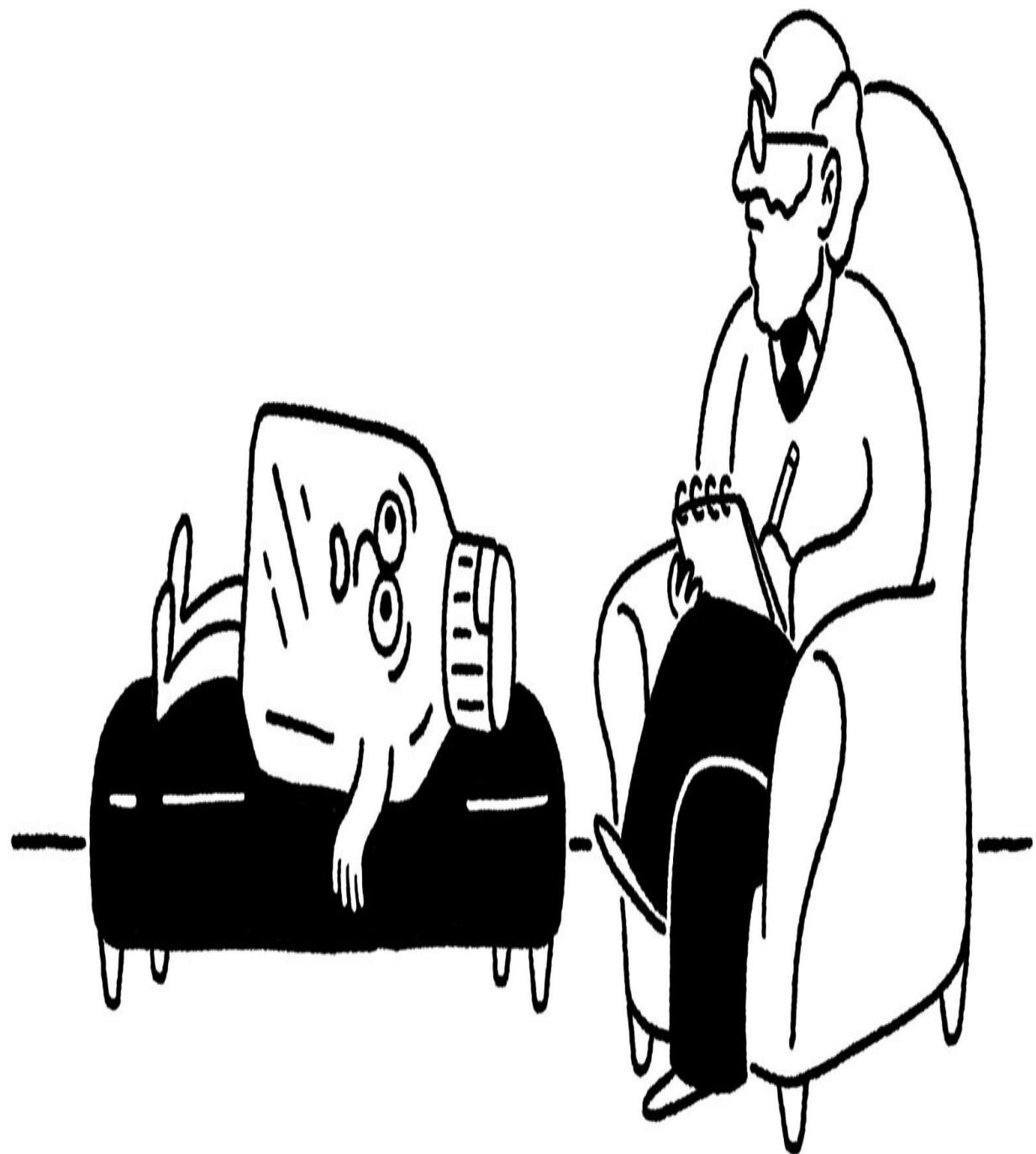
Dave Willner conceded that Facebook has “no good options,” and that censoring world leaders might set “a worrisome precedent.” At the same time, Facebook’s stated reason for forbidding hate speech, both in the Community Standards and in public remarks by its executives, is that it can lead to real-world violence. Willner went on, “If that’s their position, that hate speech is inherently dangerous, then how is it not more dangerous to let people use hate speech as long as they’re powerful enough, or famous enough, or in charge of a whole army?”

The Willners left Facebook in 2013. (Charlotte now runs the trust-and-safety department at Pinterest; Dave is the head of community policy at Airbnb.) Although they once considered themselves “true believers in Facebook’s mission,” they have become outspoken critics of the company. “As far as I can tell, the bulk of the document I wrote hasn’t changed all that much, surprisingly,” Dave Willner told me. “But they’ve made some big carve-outs that are just absolute nonsense. There’s no perfect approach to content moderation, but they could at least try to look less transparently craven and incoherent.”

In a statement, Drew Pusateri, a spokesperson for Facebook, wrote, “We’ve invested billions of dollars to keep hate off of our platform.” He continued, “A

recent European Commission report found that Facebook assessed 95.7% of hate speech reports in less than 24 hours, faster than YouTube and Twitter. While this is progress, we're conscious that there's more work to do." It is possible that Facebook, which owns Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger, and has more than three billion monthly users, is so big that its content can no longer be effectively moderated. Some of Facebook's detractors argue that, given the public's widespread and justified skepticism of the company, it should have less power over users' speech, not more. "That's a false choice," Rashad Robinson said. "Facebook already has all the power. They're just using it poorly." He pointed out that Facebook consistently removes recruitment propaganda by *ISIS* and other Islamist groups, but that it has been far less aggressive in cracking down on white-supremacist groups. He added, "The right question isn't 'Should Facebook do more or less?' but 'How is Facebook enforcing its rules, and who is set up to benefit from that?'"

In public, [Mark Zuckerberg](#), Facebook's founder, chairman, and C.E.O., often invokes the lofty ideals of free speech and pluralistic debate. During a lecture at Georgetown University last October, he said, "Frederick Douglass once called free expression 'the great moral renovator of society.' " But Zuckerberg's actions make more sense when viewed as an outgrowth of his business model. The company's incentive is to keep people on the platform—including strongmen and their most avid followers, whose incendiary rhetoric tends to generate a disproportionate amount of engagement. A former Facebook employee told me, "Nobody wants to look in the mirror and go, I make a lot of money by giving objectively dangerous people a huge megaphone." This is precisely what Facebook's executives are doing, the former employee continued, "but they try to tell themselves a convoluted story about how it's not actually what they're doing."



"Who sanitizes the sanitizer?"  
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

m.E.mcnair

In retrospect, it seems that the company’s strategy has never been to manage the problem of dangerous content, but rather to manage the public’s perception of the problem. In Clegg’s recent blog post, he wrote that Facebook takes a “zero tolerance approach” to hate speech, but that, “with so much content posted every day, rooting out the hate is like looking for a needle in a haystack.” This metaphor casts Zuckerberg as a hapless victim of fate: day after day, through no fault of his own, his haystack ends up mysteriously full of needles. A more honest metaphor would posit a powerful set of magnets at the center of the haystack—Facebook’s algorithms, which attract and elevate whatever content is most highly charged. If there are needles anywhere nearby—and, on the Internet, there always are—the magnets will pull them in. Remove as many as you want today; more will reappear tomorrow. This is how the system is designed to work.

On December 7, 2015, Donald Trump, then a dark-horse candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination, used his Facebook page to promote a press release. It [called for](#) “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” and insinuated that Muslims—all 1.8 billion of them, presumably—“have no sense of reason or respect for human life.” By Facebook’s definition, this was clearly hate speech. The Community Standards prohibited all “content that directly attacks people based on race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion.” According to the *Times*, Zuckerberg was personally “appalled” by Trump’s post. Still, his top officials held a series of meetings to decide whether, given Trump’s prominence, an exception ought to be made.

The discussions were led by Monika Bickert, Elliot Schrage, and Joel Kaplan, all policy executives with law degrees from Harvard. Most of Facebook’s executives were liberal, or were assumed to be. But Kaplan, an outspoken conservative who had worked as a clerk for Justice [Antonin Scalia](#) and as a staffer in the George W. Bush White House, had recently been promoted to the position of vice-president of global public policy, and often acted as a liaison to Republicans in Washington, D.C. His advice to Zuckerberg, the *Times* later reported, was “Don’t poke the bear”—avoid incurring the wrath of Trump and his supporters. Trump’s post stayed up. The former Facebook employee told me, “Once you set a precedent of caving on something like that, how do you ever stop?”

Making the decision to leave Trump’s post up was one thing; justifying the decision was another. According to the *Washington Post*, Bickert drafted an internal memo, laying out the options that she and her colleagues had. They

could make “a one-time exception” for Trump’s post, which would establish a narrow precedent that would allow them to reverse course later. They could add an “exemption for political discourse” to the guidelines, which would let them treat politicians’ future utterances on a case-by-case basis. Or they could amend the rules more expansively—for example, by “weakening the company’s community guidelines for everyone, allowing comments such as ‘No blacks allowed’ and ‘Get the gays out of San Francisco.’ ”

At the time, Facebook had fewer than forty-five hundred content moderators. Now there are some fifteen thousand, most of whom are contract workers in cities around the world (Dublin, Austin, Berlin, Manila). They often work at odd hours, to account for time-zone differences, absorbing whatever pops up on their screens: threats, graphic violence, child pornography, and every other genre of online iniquity. The work can be harrowing. “You’re sleep-deprived, your subconscious is completely open, and you’re pouring in the most psychologically radioactive content you can imagine,” Martin Holzmeister, a Brazilian art director who worked as a moderator in Barcelona, told me. “In Chernobyl, they knew, you can run in for two minutes, grab something, and run back out, and it won’t kill you. With this stuff, nobody knows how much anyone can take.” Moderators are required to sign draconian nondisclosure agreements that forbid them to discuss their work in even the most rudimentary terms. In May, thousands of moderators joined a class-action suit against Facebook alleging that the job causes P.T.S.D. (Facebook settled the suit, paying the moderators fifty-two million dollars. Pusateri, the Facebook spokesperson, said that the company provides its moderators with on-site counselling and a twenty-four-hour mental-health hotline.)

One of Facebook’s main content-moderation hubs outside the U.S. is in Dublin, where, every day, moderators review hundreds of thousands of reports of potential rule violations from Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. In December, 2015, several moderators in the Dublin office—including some on what was called the *MENA* team, for Middle East and North Africa—noticed that Trump’s post was not being taken down. “An American politician saying something shitty about Muslims was probably not the most shocking thing I saw that day,” a former Dublin employee who worked on content policy related to the Middle East told me. “Remember, this is a job that involves looking at beheadings and war crimes.” The *MENA* team, whose members spoke Arabic, Farsi, and several other languages, was not tasked with moderating American content; still, failing to reprimand Trump struck many of

them as a mistake, and they expressed their objections to their supervisors. According to Facebook's guidelines, moderators were to remove any "calls for exclusion or segregation." An appeal to close the American border to Muslims clearly qualified.

The following day, members of the team and other concerned employees met in a glass-walled conference room. At least one policy executive joined, via video, from the U.S. "I think it was Joel Kaplan," the former Dublin employee told me. "I can't be sure. Frankly, I had trouble telling those white guys apart." The former Dublin employee got the impression that "the attitude from the higher-ups was You emotional Muslims seem upset; let's have this conversation where you feel heard, to calm you down. Which is hilarious, because a lot of us weren't even Muslim. Besides, the objection was never, Hey, we're from the Middle East and this hurts our feelings." Rather, their message was "In our expert opinion, this post violates the policies. So what's the deal?"

Facebook claims that it has never diluted its protections against hate speech, but that it sometimes makes exceptions in the case of newsworthy utterances, such as those by people in public office. But a recently acquired version of the Implementation Standards reveals that, by 2017, Facebook had weakened its rules—not just for politicians but for all users. In an internal document called the Known Questions—a Talmud-like codicil about how the Implementation Standards should be interpreted—the rules against hate speech now included a loophole: "We allow content that excludes a group of people who share a protected characteristic from entering a country or continent." This was followed by three examples of the kind of speech that was now permissible. The first was "We should ban Syrians from coming into Germany." The next two examples—"I am calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" and "We should build a wall to keep Mexicans out of the country"—had been uttered, more or less word for word, by the President of the United States.

In May, 2017, shortly after Facebook released a report acknowledging that "malicious actors" from around the world had used the platform to meddle in the American Presidential election, Zuckerberg announced that the company would increase its global moderation workforce by two-thirds. Mildka Gray, who was then a contract worker for Facebook in Dublin, was moved into content moderation around this time; her husband, Chris, applied and was offered a job almost immediately. "They were just hiring anybody," he said. Mildka, Chris,

and the other contractors were confined to a relatively drab part of Facebook's Dublin offices. Some of them were under the impression that, should they pass a Facebook employee in the hall, they were to stay silent.

For the first few days after content moderators are hired, a trainer guides them through the Implementation Standards, the Known Questions, and other materials. "The documents are full of technical jargon, not presented in any logical order," Chris Gray recalled. "I'm looking around, going, Most of the people in this room do not speak English as a first language. How in the hell is this supposed to work?" Mildka, who is from Indonesia and whose first language is Bahasa Indonesia, agreed: "In the training room, you just nod, Yes, yes. Then you walk out of the room and ask your friend, 'Did you understand? Can you explain it in our language?' " Unlike Facebook's earliest moderators, who were told to use their discretion and moral intuition, the Grays were often encouraged to ignore the context in which an utterance was made. The Implementation Standards stated that Facebook was "inclined to tolerate content, and refrain from adding friction to the process of sharing unless it achieves a direct and specific good."

There is a logic to the argument that moderators should not be allowed to use too much individual discretion. As Chris Gray put it, "You don't want people going rogue, marking pictures as porn because someone is wearing a skirt above the knee or something." Nor would it make sense to have Raphael's paintings of cherubs scrubbed from Facebook for violating child-nudity guidelines. "At the same time," he went on, "there's got to be a balance between giving your moderators too much freedom and just asking them to turn their brains off."

Mildka and Chris Gray left Facebook in 2018. Shortly afterward, in the U.K., Channel 4 aired a documentary that had been filmed by an undercover reporter posing as a content moderator in their office. At one point in the documentary, a trainer gives a slideshow presentation about how to interpret some of the Implementation Standards regarding hate speech. One slide shows an apparently popular meme: a Norman Rockwell-style image of a white mother who seems to be drowning her daughter in a bathtub, with the caption "When your daughter's first crush is a little Negro boy." Although the image "implies a lot," the trainer says, "there's no attack, actually, on the Negro boy . . . so we should ignore this."

There's a brief pause in the conference room. "Is everyone O.K. with that?" the trainer says.

“No, not O.K.,” a moderator responds. The other moderators laugh uneasily, and the scene ends.

After the footage became public, a Facebook spokesperson claimed that the trainer had made a mistake. “I know for a fact that that’s a lie,” Chris Gray told me. “When I was there, I got multiple tickets with that exact meme in it, and I was always told to ignore. You go, ‘C’mon, we all know exactly what this means,’ but you’re told, ‘Don’t make your own judgments.’ ”

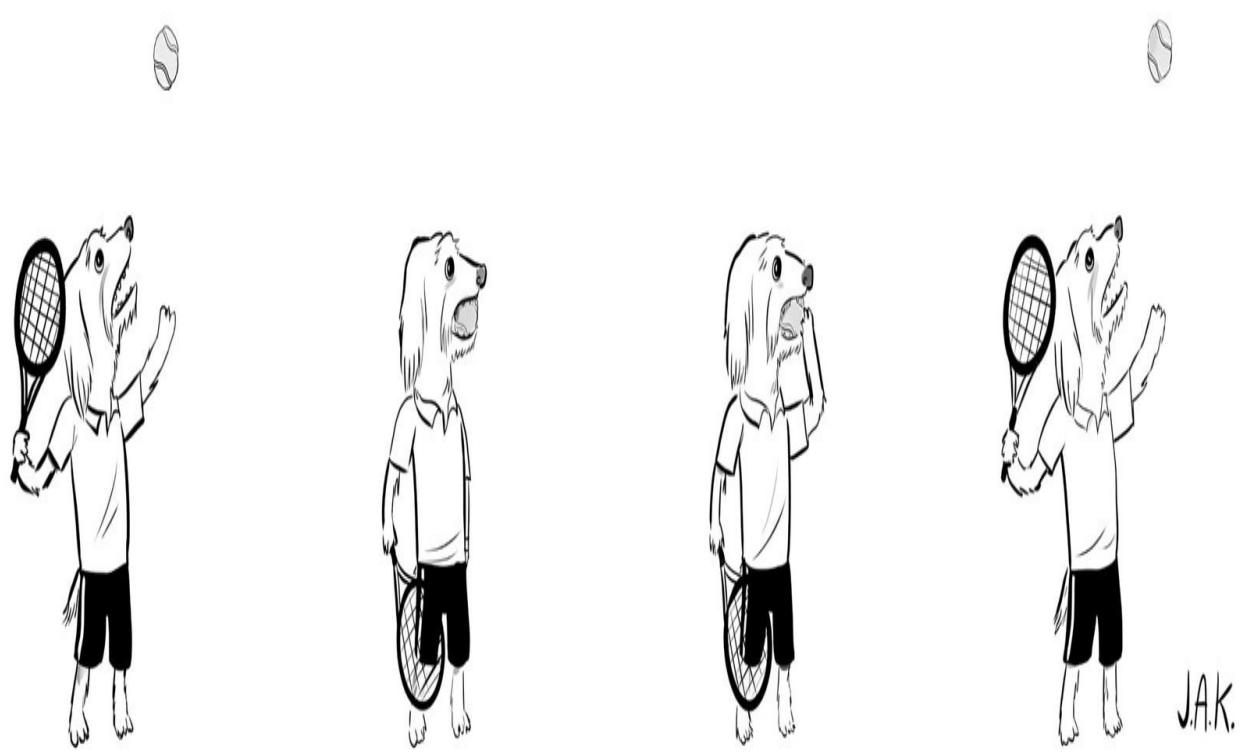
A former moderator from Phoenix told me, “If it was what they say it is —‘You’re here to clean up this platform so everyone else can use it safely’—then there’s some nobility in that. But, when you start, you immediately realize we’re in no way expected or equipped to fix the problem.” He provided me with dozens of examples of hate speech—some of which require a good amount of cultural fluency to decode, others as clear-cut as open praise for Hitler—that he says were reviewed by moderators but not removed, “either because they could not understand why it was hateful, or because they assumed that the best way to stay out of trouble with their bosses was to leave borderline stuff up.”

Recently, I talked to two current moderators, who asked me to call them Kate and John. They live and work in a non-Anglophone European country; both spoke in accented, erudite English. “If you’re Mark Zuckerberg, then I’m sure applying one minimal set of standards everywhere in the world seems like a form of universalism,” Kate said. “To me, it seems like a kind of libertarian imperialism, especially if there’s no way for the standards to be strengthened, no matter how many people complain.”

They listed several ways in which, in their opinion, their supervisors’ interpretations of the Implementation Standards conflicted with common sense and basic decency. “I just reviewed an Instagram profile with the username KillAllFags, and the profile pic was a rainbow flag being crossed out,” Kate said. “The implied threat is pretty clear, I think, but I couldn’t take it down.”

“Our supervisors insist that L.G.B.T. is a concept,” John explained.

“So if I see someone posting ‘Kill L.G.B.T.,’ unless they refer to a person or use pronouns, I have to assume they’re talking about killing an idea,” Kate said.



*Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein*

"Facebook could change that rule tomorrow, and a lot of people's lives would improve, but they refuse," John said.

"Why?" I said.

"We can ask, but our questions have no impact," John said. "We just do what they say, or we leave."

Around the time the Grays were hired, Britain First, a white-nationalist political party in the U.K., had a Facebook page with about two million followers. (By contrast, [Theresa May](#), then the Prime Minister, had fewer than five hundred thousand followers.) Offline, Britain First engaged in scare tactics: driving around Muslim parts of London in combat jeeps, barging into mosques wearing green paramilitary-style uniforms. On Facebook, Chris Gray said, members of Britain First would sometimes post videos featuring "a bunch of thugs moving through London, going, 'Look, there's a halal butcher. There's a mosque. We need to reclaim our streets.'" A moderator who was empowered to consider the context—the fact that "Britain First" echoes "America First," a slogan once used by Nazi sympathizers in the U.S.; the ominous connotation of the word "reclaim"—could have made the judgment that the Party members' words and

actions, taken together, were a call for violence. “But you’re not allowed to look at the context,” Gray said. “You can only look at what’s right in front of you.” Britain First’s posts, he said, were “constantly getting reported, but the posts that ended up in my queue never quite went over the line to where I could delete them. The wording would always be just vague enough.”

Tommy Robinson, a British Islamophobe and one of Britain First’s most abrasive allies, often gave interviews in which he was open about his agenda. “It’s a Muslim invasion of Europe,” he told *Newsweek*. On Facebook, though, he was apparently more coy, avoiding explicit “calls for exclusion” and other formulations that the company would recognize as hate speech. At times, Gray had the uncanny sense that he and the other moderators were acting as unwitting coaches, showing the purveyors of hate speech just how far they could go. “That’s what I’d do, anyway, if I were them,” he said. “Learn to color within the lines.” When Robinson or a Britain First representative posted something unmistakably threatening, a Facebook moderator would often flag the post for removal. Sometimes a “quality auditor” would reverse the decision. The moderator would then see a deduction in his or her “quality score,” which had to remain at ninety-eight per cent or above for the moderator to be in good standing.

Normally, after a Facebook page violates the rules multiple times, the page is banned. But, in the case of Britain First and Tommy Robinson, the bans never came. Apparently, those two pages were “shielded,” which meant that the power to delete them was restricted to Facebook’s headquarters in Menlo Park. No one explained to the moderators why Facebook decided to shield some pages and not others, but, in practice, the shielded pages tended to be those with sizable follower counts, or with significant cultural or political clout—pages whose removal might interrupt a meaningful flow of revenue.

There is little recourse for a content moderator who has qualms about the Implementation Standards. Full-time Facebook employees are given more dispensation to question almost any aspect of company policy, as long as they do so internally. On Workplace, a custom version of the network that only Facebook staffers can access, their disagreements are often candid, even confrontational. The former Dublin employee who worked on Middle East policy believes that Facebook’s management tolerates internal dissent in order to keep it from spilling into public view: “Your average tech bro—Todd in Menlo Park, or whatever—has to continually be made to feel like he’s part of a force for good.

So whenever Todd notices anything about Facebook that he finds disturbing there has to be some way for his critiques to be heard. Whether anything actually changes as a result of those critiques is a separate question.”

On December 18, 2017, on a Workplace message board called Community Standards Feedback, a recruiter in Facebook’s London office posted a *Guardian* article about Britain First. “They are pretty much a hate group,” he wrote. He noted that “today YouTube and Twitter banned them,” and asked whether Facebook would do the same.

Neil Potts, Facebook’s public-policy director for trust and safety, responded, “Thanks for flagging, and we are monitoring this situation closely.” However, he continued, “while Britain First shares many of the common tenets of alt-right groups, e.g., ultra-nationalism,” Facebook did not consider it a hate organization. “We define hate orgs as those that advance hatred as one of their primary objectives, or that they have leaders who have been convicted of hate-related offenses.”

Another Facebook employee, a Muslim woman, noted that Jayda Fransen, a leader of Britain First, had been convicted of hate crimes against British Muslims. “If the situation is being monitored closely,” she asked, “how was this missed?”

“Thanks for flagging,” Potts responded. “I’ll make sure our hate org SMEs”—subject-matter experts—“are aware of this conviction.”

A month later, in January of 2018, the female employee revived the Workplace thread. “Happy new year!” she wrote. “The Britain First account is still up and running, even though as per above discussion it clearly violates our community standards. Is anything being done about this?”

“Thanks for circling back,” Potts responded, adding that a “team is monitoring and evaluating the situation and discussing next steps forward.” After that, the thread went dormant.

A few weeks later, Darren Osborne, a white Briton, was convicted of murder. Osborne had driven a van into a crowd near a London mosque, killing a Muslim man named Makram Ali and injuring at least nine other people. Prosecutors introduced evidence suggesting that Osborne had been inspired to kill, at least in part, by a BBC miniseries and by following Britain First and Tommy Robinson

on social media. The judge deemed the killing “a terrorist act” by a man who’d been “rapidly radicalized over the Internet.” Within six weeks, Britain First and Tommy Robinson had been banned from Facebook. (Pusateri, the Facebook spokesperson, noted that the company has “banned more than 250 white supremacist organizations.”)

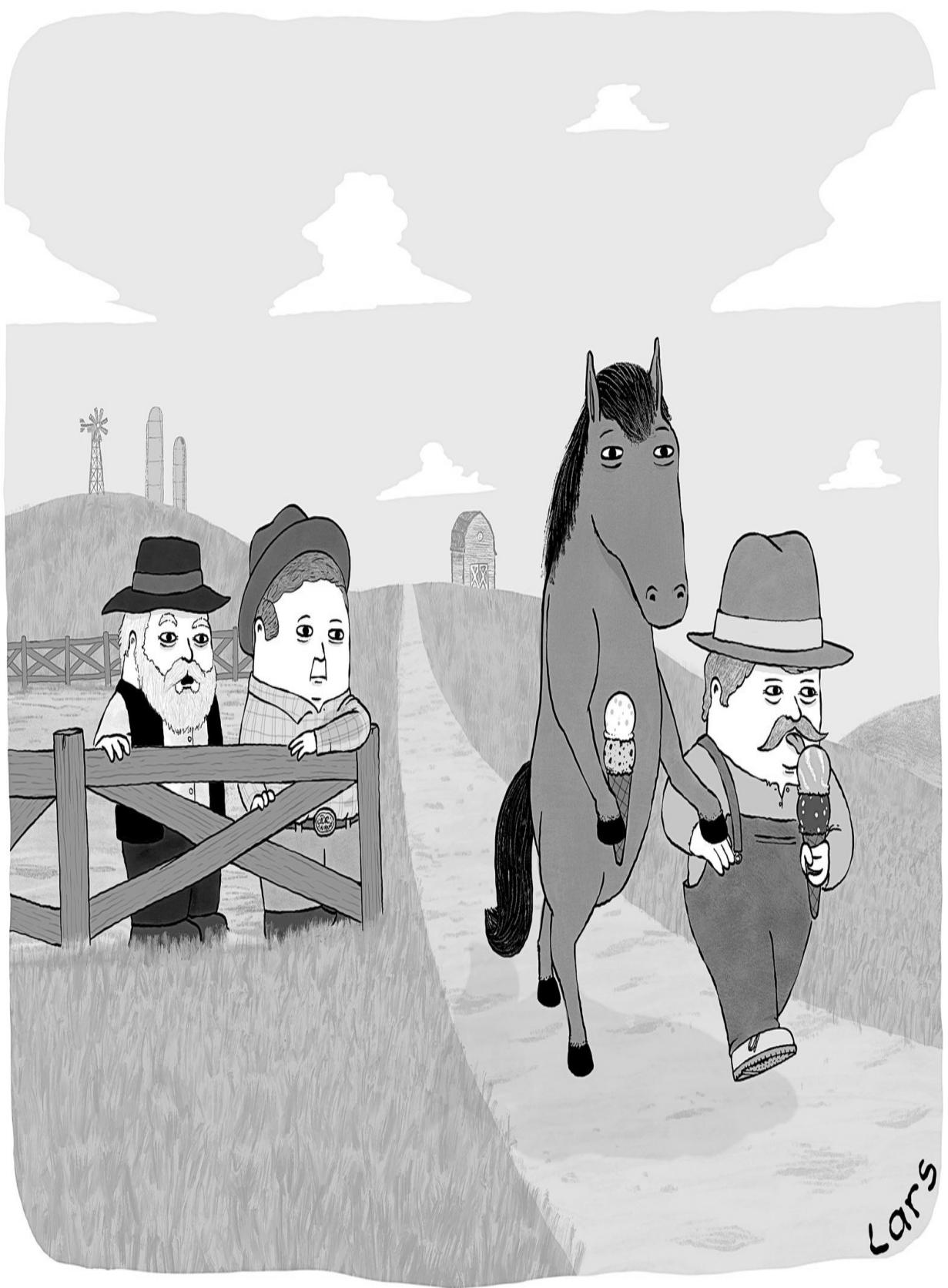
“It’s an open secret,” Sophie Zhang, a former data scientist for the company, recently wrote, “that Facebook’s short-term decisions are largely motivated by PR and the potential for negative attention.” Zhang left Facebook in September. Before she did, she posted a scathing memo on Workplace. In the memo, which was obtained by BuzzFeed News, she alleged that she had witnessed “multiple blatant attempts by foreign national governments to abuse our platform on vast scales”; in some cases, however, “we simply didn’t care enough to stop them.” She suggested that this was because the abuses were occurring in countries that American news outlets were unlikely to cover.

When Facebook is receiving an unusual amount of bad press for a particularly egregious piece of content, this is referred to within the company as a “press fire,” or a “#PRFire.” Often, the content has been flagged repeatedly, to no avail, but, in the context of a press fire, it receives prompt attention. A Facebook moderator who currently works in a European city shared with me a full record of the internal software system as it appeared on a recent day. There were dozens of press fires in progress. Facebook was being criticized—by Facebook users, primarily—for allowing widespread bullying against Greta Thunberg, the teenage climate activist, who has Asperger’s syndrome. The content moderators were instructed to apply an ad-hoc exemption: “Remove all instances of attacks aimed at Greta Thunberg using the terms or hashtag: ‘Gretarded’, ‘Retard’ or ‘Retarded.’ ” No similar protections were extended to other young activists, including those whose bullying was unlikely to inspire such a public backlash. A woman who worked as a content-moderation supervisor in the U.S. told me, “You can ask for a meeting, present your bosses with bullet points of evidence, tell them you’ve got team members who are depressed and suicidal—doesn’t help. Pretty much the only language Facebook understands is public embarrassment.”

Facebook moderators have scant workplace protections and little job security. The closest they have to a labor organizer is Cori Crider, a lawyer and an activist based in London. Crider grew up in rural Texas and left as soon as she could, going first to Austin, for college; then to Harvard, for law school; and then to

London, where she worked for a decade at a small human-rights organization, representing Guantánamo detainees and the relatives of drone-strike victims in Yemen and Pakistan. “It was through worrying about drones that I came to worry about technology,” she said. “I started to feel like, While we’re all focussed on the surveillance tactics of the Pentagon, a handful of companies out of California are collecting data on a scale that would honestly be the envy of any state.”

Last year, she co-founded a not-for-profit called Foxglove, where she is one of two employees. The foxglove, a wildflower also known as digitalis, can be either medicinal or toxic to humans, depending on how it’s ingested. The group’s mission is to empower the tech industry’s most vulnerable workers—to help them “clean up their factory floor,” as Crider often puts it. Her more ambitious goal is to redesign the factory. She was influenced by [Shoshana Zuboff](#), the author of “[The Age of Surveillance Capitalism](#),” who argues that “instrumentarian” behemoths such as Facebook pose an existential threat to democracy. In Crider’s analysis, not even the most ingenious technocratic fix to Facebook’s guidelines can address the core problem: its content-moderation priorities won’t change until its algorithms stop amplifying whatever content is most enthralling or emotionally manipulative. This might require a new business model, perhaps even a less profitable one, which is why Crider isn’t hopeful that it will happen voluntarily. “I wish I could file a global injunction against the monetization of attention,” she said. “In the meantime, you find more specific ways to create pressure.”



*"Can't say I agree with his methods, but I'll be damned if there's a horse that man can't break."*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

In July, 2019, Crider was introduced to a Facebook moderator in Europe who was able to map out how the whole system worked. This moderator put her in touch with other moderators, who put her in touch with still others. Sometimes, while courting a moderator as a potential source, Crider arranged a meeting and flew to wherever the person lived, only to be stood up. Those who did talk to her were almost always unwilling to go on the record. The process reminded Crider of the months she'd spent in Yemen and Pakistan, trying to gain people's trust. "They often have very little reason to talk, and every reason in the world not to," she said. The content moderators were not yet ready to form a union—"not even close," Crider told me—but she hoped to inculcate in them a kind of latent class consciousness, an awareness of themselves as a collective workforce.

Last October, Crider met Chris Gray at a conference in London. She started introducing him to journalists and activists, helping to spread his story. Two months later, Gray hired a local law firm and sued Facebook in Irish High Court, alleging that his "repeated and unrelenting exposure to extremely disturbing, graphic and violent content" had caused him lasting psychological trauma. Shortly thereafter, about twenty more former Facebook moderators in Dublin contacted the law firm representing Gray to ask about possible lawsuits against the company.

Soon after Gray left Facebook, he wrote a fifty-three-hundred-word memo to Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg, the company's chief operating officer, laying out his critiques of the content-moderation process. He proposed a few fixes, which ranged from the granular ("The hotkey system is a mess") to the sweeping ("Rewrite . . . all of your user privacy policies"). None, however, addressed what he considered to be the underlying issue. On the whole, he concluded, Facebook "is not committed to content moderation, does not have a clear strategy or even a good handle on how to do it, and the people trying to do the actual work are under immense pressure to shovel shit uphill without proper tools or direction. . . . There is no leadership, no clear moral compass." He e-mailed the memo to Zuckerberg and Sandberg from an anonymous address: shovellingshituphill@gmail.com.

[Jair Bolsonaro](#), the autocratic Brazilian politician, ran for President, in 2018, on a shoestring budget. To get his message out, he relied heavily on Facebook, whose social-media apps are the most popular in his country. Since taking office,

in 2019, he has delivered a weekly Presidential address on Facebook Live. Earlier this year, during one speech, he said of Brazil's indigenous population, "The Indian has changed. He is evolving and becoming, more and more, a human being like us." Bolsonaro's racism was not exactly a surprise, but his comments caused an uproar nonetheless. Facebook did not remove the video, even though its guidelines prohibit "dehumanizing speech," including any insinuations of "subhumanity."

David Thiel, a cybersecurity expert at Facebook's headquarters in Menlo Park, read about the controversy. (He is unrelated to [Peter Thiel](#), the venture capitalist and Trump donor who sits on Facebook's board.) After searching for the speech on Facebook, he was shocked to find that it was still up. He wrote on Workplace, "I assume we'll be removing this video from our platform?" His question was passed on to subject-matter experts, including one in Brasília and one in Dublin. Both ruled that the video did not violate the guidelines. "President Bolsonaro is known by his controversial and 'politically incorrect' speeches," the expert in Brasília wrote. "He is actually referring to indigenous people becoming more integrated to the society (as opposed to isolated in their own tribes)." This did not satisfy Thiel, in part because the expert, who has worked for at least one pro-Bolsonaro politician, did not strike him as an objective source. Also, given that Facebook's local sales representatives had surely encouraged Bolsonaro to use their products, there may have been a conflict of interest. "It's awkward for a business to go from a posture of 'Please, sir, use our product,' to 'Actually, sir, you're now in trouble for using our product,'" he said.

Thiel appealed the decision, and four or five members of the content-policy team agreed to meet with him by video conference. To make his case that "becoming a human being" was dehumanizing speech, Thiel, with the help of some of his colleagues, created a fifteen-slide PowerPoint presentation, parsing the utterance with a computer engineer's minute attention to detail. One slide included a Merriam-Webster definition of the word "become," and added, "To 'become' something necessarily denotes that, in the status quo ante, the subject is currently not that thing." Thiel also argued that Bolsonaro's racist rhetoric had already incited violence. (In 2019, Bolsonaro's first year in office, seven Brazilian tribal leaders were murdered, the highest number in twenty years.) Thiel's penultimate slide featured a rousing quotation from Zuckerberg's Georgetown speech: "We know from history that dehumanizing people is the first step towards inciting violence. . . . I take this incredibly seriously, and we work hard to get this off our platform." As Thiel delivered his presentation, he recalled, various members of

the policy team “interrupted a lot, pushing back on my reasoning or questioning my credibility.” When that didn’t work, “they just kept insisting, in an up-is-down, black-is-white kind of way, that the words didn’t violate the policy.” A former content moderator told me, “At some point, someone at Facebook could have said, ‘We will keep making exceptions whenever politicians break our rules.’ But they never wanted to admit that, even to themselves, so instead they arrived at this twisted logical place where they are now able to look at something that is clearly a violation of their own rules and go, ‘Nope, no violation here.’ ”

In March, Thiel announced his resignation from Facebook. “It was a pretty overt rage quit,” he told me. He posted a long, impassioned note on Workplace. “Facebook right now is increasingly aligning with the rich and powerful, allowing them to play by different rules,” he wrote, adding that “the hard-right turn has been disillusioning and is not something I feel comfortable with anymore.” Shortly after he posted his goodbye note, the content-policy team wrote to him to say that they’d reversed their decision about Bolsonaro’s speech. “I couldn’t tell if it was them trying to get me to not leave, or to leave on better terms, or what,” he said. “Either way, it was too late.”

Last October, the Trump campaign made an ad featuring blatantly false allegations about [Joe Biden](#). CNN and other networks refused to run it; YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook did not. “Our approach is grounded in Facebook’s fundamental belief in free expression,” Katie Harbath, the company’s public-policy director for global elections and a former digital strategist for Rudolph Giuliani’s Presidential campaign, wrote. “Thus, when a politician speaks or makes an ad, we do not send it to third party fact-checkers.” Later that month, in a congressional hearing, Representative [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) asked Zuckerberg how far this policy went: could any politician lie about anything on his platform? Zuckerberg responded, under oath, that he did have some red lines. “If anyone, including a politician, is saying things that is calling for violence . . . or voter or census suppression,” Zuckerberg said, “we will take that content down.”

Seven months later, Trump crossed these two red lines within a matter of days. On May 26th, on both Twitter and Facebook, he wrote, falsely, “There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent.” This seemed like an obvious attempt at voter suppression: why would the President warn the public about the putative inadequacy of the vote-by-mail system if not to dissuade people from using it? On May 29th, again

using the same language on both Twitter and Facebook, Trump mused about sending the National Guard to quell protests in response to [George Floyd](#)'s death. "When the looting starts, the shooting starts," Trump wrote, a phrase that was widely seen as an incitement to violence. Prominent segregationists had used these words, in the nineteen-sixties, to justify vicious attacks against Black people, including civil-rights protesters.

Twitter didn't remove Trump's tweets but did append warning labels to them. Facebook, by contrast, did nothing. "That was the moment when a lot of us snapped," Rashad Robinson, of Color of Change, told me. Vanita Gupta, the president and C.E.O. of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, said, "The feeling among activists was Why have we spent years pushing Facebook to adopt better policies if they're just going to ignore those policies when they matter most?" (Some Trump campaign ads—including one from June, which used a symbol associated with the Nazis, and one from September, which baselessly accused refugees of spreading the coronavirus—have since been removed.)

On June 1st, scores of Facebook employees, who were working from home due to the pandemic, staged a virtual walkout. Two days later, thirty-four of Facebook's earliest employees, including Dave Willner, signed an open letter that was published in the *Times*. "If all speech by politicians is newsworthy and all newsworthy speech is inviolable," it read, "then there is no line the most powerful people in the world cannot cross on the largest platform in the world." Cori Crider is now in close contact with some fifty content moderators, and she encouraged them to publish a letter of their own. On June 8th, a group of ten current and former moderators, including Chris Gray, signed an open letter on the publishing platform Medium. "As outsourced contractors, non-disclosure agreements deter us from speaking openly," the letter read. Nonetheless, "current events prove we cannot passively accept our role of silent algorithm facilitators—not when our screens are being flooded with hate speech."

On August 19th, Facebook announced changes to its guidelines. Chief among them was a new policy restricting the activities of "organizations and movements that have demonstrated significant risks to public safety," including "US-based militia organizations." Some reporters and activists asked why it had taken so long for Facebook to come up with rules regarding such groups; others pointed out that, although hundreds of pages had been removed under the new policy, many such pages remained. Four days later, in [Kenosha](#), Wisconsin, a police

officer shot a Black man named Jacob Blake seven times in the back, in front of his children. Nightly protests erupted. The Kenosha Guard, a self-described militia, put up a “call to arms” on its Facebook page, where people explicitly expressed their intention to commit vigilante violence (“I fully plan to kill looters and rioters tonight”). Within a day, according to BuzzFeed, more than four hundred people had reported the page to Facebook’s content moderators, but the moderators decided that it did not violate any of Facebook’s standards, and they left it up. (Mark Zuckerberg later called this “an operational mistake.”) On August 25th, a white seventeen-year-old travelled to Kenosha from out of state, carrying a semi-automatic rifle, and shot three protesters, killing two of them. It’s not clear whether he’d learned about the Kenosha Guard on Facebook, but the militia’s page was public. Anyone could have seen it.

Pusateri, the Facebook spokesperson, said, “So far we’ve identified over 300 militarized social movements who we’ve banned from maintaining Facebook Pages, groups, and Instagram accounts.” In addition, last week, Facebook banned all content relating to [QAnon](#), the far-right conspiracy theory. It also took down a post by Trump that contained misinformation about the coronavirus, and announced plans to ban all political ads from the platform for an indefinite period starting on Election Night. Its critics once again considered these measures too little, too late. [Senator Elizabeth Warren](#) described them as “performative changes,” arguing that the company was still failing to “change its broken algorithm, or take responsibility for the power it’s amassed.”

The restrictions are also likely to feed into the notion that social media discriminates against conservatives. (As Trump tweeted in May, “The Radical Left is in total command & control of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Google.”) This has become a right-wing talking point, even though the bulk of the evidence suggests the opposite. Every weekday, the *Times* reporter Kevin Roose shares the Top Ten “link posts”—posts containing links—from American Facebook pages, according to data provided by a tool owned by Facebook. Almost always, the list is dominated by far-right celebrities or news outlets. (On a representative day last week, the Top Ten included a post by Donald Trump for President, four posts from Fox News, two from CNN, and one from TMZ.) Facebook has disputed Roose’s methodology, arguing that there are ways to parse the data that would make it look less damning. Roose ranks posts by “interactions,” but John Hegeman, who runs Facebook’s News Feed, has argued that it would be better to rank posts by “reach” instead. This, Hegeman tweeted in July, would be “a more accurate way to see what’s popular.” However, he

continued, “This data is only available internally.” ♦

## **Annals of Activism**

- [Chase Strangio's Victories for Transgender Rights](#)

# **Chase Strangio's Victories for Transgender Rights**

The A.C.L.U. attorney works as a representative in every sense of the word.

By [Masha Gessen](#)

October 12, 2020



On the morning of Monday, June 15th, Chase Strangio, the deputy director for transgender justice at the [American Civil Liberties Union](#)'s L.G.B.T. & H.I.V. Project, woke up in his childhood bedroom, in Newton, Massachusetts. After three months of isolating in his small apartment, in Queens, Strangio had driven with his seven-year-old child to Newton, an affluent, liberal suburb of Boston, to see his mother, Joan. Strangio had just buzzed the sides and the back of his head—his quarantine substitute for what used to be a weekly barbershop visit, and a grooming ritual for whenever the [Supreme Court](#) might be expected to hand down a decision. The thatch of dark, glossy hair on the top of his head had gone untouched since mid-March. He'd also brought a blazer to his mother's house, in case he was asked to make media appearances.

The Court never says which decisions will be announced on a particular day, although the three biggest decisions advancing L.G.B.T.Q. rights arrived, coincidentally, on June 26th: Lawrence v. Texas, which struck down sodomy laws, in 2003; United States v. Windsor, which struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, in 2013; and [Obergefell v. Hodges](#), which affirmed the constitutional right of same-sex couples to marry, in 2015. By that precedent, it still felt early to expect a ruling in Bostock v. Clayton County, which took up the question of whether an employer who fires a worker for being gay or transgender is in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Two plaintiffs, Gerald Bostock and Donald Zarda, whose cases were consolidated, were gay men; a third, represented by the A.C.L.U., was Aimee Stephens, a transgender woman who, in 2013, was fired from her job at a funeral home in Michigan after she informed her employer that she was transitioning.

It seemed unlikely to Strangio that the decision in Bostock would be a victory for his side. [Anthony Kennedy](#), who retired in 2018, had been the swing vote in earlier cases. Now the L.G.B.T.Q. advocates' hopes hinged on [Neil Gorsuch](#), perhaps the Court's strictest proponent of textualism, the idea that a court should adhere to the words of a law—in this case, Title VII's prohibition of discrimination “on the basis of sex”—without taking into account the lawmakers' original intentions. David Cole, the national legal director of the A.C.L.U., aimed his arguments plainly at Gorsuch. Still, it was difficult to fathom that Gorsuch, [President Trump](#)'s first Supreme Court appointee, would take a stand in favor of gay and transgender rights. On Friday, June 12th, the Department of Health and Human Services had released a new rule that eliminated protections against sex discrimination in health care for transgender

patients—the latest of the Trump Administration’s many blows to trans rights. A good outcome in Bostock, however, might render the new health-care rule moot. Strangio told me, “I had spent all weekend saying, ‘The Trump Administration doesn’t have the final word on sex discrimination—the Supreme Court does.’ And I was thinking, Yes, and then we’ll lose.”

At 9:50 A.M. on June 15th, after Strangio rushed his child through online school assignments, he joined a Zoom call with most of the A.C.L.U. team that worked on the case—twenty-two people, including interns and assistants. In pre-COVID times, they would have attempted to cram into Strangio’s tiny, windowless office at the A.C.L.U. At 9:59, he started pressing the Refresh button on the Supreme Court Web site. He and his colleagues could see that an opinion in their case was posted to the site, and that Gorsuch had written it—possibly a good sign. But the document refused to load. Strangio, punching Refresh again and again, and still talking to his colleagues, started tweeting:

IT’S HERE! I can’t open it

A minute later, a single page loaded, enough for Strangio and the others to see “*Held: An employer who fires an individual merely for being gay or transgender violates Title VII’s terms.*”

Did we win????

Then:

WE FUCKING WON!? I can’t see it

One minute after that:

6 to FUCKING 3.

[Chief Justice John Roberts](#), who had dissented in the Windsor and Obergefell decisions, had joined the majority.



*"Too much violence."*  
Cartoon by Mike Twohy

I genuinely think this is a full win. We fully won. The HHS rule is completely void.

Finally, all thirty-three pages of Gorsuch's text loaded. (Slowing things down was [Justice Samuel Alito](#)'s furious hundred-and-seven-page dissent, which included eleven pages of dictionary definitions of sex and twenty-six pages of images of military-enlistment forms.) Strangio tweeted a screenshot from the last page of the Court's opinion: "An employer who fires an individual merely for being gay or transgender defies the law. . . . *It is so ordered.*"

## I AM SOBBING

Around this time, Strangio got a call from [Laverne Cox](#), one of the stars of "[Orange Is the New Black](#)" and a fellow trans-rights activist. Cox had taken Strangio to the Emmys as her plus-one and later accompanied him to oral arguments at the Supreme Court. They laughed and cried together on Instagram Live over the decision; Strangio marvelled that the trans-rights movement had convinced the likes of "Gorsuch and Roberts and this generally awful Court that we exist." Cox wore a black tuxedo gown and mesh gloves over manicured hands—a glamorous apparition from pre-COVID days. Strangio realized that he was still wearing his mother's hoodie over the T-shirt he had slept in.

Two days after the decision, Strangio sat on the pavement in the courtyard of his apartment building, in Jackson Heights, wearing an Adidas baseball cap, a gray T-shirt, black skinny jeans, and a pin-striped mask. He has big, captivating blue-green eyes and elfin ears, and even beneath a mask it's obvious when he's smiling. He smiles a lot, especially when he talks about himself; he appears to find himself amusing, perhaps ridiculous at times. He was still processing news that seemed almost impossibly good. "I feel the concept of happy, but I don't feel the emotion of it," he said. "It's hard to know how to celebrate in isolation. We have been grieving in isolation, and now celebrating in isolation. I am thinking about all the connections that went into this case, and now everybody is in their own homes."

During the months of [COVID](#)-enforced seclusion, two people who played large roles in Strangio's life had died. His friend [Lorena Borjas](#), a Queens neighbor and trans activist, with whom Strangio had co-founded a bail fund for transgender immigrants, died of *COVID* in March. Stephens, the transgender

plaintiff in *Bostock*, died in May, after years of ill health. “I was thinking, At least she went out with the hope that we might win,” Strangio said. This sentiment might have provided some comfort had they lost the case. He was crushed to think that, after seven years of fighting the employer who fired her for being transgender, Stephens died without knowing she had prevailed.

Strangio, who graduated from law school in 2010, has worked on some of the most important civil-rights cases of recent years, especially in the area of transgender rights. His clients have included [Chelsea Manning](#), the U.S. Army whistle-blower, and Gavin Grimm, the Virginia high-school student who sued his school district for the right to use the bathroom that corresponded to his gender identity. Strangio has achieved a sort of celebrity as a lawyer and a trans activist. Last year, [Annie Leibovitz](#) photographed him for a Google ad campaign, and this summer he appeared in two new documentaries: “Disclosure,” which looks at portrayals of trans people in film, and “The Fight,” which profiles five A.C.L.U. attorneys battling the Trump Administration on various fronts, in which Strangio is featured with his colleague Joshua Block as they craft a case against Trump’s ban on transgender military personnel.

Strangio describes designing a legal strategy as “a combination of a puzzle and an analytical game, and then having to merge a lot of people’s views of those things. It can be brutal. Each sentence gets rewritten fifty times.” In the Stephens case, the process was laced with dread. Stephens’s lawsuit was originally brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. By the time it reached the Supreme Court, Trump had been President for more than two years and the federal government was now arguing that employment discrimination against a transgender person was legal. Then Strangio read an article in the *Wake Forest Law Review* by Katie Eyer, a professor at Rutgers Law School. Eyer argued that a truly textualist interpretation of Title VII would leave the Justices no choice but to acknowledge that discriminating against people because they are gay, lesbian, or transgender is to discriminate against them on the basis of sex. “In the briefing room, I said, ‘We can win this!’ ” Strangio said. “Then, after the meeting, I thought, But can we?”

During oral arguments, Gorsuch affirmed the A.C.L.U.’s approach—“I’m with you on the textual evidence,” he told Cole—but he asked if the Court should “take into consideration the massive social upheaval that would be entailed in such a decision,” affecting workplace dress codes and public bathrooms. Cole responded that trans people, and transgender rights, exist, and are widely

recognized already. “There are transgender male lawyers in this courtroom following the male dress code and going to the men’s room, and the Court’s dress code and sex-segregated rest rooms have not fallen,” Cole said. “So the notion that somehow this is going to be a huge upheaval . . . There’s no reason you would see that upheaval. Transgender people follow the rule that’s associated with their gender identity. It’s not disruptive.”

One of the lawyers to whom Cole referred was Strangio, who was seated at the counsel table. (Another was an A.C.L.U. colleague, Gabriel Arkles.) Strangio was wearing a blue plaid tie in a Windsor knot with a white shirt and a gray suit, the sides of his head freshly barbered and the hair on the top gelled solid. It was perhaps not the first time that trans lawyers had sat at the counsel table before the Supreme Court, but it was certainly the first time that they had been seen for who they were. Still, Cole’s reassurance that trans people, if granted full civil rights, would behave appropriately—would remain more or less invisible—had a tinge of humiliation. It was also imprecise: Strangio identifies as trans but not as a man, uses both “he” and “they” pronouns, likes to paint his nails, and generally defies expectations of gender performance.

Legal cases make up a disproportionately large part of the way that the wider society views queer and trans people. We are represented by our sexual practices or our coupledom, or we are seen, as trans people often are, as impostors, liars, or interlopers. The image is rarely nuanced, even when it’s positive. As a trans lawyer, Strangio works as a representative in every sense of the word: in court, in the media, and sometimes in state legislatures, for his clients, for the trans community, and for himself.

When Strangio was in tenth grade, and his brother, Noah, was in sixth, their parents, Joan and Mark, split up. Mark was soon in a new relationship, with Noah’s best friend’s mother. Joan, a social worker, stayed in the family house, which has preserved the rupture of the divorce: Strangio told me that his father “took all the good furniture” when he moved out, in 1997. The great room, with its double-height ceilings, is half-empty and apparently unused. The heart of the house is the cozy kitchen, which Joan recently renovated in hues of gray and white; Strangio and I talked at a small white table in the breakfast nook.

He remembers little of his childhood and adolescence. His best friend from those years, Jenny Rossman, who is now a sex-crimes prosecutor in Orlando, Florida, told me that Chase took care of Joan and “made sure that Noah was protected.”

Noah, who was awarded a Bronze Star while serving in the U.S. Army in Afghanistan and now works in tech in the Bay Area, has maintained friendly relations with their father; Chase, who described his father last year as “a die hard Fox News watching Trump voter,” is more distant. (He continues to be protective of Joan. I met her on my visit to Newton, but she was the one person he didn’t want me to interview.) In high school, Strangio played on the girls’ soccer team, and gained early admission to Williams College. The summer after graduating from high school, he worked at J. P. Licks, an ice-cream parlor in Newton Centre, where some of the other employees were students at Oberlin College, in Ohio. “They were all queer,” Strangio recalled. “Or at least some of them were.” So, it seemed, was he. Rossman said, “I don’t remember him coming out that summer—it was more like ‘This is who I’m hanging out with. This is what I’m understanding.’ ” It wasn’t a surprise. Rossman didn’t recall any of Strangio’s high-school boyfriends, but she remembered that, as far back as seventh grade, he decorated the walls of his bedroom with pictures of Gwyneth Paltrow but not Paltrow’s then boyfriend, Brad Pitt.

As uneventful as Strangio’s coming out may have seemed to those closest to him, it upended his world. He left Williams after orientation week and started making long visits to Oberlin to be near his summer friends. He took a job at another ice-cream parlor and felt very angry, “at myself, probably, for not finding my way.” He cut off contact with his family and his high-school friends, did drugs, and struggled with an eating disorder. The following fall, he enrolled in Grinnell College, in Iowa. During his first week at Grinnell, Strangio went to Bob’s Underground, the student-run coffee shop, on open-mike night. A group of queer sophomores spotted him immediately, and one, Maggie Field, motioned to him to come sit at their table. “It’s a small school, and you see someone who is queer,” Field, now a psychotherapist in Brooklyn, told me. In Strangio’s walk and dress, Field said, “there was a toughness that a lot of queer folk might have to have.”

In 2018, fourteen years after Strangio graduated from Grinnell with a degree in history, he received an honorary doctorate in law from the college. Speaking on the occasion, he told the story of his child coming home from preschool upset that boys and girls had been told to line up separately. The child (who currently uses the pronoun “she”) had argued that she was both a boy and a girl, and was instructed to get in line with the girls. Strangio asked her what she did next:

“I threw myself on the ground screaming,” she answered. Though not

always my preferred reaction, I was pretty proud of her that day. . . . I also want to throw myself on the ground screaming when confronted with systems, like the gender binary, that make no sense, that serve to oppress us, and that limit the beauty we can build in the world. And Grinnell taught me to throw myself on the ground screaming.

His persistent sense of not fitting in had a lot to do with his decision to become a lawyer. Explaining his thinking at the time, he said, “If I’m a freak, but I can tell people that I’m a lawyer, it will discursively settle things.” After college, Strangio returned to the Boston area to work as a paralegal at Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, which had just won a staggering victory: after a long, high-stakes litigation campaign by *GLAD*, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court had sanctioned same-sex marriage. Like the A.C.L.U., *GLAD* devotes many of its resources to “impact litigation,” the practice of setting a legal goal and then finding exemplary plaintiffs to make the case. The primary intent of such cases is to secure the decision of the highest possible court, insuring legal change for the greatest number of people.

The “perfect” plaintiffs in impact-litigation cases are rarely the people who most need pro-bono legal services; instead, they tend to be like the seven middle-class, mostly white couples in the Massachusetts marriage case, or like Edith Windsor, the wealthy, charismatic white widow with a forty-year love story to tell. Strangio wanted to provide direct services to clients who wouldn’t otherwise have access to legal counsel. “Meeting people where they are,” he told me, seemed “the best way to do law.” Later, he said, he learned that “there is no best way to do law—rather, there are lots of flawed ways.”

He was accepted at Harvard and N.Y.U., but chose Northeastern University, in Boston, which had an unusually strong emphasis on training students expressly for careers in social justice and public service. “Every so often we get one of those,” Libby Adler, Strangio’s law-school mentor, told me—meaning a person who chooses Northeastern over Harvard. “And we know that they are going to be super-successful public-interest lawyers.” Strangio took Adler’s classes in constitutional law, administrative law, and gender and sexuality, and worked with her on a project to provide legal services to low-income L.G.B.T.Q. youth of color, under the auspices of Boston Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services. Adler was critical of the mainstream gay-rights movement, which she viewed as pursuing the rights of L.G.B.T.Q. people under existing law—for instance, the right to marry or to serve in the military—rather than trying to

transform the legal framework itself. Adler used homeless L.G.B.T. youth as an example: changing laws that criminalized running away from home or that precluded minors from being direct recipients of child-support payments would immediately benefit these young people in ways that equal marriage would not.

While still in law school, in 2008, Strangio moved to New York City, where he interned at the Urban Justice Center's Peter Cicchino Youth Project, working with homeless queer and transgender young people. There, he met an attorney named Nadia Qurashi; the two became friends and, later, romantic partners and co-parents. "This was the best job ever," Qurashi told me, at a coffee shop in Jackson Heights. "These young people were asking Chase about his gender and coming out, and he was so open. He challenged the boundaries between client and attorney."

In other ways, Strangio was private about his transition. When he changed his name, in 2008, college friends received a brief e-mail. ("It was probably hard to send that e-mail, despite us all being queer and progressive," Maggie Field said.) When he had chest surgery, in 2009, he didn't tell anyone about his plans until the last minute, when it occurred to him, "What if I die and someone has to tell my mother?" For a long time, he remained a "sister" and a "daughter" to his brother and mother. "But then I had a kid, and I was Dad, and I thought, O.K., I don't want to put my weird fragmented self onto my kid." He talked to his family. He recalled that his mother mourned losing a daughter: "She said, 'I didn't even want one boy. And now I have two?'" Noah, according to Chase, said, "But we should always be Noah and your old name."

Noah remembers the conversation differently: "Chase sat me down and said, 'You can call me what you want.' I said, 'I'll call you Chase.' "

After law school, Strangio won a fellowship at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, to work in prisons. The S.R.L.P., named for a legendary New York queer street activist, is collectively run and fully devoted to direct services to clients in need. At the time, it had an annual budget of around half a million dollars and a staff of seven people, all of them overworked. Strangio's mentor there, Dean Spade, who had founded the S.R.L.P., was just five years his senior. Strangio learned by trial and error, and made some bad mistakes. In an attempt to aid a trans woman who was serving time in a men's prison, he wrote to prison authorities, alerting them to violence at the institution. "As a result, the entire wing was put on lockdown, and that got everyone pissed off and created a heightened system of

violence,” he said. “What was really needed was to get the person out of prison, or at least to a women’s prison.”



Kanin

*"Yes, I know this would be easier to move in space."*  
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

He teamed up with Lorena Borjas, the unofficial den mother to transgender Latinx women in New York City, to start the bail fund for transgender immigrants, and he joined a working group of lawyers who were drafting recommendations for [President Obama](#)'s Department of Justice on the incarceration of trans people. "We asked people in prison what they needed, and they all said that they wanted a trans unit," Strangio said. But the lawyers in the working group, including Strangio, believed that L.G.B.T. units were stigmatizing, and only served to perpetuate the prison system. They advised that inmates' housing should not be determined solely on the basis of sexuality or gender identity. The D.O.J. accepted the recommendations, and a number of units were shut down. Strangio now regrets the outcome. "We acted as though the real stakeholders were the law professors," he said.

By 2012, after two years at the S.R.L.P., Strangio was burned out. "Oh, my God, nothing is improving," he recalled thinking. He was living with Qurashi in Jackson Heights with their newborn. (They have since amicably separated, and share parenting duties.) Strangio was making fifty thousand dollars a year, and was a hundred thousand dollars in debt. "This is not a sustainable situation," he thought. Sleep-deprived and full of misgivings, Strangio interviewed for a job as a staff attorney with the A.C.L.U. "I thought never in my life would I be interested in such a job," Strangio told me. The A.C.L.U. focusses on impact litigation; it doesn't provide direct services to clients. And, he said, "everyone there went to Harvard or Yale and clerked." This was not exactly true, but almost no one else at the A.C.L.U. had gone to Northeastern or worked at scrappy grassroots organizations where the lawyers order their own office supplies and take out the trash. Strangio had little practice in writing briefs and had a weak grasp of federal-court structure; for the first time in his life, he didn't feel smart. The old feeling of not belonging returned. The A.C.L.U., at that time, had no all-gender rest rooms and just one single-user bathroom, which was on a different floor.

In August, 2013, Strangio appeared on television for the first time, on "Democracy Now!" He had been invited to talk about Chelsea Manning, who was then serving a thirty-five-year sentence in a men's military prison for violating the Espionage Act by giving military documents to WikiLeaks. Manning had just come out as transgender, and the Army was refusing to provide her with hormone treatment for her transition, which Strangio argued

was unconstitutional. The show's host, Amy Goodman, said, "Couldn't you tell us your story? You are transitioning from woman to man." One can see Strangio gulping air before diverting the question. "I am someone who identifies as transgender," he replied. "And, as a transgender person, hearing from Chelsea Manning yesterday is especially, you know, empowering. I think it is so brave to come out." He told me that as he responded he thought, I am never doing this again.

For three and a half years, Strangio was part of Manning's legal team, one of her most visible public advocates, and the only trans person with whom she could communicate in person. Strangio and the A.C.L.U. fought to get Manning hormone treatment, then to get the prison administration to allow her to grow her hair, and then to get her sentence commuted, collecting more than a hundred thousand signatures on a petition. "I really thought she was going to die in prison," Strangio told me. "She had had multiple suicide attempts." Then, in 2017, Barack Obama, in his last hours as President, commuted Manning's sentence, and a few months later Strangio travelled to Fort Leavenworth, in the middle of the night, to pick Manning up.

After her release, Manning came into a kind of queer celebrity. During Pride Month, she attended gala fund-raisers; Annie Leibovitz shot her for *Vogue*; the *Times* put her on the cover of its magazine. Yet a backlash against trans visibility continued to gain momentum. Bills that would require people to use bathrooms in accordance with the sex marked on their birth certificates were being debated in states around the country. The Supreme Court, after agreeing to hear the case of Gavin Grimm, the Virginia teen-ager fighting to be able to use the boys' bathroom at his high school, sent the case back to a lower court after the Trump Administration reversed the Department of Education's previous guidance on trans students' rights.

"Nobody wanted a trans case at the Supreme Court," Strangio said—the movement wasn't ready. The fifteen-year legal and political campaign that led to the marriage victories at the Court had crafted a compelling, textured picture of same-sex couples as deserving of empathy and rights. Strangio wanted the A.C.L.U. to be the storyteller for trans people in America; because Trump's election spurred an enormous influx of donations to the A.C.L.U., Strangio suddenly had the money and the organizational will to undertake a trans-advocacy campaign. The A.C.L.U. had expanded its office space in the financial district, and now there was an all-gender bathroom on the floor where Strangio

worked.

He teamed up with Zackary Drucker, a producer on the TV series “Transparent,” to write the script of a four-minute animation on the history of trans activism, illustrated by Molly Crabapple and narrated by Laverne Cox. This was followed by three short documentaries on trans people: a car mechanic in Georgia, a former inmate struggling to make a new life in Chicago, and a six-year-old girl in Texas, named Kai Shappley. The film about Kai and her very religious mother, Kimberly Shappley, won an Emmy in 2019. “It is less that we need to create a linear narrative to convince the courts of anything than we simply need to get trans stories out there,” Strangio said. “My sense of the narrative that we have to create is just that trans people exist.”

The summer of 2020, Strangio said, “brought some amazing wins” following the decision in Bostock. The Fourth Circuit decided in favor of Grimm, who graduated from high school three years ago, ruling that a policy requiring transgender students to use “alternative appropriate private facilities” was unconstitutional. In another case that Strangio worked on, a federal judge in Idaho issued an injunction against a state law that banned trans women and girls from women’s sports teams. The decision in Bostock had changed the terrain, yet, before its session was over, the Court was cutting back on Bostock’s implications, broadening the “religious exemption” from anti-discrimination statutes in a 7–2 decision, with Sonia Sotomayor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg dissenting. In its new term, the Court will consider whether the city of Philadelphia can refuse to give a contract to a Catholic adoption agency because it discriminates against L.G.B.T. parents.

“We’ll probably lose that one, especially now,” Strangio told me, when we spoke two days after Ginsburg’s death. He was irritated by the discourse surrounding Trump’s replacement for Ginsburg, the conservative Catholic judge [Amy Coney Barrett](#). (A consortium of twenty-seven L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy groups opposed Barrett’s confirmation to the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, in 2017.) In an article for Bloomberg, the liberal law professor Noah Feldman, who clerked on the Supreme Court with Barrett twenty years ago, endorsed her as “a sincere, lovely person,” with “an ideal judicial temperament of calm and decorum.” On the phone, Strangio told me, “This is not a legitimate way to think about the material consequences for people’s lives” of a Supreme Court appointment. Attending a top law school, clerking at the Court, and mastering the idiom of civil legal debate, Strangio said, does not qualify a person to decide if certain

people should not have access to health care or be protected from employment discrimination.

In the course of several months of conversations with Strangio and people close to him, his mother's house in Newton, with its abandoned great room and busy little kitchen off to the side, offered itself up as a metaphor. The law, like the suburban American house, is designed to order a particular pattern of relationships, many of them oriented around the heterosexual nuclear family. For real people in contemporary circumstances to inhabit the house the law built, one has to find side doors and discreet corners, while the dominant space changes little and the façade remains unaltered. The two big L.G.B.T.-rights Supreme Court victories that came before Bostock—Windsor and Obergefell—did exactly that: they carved out a place for monogamous same-sex couples who want to marry (statistically, these are more apt to be white middle-class people like the plaintiffs) in the house of the American nuclear family.

Unlike those earlier decisions, Gorsuch's opinion in Bostock was not written in the soaring language of civic aspiration. Yet it opened the door wider than even the plaintiffs had hoped: his textual analysis of Title VII is so narrow that it requires neither a definition of sex nor a distinction between sex and gender identity; it says, in effect, that sex, whatever it may be, is integral to a person's transgender status. The Bostock decision might have created the opportunity for someone like Strangio to become visible not as a representative of clean-cut, gender-conforming trans people but as the person he is. Five days after the decision, Strangio tweeted a picture of himself wearing a black muscle shirt, a pink headband, and an upturned ponytail held in place by a pink hair tie. "Happy Saturday," he tweeted. "We won 6–3. And I am never going to stop fighting for more and true justice. Also I'm queer AF."

Telling the story of being trans almost inevitably becomes uncomfortably intimate. Strangio described himself to me on several occasions as "weirdly" private. The first time I saw him in Massachusetts, he wanted to talk while walking on slippery, iced-over paths in a public park, until I finally begged him to go inside. In New York, before the pandemic hit, we met in coffee shops and at the A.C.L.U. office, but Strangio insisted that his studio apartment was "not suitable for visitors." He told me, "It's a small rental space without nice things, and I'm hyperaware of that." He allowed filmmakers into his home for "The Fight," but felt self-conscious when he saw that all of his colleagues appeared to live in well-appointed Brooklyn brownstones. Shouldn't one of the country's

most prominent L.G.B.T.Q. activists have a more fabulous apartment? “I feel shame about it, like I should have done better,” he said. “But I want to be part of the story that trans people just are, and we live. I am messy. There is nothing binary, nothing neat here.”

When Leibovitz photographed him for the Google ad, she asked him to remove his shirt, and he reluctantly complied. “I don’t feel great about my body,” he told me. “But so much of trans masculinity is images of these skinny, muscular, very binary guys.” The final image was a diptych, showing Strangio reflected in the mirror of his bathroom, and a pair of gray slacks, a white shirt, and a plaid tie hanging on a door. “These are such overused tropes, which show transness as something that’s put on,” he said. (The one happy result of the shoot was that Google gave Strangio a Chromebook, which proved indispensable when his kid needed to switch to distance learning, in March.) In January, when the South Dakota legislature was considering a bill that would have criminalized providing medical transition services to minors, Strangio posted a topless selfie on Twitter. “Gender affirming health care saved my life,” he wrote. “Give young people a chance to live.” (The bill was killed in committee, after lobbying by the health-care industry.)

Strangio hates it when parents of his teen-age clients ask him about his own transition, and he sets boundaries on discussions of his medical decisions. At the same time, he realizes that for young people in rural areas, and for their parents, he is often the first trans person they have ever met. So he is open to other kinds of questions: “Are you happy?” “Do you have a family?” “How did you become a lawyer?” Perhaps when you literally embody your work and your politics, you develop a discerning sense of how to measure social distances. You get used to broadcasting details of your self to strangers. This is not intimacy; it’s education. “I’ve used my body and my story in my work,” he said, “and I hope the next generation may not have to.” ♦

## **Backup Plan**

- [Glad for Plaid, as Catholic Schools Pick Up the Slack](#)

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

# Glad for Plaid, as Catholic Schools Pick Up the Slack

A Brooklyn school-uniform store's business booms, as COVID wreaks havoc with the opening of public schools, and parents try the parochial route.

By [Casey Parks](#)

October 12, 2020

At the Bensonhurst outpost of Flynn O'Hara, a school-uniform store, the busiest time of the year is usually the Tuesday after Labor Day. By late September, families have stocked up on the insignia blazers and tartan jumpers that are commensurate with a Catholic education. But this fall, with Mayor Bill de Blasio twice delaying reopening the city's public schools, Flynn O'Hara had lines around the block. Harried-looking mothers gave themselves away by asking the telltale newbie question: How many pairs of pants should I buy?



Dana Conlon, who manages the Bensonhurst location, started working at Flynn O’Hara ten years ago. Her son and daughter attended Catholic schools on Staten Island—Monsignor Farrell and St. Joseph by the Sea—and she went to St. Brendan and St. Mark. “We still sell that uniform,” she said, on a recent Monday. “Plaid eighty-seven was mine.”

Every plaid has a number. At Flynn O’Hara, the mostly navy-and-green fitting-room curtains are eighty-three, the weave worn by students at St. Bernadette, in Dyker Heights. Eighty-seven, the plaid Conlon wore, is navy, yellow, and gray. “Which happens to be one of the oldest plaids,” Wayne DeAngelo, a district manager of the chain, said, stepping out of a storeroom.

“Thank you, Wayne,” Conlon said.

“I’m not implying that you’re old, but that plaid has been around for probably forty years,” he said. “It’s very classic.”

The previous day, the union representing the city’s principals announced that it had lost confidence in de Blasio’s plan to reopen the schools. Conlon, expecting a crowd, had called extra salespeople in to help. A customer named Thomas Aellis came in at around 4 p.m. to buy gym shirts for his three daughters, who are all at St. Bernadette. The year had taken a toll, and he mentioned that he was thinking of leaving New York. “I own a limousine company on Eighty-sixth Street,” he said.

Giulia Troia, a longtime summer worker who just graduated from Fontbonne Hall Academy, looked up: “Romantique? We had Romantique for my prom.”

“This year?” he asked. “That was the only school that did something for the kids.”

Aellis’s wife is a public-school teacher. “So she’s in the middle of the bleep storm,” he said. “Two of our best friends pulled their kids from public,” he added, and enrolled them at St. Bernadette. “Kids are in full days, one-hundred-per-cent capacity, every day,” he said of the school. “My kids wanted to go. They were tired. They missed their friends.”

“I hope it’s not just a temporary switch,” Louise Romano, an assistant manager,

said. “Where families are just putting their kids in there for now, then in a year they’re going to put them back in public schools, because a lot of the Catholic schools are in danger of closing.” She listed a couple of casualties: St. Anselm (which merged with Holy Angels and became Bay Ridge Catholic Academy), Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Aellis paid thirty-five dollars and fifty cents for three yellow gym shirts with the St. Bernadette crest. On his way out, he passed Michele Cartelli and Andrea Gatti-Bryant, sisters who swirled in with a dozen questions. They needed Our Lady of Grace uniforms for two nine-year-old boys, who were starting school the next morning.

“What’s the one they wear every day?” Cartelli asked.

“I thought I saw kids wearing beige pants,” Gatti-Bryant said.

No, a clerk explained, Our Lady of Grace requires “graphite twill”—gray pants. Gatti-Bryant sent her son, Renzo, a skinny kid she calls Bird Bones, into a changing room with a size eight slim, and he emerged grimacing. The pants were baggy and flared at the ankles. “You can’t go smaller, because I’m going to wash them,” his mother said. Renzo slunk back into the fitting room. “Drip?” he asked, using a hip-hop fashion term as he examined the uniform. “Not at all.” He went on, “It’s my choice. It’s my body.” He yanked the eighty-three-plaid curtain closed.

“I’m sorry,” Gatti-Bryant told him. “That’s what it is for Catholic school.”

Renzo didn’t have to endure the baggy pants for long. A week later, Governor Andrew Cuomo closed Our Lady of Grace and all other schools in nine neighborhoods across Queens and Brooklyn where rates of the virus had spiked. The sisters hoped that city officials would come up with a better plan. Cartelli, a physical therapist, said that balancing her job and remote learning for her son, Matthew, had been chaotic. Gatti-Bryant had initially signed Renzo up for what the public schools are calling blended learning, “but they were only going to be in person about five days a month,” she said. “People need to work. What are you going to do with your kids? Leave them home alone?”

“Not every parent is cut out to be a teacher,” Cartelli said.

Gatti-Bryant looked at Renzo, then shook her head. “I could never.” ♦

## Books

- [The United States of Dolly Parton](#)
- [The Heartsick Hilarity of John Berryman's Letters](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [Philosophy in the Shadow of Nazism](#)

# The United States of Dolly Parton

A voice for working-class women and an icon for all kinds of women, Parton has maintained her star power throughout life phases and political cycles.

By [Lauren Michele Jackson](#)

October 12, 2020



Dolly Parton is loved for many reasons—the songwriting, the singing, the industry smarts, the cheeky cracks, the homey manner, the beauty, the verve, the hits. She is also loved for being loved, and loved transcendentally. During a red-hot summer marked in part by toppled monuments to slavery and genocide, a petition arose, directed at Tennessee lawmakers, calling for Parton to be pedestalled instead. “Let’s replace the statues of men who sought to tear this country apart with a monument to the woman who has worked her entire life to bring us closer together,” the petition proposed, soon gaining some twenty-three thousand signatories.

The country-music establishment can be about as partisan as they come, a rope line of old-school apple-pie values and unquestioning patriotism. But Parton is a true diplomat. A word like “crossover” scarcely encompasses a singer admired by Vanna White (who says Parton is her role model because she “hasn’t been affected by show business”), Björk (who has called Parton’s twanged crystal timbre “immaculate”), and Nicki Minaj (who nods Parton’s way in a guest verse on Drake’s “Make Me Proud”). A Dolly Parton concert is like a local census, bringing together peoples across lines of race, gender, sexuality, and, miraculously, political affiliation.

Parton’s politics, in the two-party sense, are a secret so well kept that her reticence on this score has become as integral to the living monument of her as her blond coiffure. In 1980, she had a starring role in the movie [“9 to 5,”](#) a hit comedy about mutinous women office workers which was further buoyed by her Oscar-nominated song of that title, but she carefully disavowed any “women’s lib”: “Not that I’m not for rights for everybody,” she told *Rolling Stone*. “I’m just sayin’ I didn’t want to get involved in a political thing. It’s just a funny, funny show.” In 2014, an interviewer brought up the famous [girl-boss manual](#) by the Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg, and asked whether Parton had ever “leaned in.” Parton deflected the veiled test of feminist cred with a laugh: “I’ve leaned over. I’ve leaned forward. I don’t know what ‘leaned in’ is. Lean in to God.” In the summer of 2016, she caused a small stir among her fans when she expressed her willingness, in an [interview](#) with the *Times*, to throw in her lot with Hillary Clinton “if she gets it.” But those who were either pleased or incensed by this answer had assumed too much. Parton clarified that she hadn’t decided whom she was voting for, and she said that if she ever found an interest in politics she’d run herself: “I’ve got the hair for it, it’s huge, and they could always use more boobs in the race.”

Humor indelibly choreographs Dolly's two-step around the sort of culturally warred-over topics that trip up so many celebrities. If the shtick is slick, it doesn't feel so, only polished, with a whiff of old-fashioned etiquette concerning the subjects one doesn't talk about with company present. Another word for this is "grace," helpfully supplied by Sarah Smarsh, the author of "[She Come by It Natural: Dolly Parton and the Women Who Lived Her Songs](#)" (Scribner). It's an appropriately evangelic interpretation of Parton's seemingly apolitical poise. In lieu of taking a stand, Parton walks the walk, binding the country's disparate passions with a better politics—good works and the call of homecoming.

Parton was born in 1946, the fourth child of twelve, on her family's small farm in a "holler" (country for "hollow"), in Sevier County, Tennessee. Her father, Lee, worked as a sharecropper but acquired his own land when Dolly turned five; alongside his wife, Avie Lee, he raised tobacco and livestock. In the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, the Partons' poverty was acute but unremarkable. Luxuries—electricity, plumbing, store-bought anything—were nonexistent or scarce. Still, the family took care of its own. This period would become the source of anecdotes one could call Dollyisms, spangled throughout concerts and interviews, committed to memory by fans and followers. "I have often joked that we had 'two rooms and a path, and running water, if you were willing to run to get it,'" Parton wrote in her 1994 autobiography, "[Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business](#)."

Some of these stories are sad (the death of a newborn brother), some harrowing (her mother's bout with spinal meningitis); others are joyful or funny. Not a few are all of these things. One day, Dolly, a small child at the time, trailed a monarch butterfly off the family property and into unknown territory, dreaming of flight. Lost for hours, she returned home by way of the family milk cow, Bessie. Holding on to Bessie's collar, Dolly was dragged through the forest, arriving home bloodied and bruised. She was greeted by her mother's sobs, which kept rhythm with her mother's switch.

Parton divides her extended family into two categories: toilers and wastrels. Her father's family, the Partons, were of the usual farming stock; they worked hard and patiently, knowing that their planning and providence would pay off, as with Aesop's industrious ant. Her maternal family, the Owenses, were mostly grasshoppers, keener on making music than on making a living—Avie Lee excluded. Parton, blending these legacies, dreamed up a dazzling future that only sweat, effort, and determination could yield.

Parton's account of her life is short on judgment but long on lessons. In retrospect, regular clobberings by her brother Denver evince "a sort of male chauvinism mountain boys don't necessarily grow out of," she wrote in her memoir. ("They do tend to subdue it somewhat after two or three divorces," she adds.) Granted, there's a special tone that arises when your hardships have been spun into gold. Her song "Coat of Many Colors," a fan favorite, is based on the true tale of a school-aged Dolly parading about on a too warm day in a homemade coat whose magic no one else saw. ("I recall a box of rags that someone gave us / And how my momma put the rags to use.") Resourceful women crop up in many lyrics, their ingenuity dramatized by the deadbeats who depend on them. Parton's 1969 song "He's a Go Getter" puns on the type of man whose giddyup is confined to going to his wife's place of work—and collecting her paycheck—in lieu of holding a job. "I know that most of you will know the kind I'm talkin' about," Parton sings.

Who's the "you" who understands the deep, unelaborated truths of her songs? That's the subject of "She Come by It Natural." Smarsh's first book, "[Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth](#)," a finalist for the 2018 National Book Award, shares with its successor a concern for America's white country folk, especially the women. A hardscrabble childhood on a Kansas farm and three university degrees—in English and journalism from the University of Kansas, and an M.F.A. from Columbia—make Smarsh a bridge of sorts between the jargon-addled theory of high feminism and the women whom such theory is routinely said to forget. In the course of "She Come by It Natural," the particulars of Parton's life story are grafted onto those of white working-class women, usually matriarchs within Smarsh's own family—women who, like Parton, might never see themselves in feminist discourse but have been "living feminism" all along. These are women tested by poverty and patriarchy, who do what needs to get done and escape when it's time, even if the fleeing lands them in another bad situation that they'll soon need to escape. They're women who are wronged ("Dagger Through the Heart") or possibly doing wrong ("I Can't Be True"), finding a soundtrack to their own loves in "Love Is Like a Butterfly." They are, in Smarsh's view, Parton's muses, with lives resembling the main characters of her jubilant and sad-ass tunes. Parton is a genius, but all those stories come from somewhere. And, though Parton left and made a mint, the women she might've been kept on living. They understand Parton like few can, and, for the most part, their contributions to progressive consciousness have gone unsung except by Parton.

Those songs started early. When she was five, she came up with “Little Tiny Tasseltop,” a pair of sung couplets about a corncob doll with corn-silk tassels for hair. “Since I have been able to form words, I have been able to rhyme them,” she wrote in her autobiography. “I could catch on to anything that had a rhythm”—peas snapping, honking geese—“and make a song to go with it.” Out of so many children, it was Dolly who was given an uncle’s guitar; another of Avie Lee’s brothers introduced her to the local entrepreneur-slash-radio-personality who gave Parton her first broadcast gig, at the age of ten, on “The Cas Walker Farm and Home Hour,” in Knoxville. Young as she was, she had for years already done the amateur circuit—on the porch or atop a woodpile or at Sunday service, strumming somebody’s banjo or a mandolin fashioned with piano strings.

Her adolescence was spent being driven back and forth to Knoxville, occasionally busking for “nickels and dimes,” or so goes a song of that name which she co-wrote with her brother Floyd years later. Her first swings at Nashville landed her, at age thirteen, a slot at the Grand Ole Opry, courtesy of the Cajun artist Jimmy C. Newman, a friend of friends. Money saved from the Cas Walker show and other spots was spent on the customary teen-age fare—clothes, makeup, and peroxide—and local celebrity attracted envy at school, where she was sometimes bullied. The morning after graduation, Parton boarded a Greyhound in hot pursuit of the usual dream.

By the time she was nineteen, she had a record deal; she recorded a number of singles, and wrote songs that better-known musicians recorded. At twenty, she got married to Carl Dean, who had a road-paving business. (They’re still married; he’s out of the road-paving business.) Parton credits her uncle Bill Owens, the same maternal uncle who ushered her into her first radio gig, with her big break in Nashville. It was Uncle Bill who haunted promoters and publishers, who drove the miles and knocked on the doors that led to the string of singles that landed her in the orbit of Porter Wagoner.

Wagoner, another farmer’s kid turned musician, had become the host of a syndicated weekly TV show, and signed her on as a singing sidekick, for an eye-popping sixty thousand dollars a year. Lean and glittering in his Nudie suits (likely designed by the quietly iconic Manuel Cuevas), and two decades her elder, Wagoner became, in the singsong language of a country duet, the sometime father, sometime lover of his partner. Parton has likened their seven-year working relationship to a marriage—affectionate, contentious, heated,

volatile, maddening—but neither of them ever confirmed rumors that the relationship actually had a romantic dimension.

YOU MUST  
BE THIS TALL  
TO CLAIM TO  
BE SIX FEET  
TALL

72"

BLOPER

Smarsh gives no such quarter, likening Wagoner's control and possessiveness (he argued with Parton about everything from what she sang to what she published and how) to the dynamics of domestic abuse, particularly in the later years, when his disdain erupted on air during "The Porter Wagoner Show," as though he'd sensed that Parton had one foot out the door. In a 1972 episode, he could be seen telling Parton, who was offstage, to "shut up," losing his trusty smile. Over the years, he pushed out other male business partners, including Uncle Bill, reluctant to see another wagon attached to her rising stardom. Parton herself writes that this period was like indentured servitude—seven years in exchange for the freedom she now enjoys.

"She Come by It Natural" finds a feminist origin story in 1973, when Parton cut the cords between her and Wagoner. By then, Parton had recorded and released twenty-four studio albums: thirteen solo records, including "Coat of Many Colors," and eleven with Wagoner. That totalled about a hundred and fifty songs written by Parton for her own projects, another fifty featuring duos with Wagoner. After nine years of near-non-stop hustle in Nashville, seven by Wagoner's side, the "girl singer" on Wagoner's show had come to outshine her host.

By leaving, she entered the symbolic frequency shared by any woman who has broken free from a chauvinist, whether once tied by a ring, a child, or a contract. It's a story retold like myth. One day, Parton walked into Wagoner's office and sang him a song—a parting gift that turned out to be a gift to herself. He teared up and let her go, though not without a hell of a legal fight. The song was "I Will Always Love You," written the day before. ("Bittersweet memories / That is all I'm taking with me.") The same songwriting session also produced "Jolene," which reached No. 1 on the country-music charts, and so one legend curled into another.

While Parton played the less than dutiful li'l lady, the second wave of feminism was happening all around her. Smarsh imagines the Parton tour bus rolling past marches, sit-ins, and other signs of protest, the sexual revolution like one big orgy outside the window. Parton surely wasn't unaffected by the cultural politics of her times, stepping out from the shadows with songs like "Just Because I'm a Woman," "A Little at a Time," and "The Bargain Store." (The last was deemed overly risqué by a division of country radio that didn't like her beckoning listeners to "come inside" at any price.) But Smarsh doesn't pretend that Parton

was ever a spokesperson for the movement. She was something more meaningful: not a mouthpiece but a model. And the chronology of Parton's life, regarded from a certain angle, can be seen to dovetail with the moments of the movement. She left her home town in 1964, the year that landmark legislation outlawing workplace discrimination on the basis of sex (among other protected categories) was enacted. She quit Wagoner in the year of Roe v. Wade. Her Hollywood début, in 1980, had her sharing the screen with two notorious women, Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin, and involved a revenge fantasy against a piggish male boss. In all these syncopations, Smarsh hears the echoing footfalls of a woman walking her walk.

Parton never lost her ability to hear the beat, and to make something of it. In a delightful clip that has recently been making the rounds online, from an episode of the short-lived nineteen-eighties variety show "Dolly," Parton leads Patti LaBelle in "a little rhythm" sounded, washboard style, from the clacking of their acrylic nails. Wearing similar puff-sleeved, sparkling black gowns, the two luminaries briefly harmonize a rendition of "Shortnin' Bread," the slave folk song, before collapsing into giggles. The moment can feel silly, but no doubt Smarsh would see its serious feminine brilliance. Acrylic nails, disparaged when seen on the hands of performers like Parton or Cardi B, may very well be responsible for some spectacular feats of songwriting.

Not long after the success of "9 to 5," Parton became depressed and suicidal. This period coincided with demoralizing professional experiences—filming the 1982 movie "[The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas](#)," she was made to feel too fat for her role opposite Burt Reynolds—along with family problems and health issues. God pulled her up, with Parton's help. She trimmed her band and fired her accounting firm; she had a partial hysterectomy, after being diagnosed with endometriosis. And she cleared ground for her grandest vision yet, an amusement park of near-Disneyland proportions, situated right in Sevier County. The year Dollywood opened, 1986, she was voted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. Whatever the ups and downs, the songs never ceased. "Even when I was sick, I was always writing," she recalls in a forthcoming songbook, co-written with Robert K. Oermann. "Yellow Roses," from her 1989 album "White Limozeen," released the same year that she had a featured role in "Steel Magnolias," became her tenth No. 1 hit of the decade, the fourth by her own pen—the yellow flower of her first romance has long since "turned to blue," but her love endures.

The eighties and nineties were a time for Parton to renegotiate the place of craft in fame. She moved from RCA to Columbia Records, sticking around for several albums—including “Honky Tonk Angels,” with Loretta Lynn and Tammy Wynette—before switching labels again and starting her own, Blue Eye Records. (A second label, Dolly Records, was launched in 2007.) She gave mountain music the most earnest try of her career with her 1999 solo album, “The Grass Is Blue,” a pared-down project that won the Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album, and its 2001 follow-up, “Little Sparrow.” Fans had apparently been begging for these albums for years, she told *Billboard* in 1999. “Since I manage myself now and have my own label and can do what I want, why not do it?” she said. In 2005, when she recorded “Travelin’ Thru,” the theme song for “[Transamerica](#),” a film about a trans woman’s drive across the country with her son, she courted controversy with a certain segment of her fan base, and received another Oscar nomination for Best Original Song.

From there came the career superbloom that we associate with multiplatinum artists who cagily mix business and art. With the help of a new manager, Parton reinvigorated the celebrity portion of her stardom with a good brand plan, harvesting a popularity that already stretched across the Atlantic. In 2014, she performed for a crowd of a hundred and eighty thousand at the annual Glastonbury Festival. After two decades as the co-owner of Sandollar Productions—with the TV series “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” among its credits—she founded Dixie Pixie Productions on her own. The company recently partnered with Warner Bros. to produce the eight-episode Netflix series “Dolly Parton’s Heartstrings,” telling the stories of Parton’s songs and starring Julianne Hough and Kathleen Turner, along with Parton herself. She has written books and inspired books, and has a line of bakeware with Williams Sonoma. Proof that she can chart when she wants to is “Pure & Simple,” which, in 2016, pushed aside the frattier Nashville sounds known to dominate the scene of late to become the No. 1 country album. Last fall, WNYC Studios released the podcast “[Dolly Parton’s America](#),” featuring interviews with Parton and hosted by the Tennessee native Jad Abumrad, whose naïveté about Parton’s widespread appeal provides the fertile ground for a Dolly-centric cultural history.

At the sixty-ninth Emmys, in 2017, Parton, Fonda, and Tomlin—all nominees that year—reunited onstage to present the award for Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Limited Series or Movie. Fonda and Tomlin, draped in red and black, took their swipes at an unnamed “sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot.” Parton, in the middle, cinched in white, joked about vibrators. “Hers was the

least directly political comment of the three,” Smarsh muses, but “the one most assured to vex a man like Donald Trump.” In a TV interview following the awards, Parton stuck to her usual script: “I don’t do politics. I’m an entertainer.” Of course, as Smarsh remarks, “Parton hasn’t gotten this far without knowing exactly what she’s doing.”

Yet even Parton, as Smarsh imagines it, has an adversary. Her adversary comes with pants suits and oxfords. She is educated, cool, urbane, fluent, and upper-middle class, contemptuous of a woman’s right to red nails and fancy duds. Yes, she is a feminist, marching and theorizing, looking down her horn-rimmed glasses at frivolous femininity, high hair, and corsets and such. At least, that is how Smarsh sees her. But resentment has never been part of the Parton ensemble, and one can sometimes feel that Smarsh is enlisting her in a battle she’s outlived.

Making reluctant feminists out of famous women tends to be a task more arduous than fruitful, but there’s no doubt Smarsh knows her subject intimately. In May, [interviewed](#) as part of a *Time* 100 event, Parton relented at last. “I suppose I am a feminist if I believe that women should be able to do anything they want to,” she said. That didn’t move the dial half as much as an interview published months later, featuring Parton’s support for the sentiment “Black lives matter.”

The work continues—certainly more effectual, if not louder, than the sound bites. Whenever Parton has returned to her home town, it has had the gravitational effect of a super-massive star, reconfiguring its economic landscape with a fortune enabled by her leaving. Parton gives generously and with heart. There are the many nonprofits that receive aid through the Dollywood Foundation, a philanthropy that shares a Zip Code with the Dollywood theme park, which itself was an outsized act of charity for her home town. Its projects include a twenty-five-year-old book-gifting program dear to Parton’s heart and an impromptu fund assisting families affected by the 2016 Smoky Mountain wildfires. At the time Smarsh wrote her book’s preface, dated March of this year, Parton hadn’t yet pledged anything toward the pandemic, but Smarsh was sure that she would, and Parton did—on April 2nd, she announced a donation of a million dollars to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, for research into coronavirus treatments. All this could be feminism, or whatever Parton wants it to be—giving, giving back, walking in God’s light. When she’s fixing to change course, I trust she’ll let us know. ♦

# **The Heartsick Hilarity of John Berryman's Letters**

Tracking the poet's chaotic, self-destructive life, his correspondence strains toward the condition of music.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

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The poet John Berryman was born in 1914, in McAlester, Oklahoma. He was educated at Columbia and then in England, where he studied at Cambridge, met [W. H. Auden](#) and [Dylan Thomas](#), and lit a cigarette for W. B. Yeats. All three men left traces in Berryman's early work. In 1938, he returned to New York and embarked upon a spate of teaching posts in colleges across the land, beginning at Wayne State University and progressing to stints at Harvard, Princeton, Cincinnati, Berkeley, Brown, and other arenas in which he could feel unsettled. The history of his health, physical and mental, was no less fitful and spasmodic, and alcohol, which has a soft spot for poets, found him an easy mark. In a similar vein, his romantic life was lunging, irrepressible, and desperate, so much so that it squandered any lasting claim to romance. Thrice married, he fathered a son and two daughters. He died in 1972, by jumping from the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis. To the appalled gratification of posterity, his fall was witnessed by somebody named Art Hitman.

Berryman would have laughed at that. In an existence that was littered with loss, the one thing that never failed him, apart from his unwaning and wax-free ear for English verse, was his sense of humor. The first that I heard of Berryman was this:

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.  
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,  
we ourselves flash and yearn,  
and moreover my mother told me as a boy  
(repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored  
means you have no

Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no  
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.  
Peoples bore me,  
literature bores me, especially great literature,  
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes  
as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.  
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag  
and somehow a dog  
has taken itself & its tail considerably away

into mountains or sea or sky, leaving  
behind: me, wag.

“Wag” meaning a witty fellow, or “wag” meaning that he is of no more use than the back end of a mutt? Who on earth is Henry? Also, whoever’s talking, why does he address us as “friends,” as if he were Mark Antony and we were a Roman mob, and why can’t he even honor Achilles—the hero of the Iliad, a foundation stone of “great literature”—with a capital letter? You have to know such literature pretty well before you earn the right to claim that it tires you out. Few knew it better than Berryman, or shouldered the burdens of serious reading with a more remorseless joy. As he once said, “When it came to a choice between buying a book and a sandwich, as it often did, I always chose the book.”

“Life, friends” is the fourteenth of “[The Dream Songs](#),” the many-splendored enterprise that consumed Berryman’s energies in the latter half of his career, and on which his reputation largely rests. His labors on the Songs began in 1955 and led to “[77 Dream Songs](#),” which was published in 1964 and won him a Pulitzer Prize. In the course of the Songs, which he regarded as one long poem, he is represented, or unreliably impersonated, by a figure named Henry, who undergoes “the whole humiliating Human round” on his behalf. As Berryman explained, “Henry both is and is not me, obviously. We touch at certain points.” In 1968, along came a further three hundred and eight Songs, under the title “[His Toy, His Dream, His Rest](#). ” (A haunting phrase, which grabs the seven ages of man, as outlined in “As You Like It,” and squeezes them down to three.) Two days after publication, he was asked, by the *Harvard Advocate*, about his profession. “Being a poet is a funny kind of jazz. It doesn’t get you anything,” he said. “It’s just something you do.”

There was plenty of all that jazz. Berryman forsook the distillations of Eliot for the profusion of Whitman; the Dream Songs, endlessly rocking and rolling, surge onward in waves. Lay them aside, and you still have the other volumes of Berryman’s poems, including “[The Dispossessed](#)” (1948), “[Homage to Mistress Bradstreet](#)” (1956), and “[Love & Fame](#)” (1970). Bundled together, they fill nearly three hundred pages. If magnitude freaks you out, there are slimmer selections—one from the [Library of America](#), edited by Kevin Young, the poetry editor of this magazine, and another, “[The Heart Is Strange](#),” compiled by Daniel Swift to toast the centenary, in 2014, of the poet’s birth. And don’t forget the authoritative 1982 [biography](#) by John Haffenden, who also put together a posthumous collection, “[Henry’s Fate and Other Poems](#),” in 1977, as well as

“[Berryman’s Shakespeare](#)” (1999), a Falstaffian banquet of his scholarly work on the Bard. Some of Berryman’s critical writings are clustered, invaluable, in “[The Freedom of the Poet](#)” (1976). In short, you need space on your shelves, plus a clear head, if you want to join the Berrymaniacs. Proceed with caution; we can be a cranky bunch.

Of late, Berryman’s star has waned. Its glow was never steady in the first place, but it has dimmed appreciably, because of lines like these:

Arrive a time when all coons lose dere grip,  
but is he come? Le’s do a hoedown, gal.

“The Dream Songs” is a hubbub, and some of it is spoken in blackface—or, to be accurate, in what might be described as blackvoice. It deals in unembarrassed minstrelsy, complete with a caricature of verbal tics, all too pointedly transcribed: “Now there *you* exaggerate, Sah. We hafta *die*.” To say that Berryman was airing the prejudices of his era is hardly to exonerate him; in any case, he seems to be evoking, in purposeful anachronism, an all but vanished age of vaudeville. Kevin Young, who is Black, prefacing his choice of Berryman’s poetry by arguing, “Much of the force of *The Dream Songs* comes from its use of race and blackface to express a (white) self unraveling.” Some readers will share Young’s generously inquiring attitude; others will veer away from Berryman and never go back.

For anyone willing to stick around, there’s a new book on the block. “[The Selected Letters of John Berryman](#)” weighs in at more than seven hundred pages. It is edited by Philip Coleman and Calista McRae, and published by the Belknap Press, at Harvard—a selfless undertaking, given that Berryman derides Harvard as “a haven for the boring and the foolish,” wherein “my students display a form of illiterate urbanity which will soon become very depressing.” (Not that other colleges elude his gibes. Berkeley is summed up as “Paradise, with anthrax.”) The earliest letter, dated September, 1925, is from the schoolboy Berryman to his parents, and ends, “I love you too much to talk about.” In a pleasing symmetry, the final letter printed here, from 1971, shows Berryman rejoicing in his own parenthood. He tells a friend, “We had a baby, Sarah Rebecca, in June—a beauty.”

And what lies in between? More or less the polyphony that you’d expect, should you come pre-tuned into Berryman. “Vigour & fatigue, confidence & despair,

the elegant & the blunt, the bright & the dry.” Such is the medley, he says, that he finds in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and you can feel Berryman swooping with similar freedom from one tone to the next. “Books I’ve got, copulation I need,” he writes from Cambridge, at the age of twenty-two, thus initiating a lifelong and dangerous refrain. When he reports, two years later, that “I was attacked by an excited loneliness which is still with me and which has so far produced fifteen poems,” is that a grouse or a boast? There are alarming valedictions: “Nurse w. another shot. no more now,” or, “Maybe I better go get a bottle of whisky; maybe I better not.” There are letters to Ezra Pound, one of which, sent with “atlantean respect & affection,” announces, “What we want is a new form of the daring,” a very Poundian demand. And there are smart little swerves into the aphoristic—“Writers should be heard and not seen”; “All modern writers are complicated before they are good”—or into courteous eighteenth-century brusquerie. Pastiche can be useful when you have a grudge to convey: “My dear Sir: You are plainly either a fool or a scoundrel. It is kinder to think you a fool; and so I do.” It’s a letter best taken with a pinch of snuff.

Berryman was a captious and self-heating complainer, slow to cool. Just as the first word of the Iliad means “Wrath,” so the first word of the opening Dream Song is “Huffy.” Seldom can you predict the cause of his looming ire. A concert performance by the Stradivarius Quartet, in the fall of 1941, drives him away: “Beethoven’s op. 130 they took now to be a circus, now to be a sea-chantey, & I fled in the middle to escape their *Cavatina*.” The following year, an epic letter to his landlord, on Grove Street, in Boston, is almost entirely concerned with a refrigerator, which has “developed a high-pitched scream.” Berryman was not an easy man to live with, or to love, and the likelihood that even household appliances found his company intolerable cannot be dismissed.

Yet the poet was scarcely unique in his vexations; we all have our fridges to bear. Something else, far below the hum of daily pique, resounds through this massive book—a ground bass of doom and dejection. “You may prepare my coffin.” “If this reaches you, you will know I got as far as a letter-box at any rate.” “I write in haste, being back in Hell.” Such are the dirges to which Berryman treats his friends, in the winter of 1939-40, and the odd jauntiness in which he couches his misery somehow makes it worse. It’s one thing to write, “I am fed up with pretending to be alive when in fact I am not,” but quite another to dispatch those words, as Berryman did, to someone whom you are courting; the recipient was Eileen Mulligan, whom he married nine months later, in October, 1942. To the critic Mark Van Doren, who had been his mentor at Columbia, he was more

formal in his woe, declaring, “Each year I hope that next year will find me dead, and so far I have been disappointed, but I do not lose that hope, which is almost my only one.” We are close to the borders of Beckett.

There are definite jitters of comedy in so funereal a pose, and detractors of Berryman would say that he keeps trying on his desolation, like a man getting fitted for a dark suit. The trouble is that we know how he died. Even if he is putting on an act, for the horrified benefit of his correspondents, it is still a rehearsal for the main event, and you can’t inspect the long lament that he sends to Eileen in 1953—after they have separated—with glancing ahead, almost twenty years, to the dénouement of his days. The letter leaps, like one of those 3 A.M. frettings which every insomniac will recognize, directly from money to death. “I only have \$2.15 to live through the week,” the poet says, before laying out his plans. “My insurance, the only sure way of paying my debts, expires on Thursday. So unless something happens I have to kill myself day after tomorrow evening or earlier.” To be specific, “What I am going to do is drop off the George Washington bridge. I believe one dies on the way down.” If Berryman is playing Cassandra to himself, crying out the details of his own quietus, how did the cry begin?

It is tempting to turn biography into cartography—unrolling the record of somebody’s life, smoothing it flat, and indicating the major fork in the road. Most of us rebut this thesis, as we amble maplessly along. In Berryman’s case, however, there was a fork, so terrible and so palpable that no account of him, and no encounter with his poems, can afford to ignore it. The road didn’t simply split in two; it was cratered, in the summer of 1926, when his father, John Allyn Smith, committed suicide.

The family was living in Clearwater, Florida, at the time, and young John was eleven years old. There was a bizarre prelude to the calamity, when his brother, Robert, was taken out by their father for a swim in the Gulf. What occurred next remains murky, but it seemed, for a while, as if they would not be returning to shore. One of the Dream Songs takes up the tale, mixing memory and denial:

Also I love him: me he’s done no wrong  
for going on forty years—forgiveness time—  
I touch now his despair,  
he felt as bad as Whitman on his tower  
but he did not swim out with me or my brother

as he threatened—

a powerful swimmer, to take one of us along  
as company in the defeat sublime,  
freezing my helpless mother:  
he only, very early in the morning,  
rose with his gun and went outdoors by my window  
and did what was needed.

I cannot read that wretched mind, so strong  
& so undone. I've always tried. I—I'm  
trying to forgive  
whose frantic passage, when he could not live  
an instant longer, in the summer dawn  
left Henry to live on.

Smith's death would become the primal wound for his older son. Notice how the tough and Hemingway-tinged curtness of "did what was needed" gives way, all too soon, to the halting stammer of "I—I'm trying." The wound was suppurating and unhealable, and there is little doubt that it deepened the festering of Berryman's life. As he writes in one of the final Dream Songs, "I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave / who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn / O ho alas alas." Haffenden quotes these lines, raw with recrimination, in his biography; dryly informs us that the poet, in fact, never visited his father's grave; and supplies us with relevant notes that Berryman made in 1970—two years before he, in turn, found a bridge and did what he thought was needed. He sounds like a patient striving mightily to become his own shrink:

Did I myself feel any *guilt* perhaps—long-repressed if so & this is mere speculation (*defense here*) about *Daddy's death*? (I certainly pickt up enough of Mother's self-blame to accuse her once, drunk & raging, of having actually *murdered* him & staged a suicide.)

Alternatively:

So maybe my long self-pity has been based on an *error*, and there has been no (hero-) villain (Father) ruling my life, but only an unspeakably powerful possessive adoring *MOTHER*, whose life at 75 is still centered wholly on *me*. And my (omnipotent) feeling that I can *get away with anything*.

For readers who ask themselves, browsing through “Berryman’s Shakespeare,” why the poet bent his attention, again and again, to “Hamlet,” to the plight of the prince, and to the preoccupations—as Berryman boldly construed them—of the man who wrote the play, here is an answer of sorts. And, for anyone wanting more of this unholy psychodrama, consider the list of characters. Berryman’s mother, born Martha Little, married John Allyn Smith. Less than eleven weeks after his death, she married her landlord, John Angus McAlpin Berryman, and thereafter called herself Jill, or Jill Angel. As for the poet, he was baptized with his father’s name, was known as Billy in infancy, and then, in deference to his brand-new stepfather, became John Berryman. This is like Hamlet having to call himself Claudius, Jr., on top of everything else. As Berryman remarks, “Damn Berrymans and their names.”

A book of back-and-forth correspondence with his mother was published in 1988, under the title “[We Dream of Honour](#).” (Having picked up the habit of British spelling, at Cambridge, Berryman never kicked it.) Inexcusably, it’s now out of print, but worth tracking down; and you could swear, as you leaf through it, that you’d stumbled upon a love affair. The son says to the mother, “I hope you’re well, darling, and less worried.” The mother tells the son, “I have loved you too much for wisdom, or it is perhaps nearer truth to say that with love or in anger, I am not wise.” We are offered a facsimile of a letter from 1953, in which Berryman begins, “Mother, I have always failed; but I am not failing now.”

One obvious shortfall in the “Selected Letters” is that “We Dream of Honour” took the cream of the crop. Only eight letters here are addressed to Martha, six of them mailed from school, and, if you’re approaching Berryman as a novice, your take on him will be unavoidably skewed. By way of compensation, we get a wildly misconceived letter of advice from the middle-aged Berryman to his son, Paul, concluding with the maxim “*Strong fathers crush sons.*” Paul was four at the time. Haffenden has already cited that letter, however, and doubts whether it was ever sent. One item in the new book that I have never read before, and would prefer not to read again, is a letter from the fourteen-year-old Berryman to his stepfather, whom he calls Uncle Jack, and before whom he cringes as if whipped. “I’m a coward, a cheat, a bully, and a thief if I had the guts to steal,” the boy writes. Things get worse: “I have none of the fine qualities or emotions, and all the baser ones. I don’t understand why God permitted me to be born.” He signs himself “John Berryman,” the sender mirroring the recipient, and adds, “P.S. I’m a disgrace to your name.”

To read such words is to marvel that Berryman survived as long as he did. If one virtue emerged from the wreckage of his early years, it was a capacity to console; later, in the midst of his drinking and his lechery, he remained a reliable guide to grief, and to the blast area that surrounds it. In May, 1955, commiserating with [Saul Bellow](#), whose father has just passed away, Berryman writes, “Unfortunately I am in a v g position to feel with you: my father died for me all over again last week.” He unfolds his larger theme: “His father’s death is one of the few main things that happens to a man, I think, and it matters greatly to the life *when it happens.*” Bellow’s affliction, Berryman reassures him, lofts him into illustrious company: “Shakespeare was probably in the middle of *Hamlet* and I think his effort increased.” Freud and Luther are then added to the roster of the fruitfully bereaved.

None of this will surprise an admirer of the Dream Songs. Among the loveliest are those in which the poet mourns departed friends, such as [Robert Frost](#), [Louis MacNeice](#), [Theodore Roethke](#), and [Delmore Schwartz](#). Berryman the comic, who can be scabrously funny, not least at his own expense, consorts with Berryman the frightener (“In slack times visit I the violent dead / and pick their awful brains”) and Berryman the elegist, who can summon whole twilights of sorrow. In this, a tribute to Randall Jarrell, he gradually allows the verse to run on, like overflowing water, across the line breaks, with a grace denied to our harshly end-stopped lives:

In the night-reaches dreamed he of better graces,  
of liberations, and beloved faces,  
such as now ere dawn he sings.

It would not be easy, accustomed to these things,  
to give up the old world, but he could try;  
let it all rest, have a good cry.

Let Randall rest, whom your self-torturing  
cannot restore one instant’s good to, rest:  
he’s left us now.

The panic died and in the panic’s dying  
so did my old friend. I am headed west  
also, also, somehow.

In the chambers of the end we’ll meet again  
I will say Randall, he’ll say Pussycat

and all will be as before  
whenas we sought, among the beloved faces,  
eminence and were dissatisfied with that  
and needed more.

A photograph of 1941 shows Berryman in a dark coat, a hat, and a bow tie. His jaw is clean-shaven and firm. With his thin-rimmed spectacles and his ready smile, he looks like a spry young stockbroker on his way home from church. Skip ahead to the older Berryman, and you observe a very different beast, with a beard like the mane of a disenchanted lion. Finches could roost in it. The rims of his glasses are now thick and black, and his hands, in many images, refuse to be at rest. They gesticulate and splay, as if he were conducting an orchestra that he alone can hear. A cigarette serves as his baton.

If you seek to understand this metamorphosis, “The Selected Letters of John Berryman” can help. What greets us here, as often as not, is a parody of a poet. Watch him fumble with the mechanisms of the everyday, “ghoulishly inefficient about details and tickets and visas and trains and money and hotels.” Chores are as heavy as millstones, to his hypersensitive neck: “Do this, do that, phone these, phone those, repair this, drown that, poison the other.” We start to sniff a blend—peculiar to Berryman, like a special tobacco—of the humbled and the immodest. It drifts about, in aromatic puns: “my work is growing by creeps & grounds.” Though the outer world of politics and civil strife may occasionally intrude, it proves no match for the smoke-filled rooms inside the poet’s head. When nuclear tests are carried out at Bikini Atoll, in 1954, they register only briefly, in a letter to Bellow. “This thermonuclear business wd tip me up all over again if I were in shape to attend to it,” Berryman writes, before moving on to a harrowing digest of his diarrhea.

Above all, this is a book-riddled book. No one but Berryman, it’s fair to say, would write from a hospital in Minneapolis, having been admitted in a state of alcoholic and nervous prostration, to a bookstore in Oxford, asking, “Can you let me know what Elizabethan Bibles you have in stock?” The recklessness with which he abuses his body is paired with an indefatigable and nurselike care for textual minutiae. (“Very very tentatively I suggest that the comma might come out.”) Only on the page can he trust his powers of control, although even those desert him at a deliciously inappropriate moment. Writing to William Shawn at *The New Yorker*, in 1951, and proposing “a Profile on William Shakespeare,” Berryman begins, “Dear Mr Shahn.” Of all the editors of all the magazines in all

the world, he misspells *him*.

No such Profile appeared; nor, to one's infinite regret, did the edition of "King Lear" on which Berryman toiled for years. What we do have is his fine essay of 1953, "Shakespeare at Thirty," which begins, "Suppose with me a time, a place, a man who was waked, risen, washed, dressed, fed, on a day in latter April long ago—about April 22, say, of 1594, a Monday." Few scholars would have the bravado, or the imaginative dexterity, for such supposings, and it's a thrill to see a living poet treat a dead one not as a monument but as a partner in crime. "Oh my god! Shakespeare. That multiform & encyclopedic bastard," Berryman says in a letter of 1952, as if the two of them had just locked horns in a tavern.

Such plunges into the past, with its promise of adventure and refuge, came naturally to Berryman, nowhere more so than in "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet," which was published in the *Partisan Review* in 1953 and, three years later, as a book. This was the poem with which he broke through—discovering not just a receptive audience but a voice that, in its heightened lyrical pressure, sounded like his and nobody else's. The irony is that he did so by assuming the role of a woman: Anne Bradstreet, herself a poet, who emigrated from England to America, in 1630. It is her tough, pious, and hardscrabble history that Berryman chronicles: "Food endless, people few, all to be done. / As pippins roast, the question of the wolves / turns & turns." In a celebrated scene, the heroine gives birth. Even if you dispute the male ability (or the right) to articulate such an experience, it's hard not to be swayed by the fervor of dramatic effort:

I can *can* no longer  
and it passes the wretched trap whelming and I am me  
  
drencht & powerful, I did it with my body!  
One proud tug greens Heaven. Marvellous,  
unforbidding Majesty.  
Swell, imperious bells. I fly.

What the poem cost its creator, over more than four years, is made plain in the letters, which ring with an exhausted ecstasy. "I feel like weeping all the time," he tells one friend. "I regard every word in the poem as either a murderer or a lover." As for Anne, who perished in 1672, "I certainly at some point fell in love with her." Berryman adds, as if to prove his devotion, "I used three shirts at a

time, in relays. I wish I were dead.”

Is this how we like poetry to be brought forth, even now? Though we may never touch the stuff, reading no verse from one year to the next, do we still expect it to be delivered in romantic agony, with attendant birth pangs? (So much for Wallace Stevens, who composed much of his work while gainfully employed, on a handsome salary, as an insurance executive.) Berryman viewed the notion of his being a confessional poet “with rage and contempt,” and rightly so; the label is an insult to his craftsmanship. Nobody pining for mere self-expression, or craving a therapeutic blurt, could lavish on a paramour, as Berryman did, lines as elaborately wrought as these:

Loves are the summer’s. Summer like a bee  
Sucks out our best, thigh-brushes, and is gone.

You have to reach back to Donne to find so commanding an exercise in the clever-sensual. It comes from “[Berryman’s Sonnets](#),” a sequence of a hundred and fifteen poems, published in 1967. Most of them had been written long before, in 1947, in heat and haste, during an affair with a woman named Chris Haynes. And, in this huge new hoard of letters, how many are addressed to Haynes? Precisely one. Gossip hunters will slouch off in frustration, and good luck to them; on the other hand, anyone who delights in listening to Berryman, and who can’t help wondering how the singer becomes the songs, will find much to treasure here, in these garrulous and pedantic pages. There is hardly a paragraph in which Berryman—poet, pedagogue, boozehound, and symphonic self-destroyer—may not be heard straining toward the condition of music. “I have to make my pleasure out of sound,” he says. The book is full of noises, heartsick with hilarity, and they await their transmutation into verse. ♦

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Briefly Noted**

“The Spymasters,” “Having and Being Had,” “The Perfect Nine,” and  
“Missionaries.”

October 12, 2020

"The Spymasters is masterful at every level, the best book about the CIA I've ever read.  
Its revelations are eye-popping." —CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

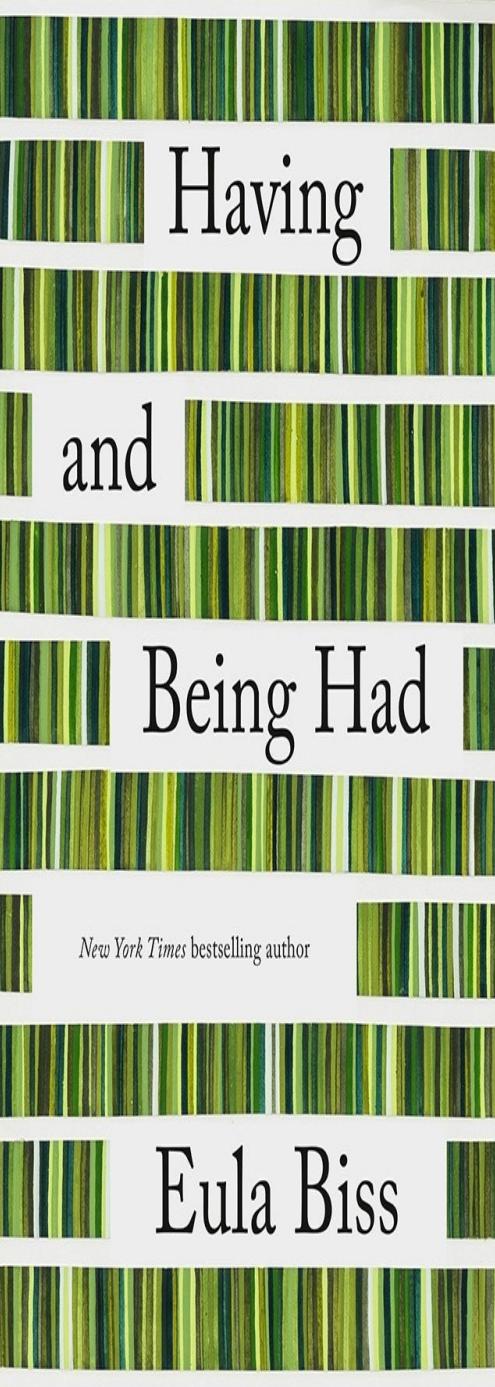
# THE SPY MASTERS

HOW THE  
CIA DIRECTORS  
SHAPE HISTORY AND THE FUTURE

CHRIS WHIPPLE

bestselling author of **THE GATEKEEPERS**

[\*\*The Spymasters\*\*](#), by Chris Whipple (Scribner). This follow-up to “The Gatekeepers,” the author’s study of White House chiefs of staff, examines how C.I.A. directors have shaped the course of the past fifty years, from Richard Helms’s refusal to help Nixon cover up Watergate to John Brennan’s discovery of a Russian threat to the 2016 election. Whipple candidly assesses how the men (and one woman) in the job have negotiated its daunting challenges, including the ethical dilemmas surrounding assassinations, coups, enhanced interrogation, drone warfare, and Presidents who want them to break the law. Underlying Whipple’s analysis is a provocative question: “Is the world’s most powerful intelligence agency a force for good or evil in the world?”



Having

and

Being Had

*New York Times* bestselling author

Eula Biss

**Having and Being Had**, by Eula Biss (*Riverhead*). The trade-off of time and money is at the heart of this memoir, which begins with the author and her husband buying a house. For Biss, a poet and essayist raised by bohemians, ownership is unfamiliar, and her descriptions of the feelings the property arouses—awareness of the debt the purchase required, a lust for expensive paint—bear a newcomer's illuminating estrangement. Money, for her, had previously been only a means of accruing time to pursue activities, like writing, on which capitalism places a low value. "It seemed like a waste to spend time on property," she writes, as she critiques the systems that have made her think in these terms.

NGUGI WA  
THIONG’O

PERFECT  
DINE

THE EPIC OF GIKUYU AND MUMBI

**The Perfect Nine**, by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, translated from the Gĩkũyũ by the author (New Press). In this sinuous retelling by the great Kenyan writer, the founding myth of the Gĩkũyũ people emerges as an epic poem rivalling the Iliad in body count and surpassing it in whimsy. The title refers to the daughters of Gĩkũyũ (Man) and Mũmbi (Woman); a tenth daughter, Warigia, “is often missing when the nine are mentioned” because of her “crippled legs” and rumored “occult powers.” When ninety-nine men arrive seeking the daughters’ hands in marriage, they must first undertake a harrowing journey to mythic realms. Tellingly, given Ngũgĩ’s preoccupation with “Decolonising the Mind” (the title of his influential essay collection), the narrative envisions migration and the mixing of peoples not as a drive for domination but as a “quest for the beautiful.”

# MISSIONARIES



PHIL KLAY

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

A NOVEL

AUTHOR OF  
REDEPLOYMENT

**Missionaries**, by Phil Klay (*Penguin Press*). Klay, who won the National Book Award for his short stories about American veterans of the Iraq War, visits similar territory in his début novel. The action unfolds in Colombia, where Lisette, an American journalist, recognizes parallels with what she's witnessed in the Middle East: the U.S. is "always projecting military power across the globe and just shifting the rationale of why." Klay's plot, depicting modern warfare through a disparate cast of characters, sometimes strains under the weight of all he wants to teach us. But his writing is wrenching and insightful. "People don't read newspapers now," Lisette says. "People don't accidentally get reported facts on the way to the opinion page anymore." Her question, and Klay's, is "How do you reach people?"

# **Philosophy in the Shadow of Nazism**

After the First World War, the members of the Vienna Circle tried to put European thought on a rigorously logical footing. Then the times caught up with them.

By [Adam Kirsch](#)

October 12, 2020



Philosophy often flourishes in the aftermath of wars, especially lost wars. Socrates served in the losing Athenian army in the Peloponnesian War; Thomas Hobbes wrote “[Leviathan](#)” while in exile in Paris after the defeat of the royalists in the English Civil War. At moments of humiliation and confusion, when people need to rebuild their understanding of the world, they are willing to rethink assumptions that go unchallenged in normal times.

The defeat of the Central Powers in the First World War gave rise to one of these historic bursts of creative thinking. [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#), perhaps the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century, served in the war as an artillery officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army. Captured just days before the Armistice, in November, 1918, he spent nine months as a prisoner of war in Italy before returning home to Vienna, an imperial capital suddenly stranded in a small, parochial new state.

It was while on leave in the summer of 1918 that Wittgenstein completed his “[Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus](#),” which was published in 1921. Today, it is Wittgenstein’s later work that commands the most attention, but the “Tractatus”—a brief, dense book that, like Euclid’s treatise on geometry, takes the form of a series of numbered propositions—magnetized readers from the start with its radical ambition. It aimed to tear Western philosophy up by the roots, just as revolutionaries on the left and the right were doing to societies all across postwar Europe.

For Wittgenstein, the renovation of philosophy had to begin with language. Since the Greeks, Western thinkers had tried to understand the world using terms such as “being” and “becoming,” “substance” and “essence,” “real” and “ideal.” But these abstractions gave rise to complicated arguments that went around and around, never reaching any definite conclusion. Now, in the early twentieth century, relativity and quantum theory were redrawing the map of reality in ways that could be verified by experiment and given precise mathematical expression. In an age of triumphant physics, did philosophy still need to bother with metaphysics?

By declaring the answer to be no, Wittgenstein set modern thought on a new course. For the analytic philosophy he helped inspire, many of the discipline’s traditional problems are actually just misunderstandings, based on an erroneous use of language. What philosophers need isn’t profundity but clarity: as

Wittgenstein says in the “Tractatus,” “Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly.”

This way of thinking about language—what it means, what it can grasp, and how it should be used—became the particular obsession of the Vienna Circle, a group of scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers who met regularly from the mid-nineteen-twenties to the mid-thirties, mainly at the Mathematics Institute of the University of Vienna. The best known of its dozen or so core members are the logician Rudolf Carnap, the sociologist Otto Neurath, the mathematician [Kurt Gödel](#), and Moritz Schlick, who turned to philosophy after earning a doctorate in physics under Max Planck, the pioneer of quantum theory. These thinkers and their students helped set the agenda for postwar academic philosophy in Britain and America, where most of the Circle’s members ended up teaching after they fled the Continent in the thirties.

Taking its cue from the “Tractatus,” the Vienna Circle sought to make language as precise and rigorous as a mathematical proof. The English philosopher A. J. Ayer, who studied in Vienna and helped popularize the Circle’s ideas, summed up its definition of the purpose of philosophy: “to dispel those confusions which arise from our imperfect understanding of certain types of sentence in our language.” If this “linguistic turn,” as it came to be known, sounded uninspiring or even priggish, so much the better; philosophy had been led astray for too long by grand, seductive illusions.

David Edmonds’s new book, “[The Murder of Professor Schlick](#)” (Princeton), offers a lively and accessible introduction to this much written-about group. Rather than plumbing the depths of the Vienna Circle’s work, which is formidably technical, Edmonds mainly explores how its ideas reflected the group’s tumultuous time and place. His research has also uncovered important new biographical information, including about its lesser-known female members.

Wittgenstein never attended a meeting of the Vienna Circle, but he knew its key figures, and his ideas dominated its proceedings. In Edmonds’s book, too, Wittgenstein ends up stealing the focus, simply because he played the role of genius so perfectly—intense and charismatic, unworldly and unpredictable, shockingly arrogant yet capable of remarkable self-sacrifice. It didn’t hurt that he was also handsome and rich, having been born into one of Austria-Hungary’s leading industrial dynasties.

In 1919, however, Wittgenstein gave up his share of the family fortune. He spent the next seven years teaching elementary school in remote Austrian villages, where he made himself loathed by regularly beating his pupils and pulling their hair. In 1926, after he returned to the capital, he made contact with the Vienna Circle, whose members had been studying the “Tractatus.” The wife of Schlick, the group’s leader, recalled that the first time her husband dined with Wittgenstein he returned “in an ecstatic state.” Another philosopher, Friedrich Waismann, “began, subconsciously, to imitate Wittgenstein’s speaking patterns.”

Edmonds’s subtitle, “The Rise and Fall of the Vienna Circle,” suggests a closer connection between the group’s work and the titular murder than the book actually establishes. Schlick’s death had nothing to do with his ideas; he was killed by a psychotic former student, Johann Nelböck, who had been stalking and threatening him for years and finally shot him, in June, 1936, on the steps of a university building. But what happened next, Edmonds shows, was indeed shaped by what the Vienna Circle had come to represent in the ideological frenzy of interwar Austria.

No sooner had news of the crime broken than the nationalist, anti-Semitic press began to extenuate and even to praise it as a blow against degenerate Jewish thought. Schlick was accused of damaging “the fine porcelain of the national character” and of embodying Jewish “logicality, mathematicality, [and] formalism,” qualities inimical to “a Christian German state.” One writer urged that the murder should “quicken efforts to find a truly satisfactory solution of the Jewish Question.” Nelböck, at his trial, played to this sentiment, claiming that he had killed Schlick for ideological reasons. That defense didn’t keep him out of jail, but after Nazi Germany annexed Austria, in 1938, Nelböck was released, on the ground that his crime had been inspired by “strong national motives and explicit anti-Semitism.”

In this deranged atmosphere, no one was deterred by the fact that Schlick was not Jewish but, rather, a German Protestant. Some of his defamers probably didn’t know this, but others simply didn’t care, since in their eyes Jewishness wasn’t defined only by religion or ethnicity. It was also a mind-set, characterized by the modernism and liberalism they saw as sources of spiritual corruption.

In this sense, Nazis and Austria’s Christian fascists were right to see the Vienna Circle as an enemy. In Edmonds’s words, the Circle was “contemptuous of superstitious thinking,” including myths about race and religion. The group

included Christians and Jews, but its members' real creed was what they called "the scientific conception of the world."

That was the title of a 1929 manifesto in which the Circle announced its intellectual program. Written as a tribute to Schlick, who was returning to Vienna after a stint at Stanford University, the essay explained that the members of the Circle, though they didn't agree on everything, were committed to two basic principles. First, "there is knowledge only from experience, which rests on what is immediately given. This sets the limits for the content of legitimate science." Second, "the scientific world-conception is marked by application of a certain method, namely *logical analysis*."

Together, these ideas gave the new school of thought its name, logical empiricism. For logical empiricists, philosophy doesn't deal with ideas or things; it deals with statements, sentences, propositions. By putting together a series of true statements, it's possible to create what Wittgenstein, in the "Tractatus," called a "model of reality," a representation of the world in language. The content of statements about the world is determined by experience, including the refined and controlled type of experience that comes from scientific experiment.

Philosophy's role in the search for truth is to examine the form of our statements, to insure that they are syntactically and logically correct. To this end, the Vienna Circle drew on the symbolic logic developed by the English philosopher Bertrand Russell, which offered a way to reduce any sentence to a series of symbols and formulas. Many pages of Carnap's 1934 book, "The Logical Syntax of Language," look as if they could have come from a math textbook.

Symbolic logic is useful because statements can go wrong in ways that ordinary usage makes it hard to detect. In most cases, determining whether a statement is empirically true or false is fairly straightforward. If someone says that the moon is made of green cheese, there are various ways to check: you could look at the moon through a telescope, or examine a moon rock, or calculate how a moon-size ball of green cheese would behave in outer space. Even if false, "The moon is made of green cheese" is still a meaningful proposition, because it makes an assertion about the world that can be tested.

Some statements, however, can't be proved true or false, because they are constructed in a way that violates the rules of language. Carnap labelled these "pseudo-statements"—"a sequence of words [that] looks like a statement at first

glance,” but whose syntax or vocabulary renders it meaningless. He gave as an example “Caesar is and”: if someone said this to you, you wouldn’t say that she was right or wrong, just that she didn’t know English syntax.

For the Vienna Circle, the best hunting ground for pseudo-statements was metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that deals with fundamental concepts like being and essence, time and space. Since Aristotle, who called it “first philosophy,” metaphysics had been seen as the highest and most disinterested form of thought. For Immanuel Kant, it was “the queen of all the sciences.” But, for the members of the Vienna Circle, metaphysics was a queen like Marie Antoinette—imperious, out of touch, and ripe for the guillotine.

The problem with metaphysical statements is that they are generally unverifiable, which to the logical empiricists meant they are meaningless. In Carnap’s 1932 essay “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language,” he asks us to imagine a man who invents a new adjective, “teavy,” and who, when we ask him how to tell whether or not something is teavy, replies that “there are no empirical signs of teavyness.” In that case, Carnap says, “we would deny the legitimacy of using this word.”

The same principle, he argues, should apply to metaphysical terms, from Plato’s “Idea” to Kant’s “thing-in-itself.” Such impressive words may provoke “associated images and feelings,” Carnap writes, but they have no actual meaning, so any explanation that relies on them is saying nothing at all.

Metaphysics wasn’t just a ghost from the past to be exorcised; it was still on the march, with important consequences for both philosophy and politics. Carnap’s essay was written as an attack on [Martin Heidegger](#), the other great German-language philosopher to emerge after the First World War. If Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus” is a fundamental work of analytic philosophy, Heidegger’s 1927 book, “Being and Time,” is equally important for “Continental” philosophy—a catchall term used by the Anglo-American analytic school to refer to all those benighted Europeans who still take metaphysics seriously.

Heidegger and Wittgenstein shared an ability to inspire awe and devotion, but in most respects the two were opposites. Wittgenstein was raised in privilege in Vienna; Heidegger grew up poor in Messkirch, a small town in rural Germany, where his father was the sexton of the Catholic church. Wittgenstein was a wanderer who moved back and forth between Austria and England, and between

academia and other pursuits; Heidegger spent his entire career at the German university where he had been a student, and did his thinking in a remote cabin he built in the Black Forest. (That cabin, the most famous dwelling in twentieth-century philosophy, is the subject of its own book, “[Heidegger’s Hut](#),” by Adam Sharr.)

Above all, the two men differed in their opinion of the value of metaphysics. In 1929, the year that the Vienna Circle published its manifesto, Heidegger delivered a lecture whose title, “What Is Metaphysics?,” was a red rag waved in the face of the logical empiricists. Indeed, he began by acknowledging that modern science has no use for metaphysics. According to the scientific conception of the world, only things we can experience directly are real; the domain of knowledge is “beings themselves—and nothing besides.”

The second part of that statement, he argues, far from being a throwaway phrase, reveals a fundamental truth: in addition to beings, there is the nothing. We come to understand the nothing not through reason but through the experience of anxiety; in moments of existential angst, “beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds round.” It is only because we encounter the nothing in this primal way that we are able to understand logical concepts like negation and nonexistence. As Heidegger puts it, “*das Nichts selbst nichtet*”—a strange phrase that English translators have rendered as “the nothing itself nihilates,” or even “the nothing itself noths.”

For Heidegger’s many admirers, his dislocation of language gave metaphysical concepts back the power and strangeness they had lost over the millennia. The way he roots philosophy in mood, rather than in mere intellection, makes his work imaginatively engaging in ways that logical empiricism can’t achieve. One might say that Heidegger wanted to make philosophy more like poetry, whereas the Vienna Circle wanted it to be more like math. For Carnap, the poetic dimension of Heidegger’s thought was precisely the issue, since it depended on misusing language to create an illusion of profundity. The problem, he writes in “The Elimination of Metaphysics,” is grammatical: because German (like English) treats the word “nothing” as a noun, it can be used as the subject of a sentence. For instance, if someone asks, “What is outside?,” you might reply, “Nothing is outside,” just as you could say, “Rain is outside.” This creates the illusion that “nothing” is an entity like rain, whose properties and actions can be described. Syntactically, “The nothing reveals itself” seems to be the same kind of statement as “The rain falls down.”

This is exactly the kind of error we need logic to rescue us from. When we say “Nothing is outside,” Carnap argues, we’re using a kind of verbal shorthand; what we really mean is “There does not exist anything which is outside.” Phrasing it this way shows that the word “not” can properly be used only to negate a proposition. Using it as the subject of a proposition, as Heidegger does, is at best a sign of mental confusion, and at worst a deliberate attempt to mystify and mislead.

Indeed, in “What Is Metaphysics?,” Heidegger explicitly says that he wants to get rid of logical thinking, so that “the very idea of ‘logic’ dissolves in the whirl of a more basic questioning.” This was the fundamental disagreement that separated Heidegger from the Vienna Circle: he believed that language could discover truths deeper than logic; the Circle believed that language without logic could yield only nonsense. As Wittgenstein warned in the last sentence of the “Tractatus,” “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”

Whereof the Vienna Circle could speak, however, it had a lot to say. Its 1929 manifesto gave rise to a new journal, a series of conferences to bring together leaders in various scientific fields, and an International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, which aimed to summarize all of scientific knowledge in two hundred volumes. Still more broadly, the manifesto announced that logical empiricism entailed a particular approach to “questions of life”: “Endeavors toward a new organization of economic and social relations, toward the unification of mankind, toward a reform of school and education, all show an inner link with the scientific world-conception; it appears that these endeavors are welcomed and regarded with sympathy by the members of the Circle, some of whom indeed actively further them.”

That was certainly true of Otto Neurath, one of the main authors of the manifesto and the most vivid personality in the Circle. Neurath, a committed leftist who had participated in the failed revolution in Munich in 1919, was an adept publicist of ideas. He was the one who named the group, hoping, in the words of a fellow member, Philipp Frank, to evoke “other things on the pleasant side of life,” such as Viennese waltzes. When he wasn’t philosophizing, Neurath worked on public housing, adult-education programs, and a new method of representing data in easily comprehensible pictograms, known as Isotype, which resulted in the visual vocabulary now used in infographics throughout the world.

But not everyone in the Circle was happy to be dragged into political debates—

including Schlick, whom the manifesto was intended to honor. Edmonds brings to life the volatile political and cultural scene in nineteen-twenties Austria, a small country created after the First World War out of the German-speaking lands of the former Habsburg Empire. Vienna, a city of two million people, had been the right size for the capital of a far-flung multinational state, but now it found itself in a country of just 6.5 million people.

“Red Vienna,” as it was nicknamed, had a socialist government, a cosmopolitan culture, and a large Jewish population. All three aspects made it thoroughly hated by the rest of the country, which was rural, conservative, and Catholic. Austria came to the brink of civil war in the twenties, and in 1933 it became a fascist dictatorship under the rule of the Fatherland Front. In these circumstances, the Vienna Circle had much to lose from becoming publicly identified with the left.

In 1934, the group came under scrutiny from the police, prompting Schlick to write letters to state agencies insisting that it was “absolutely unpolitical.” The letters didn’t help; the Circle’s official sponsoring organization was dissolved, and some members were forced out of their jobs or arrested. Though the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany was still four years away, the members of the Circle began to look for opportunities to emigrate.

Many ended up in America, where they helped shape the next generation of academic philosophers. Herbert Feigl went to the University of Iowa in 1931; Carnap was hired by the University of Chicago in 1936. Kurt Gödel, famous for his “incompleteness theorem” and his complete unworldliness, didn’t wake up to the danger until the Second World War began. After receiving a job offer from the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, in January, 1940, he had to go the long way around, crossing the entire Soviet Union, the Pacific Ocean, and the United States to get to New Jersey.

For the lesser-known members of the group, things were tougher. Edmonds documents the struggles of Rose Rand, a Jewish woman who earned her doctorate from the University of Vienna in 1938 but couldn’t find a secure academic job in England, forcing her to rely on the grudging charity of émigré organizations. Wittgenstein intervened on her behalf, but even he found her demanding and difficult to deal with. Still, she survived, living and teaching until 1980. Remarkably, no one from the Circle was killed by the Nazis.

Meanwhile, as the logical empiricists fled for their lives, Heidegger was on the rise. After Hitler's takeover in Germany, in 1933, the philosopher was appointed rector of the University of Freiburg and given the responsibility of bringing it into alignment with Nazism. An enthusiastic Nazi, Heidegger saw his task in metaphysical terms, declaring in his inaugural address that the essence of science is "the questioning standing of one's ground in the midst of the constantly self-concealing totality of what is." Carnap would have scoffed at this language; but as the Vienna Circle knew, and Germany and the world were about to find out, pseudo-statements can have very real consequences. ♦

## **Comment**

- [Donald Trump's Consistent Unreliability on COVID, and Everything Else](#)

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

# **Donald Trump’s Consistent Unreliability on COVID, and Everything Else**

It is painful to reflect on the tens of thousands of lives that might have been saved if a less reality-challenged President had occupied the White House.

By [Steve Coll](#)

October 11, 2020

Last February 7th, at five-thirty in the morning, Donald Trump tweeted praise for China’s “great discipline” in fighting the [coronavirus](#) and predicted that [Xi Jinping](#) would be “successful, especially as the weather starts to warm & the virus hopefully becomes weaker, and then gone.” Later that day, the President, in an interview with [Bob Woodward](#), acknowledged that the virus was serious, but said, “I think that that goes away in two months with the heat.” On February 24th, as infections in America increased, he tweeted, “The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA.” (“I wanted to always play it down,” he later said, according to Woodward’s book “[Rage](#).”)



It is painful to reflect today on the tens of thousands of lives that might have been saved if a less reality-challenged President occupied the White House. Trump has been consistently unreliable across the eight-month arc of our national crisis. Last week, as he recuperated from his own bout of *COVID-19*, he unleashed a fresh torrent of tweets and videos. These offered transparent nonsense (“Maybe I’m immune”) and also dangerous lies, such as the claim that for most people the coronavirus is “far less lethal!!!” than the seasonal flu. (Scientists report that the coronavirus is about six times more deadly than the typical flu virus.) “He’s in denial, as he was right from the start,” [Nancy Pelosi](#), the Speaker of the House, said last Wednesday, as she tried to negotiate with Trump over a new economic-stimulus package. She added, “I could never explain to you any rational, linear path of action on the part of the President.”

Even after four years of Trump shocks, the operatic dénouement of his reëlection campaign has been staggering. With early voting already begun, the President and the First Lady are both under care for *covid-19*, and some three dozen White House employees, advisers, and recent guests have tested positive. (The sickened aides include a military officer who followed Trump around with the “football” containing the codes that would enable him to launch a nuclear attack.) It remains unclear just how the outbreak began and spread, but such an occurrence was perhaps inevitable, given the Administration’s refusal to require masks and physical distancing in the White House and at public events. Eventually, journalists and biographers will sort out exactly what the President knew about his own possible contagiousness before October 2nd, the day he announced that he had tested positive—and how he handled any risk that he might infect others. On October 4th, during his [hospitalization at Walter Reed](#), when he was almost certainly contagious, he staged a photo op in which he was driven around in an S.U.V. and waved to onlookers. At least two Secret Service agents were required to join him in the sealed, armored vehicle, putting them at risk of exposure. It was an inane campaign stunt, and a study in selfishness.

The next day, in a made-for-TV return to the White House, Trump stood on the Truman Balcony and peeled a cloth mask from his face. But what was the point? His disdain for public-health guidelines often defies political logic. In a new poll from *National Geographic* and Morning Consult, three-quarters of Americans say that they wear a mask every time they leave home, a figure that has risen by nearly twenty-five per cent since July. According to a late-summer survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, six in ten people think that the worst of the pandemic

is yet to come, but last week Trump urged Americans not to let the coronavirus “dominate your life” and suggested “learning to live” with it. After the trauma of 2016, Democrats may be reluctant to accept that Trump could be as severely misguided about his reelection messaging as he is about so much else—such as, say, his failure to stand up to the far right. On Thursday night, he tweeted, “[Governor Whitmer](#)—open up your state, open up your schools, and open up your churches!,” just hours after members of a Michigan militia were charged with plotting to kidnap her.

National polling averages put [Joe Biden](#) well ahead in the race, but an upset is, given the importance of the Electoral College, a real possibility. Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight site, which publishes an obsessed-over election-forecast model, predicted last week that Trump had about a one-in-six chance of winning the Electoral College—not great odds, from the President’s vantage, but still only a lucky roll of a die. For all his bravado, though, Trump surely understands that he is in a hole. His campaign to discredit the election result in advance suggests that, if the margin is narrow, he and his Republican allies will contest the outcome, and hope that the courts throw it Trump’s way.

Will it be close? Since Biden won the Democratic nomination, the election has played out mainly as a referendum on Trump’s record as President. His dissembling about the coronavirus is in plain view, in his tweets and his Fox News interviews. On Thursday, he told Maria Bartiromo, on Fox Business, that he may have been infected by Gold Star families who “want to kiss me.” He added that “I’m a perfect physical specimen and I’m extremely young,” whereas “Joe’s not lasting two months as President, O.K., that’s my opinion.” On Friday, ABC reported that Trump planned to hold a rally with hundreds of people on the South Lawn on Saturday, less than ten days after his infection was made public. His campaign announced that he would also hold one in an airport hangar in Florida on Monday.

The essence of Trump’s failure during the pandemic does not lie with his Administration’s crisis management, botched as that has been; it is the result of his character. “I’m a total act and I don’t understand why people don’t get it,” Trump told [Anthony Scaramucci](#), his former communications adviser, according to “A Very Stable Genius,” by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig.

Donald Trump and Joe Biden offer starkly different visions of America, but the most important question in this election is whether voters will affirm the

President in his delusions for another four years, allowing him to further his anti-democratic instincts and push against the limits of his power. The electorate is battered, divided, and demoralized; this summer, according to Gallup, Americans reported a level of dissatisfaction with how things are going in the country comparable to that of December, 2008, in the grip of the Great Recession. Democracies endure because of their capacity for self-correction. In the postwar era, we have never required one so desperately. ♦

## **Fiction**

- [“Life Without Children”](#)

# **Life Without Children**

By [Roddy Doyle](#)

October 12, 2020



*Audio:* Roddy Doyle reads.

Once, years ago, when the children were children, someone had asked Alan if he had any—children. And he’d said no.

He hadn’t expected to say it; it hadn’t been part of a plan. It wasn’t a woman he was talking to. It wasn’t the possibility of sex that had pushed him to say it. He remembered it as a choice, a junction, yes or no. And—just the once—he’d gone for no, and for the rest of the evening he’d been a man with no children.

It had been dreadful, really, having to constantly remind himself that he had no kids. Because that was what he had been, for more than two decades—the man with kids. From the second he woke to the point in the night when he stopped knowing that his eyes were closing, he’d been that man. And the evening he’d denied it he’d still been that man, out for the night with no witnesses, but still up past his neck in four childhoods.

#### Roddy Doyle on writing from the pandemic.

It felt like the worst thing he’d ever done. For years. He’d been Peter in the Garden of wherever, denying four little Jesuses. He knew that if it had been a woman and the denial had led to sex, he’d have shouted something as he was coming—in a room off a room, in the back of her car. He’d have groaned it. *I’ve four kids.* He’d have yelled their names in order of age, from the youngest up. *Then Lizzie—she’ll be doing her Junior Cert next year!*

But there hadn’t been sex.

And now he actually *was* the man with no children. They weren’t in the house. They weren’t in his head when he woke. Their names on the screen when his phone rang were often a shock; nothing in the house or in the rhythm of his day was a reminder. They were gone.

He wasn’t a father.

What was he? A sixty-two-year-old bachelor. With a wife. And she was a sixty-year-old spinster, with an occasional husband. They’d become brother and sister, somehow.

That was shite—just nonsense. He was feeling hard done by, sorry for himself.

Or he wasn't—not now. He had felt that way for a long time. When he realized that he wasn't needed anymore, needed in the way that had defined him to himself for so long. When his youngest girl had shouted at him to shut the bathroom door. When he'd stood outside on the landing and felt like an intruder, a boor, a dangerous man. He'd fallen into something that he thought now might have been depression—he didn't know. He'd waited outside, afraid to move, terrified that he'd lost his child because he'd opened the door while she, Lizzie, his youngest, his baby, sat on the toilet. He wanted to be there when she came out. He wanted to be ready with something apologetic and funny. But he saw it, the big, dejected, wet-eyed man blocking the exit, filling the landing with himself. He went down the stairs and—he knew this—he was a different man when he got to the bottom.

But that night—back to that night when he'd said he had no children. He'd done nothing with it. He'd gone home. He'd checked on the kids. He'd gone to bed and slept. He'd been up before everyone in the morning.

But it had been a moment, that night—a different life out in front of him, if he'd wanted it.

And now: it's another one. Another moment.

He's in England—he's in Newcastle. He's just off the phone to his wife, in Dublin. The pubs have been closed at home, and the cinemas and the theatres. The schools have been shut for a week. Social distancing is a phrase that everyone understands. It's like gender fluidity and sustainable development. They're using the words as if they'd been translated from Irish, in the air since before the English invaded.

But he's in England, and it hasn't happened yet. There are no yellow-and-black warning signs. The pubs are roaring, the streets are packed.

—When are you home, Al? Sinéad had asked him. Remind me.

—Sunday, he'd said.

He didn't tell her that the bar downstairs was wide open and mad in the early Friday afternoon, full past the walls with a stag party, about thirty drunk men in "Hawaii Five-0" shirts. Knocking back double and treble shots in pint glasses. Sweating, coughing, wheezing men, barking, and whacking one another. They're

from Belfast, he thinks. It's going to end in tears. It's going to end in blood.

The taxi-driver from the train station had put it all in its place.

—The coroona carry on, he said. It's a load a shite.

Alan had laughed, but he'd opened the passenger window to let some air in. In the hotel foyer, he didn't want to put his hands on the counter. He didn't want to hand over his debit card. He wasn't going to get into the lift. It had just opened behind him. Six or seven of the Belfast/Hawaii lads poured out, clutching phones and pint glasses. He'd carried his case up the stairs.

He wants to go home; he needs to get home. But there's something else in him, too: he's loving it.

It's a moment. He knows. He can stay here. He can disappear. Into England. Be the man with no children. No country. The man with nothing at all.

He washes his hands for—he'd be guessing—fifteen seconds. He wipes the door handles with a towel. He wipes the handle of his case. He opens the case and takes out what he'll need—a shirt, socks. He wipes the handle again. He throws the towel in the bath. He takes it out and hangs it on the door. He sits on the bed. He looks at the remote control on the table beside the bed. He doesn't touch it.

He's become an anxious man. Not today—not just today, after talking to Sinéad and scrolling through the news from Ireland. He's been constantly checking his watch, checking the calendar, checking the day, checking everything—for years now. He'd look at Sinéad's expression. Was she happy—was she happy with him? He wondered if he was talking to himself, after he'd become aware that he was hissing as he walked uphill, counting the gates to his own gate. Was he doing it out loud? He would put a shirt beside a pair of jeans on top of the bed at home and wonder if they clashed, if he could wear them together—to the shops, to the pub, downstairs to the kitchen. He didn't remember caring about that when he was younger. His parents had died; he was the oldest person he knew well. This pleased him and kept him awake. He'd left the back door open; he'd forgotten to leave out the black wheelie; he'd forgotten the name of the animal that built the dams. In the nature program he'd been half watching before he came up to bed.

This is his chance. He's ready to go.

He's forgotten the name of that animal again.

This is the chance to sweat out the fear, to join a new life. He'll go down to the lads in the hotel bar. He doesn't have a "Hawaii Five-0" shirt; nothing in his case will remind anyone of "Hawaii Five-0." There's a pink shirt. He's already worn it. He won't smell it first. He'll just hold it by the shoulders and give it a snap, scare some of the creases out of it. He'll order three gins in a tumbler and slip in among the lads. He'll talk if he needs to; he'll put on the accent that irritates Sinéad when they're watching the news. *There's a wee riot.* He'll work out if they're Catholics or Prods. He's on his way, already his new self.

Beaver.

That's the bucktoothed fucker that builds the dams.

He'll need a name when he goes down there. His own name is probably neutral, but he doesn't want it. Mick, Mike, Pete, Stu, Jim, Dave, Shamie, wee Beaver—he hasn't a clue. They all feel like land mines. He'll bypass the lads and head straight out into Newcastle.

He takes off the pink shirt and puts on the last clean one. He takes his passport out of his wallet. He'll put it in the case, in the bag with the dirty laundry. He should bring it with him, fling it into the Tyne, slip it into a bin. If he's being serious, that's what he should do.

He's out of the room. He stops the door with his foot. He checks that the room key is in his wallet. It is—he's on his way.

He's smiling. He's made himself smile. This is him not being himself.

The lift doors slide open. The lift is empty. He steps in. The heat, the smell of aftershave, thrown on by men who haven't shaved. He holds his breath, he leans on nothing, presses the button with his elbow. It's only two floors. He's forgotten not to get into the lift. He'll use the stairs from now on.

From now on? He won't be staying here. He might not come back. There's a couple of shirts, a jumper, his passport, the case. That's all that's up there. And his iPad—it's on the bed. He can feel the warmth of the men on his skin, he can see their breath—the droplets—in the air in front of him. He feels the lift stop, the little jolt. He's out, sideways, before the doors are fully open. He can inhale

now, if he's careful. He hears the lads in the bar; he hears glass hitting the floor tiles.

More sliding doors—he's out. He can breathe. This air came over the North Sea; it's too cold for any virus. He's on a hill above the river. As far as he understands, he's not actually in Newcastle; he's in Gateshead. Newcastle is the other side of the river. He can see his route there. Across a road, around a building site, over a wide car park, to steps that he's sure will bring him down to the river and the pedestrian bridge he can see shining below him. He can see plenty of people on the Newcastle side, but it's quiet here. There's no traffic at all on the road; there's no one working on the building site. The car park gives him the creeps. Old potholed tarmac; there are only four or five cars parked in space for hundreds. One of the cars starts just as he's walking past it. He doesn't look through the windscreen. He doesn't look back, and the tires don't crunch over the tarmac. He's at the steps down to the river.

He checks his phone. There's a message—from Sinéad. He won't stop here. He'll wait till he gets somewhere, a pub or something, where he can read it properly and answer—if he answers.

Of course he'll answer.

He mightn't.

He's crossing the river. This is the bit where he should be lobbing his passport into the water. And his phone. Into the river without breaking stride. Whistling “Fog on the Tyne.” The river will still be there when he's coming back—if he's coming back. His boarding pass for the flight home is on his phone. Everything is on the phone. The bank, the passwords, the photos, the life. He'll have a few pints and a pizza, then decide.

He's crossing the bridge and already planning on crossing back over the bridge, returning before he arrives. He's slowing down; he can feel it in his legs. The doubts and the dread—they're turning him back. It's familiar. It's been going on for a long time.

Drivel.

Sentimental, self-pitying drivel.

He stops halfway across, but not to turn back. It's the other bridges. The five, maybe six metal bridges that span the river. They're great—they're beautiful. From where he stands, if he shifts slightly they seem like one elaborate bridge. He gets out the phone, takes a photo. He deletes it and puts the phone back into his pocket. He doesn't want the photo or the urge to send it. He's moving again. The energy's back in his legs. He's in Newcastle now—officially.

He climbs up a street from the river. There's a gang of big women coming at him. They're all big, all in black skirts and T-shirts, with pink sashes across their chests, and big pink bunny ears. There are seven or eight of them; they're singing a song he doesn't know. It's a hen group, although it's hard to pick out the hen. One of them shouts just as they reach him.

—Tracey wants some cock!

She's not looking at him as she shouts. It's not a threat or an invitation.

She does it again.

—Tracey wants some cock!

—She fooking does, too!

They're around him, almost going over him. He can feel their heat, the mass of them; he can see the eyeshadow sliding down from the eyes, the shining cheeks. It's early evening. The droplets they'll inhale tonight—they'll be dead in days. *Here lies Tracey. She wanted some cock.*

Sinéad has told him that social distancing has become almost natural at home. She's told him about the polite slalom that walking down the SuperValu aisles has become in the week that he's been gone. Not here, he'll tell her—he wants to tell her. There's no distance between the bodies here.

There's another gang of women—they're not girls, they're way too old for girls—charging down the hill. It's all hills, this town. They're in pink this time, with black sashes and no ears. A more sedate group. They're not shouting for cock.

There's a pub across the way that looks promising, one of the BrewDog places he's read about. He'll wait till the pink hens pass before he crosses. He should be following them, he thinks. This is supposed to be his new life.



*"Look, I'm a real New Yorker—I remember when this was nothing but bank branches."*  
Cartoon by Emily Flake

He'll need cash. He'll have to go to an A.T.M. He'll have to tap the silver buttons with a finger. He'll have to push his card into a slot that infected stags and hens have been rubbing and coughing on all day. He'll have to do it—touch things, breathe sweat. He really should follow those women. The pink or the black gang. He should follow them into whatever bar they commandeer and dive right in. They'll pour their drinks over him. They'll sit on him. They'll probably kill him.

He'd stood in another hotel room a few days before—he thinks it was in Manchester—and looked at himself in the mirror as he came out of the bathroom. He saw his father's legs. Just for a second, they weren't his, Alan's. He was sitting on sand beside his brother—they were in Cahore, in Wexford—and he was looking at their father as he walked up from the sea, and he came closer and closer and he stopped in front of them and Alan looked through his father's legs as a black dog and three children ran beside the water, from his father's left ankle to his other one. His father's legs were the door to the sea. They were pale—it must have been early in the summer—and they were hairless, unlike his arms and his chest, and there was a line like a river, a blue vein, running down one shin. He stood in front of the hotel-room mirror and saw that vein in his own leg. He almost looked behind him, to watch his father coming out of the bathroom. His father had been dead for seven years. They were his own legs, but he'd become his father. *You're a ringer for your dad.* People had said it at the funeral. *It's fuckin' uncanny.* He had the legs of a dead man. *I'll say this,* an old friend of his father's had said that day, beside the hearse. He held on to Alan's hand, and wouldn't give it back. *You're not half the man your father was. I'll leave it at that.*

He looks in the pub window. The place is nearly empty. It makes no sense. Both sides of the street are heaving, but there are only two punters inside. They're together, a woman and a man—close to his age, he thinks—but they're not talking. He looks away, and back to the window, in case it's a trick of the light, the late-afternoon sun hiding a line of people sitting at the bar. But no—there's no change. It's still just the two in there.

It's his kind of place, a quiet pub in a mad town. A few weeks ago, even yesterday, he'd have been straight in—straight in on his father's legs. He'd have been looking through the menu for an I.P.A. with a daft name that he could

photograph and send to his family and a couple of friends. To remind them—and himself—that he wasn’t where he normally was. He’d have opened Google Maps and checked the route from the barstool back to the hotel. He’d have ordered his pint—Born to Die, or Clockwork Tangerine—and he’d have quickly convinced himself that it made good sense to eat there, too, a burger or a pizza, and he’d have been back in the hotel before dark.

The pull of the empty pub is strong. But he resists and moves on up the hill, on his own legs.

He’d have e-mailed the kids. He’d have made sure they all got their own message. He’d have written the one, then adjusted it for each—a verb, a noun, a musical reference. He’d have spent half the night cutting and pasting. One pint was the limit for that kind of work.

But he’s the man with no kids.

He could turn back. Not to the hotel, to the BrewDog pub. A slow pint of Punk I.P.A.—what a name; fuckin’ hilarious—and a photo home, the family WhatsApp: *Are the pubs shut over there? xx.*

Here’s his chance, though. He’ll find a Wetherspoons, walk right into the happy hour and death. He’s sweating. The hill is a killer, never mind the virus. He doesn’t want to get used to the words and the terms, their meanings and consequences—COVID, cluster, at-risk, asymptomatic. He doesn’t want the carefulness. This way is freedom, back home is boredom and terror. He can walk up this hill to the life he never had, or walk back down to the life he doesn’t want. He’s still feeling exhilarated, although he has to check first. He believes what he’s doing—he does. He’s still out in the air, though. He’s socially distant. He hasn’t burrowed into the crowd. He’s a bit manic, and tired. And a bit feverish, maybe. His throat is dry. But that’s from the climb. He’s anxious.

This is what he has to stop. The roll call of the adjectives. The running commentary that comes with everything he does and thinks. The self-assessments that have always crippled him. *You’re shit, you’re weak, you’re just not good enough.*

Is he anxious now, though? He isn’t. *He thinks he isn’t anxious. But he isn’t sure.* He doesn’t know what time it is. He doesn’t know the name of the street. He could turn back and go straight down to the river and he’d see the hotel on the

other side. But that's not the point. He'll turn a corner soon, and another—more than likely. And he won't note them, or care. He's bringing his sense of direction—it's good, it's reliable. But he won't be using it.

There's a rubbish bin up ahead.

He takes out his phone.

The bin's overflowing. There are wasps bopping around it. At this time of year? At this time of day? He pushes the phone down, under a squashed McDonald's bag, and further down. He lets go of it. He makes himself walk away. It's the hardest thing he's ever done.

But he's done it. He's done the mad thing.

They were at a party, about a year ago. But he couldn't tell anymore if it was a party or just a group of people standing around in the same house.

He'd said it to Sinéad on the way home in the taxi.

—Was that a party, was it?

—What?

—Were we at a party there?

He could see the driver's eyes in the rearview, looking away.

—What d'you mean? she asked.

—Well, he said. Parties. They used to be obvious.

They'd met at a party. He'd caught her as she started to fall backwards down the stairs with a bottle of Heineken in each hand.

—But tonight, he said. For fuck sake. Is it our age?

—No one vomited, she said. Is that what you mean? Is that what you're pining for?

—Kind of, he said. It was just a bit of a nonevent. Wasn't it?

—I enjoyed it, she said.

—Did you?

—Not really, she said. No.

—No, he'd said. Me, too.

—We missed "Succession," Al.

He laughed.

The man of the house had wanted to show Alan his desk. Alan hardly knew him; they met maybe twice a year. He knew him because he was married to Orla, who had gone to school with Sinéad's sister. He didn't have his number or his e-mail, and he had to remind himself of the man's name—Geoff—every time they were about to meet. It had occurred to Alan tonight that Geoff had done the same thing, half an hour before they arrived. He'd asked Orla what Sinéad's husband was called. He remembered women's names; it was the men who were vague. But Geoff worked at home—Alan hadn't a clue what he did—and he'd got himself a desk that allowed him to stand as he worked.

—That must be some fuckin' desk, another of the husbands said. Do you have to ask its permission if you want to stand up?

—I have a back thing, Geoff told them, and some of the other men nodded. They had back things, too.

Alan had gone upstairs to the toilet, and Geoff had followed him up.

—I'll show it to you when you get out, he said, as Alan shut the jacks door.

—Grand.

He'd spent a good while washing his hands, and there was no sign of Geoff when he came out. There was no one on the landing. But he heard the voice.

—Alan?

—Yeah?

—I'm in here.

There was an open door to Alan's right. He went to the door and looked in. There was a long desk—it looked like a delicatessen counter—almost across the width of the room. There was a laptop, closed, and a lamp. There was Geoff. There was a mattress in one of the corners.

—I sleep there, Geoff said.

He looked at Alan.

Alan said nothing. He looked at the desk. He looked at Geoff. The man knew no one. He'd no one else he could tell. Alan remembered the walls. They were pink. It had been a daughter's bedroom.

He didn't tell Sinéad. He couldn't. He wouldn't have got past the walls. He'd have cried.

—Will we watch it when we get home?

—It's too late.

—Go on, Al, she said. Be wild.

—O.K., he said. A bit of it. I might fall asleep.

—That's permitted.

He's got rid of the phone.

He's happy with that. It seems enough—the act, the protest. He turns and heads back down the street. He'll have the pint in the BrewDog pub. He'll order a pizza, a spicy one that will make the back of his head sweat. He'll go back to the hotel. He'll go up the stairs to his room. He'll wash his hands for twenty seconds. He'll take his shoes off and get up on the bed. He'll use his iPad to change his flight to tomorrow morning. He'll call Sinéad on the iPad. He'll tell her he lost his phone. He'll tell her his new flight details. He'll tell her what he's seen and heard tonight. He'll tell her that Tracey wants some cock. ♦

## **Homage**

- “[AngelHeaded Hipster](#)”: Hal Willner Does T. Rex

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

## **“AngelHeaded Hipster”: Hal Willner Does T. Rex**

Joining Nino Rota, Harold Arlen, and Kurt Weill, Marc Bolan is the latest artist to be enshrined by the record producer, who died of COVID-19 in April.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

October 12, 2020

Hal Willner, the music producer, who died in April of complications from *COVID-19*, at the age of sixty-four, was perhaps best known and loved as a congregator of diverse talent, the ever-expanding stable of artists who shared, or soon came to share, his ardent enthusiasms. Through the decades, he and these motley assemblages put on dozens of (often chaotic) themed concerts and released a dozen albums in tribute to other artists and genres. The first of these, in 1981, was a reinterpretation of Nino Rota’s scores from the films of Federico Fellini. There followed eccentric homages to Thelonious Monk, Harold Arlen, Charles Mingus, and Kurt Weill. His last, released posthumously this fall, is “AngelHeaded Hipster,” with a wide range of covers of the songs of Marc Bolan, the T. Rex front man, who died in a car crash in 1977.



By this point, the guest players came not so much for the material as for the man.

“If Hal called and said he wanted me to do yard work, I’d be there in a minute trimming the hedges,” Wayne Kramer, a co-founder of the band MC5 said the other day. “Everything he asked me to do was a complete pleasure. It was always a big payday, but not in money. Hal and I go way back, to his early sobriety days: his Edgar Allan Poe record.” That would be “Closed on Account of Rabies,” a spoken-word album from 1997. “I was improvising on guitar while Christopher Walken read ‘The Raven.’ ”

In 2000, Willner released a record he’d been hired to make, called “New Prohibition: A Musical History of Hemp.” Kramer worked on that one, too. Willner conscripted Taj Mahal, John Sinclair, and Dee Dee Ramone, among others. One track featured the singer Sweet Pea Atkinson, who also died last spring. “Sweet Pea was a crusty character, but he had a heart of gold. There was a lyric in one of the songs about the Scythians. Sweet Pea was all, ‘What the fuck is this shit? Who the fuck are these motherfuckers?’ And Hal tried to explain and Sweet Pea said, ‘All right, play it again, I’ll sing it.’ ”

Kramer performed on two tracks on the Bolan album, though he couldn’t remember which. (One was “Children of the Revolution,” with Kesha.) “The songs we did I learned that day on the job,” he said. “Bolan and T. Rex, me and the MC5, we all emerged at about the same time.”

Lucinda Williams recorded a track, too: for Hal, not Bolan. “I remember when that song ‘Bang a Gong’ was on the radio,” she said, over the phone from Nashville. “I never really connected to it. But then I went onstage with Yo La Tengo at one of their Hanukkah shows in New York and we played it, and I thought, This is cool.” On the Bolan record, she performs “Life’s a Gas.” (Thomas Bartlett, the pianist, who was the musical director on some of the Bolan sessions, said recently, “I love Lucinda’s vocal. It sounds like she’s possibly dying.”)

Willner had produced Williams’s 2007 album, “West,” after her husband and manager, Tom Overby, a longtime Willner nut, played her the Willner-produced 1987 Marianne Faithfull album, “Strange Weather.” Williams had already basically recorded “West” with her band, but Willner started over, with new musicians, including Bill Frisell and Jim Keltner. Williams refused to sing the

songs again, so they grafted her takes from the earlier sessions onto the new ones.

“There was definitely some head-butting involved,” Williams said.

Overby took the phone and said, “Hal used to joke that he was the only producer who Lu worked with and still talked to.”

Williams and Overby had got the news of Willner’s demise on the same day they heard about John Prine’s. “I just can’t stand it,” Williams said.

*Brrrng-brrrng.* “I met Hal in 1999, when we did the Harry Smith Project,” the singer-songwriter Beth Orton said, from London, referring to Willner’s staging of Smith’s folk-music canon. “I sang a cover of ‘Frankie,’ the Mississippi John Hurt song. That’s how I became part of his travelling theatre circus. I never stopped off.” For the Bolan project, she sang “Hippy Gumbo,” a deep cut. “Hal chose the songs knowing the person. He cast people. He brought an air of happenstance that ended up being anything but. You always felt you were doing him a favor, not realizing that he was the one doing me an incredible favor by appreciating me.”

*Click.* “I am a Hal guy,” Thomas Bartlett, the musical director, said, from his studio in midtown. “When I was fifteen or sixteen, I was living in London, studying classical piano. I wasn’t allowed to do much, but I did get to attend concerts. I went to Nick Cave’s Meltdown festival; this was the year they were doing the Harry Smith Project. I knew very little about that world, but I felt immediately that I’d found my tribe. I thought, These are the people I’m going to work with. Hal was an unfailing champion of the delicate oddballs out there. The ones who through self-sabotage, or whatever, never *really* made it.”

What about Marc Bolan? “That’s not music I knew or cared about,” he said. ♦

## **Old Neighborhood Dept.**

- [Chloë Sevigny Is a Cool Mom](#)

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Chloë Sevigny Is a Cool Mom**

The “Kids” actress, who stars in Luca Guadagnino’s HBO series, “We Are Who We Are,” introduces her baby to B & H Dairy, in her old East Village stomping ground.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

October 12, 2020

“I used to not really respond to babies,” Chloë Sevigny, the actress and downtown style icon, said one recent afternoon. “I’d never see a baby and go, ‘Oh, I want a kid.’ But I’d see teen-agers and be, like, ‘Damn, I want a teenager!’ ” She laughed, long and loud. Sevigny, who is forty-five, and who for more than half her life has embodied the platonic ideal of what the coolest girl in any room might look and act like, was wearing square-toed cerulean-blue ballerina flats (“Comme des Garçons from the nineties”), paired with short, lacy white socks, and a black slip dress repurposed as a skirt. (“Maison Margiela, also from the nineties. I was watching that documentary series about Michael Jordan —so good!—and this fabric reminded me of basketball shorts.”) She was sitting at the East Village Kosher mainstay B & H Dairy, dining al fresco—although the roar of traffic and sirens on Second Avenue provided an ambience that was less Florentine garden than “Escape from New York.” “I’ve been eating at B & H since ‘Kids,’ ” she said, referring to Larry Clark’s 1995 skater-youth-gone-wild film, in which she had her breakout role. On her lap she was holding her five-month-old son, Vanja, a robust, serene-looking child with alert eyes.



“New customer! Let me see!” Ola Abdelwahed, who owns B & H with her husband, Fawzy, called out, approaching the table. She clucked at Vanja, who blinked calmly. “Blond hair and blue eyes, really Europe style!” she said to his mother. “He gets everything from you!”

Sevigny demurred. “For now! They say it can change. His dad has very dark coloring,” she said, referring to her boyfriend, Sinisa Mackovic, a gallery director. Ola handed the actress a B & H onesie, printed with the words “Challah! Por Favor.” The restaurant has been serving Eastern-European Jewish comfort food like knishes and matzo brei for more than eighty years, but half of its employees are Mexican. Ola is from Poland, and her husband is Egyptian.

“I used to own the falafel place next door,” Fawzy said. “That’s when I met Chloë. It was more a nighttime spot.” He closed it in 2009, a few years after buying B & H. “Chloë is family,” he went on. “She know me when I was nothing.” B & H has had its share of troubles. In 2015, a gas-main explosion in a nearby building led to a months-long closure, and this year the pandemic forced the restaurant to temporarily shut its doors. (A GoFundMe was set up in support of its workers.) After it reopened for limited business, in May, a bottle thrown by a protester shattered the front window. “It almost hit our cook Rafaelo on the head,” Ola said. “It’s, how they say, what do we have to do with this, you know? The business is suffering already.”

Sevigny frowned. “Yeah, and you’re not, like, the Verizon store,” she said. “I’m not into any sort of violence. A safer city is better for all of us.” She began to feed Vanja a bottle of milk. “But I love being in the streets, and it was a little hard not being able to go to the protests. He’s just so little still.” She cooed at the baby, “Don’t worry, you’ll be in the streets later! Won’t you?” She skillfully balanced him in one arm and took a bite of her veggie omelette. “There’s a grittiness here that I like. Tompkins Square Park keeps it really real still,” she said. She lives farther west now. “I wouldn’t come back to live in the East Village. All the bars drove me crazy,” she said. “When we were shooting ‘Kids,’ I didn’t have a place to stay, so I slept over at the costume designer’s house, right above, over there.” She pointed at Fawzy’s old falafel place (now a taquería). “It was one of those bathtubs in the kitchen, toilet down the hall . . .” Her voice trailed off. “There were always junkie works in the bathroom. I’d put up notes: ‘Please don’t leave your stuff here.’ ”

Sevigny is starring in “We Are Who We Are,” Luca Guadagnino’s HBO miniseries, in which she plays a colonel on an American Army base in Italy. There is talk of the show’s being extended, but she’s not sure she would continue. “I don’t want to go back to Italy for four months, with Vanja, without Sinisa. It’s so disruptive,” she said. “And I’ve been doing this since I was nineteen. I don’t want to say I’ve *had* my career, and I’m sure it’ll continue, but I have to really rethink my choices now.” The farthest she’s gone lately is Connecticut, where she’s been spending weeks at her mother’s house. Would she ever consider leaving New York? “No,” she said, then laughed. “Not even a second-house thing. I’d rather spend my money on a nice holiday.” She hoisted the baby to a standing position on her lap. “Do you want to move to the suburbs, Vanja?” she asked. “That’s O.K. if you want to. You can be square!” ♦

# **Onward and Upward with the Arts**

- [Adrienne Lenker's Radical Honesty](#)

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Adrienne Lenker's Radical Honesty**

In her folk-rock songwriting and in interactions with her Big Thief bandmates, the musician's raw openness creates strange and thrilling effects.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

October 12, 2020



In late August, the singer, songwriter, and guitarist Adrianne Lenker stood beside a creek in upstate New York, watching the water move. The day before, Lenker, who is twenty-nine, had packed up the Brooklyn apartment she'd been sharing with two roommates. She was preparing to haul a vintage camping trailer across the country to Topanga Canyon, on the west side of Los Angeles, where her band, [Big Thief](#), was planning to meet up. For the next couple of months, at least, the trailer would be home.

Moving can be disorienting—all that sorting and boxing and tossing out forces a kind of self-reckoning—and for Lenker the experience was only intensified by the ongoing anxiety of the coronavirus pandemic, which made imagining any sort of future feel optimistic, if not naïve. The exhaustion and sorrow of the spring had left everyone feeling precarious. The sun refracted against the surface of the creek until the water turned black. Our conversation drifted toward the Zen idea of impermanence. “Is it too early for this?” Lenker joked. “Nice to meet you—let’s talk about death.”

Lenker had spent the past few weeks recording with Big Thief at a home studio in the Catskill Mountains, run by the musicians Sam Owens and Hannah Cohen. The rest of the band—the guitarist Buck Meek, the bassist Max Oleartchik, and the drummer James Krivchenia—had since left, but Lenker stuck around to renovate the trailer. She had just ordered a twin mattress, a portable woodstove, and new linens.

This month, Lenker will release two solo albums: “Songs,” a collection of tender, harmonically complex folk tunes, and “Instrumentals,” which is composed of a pair of slowly unfolding guitar pieces. She made the records simultaneously, at a remote cabin in New England, in the early, panicked days of both the pandemic and a breakup. Lenker is a quick and instinctive writer, and even under normal circumstances her songs are raw and unfussy—it can feel as if they were dug up whole, like a carrot from the garden. She sometimes speaks about writing as a kind of conjuring. “She gives a lot of significance to that moment where she’s holding the guitar,” Oleartchik told me. “I never really think of her, like, fucking around and playing riffs or something. It’s always this instrument of witchcraft. It’s always holy. She writes music from this place that’s very intuitive and fearless, and she has confidence that there’s some kind of spirit or force that she can listen to.”

Before Lenker vacated her apartment in New York, she had to paint over an illustration that her ex-girlfriend had drawn on the bedroom wall. Lenker took some solace from the idea that the image wouldn't be erased, exactly—it remained, even if she couldn't see it anymore. Lenker has been in romantic relationships with men and with women, and doesn't feel any particular obligation to outline her sexuality in precise terms, though she is comfortable being called queer. "The fact that there's still people against that kind of stuff makes the words necessary," she told me. "But hopefully we move into a place where it's, like, You're what? Why are you saying what you are?"

The wounds from the breakup were still pretty tender. "There's a fullness that happens when someone is focussed on you," Lenker said. "For me, if I'm being fully looked at and paid attention to and seen, I'm filled up by that." She continued, "Now there isn't anyone to text; there are no love messages coming through. I feel so empty. There's a song on the new record, 'Zombie Girl,' and the refrain is 'Emptiness / Tell me about your nature.' That's a real question. I want to understand—what is this feeling of emptiness? Is that me? Am I just hollow and empty? Or is emptiness actually something beautiful?"

As we talked, Lenker teared up. I hadn't yet had to idly watch someone cry from six feet away. As she wiped her cheeks, I crammed my hands in my pockets and mumbled something about how the worst and saddest thing about heartbreak is that it always ends.

Big Thief formed in Brooklyn in 2015, and quickly became one of the most acclaimed new bands of recent years, in part because of Lenker's emotional transparency, and in part because of how her voice, which is delicate and craggy, complements the group's bold use of dissonance and volume. In 2019, Big Thief was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Alternative Music Album, but its work is more commonly described as folk rock, a characterization that, although accurate—the band is as indebted to visionary singer-songwriters such as [Judee Sill](#) and Vashti Bunyan as it is to [Sonic Youth](#) and [Neil Young](#)—feels too tame. Big Thief's best songs begin quietly, and expand until it seems as though a major artery were about to burst. The results can be strange and thrilling. "Adrianne has that disorienting quality all real-deal types have, where she comes at her songs so sideways that it subverts the form," [Jeff Tweedy](#), the front man for Wilco, told me. "Sometimes you would swear it's a mistake or misunderstanding of her own song—'Why'd she start singing there?'—but it's not, it's a precise angle that only she seems to possess."

The band grew out of a partnership between Lenker and Meek. They met at a show in Boston, where they had both been undergraduates, and then ran into each other at a bodega on the day Lenker moved to Brooklyn. “I was moving into a warehouse in Bushwick with ten other artists,” Lenker said. “I’m pretty sure it was illegal—there were beams separating the rooms, no windows, a cement floor.” She and Meek soon began performing as a duo.

“When we first started playing, we would just sit together,” Meek told me. “She had these really wild fingerpicking patterns that she had developed, and she would tune the guitar to so many different open tunings. I had this very syncopated, rhythmic structure—hers was much more liquid. And, somehow, these different rhythmic landscapes created something.”

Lenker got a job as a back waiter at a restaurant on the Upper West Side. “Five days a week, at one in the morning, I was biking all the way to Bushwick from Seventy-second and Columbus,” she recalled. “I was saving up for guitar amps, saving up for a guitar, saving up for a van.”

Meek and Lenker burned CDs of their music, wrapped them in paper bags, and wrote the track listings by hand. “Buck and I played coffee shops and back-yard barbecues and dive bars and birthday parties and shows for nobody for a couple of years,” Lenker said. In time, they fell in love, and, when she was twenty-four and Meek was twenty-eight, they got married.

There is footage of them busking in Washington Square Park in 2014, playing an early version of “Paul,” which eventually appeared on Big Thief’s début album, “Masterpiece.” The audience—a middle-aged man in billowing khakis and sunglasses, a tall guy talking on his cell phone—is gently uninterested in a New York City sort of way. Lenker and Meek share a microphone. “Paul” is a song about having a hard time loving another person. “I realized there was no one who could kiss away my shit,” Lenker sings, her voice resigned. Yet the desire to be fixed—to find relief through love—remains. “I’ve been burning for you, baby, since the moment I left,” she admits. The chorus is a mesmeric rush:

I’ll be your morning bright, good night, shadow machine  
I’ll be your record player, baby, if you know what I mean  
I’ll be a real tough cookie with the whiskey breath  
I’ll be a killer and a thriller and the cause of our death

In the Catskills, between recording sessions, Lenker and her bandmates sometimes hiked into the woods to work on a tepeelike structure they had taken to calling a fort. There was no trail, and getting to it required climbing up the face of a small mountain, mostly by grabbing the trunks of saplings—a strategy any reasonable outdoorsperson would describe as inadvisable—and scrambling to find holds in large rocks. One afternoon, Lenker and I made our way there to sit on a boulder and talk. She darted uphill gracefully.

Lenker was born in Indianapolis in 1991, and brought up mostly in and around Minnesota. She has a younger sister, Zoë, and a younger brother, Noah. When Lenker was five, she was hit on the head by a railroad spike that fell out of a tree house in her family's front yard. "Mythological Beauty," a song from Big Thief's second record, "Capacity," is addressed to her terrified mother:

Blood gushing from my head  
You held me in the back seat with a dishrag, soaking up blood with your eyes  
I was just five and you were twenty-seven  
Praying, "Don't let my baby die"

Lenker's parents married young, and joined a fringe religious sect before Lenker was born. She remembers the group as having "born-again-Christian, kind of cult vibes—a closed community. We lived in an apartment complex where the surrounding people were part of the same thing. There were a lot of rules. Honestly, I remember there being a lot of shame. My sister's name was evil, because it wasn't in the Bible. Certain shapes were evil, too, like the star. When we prayed, the Bible couldn't touch the floor, and we prayed under blankets." Her mother recalled that sometimes the group provided a chaperon if the family travelled out of state. (Lenker's father disputes some of these details.)

Her parents left the sect when she was four, and for a short while they lived out of a van. "We were still quite religious until I was about eight or nine," Lenker said. "Then I watched my parents take a dramatic turn and discard all religion." She found the shift bewildering. "I just remember feeling, like, I'm not going to go along for this ride." (Her father has since reconnected with his faith, and describes his time away from it as hedonistic.)

Lenker has spent much of her adulthood trying to unpack the experience, and is now quick to recognize troubling rhythms from her youth when they reëmerge in

her adult relationships. “I sometimes equate intimacy with turbulence, which is familiar,” she said. “The journey that I’m currently on is just: how do I transmute some of these patterns of violence?”

Her ideas of home are constantly changing. “I don’t really think of Minnesota when I think of home,” she said. “I think of it as part of who I am. The thing that I come back to is that it’s my loved ones, and Earth. I feel really at home here, in this spot in the forest,” she said, looking around. “And it doesn’t feel like it’s anyone’s.”

Eventually, we climbed back down the mountain. Owens and Cohen had built a stone dam in the stream that snakes across their property, creating a little basin for swimming. The stream runs into the Esopus Creek, a sixty-five-mile tributary of the Hudson River which winds through the eastern Catskills and fills the Ashokan Reservoir. We walked barefoot over mossy bluestone. The water was clear and bracing. Lenker disrobed and dunked, letting out an ecstatic yelp.

While Lenker and the rest of Big Thief were working, they developed a habit of leaping into the water between takes. There’s something curative about a frigid plunge, the way it forces the old air from your lungs. “You come out screaming,” Oleartchik said. In 1702, Sir John Floyer published a treatise on the benefits of cold bathing, a practice that was then still mostly unknown to the English. “Cold baths act much on the Spirits, and preserve them from Evaporation, and render them Strong and Vigorous,” he wrote. It’s comforting to think that, even in our bleakest moments, there might still be a way to protect our Spirits from dissipating entirely.

As far back as Lenker can remember, she has liked to sing. Her voice is soft but substantial, and contains an airy tremble that sometimes resembles birdsong. On occasion, she lets it stretch and fracture. On “Not,” a deep and tumultuous song from Big Thief’s fourth album, “Two Hands,” Lenker sounds nearly feral: “Not the room / Not beginning / Not the crowd / Not winning,” she grunts. When the band performs the song in concert, she might start to scream.

Lenker began playing guitar when she was six, and discovered an affinity for the instrument. Her father started giving her lessons. “He’d be, like, Whoa—how do you already know that?” she said. “I was just eating it up.”



*"Just need to send one quick e-mail, then I'm all yours."*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

When Lenker was thirteen, her parents divorced. She dropped out of school and moved in with her father in Minneapolis. He was intent on managing—and, to a degree, monetizing—her nascent music career. “I think he wanted me to be famous, wanted me to be the best, wanted me to *win that shit*,” she said. Lenker did not share his exact ambitions. She made some recordings but felt disconnected from them. “The very first music I listened to, and then continued to listen to throughout that whole time, was by Pat Metheny and Michael Hedges —these guitar guys my dad loved,” she said. When she was fifteen, a boyfriend introduced her to Elliott Smith, whose tense and immediate folk songs provided a counterpoint to the more polished music her father had encouraged. “I was, like, Oh, my God, this is so good,” she recalled. “This is all I want to do. I don’t want to create these elaborate, pop-sounding productions.”

At sixteen, Lenker cut her hair short and briefly ran away from home. She got her G.E.D., and enrolled in a five-week summer program at the Berklee College of Music, in Boston. Toward the end of the summer, she made an appointment with Damien Bracken, the dean of admissions. “I went into his office and I said, ‘I don’t know any of this music theory, any of this stuff that is on your curriculum, but can I play you a song?’ ” She performed an original piece called “Far from Where I Started.” With the dean’s support, she applied for and received a full scholarship to Berklee, offered by the blues guitarist [Susan Tedeschi](#). “I’ll never forget the image of, like, twenty-five boys shredding on guitars in the hallway, preparing for their auditions and exams,” she said. “I felt self-conscious that I didn’t know those things.” Lenker was still figuring out how to do ordinary chores, such as buying laundry detergent. “I hadn’t gone to high school. I left Minnesota, I left home, I was on my own,” she recalled. “I was seventeen.”

Despite the intensity of her training, virtuosity doesn’t resonate for Lenker as much as vulnerability does; she has always been more interested in making emotional connections. The pop singer [Carly Rae Jepsen](#) told me that she has been able to find enormous comfort in the way that Lenker sings about her life. “I came across ‘Paul’ while I was in Italy for a solo adventure trip,” Jepsen said. “The lyrics spoke to me like a journal entry would. She’s brilliantly confessional.”

In addition to the recordings that Lenker made as a teen-ager, her work with

Meek, and the four records she has done with Big Thief, she has also released two solo albums: “Hours Were the Birds,” in 2014, and “Abysskiss,” in 2018. Lenker is curious about the mechanics of creative work—the spring from which songs appear—but finds that the process itself is more visceral and perceptive. “How does a song come into being at all? How does it form and organize itself into the pattern?” she said. “I never think, Oh, I want to make something that sounds like this. It’s just reaching for elements. I see the visual of translucent ribbons flowing in a riverlike way—they’re multicolored. And maybe there’s one specific color that I want to braid in, and they’re all flowing by, and maybe it’ll go by for a while with nothing of that color, and then, ‘Ah, there.’ ”

When I asked Meek to describe Lenker’s songwriting, he paused for forty-five seconds to gather his thoughts. “It’s as if she removes her conscious mind from the room,” he said finally. “She’ll hold her guitar, and she’ll start to speak in abstractions, or speak in complete nonsense—just sounds and shapes. Then she emerges from that space, and slowly the words start to form into syllables, and into the English language, and become a story, or a character, or a reflection of her own experience. But it has this really clear element of . . .” He thought about it. “Grace.”

One evening in early September, Lenker and I sat on opposite sides of Owens and Cohen’s kitchen table, snacking on figs and cheese. It was raining, and Lenker lit some candles. Her sister, Zoë, who was visiting for the week, was reading in a bedroom upstairs. Lenker showed me the room where she was staying, and the notebook where she had written most of the lyrics for “Songs.” There was a watercolor of a small cabin and a yellow sky propped up against a mirror, and a photograph of her grandmother by her bedside. Recently, she had acquired an electric pencil sharpener, which she demonstrated: “Isn’t that satisfying?” She picked up the acoustic Martin guitar she plays on the new albums. “I’ve had this since I was fourteen,” she said, strumming a chord.

Big Thief was on tour in Europe when [COVID-19](#) cases began to spike there. Minutes before the band was to take the stage in Copenhagen, the Danish government announced a ban on gatherings of more than a hundred people. The venue was already full. “We went out in the street and played some acoustic stuff, just four or five songs. Then we all had to make a snap decision about where we were going,” Lenker said.

“Suddenly, we’re all in this lobby of this hotel that’s basically empty, and the

dude at reception is wearing black gloves, and there's no more music," Oleartchik recalled wistfully.

Lenker flew back to New York City and then headed north, to a cabin in the foothills of the Berkshires, in western Massachusetts. She was entranced by the sound of the space, which she described as "like the inside of an acoustic guitar." She asked Philip Weinrobe, an engineer and the owner of Rivington 66, a recording studio on the Lower East Side, to help her make an album there. He agreed, and Lenker headed back to the city. "She left at, like, 5 A.M. to come pick me up in Brooklyn," Weinrobe recalled. "The whole thing was structured around the space, which was very small, with exposed wooden beams. We could hear the bugs, we could hear the wind in the trees. The idea was to really lean super hard into that physical atmosphere, and to create a record that tried to mimic it. As soon as I got there, everything started to shift: my sense of time, my sense of self, the way I breathed the air." He added, "There's no plumbing in the cabin. You poop in a bucket."

They used a binaural microphone to capture the sound of the room. "You really feel like you're sitting in front of Adrianne singing," Weinrobe said. "You can hear the birds go by, and you hear the squeak of the fingerboard, and the sound bouncing off the walls."

Lenker's lyrics often allude to nature, and she toggles between straightforward narratives and more imagistic lines. Her language reminds me, at times, of [Joanna Newsom](#) or [Louise Erdrich](#)—it's mystical yet highly grounded in the physical world. On "Ingydar," a new track, she sings:

His eyes are blueberries, video screens  
Minneapolis schemes and the dried flowers  
From books half read  
The juice of dark cherries cover his chin  
The dog walks in and the crow lies in his  
Jaw like lead

Weinrobe's grandmother died while they were recording, which meant that he and Lenker were both suffering a loss. "I wrote nine of those songs once we started the session," Lenker said. "We would record them the same day that I wrote them. I was surprised at how much I was writing, because I was in so much pain. I was not in the part of the pain where I was just reflecting on it."

She added, “I feel as if my psyche was putting as many things together as I could from my relationship, as many beautiful things as I could, to preserve it into eternity.” One of the instrumental pieces, “Music for Indigo,” was originally written as a kind of offering—something for her former partner to listen to as she fell asleep at night.

Two years ago, in California, Lenker bought a used Toyota Land Cruiser with a multitone paint job and a manual transmission. She drove it back East and began fixing it up, sanding down the exterior and refinishing it in a bright, hopeful blue. (The first time I met Lenker, she was in the midst of expertly backing the truck down a winding driveway and across a narrow wood-plank bridge.) With some help from an uncle, she outfitted the back of the truck with a foldable sleeping pad, a cooler, and wooden drawers for tools, clothes, and supplies. It has enormous tires—“It can go up any kind of mountain road,” she said proudly—and a beaded medallion hanging from the rearview mirror. It would pull her trailer across the country.

Lenker and Meek divorced in 2018. They are now what Lenker describes as “deep friends.” They didn’t hide their marriage and its dissolution from the press, exactly, but they also didn’t speak about it publicly. “I feel like it made us stronger and closer,” Lenker said, of the breakup. “I feel like we sing together better now, and we write together more. A lot of our love is funnelled into the music, which is maybe the form it was always meant to have.”

Krivchenia joined the band shortly after Meek and Lenker got engaged. “I was suddenly plopped into observing the intimacy, the beauty, and the shortcomings of a relationship, 24/7,” he said. “It’s been amazing to see it evolve.” He added, “They broke up, and it was a whole huge year of a specific kind of stress for them, and for the band. We did some tours without Buck, when they just needed to not be together for a while.” Though less dramatic fissures have undone other bands, playing together seemed only to accelerate the healing process. “Adrianne is always writing about whatever’s going on in her life, and so when they were getting divorced she was writing about it,” Krivchenia said. “Buck was processing that in real time, onstage. Some nights I’d look over and be, like, ‘Oof, that’s a rough one to hear, man.’ But he was really supportive of it.”

After their separation, Meek moved to California and wrote a record, “Two Saviors,” which he will release in January. It’s got more twang and air than Big Thief’s albums—Meek is from Texas, and his solo work is infused with the

pathos and mischief of Townes Van Zandt and Waylon Jennings. “I played a huge amount of shows on my own, learned to surf. And she did her own thing,” he said. “When we finally did come back together, we jumped right into a tour. The music felt more important than us. It felt like something we had to serve and set aside our fears for.”

Meek had been visiting his partner in the Netherlands, where the government had lifted coronavirus travel restrictions for people in committed relationships. A couple of weeks after we first spoke, he sent me a voice memo. “I think we sacrificed it all for the music,” he said, of his marriage to Lenker. “It was a vessel for our love and friendship. And then our love and friendship became a vessel for the music.” It was too hard, in the end, to nurture a new marriage and also be in a band. “We didn’t actually have a home for maybe four or five years,” he said. “There was no privacy whatsoever, because we were always on tour. There was a complete lack of personal time or space. And part of us knew this—we were aware that it was taking a toll on our relationship.”

In conversation, I found Lenker attentive and kind, and there were moments during our time together when the emotional maturity of the Big Thief universe —how patient and evolved the intra-band negotiations are; how careful the members are to preëmptively diffuse volatile situations; how they have even adopted the phrase “everything is optional” to avoid compromising their integrity—felt almost intimidating. Anyone who has survived an experience via the careful suppression or compartmentalization of emotion is likely to find Big Thief’s system of communication astounding. “If you don’t talk, you know, you’re gonna get to Kansas and you’re still gonna have feelings from Baltimore,” Oleartchik told me. The end result of all that talking, he said, was the sentimental (yet still radical) discovery that “it’s actually acceptable to be who you are to your friends.”

Kyle Jaster and Misha Handschumacher live down the road from the studio, on Atticus Farm, where they grow flowers and organic vegetables, and tend to a passel of free-range heritage pigs. They offered to let Lenker park her trailer in their driveway while she worked on it, and before long they became part of the renovation team. When I arrived there one afternoon, Jaster’s brother, Wyatt, was measuring and installing new plywood subfloors. The trailer was small, aluminum, and from 1966. The interior was painted cherry red, but Lenker had just picked out a new color, a mellow cream called Honeyed White. We began priming and repainting the cabinets, drawers, and trim. “I’m curious how this

trip is going to feel,” Lenker said. “I’m excited about the freedom, but I haven’t really felt full of relief. I’ve found it almost burdensome: I don’t know where home is. I don’t know who I belong with.”

When it grew too dark to paint, we retreated to a fire pit in the back yard. Jaster and Handschumacher prepared supper—okra and carrots grilled over the fire, chicken legs, blackberries, homemade ice cream—as their two dogs sprinted in figure eights around our lawn chairs. At dusk, a large owl swooped along the tree line. Owens and Cohen came by with beer. At some point, Lenker ended up with a Cuban cigar. “This was my fantasy when I was a kid,” she said, taking a tentative puff and laughing. “I wore knee-length jean shorts, plaid shirts, and a backward baseball cap, and all I wanted to do was eat beef jerky, drive a tractor, and smoke cigars.” An outdoor speaker played Michael Hurley, [Arthur Russell](#), Moondog, [Lucinda Williams](#), Bill Callahan. Lenker talked about moving to Vermont this fall—maybe building a little cabin in a corner of some land that her sister was buying there.

I left shortly after midnight. On the drive home, I rolled the windows down and let my hair blow around. I played “Dragon Eyes,” the penultimate track on “Songs.” It’s musically spare, with acoustic guitar and just a bit of brushed percussion. The final verse implores:

Stars bloom  
On a warm summer night  
They have a clear view  
Without the bedroom light  
I just want a place with you  
I just want a place

A few weeks later, I returned to the farm to toast the renovation of the trailer. It was a brisk mid-September evening, and leaves were starting to accumulate in corners. Jaster and Handschumacher set out platters of gumbo, corn bread, and succotash on a long picnic table in the back yard. We kept our coats on as we ate. After supper, Lenker stood in the door of the trailer, holding up a glass of bourbon, and offered sincere thanks to everyone who had helped her fix it up. The interior was complete—new hardwood floors, linen curtains hung on silver wire, a small dining table made from a maple tree on the farm. Lenker showed me the blue enamel coffee mug she’d placed in the cupboard (“Unbreakable!”), the books she’d lined up on a small shelf near her bed, the single cast-iron

casserole dish she could use to cook in the woodstove. She still needed to buy a tire jack and some roadside flares, just in case. She was leaving in two days.

In “[Letters on Cézanne](#),” Rilke describes autumn as “containing depth within itself, darkness, something of the grave almost.” Lenker writes often about time and loss—how to cling to what we need and let go of everything else. For her, songwriting is a way of externalizing specific experiences or memories and pinning them in place, like a butterfly under glass. “I like my songs to be reminders of certain things that I don’t want to forget,” she told me. Once they’re captured, then in a sense she is free. ♦

## **Podcast Dept.**

- [How We Lie to Ourselves About History](#)

# How We Lie to Ourselves About History

“You’re Wrong About” debunks the stories of the past. But its real subject isn’t so much facts as the process by which we absorb them.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

October 12, 2020



I first started listening to the podcast “You’re Wrong About,” a cultural-history show hosted by the journalists Michael Hobbes and Sarah Marshall, because of a T-shirt. Late last year, while lazily strolling along the social-media promenade, I came across a woman wearing a boxy T with a cheeky, provocative illustration on the front. The design, which was drawn by the artist Aude White, featured an X-Y axis, along with the faces of eight notable women who had made headlines over the last six decades. The caption read “The Maligned Women of ‘You’re Wrong About,’ ” and it sorted the women into four categories: Mistreated by Politics (Anita Hill, Monica Lewinsky), Mistreated by Media (Kitty Genovese, Anna Nicole Smith), Mistreated by Capitalism (Tonya Harding, Janet Jackson), and Mistreated by Religion (Tammy Faye Bakker, Terri Schiavo). At first, the shirt seemed like yet another piece of Girlboss merchandise, an attempt at hagiography that flattened women into symbols. But the categories intrigued me; I knew very well how Lewinsky had been mistreated, from her own public reclamation of her story through articles and activism. But I was less familiar with the story of, say, Kitty Genovese—I had only a hazy fable in my head, of a woman who was murdered in New York City while dozens of apathetic strangers watched.

As it turns out, I was wrong. Genovese, a twenty-eight-year-old whom Marshall introduces as “a real-life woman who became a metaphor,” was fatally stabbed, by Winston Moseley, in Kew Gardens, Queens, in 1964—but the narrative, pushed by a hyperbolic New York *Times* headline, about how thirty-seven people witnessed the attack and did nothing, was patently false. In fact, only a few neighbors were able to see the crime, and none saw it from beginning to end. Other neighbors called the police after hearing screams, and one witness, a valiant, petite woman named Sophia Farrar, immediately dashed downstairs to help, knowing full well that she might be rushing into a dangerous situation. Farrar cradled Genovese’s body until aid arrived, an act that directly contradicts the fearmongering media angle that the victim was left to die alone. For Marshall, the frenzy around Genovese’s death became a tool used to scare women about the dangers of moving through the city independently, and to scare the broader public about the terrors that new freedoms, forged by the civil-rights movement, might unleash upon an urban populace. “We used a story about what was wrong with a society we already had to make us feel afraid of that society changing,” she says in the podcast. “Once again, society figured out that it was sick, and decided that the antidote was more poison.”

“You’re Wrong About,” which began airing in May of 2018, has gradually climbed to the top of the history-podcast charts on iTunes, and now nets around 2.5 million downloads each month. The show works—and never feels preachy—because it follows a novel format. While many history podcasts feature one or two hosts reciting a litany of facts, like a staged reading of Wikipedia, Hobbes, thirty-eight, and Marshall, thirty-two, have taken a more exploratory approach. After they choose their subject—topics have included urban legends, infamous cultural figures, and tabloid fodder such as the Satanic Panic of the nineteen-eighties—one host usually does a mountain of research, and the other comes into the episode completely blind, with only their assumptions and memories to go on. The result is a sort of Schadenfreude theatre; you hear someone get absolutely schooled, in real time, as they make the journey from ignorance to insight. In a recent episode, for example, Marshall took on the task of explaining the story behind “The Stepford Wives,” the 1972 horror novel by Ira Levin about submissive housewives who may or may not be mechanical fembots. She begins by asking Hobbes what he knows about the book. He thinks that it was published sometime in the fifties, and that “all of the housewives are either robots or aliens, I can never remember.” Marshall simply laughs. “You’re Wrong About” thrives in these moments, when the hosts, after some acidic banter, begin evicting the untruths that have been occupying our brains.

And yet the show’s allure goes beyond mere fact-checking, which has become, by now, just another genre of entertainment. Fifteen years ago, in the first episode of “The Colbert Report,” Stephen Colbert coined the term “truthiness,” to distinguish those who “know with their heart” from “those who think with their head.” The deeper theme of “You’re Wrong About” is this divide—how we transcend it, or whether we are doomed, for eternity, to subordinate facts to the iron force of our instincts. Getting the Genovese story “right,” for example, is a more complex process than debunking it; it’s about wading through what *felt* right, at the time, and why. When the murder took place, the horrors of the Holocaust were gaining further exposure, and many families had left New York City for the suburbs; readers were primed to accept a tale, albeit one that was false, about insidious apathy to violence. When Marshall explains what we got “wrong” about the event, it is not an indictment of fake news. Instead, she is interrogating the “truthiness” that elevated one narrative in the past, and that allows us to seek out revisions of that narrative—her own take on the Genovese story, for example—in the present. The show is less about facts than it is a meta-narrative about how we absorb them. If, as Joan Didion once wrote, we tell ourselves stories in order to live, then “You’re Wrong About” wants to know

why we keep some stories going longer than others.

To the extent that “You’re Wrong About” is a critique of the media, it’s also an inside job. The show began when Hobbes, a writer at HuffPost, sent an e-mail to Marshall in early 2018. He had read her searching essays, in publications such as *The Believer* and BuzzFeed, about subjects as wide-ranging as JonBenét Ramsey, the Titanic, and Elvis. Marshall’s writing is obsessive; she picks a popular story, pores over archival sources, and discovers what the public missed during the initial media blitz. Hobbes, who had used a similar method in his work, proposed re-creating their process in an auditory format. They recorded the show remotely for five months before meeting for the first time. The duo fund the podcast on their own, through both donations and merchandise sales; recent items include masks with slogans like “Aww, sweetie,” a catchphrase that Hobbes often deploys when the dramatic irony in an episode becomes too delicious. Because Marshall and Hobbes have never partnered with a major production company, and do all of the reporting themselves, the show has earned a kind of cult status among listeners. In September, it aired its hundredth episode, about the spectre of killer clowns.

What keeps the show fresh is its outlook. Marshall and Hobbes are endlessly curious about their own blind spots, which they hunt down like truffle pigs set loose in a damp forest. Each brings a unique view and tone to the show; Marshall is more world-weary and sardonic, with a gravelly voice that sounds not unlike the caustic cartoon character Daria Morgendorffer. Hobbes is excitable and buzzing, often so eager to rattle off information that he speaks in full paragraphs. Together, they make up a kind of millennial Statler and Waldorf, heckling the shoddy journalism of the past. But even their response to the media is one of amusement, or droll resignation—they stay far away from the outrage that has become the pattern of public life. (Indignation would imply certainty, and certainty would cut against the core of their project.) In one episode, the hosts discuss the Y2K-bug scare, in which people feared that the year 2000 would cause computer systems—and society at large—to crash. Hobbes tells Marshall that people often use the subject as a bludgeon. “When we’re talking about climate change, people will bring up, like, Oh, we were worried about Y2K, too, and that turned out to be a hoax,” he says. “And somebody else will respond to that by saying, No, Y2K is an example of us coming together and fixing a problem.” After he’s done, Marshall playfully clears her throat. Then she says, “And, since we have now had two years of doing this show, I am able to extrapolate that perhaps the answer is *no one* is right.”

It's an apt mission statement for "You're Wrong About," which, despite the neatness of its name, is the one history podcast I've heard that assumes the audience is capable of complex thought. It doesn't try to sift out nuance; it's a podcast for adults, albeit those who have spent most of their lives telling themselves the wrong stories. As for the right story—who can say? You walk away from every episode of "You're Wrong About" with questions, not answers. What else do we believe is true, just because it sounds correct? Can we ever see through the fog of media manipulation? And even if we push back on what we are told, dig for a deeper knowledge, will we find out, in twenty years, that the "real" story has changed yet again? It's not that Marshall and Hobbes believe that nothing is true; they have faith in documents, reporting, quotations. But the very premise of their show, in which they apply old data to a new, unified theory, proves their broader point: that any story can be revisited, recast, and even remade. They know that there's a seductive aura around the facts that *feel* true. And, if they can't sell the feeling, they will, at the very least, try to sell you the T-shirt. ♦

# Poems

- “[Vectors](#)”
- “[Song](#)”

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

# Vectors

By [Arthur Sze](#)

October 12, 2020

*Audio:* Read by the author.

First extinction in the Galápagos Islands, the least vermillion flycatcher—

Hopis drill a foot deep and plant blue corn along a wash—

*Danger*, a woman brushed on the side of a napalm bomb—

in an oblong box emptied of firewood, a black-widow web—

shaving, he nicked himself and stared in the mirror in a moment of blood—

out of a saddlebag, a teen pulls a severed goat's head—

before signing his name, he recalls hotel rooms were once used as torture chambers—

in Thessaloniki, the beach attendant made a gun of his hand and fired at him—

prisoners cackled when the inmate onstage said, “Is it not time for my painkiller?”—

weighing mushrooms, the Tibetan cashier grins, “You suffer from suspicion; I suffer from kindness”—

a mercenary turned car mechanic spilled a pile of Krugerrands onto the table—

looking up from a tusk under the lamp, the carver smiled, “It’s butter in my hands”—

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

# Song

By [Louise Glück](#)

October 12, 2020

Leo Cruz makes the most beautiful white bowls;  
I think I must get some to you  
but how is the question  
in these times

He is teaching me  
the names of the desert grasses;  
I have a book  
since to see the grasses is impossible

Leo thinks the things man makes  
are more beautiful  
than what exists in nature

and I say no.  
And Leo says  
*wait and see.*

We make plans  
to walk the trails together.  
When, I ask him,  
when? Never again:  
that is what we do not say.

He is teaching me  
to live in imagination:  
  
a cold wind  
blows as I cross the desert;  
I can see his house in the distance;  
smoke is coming from the chimney

That is the kiln, I think;  
only Leo makes porcelain in the desert

Ah, he says, you are dreaming again

And I say then I'm glad I dream  
the fire is still alive

## Profiles

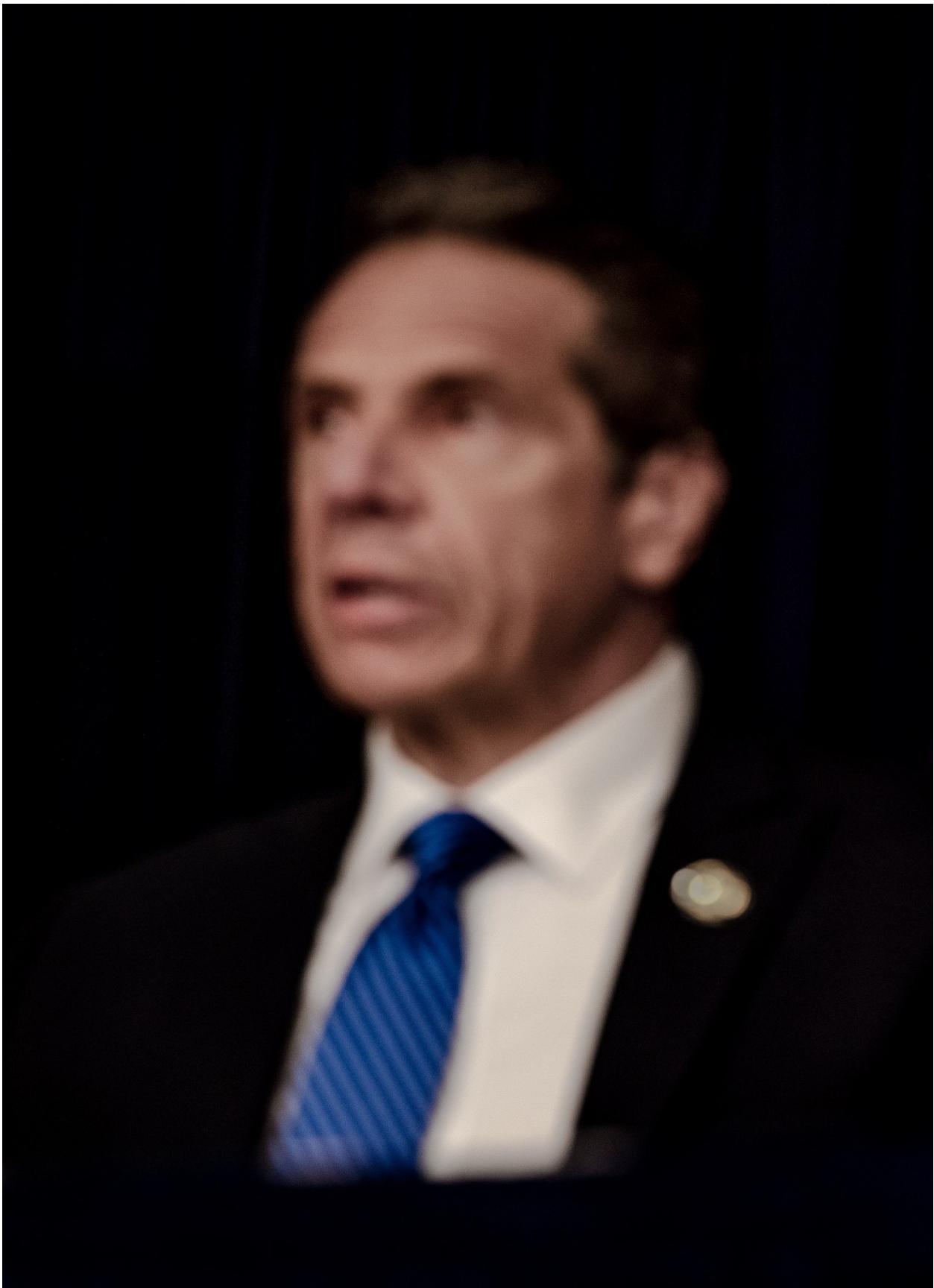
- Andrew Cuomo, the King of New York

# **Andrew Cuomo, the King of New York**

The Governor has been widely praised for his response to COVID. But his critics see a would-be authoritarian obsessed with settling scores.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

October 12, 2020



The difference between doing the job and just appearing to do the job is rarely absolute. In the more than eight months since [\*COVID-19\*](#) manifested in the United States, our public officials have demonstrated pretty much every gradation. Recently, [President Donald Trump](#) was ailing at Walter Reed hospital, both a victim and a symbol of his Administration's lassitude and arrogance in the face of the pandemic. He'd failed to protect the country, and now he'd failed to protect himself—not to mention his staff, his supporters, and perhaps his opponent. Even after he returned to the White House, persistent obfuscations about how long he'd had symptoms and how serious they were called only more attention to the Administration's negligence and bad faith. He continued to do nothing, and to urge the country, and Congress, to do nothing. Photographs released by the White House on October 3rd, of Trump supposedly working, depicted him using a Sharpie to sign his name on a blank sheet of paper. A boy practicing his autograph.

"It's all been exposed," [Andrew Cuomo](#), the Governor of New York, told me recently. "Trump was exposed. The lies are exposed. The incompetence is exposed. It's like low tide in the ocean. Now the whole shoreline is exposed. There's no question as to what was under the water." Cuomo was busy contending with some other new *COVID* clusters—a dozen or so, many in predominantly Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods in and around New York City. The onset of autumn had brought a surge in viral transmissions and had complicated the delicate task of opening up while keeping numbers down. Last week, Hasidim were out in the streets, angrily protesting the Governor's abrupt restrictions on religious gatherings in certain communities. In their eyes, he was doing too much, at least to them. Still, most New Yorkers felt that Cuomo had done a commendable and by some measures miraculous job bringing New York back from the brink. The image they'd formed of him, at the height of the pandemic, still pertained.

One can forget the terror of those weeks in the spring, and the devastation of the numbers. A Saturday in April: the confirmed death count, statewide, was five hundred and seven. The days had all started to seem the same, at least to those people fortunate enough to be able to say so. From a distance, what set one morning apart from another was its place on the curve—the tally of new *COVID-19* fatalities. On Sunday, from a medical-research center in Manhasset, on Long Island, Cuomo shared this information with the media and the many citizens watching on their screens. For seven weeks, he had been delivering daily

briefings, to widespread and in some circles ardent acclaim. The repetitiveness of these performances, the almost liturgical demonstrations of what seemed like good sense, was itself calming, especially in contrast with whatever fresh craziness came out of the White House each night. Cuomo, by leaning on data, brandishing logic, speaking in paragraphs, and expressing something like human feeling, had stepped into the void left by the federal government's cynical and capricious response. In the land of the incoherent, the silver-tongued man is king.

For the first time, the death rate was at an ebb. "We are on the other side of the plateau, and the numbers are coming down," Cuomo said. While Joe Biden played possum in his bunker and Trump, in spite of the carnage, maintained some viable wedge of support in the polls, Cuomo was all over TV, with his crisis-time white polo shirt and furrowed brow. He had running themes, which he enunciated with relish: the preference for facts over opinions (his elongation of "facts" giving the word almost another syllable), the idea that the virus had come to New York from Europe rather than from China (his pronunciation of "China" either eerily or mockingly similar to Trump's), and this concept of "New York tough," which, as he kept explaining, with the assistance of PowerPoint slides, meant tough not just in the hard-ass way that people might associate with the city (and with him) but also "smart, disciplined, unified, loving."

Loving! Here was a politician known as a man who doesn't much like people and whom most people don't like, at least in the way you might, say, a colleague or a friend. "He was born for social distancing," a former aide told me. When people thought of him, they pictured a calculating, very capable, somewhat grim tactician, a man of relentless and ill-concealed ambition and intrigue—a mechanic of government, it was usually said, in a nod both to his understanding of the levers of power and to his talent for tinkering with muscle cars. But now the Prince of Darkness (a tag he'd always resisted) was a self-proclaimed "cool dude in a loose mood," or, as his younger brother, Chris, the CNN correspondent, kidded him during their regular mock interviews, the Love Gov. The comedian Randy Rainbow came out as a "Cuomosexual," and a new orientation was born. The public snickered about his nipples—or even speculated about nipple rings—visible beneath his white polo, just below the state seal.

"If it were up to the women," my friend Anna wrote me, "G♥v Cu♥m♥ wld be

on all the time. He is, among most of my friends, .” It could be the voice, which has the timbre and phrasing of his father’s, the way it alights softly on certain plosives, on the letters “P” or “D,” the “S”s becoming “Z”s. The way he intones “LaGuardia” as he claims credit, deservedly, for building its new terminals. Among the fans of the sound of his voice, you’d probably have to include Cuomo himself. “This is a guy who knows he has a moment, and he’s not going to waste it,” a former city official told me.

Throughout the crisis, the Governor, who is sixty-two, had talked a lot about his mother, Matilda, unable to see her grandchildren; about Chris, afflicted by *COVID* and quarantined, sort of, in his basement in the Hamptons; about his three daughters, Cara, Mariah, and Michaela, who had come to live with him during the quarantine, something he noted so often that anyone who’d been through a divorce might have wondered if he was doing it to nettle the ex-wife. The ex was Kerry Kennedy, a daughter of Bobby and Ethel. “Part of the reason women are going wild for him,” a woman who was going wild for him wrote me one day, “it’s the daughters. They adore him. And he seems to have saved them from the Kennedy curse. He put the iron in their souls.”

On this Sunday, the day after the confirmed deaths of five hundred and seven people, Cuomo eased into one of his familial tangents: “I come from an Italian-American household where we had a great tradition on Sundays—the family had to come together at the table. . . . They called it dinner, but it started at two o’clock in the afternoon—I don’t really know why they called it dinner. But everybody was at the table. Spaghetti and meatballs every Sunday.” Now his daughters were home; he’d already started cooking the sauce. Can you imagine Trump stirring a sauce? Cuomo then summoned the sitcom-dad persona he’d been trying out. “Mariah brought her boyfriend,” he said. “The boyfriend is very nice, and we like the boyfriend. Advice to fathers: the answer of what you think of the boyfriend is always ‘I like the boyfriend.’ Always.”

At this point, Cuomo was, as one longtime antagonist described it to me in the spring, “the boyfriend of all America.” Whether you liked the boyfriend or not, you said you liked the boyfriend. He seemed better than the other guys—the President a maniac, the Mayor a buffoon. But what would happen when people got to know the boyfriend a little better?

Six weeks later, on the final day of May, Cuomo devoted most of his daily briefing to a different subject. *COVID* deaths in the state had reached a new low

of fifty-six, he said, “which is, in this absurd reality we live in, actually very, very good news.” It was. The city was scheduled to begin opening up in a week. But augmenting the absurdity of our reality was the chaos that had broken out the previous nights in cities across the country, [including New York](#), in the wake of the killing of [George Floyd](#). Police had beaten, maced, and mowed down demonstrators and journalists; rioters had looted stores and torched police vehicles. Another night of mayhem loomed. The day before, Cuomo had named some Black victims of police violence in the past three decades, and bemoaned the fact that nothing had changed, that our political leaders had done little to address what he agreed (“Of course!”) was a crisis of systemic racism and state-sanctioned violence against people of color. “I’m with the protesters,” he said.

Now Cuomo had specific fixes in mind: independent investigations of police-abuse charges, transparency with police disciplinary records. His voice had attained that higher, singsong pitch it sometimes does when he is strenuously insisting on something, in this case the failure of the political establishment to fix the relationship between the community and the police and, more broadly, the long-standing inequities between white and Black, rich and poor, in education, housing, and health services. It was an impassioned call from a mainstream Democrat for a new progressivism, which he depicted as long overdue.



*"He'll never share the road with a bicycle."*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

These were stirring words, but, to people who'd been paying attention to Cuomo, they came with some dissonance. And not just because the next day he announced, with [Mayor Bill de Blasio](#), a curfew for New York City, the first in seventy-five years, and a surge in the deployment of police, or because, in the nights ahead, the police went on a spree of violence against peaceful protesters. It was almost as if he were calling himself out. If Cuomo wasn't the political establishment, who was? He was approaching the midpoint of his third term; he'd been governor for almost ten years. Before that, he'd been the New York attorney general, and, well before that, in the eighties, a top adviser to his father, Mario, during his three terms as governor, and, in the nineties, [Bill Clinton's](#) Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Though Cuomo lamented that many of his progressive efforts had been undone by politics—"I am perpetually frustrated about how hard it is to get that political machine, that governmental machine, to turn. It's like a big freighter coming down the river"—he seemed to be describing an agenda that he, for most of his time as governor, had often quietly done his best to thwart. Frequently, it was he who kept the freighter steaming straight ahead.

The latest crisis drew new attention to the quandary of Cuomo: the Cuomo people see on TV and the Cuomo people contend with behind closed doors. Such incongruities are almost universal in politics and government, but there's something particularly fraught about Cuomo's contradictions—the promise that comes with such power and political skill versus the bitter fruit it can bear.

Even before the death of George Floyd (Mr. Floyd, as Cuomo almost always refers to him), the public perception of the Governor's handling of the pandemic, in many quarters, had started to adjust. As eloquent as he was, as competent as he'd seemed, his state had suffered arguably the world's worst outbreak, with a staggering number of deaths and hospitalizations. Much of this could be ascribed to the density and inequity of New York City, along with its airports, which served as the main ports of entry for flights arriving from the most infected regions of Europe. Cuomo reminded everyone that the virus had ambushed us precisely because the federal government had paid it such scant attention. But even if one allowed for the fog of war, and the pieties of hindsight, many of the moves Cuomo made in the earliest days of the pandemic were indicative of a governing style often hampered by political calculation and personal pique.

People came after him either for overreacting or for underreacting. The overreaction critique came mostly from the right, from the open-it-up-ers, who felt that a statewide shutdown, and the Governor's dire requests for forty thousand ventilators, had been excessive, a product of hysteria and a desire to undermine Trump. This was easy to parry. Cuomo credibly made the case that the ventilator and I.C.U. predictions had been based on worst-case models issued or endorsed by the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and other public-health authorities. He'd deferred to the scientists, as the Trump Administration kept failing to do. And the shutdown did flatten the curve, greatly diminishing fatalities and hospital overload. In a pandemic, you hope to be accused, afterward, of having overreacted.

The underreaction critique was harder to shake. Had Cuomo's shutdown order come too late? Had his policies led to the needless deaths of thousands of nursing-home residents? At the peak of the pandemic, hospitals—especially the public ones—had been in chaos. The city was a hellscape of ambulance sirens and mobile morgues. How much of this could be left at the feet of the Governor and his health department, as opposed to the Mayor, or an inept White House, or a decrepit, jerry-rigged, money-sucking health system that was decades in the unmaking? Until something like the 9/11 Commission takes up the American response to *COVID*, these arguments will proceed along the lines of political allegiance and self-interest.

As much as Cuomo kept saying that his *COVID* response wasn't about politics, it became abundantly clear that it had to be. Declaring victory became a full-time job; admitting error was impossible. The war, as articulated by Cuomo and his staff, was one of ideas, between people who believe government can be a force for good and those who think otherwise. If you asked them why they persisted with such aggressive messaging, they talked about Cuomo's commitment to demonstrating competence, so that more people might demand it. "We were reinforcing the idea that government matters," Melissa DeRosa, the secretary to the Governor, told me.

And yet, for *Homo politicus*, especially perhaps the subspecies *Cuomo*, what is life but a campaign? He insisted that he wasn't running for anything, saying over and over that his lack of any such ambition freed him up to do his job. His third term expires at the end of 2022, at which point he'd be vying—probably with a sturdy challenge from the left—for one more than his father had, a feat of one-upmanship that would gratify the son, according to people who know him. If he

remained in office, it would be the longest tenure since that of the first governor, George Clinton, more than two centuries ago. Cuomo reads deeply and calls in historians for discussions about his predecessors, even if he usually does most of the talking. And what about the White House? At one point, people were suggesting, impractically, that he be drafted to replace Biden on the ticket. By 2024, perhaps many of the particulars of the *COVID* months will have faded from memory and one will be left with a binary judgment of Cuomo's performance, a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down.

One night early in the spring, on CNN, Chris Cuomo, enacting journalism, asked his brother if, in light of his recent acclaim, he'd given any thought to the Presidency.

"No, no," the Governor said.

"No, you won't answer?"

"No, I answered. The answer's no."

"No, you're not thinking about it?"

"Sometimes it's one word. I said no."

"Have you thought about it?"

"No."

"Are you open to thinking about it?"

"No."

"Might you think about it at some point?"

"No."

One can safely surmise that the Governor wasn't levelling with his brother or the audience, or even himself. Surely he'd gamed it out. He hardly slept these days —a few hours a night, mostly lying there, staring at the ceiling. What if Biden wins, what if he loses? This running mate, that one. He might have concluded that four more years of Trump, whatever the pitfalls, would enhance his chances

in 2024. People who have worked with Cuomo say that he has at least considered this. Who among us, were we wired to win political races, wouldn't, however idly, do the same?

# MACBETH: TAKE TWO



“How can you know what you might think about at some point right now?” the younger brother asked.

The older brother replied, “Because I know what I might think about and what I won’t think about.”

Cuomo often speaks of government as “an art form.” By reputation, he’s an ace—an exemplar of aptitude, thoroughness, hard work. But he’s also a master of the art of politics. “He doesn’t make many political mistakes,” the former city official said. It is hard to think of a contemporary of Cuomo’s stature who is as deeply schooled. He was thrown into it young, first as a teen-age volunteer in his father’s down-ballot bids and later as his de-facto campaign manager, aged twenty-four. This was 1982, when Mario Cuomo stormed back from a distant second in the polls to upset New York’s mayor, [Ed Koch](#), in the Democratic primary for governor. Andrew had a knack for the pulleys and trapdoors, the mirrors and smoke. On the day of the state convention, in Syracuse, as Cuomo’s campaign tried to bluff its way into having enough delegates to stay in the race, Andrew had a staffer charter a pleasure boat (and then have it conk out in the middle of Onondaga Lake) to sequester a bunch of Cuomo-leaning delegates, so that Koch’s campaign couldn’t court them.

Earlier, Koch had soundly defeated Cuomo in the 1977 mayoral race, during which signs had reportedly sprouted in the boroughs reading “Vote for Cuomo, Not the Homo.” Even on his deathbed, Koch blamed the Cuomo campaign for this, Andrew in particular, who was then a muscular teen who worked nights clambering lampposts to put up his father’s posters and tear down Koch’s. Andrew has always denied any involvement, and even the existence of the homophobic posters remains in dispute; no one has ever produced a smoking staple gun. Decades later, Andrew would become something of a gay-rights hero, for his success, as Governor, in passing a marriage-equality law—a legislative equivalent of the upset in 1982. Still, the taint of that old slogan has followed him; [Cynthia Nixon](#), his opponent in the 2018 primary, tried the slogan “Vote for the Homo, Not the Cuomo.”

Michael Shnayerson’s unauthorized 2015 biography of Andrew, called “[The Contender](#)” and conceived as a portrait of a potential 2016 Presidential candidate, presents him as a restless conniver and a seductive antihero: some combination of the [Thomas Cromwell](#) of “[Wolf Hall](#),” without the delicacy or

the taste, and maybe Jimmy McGill, from “[Better Call Saul](#),” without the vulnerability or the lovable charm. In spite of—and sometimes because of—his maneuverings, you want to root for him. You’d watch all six seasons. “I don’t think he has any political ideology, other than to crunch his enemies and make the wheels of government turn,” Shnayerson told me. “But there is something useful in that.”

Here he is at his father’s kitchen table appraising the Queens political bosses, or pumping out curls in his bedroom while reviewing torts at Albany Law School, or working nights driving a tow truck for AAA, or rebuilding a Corvette in his parents’ driveway, or sitting stiffly on the Kennedy sailboat off Cape Cod, in fresh-bought neon swimming trunks, while the Kennedy boys snicker. In profiles through the years, his almost unsociable fastidiousness has come up again and again, even as he chain-smoked Parliaments. The furniture in his apartment was covered in clear plastic. He used Fantastik to buff his leather couch.

Cuomo has always had a chip on his shoulder, as a child of Queens and of Mario. The neighborhood was not Hollis, which was predominantly Black, or Hollis Hills, which was wealthy and white, but Holliswood, more middle class. His mother came from a Brooklyn family that owned real estate in the borough and in New Jersey. Mario, as Andrew called his boss, was the son of Italian immigrants who had a corner grocery store. Mario graduated from St. John’s Law, top of the class, and, when no Manhattan firm would hire him, started out in Brooklyn; one of his clients was Fred Trump. Mario was a largely absent but highly demanding patriarch. Much has been made through the years, with little comment by Andrew himself, of Andrew’s desire to please or, as time has gone by, surpass his father. “Mario was fucking brutal,” a former aide told me. “Andrew was scarred.” Their one-on-one basketball games, in the state-police gym in Albany, were notorious. As people can sense from watching the Cuomo brothers chirp each other, even the most lighthearted Cuomo-family trash talk comes with a tincture of grievance. Joe Klein, in “[Primary Colors](#),” depicts the Cuomos, *padre e figlio*, as Orlando and Jimmy Ozio, the latter a crafty political pro, “handsome in a lurky kind of way.” The father-son pathology is always cited but never really spelled out; one gets the feeling that the Cuomos aren’t big on therapy.

The son logged some private-sector years, as a lawyer at a firm that did work for many of the big New York real-estate families, including the Trumps, and then started a nonprofit, called *HELP*, that built housing for the homeless. On his first

date with Kerry Kennedy, he took her to one of these facilities. Later, he asked reporters how his marriage proposal would play in the press. Before the wedding, Shnayerson writes, he decreed that there be no toasts at the reception and, in another break from Kennedy-family tradition, that no exes be allowed at Hickory Hill, the family compound in Virginia, where he and Kerry later took up residence. (Cuomo denies all this.) By then, he was at *HUD*, doggedly protecting an ossified agency (what Jack Kemp, a former Secretary, called “ten floors of basement”) from a Republican Congress while waging war for years with *HUD*’s inspector general, Susan Gaffney, whose public profile, huge staff, and subpoena powers he came to resent. As Shnayerson writes, Cuomo sought to rein her in, “first by wooing her, and then when that didn’t work, doing his best to destroy her.” He basically created an investigative unit of his own, and used it to render her redundant. He was perhaps at his best, and his worst, when he had an enemy.

In 2000, after Al Gore lost to George W. Bush (there had been talk of Cuomo becoming Gore’s chief of staff), Cuomo decided to run for governor of New York, in part, people assumed, to avenge his father’s loss, six years earlier, to the Republican George Pataki. The putative Democratic nominee, popular with the Party establishment, was a courtly apparatchik named H. Carl McCall. It was McCall’s turn, as Party etiquette would have it, and he was poised to be the state’s first Black major-party candidate for governor. Various people, none of them exactly his allies, quoted Cuomo as having said, at the time, regarding his presumptive hold on the African-American vote, “Every Black home has three pictures: one of Jesus Christ, one of Martin Luther King, and one of either Bobby Kennedy or J.F.K.”—the implication being that Cuomo’s marriage to Bobby’s daughter made him a Kennedy, too. (Cuomo has denied saying this.) The transitive property didn’t apply. In the *Times*, Bob Herbert called him “arrogant, abrasive, controlling.” The oft-cited self-infliction was a put-down of Pataki, after September 11th. “He stood behind the leader. He held the leader’s coat,” Cuomo said, meaning that all Pataki had done, as Rudy Giuliani played the hero of Ground Zero, was act as the Mayor’s valet. It’s difficult, amid the debased discourse of the Trump era, to imagine that such a remark could be deemed suicidally indecorous, but it was, partly because it wasn’t really true, and we were all, for a while there, patriots and allies. As it happens, Bill de Blasio, a city councilman at the time who had worked under Cuomo at *HUD*, was one of the few Democrats who stood by him. “You could have gotten all of his supporters into a phone booth,” de Blasio said some years later. After Cuomo dropped out of the race, Kerry Kennedy told him that she wanted a divorce.

Cuomo foundered in the doldrums of an apparent political and personal dead end. Some friends even reported glimpses of introspection. He vowed never to let such a thing happen again.

Cuomo started over, and in 2006 he won the attorney-general seat that Eliot Spitzer was vacating to be governor. Spitzer, before doing himself in, amid a prostitution scandal, was bedevilled, from within his own party, by Cuomo, who as A.G. skillfully undermined him in his battles with the Albany establishment. Spitzer's replacement as governor, David Paterson, once said that he always felt as if Cuomo were sawing the floor out from under his feet. Soon the stage was set for Cuomo to run again—to take his father's old job, and to move back into the governor's mansion, the state's most powerful perch.

In early March, as the coronavirus took hold, Cuomo got the Legislature to grant him sweeping emergency powers, which enabled him to unilaterally make or suspend laws. The effort had started innocently, weeks before, as a request for forty million dollars, to help the state prepare for the new virus. By the time the bill came to the floor, it was also, incidentally, an authorization of absolute power. In the coming months, he issued seventy executive orders and signed some two hundred and twenty-five laws, including one granting him the right to make budget cuts. "Now is not the time for politics," he said.

In some ways, the occasion was perfect for Cuomo. "He's inclined toward tyranny," a Democratic legislator told me. "But in a crisis that's what people want. Someone who can exert command and control. This situation is tailor-made for a tactician of his abilities." An advocate for government could deploy its considerable capabilities without having to put up with its usual difficulties, which we sometimes call politics. But you can no more repress politics than you can feelings.

Later, as the state began to open up, various advocates argued that Cuomo should cede those powers. Blair Horner, of the New York Public Interest Research Group, told public radio, "What we're arguing for is a return to the American form of democracy, a system of checks and balances. If the Governor doesn't like that, of course he's entitled to his opinion, but it'd be a debate he'd have to have with Thomas Jefferson, not with us."

Monica Klein, a progressive strategist, told me that shortly before Richard Brodsky, the fourteen-term Westchester County assemblyman known as

“Albany’s conscience,” died, in April, “the last thing he yelled at me was ‘You need to tell everyone that Andrew Cuomo is an authoritarian!’ ”

It may be hard for someone outside the hothouse of New York politics to understand how much Cuomo is resented by the more progressive wing of his party, which his staffers disdainfully call “the professional left”—to whom he, in turn, is Quid Pro Cuomo. Members of the Cuomo team relish the resentment.

Cuomo has said, and his people insist, that he is a great progressive. They cite the accomplishments: gay marriage, marijuana decriminalization, gun control, a minimum-wage increase, paid family leave. “Every time you set up the government for failure, you’re aiding and abetting the conservatives,” Cuomo told me. “I’m looking at an original poster: ‘Re-elect F.D.R. for Progressive Government.’ It’s not a new word, a new concept. It was F.D.R. and Al Smith. *They* were the progressives. F.D.R. was all about you get done what you can get done.” Cuomo likes to say that, under his watch, New York has the most progressive record of any state in America, and believes that history will say so. “The right decision ultimately outs,” he continued. “If you don’t believe that the truth wins, you can’t do the job. You have to believe that the right thing gets appreciated in the long run. Only the long run matters.”

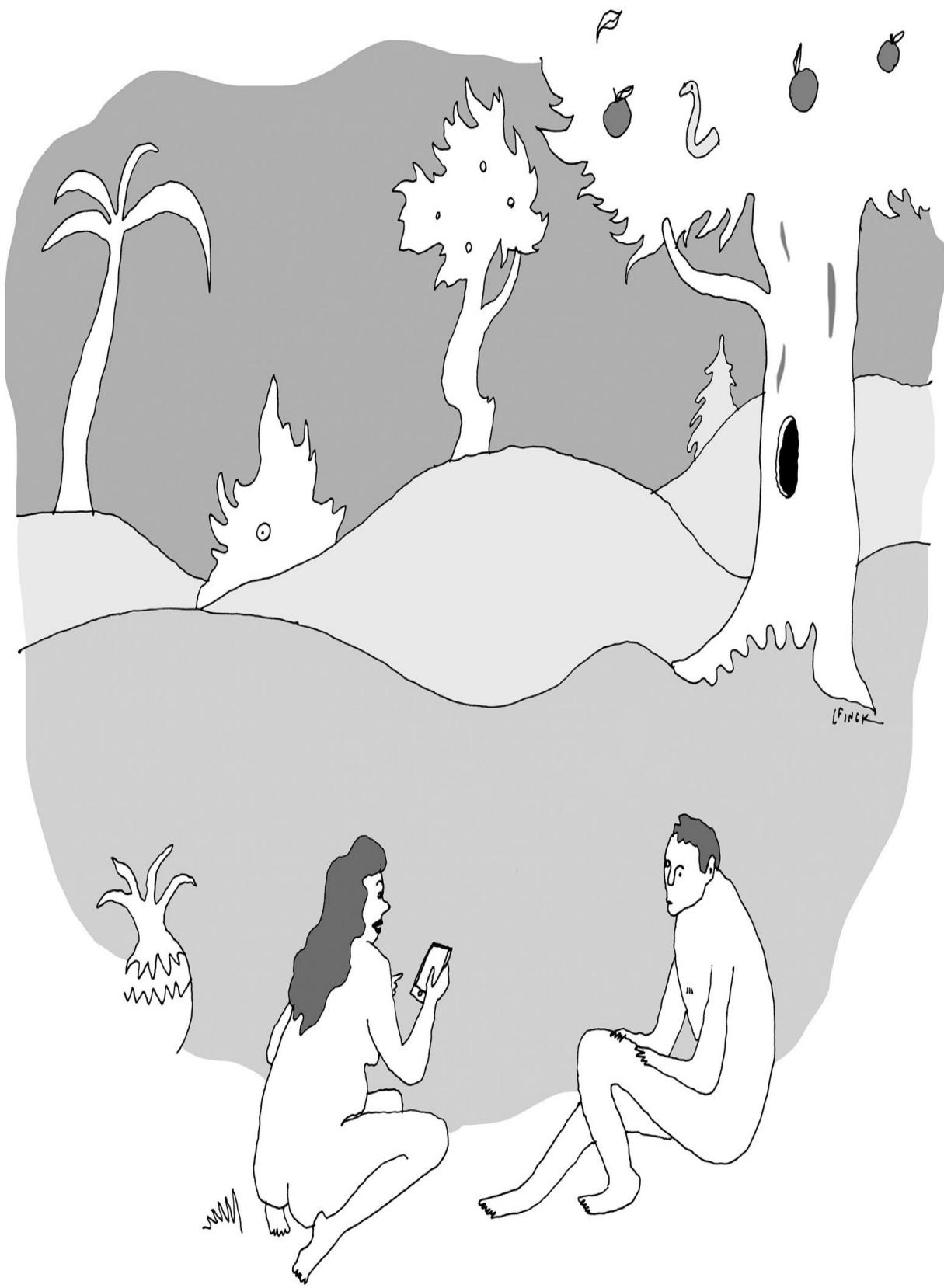
As a so-called Clinton Democrat, Cuomo came into office, in the wake of the financial crisis, determined to cut spending and to bring public-sector unions to heel. At the time, Republicans controlled the State Senate, a situation that had the perverse effect of helping Cuomo neutralize his left flank, which consisted mainly of New York City liberals. The city has almost half the people, and more than half the money, but the state is vast and diverse, and a governor has to triangulate.

In 2012, the G.O.P. lost its majority. A handful of mostly conservative-leaning Democrats, by many accounts at Cuomo’s urging and with his strategic advice, had established the Independent Democratic Conference, which formed a coalition with the Republicans and therefore effectively negated the new Democratic majority. Democrats called it a “coup.” Cuomo’s office called it an “internal legislative matter” and disavowed any involvement.

In the next electoral cycle, the Working Families Party, a left-wing movement that started in New York in the late nineties, grudgingly agreed to endorse Cuomo, over his challenger, [Zephyr Teachout](#), if he promised, among other

things, to end the I.D.C. His less than enthusiastic on-camera accession to the Party's demands, in exchange for its backing (the deal was brokered by de Blasio, an early supporter of the Party), became known as the "hostage video" and was initially greeted with jeers at the W.F.P. convention. Sure enough, once Cuomo was reëlected, he failed to deliver on his promise.

In the fall of 2018, primary challengers beat six of the eight I.D.C. defectors. After Cuomo trounced the Republican candidate, Marc Molinaro, in the gubernatorial race, he started his third term having to contend for the first time with a truly liberal Democratic majority. Last year, the Legislature had its most progressive session ever: new laws were passed addressing rent control, climate change, bail reform, and driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants. Cuomo, who has in private conversations expressed concern over the leftward lurch of his party, did his best to ride the wave rather than let it wash over him. Now he drove the left nuts in a new way—with, as a Democratic legislator put it recently, "his proclamation of positions that he's working hard to sabotage."



*"Everyone else is going apple-picking."*  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

"He's still doing a good job of keeping the crazies at bay," a prominent Manhattan Democrat told me. He happened to be the kind of [Davos Man](#) constituent who Cuomo feared would abandon the city if he were subjected to a new wealth tax, which many progressives have endorsed.

"Cuomo decided years ago, partly by watching his father, that Democrats can't govern effectively, that they are a tax-and-spend juggernaut, and that any power they have in the Legislature is bad for him," Bill Lipton, a former political director of the W.F.P., told me. "The ease and consistency with which he does one thing in practice while arguing in public he's doing the exact opposite—and saying anyone who suggests he's doing this is crazy—should worry anybody who believes that executives should be transparent and accountable."

"These are institutional advocates who by their job can never say, 'It's enough,'" Cuomo told me. "A sitting governor can never satiate advocates. Otherwise, they're not advocates, by definition. I can't. My father couldn't." Cuomo and his staff, buoyed by their own internal polling and the results of his two primary challenges, contend that he is actually more popular among Democratic voters who consider themselves to be very liberal than he is among those who are closer to the center. They dismiss the W.F.P. as being representative of no one. "They're not the left," one of them said. "They don't represent anybody. They're a piece of stationery."

After winning a third term, Cuomo got to work getting back at the Working Families Party. In each of the past two years, he has sneaked a provision into his budget that would more than double the number of votes a party would need to remain on ballots. The new threshold would be a high hurdle for the W.F.P. On NY1, [Jumaane Williams](#), the New York City public advocate, called Cuomo's tactics "Trumpian." Lipton told reporters that the maneuver was "a power grab." Cuomo, a master of the "Who, me?" defense, dismissed such talk as "conspiracies."

In his own party, his detractors often speak of him (almost always without attribution, because they are afraid of him) as a brutal boss, a friendless bully, and a paranoid control freak. "It's not enough for him to win. Other people have to lose," one said, having lost. Yet there are often caveats. "And by the way," another told me, after carpet-bombing my notebook with slurs, "he may go down

as, if not the greatest, then the most accomplished governor New York has ever had.”

With the press, Cuomo has a reputation for being both exacting and adept. He makes late-night or early-morning calls to reporters—usually off the record, often genial and confiding, sometimes foulmouthed and scathing—which can seem like a gambit to seduce and cow the cadre of regulars assigned to the statehouse beat. He prefers bending an ear to pressing the flesh; the biggest impediment to any designs on the Presidency is the thought of him having to spend weeks in Iowa. Prior to the pandemic briefings, his press conferences were infrequent, his stagecraft tightly controlled. He has a small and loyal team. He is known to have, as one reporter wrote, “an elephant’s long memory for slights.”

I first approached Cuomo’s office in the spring about spending some time with him. Various members of his staff took up the request and then let it drop. By midsummer, I’d all but given up. Rich Azzopardi, his senior adviser, laughed at my suggestion that I spend a night in the governor’s mansion. In a pandemic? Then, one day in August, my phone rang: Hold for the Governor. He asked to speak off the record, and did so for more than an hour and a half. There was a strange intimacy to the conversation; his timbre was like a pheromone. It didn’t sound as though he were multitasking or pulling faces with his aides. It wasn’t a man just talking to himself, like Nixon at night. He seemed to have all the time in the world. I found myself laughing out loud at some of the Cuomisms (“We created the we!”), the rhetorical repetitions and Rumsfeldian logic pretzels. I wondered, as I had before, if he was aware of his own peculiarities. For a New Yorker, shtick can be self.

A few weeks ago, there was another call, this time on background, with quotes to be used only with his later approval. He explained his rationale. “I did four hundred hours of briefings,” he said. “The people can come up with their own opinions of me. They do and they did. They know me better than you know me. And, by the way, they do. They literally do. You bring baggage. They have no baggage. They know me. They know my kids. They know my mother. They know my dog. They came to their own conclusions about me. They don’t need your opinion.”

The first time I met Cuomo was in 2014, at [Billy Joel](#)’s house in Oyster Bay. I was writing about Joel, and he’d invited me to hang around on a morning when he and Cuomo were going out on Joel’s boat for a photo op having to do with

cleaning up the bay. The two are good friends. They share an interest in motorcycles and boats, and a pride in being rough-hewn street-smart outsiders vaulted, by talent and luck, into a world of high-class swells. Cuomo presided at Joel's fourth wedding and is the godfather to his young daughters.

The two men were alone in the kitchen, not-eating breakfast. Cuomo had on his in-the-field uniform: khakis, white polo shirt with state insignia, tucked in, windbreaker with insignia. They talked about wives and houses. Out on the bay, on the Argos, Joel's refitted lobster boat, Joel and Cuomo scooped up some plastic for photographers in smaller boats; then they took turns awkwardly scattering panels of oyster seed into the water, to demonstrate support for the oyster-farming operations in the bay and the clean water that they both enable and require.

Sometime later, I found myself at Joel's house, on Independence Day. Cuomo was there. Emboldened by a taste of Billy Joel's gin, I sat down next to the Governor and began to make an argument against an infrastructure project that he'd been promoting, a bridge or a tunnel across Long Island Sound, from Rye to Syosset—a very long and expensive connector between the mainland and the island, to divert traffic from the metropolitan area, that could devastate the region's shellfishery, which Cuomo and Joel had celebrated a few years earlier. I began to state the case against the project, and Cuomo interrupted and dismissed the premise that there was any oyster fishery worth considering. "They get, what, five oysters a year?" he said. (I'm quoting from memory.) He held forth, in a playfully caustic tone, about *NIMBYism*, the future of John F. Kennedy Airport as an e-commerce hub, and the virtues of thinking big, in a world of small-minded people, of whom I was presumably one.

What thrills Cuomo most, to go by his reputation and the evidence, is building things—the kind of big infrastructure projects that might vex more deferential executives. The Second Avenue subway, a new LaGuardia Airport, an expansion of Pennsylvania Station, a replacement for the Tappan Zee Bridge, which he named for his father. Each summoned up a disregard for bureaucratic niceties which some might find refreshing, and a hands-on obsessiveness that is extremely expensive and, for bureaucrats and other hands, crazy-making. As one of those bureaucrats told me, referring to the Cuomo team, "They will slam a bureaucracy for taking too long but then spend an inordinate amount of money to rush it. He is adept at throwing money at a problem. That is a luxury that the bureaucrats don't have."

Still, the travails of the city's transit system, and of the finances of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, have beset him throughout his tenure. In 2017, soon after celebrating the opening of the Second Avenue subway, a costly project that had been delayed for decades, Cuomo was confronted by the so-called Summer of Hell—an epochal rise in delays, overcrowding, derailments, and signal malfunctions brought on by years of underinvestment and neglect. Unsuccessfully trying to deflect some of the blame and the cost onto Mayor de Blasio, Cuomo, who controls the M.T.A., declared a state of emergency and hired [Andy Byford](#), a respected transit expert who had most recently remade Toronto's subways, to run the system. Acclaim in the press (including this magazine) for "Train Daddy" reportedly irked the Governor. After two years, Byford quit, complaining that Cuomo had undermined him, hounded his staff, and in general made it impossible for him to do his job.

Byford told Marcia Kramer, of WCBS-TV, during his only on-the-record debriefing, "I just would not accept the fact that my people were being yelled at, they were being given direction, and I was deliberately excluded from those meetings." He added, "To me, it's actually dangerous, also, that people who are not professionally qualified should give direction on operational matters." Byford, who read "The Contender," has compared his ordeal to that of the inspector general at *HUD* and has accused the Governor of "steamrolling" him. Now, with the M.T.A.'s finances further wrecked by an unprecedented collapse in ridership as a result of the pandemic, the prospects for the transit system, and with it the viability of the entire region, are gloomier than they were even in the dark days of the city's last major financial crisis, in the seventies. In June, Byford took over the transit system in London.

It can be instructive to go back and chart, day by day, the encroachment of *COVID* consciousness, its mutation in the public's mind from "just another swine flu" to an invisible menace that forever altered our lives. March 1st saw the first confirmed case in New York State, a doctor returning from Iran, and then there was a flareup in New Rochelle, outside the city—Patient Zero hadn't travelled anywhere, so *COVID* was here. At that point, people who went out in public wearing gloves and masks were generally considered to be paranoid. Cuomo said, on March 2nd, "Avian flu, Ebola, SARS, *MERS*, measles—right? So we have gone through this before."

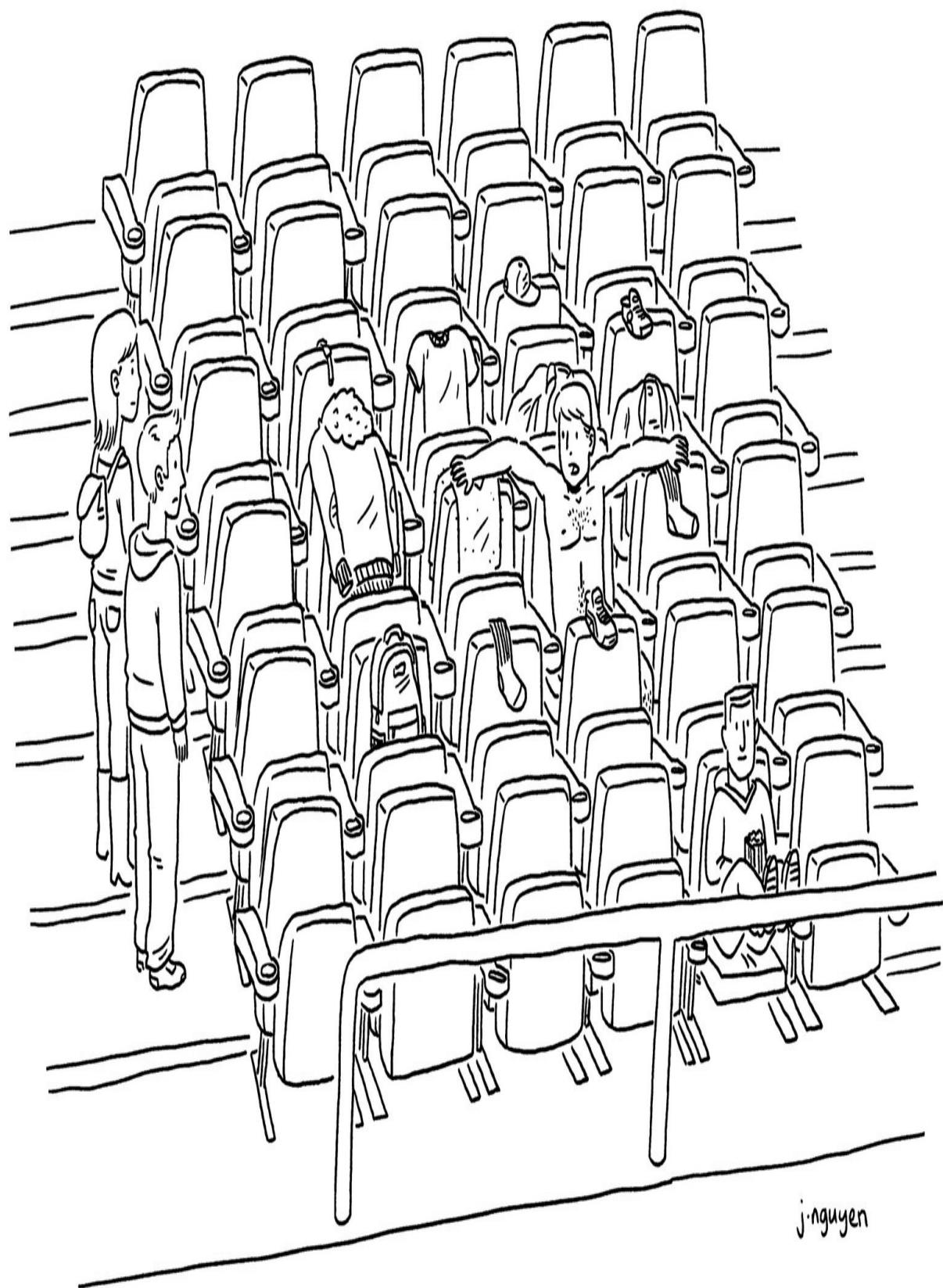
On March 13th, Cuomo indicated that the state would defer decisions about school closures to local governments. Two days later, de Blasio, after dithering,

decided to close the city's public schools. The following Tuesday, March 17th, after a weekend in which patrons unadvisedly packed the city's restaurants and bars, de Blasio, to the surprise of his own staff, floated the prospect of an order to "shelter in place." (First, though, he sneaked in one last workout at his gym in Brooklyn, to which he'd been driven by S.U.V., from Gracie Mansion, in Manhattan, most mornings throughout his mayoralty, amid almost universal derision.)

Cuomo, objecting to the language and the spirit of such a measure, overruled the Mayor. "For New York City or any city or any county to take an emergency action, the state has to approve it," he said. "And I wouldn't approve shelter in place." He added, "The fear, the panic, is a bigger problem than the virus." Freddi Goldstein, who was de Blasio's press secretary at the time, told me, "It was very, very clear we had hit a nerve and in their eyes had gone too far." According to the *Wall Street Journal*, a dozen public officials held a conference call with the attorney general, Letitia James, to figure out how best to get Cuomo to announce some kind of shutdown, without seeming as if he were following the Mayor.

It wasn't until March 22nd, when New York had almost six thousand confirmed cases, that Cuomo's "pause"—shelter in place by another name—went into effect. [Gavin Newsom](#), the governor of California, had ordered a shutdown on March 19th, when the state had less than a third of the number of confirmed cases that New York had. Days mattered. Columbia University epidemiologists later estimated that a week's delay in March quintupled the number of deaths in the New York metro area in the pandemic's first two months.

Cuomo, to be fair, had already closed universities, schools, theatres, barbershops, gyms, restaurants, and bars. Maybe the people weren't quite ready for quarantine, by any name. "You had to fundamentally change the behavior of nineteen million people and get a buy-in from a cynical populace," DeRosa, a top aide, told me.



*“Sorry, these are saved.”*  
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Still, it's hard to find anyone who knows the two men who doesn't conclude that one of the reasons Cuomo lagged some of his peers was that he was just doing what he has often done: begrudging de Blasio any political oxygen. Cuomo didn't want to be the one holding the coat. New Yorkers have come to think of these spats as a feud, but for the most part they have been sustained by Cuomo. De Blasio has done himself few favors, however; he is a master of the unforced error. After New York's first confirmed case, de Blasio tweeted that people should get on with their lives. Cuomo had been cavalier, too, but de Blasio did it with a certain kind of flair: suggesting that New Yorkers “get out on the town despite Coronavirus,” he threw in a recommendation for an Italian Mafia movie called “The Traitor.”

As conditions in the state and the city deteriorated, Cuomo kept pressing de Blasio. On April 11th, de Blasio announced that the city's schools would remain shut down for the rest of the year. But he'd failed to consult with Cuomo; he alerted the Governor by text message just before his announcement. Legally speaking, the decision was Cuomo's to make. “That's his opinion,” Cuomo told the press. “He didn't close them. And he can't open them.”

Eric Adams, the Brooklyn borough president, tweeted, “Cut the crap.” But the crap was not cut: similar episodes of rank-pulling and wrong-footing, whether about gyms or restaurants, cops or schools, cropped up again and again in the coming months. The day after the death of [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), de Blasio tweeted that he was looking into building a memorial for her. Twenty minutes later, Cuomo announced that the state had a plan for one already.

Last week, the crap kicked up again, when the Mayor, without consulting the state, announced some measures to contain new *COVID* hot spots in certain neighborhoods. The next day, the Governor nixed those plans, in favor of some of his own. The schools would close on Tuesday, not Wednesday. Closures would be determined by cluster zones, not Zip Codes. And so on. Whatever the merits of each approach, the petulance and the lack of coördination confused New Yorkers, and sent a portion of them into a rage. By Tuesday night, mobs of Hasidic men were running amok in the streets. “To the extent there are communities that are upset,” Cuomo said on Wednesday, it is “because they weren't following the rules and the rules weren't being enforced.”

In New York, through the decades, the relationship between the governor and the mayor has often been strained, especially when they have been members of the same political party. Nelson Rockefeller and John Lindsay, both moderate (and blue-blooded) Republicans, could hardly talk to each other. Mario Cuomo regularly undermined David Dinkins. George Pataki and Rudy Giuliani were chilly at best. Some of the tension is structural. At least where the city is concerned, the governor has the power, the mayor the responsibility. The mayor oversees a huge budget, controls the nation's biggest police department, and lives and works in the country's media capital, while the governor, stuck up in Albany, has a diffuse political base, an unruly legislature, and a state police force much smaller than the city's. Yet the mayor needs state approval for almost everything. The inevitable thumb wrestling between the two executives and their staffs requires political acumen, message discipline, and the cultivation of powerful constituencies and alliances. In these departments, Cuomo, by most accounts, is a samurai, whereas de Blasio is a schlimazel. Even members of de Blasio's administration, past and present, say that his political ineptitude is surpassed only by his self-regard.

When de Blasio was elected, in 2013, he set out to make good on a campaign promise to introduce public pre-kindergarten citywide. Though Cuomo outwardly supported the idea, he didn't like how de Blasio wanted to pay for it, with a tax on people earning more than five hundred thousand dollars a year. Cuomo was running for reëlection, and was trying to cut taxes, not raise them. De Blasio, who had won in a landslide, felt that his victory gave him the political capital not only to impose a wealth tax but also to force Cuomo's hand. "The people in the city have given me a mission," he said at City Hall.

"Pre-K drove Cuomo's people crazy," a former de Blasio aide recalled, adding that one of them told him, "We're gonna bury you, you just wait." Cuomo believed that it would be a bad idea to drive away the rich, both from the state and from the tax rolls, and maybe, as his critics would have it, from his fund-raising Rolodex. Amid the pre-K battles, he told the *Times*, echoing his father's famous formulation, "The way we campaign is in poetry, aspirational generalizations. We govern in prose, which is in compromise and programs. The millionaires tax is a great political theme; it's a great proposal politically. It is governmentally, currently, an impossibility." He has compared his commitment to not raising taxes with his father's steadfast opposition to capital punishment.

De Blasio began targeting charter schools, diverting funds and rescinding space.

Supporters of the charter-school movement include some of Cuomo's big donors, such as the fund managers Paul Tudor Jones, Daniel Loeb, and Bruce Kovner. With Cuomo's approval, some of them launched harshly critical, multimillion-dollar ad campaigns against de Blasio—an aggressive tactic so early in a new mayor's term. Then Cuomo teamed up with the Republicans in the State Senate to kill the tax proposal and pass stronger protections for the charter schools. "Our tax package is not an advocacy statement," Cuomo said, announcing his budget. "It's not a package that has been put together to provoke. It's a package that has been put together to pass." Still, in the end, the Governor, having marked his territory, set aside money for universal pre-K. It would prove to be both one of the Mayor's signature achievements and the catalyst for ongoing rancor that would wind up being costly for de Blasio, and for the city.

The half decade since has given New Yorkers a running serial of de Blasio-Cuomo pissing contests, some almost comically trivial (a spat over euthanizing a deer in Harlem) and some not funny at all (their posturing over the pitiable state of the housing projects under the jurisdiction of the New York City Housing Authority). In 2015, de Blasio complained about Cuomo, on NY1, "If someone disagrees with him openly, some kind of revenge or vendetta follows." The V-word, as it became known, seemed to trigger Cuomo, its Mafia associations suggesting an Italian-American slur, of a kind that his family had been on guard against for decades. Rumors that Mario's father-in-law might have had connections to organized crime were never substantiated. Bill Clinton had to apologize in 1992 for his remarks, captured on a secret recording by Gennifer Flowers, that Mario Cuomo often acted like a mafioso. Then there was Chris Cuomo last summer threatening to throw a heckler down the stairs of a Shelter Island bar after the man called him Fredo, referring to the weakling Corleone in "[The Godfather](#)," which, Chris said, was "like the N-word" to Italian-Americans. Andrew, the Michael in this formulation, has said that he has seen only parts of the film, and finds it offensive.

People have described the Cuomo-de Blasio shenanigans as a beef between two Italian-American men. But their backgrounds are vastly different. De Blasio, who is from Cambridge, Massachusetts, adopted his mother's surname. His father was a Wasp and a Yale graduate who lost a leg at Okinawa. He later abandoned the family and, stricken with lung cancer, killed himself. De Blasio molded himself into a hardworking Brooklyn man of the people. "It's sort of a false identity, like the shit-kicking version of George W. Bush, whereas Andrew is who he is," the former city official said.

It was never clear if de Blasio understood how much the V-word would anger Cuomo. To govern effectively, the Mayor, whatever his share of the popular vote and his opinion of himself, needed the Governor. Cuomo avoided even mentioning de Blasio's name. Moments of détente came and went. Distractions —among them a series of federal corruption investigations into both administrations—forced the combatants to guard other fronts. De Blasio had to contend with the convictions of two financial backers for bribery. Meanwhile, Joe Percoco, Cuomo's right-hand man (whom Cuomo had referred to as "my father's third son, who I sometimes think he loved the most"), was sentenced, two years ago, to six years in prison for accepting bribes, which he and his co-conspirators had referred to, in code borrowed from "The Sopranos," as "ziti." A separate probe led to the conviction of another Cuomo ally, Alain Kaloyeros, a former president of the State University of New York Polytechnic Institute, for rigging bids in Cuomo's troubled upstate development push known as the Buffalo Billion. Cuomo, like so many before him, had come to the governor's mansion with vows to clean up Albany—only to shut down the anti-corruption commission he'd appointed after it became inconvenient.

When de Blasio sought reëlection, Cuomo, unable to get anyone to run against him, had to defer to the logic, as one Democratic operative said, of "Shit, this guy's not going anywhere." The Mayor took his subsequent reëlection to be a refreshment of his mandate: the illogic of "Fuck this guy, I won."

They fell back into their designated roles: Cuomo the bully, de Blasio the bleeder. As one adviser put it, "The Mayor recognizes he can't win, that Andrew Cuomo is a shark, and that fighting with him doesn't help the city. He knows the Governor only respects political violence. But de Blasio is his own worst enemy."

Sometimes it's hard to decipher whether Cuomo is benefitting from luck or playing the long game. He allowed de Blasio to twist in the wind during the first significant crisis of his mayoralty, after [Eric Garner](#) was choked to death by a policeman, on Staten Island. A grand jury's failure to indict the officer led to protests, in the city and across the country, and then to the murder of two cops, by a man from out of town. During the protests, de Blasio, who had campaigned on police reform and who had curtailed the stop-and-frisk tactics of the previous regime, criticized the department and talked frankly about having spoken to his son, who is biracial, about the dangers of coming of age in a city where the cops routinely mistreat young Black men. Pat Lynch, the head of the Police

Benevolent Association, considering these remarks to be an attack on his members, accused de Blasio of having blood on his hands, and advised him not to attend officers' funerals. The Mayor showed up to the two cops' burials anyway, and hundreds of uniformed police turned their backs on him.

De Blasio had asked Cuomo for help in calming relations with the police unions, but the Governor demurred. (The Governor's aides deny this.) At the funeral, union leaders were seen huddling with members of Cuomo's staff. That year, Lynch's union (which recently endorsed Trump for President) named Cuomo its Man of the Year.

Soon after the death of George Floyd, and a night of looting, the police began roughing up peaceful protesters. On June 4th, Cuomo seemed unaware of all the video evidence of their tactics, and he not only defended the police but chided a reporter for asking about the incidents. "You see, it's that kind of incendiary rhetoric that is not a fact," he said. "It's not even an opinion. That is a hyper-partisan rhetorical attack." Later, perhaps having seen and been shocked by the videos and recognizing the irrefutability of the evidence, he condemned the police, while the Mayor, who needed the police on his side, stayed quiet. Five years on, the P.B.A.'s Man of the Year had outflanked the Mayor with blood on his hands.

"Why does Bill look like an idiot?" the former city official told me. "Because Bill always looks like an idiot. When shit flies around, it's gonna stick to him."

In mid-June, after a hundred and ten days, Cuomo ended his daily briefings. Deaths had dropped, from around a thousand a day to twenty-five. Hospitalizations were down more than ninety per cent. His approval rating for his handling of *COVID* was in the seventies. He took his place at the dais, flanked by his supporting characters, and removed his mask. Though he repeated many themes and phrases of the previous few weeks and months, his remarks had a valedictory heft that might have been keyed to a national audience. In the coming days, Cuomo still seemed to show up on TV every day, but now mostly as a talk-show guest. Clearly, it was hard to stay away.

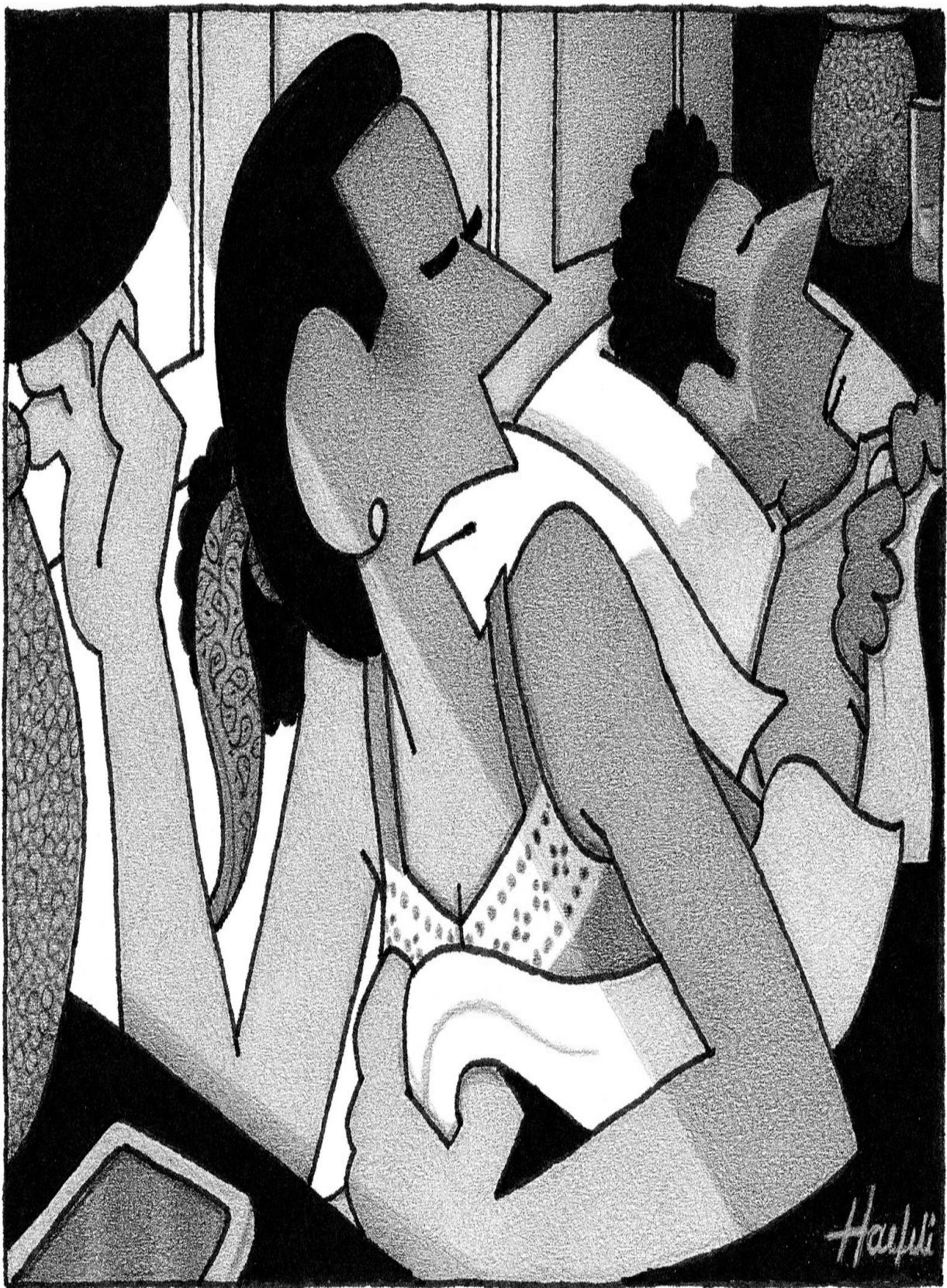
One night, he revived the Chris-and-the-Love-Gov act with his brother, who said, "I hope you are able to appreciate what you did in your state and what it means for the rest of the country now and what it will always mean to those who love and care about you the most," adding, "I'm wowed by what you did, and,

more importantly, I'm wowed by how you did it." The deployment of the past tense, this grammatical suggestion that the job was done, had sneaked into the Governor's speech as well. In terms of self-congratulation, it wasn't quite "Mission Accomplished" aboard the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, but this rearview mirroring of the pandemic—the surge and decline, the crisis and its containment—suggested a victory lap. Cuomo had started writing a book ("American Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic," which comes out this week). One day, near the end of June, he unveiled a foam sculpture of a mountain. Its contours matched the graph of the upward and downward death-rate slope he'd been displaying at his briefings. (The mountain was his long-running metaphor for the ordeal. "We don't want a mountain range," he'd kept saying.) People compared his mountain, painted Army green, to Jabba the Hutt or Richard Dreyfuss's towers of mud in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" or the miniature Stonehenge in "Spinal Tap."

A couple of weeks later, Cuomo produced another work of gubernatorial folk art, this one [a poster](#), an illustration composed of images and text in the style of political posters of the Gilded Age. It depicted a mountain—may we call it *the* mountain?—with various *COVID* milestones along the way. An image of a white-water torrent was labelled "Economy Falls." ("Get it?" Cuomo said, at the press conference. "Like Niagara Falls.") Beneath this was an image of flames ("New Rochelle Hot Spot") and one of a nose with a swab in it ("Testing, Tracing"), which brought to mind both the day the Governor, on camera, submitted to a *COVID* test and the ensuing bit, on CNN, with Chris, who, while joking about the size of his older brother's nose, brandished a makeshift swab the size of a toilet plunger. (If there were a Cuomo-bros poster, that big-nose gag would be the pinnacle: peak Cuomo.) In the poster, on the far side of the mountain, a young man dangled from a crag—"Boyfriend Cliff"—in such a way that it looked as if he'd been forced off the ledge by the Governor, depicted in his Pontiac GTO. Beneath the car, and above the words "111 Days of Hell," was a quote from A. J. Parkinson: "Tell the People the Truth and They Will Do the Right Thing."

The news had generally got so surreal—one day after another of things you didn't have on your 2020 bingo card—that sometimes one could lose sight of how odd Cuomo's performance was. At some point in April, he began attributing bits of wisdom to this fellow A. J. Parkinson. At first, just a few old Cuomo hands knew what was going on. Mario Cuomo had invented Parkinson almost forty years ago, as a vessel for manufactured adages. The elder Cuomo

possessed, to quote his aide Tim Russert, “the world’s only complete collection of Parkinson.” When reporters, trying to get in on the joke, unearthed some Parkinsonisms of their own, such as “When in doubt, mull” or “Let them eat polenta,” Mario chided them, “A. J. Parkinson never said those things.” (The latter remark he attributed to his mother, Immaculata, one of whose actual quotes he had, in turn, attributed to Aristotle.) Now Andrew was reviving the practice, and the ghost of A. J. Parkinson: another character in the multigenerational menagerie, here to see us through the plague.



*"Good night. Sleep quietly."*  
Cartoon by William Haefeli

With the victory lap, and some of the goofiness that surrounded it, came renewed scrutiny of Cuomo's pandemic performance. The most stinging critique had to do with the death rate in New York's nursing homes, which are privately operated but state regulated. The Cuomo administration had issued an advisory, on March 25th, that seniors who tested positive for the coronavirus or who reported symptoms couldn't be turned away from being readmitted to nursing homes from hospitals. The rationale, as Cuomo and his health commissioner, Howard Zucker, later tried to explain, was that they needed to make hospital beds available for the predicted surge in *COVID* cases—which never quite materialized. Nursing-home staff were to be allowed to keep working if they tested positive but were symptom-free. In the end, the virus passed through the nursing homes like "fire through dry grass," as Cuomo himself put it. By mid-June, more than six thousand elderly nursing-home residents had died, constituting about a quarter of the state's *COVID* fatalities. (This number includes both confirmed and probable deaths, but does not include residents who died in hospitals.)

Nursing-home operators complained of being overwhelmed and under-provisioned, of lacking adequate access to testing. (Cuomo's office blamed the shortage on the federal government.) Critics held that the health department had focussed on the hospital system and all but ignored the nursing homes. The Cuomo administration launched inspections of the nursing homes, which some took to be an attempt to silence them, under the perceived threat of the state's decertification power.

Cuomo pointed out repeatedly that, by the metric of nursing-home deaths as a percentage of all *COVID* deaths, New York State ranked among the lowest nationwide, and that the original advisory had been in accordance with guidelines from the C.D.C, which were intended to protect seniors from discrimination and keep medical staff on the job. If anyone had been negligent, he said, it was the federal government. "Blame Mr. Trump," he said.

But many Democrats who blamed Trump were capable of blaming Cuomo, too. When Zucker appeared before the Legislature, State Senator Gustavo Rivera, a Democrat and the chairman of the Senate Health Committee, said, "It seems, sir, that you are choosing the information so that you can look better."

In July, Cuomo's health department released a report saying that, according to Zucker's analysis of the data, the virus had infiltrated nursing homes well before the March 25th directive—that, therefore, it was the health workers, and not readmitted residents, who'd sparked the dry grass. But, by then, the sides in the debate had hardened, and Zucker was accused by the policy's critics of taking part in a political stunt, and of scapegoating health-care workers, to cover for his own department's supposed mistakes, as well as his boss's. Meanwhile, Cuomo, at his press conferences, dismissed questions about an independent nursing-home inquiry as being politically motivated, a crusade concocted by the *Post* and Fox News. But even Democrats in the Legislature were now pushing for an investigation. "I don't think the health-department report was adequate or thorough," Liz Krueger, a state senator from Manhattan, said.

Bill Hammond, a senior fellow for health policy at the Empire Center, in Albany (dismissed by the Governor's staff as a "shady right-wing think tank"), drawing on reporting in the *Wall Street Journal*, noted that a powerful industry group called the Greater New York Hospital Association had pushed for the nursing-home policy. The Association had also contributed a million dollars to the state Democratic Party in 2018, at Cuomo's request, and had lobbied the administration successfully for an increase in Medicaid reimbursements, at a time when the state was already running a multibillion-dollar deficit in its Medicaid payouts. "I get skeptical of quid-pro-quo narratives," Hammond told me. "This stuff is built into the system, and you can never prove there's a specific trade. But this one was so unusual, it felt like a specific swap."

He went on, "I'm also not in the #CuomoKilledGrandma school. But the nursing-home policy was awful, and the fact that Cuomo is unwilling to admit that it was a mistake is one of the worst things he's done." A spokesperson for the Governor said, "No contribution of any size has any influence on any government decision, period."

In August, [Attorney General William Barr](#) announced that the Department of Justice was launching an investigation into nursing-home cases in four states, all of them with Democratic governors. Cuomo again dismissed the inquiry as a political sham. "Mr. Barr cannot spell the word 'justice,'" he said. "He doesn't even feign to be impartial." Partisan hostilities could be either amplifying blunders into sins or disguising sins as blunders.

Early in the pandemic, Cuomo, who has known Trump for almost four decades,

tried the chummy approach, in appealing to the White House for supplies and aid. He knew very well that, with Trump, flattery gets you everywhere. But this time it didn't. And, as New York beat back its mortality rate, the Governor's needs shifted, from supplies to money—and from help to blame. For funds, he needed Congress. For blame, he had Trump.

The pandemic cratered New York's already fragile finances. Cuomo is now contending with a budget deficit, over two years, of thirty billion dollars. A state, unlike the U.S., can't just print money. It has to tax, cut, borrow, and beg. For months, Cuomo cajoled Congress for a rescue, on the ground that New York had borne the brunt of the federal government's failure to track the virus. "If we could sue for negligence, we would win in court," Cuomo told me. But the Republicans seemed determined to compound inaction with inaction. [Mitch McConnell](#), of Kentucky, the Senate Majority Leader, dismissed such support for local and state governments as "blue state bailouts" and suggested that they consider bankruptcy instead. Cuomo called this "one of the saddest, really dumb comments of all time," and noted, repeatedly, that Kentucky receives tens of billions more from Washington each year than it contributes, whereas New York gives tens of billions more. "That's the bailout!" he fumed. While such jawboning did nothing to alter the politics on Capitol Hill or shake loose badly needed funds, it was galvanizing, at least, for many blue staters, facing budgetary Armageddon and the quadrennial Electoral College handicap, to see someone shake a fist. For years, many Democrats had pined for a tough guy of their own. Cuomo has avoided talking specifics, so as not to negotiate against himself: "I don't think you can take any dramatic action until Election Day." If Trump wins and the Senate remains in G.O.P. hands, he told me, "that is a *long* four years, my friend. These deficits are so large that there is no constructive way to close them."

At home, Cuomo's emphasis on Washington's indifference deflected blame for prior budget mismanagement, and for the pain of the *Covid* closures. Restaurants, gyms, summer camps, schools: citizens chafed as their businesses and lives withered in quarantine. Cuomo, determined to keep the *Covid* numbers low, stayed strict. With reports of revellers congregating outside bars, Cuomo started going after liquor licenses, dusting off an old statute requiring bars to also serve food—real food, not just peanuts or chips. Who knew? The State Liquor Authority, with local law enforcement, began citing and, in hundreds of cases, shutting down bars. "The Drinktator," the *Post* called Cuomo. As for the schools, he declared that they could open, then left it up to the localities to figure out

how: aggregate the power, disperse the responsibility.

Without money from Washington, the pressure on Cuomo to raise taxes and make painful cuts was increasing. By now, he was accusing Trump of “actively trying to kill New York.” “I think it’s psychological,” he said. Trump not only “caused” the virus (“That’s a fact!” Cuomo said); he was also to blame for withholding previously earmarked funds for essential New York infrastructure projects, for having imposed the cap on federal deductions for local and state taxes, and for doing nothing to persuade the Senate to do right by the city that made him. Trump had even floated the ludicrous idea of cutting off federal money to Democratic cities, which he called “anarchist jurisdictions.”

“This is a war on cities,” Cuomo said. “It is an unsustainable position for the federal government. Either this President will figure it out or the next President will figure it out. If the Congress doesn’t figure it out, there’ll be mayhem in this country, and there will be a different Congress in January.” The next day, once again addressing the President’s hostility to his erstwhile home town, Cuomo said, “He can’t have enough bodyguards to walk through New York City. Forget bodyguards—he better have an army if he thinks he’s going to walk down the streets in New York.” This you could classify, perhaps, as both opinion and fact.

There has been talk, lately, of New York needing a savior, a hero from the political class. In early September, a coalition of a hundred and fifty business leaders sent a letter to de Blasio, accusing him, in a roundabout way, of neglect and begging him to fix things. Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, Related, Vornado, JetBlue: the power élite had observed that, as the letter said, “there is widespread anxiety over public safety, cleanliness and other quality of life issues that are contributing to deteriorating conditions in commercial districts and neighborhoods across the five boroughs.” The signatories, many of them supporters of Cuomo, had been rounded up by an ally, Kathryn Wylde, the president of the Partnership for New York City, who told the *Times*, “It’s all a chicken-and-egg problem. Until the people come back, the streets aren’t safe. If the streets aren’t safe, the people don’t come back. So somebody’s got to break the egg.”

The egg-breaking aspirants, past and present, made for a sad array. Cuomo’s predecessor, David Paterson, showed up at a bar in Hell’s Kitchen, to perform some covers on guitar accompanied by his teacher, whose flyers—“Dan Smith Will Teach You Guitar”—have for decades been ubiquitous all over town.

Another former governor, George Pataki, he who'd held the coat, said, on Fox News, “The Mayor is a catastrophe,” while Rudy Giuliani, he whose coat had been held, went on CNN to tell Chris Cuomo, referring to either the Governor or the Mayor, or both, “I think what they’re doing to this city could be fatal.” Giuliani’s son, Andrew, an aide to Trump, revealed that he was considering a run for City Hall. Anthony Weiner, the disgraced former mayoral hopeful, resurfaced as the new C.E.O. of a kitchen-countertop company specializing in the use of broken glass. If you listened closely, you could hear the sawing under the floor. Or maybe it was just the sound of New York, arguing with itself, as it went to pieces. ♦

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly described a provision that would raise the number of votes needed by a party to remain on ballots in New York.*

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## More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

# **Sketchbook**

- [News Cyclones: Breaking News Over Your Head](#)

October 19, 2020 Issue

# News Cyclones

By [Barry Blitt](#)

October 12, 2020

## **Staten Island Postcard**

- [New York City's Biggest Trump Fan Wants to Paint You an American Flag](#)

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

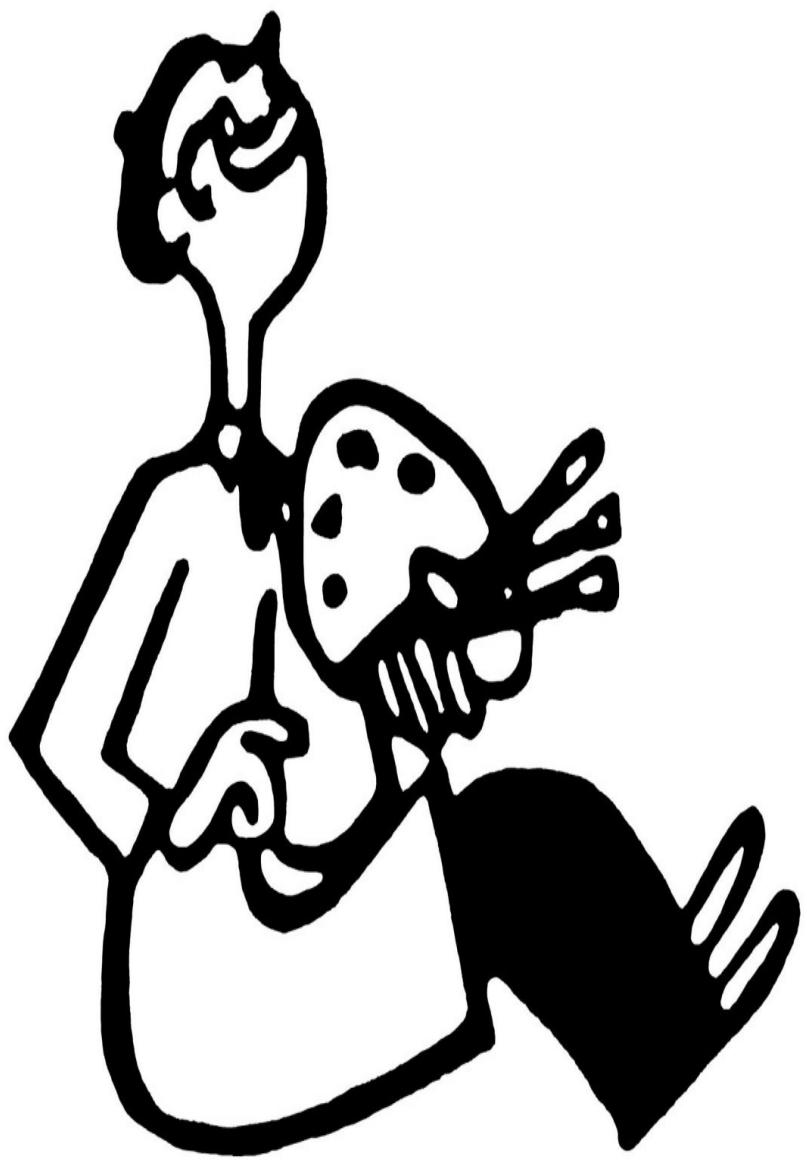
# New York City's Biggest Trump Fan Wants to Paint You an American Flag

Scott LoBaido, a Staten Island artist who has plastered thousands of buildings with renderings of the Stars and Stripes, has his eye on Bill de Blasio's job.

By [Ian Frazier](#)

October 12, 2020

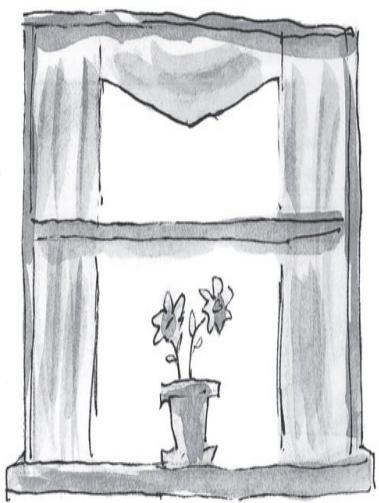
New Dorp Lane, on Staten Island, is nothing like a lane. Half of the borough, it seems, promenade along the thoroughfare by car or on foot, and of those passersby half (it seems) stopped by a storefront gallery one day recently to greet Staten Island's most famous artist, Scott LoBaido. The gallery occupies a space similar to the ones rented by small businesses—Italian, Chinese, and Mexican restaurants, a cell-phone-repair store, insurance brokers, bakeries, hair salons—up and down the street. Sometimes the artist takes a break at a table on the sidewalk. From a distance, a vertical view would include the table, covered with a white cloth; a Martini in a Martini glass (yellow dab of lemon peel); a pack of Marlboros; a brushed-chrome Zippo lighter; the seated artist, deliberately unshaved, dressed in a white T-shirt and a gray knit hoodie (unzipped; purchased at a Salvation Army store); the awning of the gallery, which says “American Artist, Scott LoBaido”; and, atop all that, on the roof, an unrelated billboard for a personal-injury law firm, with the words “Bite Back” in big letters and a picture of a snarling dog in a spiked collar.



LoBaido is perhaps the most visible supporter of Donald Trump in New York City, maybe on the entire East Coast. On the day that the President checked into the hospital with *Covid-19*, the artist sat at his table with an acquaintance who last saw him (and who wrote about him in these pages) in the aftermath of the 2016 election. A pedestrian wearing a Syracuse University sweatshirt gave LoBaido a thumbs-up and said, “This *Covid* business is only gonna help us.” The artist returned the thumbs-up and replied, “Trump will use it to his advantage, you watch. He’ll quarantine, take a few days, kick back, get a lot of work done, and come out swinging, like a bull in a fuckin’ rodeo!”

“I don’t want to interrupt, I just wanted to tell you that I love what you do,” a short dark-haired woman said, squeezing LoBaido’s shoulder and continuing on. He paints somewhat surrealist works on the themes of patriotism, religion, racial harmony, Nascar racing, and the American flag. He has driven all over the country in a Chevy Suburban painting American flags on buildings for free. In some of the most far-flung small places, you might come upon a LoBaido flag on the side of a grain elevator or a brick building on Main Street. He says that he has painted at least three flag murals in every one of the fifty states.

The acquaintance asked whether he paints Confederate flags. “No,” LoBaido answered immediately. He raised his Martini glass to salute a driver who was saluting him with a Dunkin’ Donuts cup through the open window of a pickup truck. “I can’t say I would never paint any particular thing,” he went on. “But a Confederate flag? No. I know some people say it’s not racist, it’s about Southern heritage. But I’ve never painted a Confederate flag. It’s nothing like the American flag. The American flag is the greatest work in the history of art, because it’s about everybody—Blacks, whites, every immigrant, every person who dreams about this country. It’s about me, it’s about you even though I know you don’t agree with me politically, and, most of all, it’s about freedom, the greatest discovery in the history of mankind. I’m the first person to paint the flag as a work of art.”



Ernesto

*"Ignore it. He barks at everything."*  
Cartoon by Edward Frascino

What about Jasper Johns? “Yes, of course Jasper Johns did that before me, and his flags are beautiful, don’t get me wrong,” LoBaido said. “But how many did he do? Maybe a few dozen, tops, not including prints? I have painted literally thousands of American flags.”

Praise kept arriving from passersby: for the photographs of his work that had been published that morning in the *Post*; for his painting depicting Trump as a boxer exulting over a flattened opponent labelled “Antifa”; for the blue line he painted down the middle of nearby Hylan Boulevard, in support of the police; and for the banner he recently hung from a bridge on the Staten Island Expressway showing Mayor Bill de Blasio holding the severed head of the Statue of Liberty by a spike of her crown. “Loved the de Blasio thing, Scott!” a man who pulled up in an S.U.V. covered with Trump signs said.

“I . . . could do a better *job* . . . of running this *city* . . . than *that fucking guy!*” LoBaido said, gesturing with his right hand like a Toscanini conducting his own conversation. Then he revealed that he plans to run for mayor in 2021. “No formal announcement yet,” LoBaido said. “But I’m definitely gonna do it.” His assistant, Annmarie, brought him a postcard, just received, with most of the words on it capitalized, saying that the sender admires everything LoBaido does and is with him all the way. ♦

## **Tables for Two**

- [Spicy Noodles and Gossip at Public Village](#)

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

# **Spicy Noodles and Gossip at Public Village**

The pandemic has quashed much of the theatre of dining out, but the new Sichuan restaurant, offering fresh noodles, spicy beef jerky, and a seat-yourself pavilion, finds ways to be charming.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

October 9, 2020



Some people deem gossip immoral, even destructive. I find it (within reason, of course) to be as stimulating and restorative as a bowl of spicy noodle soup. And so I was delighted to partake of both, recently, at Public Village, a new restaurant on the Lower East Side. After all, I was only following directions: the tagline of the place, as displayed on its Web site, is “Eat, drink and gossip like Sichuanese.” My lunch date and I—an old friend who happens to be a native of Sichuan Province—had a lot to catch up on.



*Stretchy sheets of noodle, made from a mix of rice, buckwheat, and potato flours, are wrapped around sliced chicken sausage, mozzarella cheese, cucumber, scallions, and sesame seeds, then coated in egg, griddled until crispy, and finished with a drizzle of spicy aioli. Photograph by Mengwen Cao for The New Yorker*

The best menu item for gossiping, we agreed, was the house-made beef jerky, dehydrated strips of eye of round coated in five-spice powder, sesame seeds, and crisp snips of dried chili, small enough to be popped into your mouth between juicy revelations and piquant enough to match the emotional rush with a physical one. My friend and I were the only people sitting in the wooden pavilion that the tiny restaurant installed on the street out front, but, had we been worried about eavesdroppers, or stricter social distancing, taking our jerky to go would have been a cinch: it comes in a vacuum-sealed packet. (Enjoy it with a cup of “Mom’s homestyle plum juice,” an intensely smoky brew that helps to “detox,” and cleanse your system if not your conscience.)



*A glass case just outside the front door displays flaky rainbow-patterned buns filled with purple taro paste. Photograph by Mengwen Cao for The New Yorker*

Other dishes require a bit more attention. Gesticulate wildly while pinching a smashed cucumber between your chopsticks and you might end up with a splatter of neon chili oil on your shirt; pack a plastic clamshell of crunchy lotus root in your tote bag too casually and you could later find a garlic-scented puddle pooling in the depths. Luckily, Public Village's cooking is worthy of quiet reverence and thoughtful contemplation.

Fat white mung-bean noodles, made from scratch on the premises, are buttery in texture, so light that they seem to dissolve on the tongue and yet beguilingly sturdy, standing up to a generous portion of unctuous and fiery sauce. Cubes of ruddy braised drunken beef, scented with cumin and star anise, come scattered, along with vibrant-green stems of Chinese broccoli, atop a tangle of thin wheat noodles dyed black with squid ink. A gentle mash of yellow split peas is folded, with crumbles of ground pork, into a mix of ribbony egg and spinach noodles; a Seussian puff of batter coating crispy pork strips, tingly with a dusting of Sichuan peppercorn, gives way to tender meat marbled with rendered fat.



*House-made spinach noodles are topped with the classic Chinese combo of stir-fried tomato and egg, plus scallions, sesame seeds, and Chinese broccoli. Photograph by Mengwen Cao for The New Yorker*

So much of the theatre of restaurant-going has been quashed by the pandemic, but Public Village, which had a soft opening in March, just before the shutdown, and then relaunched in May for takeout and delivery (the pavilion is seat-yourself), still manages to be charming. A sign out front instructs you to ring a bell and wait, beside a glass case displaying flaky rainbow-patterned pastries filled with purple taro paste, for an employee to emerge. You might catch a glimpse of the place's mascot of sorts—Kaya, an adorable corgi who belongs to Kiyomi Wang, the restaurant's chef and co-owner, who was born and raised in Chengdu. (The other owner, Karen Song, is from northeast China.)



*Public Village joins a group of restaurants just east of Chinatown that feel unmistakably of the moment yet indispensably timeless. Photograph by Mengwen Cao for The New Yorker*

Kaya the corgi is named for *kaya* the jam, a sweet coconut-and-egg concoction ubiquitous in Southeast Asia, where it's often spread thickly on toast. You can find *kaya* toast just around the corner at Kopitiam, a beloved Malaysian café co-owned by the chef Kyo Pang, to whom Wang is married. Like Kopitiam, Public Village fits seamlessly into the micro-neighborhood, a pocket of the Lower East Side just east of Chinatown that's sometimes called Dimes Square, after the endlessly mimicked California-style café Dimes. The area has become a gold mine of restaurants (including Cervo's, Scarr's Pizza, and Wu's Wonton King, all holding strong for now) that feel both indispensably timeless and unmistakably of the moment—not least because of their ability to adapt. (*Dishes \$6-\$15.*) ♦

# The Art World

- [Philip Guston and the Boundaries of Art Culture](#)

# **Philip Guston and the Boundaries of Art Culture**

The debate surrounding the postponement of a show containing depictions of Klansmen is indicative of a larger cultural crisis.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

October 12, 2020



Art people have been shocked by the postponement, possibly until 2024, of a major exhibition, “Philip Guston Now,” by the institutions that were scheduled to mount it: the National Gallery of Art, in Washington; the Tate Modern, in London; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. I shared the reaction until I thought about it. At issue are some darkly comic paintings by the great American artist which feature cartoonish Ku Klux Klan figures smoking cigars, tootling around in open cars, and generally making fools of themselves. The dark part consists of abject self-portraiture, the focus of works, including the Klan pictures, that dumbfounded the art world when first shown, in 1970. At fifty-seven, Guston had trashed his status as the most sensitive stylist of Abstract Expressionism and unclenched raucous pictorial confessions of fear and loathing. Stricken with such regrets as having, in 1935, disguised his identity as the son of impoverished Jewish immigrants (his father hanged himself in 1923) by changing his name from Goldstein, he presented himself as a sad sack beset by bad habits and bad thoughts.

The subject matter is self-lacerating, albeit antic. The form stuns with visceral color, prehensile line, and the most insinuative brushwork of any modern painter, all indirectly nourished by Guston’s passionate reverence for Renaissance masters. He as much as announced that he had nothing going for him except a way with a brush, which he then exalted from a subbasement of the soul. Long resisted by many—I was slow to come around myself, having venerated his abstractions—the body of work has outlasted, in authenticity and quality, that of every other American painter since. As an inspiration and a challenge, he companions innumerable young painters everywhere, to this day. (He died, of a heart attack, in 1980.) A celebration by leading institutions is entirely in order. As for the Klansmen, they first appeared briefly, as murderous lynchers, in works that Guston, a lifelong leftist, made in the thirties. Do they lurk, repressed, in his abstractions? This would help to explain the mysterious tension in some of even his most elegant Abstract Expressionism, before they resurfaced as psychological cats out of bags.

But . . . the white hoods, icons of evil at the pitch of swastikas. Guston’s Klansmen are the first—and likely the last—things that most people will notice in the paintings at a time when it can seem that no symbol is safe from being politicized, let alone one already steeped in politics. What public reception to Klan imagery in a show of a white artist can the museums have expected? (A revolt against it began with staff members at the National Gallery.) Always risky,

perhaps, the unintended but inevitably incendiary provocation belongs to a pre-2020 age of educated innocence. Does it now reveal the boundary of an art culture that is maintained by and for members of an élite so confident of virtue—putatively independent of race and class, democratically self-selected, oozing benignity—as to be unconscious of existing as such? Suddenly silhouetted, the faction is made up of a scant minority of citizens who take an active interest in art and espouse cosmopolitan values—the culturally privileged, whom museums represent and serve while, these days, laudably trying to extend their appeal to neglected audiences.

The National Gallery's director, Kaywin Feldman, has said that the postponement—note, not the cancellation—responds to “a tough time in America.” That’s putting things mildly. The Guston affair is a symptom of a society-wide deterioration of trust in institutions and tolerance for uncongenial expression. Harsh light falls on long-tacit norms. Consider the fact, cited by Feldman as a decisive concern of the museum, that the curators of the show, with its racially charged content, are all white. A time-out to recontextualize does not, contrary to the thrust of an art-world open letter protesting the postponement, first published by the *Brooklyn Rail* and then quoted in the *Times*, constitute cowardice at a national institution. (Feldman now says that the show is likely to open sooner than was initially announced.)

In a small way, the controversy exemplifies divisions that are splintering the United States: votes of no confidence in the good will of contending interests. (Signatories to the letter include Black artists and intellectuals, as the conflict is widely cultural, not narrowly demographic.) Any difference may breed enmity. In our Partisan States of America, we watch our words—or, perversely, don’t—for fear of, or with ardent intent of, offending. Offense doesn’t spur debate; it replaces it. With apologies for amateur punditry, I doubt that this will stop after the Presidential election even if the conciliatory-minded Biden wins, with liberal unity against Trump fragmenting and rightists incubating ungodly new species of insurrection.

Welcome to an argument with myself, as I risk the appearance of wielding cancel culture against my lifelong allies in the cause of art. Regarding Guston’s Klansmen, I’m ambushed by imagining the intractable opposition of people who neither find humor nor seek subtlety in racist symbology. Guston’s subject is moral anguish, which, I suspect, increasingly amounts to a thorny luxury for old-fashioned and atomized liberals like me. Am I underrating the comprehension of

viewers new to Guston? Do I condescend? I can't rule it out. But what worries me is the assumption by art-world peers of mine that artistic license is an unexceptionable principle, rather than a persuasion of fortune-favored, cultivated liberal sentiment and taste. If I sound populist here, it's because I'm the kind of liberal who is perhaps oversensitive to the feelings of all constituencies. Having, in thought, stepped outside my cohort, I can't with honesty jump back in, however pained I may be that I won't get to see an assuredly wonderful show in the coming months. I remain preoccupied by the sense of a crisis that spills beyond the misapprehension of a should-be canonical artist. The trouble resonates backward as well as forward in time. Indeed, it is endemic to democracy, a seething of differences that now and then boils over.

The cosmopolitan cast of modern art culture has a history. Until almost the middle of the twentieth century, in the United States, it could be popularly associated with urban clusters of bohemian mavericks and eccentric patrons, arguably besieged by yahoos. (From a provincial distance, that myth retained just enough zing in 1962 to make me drop out of college and drive non-stop from Minnesota to New York. Well, first to a job in Jersey City.) The glamorization of modernism owed much to the aura of Allied triumph in the Second World War, which established so many other parameters of national amity that have lately, and rapidly, been crumbling. Pioneering institutions and, this being America, the charisma of inrushing wealth closed the deal, giving pause even to yahoos. (You might think that a Jackson Pollock was something your kid could do, and that Andy Warhol's fame was an emperor's-new-clothes con, but you became less apt to say so in unfamiliar company.) Aggressive innovation remained a punching bag for conservatives, but arguing back was hardly worth the breath. Cosmopolis won, to its own satisfaction and the apathetic disregard of folk at large. After the sensations of Pop art and the jolts of Minimalism, in the sixties, avant-gardist rebellion turned inward with the esoterica of conceptual art and, later, with applications of critical theory, but they served only to shrink rather than to redraw the public profile of new art. A glaring precedent for the Guston affair came about with malice aforethought in 1989, when institutional displays of Robert Mapplethorpe's (excellent) homoerotic photographs and Andres Serrano's (puerile) "Piss Christ" set Senator Jesse Helms, of North Carolina, on a spectacular moralistic crusade. The art world soon recovered its obscurity, except for odd blips, until, as emblematised by the trophy aesthetics of Jeff Koons, its values were transmogrified into the news-making prices paid by a speculative international oligarchy of the ultra-rich.

Art goes on. Art that is transgressive will recur. But it will do so nakedly for anyone who chooses to characterize it, not only for those initiates who congratulate one another on their shared investment in standards of truth, beauty, and good conscience. Cold winds are blowing from the future onto aspirations to provide society, or even segments of society, with a capacity to bridge differences with mutual respect. I've often reflected that uses of "we" in critical writing are unavoidably presumptuous, though they are rhetorically meant only to invite, or perhaps to seduce, agreement. I've never felt less confidence in the pronoun, at a time of alienations that recall what W. B. Yeats perceived in another pandemic year, 1919: "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." ♦

## The Theatre

- [David Byrne's “American Utopia” Comes to Television](#)

[October 19, 2020 Issue](#)

## **David Byrne’s “American Utopia” Comes to Television**

Part concert, part vision quest, the Broadway show, filmed by Spike Lee and featuring a roving twelve-piece band, all in matching silver suits and bare feet, airs on Oct. 17.

October 9, 2020



*Photograph by Ethan James Green for The New Yorker*

At the start of David Byrne's peculiar, exuberant "**American Utopia**," which played on Broadway last season, the former Talking Heads front man contemplates a model of a human brain. Part concert, part vision quest, the show is also a chance to contemplate Byrne's own brain—a unique specimen—as he expounds on philosophy, belts out many of his hits, and marches through the aisles with a roving twelve-piece band, all in matching silver suits and bare feet. A filmed version, directed by Spike Lee, comes to HBO on Oct. 17.

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