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VIVA

# The New Yorker Magazine

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## [Goings On](#)

# The Pop Heartthrob Nick Jonas on Broadway

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By [Helen Shaw](#), [Dan Stahl](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Marina Harss](#), [Michael Schulman](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Jane Bua](#), and [Jennifer Wilson](#)

April 11, 2025

[You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. \*\*Sign up to receive it in your inbox.\*\*](#)

**Our theatrical spring** continues to be a bright one, with a bounty of audacious, boundary-breaking work emerging Off Broadway in the coming weeks. At the Atlantic Theatre Company, Mona Pirnot’s tribute to the downtown theatre scene, **“I’m Assuming You Know David Greenspan,”** is at Atlantic Stage 2, through April 30, and Eliya Smith’s kid-bereavement drama, **“Grief Camp,”** will be on the mainstage, through May 11. These were two of the season’s most anticipated productions, whose runs earlier this season were cut short by a strike, so it’s a double relief—yay unions! yay shows!—to have them back.



Whitney White in “Macbeth in Stride.” Photograph by Lauren Miller

New York has also stumbled into an unplanned micro-season of the experimental genius Caryl Churchill. A quartet of her short works, **“Glass. Kill. What If If Only. Imp.,”** comes to the Public (through May 11), with the divine Deirdre O’Connell in the cast, and the living-room–size Torn Page salon hosts a chamber evening of two other Churchill miniatures: a film inspired by **“Escaped Alone”** and a live performance of her radio play **“Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen”** (through April 20). The truly adventurous might look for a piece by the *next* Churchill at the weeks-long **?!: New Works** festival (“?!” is pronounced “interrobang”), at the Brick, in Williamsburg, where each night features a different lineup of mind-bending mischief.

And, while Whitney White is best known for her work as a director—she was nominated for a Tony last year, for “Jaja’s African Hair Braiding,” and just opened the musical “The Last Five Years” on Broadway—she is also an indie-soul musician starring in her own song cycle, **“Macbeth in Stride,”** directed by Tyler Dobrowsky and Taibi Magar, at *BAM*’s Harvey Theatre (April 15-27). White plays the front woman of a band who talks to the audience about Black female ambition, and, simultaneously, she’s Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, impatient for power and ready to dispense with the milk of human kindness. Usually, I’d say she was heading for tragedy, but it seems promising that this Lady M has all three witches singing backup.—*Helen Shaw*



## About Town

### Off Broadway

**“The Swamp Dwellers,”** written in 1958 by a twenty-four-year-old Wole Soyinka, is set in a village hut in the Niger Delta shrouded in mist (via Jason Ardizzone-West’s astonishing set design). Makuri (Leon Addison Brown) and Alu (a tempestuous Jenny Jules) await the return of their son Igwezu (Ato Blankson-Wood), who’s been in “the city” for several months.

A knock finally comes, but it's a blind vagrant from the Islamic north (Joshua Echebiri, transfixingly strange); then a pompous local priest (Chiké Okonkwo) rolls up. The play becomes a delta itself, where tributary identities—Muslim, Yoruba, traditional, modern—mingle and, when the priest's hypocrisy is exposed, surge toward confrontation. Directed with unhurried assurance by Awoye Timpo.—*Dan Stahl (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; through April 20.)*

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## Folk

**Ani DiFranco** is a folk musician who refuses to go quietly. The genre often lends itself to hushed, inward-looking tranquillity, but DiFranco chooses to aim her piercing gaze outward at our patriarchal society. That pointed perspective, honed since the late nineties, has grown in tandem with an edgy songcraft that has shifted to include jazz and indie rock. Her songs are more proactive than cynical, open to collective action's transformative power to shake the table. The album she released in May, "Unprecedented Sh!t," is among her most biting and dynamic, making full use of her gloriously snarky voice. "How the hell can anyone listen when you forget to speak?" she sings, a reminder to never let tyrants have the last word.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Steel; April 18.)*

**For more:** read Matt Dellinger on when [DiFranco toured with Greg Brown](#), twenty-five years ago.

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## Ballet



*Preston Chamblee and Sara Mearns in "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Photograph by Erin Baiano*

After a somewhat sleepy winter run, **New York City Ballet** packs a lot into its six-week spring season. The company offers a full evening of ballets set to the highly perfumed music of Ravel, including a rarity: Jerome Robbins's "In G Major," a summer-themed romp costumed in Erté bathing suits. "Belles Lettres," an early ballet by the phenom Justin Peck, reveals Peck's ability to tease out the textures and layers in classical music—in this case, César Franck's Piano Sextet. Alexei Ratmanský's "Solitude," a searing meditation on war, death, and the surreality of loss, returns. The season closes with a week of performances of George Balanchine's "Midsummer Night's Dream," a tale of quarrelsome fairies and foolish humans who cross paths in the forest.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre, April 22-June 1.)*

**For more:** read Jennifer Homans on how [Justin Peck found his feet](#).

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## Broadway

Jason Robert Brown debuted "**The Last Five Years**," his two-character musical autopsy of a marriage, in 2001, when Nick Jonas was a child actor. Now Jonas returns to the stage, a conquering pop heartthrob, in the show's first Broadway outing, directed by Whitney White. The story of Jamie (Jonas), a successful writer, and Cathy (Adrienne Warren), an unsuccessful actress, unfurls in crisscrossing time lines: his goes from the relationship's blooming beginnings to its bitter end; hers starts in the wreckage and winds backward. (They meet in the middle, on their wedding day.) The chronology-bending structure gives the show a bittersweet poignancy, with each moment tainted by its inverse. Warren overpowers Jonas vocally, but Jonas—who wears glasses to indicate that he's an Upper West Side nebbish—does fine when he's not dropping Yiddishisms. Oy!—*Michael Schulman (Hudson; through June 22.)*

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## Movies



Takeshi Kitano, Tadanobu Asano, and Nao Omori in “Broken Rage.” Photograph © Amazon MGM Studios / Courtesy Everett

The veteran actor and director Takeshi Kitano’s startlingly inventive new feature, “**Broken Rage**,” is a conceptual gem realized with effervescent flair. In its brisk sixty-six minutes, Kitano unfolds a tale, in which he also stars, of an elderly hit man called Mr. Mouse—rather, he tells the same story twice, first as drama, then as farce. The tight-lipped, sharp-eyed Mr. Mouse receives his instructions at a local café and proceeds slowly and methodically, in a series of coolly controlled rituals. But when he slips up, the police take advantage and force him to infiltrate a drug ring. The comedic version, reducing his meticulous plans to antic ruins, turns the choreographed grimness into exquisite physical comedy and summons bitter irony regarding the hard-won wisdom of experience and the pathos of old age.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon Prime Video.)*

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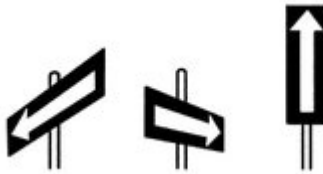
## Classical

Rudersdal, Denmark, situated beside Copenhagen and along the open coast, exists in a perpetual tug-of-war between the rustic and the modern. The classical ensemble that bears the town’s name, the **Rudersdal Chamber Players**, boasts a similar coalescence of time and character, with repertoire spanning olden mononyms like Mozart to lesser-known, forwarding-looking contemporary composers. As part of Symphony Space’s Cutting Edge Concerts New Music Festival, the ensemble presents Victoria Bond’s “Other Selves” piano trio, as well as three premières: the U.S. première of Elena Firsova’s “Four Seasons”; the world première of Andrew Waggoner’s



“Matter, Circle, Heart”; and the East Coast première of Poul Ruders’s Piano Quartet.—*Jane Bua (Symphony Space; April 16.)*

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## Pick Three

*Jennifer Wilson on a new crop of murder mysteries.*

1. The year is 1557. The setting: the Basilica di San Lorenzo, in Florence. The victim: the painter Jacopo da Pontormo, found stabbed in the heart with a chisel. Sold. In “[Perspective\(s\)](#),” the French writer Laurent Binet appoints the medieval art critic Giorgio Vasari as the detective on the case. Michelangelo suspects suicide, since “what could be more agonizing than painting a fresco?” This gossipy, epistolary novel is as full of epic characters as the Sistine Chapel ceiling: naughty Médicis, wine-drunk nuns, proto-Marxist painter’s assistants. This was sinfully fun to read.

2. The Argentinean novelist Antonio di Benedetto is famous for not being famous. His star did not rise during the Latin American Boom of the sixties and seventies, alongside Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez. That is changing with new English translations of his novels. In the slim, Kafkaesque tale “[The Suicides](#),” a journalist balancing his own self-destructive tendencies—womanizing, reading Nietzsche—covers a mysterious string of suicides.



*Illustration by Gosia Herba*

3. Everywhere you turn, men are on podcasts complaining that they feel castrated by the women in their lives. In “[Death Takes Me](#),” they actually are. The Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza’s latest exploration of gendered violence features a creative-writing professor who stumbles across the body of a man whose penis has been mutilated. On a nearby brick wall, scrawled in nail polish, are lines from a poem: “Beware of me, my love.” A page-turner for the ages, but especially ours.

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**P.S. Good stuff on the internet:**

- [Is heterosexuality a construct?](#)
- [The coyote next door](#)
- [Servers’ skincare routines](#)



[Helen Shaw](#) joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.

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[Marina Harss](#) has been contributing dance coverage to *The New Yorker* since 2004. She is the author of "[The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky's Life in Ballet](#)."



[Michael Schulman](#), a staff writer, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2006. He is the author of “[Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat, and Tears](#)” and “[Her Again: Becoming Meryl Streep](#).”



[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of “[Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard](#).”  
[Jane Bua](#) is a member of *The New Yorker*’s editorial staff.



*[Jennifer Wilson](#) is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering books and culture. In 2024, she received a Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism.*

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## [The Food Scene](#)

# Crevette Makes Great Seafood Look Easy

*A new restaurant from the team behind Dame and Lord's doesn't so much enter the seafood conversation as elegantly commandeer it.*

By [Helen Rosner](#)

March 30, 2025



*Crevette's dining room bears the off-pastel accents of a ritzy beach club, and the menu channels assorted European coastlines. Photographs by Scott Semler for The New Yorker*

[You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)

One of the more pleasing trends these days in New York dining is the casually perfectionistic seafood restaurant. There's [Penny](#), exuding a marble-wrapped friendliness; [Quique Crudo](#), in the West Village, teensy and glimmering; [Strange Delight](#), bringing a Cajun playfulness to Brooklyn's Fort Greene; and the excellent and often wonderfully weird Smithereens, in the East Village. I suppose, yes, on a certain level, a chilled shrimp is a chilled shrimp, but there's novelty, even thrill, to be found in the details: the size and shape and arrangement, the specifics of the saucing, the hint of bay leaf or juniper from the court bouillon. At Crevette, a new spot in the West Village, the chilled shrimp are pink and sweet and slightly coquettish, served with a gracious aioli and bowl of minced Calabrian chile that nods to cocktail sauce but skews more Mediterranean,

more feminine, more knowing. The restaurant doesn't so much enter the seafood conversation as elegantly commandeer it. Crevette is yet another spot to get squid and beans, but, oh, what squid and beans they are!

Crevette is the third restaurant from Patricia Howard and the London-born chef Ed Szymanski, whose previous ventures, Dame and Lord's, established them as the kind of restaurateurs who can transform straightforward briefs (English fish and chips; English gastropub fare) into something at once rigorously referential and creatively their own. At Crevette, they've turned their gaze beyond Britain to assorted nearby coastlines: that thrilling swoop at the southeastern corner of the Bay of Biscay that runs from San Sebastián up to Biarritz, the lush sweep of the Cote d'Azur, the sunny arc of the Ligurian Sea. (*Crevette* is how you say "shrimp" *en français*.) The space, which was previously home to the gently appalling chrome-and-leather influencer magnet Holiday Bar, has been evocatively re-outfitted in creamy whites, honey-toned wood, and the off-pastel tones of a ritzy beach club—sherbet yellow, seashell pink, melon orange, cerulean blue. A tucked-away, slightly elevated bar area seems to exist primarily for eating rather than drinking (and provides one of the neighborhood's loveliest perches for a solo dinner); scalloped banquettes feel intimate and a little sexy. The effect is that of a restaurant that doesn't so much thematically re-create a regional aesthetic as capture an ambient sensibility, a certain quality of light.

As with the chilled shrimp, the food follows a principle of easygoing elegance. A puck of Spanish tortilla is a textural feat, with tender bits of potato suspended in a vividly yellow matrix of egg that's still slightly soft at its center; a snowcap of sweet peekytoe crab dressed in a richly saline seaweed butter adds silk on top of silk. Seafood rice with saffron, razor clams, and lobster sits somewhere in the genetic lineage of paella and related *arroz con cosas*, each grain plump and springy, slick with aromatic fats, harmonizing with the quiet assertiveness of the shellfish. The airy, crispy fritto misto, like the fish and chips at Dame, proves that Szymanski is one of the city's foremost practitioners of the sacred art of deep-frying.

The *petit aioli* (a winking little riff on the Provençal *grand aioli*) is a controlled study in abundance. A bowl of the eponymous garlicky sauce, tinted rich yellow with egg yolks and golden olive oil, is surrounded by a

seasonally changing lineup of vegetables that included, on my visits, a salade Niçoise-ish array of multicolored carrots, tender tiny potatoes, baby artichoke hearts, and two varieties of radicchio. The composition is completed by a halved soft-boiled egg, each face draped with a cured anchovy, and a pair of panko-crusted fried skate cheeks, whose texture suggests something between scallop and halibut—a slight sweetness, a tender give. I was struck by the attention to detail: the carrots are par-cooked, for ease of chomping; the chicories delicately salted leaf by leaf. It's the sort of dish that makes a person lament that Crevette is open only for dinner; paired with a diminutive Martini (the Montgomery, scented with orange bitters, is a wee two-and-a-half ounces and served in a chic little bistro-style water glass), the *petit aioli* would make the perfect solo lunch for the sort of afternoon when you want to feel like a character in a novel in translation, languidly alone, with nowhere particular to be. There's a note-perfect bouillabaisse, that storied fisherman's stew that began as a utilitarian way to use up the unsellable bycatch before evolving into one of the world's great soups. Crevette's version is rapturous: a russet-colored broth, perfumed with saffron and fennel, in which swim tender hunks of John Dory, monkfish, black bass, and red mullet. Stir in the rouille—a saffron-kissed mayonnaise—to enrich the already opulent broth, and let the croutons soften until they're suspended somewhere between crispiness and collapse.

Not everything at Crevette is effortless perfection. The Dover sole, a pricey fish that seems to be experiencing a renaissance in New York's more high-end dining rooms, arrives traditionally dressed in capers and béarnaise, the body de-finned and de-tailed, but otherwise intact. A server gave a brief set of verbal instructions for D.I.Y. filleting, and then disappeared, leaving us to it. Dover sole is one of the easier fish to take apart, but the task nevertheless requires both skill and confidence, of which I have only the latter; luckily, I was dining with a friend in possession of both, but his dexterous manipulations somewhat anticlimactically revealed an underdone interior. I wonder if the restaurant might be better served doing the knife work themselves, offstage; then again, the pared-down presentation would feel at odds with the restaurant's whole vibe of gentleman-fisherman exuberance. But that's a minor quibble about a kitchen that otherwise exudes competence. The seafood-averse would be remiss to overlook the chicken, a



handsome presentation of a deboned half bird rubbed with spices that give the skin a dark, burnished oxblood hue. Each slice is topped with a dollop of bright green persillade, vibrant with parsley; the meat rests atop a pool of jus so deep and sticky it flirts with demiglace. It arrives with a side plate of ultra-skinny *frites* that were thrown into the fryer along with a handful of green herbs, a crunchy tangle purpose-made for mopping up the sauce. It's one of the better birds in town, hiding in plain sight at a seafood restaurant.

In its playful sophistication and unapologetic refinement, Crevette speaks to yet another trend in New York dining: it is a restaurant for grownups—prioritizing subtlety over flash, thoughtfulness over grandstanding. There's no TikTok-bait visual spectacle, no straining for virality—just focussed, attractive expertise. And, as the weather warms, I suspect Crevette will only grow more appealing. Soon enough, your Instagram feed will begin its annual transformation into a carousel of other people's European vacations—friends you haven't spoken to since college suddenly posting sun-drenched photos from terrace restaurants in Positano, colleagues somehow enjoying three-hour lunches in Provence despite ostensibly having the same amount of P.T.O. as you. At some point between Memorial Day and Labor Day, you'll find yourself hunched over your phone in your un-air-conditioned apartment, scrolling through yet another story of someone's "little boat day in Sicily," and that's when Crevette's particular charms will feel most urgent. A sidewalk table, an afternoon spent lingering over a glass of pastis or a strikingly lovely (and non-alcoholic) saffron-white Negroni—it'll almost be enough to make you forget that you're stuck in boring old New York.

### **Helen, Help Me!**

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

Perhaps the most illuminating item on Crevette's menu is the Sicilian sashimi: a plate of expertly sliced raw fish (on my visits, the lineup was yellowfin tuna, scallop, ocean trout, and hamachi) dressed with good olive oil, flaky sea salt, capers, and finely minced red onion and chives, and served with a wedge of lemon—a crucial final ingredient. It's the sort of dish that's almost embarrassingly simple, something you could absolutely

make yourself at home, with access to a good fishmonger and a decent knife. And yet. That same assembly consumed at your kitchen counter, with your browning bananas in the fruit bowl and your laptop open on the couch, simply cannot compete. The preparation is transformed not by some arcane technique or secret ingredient but by the wizardry of context—the way it arrives after those chilled mussels with their punchy *salsa brava*, in a room of airy ceilings and candlelight and the starfield of street lamps and brake lights filtering through those massive windows, served on a perfectly chilled plate by—and this is the most important part—*someone who isn't you*. As with all the best restaurant meals, you're not paying for the recipe; you're paying for the spell it casts when consumed in this particular space, at this particular remove from home. Is that worth the markup? In the cold light of your apartment, perhaps not. But within Crevette's carefully crafted universe, absolutely. ♦



[Helen Rosner](#), a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, [The Food Scene](#).

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# The Talk of the Town

- **[What the World Learned from Donald Trump's Tariff Week](#)**

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells | The danger behind the President's posturing is that, by so emphatically insisting on America's indispensability, he may be undermining it.

- **[Living Through the Market Crash? Ask a Centenarian](#)**

By Charles Bethea | Charlie Duncan, a hundred-and-five-year-old Georgia resident, recalls the mood in 1929.

- **[R. Crumb Looks Back](#)**

By Bruce Handy | The underground-comic artist visits the Whitney with his biographer, Dan Nadel, and considers some old friends: his own psychedelic skulls, placemat sketches, and muscly women.

- **[Michael Gandolfini Worries About Brawn and Bravado](#)**

By Alexandra Schwartz | To prepare for his role on the TV show "Daredevil: Born Again," the son of Tony Soprano gave Staten Island a try.

- **[David Byrne Takes the Stairs](#)**

By Sarah Larson | The Talking Heads front man brought his acrylic markers to the Pace gallery recently to make some art—dancing ovals, a glamorous blob—on the stairwell walls.

[Comment](#)

# What the World Learned from Donald Trump's Tariff Week

The danger behind the President's posturing is that, by so emphatically insisting on America's indispensability, he may be undermining it.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)

April 12, 2025



*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs (left to right) by Arne Dedert / Getty; Daniel Ceng / Getty; Win McNamee / Getty; Truman Moore / Getty*

Just after 1 *p.m.* this past Wednesday, [President Trump](#) posted a statement on Truth Social saying that he was pausing, for ninety days, the historically steep, economically nonsensical [Liberation Day tariffs](#) on virtually the entire world, which he had announced the week before. Retreat was inevitable. The tariffs had been so hastily designed that they imposed duties of ten per cent on Antarctic islands inhabited by only seals and penguins, and placed a duty of nearly fifty per cent on Cambodia, a producer of cheap textiles that is too poor to plausibly buy much of what we produce. The

markets predictably plunged, wiping out more than six trillion dollars in value; Jamie Dimon, the chief executive of JPMorgan Chase, said that the “likely outcome” would be a recession; and a sell-off of government bonds raised the ominous possibility that the U.S. Treasury market would no longer be the world’s reserve of choice. The labor economist Arindrajit Dube wrote, “Never in human history has a whimsical decision by a single person destroyed so much wealth.”

The markets, the President allowed, had become “a little bit yippy.” But Trump never really retreats; he repositions. In his Wednesday post (“Thank you for your attention to this matter!” he closed), he revealed that he would be leaving in place ten-per-cent duties on most countries and immediately escalating a trade war with China, imposing tariffs of nearly a hundred and fifty per cent. The stock market rebounded rapidly on Wednesday, when most of the more inane tariffs were rescinded, and then fell again on Thursday, when the reality of the conflict with China set in. Had the President actually pulled back at all?

Jason Furman, who’d chaired [President Obama](#)’s Council of Economic Advisers, wrote on social media, “I don’t think people realize that in important respects tariffs are now higher & more inflationary than what was announced” on Liberation Day—even the “reduced” tariffs are now far higher than those levied by any other large nation. So the President’s new approach may not be the end of a self-induced destabilizing and hugely risky period in global economics but the beginning of one.

Trump’s efforts to make a bold adjustment in the relationships that govern the economic world have some financial analysts asking why. Viktor Shvets, a global-market strategist at Macquarie Capital, said, on Bloomberg’s “Odd Lots” podcast, “I keep asking myself, ‘What is this Administration trying to do?’ ” Was the objective to reindustrialize the United States, or to raise revenue to help pay for tax cuts to the rich, or to change the global flow of funds? “My answer consistently is, they want to remake America,” Shvets said. “But you can’t remake America unless you remake the world at the same time. So it’s a revolutionary movement.”

As Shvets went on to hint, the second Trump Administration is taking shape as a through-the-looking-glass Team of Rivals. It comprises big

personalities (Trump, Elon Musk, J. D. Vance) with incongruous views of what America's role in the world should be—a rift highlighted this past week, when Musk publicly denounced the Trump trade adviser and tariff architect Peter Navarro as “dumber than a sack of bricks.” But, even if the advisers have different objectives, they seem to share a sincere repugnance for the universalism of the liberal world order and a desire to reimagine it radically—to weaken its universities, to abridge the global movement of people and goods, to retreat into a fortress of self-interest.

If the Trump Administration could pivot so easily from a punitive tariff system aimed at practically everyone to one that summoned a sudden trade war with China (which quickly imposed retaliatory tariffs), perhaps that's because the details of the policy change mattered less to the White House than its scale—that it represents a dramatic break from the old system. On Tuesday, as the markets were plunging, Trump told the National Republican Congressional Committee, “They've ripped us off left and right, but now it's our turn to do the ripping.”

That remark presumes a brute power—an ability to apply transformative torque—that the U.S. may not have for much longer. The week of the Liberation Day tariffs operated as a test of how the markets would react and how the real economy would reset, and it provided some results. We now know that investors don't trust Trump to reinvent the trade system, and neither do many people in his own party: in a hearing this past week, Senator Thom Tillis, of North Carolina, asked the U.S. Trade Representative, Jamieson Greer, “Whose throat do I get to choke if this proves to be wrong?”

The White House's theory seems to be that high tariffs will eventually incentivize manufacturers to relocate, say, auto plants and aluminum smelters to the U.S. But businesses need stability to make the kinds of major capital investments that building new factories in this country requires, not a climate defined by ninety-day pauses and abrupt reversals. Even amid tariffs, the *Times* found little appetite for re-shoring among companies: “Staying in China and making China work is everyone's strategy right now,” a U.S. entrepreneur said. Meanwhile, China and the [European Union](#) are exploring their own trade relations. The danger behind

Trump's posturing is that, by so emphatically insisting on America's indispensability, he may be undermining it. (On Friday, *Axios* reported, "The world's hot new trade is 'sell America.' ") Currently, some ten per cent of global trade flows through the U.S., but, if nations continue to look for other trading partners, how much of that will be lost?

Beijing, for its part, is preparing for a trade war. According to the *Financial Times*, Chinese state and commercial institutions have organized a "national team" to fight the tariffs, coordinating investments in Chinese companies to offset trade losses. And, though Trump has spent a decade inveighing against the effects of China's economic gains on American communities, the current chaos indicates he does not really have a road map for how to unwind them, beyond complete faith in his own ability to pull off a deal. He means to gamify tariffs so that he can leverage each threat for a better negotiating position. But too much now rests on presumptive talks to come: one estimate suggested that the new tariffs would cost the average American household forty-seven hundred dollars a year. Unlike partisan politics, trade wars aren't zero-sum. Sometimes everybody loses. ♦



*[Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#) began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2015. He writes about American politics and society.*

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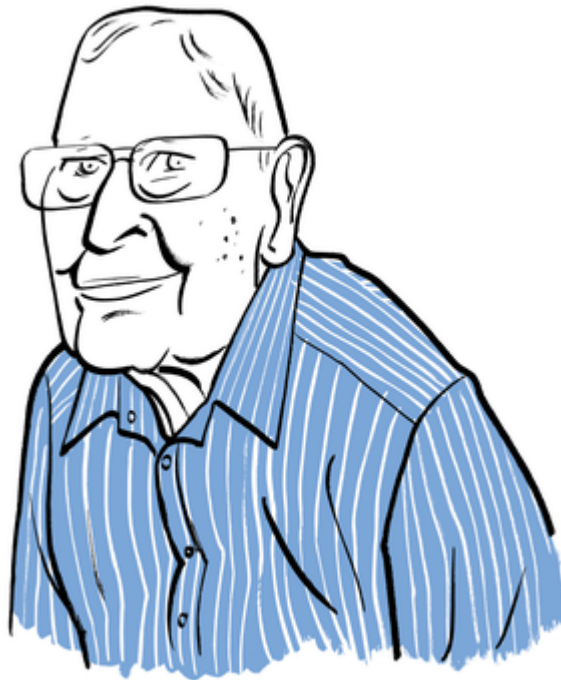
[Been There Dept.](#)

# Living Through the Market Crash? Ask a Centenarian

Charlie Duncan, a hundred-and-five-year-old Georgia resident, recalls the mood in 1929.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

April 12, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Charlie Duncan could very well be the oldest man in Georgia. “I’ll be one hundred and six in May,” he said the other day at Benton House, a senior-living facility in the town of Woodstock. With that much mileage, he’s survived a few things, one of them being the stock-market crash of 1929.



Duncan, who still has his hair and his wits, and tooled around behind the wheel of a PT Cruiser until a fender bender last year, was ten years old when the market crashed. At the time, his family had a farm in nearby Hickory Flat. “Cotton, corn, peanuts, sweet potatoes,” he recalled, leaning back in his recliner, beneath a framed certificate from the United Square Dancers of America and a proclamation from the county, which recently designated a Charlie Duncan Day.

“We did O.K. for a while,” he went on. “Daddy got up at four-thirty in the morning seven days a week. When he got up, everybody got up.” He spat in a cup. “I’ve used it since I was eight years old,” he said, referring to his snuff. “My grandmother lived with us, and these two old women told her, ‘That boy’s wormy.’ So she started me on tobacco and I passed those tapeworms. I thought my guts was coming out.”

In October of 1929, Duncan recalled, his world changed: “I didn’t know what a stock was until somebody told me the whole thing crashed or smashed or whatever it was.” He thinks he heard the news from his father — “That’s how we heard most things,” he said. “All of a sudden you couldn’t sell your crops for nothing,” he added. “You couldn’t make fifty cents in a day on a farm, if you could find somebody to hire you, which you couldn’t.”

Duncan had hoped to grow up to be a country doctor. “There wasn’t enough of them around,” he said. “If you had a toothache, he pulled your tooth. A cut? He sewed it up.”

The crash scuttled that dream, and the family moved to a new farm. “Me and my brother drove a team of mules hitched to a two-horse wagon,” Duncan said. They paid for eighty-nine arable acres with cotton: “Two bales was the down payment.” The poor economy had stunted schools, too. “You couldn’t get schoolbooks,” he said. “Then our school burned down. You had to walk several miles to another district.” When he was fifteen, his father pulled him out to work full time. In 1931, the family could only get a penny and a half for a bale of cotton. “You had to pile up so many bales after the Depression hit,” he said. At nineteen, he left home to work on a dairy farm, but the owner accused him of being lazy. “I told him to take the job and shove it up his ass,” Duncan said. The phone rang in his room. He ignored

it. “I got forty-five calls one Friday,” he said. “All scams. I got one this morning. It was a woman. I said, ‘What do you want? If you gonna want sex, you got the wrong person. That quit working twenty-five years ago.’ ”

The events of 1929 left Duncan with a sixth-grade education and a life of mostly physical labor. After serving in the Second World War, he worked at mills and as a craftsman who specialized in bannisters for spiral staircases. He married twice: around forty years to each woman. He flipped a few houses and eventually made a little money, which he did not invest in the stock market. “I can’t afford to lose it, because I can’t make no more,” he said. “So I go the safe way: C.D.s.” Asked whether he had any other general life advice, he listed, in no particular order, good sex, fresh vegetables, the occasional Coors Light, and water aerobics, which he did three times a week until his hips gave out last year.

A friend arrived to take him to lunch at a biker bar, whose wall holds a framed photo of Duncan with Rudolph Giuliani, who tracked him down for a preëlection photo op in 2024. (“He said hello, he smiled, then he left,” Duncan recalled, with a shrug.)

Back at Benton House, Mariam Bailey, who is a hundred and six, sat down to lunch. She was born near Pittsburgh, the daughter of a minister. The Depression hit the congregation hard. “We just took the fall as it came and did the best we could do,” she said.

What was her advice if the market kept dropping, as in 1929?

“Just hold on,” she said. “Life is full of ups and downs.” The soup arrived. Bailey narrowed her eyes and took a look. “Cream of something,” she said. ♦



*[Charles Bethea](#), a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2008. He covers crime, politics, food, local media, and the American South.*

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# R. Crumb Looks Back

The underground-comic artist visits the Whitney with his biographer, Dan Nadel, and considers some old friends: his own psychedelic skulls, placemat sketches, and muscly women.

By [Bruce Handy](#)

April 14, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The cartoonist Robert Crumb is described in a new biography as “misanthropic.” In his own work, he typically characterizes his personality as an unpleasant cocktail of rage, lust, and social ineptitude. But he was perfectly affable the other day, during a visit to the Whitney Museum. The

occasion was a private viewing of prints and drawings, including a couple of his own that he hadn't seen in decades. All were displayed in an austere room designed for examining art works—an oddly formal space for an encounter with one's past.

The eighty-one-year-old Crumb, dressed in a long dark coat and his trademark fedora and Coke-bottle glasses, looked over his drawings as if trying to place old acquaintances at a party. His works were on hand in preparation for an exhibit that is scheduled to open this fall, "Sixties Surreal," which will connect the switched-on art of that decade to the dreamier Surrealism of the nineteen-thirties and forties. One drawing, titled "Head #1," dates from 1967, when Crumb's underground comics—the era's term of art—began making their way from Haight-Ashbury to head shops and hippie bookstores across the country.

Intended as the cover for a comic book that never came together, "Head #1" is an example of what you might call O.C.D. psychedelia: a minutely detailed ink drawing of a cross-section of a person's skull, with a camera for an eye, plumbing for the sinuses and throat, an ear trumpet for hearing, a reel-to-reel tape deck for memory, and a small forest's worth of intricate electronic circuitry representing the brain. Crumb peered at his work through a Sherlock Holmes-style magnifying glass, doubling the effect of his thick spectacles. "Probably took me two days," he said. A curator asked if he had used a brush to fill in the black spaces around the head. "I hope so," Crumb replied, not altogether ruling out that he might have used the Rapidograph pen that he then favored to ink the negative space, which would have been a painstaking, even masochistic feat.

There was non-Crumb art to look at, too, unrelated to sixties Surrealism, including works by Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh, Wanda Gág, and George Herriman. Mabel Dwight's lithographs depicting working-class urban scenes from the nineteen-twenties, populated by borderline grotesques, were new to Crumb but very much up his alley. Also of interest were Benton's and Marsh's renditions of young women with muscly legs and shelf-like bottoms—a body type that Crumb has gleefully fetishized in his own work, to the point that "Crumb woman" is almost as recognizable a physiognomic stereotype as "Hooters server." (The 1994 documentary

“Crumb” captured a photo shoot in which the cartoonist cavorted with several such women for the magazine *Leg Show*.)

“They look very powerful,” he noted approvingly of Marsh’s depiction of a group of ladies out on the town, a breeze rustling their hair and skirts.



*“The trick is to become the only thing that makes them happy—then you can chew on anything.”*  
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

“I chose some of these works with Robert’s taste in mind,” Dan Nadel, one of the curators of “Sixties Surreal,” said. He knows that taste better than most, since he is also the author of “Crumb: A Cartoonist’s Life,” the aforementioned biography. Its view of Crumb, who coöperated with the book, is affectionate but unsparing, which seems to be the perspective of most people in the cartoonist’s life, including Crumb himself.

Nadel wasn’t the first author to approach Crumb about a biography, but earlier suitors came from broadly traditional culture-writing backgrounds, whereas Nadel had developed a deep knowledge of comics as both a writer and a curator. “A guy in an orchestra might be a great violinist, but that doesn’t mean he knows anything about accordions,” Crumb offered by way of analogy. His only conditions for giving Nadel the go-ahead were that, in Nadel’s words, the book would “tackle the charges of racism and sexism” made against Crumb’s work, and that “I would not bother him too much.”

“But he ended up bothering me a lot,” Crumb said good-naturedly. “He’s an excellent researcher. He helped me find a guy who gave me some bad LSD in 1966.”

“In fairness, yes, I found him,” Nadel said. “But he had died, so Robert didn’t get to confront him.”

Crumb has benefitted from the art world’s embrace—his gallery sold the original drawings from his 2009 graphic-novel adaptation of Genesis to the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art for \$2.9 million—but that doesn’t mean he likes it. He made fun of an art dealer’s efforts at “frickin’ pitching” the sketches he does on restaurant placemats: “There’s these bourgeois couples he’s showing them to, and he’s, like, ‘Crumb does these things spontaneously at dinner—and look at the food stains!’ ” That brand of authenticity—the idea of his work as singular art *objects*—offends him. “Comics are done for print,” he said. “The final product isn’t a piece of finished art—it’s the printed book. For me, the thrill was always seeing a book. It’s all there. It’s folded. It’s stapled. Yeah, *that’s* the art object.” ♦ [Bruce Handy](#) is the author of “[Hollywood High: A Totally Epic, Way Opinionated History of Teen Movies](#)” (2025) and the picture book “[There Was a Shadow](#)” (2024), illustrated by Lisk Feng.

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[Outer Borough](#)

# Michael Gandolfini Worries About Brawn and Bravado

To prepare for his role on the TV show “Daredevil: Born Again,” the son of Tony Soprano gave Staten Island a try.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

April 13, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

On a recent afternoon, the actor Michael Gandolfini ascended an escalator to Whitehall Terminal to take the twelve-thirty ferry to Staten Island. Packs of tourists mingled with commuters and a few stray pigeons in the waiting hall. “It’s popping, always,” Gandolfini said admiringly.



Gandolfini, who is a boyish twenty-five, said that he grew up primarily “in the meatpacking district, when they were, like, hanging pigs and cows.” He had never been to Staten Island until he was cast as Daniel Blake, an aide to the thuggish New York City mayor Wilson Fisk, on the Marvel Television show “Daredevil: Born Again.” “They said, ‘Look, he’s a Trump supporter, he’s politically blind, he’s very ambitious, and he’s *really* from Staten Island,’ ” Gandolfini said, describing the character notes he was given. For research, he spent a week in the borough trailing a firefighter friend—“I went to a lot of bars”—and rode the ferry into the city amid the 5 A.M. office-worker crush. “There’s the backdrop of this amazing skyline, and the sun is rising, and everyone’s just miserable,” he said. One plus: the ferry is free. “It’s the only thing in New York City history whose price has actually gone down,” he said.

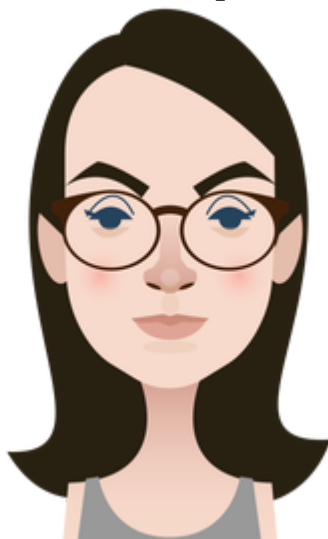
Boarding began. Gandolfini stepped onto the ferry, Spirit of America, and chose an outdoor bench, portside. He was dressed in a dadcore ensemble of rumpled jeans, work boots, and a broken-in leather jacket. Around his neck hung a St. Michael medal, which he was given at birth. The sky was blue, the winds springish. As the boat passed Governors Island, he reminisced about his preparations for other roles. For the movie “Cherry,” in which he played a veteran from Cleveland, he posed as a prospective transfer student to infiltrate a local high school. “I was just young enough, and the bags under my eyes weren’t as dark,” he explained.

More recently, he appeared in “Warfare,” a movie directed by Alex Garland and Ray Mendoza, a former Navy *SEAL*, based on Mendoza’s experience in Iraq in 2006, during the Battle of Ramadi. Each character was modelled on a real person; Gandolfini played Lieutenant McDonald, a member of the Marines’ Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company. Castmates lodged together in Tring, England, before the shoot, to undergo a version of boot camp. “My dad”—the actor James Gandolfini, best known for playing Tony in the HBO drama “The Sopranos”—“passed away when I was young, and I was around a lot of women my whole life, so that side of masculinity was quite uncomfortable and nerve-wracking,” Gandolfini said. He worried about brawn and bravado: “Are we going to have, like, boxing matches?” But the vibes were more bromance than “Fight Club.” “It was such an incredible experience to be in a group of healthy men,” he said.

The ferry pulled into port. Gandolfini headed to a Starbucks with water views and ordered a shaken iced espresso. As a kid, he was obsessed with Elvis, then with “Grease.” He saw “Wicked” on Broadway six times. (The movie adaptation? “Loved it.”) “The Sopranos” premièred four months before Gandolfini was born. “I was very protected from it,” he said. He spent summers mowing lawns in New Jersey; he wasn’t allowed to see his dad perform. Still, the acting bug bit.

In 2021, he starred in the “Sopranos” prequel, “The Many Saints of Newark,” as the teen-age Tony. “I had rejected the show for my whole life,” he said. After he was cast, he watched the series for the first time with his “bonus dads”—the actors Chris Bauer and Jon Bernthal—and a notepad. “I did a big time line so I could understand everything,” he said. “Tony—I played him for two months. But the thing that struck me is how bipolar he is. You’re reaching a high sense of anger masked with intense depression.” Gandolfini doesn’t do Method: “Everyone’s over it.” Acting, for him, is a kind of reverse osmosis. “If you play someone who’s cyclically angry, your anger patterns in your brain, they’re just easier, more acceptable,” he said. “I knew that, for my dad, it was all real. You can feel it.”

Back on the water, Gandolfini gazed at the Statue of Liberty. In high school, he had done a stint in Los Angeles. Palm trees and positivity? They can have it. “You could never do this in L.A.,” he reflected. “If you want to hike, sure. But think about it. You come on here. You’re depressed. You look out over the water, thinking about how much you hate your life.” The water sparkled. Manhattan loomed. “It’s perfect.” ♦



[Alexandra Schwartz](#) has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2016, and is a co-host of the magazine's [Critics at Large](#) podcast.

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[Good Ideas Dept.](#)

# David Byrne Takes the Stairs

The Talking Heads front man brought his acrylic markers to the Pace gallery recently to make some art—dancing ovals, a glamorous blob—on the stairwell walls.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

April 14, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

At the Pace gallery in Chelsea in early April, the artist and musician David Byrne was in a stairwell, lying on the floor and drawing on the wall with a black acrylic marker. Byrne, who is seventy-two, wore a buttoned-up navy polo shirt, a white wristwatch, and railroad-striped overalls. (“I thought, I have to dress like an artist today,” he said.) He finished inking a foot, said,

“O.K., we’ve got hands to draw,” stood, and admired his creation: a mural showing a family of four with humanoid bodies—soft curves, rumpled clothes, neatly folded hands—and skyscrapers for heads. Byrne, who lives nearby, had been drawing in the stairwell all day. He was working from sketches he’d made, which Nate Kamp, an exhibition manager, projected onto the walls. Byrne finished the hands on a skyscraper-headed child, then asked, “What’s the next one? Oh, the one with the eyes?”

“I think the Eyes, yeah,” Kamp said.

“Whoa, boy,” Byrne said, in a here-we-go tone. He picked up a wooden stool and proceeded down to a third-floor landing.

Pace, founded by Arne Glimcher in 1960, and now run by his son Marc, opened its eight-story flagship building, designed by Bonetti/Kozerski Architecture, in 2019. Beauty and art abound—that day, Robert Indiana number sculptures adorned a sixth-floor terrace—but only recently in the stairwell. “I just thought, Oh, it would be fun to do something in the stairwell, because I take the stairs all the time, and they’re boring,” Lauren Panzo, a Pace vice-president, said. Gallerygoers often take the stairs, too; perhaps Byrne could liven them up. Panzo proposed the stairwell idea to Byrne, who had shown a whimsical tree-diagram mural and other drawings at Pace in 2022, and spot illustrations, or dingbats, in 2020. He was intrigued.

“I thought, Oh, people are really in close proximity to the walls when they go up or down,” Byrne recalled. “What if they were confronted by all these different kinds of people and creatures, each one at eye level, so when you get to the landing you’re looking right in their eyes?” This felt fun. He made some sketches, each a “little idea”: “Let’s make it a family, a couple and children, all with building heads.” Other ideas included a winking, arms-akimbo Accusatory Guy (floor 1); “two people dancing, but they’re all free-floating ovals” (floor 6.5); a strangely glamorous blob (floor 2.5); and Spiky Person (floor 3.5). “I showed the spiky drawing to someone and they said, ‘Oh, that’s a Russian bear-hunting outfit from the nineteenth century,’ ” Byrne said. He pulled up a photograph of a nail-infused leather outfit. (The costume, whose origins are mysterious, is at the Menil Collection.) Byrne’s Spiky Person is cuddlier—part hairy Ed Koren

cartoon, part “Hellraiser.” He drew nine stairwell murals in all, which are now on display indefinitely.

On the landing, Kamp projected the next sketch: two faceless eyes, for “this slightly creepy or disturbing effect,” Byrne said. Marker squeaking loudly, he drew—eyes first, dark and intense, then a series of radiating lines, which evoked sunbeams, then tears, then eyelashes. “Wow,” Byrne said.

“I thought you were going to emulate bicycle spokes,” Kamp said. Byrne laughed, sounding startled. Then he drew crisscrossing lines across the original lines, which ended up looking like the Brooklyn Bridge, or a spiderweb—or, indeed, a bicycle wheel.

Byrne, a well-known cycling enthusiast, often has insights about his art after completing it. As a kid, he drew “rocket ships and spies”; as a teen, he drew surreal cartoons inspired by Zap Comix; in Talking Heads and beyond, he drew storyboards for music videos. During the pandemic, alone at home, he began drawing dingbats. “It was fun, but it was also a kind of therapy,” he said. “In retrospect, I could look at the stuff and go, Oh, look, the drawing’s about being trapped in your body or something—some body distortion.” He went on, “I thought, O.K., you’re unconsciously working through everything that’s happening during the pandemic.” He said that drawings often help to clarify ideas. “The astronomer Vera Rubin was mystified by this data she was getting from galaxies,” he said. “As soon as she did sketches, it revealed to her what was going on. She’s been credited with verifying or discovering dark matter.” He laughed. “And the late physicist Richard Feynman did these weird diagrams with arrows and squiggles and things. He found that it was much faster to think using the diagrams than to write out the whole mathematical formula for the way the electrons or whatever were moving—subatomic stuff. Once he could think with the diagram, he could go back to the math.”

Completing the Eyes, whose radiating lines extended to the wall’s edges, required some athleticism. Byrne stood on the stool, huffing like a tennis player, then lay on the floor, pushing off the wall like a swimmer. Finished, he stood, dusted off, and regarded the image. “It’s staring at me!” he said, happily. How did it feel? “Creepy!” ♦



*[Sarah Larson](#), a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2007.*

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## [Annals of Higher Education](#)

# What Comes After D.E.I.?

*Colleges around the country, in the face of legal and political backlash to their diversity programs, are pivoting to an alternative framework known as pluralism.*

By [Emma Green](#)

April 14, 2025



*Under Trump, the mood in higher ed has shifted from introspective to panicked. Illustration by Eleni Kalorkoti*

A couple of weeks after President Donald Trump was reëlected, a group of college presidents gathered for an event at the Penn Club, a stately building with wood-panelled rooms, in midtown Manhattan. Over drinks, Tania Tetlow, the president of Fordham University, in New York, told me about another college president, whom she had become friends with after taking her role, in 2022. The president confided to Tetlow that every morning they would lie in bed wishing they had cancer so that they wouldn't have to go to work. We spoke about the difficult experiences of university leaders over the past year and a half—calling the cops on protesters, getting hauled before Congress, protecting students who felt scared of one another. “To be held personally and professionally responsible for the behavior of ten thousand students is deeply unfair,” Tetlow said.

Though conservative critics of higher education claim that universities indoctrinate students to adopt leftist attitudes, several presidents told me

that students arrive on campus already formed. “They’re not tabula rasa,” Rich Lyons, the chancellor of U.C. Berkeley, said. Young people who have faced economic hardship, he added, tend to “bring with them hardened perspectives, and a significant degree of anger.” At Berkeley’s commencement last spring, pro-Palestine protesters disrupted the speakers—including the former chancellor Carol Christ, who said sadly from the podium, “We have lost the ability to talk with one another.” Lyons and the presidents at the Penn Club were grappling with the same question: How could they reach a wildly diverse set of students and teach them to engage with people who think differently than they do?

Several of the presidents talked about initiatives they’ve rolled out to encourage civil debate. Incoming students at William & Mary go through a “Better Arguments” program, in which they are instructed, for instance, to prize maintaining relationships over winning a dispute. Arizona State University has a slew of centers designed to foster democratic habits: civic literacy, the exercise of free speech. Marlene Tromp, the president of Boise State, said that when she took her job, in 2019, the university was “facing a lot of concern surrounding this narrative that higher ed only moved in one direction—there was only one set of ideas that were available.” The school launched the Institute for Advancing American Values, which asks students and various speakers from different political backgrounds to describe the formative aspects of their lives, and their most deeply held beliefs.

Amid all the enthusiastic salesmanship for viewpoint diversity and civil disagreement, it was striking that most of the presidents studiously avoided the topic of diversity on campus—not just what ideas you have in the room but also who you have in the room. Tromp said that the Harvard scholar Danielle Allen was an intellectual inspiration for Boise State’s center. Allen, who is Black, has written that colleges have gotten lost in “the swamps of particular tenets of anti-racism,” as part of their embrace of diversity, equity, and inclusion, or D.E.I. Conservatives have painted D.E.I. as a uniform set of programs, ideas, and ideologies. In reality, the term encompasses a wide-ranging set of practices. Still, D.E.I. spaces often share certain analytic frameworks, usually centering on questions of justice: “How you make sure a specific subset of folks don’t find themselves facing obstacles and barriers on campus,” Allen said. “Often, in the D.E.I. space,

what we've done is to say Black compares to white compares to Asian." She added, "That, by definition, is corrosive of community."

Allen has advocated for an alternative intellectual framework that she describes as pluralism. The model aims to help students live and learn together—making everyone feel welcome, and also helping students navigate the conflicts that inevitably arise in a community where people have different world views. Pluralism demands that conservative evangelicals who don't believe in same-sex marriage be welcomed to campus alongside gay students, and that political conservatives who oppose affirmative action have fruitful discussions with people of color.

In 2018, Allen and a group of colleagues published a report suggesting that viewpoint diversity and free expression are crucial components of inclusion and belonging on university campuses. But it was a hard time to push for viewpoint diversity, with Trump in office and the nation on the cusp of a racial reckoning. Conversations about "inclusion and belonging" effectively became limited to race, gender, sexuality, and disability, Allen said. "I've experienced some frustration, I will admit, as I watched that paradigm narrowing in the years post-George Floyd," she told me. "All those identities matter, but what we need to do as a pluralistic society and as pluralistic campuses is broader than that."

Recently, the mood in higher ed has shifted from introspective to panicked. In March, the Department of Education warned sixty schools that they had potentially violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by allowing "relentless antisemitic eruptions" on their campuses. The D.O.E. pulled four hundred million dollars in federal funds from Columbia University; in response, the university has reportedly pledged to overhaul its security protocols and review its Middle East-studies programs. The Trump Administration also froze a hundred and seventy-five million dollars in funding for the University of Pennsylvania, for allowing transgender athletes to compete in women's sports. Other universities that depend heavily on federal money for scientific research, such as Johns Hopkins, have laid off workers and closed labs following deep cuts across federal agencies—cuts that were partly premised on objections to D.E.I.

All of this has prompted college presidents to take another look at the ideas that Allen and her allies have long promoted. Call it the pluralism pivot: a desire for a new paradigm that might ward off skeptical politicians and heal the bad vibes that have plagued higher ed. Though many college presidents were already trying to fix the cultural problems on their campuses, their hands may soon be forced by policymakers. Some of the universities that have most fully embraced pluralism are in politically purple or red states, such as Utah, where legislators have been moving to stamp out D.E.I. “I’m sorry—deeply, profoundly sad and sorry—that our sector had to start its reconsideration under these kinds of circumstances,” Allen told me. “That said, I’m glad to see that the pluralism concepts and frameworks are getting traction.”

As recently as a few years ago, the University of Utah—the state’s flagship public school, which has about thirty-six thousand students—seemed eager to advertise its progressive bona fides. In a 2022 issue of the alumni magazine, a feature on Taylor Randall, the recently installed president of the U (as people call it), listed some books he recommended, including Ibram X. Kendi’s “How to Be an Antiracist.” A web extra detailed the history of the U’s Black Cultural Center, which its then director described as “trying to fight anti-Blackness” through a “pan-African lens.” Letters to the editor praised a profile of an alum who performs as the ice-skating drag queen Denali Fox: “That’s our gurl out here slaying!”

Race- and gender-focussed centers had opened in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies, and the first administrator in charge of diversity was appointed in 1983. But the university’s D.E.I. efforts—known at the school as E.D.I., with the “equity” and “diversity” switched—accelerated in 2015. University leaders held a campus-wide dialogue on the “racial climate,” which led to extra money for ethnicity-related student groups, an effort to hire more minority faculty members, and an office “to respond to racial microaggressions.” The university created a new college, the School for Cultural & Social Transformation, nicknamed Transform. Transform was the “left humanities” college, as one professor put it, whereas another college served as the “centrist humanities” school. This effectively created a siloed ecosystem, in which the most progressive professors would teach the

most progressive students, who worked with the most progressive staff members.

Kathryn Bond Stockton, a professor of English and critical theory, helped to create Transform and served as the chief diversity officer for the U's main campus. She had come to Utah in 1987 from Brown. "I just remember saying to myself, 'I don't think the East Coast or the West Coast needs me,' " she said. "It was exciting to come to a place where I knew there would be a lot of disagreement with me and with my views." Stockton, who is gay, was an evangelical throughout her teens and twenties, and felt that she could relate to religious people, even if they might reject her sexuality. "The queerest thing about me is that I love Utah," she said.

Stockton recalled a 2023 event put on by the Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative campus group. Local education activists were invited to make their case against D.E.I., "gender ideology," and critical race theory, or C.R.T. Stockton, along with a group of other faculty and students, protested outside, in the rain, before the event. "I don't know that anybody saw us or anybody heard us," she said. Still, she went to the lecture, and later spoke to a group of women who had seemed excited about the talk, so that she could better understand their perspective. "I have lived my whole life in such an impossible set of circumstances—not being gendered in the way that I want, and not being able to love the people I want to love—that I feel that's work I want to do," she said. And yet she also emphasized that others might feel uncomfortable engaging with views they find offensive and dehumanizing. "I never recommend this as a general principle," she said. Stockton was a both-and: willing to engage with people who didn't agree with her world view, but also keen to protect students whom she saw as vulnerable.

When Mary Ann Villarreal arrived at the U, in 2019, to serve in the newly created role of vice-president for E.D.I., she noticed that the university was most responsive to students and staff who sought out conflict. "The way that people got what they wanted was they pushed demands, and resources were allocated in that way," she said. The school's cultural centers were designed to offer camaraderie and support to students from similar backgrounds. But they largely weren't set up to address the needs of rural

students or Latter-day Saints—commonly known as Mormons, although the Church has discouraged that term. Some secular faculty from out of state have historically taken a defensive posture toward the Church, which is headquartered in Salt Lake City—punching up against the dominant conservative religious group, even though Latter-day Saints are a religious minority in the United States. Clark Ivory, a Church member who was previously the chair of the U’s board of trustees, has served on search committees for high-ranking academic leadership positions. He told me, “While it was never spoken, you knew that a candidate who was from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was going to have an uphill climb.” Eboo Patel, the founder and president of Interfaith America, an organization that fosters pluralism on campuses, told me that the U’s rank and file seemed enthusiastic about racial diversity, gender diversity, and cultural diversity—but not religious diversity. “That is pretty normal among lefty, student-facing staff, because religion is framed principally as being anti-L.G.B.T.,” he said. “The mid-level staff were just intransigent.”

Villarreal wanted to make E.D.I. less insulated. “Their idea of diversity was ‘Can I have one of each?’ ” she said. “That was the university’s way of being.” She built relationships with leaders at the Institute, a center for L.D.S. students near campus. She proactively pushed to revamp the spaces for Black and Latino students, trying to anticipate their needs, rather than waiting for students to complain. She talked about a “culture of connection” as the North Star of E.D.I.

In the fall of 2023, she got a hint that the school’s E.D.I. work might be in trouble. Nationally, protests over Israel and Gaza were roiling campuses. The discourse about D.E.I. had reached a fever pitch, with conservatives claiming that it was a vehicle for indoctrination. Versions of these battles were playing out at the U: a Latino student group, Mecha, blocked the entrance to a film screening about transgender kids who had detransitioned, hosted by the Young Americans for Freedom. Later, when the university sent a letter revoking its sponsorship of Mecha, the club’s members staged a protest at one of the school’s cultural centers, reportedly waving a Palestinian flag and refusing to leave. Villarreal learned that state legislators were working on an anti-D.E.I. bill. She put together an inventory: every dollar her office spent, every outcome achieved. It was meant to prove the

worth of what the staff was doing, but Villarreal also understood that it might be a death document—a memorialization of work that was coming to an end.

Utah has long been deep-red politically but moderate temperamentally; Mitt Romney, as a U.S. senator from Utah, was one of the few elected Republicans who didn't show unwavering fealty to Trump. In late 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, a number of Utah leaders—including the incoming Republican governor, Spencer Cox—signed on to the Utah Compact on Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. The compact stated that racism is “a system of ideas, beliefs, practices, structures, and policies” which requires “bold anti-racist actions” to unravel. The signers affirmed that “our commitment will not just be a passing moment, but a legacy movement of social, racial, and economic justice.”

But, by 2023, Cox signalled a change in attitude on D.E.I. He called diversity statements—essentially a pledge from job candidates to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion—“awful, bordering on evil.” Randall, the school's president, agreed to reevaluate its diversity practices and prohibited the use of diversity statements in hiring. It didn't matter. In early 2024, two legislators introduced a wide-ranging bill, H.B. 261, the “Equal Opportunity Initiatives,” which would rein in D.E.I. practices across Utah. Among other things, the legislation banned diversity trainings and offices, and barred universities from promoting the idea that people are “inherently privileged, oppressed, racist, sexist, oppressive, or a victim” because of their race or gender.

One of the bill's authors, Representative Katy Hall, spoke of receiving letters from professors who described themselves as lifelong liberals. “There is a tension amongst faculty and administrators regarding the mission and role of the university,” one wrote. “There are those who perceive it to be the production of knowledge. And there are those who have shifted to seeing the role as that of social justice. The two approaches are not compatible.” Keith Grover, the bill's Senate sponsor, said he had received complaints from three students in Utah who were turned away from tutoring services, academic advising, and a club because they were not racial minorities. Dozens of Utahans lined up to comment on the bill;

supporters were just as likely to be racial minorities as they were to be white. A defector from China, for example, called D.E.I. “a dangerous weapon in the hands of biased educators.” The bill’s critics, however, questioned the legislators’ motives. One public-university educator suggested that the bill’s purpose was “to have a chilling effect on higher-education professionals, and for us to question what we are and aren’t supposed to be doing.” Virtually none of the comments were narrow assessments of particular D.E.I. programs. The people of Utah were grappling with much bigger questions: whether race and gender should define them and their friendships and communities; why some people in the country feel muzzled and excluded; whether D.E.I. is a useful way to account for America’s sins of discrimination.



*“Sure, scooting is great. But nothing beats the rush of pushing the elevator button.”*  
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

“When people watched the testimonies, they started to realize, ‘What in the world have we done?’ ” John Johnson, a conservative legislator, told me. I asked him why some of the signers of the Utah Compact had, just a few years later, come to support an anti-D.E.I. bill. “I firmly believe the people in Utah, our governor—they had the best of intentions. There was a real desire to improve race relations,” he said. But “people could see how far things have shifted.” H.B. 261 passed in January, 2024, and was signed into law by Governor Cox.



This winter, I visited the Utah statehouse and met with Hall, the bill's author, in her office. An American flag and an elk skull were mounted on the wall; a hat on a shelf read "*MAKE THE GREAT SALT LAKE GREAT AGAIN*." Hall told me, " 'Diversity' is a beautiful word. Everybody wants that. Inclusion—we want that. But we don't want that to the point of exclusion." On a campus, "when you have just race- or identity-based places, you become in this bubble," she said. Ann Millner, a state senator, told me, "This feels like a pendulum that we're swinging. We were separate but equal. And then it was open access, to everyone, and then there was this swing back to more separating. I think the pendulum is moving back a little bit." Before she got elected to the legislature, Millner served as the president of Weber State, a university with nearly thirty thousand students in Ogden, Utah. Many of them are parents, or full-time workers, or the first in their family to go to college. Millner felt that student services shouldn't just focus on race and gender; they should offer everyone the support they need to put their heads down and get a degree.

She and others touted the same initial stat about H.B. 261's success: after the bill was passed, Weber State opened the Student Success Center, which offers things like advising and workshops on personal finances, to all students. More than a thousand students visited in the fall of 2024. The previous fall, only four hundred and fifty students had shown up at seven different race-, ethnicity-, and gender-focussed cultural centers—combined. Grover, the Senate sponsor, told me that he sees Utah as a national leader on this issue. "The country has definitely moved on D.E.I.," he said. "This is where we're going now."

It seems like in every generation conservatives have questioned the role of gender and race on campus, whether they're focussed on women's liberation or affirmative action or C.R.T. In recent years, however, the most significant shift has happened not on the right but in the center and on the left, as leaders who once embraced D.E.I. have come to doubt the way it has been carried out. Patel, the Interfaith America president, who describes himself as an Obama liberal, blames the backlash on the "anti-oppression" strain of D.E.I., which emphasizes the marginalization of minority groups. "For it to prove itself right, it has to define minorities as people who are principally victims of something," he said. He described events with

students that “felt like Communist Party meetings,” where young people were unable to see themselves as anything but oppressed. “There’s no college president who wants classrooms to become Communist Party meetings.”

In 2022, Raj Vinnakota, a friend of Patel’s and the president of an organization called the Institute for Citizens & Scholars, started talking with college presidents about the unease they felt on their campuses. They worried that the perspectives at their schools had become too narrow, and that their students didn’t understand how to engage with opposing viewpoints. Higher education had become polarized, with a college degree serving as a reliable predictor of how someone might vote. People had come to view higher education “as a private good,” Vinnakota told me. It’s easy for politicians to vilify college when the point of it is to adopt the right ideas and get ahead rather than to become a productive member of society. “There is a public-good responsibility that is being lost, that is being devalued, that is being deprioritized,” Vinnakota said.

In August, 2023, he launched a new initiative, College Presidents for Civic Preparedness. A few months later, Hamas fighters invaded Israel, initiating a war. On campuses, “the floodgates opened,” Vinnakota told me. A hundred and twenty-three presidents are now in the group, and have committed to protecting open debate and free inquiry. Roslyn Artis, the president of Benedict College, an H.B.C.U. in South Carolina, told me that the goal is to take on “the P.R. problem in education, which generally is born of this perception that we are biased, we are liberal, that we are producing little anarchists.” In 2019, Artis hosted Trump on campus. “I nearly died over it, politically and otherwise,” she said. Benedict is about eighty per cent Black, and eighty-four per cent of students come from low-income families. Artis believes that she has a responsibility to expose students to views they might not like. “I am anti-safe space,” she said. “It is our students who have to assimilate. The world does not assimilate to them.” But Lori White, the Black president of DePauw, a majority-white liberal-arts school in Indiana, who also joined the coalition, was careful to note that philosophical discussions about freedom of expression go only so far. As a student, she said, “if I’m in an argument with you, and you say something controversial that I feel like somehow compromises my

humanity, it's really hard for me to hear. I'm not yet mature enough, sometimes, to be able to accept that."

In this charged political moment, college presidents may have mixed motives for waving their hands in the air in favor of free expression. It's not just Trump's crackdown: legislatures around the country are considering anti-D.E.I. bills along the lines of Utah's. Texas and Florida have already placed even stricter limits on academic content seen as biased or indoctrinating. When I asked Michael S. Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, whether presidents are flocking toward pluralism because they're afraid of being hit with a lawsuit, he laughed. "They're entirely that," he said. "One hundred per cent. What else would they be? People are afraid—as they should be!" Still, to see the pluralism pivot entirely as an exercise in covering your ass would miss the depth of the soul-searching that college presidents are doing. Especially after Trump's election, presidents "feel lied to" by their diversity experts, Patel told me. For years, college administrators claimed that minority groups felt literally endangered by the ideas of Trump and his allies. And yet, to take just one example, roughly fifty per cent of Latinos under the age of forty voted for him. "It's, like, You're just wrong," Patel said. "You're like a dentist that pulled the wrong tooth."

A few months after H.B. 261 passed, Villarreal, the U's V.P. of E.D.I., left the school for another job. "It was disappointing," she said. "I really struggled with the question of where I had failed to cross some bridges." She had wanted to turn diversity work at the U into something bigger than racial box-checking. "It was a failed vision on my part," she said. Perhaps the banner under which she was working, the campus-diversity movement, no longer serves the purpose it was meant to. A movement that had always focussed on making people feel that they belong had become associated with division and exclusion. "The acronym and the word—there's no win in it," she said. "There's no win in claiming D.E.I. Let's just be clear about what we're doing."

As with so much of the debate over D.E.I. and free expression, H.B. 261 is largely about language. It prohibits state-funded universities from using the phrase "diversity, equity, and inclusion" for offices or trainings. It requires

professors to enter their course titles and syllabi in a public database, presumably so that others can see how they describe their lessons. Leaders at the U put out a guidance document for staff that reads a bit like instructions for the board game Taboo, in which the goal is to describe a word without actually saying it. The document advises avoiding interview questions about working with a “diverse team,” for instance, swapping that for a question about working with “people from backgrounds that are different from your own.” Before the law was passed, the university sponsored and funded a half-dozen race- and ethnicity-based student groups. These groups were told that they, too, had to comply with the new law; the Black Student Union, for example, could not take public positions on concepts like anti-racism or intersectionality. Nearly all the student groups decided that the bureaucratic compliance wasn’t worth the effort, and gave up their sponsored status. Alex Tokita, a senior who serves as president of the Asian American Student Association, one of the formerly sponsored groups, told me, “There’s a lot of disappointment and feelings of helplessness. All these things are being taken away without anybody to really talk to about it.”

Several of the school’s identity-related cultural centers have also shut down. This winter, another student leader, who asked not to be named because she was worried about being targeted by *ice*, took me on a tour of the student union, which is being rearranged to comply with the law. We visited what had once been the Center for Equity and Student Belonging. She led me to the back of an office, where men were assembling furniture next to a stack of moving boxes. The walls were blank; administrators had recently removed art work depicting eight female activists, including Angela Davis, the Marxist prison abolitionist, and Grace Lee Boggs, the Asian American Black Power activist. “This is where we used to always congregate,” she said. Now it’s less clear whether students are welcome—not that they’d have much of a place to sit. We walked past the old LGBT Resource Center, which had been replaced by the catchall Center for Community & Cultural Engagement. It hosted programs celebrating M.L.K. Day, and planned to hold events for Pride Week—both allowed under the new law. “It’s a little bit confusing,” she said. “The centers share awareness of the different cultures that are represented here on campus, without talking about the adversities. So it’s more performative.” When I asked whether she had gone

to the events, she shrugged. “I don’t engage with them as much,” she said. Nearby was another center with an impossible-to-remember generic name, the Center for Student Access and Resources. The director, Kirstin Maanum, used to run the Women’s Resource Center. The new center’s acronym—*CSAR*—was pasted on an otherwise blank wall. “Students have observed that it feels like a dentist’s office,” Maanum said.

Later that afternoon, I met a student named Sadie Werner. She had been the president of the Black Student Union when H.B. 261 passed, and quit out of frustration over the new rules. “I have shed way too many tears over this bill,” she said. She used to hang out at the Black Cultural Center, where students could reliably find programming, friends, and free food; now, she said, the space is locked. Werner heard that one of her scholarships—which had been administered by the center—was being eliminated, sending her into a panic about how to pay for school. It turned out that no scholarships had been eliminated, but they had been distributed among several different offices. Werner said she hadn’t heard about how to reapply.

Grief over the end of the U’s cultural centers has gone far beyond students and staff. The Democratic minority leaders in the Utah House and Senate, Angela Romero and Luz Escamilla, both went to the University of Utah; they met at what was then known as the Center for Ethnic Student Affairs. “In 1997, there was hardly anyone with black hair in Utah,” Escamilla told me. The center “really helped us feel that we belonged at the University of Utah.” The fact that both she and Romero came through the same program and ended up as leaders in the legislature “speaks volumes,” she said. Romero told me, “If it wasn’t for the Center for Ethnic Student Affairs, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now. I am a product of D.E.I., and I am O.K. with that.”

Even a year after the passage of the law, Escamilla couldn’t understand what it was trying to achieve. “I don’t know how erasing someone’s identity is getting you closer to collaboration,” she said. “I was trying to understand, Why is this bothering you? How could this be harming you, that kids have a way of belonging?” Escamilla’s district in Salt Lake is predominantly working class and Latino. “It was so heartbreaking to me that the kids in my

neighborhood, my district, the children I represent—it was us fighting for them, and no one else,” she said.

When the university announced that it would be closing the Women’s Resource Center, Maanum took down the art that hung on the walls. She loaded a couple of pieces into her car and returned them to the former staff members who had donated them. She and her colleagues organized a farewell party at a brewery. They wore T-shirts with the center’s logo. They took Polaroid selfies. They wrote love letters to what their community had been.

The pictures and notes sit in a small cardboard box on a shelf above Maanum’s computer. She meant to take them to the university archives, but she hadn’t been able to bring herself to do so. “I take them down and read them,” she told me. “Some days I cry.” Inside the box, stickers decorated with groovy flowers and “WRC” in nineteen-seventies-style font note the dates of the center’s founding and closure, like an obituary: 1971 to 2024.

The big question for the pluralism paradigm is whether it will eventually go the same way as D.E.I., becoming a target for lawsuits and culture-war backlash. The intellectual framework of pluralism seems legally sturdier than that of D.E.I., which focusses on certain aspects of identity in a way that arguably runs afoul of America’s civil-rights laws. The Supreme Court recently banned race-conscious admissions, for example, and many colleges have moved to end race-specific scholarships after facing legal challenges. By contrast, pluralism emphasizes everyone’s ability to thrive, with all their differences fully respected. It’s less clear how pluralism will land politically, though, in the Trumpian moment. A strong movement for pluralism on campuses, largely spearheaded by liberals, was well under way before Trump was elected. The coterie of scholars and consultants who are pushing pluralism are all deeply worried that their work will be construed as yet another leftist program of indoctrination—or, now that Trump is cracking down on D.E.I., mistrusted by academics as capitulation to the regime. “It’s important that this work does not get co-opted as just a conservative thing or a liberal thing,” Manu Meel, the head of BridgeUSA, a network of student groups that host conversations about controversial topics, told me. “It has to be an American thing.”

The philanthropic sector may or may not follow the pluralism pivot. Michael Murray, the president of the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, which fund projects in higher education and religion, told me that “since October 7th things have changed quite a bit in terms of available philanthropic dollars.” High-net-worth individuals “have made it clear that they are willing to put resources on the line for institutions to do work in this space.” Jennifer Hoos Rothberg, the executive director of the Einhorn Collaborative, a nonprofit philanthropy, has put together a group of funders who she says want to take pluralism work from “nice to have, soft, squishy” to “tangible, measurable, meaningful, and sustainable.”

Even traditional philanthropists in higher ed are poking around pluralism. Terri Taylor, a strategy director at the Lumina Foundation, a heavyweight funder with one and a half billion dollars in assets, told me that a group of twenty organizations joined a call in December, after Trump’s reelection, to trade notes on efforts to foster dialogue on campuses. Still, the foundation, which has historically focussed on equity, is leery of abandoning its emphasis on racial justice. “Race is, in many ways, a superseding factor,” Jamie Merisotis, Lumina’s C.E.O., told me. “Being a person of color, being Black, or being someone who comes from an underrepresented ethnic group like Latinos leads to poorer outcomes.” He sees the turn away from D.E.I. as a response to its politicization. “To walk away from the construct of race or ethnicity,” he said, “means our collective talent as a nation will suffer.” The most stalwart D.E.I. advocates see the criticisms of current D.E.I. practices as cover for racism. Paulette Granberry Russell, the president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, said, of legislators who oppose D.E.I., “The real interest is in obliterating efforts that provide support for particular communities. It’s been two years of trying to get a message across that this work is not divisive, it’s not discrimination, it’s not exclusion or indoctrination.” She added, “Don’t let them get away with saying it’s divisive.”

At a place like the University of Utah, these debates are largely theoretical. H.B. 261 is the law, and the school must move forward. I met with Taylor Randall, the president, in his office. He has been working with Patel, the Interfaith America president, along with others to develop a pluralistic vision for the U—not a repackaged form of D.E.I. but a new vision, based

on coöperation across difference. Randall has a scholarly background in accounting, and his attraction to pluralism is fittingly pragmatic. “A market economy functions on relationships and transactions, which naturally require compromise and coalition-building,” he said. Helping students find common ground is “the most practical skill I can teach.” Students need to learn how to state and debate their views, he added: “It’s one of the critical skills we’ve got to have as citizens.”

The U is starting to roll out new initiatives. In addition to Patel, the school has brought in Arthur Brooks, a Harvard professor and a self-styled happiness guru, and Timothy Shriver, the chairman of the Special Olympics, as “impact scholars” who regularly visit the campus. There are scholarships for students who do service projects with one another. Faculty and students who pitch ideas for collaborating across lines of difference will be eligible for grants. “We’re in the early stages to see whether this framework is going to work or not,” Randall said.

One of the U’s efforts is centered on religious inclusion. Interfaith America has conducted “bridge builder” trainings in which students learn techniques for careful listening and facilitating difficult conversations. The U’s leaders are also focussed on trying to change the school’s reputation for being unfriendly toward L.D.S. students. To boost enrollment, the school is recruiting from the fastest-growing counties in the state, including the heavily L.D.S. area around Provo, where Brigham Young University is situated. Over the past couple of years, Clark Ivory, the former board chair, has led a project to open “standards housing” for students who agree not to drink or do drugs, or host overnight guests. It’s not explicitly marketed as L.D.S. housing, but, he told me, it will provide those students with “a place where they can come and be very safe.” It was a surprising echo of a D.E.I. idea: that students should feel “safe” in their identities, and that their safety comes from being surrounded by others who share the same values. Randall’s pluralism initiatives look different in the context of the U’s recruitment efforts: they could be read as a bid to make the university seem more palatable to the conservative audience it is intentionally courting. Still, there’s significant suspicion on the right about pluralism—that it’s just a new word for the expectation that conservatives will compromise on their convictions in public spaces.



On a recent evening, a few hundred students gathered at the Institute, the Church's center beside the U's campus. The building is huge, with multiple social halls and two basketball courts. There was an elaborate dodgeball tournament happening; many students had arrived earlier for a panel with InterVarsity, an evangelical group, and classes about L.D.S. theology. Troy Virgin, the Institute's director, told me that three thousand students are enrolled in classes there, a number that's been rising steadily. I met with a few students in one of the classrooms. Gideon Kiphibane, a sophomore at the U, told me that most of his friends had gone to Brigham Young, but that attending the U had helped him take ownership of his faith. "When you're surrounded by your own people, you go with the flow," he said. "For me, I have to make that choice to come to the Institute or go to church." The students were only dimly aware of H.B. 261. Kiphibane, who is Laotian, was the sole nonwhite student in the room; he was also the only person who had visited one of the cultural centers. The other students didn't need to. At the Institute, they had found a home for people like them. A junior named Eliza Stewart remembered, "as a freshman, coming and feeling very intimidated and overwhelmed by college and being an adult." This, she told me, "was a safe place." ♦



*[Emma Green](#) is a staff writer at The New Yorker who covers education and academia.*

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# How to Survive the A.I. Revolution

The Luddites lost the fight to save their livelihoods. As the threat of artificial intelligence looms, can we do any better?

By [John Cassidy](#)

April 14, 2025



*The challenge isn't just understanding where A.I. is headed but shaping its direction before we lose all possibility of control. Illustration by Jack Smyth; Source photograph from Getty*

In the early hours of April 12, 1812, a crowd of men approached Rawfolds Mill, a four-story stone building on the banks of the River Spen, in West Yorkshire. This was Brontë country—a landscape of bleak moors, steep valleys, and small towns nestled in the hollows. The men, who'd assembled on the moors hours earlier, were armed with muskets, sticks, hatchets, and heavy blacksmith's hammers. When they reached the mill, those at the front broke windows to gain entry, and some fired shots into the darkened factory. But the mill's owner, William Cartwright, had been preparing for trouble.

During the previous twelve months, a wave of attacks had swept through textile factories across central and northern England. The unrest began in Nottinghamshire, where stocking knitters stormed their employers' premises and destroyed newfangled knitting frames, which they blamed for undercutting wages and reducing them to penury. These attacks spread to Lancashire, the heart of textile manufacturing, and to Yorkshire, where mill

owners had begun mechanizing the ancient craft of “dressing” woollen cloth—raising the nap and cutting it into finished pieces.

For centuries, the “shearers” or “croppers” who practiced this craft had formed something like an artisanal priesthood, raising the nap with the heads of teasel plants and finishing the cloth with handheld shears in a ritual of skill passed from father to son. Now came the machines—the gig mills with their cold metal rollers and the shearing frames that needed just one man turning a crank, like an organ grinder playing a funeral march for an entire way of life.

Cartwright had been staying in the mill overnight with employees and armed reservists from the Cumberland militia, one of many military units dispatched to centers of unrest. When the attack began, reservists opened fire while Cartwright’s men dropped rocks from the roof. Taken by surprise by the forceful resistance, the crowd quickly dispersed, leaving behind two seriously wounded young men, who died within forty-eight hours. At the inquest, a coroner issued a verdict of “justifiable homicide.”

In January, 1813, at York Castle, fourteen croppers stood trial for rioting and machine breaking, which Parliament had deemed a capital offense in the new Frame-Breaking Act. The court discharged some defendants but found five guilty. In other trials, nine more men were convicted. On January 16th, Yorkshire’s executioner hanged all fourteen condemned men. “I do not think any of them had a proper sense of the Crime they died for,” one witness recounted.

It isn’t clear where the term “Luddite” originated. Some accounts trace it to Ned Ludd, a textile worker who reportedly smashed a knitting frame in 1779. Others suggest that it may derive from folk memories of King Ludeca, a ninth-century Anglo-Saxon monarch who died in battle. Whatever the source, many machine breakers identified “General Ludd” as their leader. A couple of weeks after the Rawfolds attack, William Horsfall, another mill owner, was shot dead. A letter sent after Horsfall’s assassination—which hailed “the avenging of the death of the two brave youths who fell at the siege of Rawfolds”—began “By Order of General Ludd.”

The British government, at war with [Napoleon](#), regarded the Luddites as Jacobin insurrectionists and responded with brutal suppression. But this reaction stemmed from a fundamental misinterpretation. Far from being revolutionary, Luddism was a defensive response to the industrial capitalism that was threatening skilled workers' livelihoods. The Luddites weren't mindless opponents of technology but had a clear logic to their actions—an essentially conservative one. Since they had no political representation—until 1867, the British voting franchise excluded the vast majority—they concluded that violent protest was their only option. “The burning of Factorys or setting fire to the property of People we know is not right, but Starvation forces Nature to do that which he would not,” one Yorkshire cropper wrote. “We have tried every effort to live by Pawning our Cloaths and Chattles, so we are now on the brink for the last struggle.”

As alarm about artificial intelligence has gone global, so has a fascination with the Luddites. The British podcast “The Ned Ludd Radio Hour” describes itself as “your weekly dose of tech skepticism, cynicism, and absurdism.” Kindred themes are explored in the podcast “This Machine Kills,” co-hosted by the social theorist Jathan Sadowski, whose new book, [“The Mechanic and the Luddite,”](#) argues that the fetishization of A.I. and other digital technologies obscures their role in disciplining labor and reinforcing a profit-driven system. “Luddites want technology—the future—to work for all of us,” he told the [Guardian](#).

The technology journalist Brian Merchant makes a similar case in [“Blood in the Machine: The Origins of the Rebellion Against Big Tech”](#) (2023). Blending a vivid account of the original Luddites with an indictment of contemporary tech giants like Amazon and Uber, Merchant portrays the current wave of automation as part of a centuries-long struggle over labor and power. “Working people are staring down entrepreneurs, tech monopolies, and venture capital firms that are hunting for new forms of labor-saving tech—be it AI, robotics, or software automation—to replace them,” Merchant writes. “They are again faced with losing their jobs to the machine.”

Warnings about A.I.'s impact on employment have been amplified by studies predicting mass job displacement, including in white-collar fields

once thought immune to automation. A widely cited [McKinsey report](#), updated in 2024, estimates that technologies like generative A.I. “have the potential to automate work activities that absorb up to 70 percent of employees’ time today.” An earlier Goldman Sachs analysis projected that generative A.I. could put the equivalent of three hundred million full-time jobs at risk worldwide. One profession already seeing steep losses is computer programming, at which A.I. has proved especially adept; U.S.-government data indicate that more than a quarter of all programming jobs have disappeared in the past two years.

For a time, the standard economic view of A.I. was more optimistic. Historically, economists have associated major technological breakthroughs—such as the steam engine and electrification—with productivity growth that, in the long term, raises living standards. In “[The Second Machine Age](#)” (2014), the M.I.T. economists Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee argued that A.I. and robotics could play a role akin to that of the steam engine: “The key building blocks are already in place for digital technologies to be as important and transformational to society and the economy.”

At that time, generative A.I. was still in its infancy. But, in an article published in May, 2023, about six months after OpenAI released ChatGPT to the public, Brynjolfsson and his colleagues Martin Baily and Anton Korinek described how one of them had used the chatbot to accelerate research: after he entered a few plain-English prompts, “the system was able to provide a suitable economic model, draft code to run the model, and produce potential titles for the work. By the end of the morning, he had achieved a week’s worth of progress on his research.”

Raising economists’ productivity might not significantly affect the broader world, but the authors highlighted potential benefits across multiple disciplines, including mechanical engineering, materials science, chemistry, and robotics. “If cognitive workers are more efficient, they will accelerate technical progress and thereby boost the rate of productivity growth—in perpetuity,” they wrote. Their paper included a chart showing how A.I. could potentially double labor productivity and G.D.P. within twenty years under an optimistic scenario.

The economists acknowledged that a “bigger pie does not automatically mean everyone benefits evenly, or at all,” and cited studies on A.I.’s automation potential. Still, drawing lessons from previous technological transformations, they suggested that displaced workers would eventually find new employment: “Job destruction has always been offset by job creation.”

Recently, however, some prominent economists have offered darker perspectives. Daron Acemoglu, an M.I.T. economist and a Nobel laureate, told [MIT News](#) in December that A.I. was being used “too much for automation and not enough for providing expertise and information to workers.” In a subsequent article, he acknowledged A.I.’s potential to improve decision-making and productivity, but warned that it would be detrimental if it “ceaselessly eliminates tasks and jobs; overcentralizes information and discourages human inquiry and experiential learning; empowers a few companies to rule over our lives; and creates a two-tier society with vast inequalities and status differences.” In such a scenario, A.I. “may even destroy democracy and human civilization as we know it,” Acemoglu cautioned. “I fear this is the direction we are heading in.”

The Luddites grasped an essential truth: the factory system threatened their artisanal economy and livelihoods. This transformation was most dramatic in cotton manufacturing, as exemplified by Murrays’ Mills, in Manchester’s Ancoats neighborhood—a vast operation with eight-story buildings, steam engines, and more than twelve hundred workers. Visitors flocked to see the complex, which represented the new economy of its day.

Cotton manufacturing involved two stages: spinning fibres into yarn, then weaving yarn into fabric. Inventors like Richard Arkwright and James Hargreaves had mechanized spinning with various contraptions, but weaving initially remained too complex to automate. This technological imbalance actually increased demand for hand-loom weavers, whose numbers grew in Britain from thirty-seven thousand to two hundred and eight thousand between 1780 and 1812. Until about 1800, these weavers, many of whom worked from their homes, enjoyed rising incomes.

It was a temporary reprieve. In 1785, Edmund Cartwright patented a power loom, and though it was initially difficult to use, some Lancashire mill

owners began adopting steam-powered versions in the early eighteenth centuries. This development, combined with slumping global textile demand during the Napoleonic Wars, devastated weavers' livelihoods. From 1804 to 1810, their incomes plunged by more than forty per cent.

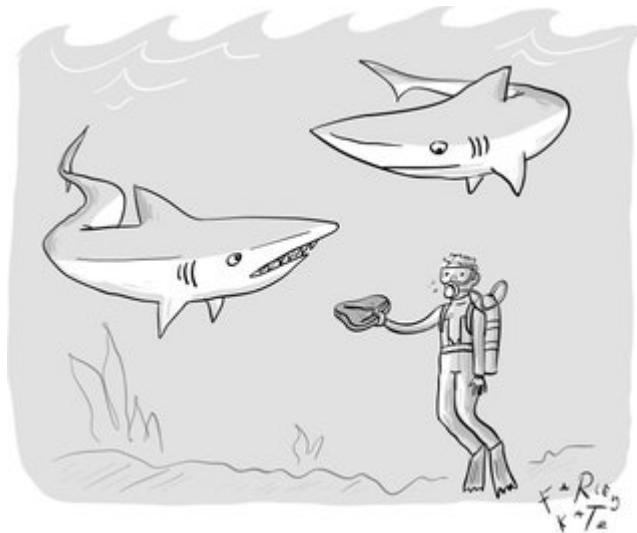
The weavers at first reacted peacefully, despite repressive laws that prohibited labor unions. They gathered a hundred and thirty thousand signatures petitioning Parliament for a minimum wage, which the House of Commons flatly rejected, in 1808. Strikes and riots followed across Lancashire towns. After authorities responded with mass arrests, weavers formed clandestine committees and took secret oaths. Violence escalated in March, 1812, when workers burned a factory in Stockport that had introduced power looms. The following month, crowds attacked a Middleton mill, resulting in three deaths and multiple injuries. When protesters returned the next day, they burned the mill owner's house after failing to enter the mill. Military confrontations left at least seven more dead.

These Luddite protests merged with broader discontent about wartime economic depression and rising living costs that pushed many workers toward starvation. Food riots erupted across northern England in the spring and summer of 1812. Mill owners received threatening letters, including one from "General Justice" that warned a Stockport businessman, "It is Not our Desire to doo you the Least Injury But We are fully Determined to Destroy Both Dressing Machines and Steam Looms."

Facing Britain's tight-knit ruling class and its willingness to deploy state violence, the Luddite movement gradually faded. By 1815, machine breaking had become rare, but the plight of the artisans remained dire. Hand-loom weavers suffered most severely—their wages, after briefly rebounding, collapsed permanently. By 1830, they had fallen by about eighty per cent compared with their levels in 1800. A parliamentary witness described visiting a starving family in a weaving village: "We there found on one side of the fire a very old man, apparently dying, on the other side a young man about eighteen with a child on his knee, whose mother had just died and been buried." Between 1820 and 1845, the number of weavers

plummeted from two hundred and forty thousand to sixty thousand, as many faced destitution.

However short-lived, Luddism was of immense historical significance, because it raised what came to be known as “the social question”—how to maintain the legitimacy of an economic system where workers create value yet remain subjugated to the vagaries of the market and the prerogatives of capitalism. This fundamental challenge would dominate nineteenth-century politics in all industrialized countries. As the historian E. P. Thompson noted six decades ago, in “[The Making of the English Working Class](#),” the Luddites weren’t simply opposing new machinery. They protested “the freedom of the capitalist to destroy the customs of the trade, whether by new machinery, by the factory-system, or by unrestricted competition, beating-down wages, undercutting his rivals, and undermining standards of craftsmanship.”



*“You want the little steak or the big steak?”*  
Cartoon by Farley Katz

The Luddites rejected the moral and political authority of a system that had abandoned long-held principles of fairness, quality, and mutual obligation. Under feudalism and mercantile capitalism, Britain’s rigid class structure placed the gentry at the top, merchants and professionals (such as doctors, parsons, and lawyers) in the middle, and the vast majority in the “lower orders.” Yet this social hierarchy was accompanied by labor-market regulations—both formal and informal—that provided some measure of reciprocity. Skilled trades were restricted to those who had undergone



apprenticeships, and in times of economic distress local authorities offered unemployed workers and their families “outdoor relief” in the form of food, money, and clothing.

Industrial capitalism, by contrast, ushered in a free-market ideology that emphasized employers’ rights and viewed government intervention—whether in wage regulation or in hiring and firing practices—with suspicion. As Thompson observed, Luddites “saw laissez-faire not as freedom, but as ‘foul Imposition.’ ” They rejected the idea that “one man, or a few men, could engage in practices which brought manifest injury to their fellows.”

Even technology optimists acknowledge that A.I. raises questions similar to those that the Luddites once posed. In a 2022 article in *Daedalus*, Erik Brynjolfsson argued that today’s key challenge is steering A.I. development toward augmenting the efforts of human workers rather than replacing them. “When AI augments human capabilities, enabling people to do things they never could before, then humans and machines are complements,” he wrote. “Complementarity implies that people remain indispensable for value creation and retain bargaining power in labor markets and political decision-making.”

That’s the hopeful scenario. But when A.I. automates human skills outright, Brynjolfsson warned, “machines become better substitutes for human labor,” while “workers lose economic and political bargaining power, and become increasingly dependent on those who control the technology.” In this environment, tech giants—which own and develop A.I.—accumulate vast wealth and power, while most workers are left without leverage or a path to improving their conditions. Brynjolfsson termed this dystopian outcome “the Turing Trap,” after the computing pioneer [Alan Turing](#).

So how do we increase the odds that A.I. works for us, rather than the other way around? Brynjolfsson, in his *Daedalus* article, suggested changing the tax system to give businesses more incentive to invest in technology that augments labor rather than replaces it. The problem, he pointed out, is that hiring humans comes with payroll taxes, while income from capital is typically taxed at a lower rate than labor, encouraging investment in machines. Fixing this imbalance, he argued, could nudge businesses toward

a more worker-friendly future. But would that be enough to push A.I. in a similar direction? Daron Acemoglu has argued for a more all-encompassing approach. So has a colleague of his at M.I.T., David Autor, who is one of the economists who charted how the so-called China shock—an avalanche of cheap imports from that country—gutted American manufacturing jobs. Lately, Autor has been thinking about A.I.’s social and economic impact.

When I spoke to him, he noted that the Chinese-import wave was devastating but contained: certain industries, like textiles and furniture, were hit hard, but much of the service sector remained untouched. A.I., by contrast, may well seep into nearly every corner of the workforce. “I think there is great opportunity,” Autor said. “I also think there is great risk.”

The opportunity lies in enabling scientific research and boosting productivity, Autor thinks. The biggest danger—and here he agrees with Brynjolfsson and Acemoglu—is that A.I. will take over not only routine tasks but also highly skilled work, eroding the value of human expertise and leaving people to handle whatever the machines can’t. That could mean an economy in which the owners of A.I. systems capture most of the rewards, and the rest of us are left with the scraps. But Autor is not entirely pessimistic. “There’s going to be a long period where there are a lot of A.I. systems acting as sophisticated tools to help us do the work we do,” he said. “We need to design for that world.”

The challenge, then, isn’t just understanding where A.I. is headed—it’s shaping its direction before the choices narrow. As an example of A.I.’s potential to play a socially productive role, Autor pointed to health care, now the largest employment sector in the U.S. If nurse practitioners were supported by well-designed A.I. systems, he said, they could take on a broader range of diagnostic and treatment responsibilities, easing the country’s shortage of M.D.s and lowering health-care costs. Similar opportunities exist in other fields, such as education and law, he argued. “The problem in the economy right now is that much of the most valuable work involves expert decision-making, monopolized by highly educated professionals who aren’t necessarily becoming more productive,” he said. “The result is that everyone pays a lot for education, health care, legal services, and design work. That’s fine for those of us providing these

services—we pay high prices, but we also earn high wages. But many people only consume these services. They're on the losing end."

If A.I. were designed to augment human expertise rather than replace it, it could promote broader economic gains and reduce inequality by providing opportunities for middle-skill work, Autor said. His great concern, however, is that A.I. is not being developed with this goal in mind. Instead of designing systems that empower human workers in real-world environments—such as urgent-care centers—A.I. developers focus on optimizing performance against narrowly defined data sets. "The fact that a machine performs well on a data set tells you little about how it will function in the real world," Autor said. "A data set doesn't walk into a doctor's office and say it isn't feeling well."

He cited a 2023 study showing that certain highly trained radiologists, when using A.I. tools, produced diagnoses that were less accurate, in part because they gave too much weight to inaccurate A.I. results. "The tool itself is very good, yet doctors perform worse with it," he said. His solution? Government intervention to insure that A.I. systems are tested in real-world conditions, with careful evaluation of their social impact. The broader goal, he argued, should be to enable workers without advanced degrees to take on high-value decision-making tasks. "But that message has to filter all the way down to the question of: How do we benchmark success?" he said. "I think it's feasible—but it's not simple."

One tool the federal government could use to shape A.I.'s development is its buying power. In health care alone, public money accounts for roughly forty per cent of expenditures, through Medicare, Medicaid, and the National Institutes of Health. Education is another sector where government funding exerts significant influence, as the Trump Administration is now demonstrating.

In Autor's ideal scenario, government agencies would leverage this influence by tying research grants and A.I. procurement to stricter requirements for product development and real-world testing. But this approach faces a major hurdle: in most industries, A.I. development is entirely privately funded, with profit as the primary driver and government directives often viewed as interference. Autor acknowledged the challenge.

The internet, he pointed out, was largely shaped by *DARPA*, the Pentagon's research arm, which steered its development by supporting open protocols. With A.I., "we have fewer levers than we did with previous technologies," he said. Still, he remained cautiously optimistic: "There's a ton of leverage there. I don't think it is out of our hands."

On February 27, 1812, the twenty-four-year-old poet [George Gordon Byron](#) rose in the House of Lords to deliver his maiden speech. Fresh from a grand tour of the Levant, he had returned to his mother's home, in Nottinghamshire, where local stocking knitters were smashing machinery in protest of falling wages and joblessness. The attacks were "outrages," Lord Byron told the assembled peers, but they were driven by "circumstances of the most unparalleled distress," caused by new knitting frames. Only desperation, he argued, could drive such an "honest and industrious body of the people" to violence. He also mocked the Frame-Breaking Act, which Parliament was then debating, along with its proposed capital punishments. "How will you carry the Bill into effect?" he asked. "Will you erect a gibbet in every field, and hang up men like scarecrows? Or will you proceed . . . by decimation? Place the country under martial law? Depopulate and lay waste all around you?"

Parliament ignored Byron's warning and responded with repression. It took decades for Britain's political system to acknowledge the deeper disruptions of industrialization. Eventually, it did—passing a series of Factory Acts that limited working hours and child labor; expanding public education; legalizing labor unions; and, by the early twentieth century, constructing a social safety net that included health and unemployment insurance.

With A.I. advancing at a far faster pace than the textile mechanization of Byron's era, today's policymakers will have much less time to respond. The rollout of automated driving systems alone threatens the jobs of an estimated 3.5 million American truck drivers and perhaps two million taxi-drivers, chauffeurs, and rideshare drivers. In a recent paper, Ege Erdil and Matthew Barnett, of the nonprofit research group Epoch AI, warned that such displacement—a "general automation explosion"—could provoke a big public backlash long before A.I. delivers more speculative transformations like rapid economic growth or extended human life spans.

Could we see protests akin to the Luddite attacks—this time targeting server farms instead of knitting frames? And how will the U.S. political system respond? In October, 2023, President Biden issued an executive order on A.I. that laid out broad goals—insuring safety, promoting “responsible innovation,” expanding job training—but offered little in the way of specific policy measures. Now A.I. regulation is in the hands of a President who claims to be both a champion of workers and an expert on automation. “I’ve studied automation and know just about everything there is to know about it,” Donald Trump declared in a December, 2024, social-media post, aligning himself with unionized dockworkers resisting automation at U.S. ports. “The amount of money saved is nowhere near the distress, hurt, and harm it causes for American Workers, in this case, our Longshoremen.” Trump’s Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, has said that the Administration’s priorities are job security and wage growth above all else. “The American Dream is not ‘let them eat flat screens,’ ” he said recently. It is “not contingent on cheap baubles” but buttressed on the dignity of work, the promise of a stable job, and the ability to afford a home.

This vision—rooted in economic nationalism and the rhetoric of an industrial-era social contract—stands in stark contrast to the techno-libertarian accelerationism of another key Trump ally. Elon Musk, who has been described as an unelected co-President, has declared that A.I. will eliminate most jobs and that societies will have to adopt a universal basic income (U.B.I.) to compensate. His company xAI has poured billions into developing its own A.I. model, Grok, and, as the de-facto head of Trump’s Department of Government Efficiency, he is pushing an “A.I.-first” strategy for federal agencies.

Yet if A.I. were to render work obsolete, as Musk predicts, the very economic foundation of the Bessent vision would collapse. Where would the tax revenue come from to fund a large-scale U.B.I.? Presumably, it would have to come from A.I. titans like Musk himself—who not only own the technology but also effectively own a lot of politicians, Trump included.

In other words, A.I.-based capitalism, if it is to maintain its political legitimacy, may well have to be accompanied by very high levels of

taxation on capital, which would, in effect, socialize the financial returns that the A.I. models generate. Perhaps this was what the A.I. pioneer [Geoffrey Hinton](#) was getting at during a recent interview when, on being asked about the economic policies needed to make A.I. work for everybody, he gave a one-word answer: “Socialism.”

In the late nineteenth century, it was the rise of socialism—and, ultimately, the threat of a workers’ revolution—that spurred the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to create the world’s first comprehensive social-insurance system, a model that other countries later adopted. Conceivably, a cross-party coalition of embattled professionals—middle managers, computer programmers, copywriters, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and so on—could force a preëemptive or at least a mitigating response to A.I. Right now, though, a coherent A.I. policy seems well-nigh inconceivable. The country is deeply polarized, the Trump Administration is slashing many of the federal agencies that would oversee any comprehensive approach, and the very notion of evidence-based policymaking is under threat.

“We would have handled this challenge better in the nineteen-seventies than we are handling it now—and that’s a very sad statement,” David Autor told me. “Ironically, I have less faith in our ability to manage it today than I would have had when we were a lower-tech society.” It wasn’t an irony he seemed to savor. “This is probably a bad moment for A.I. to appear,” he said. ♦

*This is drawn from “[Capitalism and Its Critics: A History: From the Industrial Revolution to AI](#).”*



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[A Reporter at Large](#)

# Starved in Jail

Why are incarcerated people dying from lack of food or water, even as private companies are paid millions for their care?

By [Sarah Stillman](#)

April 14, 2025



*Mary Faith Casey died after prolonged starvation in a county jail. “We know that Mary is one of many,” her sister said. Illustration by Adam Maida*

Carlin Casey first considered the idea of human starvation when he was seven years old. Back then, in 1992, his mother, Mary, read aloud to him and his little sister, Karina, from an unusual bedtime story, Anne Frank’s “Diary of a Young Girl.” The family led a life of relative abundance. At their pueblo-style home in California’s Coachella Valley, Mary blasted Madonna in the kitchen as she made her kids burgers or big plates of spaghetti, lighting candles and burning essential oils (“for the vibes,” Carlin told me). Curled up in bed, listening to his mother describe Anne Frank’s privations, Carlin wondered, what was it like to experience a hunger so cutting? “Now, when I look back on it,” Carlin said recently, “I think maybe that was my mom’s way of trying to warn me—trying to prepare me for how cruel the world can be.”

The memory returned to Carlin years later, in August of 2022, when his then partner, Eric, drove him to Banner-University Medical Center, in Tucson, Arizona. The pair walked into the emergency room. There, Carlin found his mother, looking skeletal in a hospital bed, wearing a diaper. When he’d last seen her, that spring, Mary was a healthy hundred and forty-five



pounds, her cheeks bright. Now she was so emaciated that Carlin gasped. “She looks like a famine victim,” he told Eric. He stepped closer.

Mary’s hair—once long and lustrous, a lifelong point of pride—was matted to her head, Carlin noticed. She weighed ninety-one pounds.

“What happened to you, Mom?” Carlin asked.

Mary could barely speak. She worried that Carlin wasn’t actually Carlin. She’d spent the whole night screaming in pain and fear. Her jailers, she believed, might come back for her. “You don’t understand,” she told her son, who she thought might be a robot, or a co-conspirator. “They’ll do whatever they want!”

Carlin told his mom that he would investigate. He’d figure out how she had wound up in such a dire condition, and he’d identify who, exactly, was responsible.

“They aren’t going to let you,” Mary replied. She tried to weep, but her body was too dehydrated to make tears.

Carlin had no idea he was stepping into a scandal that involved health-care corporations with, in at least one case, an annual revenue of roughly a billion dollars—a scandal that implicated core institutions of American public life and affected a shocking number of victims across the country. At its worst, the wrongdoing involved state-sponsored homicides of the most vulnerable citizens, covered up by private companies and county officials.

At the hospital, Carlin had a conviction he later came to regard as painfully naïve: that he could expose whatever horrible thing had happened to his mom, and put a stop to it.

“You wait and see,” he told Mary. Carlin trusted that he could bring about a reckoning.

*More information can be found at [Starved for Care](#).*

Growing up, in San Diego, Mary Faith Casey could easily access delight. She'd accompany her mother, an amateur astronomer, to the planetarium, or spend long days with her older sister Michelle, climbing around the exhibits at the natural-history museum in Balboa Park, where their mom had a job playing reel-to-reel films. In high school, Mary grew interested in fashion. She'd sew miniskirts and halter-top dresses out of glittery fabrics she bought at a thrift shop, and she wore her shiny blond hair past her waist. Michelle noticed Mary's depth of feeling. "She was a very sensitive, very kindhearted child, and empathetic to the point of extremes," Michelle said. "She was also naïve to her physical beauty, so I often felt I needed to protect her."

The girls' mother, Phyllis, struggled with bipolar episodes, so Mary lived with her father, who'd served in the Air Force and worked in supercomputing. Mary's siblings were scattered across various living arrangements. As Mary and Michelle grew older, they would visit their mom every other weekend in Pacific Beach, where the girls would walk to the ocean and sometimes hitchhike home without Phyllis seeming to mind. "It was Mary who fought to keep us together as a family," Michelle said. "That was her rescuer instinct."

When Mary reached her mid-twenties, her life took a glamorous turn. She fell in love with a handsome tennis player who coached celebrities at a local country club; they soon got married. The newlyweds designed a comfortable home, filled with Mexican pottery and delicate, cactus-patterned tile, and surrounded by bougainvillea blossoms and palm trees. Mary gave birth to Carlin in 1985, and to Karina four years later. The young couple went to parties at desert estates, for which Mary would blow-dry her feathered bangs and wear bedazzled jackets with shoulder pads. Through her husband's tennis coaching, the two sparked a friendship with the Nike founder Phil Knight and his wife, who flew the couple to Europe on their private jet. In the summertime, the Caseys travelled to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where the kids splashed around in Hayden Lake and rode Jet Skis with their mom.

Mary's personality began to palpably shift as the kids approached adolescence. Mary had brought her mother, who had suffered multiple

mental-health crises, to live with the family; Phyllis then fell ill with metastatic lung cancer, and Mary served as her caretaker. Mary's marriage deteriorated, and after her mother died, in 2000, she became severely depressed. Mary had experienced previous mental-health dips—two bouts of postpartum depression, for instance. But this time she began drinking heavily, and developed a new volatility from which she couldn't seem to return. "Before, she'd have outbursts, but she could always get back into mom mode," Michelle told me.

Mary and her husband divorced in the early two-thousands, when the kids were in their teens, and sold their house in the desert. Karina had gone to live with her dad, and Carlin with Mary's younger sister Kaj. After her marriage ended, Mary fell for one physically abusive man after another. "It was self-punishment," Michelle said. Mary lived off the funds from the sale of the house for a while, but soon she found herself sleeping in women's shelters and hotels, and she landed in jail on vagrancy charges. She had been diagnosed as having bipolar disorder and was later diagnosed as having schizophrenia. At times, she went on medication and, to family members, seemed more like her old self. But she was bothered by the attendant weight gain and lethargy. "I feel half dead, and I can't be creative," she'd tell Michelle. So she'd let her medication slip. Initially, Mary would have a flash of pleasure as "the natural high of her mania returned," Michelle told me; she could stay up late using her collection of gel pens to craft vibrantly colored cards for people she loved. Inevitably, though, the same cycle of addiction and incarceration would repeat.



*"I don't want him to stop binge-watching and find you here."  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham*

From jail, Mary would send sweet letters to her kids, festooned with hearts and stickers. "I love you," she'd write Karina, "with the heart of a lion." She'd often include an earnest token of maternal care: a rectangular card that promised, "This coupon entitles Karina to mucho hugs and kisses," or a "Prayer for Stress" that read, "Quiet my anxious thoughts." Both her children struggled. When friends from high school asked Karina where her mom was, she'd keep it vague—"San Diego," she'd say. She and Carlin held out hope that their "real mom" would return: the good-natured woman who'd sewn their Halloween costumes by hand (a green T. rex for Carlin one year, and a sequined disco queen for Karina), and who, whenever they were sick, held a Gatorade bottle to their lips and a washcloth to their foreheads. "When she was on her medication, her daily life was completely different," Karina told me. "We could tell right away when she'd been off it. She'd go into a tunnel, and we had to protect ourselves."

By the time the pandemic began, Mary, in her early sixties, was homeless. Carlin, now in his thirties, had recently moved to Tucson, and Mary followed him there. Carlin found this stressful. "She was good at disturbing my peace," he told me. She hallucinated that Carlin had been kidnapped and tried to break into his home to rescue him. Police arrived at the scene, interviewed Mary, and let her go, but she wound up in police custody again the next day, after assaulting a man who'd tried to help her. She was

released on probation, the terms of which required her to maintain an approved residential address. But Mary lacked a job and slept in a tent encampment in a park. She hadn't fully processed that, in Tucson, her homelessness could be treated as a crime.

On April 30th, 2022, a security guard at a local business plaza called the police to report Mary as a nuisance. The police found an outstanding warrant for Mary, tied to her failure to register her address. Officers arrested her on a probation violation and drove her to the Pima County Jail.

Mary declared her mental-health troubles to jail-intake officials. An administrator logged her as “alert,” “responsive,” and “cooperative,” and recorded her affect as “flat.” Soon afterward, she told a nurse that she was “extremely disappointed” with herself, and was suffering from severe depression. When Michelle, who lived in Encinitas, California, learned of her sister's latest arrest, she reached out right away to Mary's public defender, Darlene Edminson, saying, “Tell Mary we love her, and we'll do what we can to help.” Michelle and Kaj felt certain that they'd hear from Mary soon. Instead, the family was met with “radio silence,” Michelle told me. “That was the beginning of the end.”

If you've ever considered calling for help during a loved one's mental-health crisis, you'll know the potential terror of getting law enforcement involved. People with untreated mental-health issues are sixteen times more likely to be killed during a police encounter than others approached by law enforcement, according to the Treatment Advocacy Center, a nonprofit that works on behalf of people with severe mental illness. Your friend or family member might get harmed by police, or they might get jailed in the midst of a psychiatric episode—a far more common outcome than a police killing, but one that can also prove lethal. “This could honestly happen to anyone,” Carlin told me. “Mental illness doesn't care how wealthy you are.”

For decades, America relied heavily on psychiatric asylums to treat—or, in many cases, to warehouse and neglect—people with serious mental-health conditions. Then the grand project of “deinstitutionalization” began. In signing the 1963 Community Mental Health Act, President John F. Kennedy promised that dysfunctional asylums would be emptied out and replaced with a robust, well-funded network of outpatient-treatment providers and

community behavioral-health services. But the funding for that vision never materialized. Instead, new policies criminalizing poverty and addiction swept up people in severe psychiatric distress, who often ended up in county jail—where, with the rise of the cash-bail system, they might languish for months or even years, simply awaiting their day in court. The number of people jailed pretrial has nearly quadrupled since the nineteen-eighties; people with mental-health issues tend to be detained significantly longer than the rest of the population. Today, the nation's three largest mental-health providers are New York's Rikers Island, L.A. County's Twin Towers Jail, and Chicago's Cook County Jail. According to a recent report by the Pima County administrator, more than half the people locked up at the local jail have, like Mary, a mental-health condition that requires medication.

After Mary was arrested, Michelle and Kaj bought her items from the commissary online: a tube of cocoa-butter lotion, a pack of playing cards, some Kraft jalapeño spread, a flour tortilla, and a pair of reading glasses. Mary's family also tried to put money in her online account for virtual messaging, but they were told that she wasn't eligible for the service. Weeks passed, and Mary remained incommunicado. She had entered some mysterious vortex.

In May, Mary's jailers brought her to a court appearance, where she admitted to her failure to reside at an approved address; the court found her in violation of her probation and sent her back to jail to await sentencing. Her jailers didn't bring her to subsequent mandatory court dates, including a hearing in late July, to determine if she was mentally competent to be sentenced.

Finally, on August 16, 2022, nearly four months after her arrest, Mary entered the courtroom in a wheelchair. The judge had no inkling of Mary's former radiance. Still, he seemed stunned by her skeletal frame.

"What are we going to do, Mary?" Judge Howard Fell asked. Mary, who'd been chatty and energetic just months earlier, was too far gone to speak.

"She is, as you can see, a shell," Edminson, her public defender, said. "She needs care immediately. She looks like she's dying, Your Honor."

Fell said, “I know.” He set aside Mary’s charges and sent her to the emergency room. There, doctors began an effort to save her.

Carlin and Karina hastened to the hospital, with Karina driving from the Coachella Valley, where she still lived. Mary looked, as Carlin put it, “like a Holocaust person.” Her legs and feet were covered with open sores. She moaned, “Torture!,” and cried out, “I don’t have an esophagus!”

For nearly a month, the hospital tried to bring Mary back to life. Then its ethics committee convened to discuss her case. When Mary was admitted, she had been suffering from “severe” malnutrition, a physician noted. Any further interventions on her behalf, the committee concluded, would be “medically futile.” Mary was released to hospice care. The family loaded her into a rented van and took off for Kaj’s house, in San Diego. Karina was, like her mother, an unrelenting optimist. “She’ll recover,” she told herself. “How could she not?”

Carlin had begun to investigate his mother’s fate. “I kept wondering, who was working in the jail, and why weren’t they doing their job correctly?” he told me. He eventually learned that her medical care at the Pima County Jail wasn’t handled by the county alone. Instead, the county had contracted with a private company, an Alabama-based firm called NaphCare. “We can’t just let this slide,” Carlin told his partner, Eric. “This company’s treatment is absolutely careless.”

Eric, a former paralegal who sold purses online, was doing his own research. The more he learned, the more appalled he was by the corporate model for correctional health care. Local jails, as the holding pens for people whom our society would seem to want to disappear, tend to be governed by a simple philosophy: Let’s spend as little as we can. But the severe medical and mental-health needs of the jailed population make this a daunting task. Jail deaths, too, pose a steep cost; they often lead to litigation.

Since the seventies, private companies have offered a solution by taking health care out of the counties’ hands. Often, a company like NaphCare signs a contract with a county to provide medical and mental-health care at a capped cost; any additional money expended on care comes out of the

corporation's earnings. The companies often try to control their costs by understaffing, Eric concluded from his research. According to a 2020 examination of jail-death data by Reuters, jails that provided health care through the top five companies in that market—including NaphCare—had death rates that were eighteen to fifty-eight per cent higher than those of jails whose medical services were publicly managed. Of the five companies studied, NaphCare had the highest death rate across a three-year period. Eric spent nights at his laptop, downloading legal filings against NaphCare that alleged horrific deaths from neglect or substandard care. “I kept wondering, why on earth did Pima County hire them?” Eric said.



*Mary with her son. Photograph courtesy Mike Casey*

Eric had an idea for Carlin: they should file a “notice of claim” against Pima County officials, asking them to preserve all records tied to the case. Eric wrote up a twenty-four-page notice to the county; in it, he asserted that NaphCare was a “clear and present danger” to people with health problems in the Pima County Jail. He wondered what would happen if the facility in



question were an amusement park or a day-care center. What if, year after year, such a place “continued operating in this manner, with this level of human misery, neglect, and death”? The answer, Eric wrote, was obvious: “It would be shut down in a heartbeat.” (A spokesperson for NaphCare said, “Our goal is transparency, and we have a robust mortality and morbidity review process. We have taken over healthcare operations for many of the most challenging correctional facilities in the nation, and we have lowered the rate of mortality in those locations over time.” The Pima County Sheriff’s Department declined to comment for this story.)

After filing the notice, Eric turned to finding the Casey family a lawyer. He compiled a list of twenty potential firms. One, a small practice in Seattle called Budge & Heipt, was unusually seasoned in holding corporations and counties accountable for jail neglect.

“This isn’t our first rodeo with NaphCare,” Erik Heipt told Carlin and Eric, on an early call. His firm was representing the family of a fifty-five-year-old named Cindy Lou Hill in a lawsuit against NaphCare; Hill had died of a ruptured intestine while awaiting trial in Spokane, Washington, after abysmal care at the county jail. (NaphCare was ordered to pay roughly twenty-seven million dollars in damages; the company has appealed the judgment.) “This is a multibillion-dollar industry dominated by a few major players,” Heipt’s colleague, Ed Budge, explained. “NaphCare is one—they were getting nearly eighteen million a year to provide medical and mental-health care at the Pima County Jail.”

The firm also had experience with cases involving starvation. Recently, Budge & Heipt had represented the parents of an eighteen-year-old named Marc Moreno. Marc’s father had taken him to a county mental-health crisis center during a serious episode. A counsellor there found Marc talking to angels and turned him over to police for a ride to the hospital. Instead, officers took him to the county jail, on two outstanding misdemeanor warrants for a traffic violation. The jail, which had outsourced its medical care to a private company that’s now called Wellpath, put Marc in an isolation cell and took little action when he stopped eating and drinking. He died eight days later, of dehydration; records show that he had lost thirty-

eight pounds. (Wellpath settled the case for four and a half million dollars, but did not admit wrongdoing.)

Budge & Heipt started representing the families of people who'd been neglected by jail medical staff in 2003. "For the first fifteen years of doing this work, we weren't contending with the trend of privatization," Heipt said. "Now the corporate presence is the norm, and sometimes the operations of the entire jail can be private." The firm was inundated with such cases, and could litigate only two or three each year. The intake form the lawyers had received about Mary Faith Casey stood out. Most of all, the lawyers noticed the precipitous drop in Mary's weight under county custody. Heipt recalled thinking that this was the *res ipsa loquitur* of the case. He told me, "In Latin, it means 'The thing speaks for itself.' "

After leaving the Tucson hospital, Mary's family set up a nursing station for her at her sister Kaj's house. There, Karina mirrored her mother's nurturance from years before: she pressed a washcloth to Mary's face, and held Gatorade to her lips. Karina painted Mary's toenails fuchsia, and cooed sweetly, "Are you a little kitty cat?," as she curled up beside her mom and stroked her head.

"Slowly, she became more trusting," Karina remembered. "She'd say, 'I really want a quesadilla,' and I'd make it for her." At night, Karina slept beside Mary, just as they'd done in the Coachella Valley.

That first week after Mary's release proved oddly healing for Karina. Mary apologized for how out of control her life had become. Karina said, "I'm not mad at you, Mom." She fixed Mary's rat's-nest hair, which required a pixie cut that made them both laugh. Karina's aunts also doted on Mary, bringing her Pringles and poundcake. "I think all of the women around her made her feel safe," Karina told me.

On a Thursday evening, Karina was eating Chips Ahoy! cookies when her mom said, "I want some!" Karina was glad to hear it; she fed the cookies straight into Mary's mouth. "She was so happy," Karina said, recalling how they'd both giggled as they snacked. The next morning, Mary did not wake up.

The coroner's office arrived that afternoon. As two men hauled Mary's body to a van, a country song by Chris Stapleton, "You Should Probably Leave," played on a portable radio that Kaj had bought for Mary:

I know you, and you know me,  
And we both know where this is gonna lead.  
You want me to say that I want you to stay,  
So you should probably leave.

The exit music felt fitting to Karina. Mary's cause of death was found to be protein-calorie malnutrition, an apparent result of her prolonged starvation in the county jail. Now, Karina and Carlin both felt, the work of understanding what had happened to their mother could begin in earnest. How many others might have starved to death?

During the past year, I found it hard to explain, to family and friends, a strange truth. I was reporting on places where starvation and dehydration deaths had unfolded across a span of weeks or months—but these were not overseas famine zones or traditional theatres of war. Instead, they were sites of domestic lawlessness: American county jails. After meeting Carlin and Karina, I identified and scrutinized more than fifty cases of individuals who, in recent years, had starved to death, died of dehydration, or lost their lives to related medical crises in county jails. In some cases, hundreds of hours of abusive neglect were captured on video, relevant portions of which I reviewed. One lawyer, before sharing a confidential jail-death video, warned me, "It will stain your brain." It did.

The victims were astoundingly diverse. Some, like Mary, were older. Some were teen-agers. Some were military veterans. Many were parents. In nearly all the cases I reviewed, the individuals were locked up pretrial, often on questionable charges. Many were being held in jail because they could not afford bail, or because their mental state made it hard for them to call family to express their need for it. (These jail deaths would not have occurred, several lawyers pointed out to me, in the absence of the cash-bail system.) Others were awaiting psychiatric evaluation or a court-mandated hospital bed. Often, the starvation victims were held in solitary confinement or other forms of isolation, which is well proved to deepen psychosis. Some

were given no toilet and no functioning faucet, or were expected to sleep on mats on concrete floors, in rooms where the lights never turned off.

My search for these cases began with a tip about Mary's death. From there, I set out to answer Carlin and Karina's question: Was their mother's starvation an anomaly, or a sign of something larger? I came upon another case, and then another. Eventually—after interviewing more than a hundred sources nationwide, visiting with surviving families, travelling to jails in Michigan, Louisiana, Arizona, and Tennessee, and uncovering thousands of legal records, from medication logs to autopsy reports—I'd accumulated a file that included deaths from starvation, dehydration, and neglect in county jails across nearly every part of the country.



*"Look, I'm a big-picture guy. I say 'Let there be light,' you guys figure out if it's a wave or a particle."*

*Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz*

One victim, a thirty-eight-year-old mother named Shannon Hanchett, ran a beloved bakery in Norman, Oklahoma, where locals called her the Cookie Queen. A lawsuit alleged that she died after being locked in a processing cell where she lacked sufficient water and hardly ate for eleven days. She'd been arrested during a mental-health episode at a cellphone store. According to medical records I reviewed, she'd lost thirty pounds while in jail.

Another victim, Keaton Farris, was a twenty-five-year-old nature enthusiast from Lopez Island, off the coast of Washington State, near my parents' home. Keaton had a supportive family and an exuberant mind. "He loved getting his hands dirty in the garden, and he was a flower guy," his father,

Fred, told me. Online, Keaton gushed about his love of the Salish Sea, beside which I'd spent many days as a teen: "Thanks sea, for being so big, blue and neat. You too Sun, for your brilliant awesomeness." He died of dehydration and malnutrition at the Island County Jail, in northwestern Washington. Jail officials had cut off the water to his cell for four days. Keaton's death was a reminder that not all the cases involved jails that outsourced medical care to private companies. The sheriff of Island County, Mark Brown, apologized to Fred and acknowledged, in a public report, that his own staff was responsible. Fred told me that, both before the apology and after, he had protested regularly outside the jail, often joined by a crowd.

Nearly every starvation or dehydration victim had been arrested in the midst of a mental-health crisis, often on petty charges tied to their psychiatric distress. In Jackson County, Indiana, Budge & Heipt reached settlements with the county and a private medical contractor, Advanced Correctional Healthcare, on behalf of the family of a twenty-nine-year-old victim named Josh McLemore. McLemore's family had sought help when he was having a particularly bad episode of schizophrenia, and an ambulance took him to a hospital. But McLemore pulled a nurse's hair. A security guard saw the incident and called the police, who arrested him. According to the family's lawsuit, no medical or mental-health intake was performed at the jail, and McLemore, who was held in a windowless cell, began to fear food and water. In three weeks, he lost forty-five pounds. At that point, a staff member tried to get him medical attention, but it was too late. McLemore died of starvation and multiple organ failure. (Both the county and Advanced Correctional Healthcare denied wrongdoing.)

Several of the people whose cases I examined were, like Mary, criminalized for being unhoused, or for falling asleep where they weren't allowed to do so. In Florida, a twenty-three-year-old named William Herring was arrested for sleeping on a bus-stop bench. He lost eighteen pounds in fifteen days in the Broward County Jail, where Armor Correctional Health Services was the health-care contractor, before dying of what the medical examiner deemed suicide by way of "prolonged fasting." Alan Thibodeau, a single father who had been his parents' caretaker, got arrested during a mental-health episode in which he wandered into a stranger's home and fell asleep.

“This was so, so preventable,” his family’s lawyer, James B. Moore III, told me, explaining that Alan had entered the jail at a hundred and seventy-eight pounds; he died there, under the care of a private medical company called Southern Health Partners, weighing barely a hundred. “He had a really strong support group and family who loved him,” Moore said. “He didn’t fit the profile you might assume.” (Armor and Southern Health Partners did not respond to requests for comment.)

One symptom of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and other mental-health conditions can be a refusal to eat and drink. According to a paper recently published in a peer-reviewed medical journal, “food refusal” and starvation are “an important but underappreciated consequence” of psychosis. In county jails, people suffering from acute mental-health distress sometimes stop eating; they may fear, as Mary did, that their jailers are trying to poison them. Others simply decompensate to the point that the simplest acts of self-care, including eating and drinking, become impossible. When people like Mary are deprived of proper psychiatric medications, therapy, and other treatments, and placed in restrictive confinement, incidents of starvation and dehydration aren’t anomalies. Instead, they are predictable medical emergencies, requiring swift intervention by trained clinicians. “When someone in a jail stops eating or drinking, it’s extremely dangerous,” Craig Haney, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, told me. “It’s a crisis that requires moving someone immediately out of solitary confinement, or out of a traditional jail setting, and into a psychiatric facility, for close clinical care and observation.”

Together with Eliza Fawcett and Matt Nadel, at the Investigative Reporting Lab at Yale, I identified more than twenty private correctional-health-care companies that were responsible for providing care in jails where deaths from alleged neglect occurred. As Moore put it to me, “The private medical providers have different names, but it’s the same results.”

Moore told me that many of these companies’ psychiatrists meet with ailing inmates virtually, from out of state, for only a matter of minutes, leaving entry-level nurses to oversee care in the jails. “You can’t have a licensed practical nurse running a jail for three hundred people who have more

mental-health needs than ever before in history,” he said. “It generates profit for providers. But it’s designed to fail.”

Other legal experts told me something similar. “Right now, we have multiple starvation cases, and multiple dehydration cases, too,” Dan Smolen, a civil-rights attorney in Tulsa, Oklahoma, said. “I believe this is the civil-rights violation of our lifetime.”

Smolen stressed that the wrongful-death lawsuits against private medical providers in jails may represent only a small fraction of cases. “A lot of these deaths go unreported,” he said. Sometimes the victims get transferred to a hospital after they lose consciousness in their cells; the resulting fatalities usually get left out of jail-death logs, as Mary’s was. Other times, the responsible parties engage in active subterfuge. In a half-dozen cases I examined, companies or counties falsified records, deleted crucial surveillance videos, or purposely purged documents. After Marc Moreno’s death, for instance, a judge censured Wellpath (then called Correct Care Solutions) for “obstruction of the truth through the permanent deletion of countless emails”; the company, the judge noted, had “decided to begin a new document destruction policy in the middle of litigation over a teenager’s death.”

What’s more, jail-death data are surprisingly hard to obtain. In most states, the details are not publicly accessible. When my colleagues at the Investigative Reporting Lab and I filed more than two dozen public-records requests with local sheriffs, many stonewalled us; most didn’t seem to keep clear data on starvation cases. We sought detailed records, for instance, on any fatalities in Los Angeles County jails since 2015 that showed a cause of death related to dehydration or starvation, offering up a long list of search terms. We heard back from the sheriff’s department: it was “unable to identify any records as responsive” to the request. But, when it later provided a list of all in-custody jail deaths in the county, we discovered cases such as that of Sergio Silva, who, at thirty-three, died of “dehydration due to history of mental confusion.” (His cause of death was listed as “natural.” So, too, we found, are the vast majority of starvation and dehydration deaths in jails.) We also requested a list of inmate deaths at the Pima County Jail since 2019 associated with a similarly long list of search

terms, and we asked that, if such data were not available, we be given a list of all deaths by natural causes or else all jail deaths. The sheriff's department replied, "We do not have any inmate deaths that meet this criteria." We later discovered that at least twelve people, most of them under fifty, had died of "natural causes" during the time span we'd specified. Where had the evidence of these deaths gone?

Starvation deaths, though often unreported, do not go unwitnessed in jails. "These deaths are so prolonged, with tons of people observing them, and each death could easily be stopped at any point in the time line," Smolen said. "So it's crazy that that many people would allow this to happen."

In such cases, law-enforcement officers—but also, at times, doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel, mostly working for private corporations—watch for days, weeks, and months as ailing people waste away in their care. Many of these deaths could have been prevented by providing people like Mary with their required prescriptions, or by insuring that they were able to attend their court dates (which, quite often, might have led to their release). Even once the victims stopped eating or drinking, they still might have been saved by swift clinical intervention and psychiatric hospitalization. Most of the victims' names likely remain unknown. As Eric, Carlin's former partner, put it to me, "I often think about how rare it was that Mary at least had a family that was in a position to file a legal claim."

Sometimes the victims screamed out for help or for water. Holly Barlow-Austin did both in the days before she died, at forty-seven, in the Bi-State Justice Center, in Texarkana, Texas. Barlow-Austin had serious health issues that the jail's private operator and medical contractor, LaSalle Corrections, neglected to treat, leading to sudden blindness. She found it difficult to locate the food and water in her cell and began to go without it. In jail footage that I reviewed, obtained by Budge & Heipt, she realized that she'd knocked over a precious cup of water with her foot, tried to drink from it, and curled up in a fetal position when she found that it was empty. Another day, she screamed and waved her arms, seeking help from a nurse. The nurse looked at her, then left, jotting, according to records, "0 needs voiced" and "0 distress noted." Barlow-Austin died the following week, of



meningitis and other complications. (LaSalle Corrections and other defendants agreed to a seven-million-dollar settlement.)

In some instances, these individuals suffered a fate I would have thought impossible in the twenty-first-century United States: they were left to be fed on by insects and rodents. The body of Lason Butler, a twenty-seven-year-old dehydration victim in South Carolina, showed “possible postmortem rodent activity.” (According to a civil lawsuit, Butler’s mother had tried to contact her son; a corrections officer allegedly told her, “All we can do is pray for him.”) In Memphis, Tennessee, I visited the jail where Ramon McGhee died, at forty-two. McGhee’s mother had purchased pizza and hamburgers for him from the jail’s commissary. She told me that McGhee didn’t receive the meals, or his psychiatric medication. According to McGhee’s preliminary autopsy report, he was plagued with “extensive insect infestation.”



*“If anyone asks, I’m taking a power nap, not a catnap.”*  
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Our President has come unusually close to one site of this scandal. In the summer of 2023, Donald J. Trump rolled up in his motorcade to the Fulton County Jail, in Atlanta, Georgia. He was booked and fingerprinted on multiple felony charges, as Inmate No. P01135809. Last spring, a fundraising e-mail contained a signed personal statement from Trump describing his experience. “I want you to remember what they did to me,” it read. “They tortured me in the Fulton County Jail, and *TOOK MY MUGSHOT.*”

Trump wasn't wrong about the Fulton County Jail's capacity for torture. The previous year, a thirty-five-year-old named Lashawn Thompson had been sent, pretrial, to the jail, where NaphCare was the medical provider. Thompson, who was assigned to the mental-health unit, never made it out. Malnourished, dehydrated, and deprived of his prescribed medications, he died of neglect, including "severe body insect infestation."

"Those circumstances were far from isolated," Kristen Clarke, then an Assistant Attorney General at the U.S. Department of Justice, said in July, 2023, as she announced a civil-rights investigation into the jail's conditions. "Following Mr. Thompson's death, evidence emerged that the mental-health unit where he died was infested with insects and that the majority of people living in that unit were malnourished and not receiving basic care." According to an internal NaphCare report, every single person in the mental-health unit—some hundred individuals—suffered from lice, scabies, or both. "Greater than 90% of affected inmates were significantly malnourished with obvious muscle wasting," the report continued. This January, the D.O.J. sued Fulton County for the jail's "abhorrent, unconstitutional" conditions; the county agreed, in a settlement, that the jail would come under federal oversight.

NaphCare remains the jail's medical provider, and received nearly thirty-seven million dollars from Fulton County last year. The company's C.E.O., Brad McLane, told me that the jail was "one of the most difficult places we've operated," and that "the safety and security issues were severe." He added that NaphCare had been responsible for bringing many of the abuses there to light: "We sounded the alarm over the issues that we were seeing, as far as the lice, scabies, and ectoparasites, multiple times," McLane said. "I believe we're doing better, but we had some periods of time where we were at the point of 'If this doesn't change, we have to just end this contract and leave.' "

Fulton County is hardly unique. What I found in a year of studying deaths related to starvation, dehydration, and neglect is hard to describe as anything other than a pattern of widespread torture of people with mental-health issues in county jails. In Shannon Hanchett's case, Smolen, who filed the lawsuit, watched more than a hundred hours of footage from her last

eleven days of life, at a jail in Cleveland County, Oklahoma, where health care was provided by Turn Key Health Clinics, which has since rebranded as TK Health. During this time, the Cookie Queen, a mother of two, had been placed in a concrete cell with no toilet, sink, or bed, where she fell deeper into psychosis. At one point, Smolen said, no one opened the door to Hanchett's cell for five days straight. She was rarely given water and discarded much of her food. Finally, jail staff found her naked and unresponsive on the floor. Smolen told me that he watched as jail and medical staff mocked Hanchett, laughed at her, and dragged her from one place to another, semiconscious, to determine what to do about her condition. They left her in a medical cell with a cup of Gatorade, which she was unable to drink. According to a nurse's records I reviewed, Hanchett stated, "They are going to kill me." The next day, she was found dead. According to the *Oklahoman*, a state medical examiner ruled her cause of death as "natural," likely caused by a heart defect with dehydration as a contributing factor. (A judge initially indicated that, without additional evidence, he would dismiss Smolen's lawsuit; after obtaining the sealed surveillance footage, Smolen filed an amended complaint describing what he'd seen. A representative for TK Health told us the company could not discuss details of the case but "vehemently disagrees" with the complaint's assertions. The Cleveland County Sheriff's Office did not respond to a request for comment.)

In some cases that I scrutinized, medical examiners concluded that the death was a homicide. In San Diego, Lonnie Rupard, a forty-seven-year-old father who was arrested on a parole violation, died at the county jail after losing a third of his body weight amid untreated psychological distress. "While elements of self-neglect were present," the medical examiner ruled, "ultimately this decedent was dependent upon others for his care; therefore, the manner of death is classified as a homicide." After the dehydration death of thirty-eight-year-old Terrill Thomas, in a Milwaukee jail, three staff members were criminally prosecuted for having left Thomas without water for a week; they reached plea deals that involved jail time. In a highly unusual twist, the medical contractor involved, Armor Correctional Health Services, was also criminally prosecuted, successfully, on seven counts of intentionally falsifying medical records and one count of abusing or neglecting a resident in a penal institution.



*Mary with her daughter. Photograph courtesy Kaj Miller*

Increasingly, families have argued that their loved ones' deaths should be recognized as killings—or even as intentional murders. Such was the case for Rodney Price, who devoted his life to working in California prisons as a corrections officer, only to have his own brother, Larry, die of starvation and dehydration in solitary confinement in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Larry, who suffered from schizophrenia, owed a hundred dollars to get out on bond.

Rodney had always valued his older brother's "loved" attitude: how he enjoyed imitating the Three Stooges and sharing jokes and updates from Fort Smith, where they'd grown up. When Rodney saw the autopsy photographs of Larry, he told me, "it blew my brains open." Rodney had, as part of his job, monitored prison conditions to insure that people with mental-health issues were placed in proper, legal confinement. Now he flew back to his home town to interview county officials and detectives investigating Larry's death. He gathered reams of notes in a big blue binder, to prove that his brother had endured months of solitary confinement without proper medication; across the front, Rodney wrote, in thick marker, "*#JUSTICE FOR LARRY EUGENE PRICE JR*" and "*#121 POUNDS.*"

Rodney hired Budge & Heipt to help him sue Sebastian County and Turn Key, the medical provider at the jail. He also wanted to push for policy change, suspecting that more losses would follow his brother's. (I later confirmed his fear, uncovering a Navy veteran's apparent death by neglect

in an Arkansas jail.) “I think of what happened to my brother as a murder,” Rodney told me last summer, from his home in Elk Grove, California. “A murder by officials who never took responsibility. Who is going to hold them accountable? The state? No. The feds? No. The only one who is working to hold them accountable is my attorney, and myself. And this is America?”

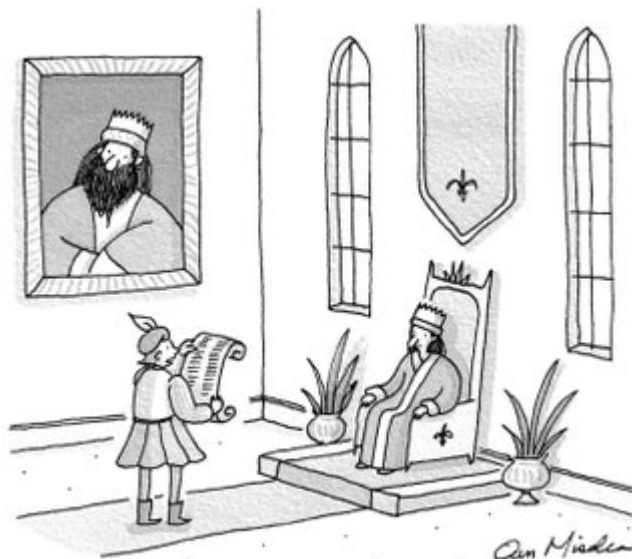
Some nights, after trying to manage his stress by running or rollerblading, Carlin would stay up late in bed on his phone, researching the Pima County Jail. On Instagram, he found a Tucson-based group called No Jail Deaths. The group had a list of demands, and a clear mission statement: “To get justice for the lives lost in the Pima County Jail,” it read, “to memorialize each person the jail has stolen from us.”

Carlin appreciated that the group engaged in acts of civil disobedience. Dozens of locals, many of them moms and wives of the dead, had been holding regular vigils and protests in front of the jail. Mostly, they gathered peacefully, holding candles and laminated posters featuring images of those who had died there. But, the winter before Mary starved, the sheriff’s deputies had declared that the protesters were engaged in an “unlawful assembly” and tried to boot them off the property. Some eighty people had refused to budge. They’d blown vuvuzelas, struck a jail-shaped piñata, banged pots and pans, set off fireworks, and called out the names of their loved ones, according to the Tucson *Sentinel* and the *Arizona Daily Star*. Carlin sent the group a message: Could he get involved?

Last February, Carlin gained another ally. Budge & Heipt had hired a former A.C.L.U. litigator, Andrea Woods, who had extensive experience suing county jails for civil-rights abuses. Woods arrived for her first day at the firm’s Seattle office to find a sixteen-page memo in her e-mail about Mary Faith Casey. “This is your case,” Budge told her.

The firm had already obtained more than a thousand pages of jail records in Mary’s case. Right away, Woods noticed alarming details. On April 30th, the day of Mary’s arrest, an emergency medical technician notified NaphCare that Mary was “*REQUESTING TO BE PLACED BACK ON PSYCH MEDICATIONS*.” But Mary, as far as Woods could tell, did not receive them. She was seen by a NaphCare nurse that day, but the nurse,

Woods alleges, did not insure that Mary got prompt access to a psychiatric provider. According to Woods, NaphCare's records indicate that, for much of the time that Mary was jailed, the company did not have a chief psychiatrist for the site, despite the fact that its contract with the county required it to do so.



*"Your approval rating has plummeted ever since you shaved."*  
Cartoon by Dan Misdea

Within weeks, Mary, untreated, had stopped eating regularly, according to other jailed women, who informed the staff. In late May, she finally saw a NaphCare mental-health worker for an initial evaluation. He observed that she was having trouble with "perseverating, loss of interest, and rumination." He filled out a "treatment plan" for Mary, which recommended meditation and "deep breathing." The worker thought Mary showed "good insight and desire for improvement," and he recommended that she see a psychiatric provider to get the prescription medications that had helped her to function in the past, with her long list of clear diagnoses: post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and more.

Still, Mary went weeks, and then months, without her medications, Woods found. On June 8th, a behavioral-health staffer for NaphCare wrote her colleagues an e-mail with the subject line "Concerns," explaining that she was worried about an "older gal"—Mary—who was "weak," "feeble," and "despondent," and who, according to peers, "eats/drinks very little if anything." On June 12th, a nurse prescribed an antidepressant, which,

alone, was inadequate. On June 25th, when NaphCare staff checked Mary's weight, they found that she was down to a hundred and six pounds. In mid-July, the nurse who prescribed the antidepressant noted that Mary was lying in bed, "deteriorating" and not responsive, and decided to discontinue her sole psychiatric medication, calling for follow-up "in 30 days." He referred her to the medical team for "significant weight loss." By August, Mary showed little will to live. "I am stuck," she told a nurse, crying out in pain. "I can't walk, and they do not believe me." Jail records noted that she "was having trouble speaking and kept licking her lips to get moisture."

Mary had been in the Pima County Jail twice before, in 2020. The facility had a contract with another health-care company, Centurion, at the time, and her experience was different. When she was first booked, that October, jail-intake officials recognized her acute mental-health needs right away. (Mary had mistaken the intake professional for Karina, and kept saying, "Mommy loves you.") Within forty-eight hours, Mary was moved to Sonora Behavioral Health Hospital, where, after being given proper medications, she was described as "talkative" and "cheerful." In her psychiatric progress notes, Mary's chief complaint was that she was "helpless, passionate, and romantic." By late November, she was booked back into the jail. Within the first ten days of her confinement, she saw a mental-health practitioner with prescribing authority, and she was promptly medicated, never missing a single dose, according to Woods. She gained weight and left in better health than when she'd entered.

This time, Mary looked famine-struck and spoke mostly in pained moans. When a mental-health worker expressed concern and pleaded with her to eat, Mary replied, "I tried to drink the Ensure but it tasted like glue. They're putting glue in the Ensure to punish me." In August, she was sent to the hospital four times. "I think she is stable to return to jail," a note in her medical chart read. During Mary's final hospitalization, before she was released to hospice, she sobbed that she had "ruined everything." She'd wet the bed, she explained, and she thought that this was "why she does not deserve her health." She reported severe hopelessness. She said that she was hungry, but didn't "know what to do about that," because "she would not be able to swallow anything."

What stood out to Woods was how many paid professionals had witnessed Mary's decline across her nearly four months of starvation and heard her cry out in distress. "The company was way, way, way below the standard of care on mental health," Woods told Karina.

Both Carlin and Karina found the slow-moving nature of their mother's crisis one of the hardest details to accept. Mary, Carlin told me, had always been a protector. "She was always helping homeless people," he said, "to the point that it bothered me!" When he was in middle school, he said, she "would take this one homeless woman shopping at Mervyn's, the department store, and buy a bunch of clothes for her."

Karina agreed that her mom's empathy for strangers could be so intense as to verge on a liability. She told me about how, when she was seven, they were cruising down a cactus-lined thoroughfare in the desert when Mary spotted a minivan pulled over in the dirt. A man appeared to be physically abusing and berating a woman beside the car. "My mom pulled right over and told the woman, 'Get in!' " Karina said. "The woman didn't speak English, but she grabbed her infant from the back of the car and came running over to our car." Mary hit the gas. "She was driving all crazy, like a bat out of hell," Karina recalled. "Don't worry, we'll lose him!" Mary shouted. Escaping the abusive man's tail, Mary sped to a nearby hotel, where she rented the woman and her child a room for the night, hugged the woman, and said, "You're safe now."

One afternoon, after Woods had gone through Mary's case file, she gathered the family on Zoom and shared a surprising document. On June 5, 2022, three urgent requests had appeared in Mary's name. But the "audit photo" on the intake forms wasn't of Mary. In her place was a much younger person, with dark, warm eyes, thinly pencilled brows, and a wide, shiny forehead. Another incarcerated woman appeared to have impersonated Mary, in a desperate attempt to get her some help.

"Have not been feeling well," a medical complaint, filed at 7:36 *P.M.*, read. "Have not been eating nor drinking my theeth [sic] hurt my body hurts I need to be seen asap please."



The second message, a few minutes later, was a mental-health request. “I need help,” it read. “I feel like I’m too far gone and no one can help me I need too [sic] be seen asap please I feel miserable.”

The third request sought dental services. “My mouth hurts really bad,” it read.

After Woods presented the documents, Karina grew emotional. “If they’d done something to respond, we probably wouldn’t be here now,” Karina said. Instead, Mary’s weight had dropped, by August 4th, to seventy-six pounds, according to records. That day, Mary’s cellmate, a different woman, told a mental-health practitioner that Mary hadn’t eaten or used the toilet in four days, and that, when she’d offered Mary some fruit, Mary had whispered, “It won’t go down.” A few days later, Mary finally got her psychiatric medications. She was seen by a psychiatrist, who placed her on a full slate of the sorts of drugs that had helped her before.

Karina found some small comfort from learning that others had tried to save her mother. “It’s broken my heart, for the longest time, because I knew if my mom had seen anyone in the state she was in, she would have helped—she would have gotten herself in trouble or risked anything, if it came to that,” she said. “When I see how NaphCare did nothing for my mom,” she said, “I think, *Is that the level of treatment their family members would deserve?*”

The strangers’ attempts to help bolstered Carlin’s faith, too. He wanted to know what it would take, in civil litigation, to prove that NaphCare had violated the Constitution. On April 25th of last year, Budge & Heipt filed a landmark civil case, on behalf of Mary Faith Casey’s estate, against NaphCare. The suit also named Pima County; Sheriff Chris Nanos, who oversaw the jail; and several medical providers who had treated Mary through NaphCare—two doctors, two nurses, and a mental-health professional. (The medical providers have all denied wrongdoing. Pima County and Sheriff Nanos filed a motion to dismiss several claims in the case, which was largely denied.) The case alleged that NaphCare’s policies and practices at the Pima County Jail—including inadequate staffing and poor psychiatric screening—had caused Mary “to receive constitutionally inadequate care” and “ultimately to die.” “What we’re trying to do with this

case, and so many others, is to make it really expensive for jails—and, even more so, for private health-care companies—to kill people,” Ed Budge told me.

(The NaphCare spokesperson said that federal privacy law prohibited the company from discussing Mary’s case in detail, but that the version of events outlined by Budge & Heipt was “inaccurate” and “demonstrably false.” She added, “Patients sometimes refuse care or medications. While we make an effort to educate, encourage, and support compliance, we must also respect their legal right to refuse treatment.” The spokesperson noted that “the individual you are inquiring about was transferred to two separate hospitals on four different occasions—and was repeatedly returned to the facility by hospital staff.”)

Mary’s family saw their mission as even larger than penalizing poor medical care in jails: they wanted to change how people in mental-health crises get handled by the justice system. They were heartened to hear that, last fall, Rodney Price had succeeded in holding his brother Larry’s jailers accountable in Arkansas; the Price family had won a record-setting six-million-dollar settlement against Sebastian County and Turn Key. (“There’s no good way to spin it, so why try?” Hobe Runion, the county sheriff, told me of Larry’s death. “It’s horrendous, and I can’t make excuses.”) But Mary’s family shared Rodney’s conviction that real justice would have to go well beyond an isolated payment. Michelle, her sister, felt clear about this. “We know that Mary is one of many,” she said.

Working with the researchers at the Investigative Reporting Lab, I studied more than forty lawsuits involving claims of starvation, dehydration, and severe neglect, filed against more than a dozen correctional entities and county governments. We found that, again and again, taxpayers ended up paying multimillion-dollar settlement bills for actions that killed off members of their own communities. But most major correctional-health-care providers, too, were saddled with millions of dollars in liability, raising the question: would it have been so expensive, after all, to provide adequate psychiatric care for people like Mary?

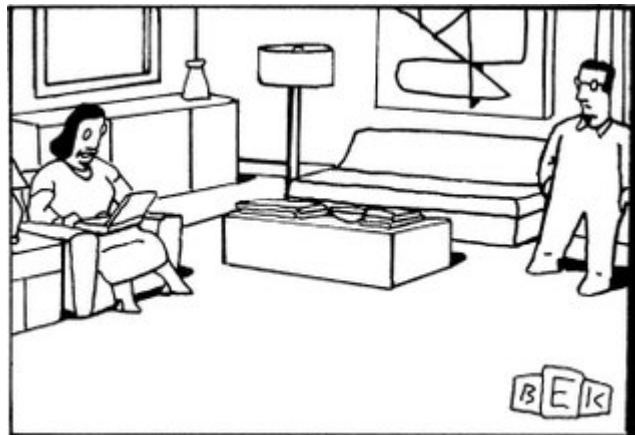
Three of the largest correctional-health-care corporations—Corizon (now YesCare), Armor, and Wellpath—have filed for bankruptcy in recent years.

Wellpath, which filed this past November, has been hit with more than fifteen hundred lawsuits claiming inadequate medical care of incarcerated people. “A big part of this industry’s business model is filing for bankruptcy, cleansing their balance sheet of responsibility for their misconduct, and then starting all over again,” Bianca Tylek, the executive director of Worth Rises, a nonprofit that fights the commercialization of corrections, told me. I asked Tylek, a former investment banker who has studied hundreds of correctional-health-care contracts, if she thought the industry was lucrative. “It’s only lucrative because the industry is based on stealing,” she said. “They’re stealing billions of taxpayer dollars and not providing constitutionally required services to the people in their care, services they were contracted to provide. They are using the bodies of incarcerated people to extract wealth.” (A spokesperson for Wellpath said that filing for bankruptcy had allowed the company to improve its financial organization and better serve its patients. YesCare did not respond to a request for comment.)

I met Ryan Dreveskracht, a civil-rights lawyer, at a beer garden in Seattle. His firm, Galanda Broadman, was suing NaphCare for several cases of alleged medical neglect in jails. He’d taken on the case of Javier Tapia, for instance, who’d lost his lower leg after a blood clot went untreated at the Pierce County Jail, in Washington State. “Tapia was made to sit in solitary confinement while his foot and leg literally rotted off,” Dreveskracht said. (This month, a federal jury ordered NaphCare to pay twenty-five million dollars to Tapia. NaphCare said it plans to appeal.) Dreveskracht wanted to talk about the McLane family, which owns the company—about the founder, Jim, and his son Brad, who’d stepped into the C.E.O. role after an esteemed career at the Department of Justice. “As a family-owned company, they’ve been totally insulated from accountability,” he told me. “It’s just like the Sackler family and opioids—they’re making money hand over fist. But no one knows their name.”

Brad McLane, however, proved willing to talk with me. He shared his vision for how private contracting, done right, can improve the quality of care in county jails. “One strength we offer is economies of scale,” McLane told me recently, on a Zoom call from his office, in Birmingham, Alabama. “If you’re just one county working to provide health care in the jail, you’re

going to have limited resources,” he said. “One of the things we’ve built over our thirty-five years is that we have over eighty corporate nurse practitioners and mid-levels who are working around the clock.” McLane expressed pride in NaphCare’s efforts to test new models for mental-health care. He touted, for instance, NaphCare’s Mental Health Stabilization Unit, at the Hillsborough County Jail, in Florida, through which the company provides treatment to severely mentally ill people in a less restrictive setting.



*“Here’s a list of ten fun things to do this weekend that aren’t really fun.”  
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan*

In his youth, McLane had little interest in his family’s correctional-health-care business; he was passionate, instead, about “saving the environment.” After graduating from Georgetown Law, he became an attorney at the Department of Justice. “I was doing a lot of Clean Air Act enforcement, trying to clean up coal-fired power plants,” he told me. But then his younger brother, who was slated to take over NaphCare, died unexpectedly, and McLane agreed to assume his place. “There are definitely a lot of things I’ve had to unlearn to be good in this job,” he said. “You do the best you can to continually improve and learn, and accept that sometimes we do have, obviously, losses in the jails.”

Though many civil-rights attorneys see health-care contractors as distinctly responsible for such losses, they rarely consider the companies to be the only or even the central reason for dysfunction in county jails. “Why should people working in jails be the ones having to deal with the convergence of so many social crises—poverty, education, housing, and the total lack of access to mental-health care?” Margot Mendelson, the executive director of

the Prison Law Office, in Berkeley, California, asked me. Mendelson strongly opposes the privatization of jail health care—“It’s a repulsive social choice to put a dollar sign on this public system,” she said—but, in her view, the much bigger problem is that jails are “totally ill-suited” to being mental-health-care providers. “Where is the infrastructure that *isn’t* the jail, to address the mental-health crisis we’re in?” she asked.

NaphCare recently underwent a national expansion. “There’s unprecedented demand for our services,” McLane told the Birmingham *Business Journal* last June. The company has created what it calls a Proactive Care Model, which it advertises, online, as a method “to identify medical and mental health concerns during intake for early treatment intervention.” McLane also told the *Journal* that NaphCare is eager to pioneer the use of artificial intelligence to manage jail health care. “We’re looking at developing a chatbot for jails and prisons,” he said, “that will interact with our patients in terms of helping them with their mental-health needs.”

Carlin Casey believes that, given how human employees have failed to provide proactive care to his mother and countless others, NaphCare chatbots won’t suffice. He finds the company slogan jarring: “We Treat Everyone How We Want to Be Treated.”

In the *Business Journal* interview, McLane was asked, “If you could give your 18-year-old self one piece of advice, what would it be?” McLane’s advice was sound. “Just enjoy the time you have with friends and family and people you care about,” he said. “They’re not around as long as you might think they’re going to be.”

Last June, I made my way to the radiant heat of the Coachella Valley, to visit with Karina on her mom’s home turf. Karina had offered to give me a tour in her S.U.V. “Still surrounded by palm trees and cacti,” Karina said, pointing to her childhood home. We idled in front of her bedroom window, where her mom had read Anne Frank’s diary to her and Carlin, and where she’d learned that human beings could starve. “It terrified me!” she said, of the book. The block was dripping with blooming jacarandas, and magenta flowers that made me marvel.

We stopped at a coffee shop near the country club where Karina now works, helping corporate C.E.O.s race sports cars. She carefully placed a stack of letters on the table. Nearly all the envelopes were bright with crayon drawings of hearts, or filled with rainbow “Smooch Smooch” stickers, or stuffed with confetti. In each letter, Mary wrote, from jail, of her love for “my Bee” or “my honey” or “my Baby.”

One letter was particularly hard for Karina to reopen. Months after her mother’s death, she’d been cleaning off a table when she spotted an envelope with her own handwriting. She’d written to Mary at the Pima County Jail on Mother’s Day, and had always assumed her mom had received the note.

“I want you to know that despite the challenges you’ve faced you have so many beautiful qualities about you as a mother and person,” Karina had written. “You have always been the most caring, loving and giving woman.”

The letter continued, “I hope that we can get closer in time, and things turn around for you. Maybe some year even spend Mother’s Day together!!”

Karina realized that her letter had never reached Mary. The jail had returned the envelope, rejecting the type of stamp Karina had used.

I asked Karina what she thought Mary would think of the lawsuit against NaphCare and Pima County. We were back in the car and driving past the spot on the highway where Mary had once pulled over to help the woman who was being abused by her male companion. “She’d see this case,” Karina said, laughing, “and say, ‘Hell yes, fuck those guys, and shut them down.’ ”

Last summer, I also flew to Tucson. Carlin had hoped to show me his mother’s writings, too. But his spirits were down, and he wasn’t sure that he could do it. In the meantime, I’d made plans to meet with some of the women who’d been leading recent protests at the Pima County Jail. All around the country, I knew, groups of grieving family members were mobilizing like this. Often, they were winning significant fights against jail expansions. One of the most active participants in No Jail Deaths, a woman

named Stephanie Madero-Piña, offered to take me to the jail, where she'd held up a bullhorn at multiple protests. She wanted the community to know what had happened to her former husband, Richard Piña. Years ago, Piña had proposed to her live on the radio, as the station played "Chapel of Love." He later developed an addiction, and, during a stint at the jail in 2018, he contracted an infection, Madero-Piña said. He was transferred to a hospital, where he died. "He'd been sick for about three weeks," she'd told the crowd at a protest. "If he'd gotten any kind of medical, he probably could have lived."

When we met, Madero-Piña wore pink eyeshadow and a beautiful purple dress; her long, freshly curled hair draped down her back. She mentioned that her husband wasn't the only loved one she'd lost at the jail. Her niece's boyfriend, twenty-two-year-old Jacob Miranda, had also died there, of a fentanyl overdose.

"You may think this won't happen to you," she said. "You may think, *Oh, not my kid*. But, I'm promising you, that's not the case. It's hard for us mothers to do the work that we are doing, but, if we can save some other people from this pain, it will give some kind of meaning to our loss."

Later, Madero-Piña and I ventured to the park where Mary had lived in the months before her arrest. Madero-Piña often distributed food and supplies at the park, and we met a few of the people who spent nights there, in tents or sleeping bags, beneath large palms. The police, several older unhoused people explained to me, were making their lives increasingly difficult by staging regular raids. "They took my propane burners for cooking, and that was an essential part of my life," one man, who'd been unhoused for more than a year, said. The police stripped him of other valued possessions, too. "My dog is everything to me. I lost her bedding and her food and her heat-sensitive shoes. They came at 6 A.M. with two bulldozers. I lost everything."

Madero-Piña and I passed out cans of tuna, slices of strawberry shortcake, and other snacks to a few dozen people. Afterward, she told me that she'd recently got the first part of a two-part tattoo. She rolled up her right sleeve to show me. "Honor the dead," it read. "Next week, I'm getting the other half," she said. "It'll say, 'And fight like hell for the living.' "

Carlin was also involved with a mutual-aid group that volunteered in the park; he'd donated clothes, and he hoped to join them on a weekend mission soon. For now, he'd been exercising, practicing songs for a local men's choir he'd joined, and trying his best to take care of himself. "I've inherited a lot of the mental-health problems that my mom suffered from, and I've attempted, so many times, to get help from the proper authorities, and it's been a fucking terrible experience," he said, over the phone one afternoon. "What is it going to take for society to realize that, if people want to make a change in their life, you should try to help them? The floodgates should open, and the help should come."

To Carlin, the crisis in county jails isn't just about starvation deaths like his mom's—it's about preventing the mass criminalization of people like her. He wonders, what if we didn't use jails as our primary mental-health-care providers and instead offered better access to addiction services, mental-health treatment, and housing? In Denver, a nonprofit recently tried giving a universal basic income of a thousand dollars a month to a large group of unhoused people. A year later, nearly half the participants had housing.

In the early days after Mary's death, Carlin used to crack open a Bible that she had sent him as a gift, not long before she'd starved. On the inside cover, his mother had inscribed a message to him. "You don't deserve to feel like a lost sheep, stuck and hopeless," she'd written. She encouraged him to check out Isaiah 43:18. Together, one recent afternoon, we looked up the passage. "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past," it read, addressing how people might live amid impossible darkness:

See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness,  
And streams in the wasteland. ♦





*[Sarah Stillman](#), a staff writer, won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting. She also received the 2012 National Magazine Award for Public Interest and the 2022 George Polk Award for Magazine Reporting. She teaches writing at Yale, and is a MacArthur Fellow.*

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# After Forty Years, Phish Isn't Seeking Resolution

*People who love Phish do so with a quasi-religious devotion. People who dislike Phish do so with an equal fervor.*

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

April 14, 2025



*Improvisation is central to the band's appeal. A member described the ambient jam as "the safest, most comfortable place I know in life." Photographs by Peter Fisher for The New Yorker*

Last August, Phish hosted a four-day music festival at a racetrack in Dover, Delaware. It was called Mondegreen—the word for a misheard lyric or phrase—and it was the band's first festival since 2015. Phish—the singer and guitarist Trey Anastasio, the keyboardist Page McConnell, the bassist Mike Gordon, and the drummer Jon Fishman—was scheduled to play at least two sets a night for four nights in a row. No other bands were on the bill.

Mondegreen kicked off on a Thursday. That afternoon, I joined a long line of cars inching through cornfields that surrounded the motorway. The horizon was wavy with exhaust. The sun was fluorescent. I gazed at the stalks, fantasizing about a "Field of Dreams"-type scenario in which a ballplayer would emerge from the corn and offer me a sweating bottle of

water. Eventually, I texted a friend who was already at the campground. He expressed his sympathies, then volunteered to deliver edible marijuana to my car. I demurred, but it nonetheless felt like an appropriate welcome. I would soon come to understand these two impulses—fellowship and oblivion—as central to the Phish experience.

Phish formed in 1983 in Burlington, Vermont, when its founding members were in their late teens. The band is now a singular American institution, less for its studio albums (there are sixteen, including “Evolve,” from 2024) than for its storied live shows. Bernie Sanders recently told me, “Phish is one of the great American rock bands, and they represent a lot of what I love about Vermont. They create community, experiment creatively, and have an enormous amount of discipline around their music.” The band’s accolades are endless. Since 1997, Phish has had its own flavor of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream (Phish Food: chocolate with fudge fish and swirls of marshmallow and caramel). Its tours are ranked among the highest grossing in the world, and its philanthropic arm, the WaterWheel Foundation, has donated more than nine million dollars to five hundred nonprofit organizations. For New Year’s Eve, 1999—Y2K, the trembling eve of the new millennium—some eighty thousand Phish fans journeyed to a Seminole reservation just south of Lake Okeechobee, in Florida, for Big Cypress, which was the largest concert in the world that night, eclipsing offerings from Metallica, Barbra Streisand, Eminem, and Jimmy Buffett. The band played from just before midnight until after sunrise; part of the show was broadcast live on ABC News. (Peter Jennings repeatedly referred to the band as “the Phish.”) This year, Phish was nominated for induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, dominating the fan vote. (A fifteen-foot foam hot dog, which the band piloted around Boston Garden on New Year’s Eve, 1994, while tossing confetti, is already suspended in an atrium at the Hall of Fame.) The band operates its own streaming platform, LivePhish, which offers soundboard recordings of every show Phish has played since 2002, and live audio from as far back as 1989. In early March, at an all-star benefit concert at the Beacon Theatre, in New York, I watched Cher casually toss an arm around Anastasio as they performed Stevie Wonder’s “Higher Ground,” a gesture of affirmation that is impossible to quantify but nonetheless felt like a kind of anointing. (“Mind absolutely fucking blown,” Anastasio texted me afterward.)

People who love Phish do so with a devotion that is quasi-religious—deep, eternal, and rhapsodic. People who dislike Phish do so with equal fervor, often while making jokes about the degenerative effects of LSD on the prefrontal cortex. This divisiveness speaks, in part, to the band’s abiding disinterest in capitulating to the Zeitgeist. The barrier to entry is high: to experience the phenomenon on any significant level, you need to see the band live, probably more than once. The songs will be complicated and partly improvised. There will be two sets, with a twenty-minute break in between. There will not be much in the way of banter, though there will be a light show designed by the band’s longtime lighting director, Chris Kuroda. You might hear a song in which the phrase “Gotta jibboo!” is repeated far more often than you’d like.

Phish requires commitment—a subversive idea in our moment of minuscule attention spans. Even the songs that go viral on TikTok—a platform that already demands a kind of maniacal concision—often have their tempos increased in order to arrive at the hook sooner. Yet Phish fans embrace searching, forty-minute jams with enthusiasm. The band has built this world largely outside the architecture of the music industry, with minimal radio airplay, mainstream press, or strategic marketing. “The other day, my wife and I watched the Grammys,” McConnell, the keyboardist, told me. “It was a really good show—so much young talent. Then the whole thing ended, and I thought, *It feels so strange how completely disconnected I am from this*. It’s not as if I have a desire to be a part of it. But how odd is it that I’m in the music business, and really successful in the music business, and I have absolutely zero to do with this?”

“I remember after we got signed to Elektra, around ’93,” Anastasio said. “We were developing this crowd that was nuts for the band, in our own self-supporting bubble. I went into the label’s office with this record, ‘Rift,’ and the A. & R. rep said, ‘It’s not just that I hate this music. I don’t just hate it—I refuse to work this record.’ And then they handed me the new Frank Black record, the one with ‘Los Angeles.’ And they said, ‘Go home and listen to this if you want to hear what cool music sounds like.’ ” Anastasio laughed. “I was, like, ‘Look, we all love the Pixies. But what do you want me to do with that?’ It represented this fear. Like, we are so out of step with what’s cool and what’s happening.”

Phish's fans have been characterized—perhaps ungenerously—as burnouts who wish only to stand around in parking lots huffing nitrous oxide from balloons. At Mondegreen, when I finally emerged from my car, I found that stereotype both challenged and corroborated. The air was heavy with cannabis vapor and leg sweat. The crowd felt culturally if not particularly racially diverse—men, women, young, old, sober, plastered, minor felons, investment bankers, minorly felonious investment bankers. To be fair, there is sort of a type. T-shirt: tie-dyed. Pupils: dilated. Merch: bootleg. Haircut: surely not. This category of Phish enthusiast is referred to as a “wook,” a term that evolved from “wookiee,” the big, brutish, hairy creatures from “Star Wars.” It is now applied to anyone who has not visited the shower trailer and is desperately trying to bum a cig.



*“O.K.—for the next batch, I need you to spin it into shareable content.”*  
Cartoon by Edith Zimmerman

A Phish show is always a kind of homecoming—if you are there, you are received. The band has been hosting festivals since 1996, when it put on the Clifford Ball, a multidimensional extravaganza—carnival rides, circus performers, aerial stunts—at Plattsburgh Air Force Base, in upstate New York. Phish played seven sets over two nights, including an instrumental jam that it performed while rolling through the parking lot on the back of a flatbed truck at 3:30 A.M. (To learn about the “Flatbed Jam,” as it came to be known, is to hear about a kind of mystical visitation. One history, published on Phish.net, reads like an account of a U.F.O. sighting: “The dimly-glowing scene continued to crawl, just faster than walking speed, around the south edge of the parking lot, then briefly north near the lot entrance, before circling back.”) More than seventy thousand people

attended the Clifford Ball, making it the biggest rock concert in the U.S. that year. A *Times* headline read “Small Adirondack Town Is Host of a Giant Concert.”

In the decades following the Clifford Ball, the popularity of music festivals exploded, a trend that Phish inadvertently helped engineer. (In the early two-thousands, the founders of Bonnaroo, when planning their first event, reached out to Phish for guidance.) Yet Mondegreen, which was attended by around thirty-eight thousand people, felt spiritually distant from happenings such as Coachella, where calculated preening is both the central pleasure and the purpose. People came to Delaware for Phish.

Mondegreen also featured a variety of nonmusical attractions, including a Ferris wheel, a farmers’ market, a post office, a record store, a radio station, live comedy, yoga classes, and a spa offering beard trims and I.V. hydration. There were a dozen mostly site-specific art installations, including a twenty-three-foot internally lit moon suspended over a clearing. (The piece, by Luke Jerram, was titled “Museum of the Moon” and featured an ambient score composed by Dan Jones.) An enormous cardboard structure designed by the French artist Olivier Grossetête, called “City Hall,” was assembled by volunteers on the first day, using tape and nearly two thousand cardboard boxes. Once complete, it stood more than eighty feet high and weighed almost two tons. (On Saturday afternoon, it was rigged with ropes and deliberately toppled.) At the Cerealist Bowl, a bizarre, Salvador Dalí-meets-Lewis Carroll speakeasy tucked away in the woods, I watched a guy on a gurney entomb himself in cotton candy, the sugary pink wisps blown onto his body by a fan. There was a porta-potty that led to a planetarium. There was a seventy-four-foot retro-futuristic viewing tower called the Heliograph; on Sunday, Questlove performed a d.j. set from the top, pulling his vinyl from a cooler. (It was hot.) There was even a tattoo parlor, where fans could immortalize the experience with a silhouette of Anastasio’s face or an iteration of the band’s logo. I met a sweet couple there, Gram and Erica, who had just got engaged and were about to have matching doughnuts tattooed on their ring fingers.

Gram, who was forty-six, guessed that he had been to a hundred and fifty Phish shows; Erica, forty-five, thought that her count was around two

hundred. They met in 1998, at a Phish concert in Chicago. “We’ve both been through a lot of shit,” Erica said. “We’ve known each other for a long time, but we weren’t ready for this before now.”

It’s hard to say exactly when doughnuts entered Phish lore, but since the mid-eighties Jon Fishman, the drummer, has worn a tunic—it’s a dress, really—printed with colorful rings. On some metaphysical level, the food simply suits the band. The connection was cemented in 2017, when Phish played thirteen consecutive shows at Madison Square Garden, a feat dubbed the Baker’s Dozen. Each night was themed around a different flavor of doughnut: on Boston Cream night, the band played a medley of tracks by the bands Boston and Cream; on jam-filled night, the band went long even by Phish standards, stretching two tracks into thirty-odd-minute jams. Each Phish set list is unique, but for this particular run the band didn’t repeat a single tune: two hundred and thirty-seven different songs in less than two weeks. “Not repeating songs is at the core of what Phish is,” Anastasio said. “There were people who went to every single show.” On the final night, a banner commemorating the achievement was lifted to the rafters, where it still hangs, next to Billy Joel’s.

Gram and Erica kissed. The tattooists clapped.

Phish took the stage at around 7 *P.M.* on Thursday. Anastasio, who turned sixty the following month, remains youthful and spry, with rimless glasses, a flop of red hair, and a gently graying beard. The doughnuts on Fishman’s tunic were emerald green. Gordon and McConnell each occupied a side of the stage. After forty-some years, the members of Phish remain earnestly and improbably enamored of one another: whenever I told Anastasio that I was doing something with one of his bandmates, he would say, without guile, “I love that guy!” Part of the band’s emotional tenor has to do with the parity built into its sound. “Any one of the four of us could be leading the moment,” McConnell said. “For a few bars, the bass will be doing something extraordinary, and we’re all following Mike around. Then it’ll be Fish. It just gets passed around between the four of us.” (The members’ equanimity does not stem only from musical synchronicity. “We were able to afford to get our own hotel rooms just in time,” Fishman joked. “We were able to afford a road crew to help us move equipment just in time!”)

The band opened with “The Moma Dance”—a mondegreen, appropriately. (The actual lyric is “The moment ends.”) I had last seen Phish in 1997, at Hampton Coliseum, in Virginia, when I was seventeen. (Hampton is referred to as the Mothership, largely because it resembles an enormous spacecraft.) Twenty-seven years later, some things felt familiar; others were new. Anastasio is vehemently uninterested in Phish becoming a nostalgia act—the band’s sets contain a mixture of songs that it has been playing since the eighties and more recent material, including, that night, “What’s Going Through Your Mind?,” which Anastasio wrote last year. (Eight days earlier, the band had played it live for the first time, at a show in Grand Rapids, with the bluegrass prodigy Billy Strings joining on guitar and vocals.) Anastasio sometimes collaborates on lyrics with his childhood friend Tom Marshall, and the results tend to be intricate and fantastical. His solo writing, however, has become considerably less abstract and more confessional in recent years. In “A Wave of Hope,” a boisterous song from “Evolve,” he sings about a kind of spiritual exorcism: “The pillow drowns the moans.” When Anastasio sang the line on Thursday, his voice was nearly cheerful. The crowd went bananas.

At one point, a friend leaned in to make an observation. It was quick, and he was speaking quietly, but we were immediately shushed by a dude who appeared seemingly out of nowhere, holding out his hands, palms forward, saying, “Please, please, please.” He made his way down the line, shushing in every direction. In jam parlance, talking during a set is known as chomping, and it’s a humbling thing to be caught doing. The expectation that tens of thousands of people hanging around an old *NASCAR* track would be library-quiet for three-plus hours felt slightly deranged to me, but such is the cult of Phish.

During my days at Mondegreen, I came to love this about the community. The music is worshipped, but elsewhere there is an undercurrent of lawlessness and benevolent revolution. One morning, I took a photo of a large black flag blowing proudly in the breeze:

Quit your job  
Go on tour  
Bang a wook



Sell grilled cheese  
Boof a crystal  
Live in a van  
Never return

All around us, institutions were failing. Why not bang a wook and never return? (I had to text a friend to decipher the line about the crystal. “What does ‘boof a crystal’ mean?” I carefully typed into my phone. He replied immediately: “BOOF AMANDA BOOF. It’s where you put drugs in your ass.”) Though the scene is peaceful and loving, there is a lot of rebellion baked in. Do what you want. Except chomping.

The crowd at a Phish show dances. Should I leave it at that? There are a few common styles, including the Floppy Puppet (picture someone distractedly operating a marionette) and the Invisible Surfboard (feet planted, knees bent, arms akimbo). People get loose, and they have a blast. There was a striking lack of cellphone usage, both during the show and on the festival grounds. Attendees were encouraged to keep up with the news by reading the *Daily Greens*, a paper produced and distributed on site. At one point, the Mondegreen app sent a notification: “Good morning! You should not be on your phone so much.” Phish’s earliest festivals were held in obscure and off-the-grid locales—between 1997 and 2003, it hosted three events in Limestone, Maine, a town of about fifteen hundred people, near the Canadian border—and the band is still intent on creating such an immersive and self-contained experience that, Anastasio said, people have no choice but to “come out the other end having shared something.”



Cartoon by Eugenia Viti

It turns out that all these things—the unplugging, the dancing, the utter lack of corporate branding—matter. The vibes were so solid. Since the mid-nineties, when it became more common for amphitheatres to plaster barricades and other surfaces with advertising, Phish has been vigilant about covering up any audience-facing billboards, a job that can require a cherry picker and some scrupulously draped fabric. For many artists, the richer they get, the more entangled they become with corporations. Phish has adopted the opposite approach: the money buys the band freedom. “There might’ve been a fantasy, or individual fantasies, about having a hit song on the radio,” Gordon told me. “We didn’t want to make music that was so quirky no one would want to crank it up at a party. But maybe having this unique experience every night is bigger than the having-a-hit-song feeling.”

Anastasio is a voracious consumer of new music: M. J. Lenderman, Waxahatchee, the Japanese House, Mitski, Mannequin Pussy. He writes songs constantly, almost compulsively. He showed me the voice memos on his phone, an endless scroll of ideas, composed early in the morning, over coffee, on the piano in his apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Sometimes he sent me sketches. Once, when I told him I was making chili, he wrote me a little song about stirring the pot.

Though Phish is considered the ur-jam band of its era, many of its more outré improvisations remind me of Brian Eno: cinematic, elegant, soft, dreamy, modern. In general, it’s challenging to ascribe genre to Phish. One night, over dinner at Café Carmellini, in New York, Anastasio and I shared a dish called Duck-Duck-Duck Tortellini, which led us to revisit a conversation in which I had repeatedly confused Goose (a jam band from Connecticut) and Geese (a post-punk band from Brooklyn). Anastasio found this very funny. He likes and relates to punk; he is less sure what, exactly, “jam band” connotes, beyond “too much soloing.” He told me, “The term didn’t exist in my formative years. It’s possible its creation had something to do with us. But when I saw Fugazi, in Burlington in 1989, I remember thinking, *These guys are thinking exactly the way I’m thinking*. We played a show in 1992 with *firehose*, Fishbone, and the Beastie Boys, in a parking lot at UMass. We felt like we were planting a flag, too.” (“I remember seeing Phish and being impressed that they were onstage with a

full-size B3 organ,” Mike D, of the Beastie Boys, told me. “There were a bunch of New England collegiate and hippie types all watching, knowing this band that I had never heard of.”)

“I respect them,” Ian MacKaye, of Fugazi, said, of Phish. “They’ve always been iconoclastic. They do these festivals on their own. It’s insane. I’ve never seen Phish, but I am not surprised that they were at that show. We could be much farther apart.”

On the second night of Mondegreen, the band played a surprise third set. The members set up behind a screen featuring projections by Moment Factory, a design studio known for its immersive, trippy environments. The fifty-minute instrumental improvisation that followed would come to be known as “Mondegreen Ambient Jam.” A Phish jam is usually preceded by an enormous amount of preparation. The Mondegreen jam was divided into seven parts, and each was assigned a key, an image (“Organic Architecture,” “Shape Shifting Trees”), and an energy level (a number between one and ten). Despite the planning—there were PDFs—it still required what Anastasio called “a willingness to fail right in front of people.” He finds parameters generative. “If I know what the image is—flying saucers in blue air, or whatever—and I know what the key is, and I know the level of intensity, and I get handed a guitar, those limits allow me to play with raw emotion, which is what everyone responds to, anyway,” he said. “The theory is, art lives by limitation. You develop the theme, you can go backward, forward, stretch it out. But don’t keep bringing in more material.” At one point, he was playing two guitars (an acoustic set to an open tuning and placed in a stand, and an electric) simultaneously. The feeling in the crowd was a kind of dazed submission. It was late; people were woozy and receptive. The band remained concealed behind the scrim. I stood there, vibrating. At times, it sounded like Aphex Twin, or William Basinski, or Eno, but more human, less synthesized.

Since 1992, Gordon has kept a list in his journal titled “Bass Playing Thoughts.” Many entries read like koans: “A high note can be felt as low, repeated.” It has been a useful repository for his own self-reflection. “Acceptance has been a big theme for Phish over the years,” he said. “In the nineties, we had a thing where we would get backstage between sets and

talk about the set. And then we decided that wasn't allowed anymore. For me, the shows got twice as good at that point, because I knew that I wasn't going to be judged."

Fishman paraphrased Charlie Parker: " 'Study and study and learn everything you can, and then forget that shit and play.' That ambient jam is the safest, most comfortable place I know in life."

"It's like hang gliding, in the sense that you do all kinds of preparation to make sure you're safe—you check your gear, you tighten the knots," Anastasio said. "But you still have to jump off a cliff." He added, "You're never gonna find four people who are happier diving off a cliff than the four guys in Phish."

There's a particular moment that Phish fans wait for. It doesn't happen at every show, and it's difficult to describe without sounding as though you've been a whiff too cavalier with your dosing, but here goes: there is sometimes a brief yet transcendent stretch, occurring maybe ten or twelve or even twenty minutes into a jam, in which the band achieves a kind of otherworldly synchronicity, both internally and with its audience. This kind of moment, though mysterious, has been an essential and meaningful part of the band's gestalt since the beginning. I felt it during the Mondegreen jam—a short but delightful vacation from my corporeal self.

Musically, Phish braids three major elements: formal composition, improvisation, and—despite what you may have heard—pop hooks. (Fervent fans tend to favor the more sprawling songs, but the band's most streamed tracks—"Farmhouse," "Sample in a Jar," "Bouncing Around the Room"—are bona-fide earworms.) These elements might appear to be in opposition to one another, but the band's capacity to hold them in balance is arguably its defining achievement; all three are crucial, in different ways, to whatever trapdoor occasionally opens up mid-set. Anastasio and I spent dozens of hours parsing the physics of it. "Last night got so deep," he texted me one morning, after Phish had played its second of four shows at Moon Palace, a resort in the Riviera Maya, in Mexico. "Gratitude, emotions, heavy heavy hurt anger explosion, safe space to let feelings go. Fear, confusion. Sometimes the guitar is the only place it's safe to let that out." He pointed me toward a particular jam, during "Twenty Years Later," the

track that closes “Joy,” the band’s twelfth album, from 2009. It’s hard not to understand the lyrics, which Anastasio wrote with Tom Marshall, as a rejoinder to excess:

I can hold my breath for a minute or so  
Five days without food is as long as I’ll go  
I didn’t sleep once for four days and three nights  
I once didn’t stop for seven red lights

Around five minutes in, you can hear the band members find one another and begin to coalesce. Phish is generally oriented toward euphoria, but there are instances in which it gets dark, brooding, nearly carnal. Fans refer to this as Evil Phish. (The most consistently beloved example of Evil Phish is “Carini,” a creepy, taunting song that has never appeared on an album. It opens with a vicious riff and an ominous lyric: “I saw you with Carini and that naked dude!”) “Twenty Years Later” is a hopeful song, but the jam got heavy. “Often there is a moment when it feels like the safety rails fall off,” Anastasio wrote to me. “We lose any sense of time passing. Then I feel safe letting people see how I actually feel, which is terrified a lot of the time. Around eight minutes, it starts to feel like my heart is wide open. It feels like pure emotion when the music gets like that. No sense of notes/scales. Just energy.” He added, “It’s why people come.”

Achieving this sort of dissociative bliss is not uncommon when listening to Hindu *bhajans* or Gregorian chants or other forms of religious music; I last felt it in the Pindus Mountains of northern Greece, when a Roma clarinetist played a *mirologi*, or ancient Epirotic lament, directly into my ear, at two o’clock in the morning, in a dark forest. I bring this up simply to say that it’s extraordinary that this sort of thing—a fleeting doorway to nirvana—is regularly occurring for Phish fans in minor-league-hockey arenas.

“When that portal opens, I don’t remember a single thing,” Fishman said. “I know which gigs are really good by how little I can remember. I do things on the drums that I never practiced and had no idea I was capable of. I have to go back and learn shit that happened in jams that I don’t actually know how to do.”

One night, I asked Anastasio to walk me through what it felt like onstage when the band passed through the portal. “I’ll pick a jam and try to describe what’s going on,” he said. “Camden, New Jersey, 1999, ‘Chalk Dust Torture.’ The song is what it is. It’s fast, it’s ridiculous, and still, in some weird way, it’s my fucking all-time favorite Phish song.” About five minutes in, after a spontaneous key change, the band starts communicating musically, changing keys and rhythms. “I throw out a melodic phrase, something we can all jump on. That leads to another spontaneous key change, which can only happen if we’re all fully listening. And then the universe opens up, and I feel like I don’t exist,” he continued. “I’m not locked in my mind anymore. I feel entirely connected to the people way back on the lawn. I can sense the scale, how insignificant the venue looks from above, how minuscule we are in the grand scheme. I don’t understand any of it—it feels like being pulled by the music like a water-skier. It’s a miracle, this moment. But it’s ephemeral—it can’t last. And slowly, around twelve or thirteen minutes, it goes back down to earth. But I’ve gotten to peek behind the curtain for just a moment. The set continues, and when I step off the stage someone walks up and says something like ‘The bus is leaving’ or ‘What time do you want to eat?’ And—ugh. Fuck. I’m back in this shit.”

Phish invited me to visit Anastasio’s recording studio, in a barn in the Green Mountains just outside Burlington. When I arrived, in February, the city was buried in more than a foot of snow, and I white-knuckled my rental car up a long switchbacked driveway. Anastasio and McConnell were sitting at a wooden table, eating sandwiches. Anastasio jumped up and offered to show me around. “I love giving the tour!” he said. “I get very excited.” We walked onto a deck overlooking the mountains. In the mid-nineties, after acquiring the land—seventy acres—Anastasio bought the two-hundred-year-old barn for a thousand dollars. “That’s Mt. Mansfield,” Anastasio said, pointing. “See that white patch? The barn was down there.” A team of woodworkers eventually transferred the building, beam by beam, to its current spot. Once the barn was reassembled, a second structure was built around it, mostly for insulation. Anastasio got out a photo album and showed me some grainy snapshots from its construction. “That’s me, working the saw,” he said, proudly. “They let me help out. There’s me hammering while they drink beer.”



*“Let me at least put the dishes away in the wrong place so you’ll never ask me to do it again.”*  
Cartoon by Lynn Hsu

The interior is warm, rustic, and inviting. “There isn’t a single chain or screw that was bought new at a hardware store. Anything that got worse when it got old, we didn’t use,” Anastasio said, as he led me around. The light fixtures were salvaged from a local school; a blackboard had been used to make tiles for the shower. There are several large stained-glass windows. Everything there is meaningful to Anastasio, from his grandmother’s davenport (“I used to eat nuts on that,” he said, laughing) to a mosaic tabletop his mother made and two seats from the Spectrum arena, in Philadelphia. “When my dad took me to see the Flyers the year they won the Stanley Cup, we sat in those two seats,” he said. The floorboards were culled from trees cut down to make the driveway. “This is one of my favorite details,” Anastasio said, pointing at them. “We’ve done at least fifteen albums here. Long projects, where everybody’s staying up till two o’clock in the morning, running around, skateboarding, whatever. These are random sizes, rough-planed on one side. We wanted people to be able to spill beer and feel good. I didn’t want anything fancy.”

There’s no control room or isolation booth at the barn; the recording console is out in the open. “It was purchased in Miami, from the people who did the ‘Cops’ soundtrack,” Anastasio said. I asked him if he worked differently here. “Yes,” he said. “I really believe that, without the barn, there wouldn’t be a Phish. You go into a recording studio, it’s business

hours. Most of our time here is spent laughing. It's been a tether to remembering who we actually are."

Phish maintains a sizable archive, situated in a Burlington warehouse. The rooms are kept at 64.7 degrees, and their contents are managed by Kevin Shapiro, the band's full-time archivist. One morning, Shapiro and Beth Montuori Rowles, the general manager of Phish Inc. and the executive director of the WaterWheel Foundation, showed me around. There were old stage props (a plywood time machine, miniature trampolines, copper balls from the Clifford Ball), oil paintings, gig posters, costumes, ticket stubs, T-shirts, books, photographs, newsletters, and seemingly endless shelves of media, from eroding four-tracks and VHS tapes with titles such as "Random Party, UVM, 1987" to almost a hundred and twenty pounds of hard drives, held in foam-lined, waterproof cases, which contain the visuals that the band used at its sold-out four-night run at Sphere, in Las Vegas, in 2024. "When I started, in '96, my dad was, like, 'Are they a rock band? Is this what you're gonna do?' " Shapiro said, standing next to a humming stack of computer servers. "I was, like, 'Well, maybe.' And he said, 'What's the longevity of that? It's just gonna burn alive—that's what rock and roll does.' Which is a true statement. But I thought, *If ever a group might endure, this could be the one.*"

From the beginning, Phish both taped its shows and allowed others to tape them, which means that there is now an overwhelming amount of recorded music to manage. (Shapiro and Montuori Rowles referred to the magnitude of material as "the archival conundrum.") We paused in front of a series of cobalt-blue boxes. "You asked about a holy grail," Shapiro said. "For the fans, the holy grail is a release of Big Cypress. We've done a fair amount of the background work—these tapes are already transferred." At one point, Shapiro handed me the original copy of Anastasio's senior thesis, the music for a concept album titled "The Man Who Stepped Into Yesterday," which is set in a mythical land called Gamehendge. It is the basis for several of Phish's most beloved early tunes. "I feel like I'm looking at the Gutenberg Bible," I joked. "You are," Montuori Rowles replied.

The next day, I met McConnell for breakfast. After touring the archive, I'd felt overwhelmed. What did it all mean? "I don't know what it means,



either,” McConnell said, chuckling. He was wearing bluejeans and a Mets hat. “I don’t try to.” Later that morning, McConnell drove me around Burlington, pointing out where the members of Phish had lived, practiced, hung out, and gigged during the band’s formative years. A lot of the clubs from that time were gone—Finbar’s, Hunt’s, Memorial Auditorium, where the band once opened for Allen Ginsberg—but the scrappy apartments mostly remained. McConnell guessed that he’d rented something like seventeen different spots, in total, around town. (He and Gordon still live nearby; in 2006, Fishman bought a blueberry farm in Lincolnville, Maine, a Down East town where he has served as a town selectman.)

McConnell joined Phish in 1985, when the band still had a second guitarist, named Jeff Holdsworth. Anastasio, Fishman, Gordon, and Holdsworth had all been undergraduates at the University of Vermont; McConnell was studying at Goddard, an experimental college in nearby Plainfield. McConnell was doing the booking for Goddard Springfest, which featured a dozen acts. “There was a band called the Cuts, which played eighties music,” McConnell recalled. “They wore black suits—they had a thing going. But they had to cancel. Mike found out they cancelled, got my number, and called me in my dorm at seven-thirty in the morning. The phone was just ringing, and ringing, and ringing. I ended up picking up, like, *Stop calling me.*” Still, Phish got the gig. “I just knew kind of immediately that I was supposed to be in this band,” McConnell said. “Even before I heard them, just seeing them driving up.” In 1986, Anastasio and Fishman both enrolled at Goddard, and McConnell received a hundred-dollar finder’s fee from the school—at the time, the college had just thirty-three undergraduates.

We wound through the U.V.M. campus. “The very first time I played with the band was right up here,” McConnell said, slowing down and pointing toward a courtyard between two buildings. For about six months, Phish was a quintet—then Holdsworth quit. “I was bringing in this massively composed music, and he didn’t want to learn it,” Anastasio told me. “But Page was all in.”

“When I first joined, Trey asked me, ‘How much will you commit to this? Are you gonna be gone in a year?’ I was twenty years old at the time,”

McConnell told me. “And I said, ‘No, I’ll be here for ten or fifteen years. I will really, really commit to this.’ I remember thinking, *This music is unconventional, but it’s good enough that there’s gonna be a niche for this.*”

At Goddard, Anastasio started studying with a composer named Ernie Stires, whom he described as “kind of a second dad.” With Stires’s guidance, Anastasio began writing atonal fugues. In Phish’s earliest songs, he said, “all four parts were composed and fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.” (He later showed me pictures of some of those early, handwritten compositions, including “The Squirming Coil,” from the band’s second album, “Lawn Boy,” fully annotated, with marginalia like “WEIRD TIME STUFF.” “I have hundreds of pages of this,” he said.)

For Anastasio, composition and improvisation are not quite antipodes, though they do function differently. “Rhythmic variation is a huge part of the way that I improvise—that’s something a little bit unique about my guitar playing. When I’m composing, I tend to lean into harmony,” he said. “Improvisation arises from a gut-level reaction rather than from rational thought. Composition—arranging sounds to create a musical narrative—is slower.” Both, he offered, “are a very direct path to the heart and emotion.”



*In the audience at Phish's four-night New Year's run.*

The band began booking regular shows at Nectar's, a bar and restaurant in downtown Burlington. "Nectar's was three nights a month, three sets a night," Gordon said. "That's one way to be relaxed—to have all that time and nothing to prove."

"We knew everybody's name in the audience," Anastasio said. "Burlington was particularly cool right then. Bernie was our mayor. Ben and Jerry were handing out ice cream. We would play a show until two in the morning, then we would all go to Howard Johnson's and eat French fries. It was a really deep social scene during that incredible age when you're figuring out who you are."

"We were rebelling, but no one cared," McConnell said. "We weren't rebelling against anyone in particular," he added, laughing. "We just weren't gonna not do what we did." Slowly, Phish's audience got bigger. "It

used to be easy to track, because we would go to a town—Northampton, Massachusetts—and play to five people in a club in the basement,” McConnell said. “And the next time there would be twenty-five people. And then they’re, like, ‘O.K., we can move you to the club upstairs.’ And then there were fifty people. And then it was the next club, and the next club, and then it’s the arena at UMass.”

Phish has long been likened to the Grateful Dead, a comparison that feels easy but is also apt. (Both bands are known for improvising and for self-actualizing onstage rather than in a studio, and have been trailed around the country by packs of sandal-wearing devotees.) After Jerry Garcia’s death, in 1995, some followers of the Grateful Dead saw Phish as a viable alternative—a new anchor for the life style. “There was a real change sometime in ’96,” Anastasio said. “We got famous. The pace of the growth was so astonishing. We were all just hanging on for dear life.”

On my last day in Burlington, Anastasio and I met for coffee. The night before, at dinner, I’d been asking him about Phish as a disobedient force that refuses to acquiesce to the whims of the culture. I was thinking specifically about the band’s screwball humor—what it meant to play an Electrolux vacuum cleaner, as Fishman occasionally did, or to sing very long songs about lizards in the early and mid-nineties, when rock music was perhaps at its most righteous and angsty. (I recalled, as a teen-ager, watching Eddie Vedder, of Pearl Jam, scrawl the phrase “PRO CHOICE!!!” on his forearm, on MTV, and thinking it was easily the most intense thing I’d ever seen.)

Anastasio said that some degree of exuberance and absurdity were simply ingrained in the process for him—that he had always thought of songwriting as collaborative and fun. Anastasio was brought up in Princeton, New Jersey, where his father worked for the Educational Testing Service. His mother was a children’s-book author and an editor at *Sesame Street* magazine. He started singing and playing guitar as a teen-ager, hanging around the Princeton campus with his friends. (Anastasio was one of the first employees of the Princeton Record Exchange; for a while, he was paid partly in vinyl Led Zeppelin bootlegs.) “There’s a rhombus sculpture at the Institute for Advanced Study, and we would climb up on

this thing with a four-track machine. It was hard to climb up—it was a big success story if you could get on it. We’d bring acoustic guitars and a six-pack of beer, a couple joints, and laugh and make up these songs,” he said. Some of those early tunes eventually made their way into the Phish repertoire, such as “Guy Forget,” which was named after the French tennis player and contains just one lyric: “I’ve never met a man that I could not forget / Except for Guy Forget.” “Everyone was laughing and falling over, and I’m just playing the guitar, making up this ridiculous non-song, but it’s catchy and it’s funny. Years later, I spontaneously started to sing this thing at a Phish concert, at Nectar’s, and suddenly it’s in the lexicon. It’s nothing, and yet people have signs and they scream for it. So you do it, and it’s fun. But half of my brain is thinking, *Oh, my God, shoot me now.*”

Still, Anastasio said, he didn’t really see silliness as the nucleus of Phish’s countercultural ethos. He took his phone out and started playing “Fluffhead,” a song he wrote when he was nineteen or twenty. “*This* was always the point of rebellion,” he told me. “This is all written out—it’s tongue and groove, piano and guitar.” He played a bit more of the song. “Right now, the countertheme is the bass. Then it’s the piano. Now it’s the guitar. Now we’re playing it in a different key. There it is again. Then we do it without any rhythm, same theme. Now I’m playing the upbeat, and Page is playing the downbeat. Same theme. Now Page is on the upbeat, I’m on the downbeat. That’s backward. Now I’m going up keys, and he’s answering me. There it is again. O.K., practice *that* for fifteen hours.” Anastasio laughed. “That’s one theme, developed. We do a twelve-minute-long song, and *then* we start improvising.”

Anastasio pointed out a window toward a church where he used to watch Stires, his mentor, play organ. He said, “One of the first things that he taught me was the concept of the emancipation of dissonance, which was an idea put forth by Schoenberg. Conceptually, what it means is that as music progresses through time it ought to become more dissonant.” He paused. “I was writing atonal fugues as an exercise to figure out those outer realms of harmony. If you listen closely, you can hear nods to that in the middle of ‘Fluffhead.’ ” For Anastasio, this was the truest point of insubordination. “*That’s* Phish,” he said. “And that’s the defiance.”

During my time with Anastasio, the musician he spoke about with perhaps the most passion was Leonard Bernstein. Anastasio's enthusiasm for Bernstein is based, in part, on the composer's ability to effectively wed classical theory with popular song. " 'West Side Story' was the first album I ever got. I'm talking about fifth grade," Anastasio said. "Even then, I was thinking, *How the fuck does he do this?*" He went on, "I don't think Bernstein wanted to do a Broadway play. He felt like it was a waste of his talents. But it wasn't! The best part is when Tony gets shot and dies at the end. I've got to play it for you. I'm sorry." He pulled out his phone again. "You've heard this melody before, and it was hopeful. And then when he dies, and she's over him, they play it again, and he re-harmonizes it, and it's heart-wrenchingly horrible." Anastasio's eyes filled with tears. "This is the moment I fell in love with music. It's like a funeral dirge. That's all liberated dissonance, everything you're hearing. This is a very simple phrase, a simple melody. And then he modulates. And he's consonant now, the last shred of hope . . ." The song kept playing. "That's in key. Finally, he gets there. He goes, 'There's a place for us, there's a place for us, there's a place for us . . . somewhere . . .' And then it never modulates. It ends on the most dissonant interval." Anastasio looked stricken. He wiped his eyes. "Ernie and I would talk about this stuff when I was eighteen. 'Don't give it to 'em. Don't resolve,' " he said. "Instead, I would just keep going and going and going."

On September 14, 2000, Phish performed an aching cover of Neil Young's "Albuquerque"—a song about the isolation and stress of life on the road—at the Darien Lake Performing Arts Center, in New York. Anastasio's voice was uncharacteristically melancholic. By then, Phish had been pushing the limits of most everything for nearly twenty years. Soon afterward, the band took a two-year break, but it wasn't enough.

In April, 2004, Phish played a series of exceptionally grim shows in Las Vegas. Anastasio was addicted to opiates. "I remember coming offstage, and, to anybody who was standing around, I'd say, 'Did people like that shit?' " Anastasio told me. "I knew it wasn't good." The financial pressures of the operation (at the time, Phish employed around fifty people) were overwhelming; the scene backstage was decadent and depraved. There were marriages and children at home. The drugs caused problems; the drugs

obscured problems. “I don’t know what came first,” Anastasio said. “When you feel bad about letting people down, a great solution is to take an OxyContin. If you aren’t working as hard as you used to, you think, *I’ll just do a line of cocaine, and then I can work harder*. We had doctors who were writing prescriptions in order to get backstage: ‘Oh, you must be tired from all this touring. Here are five hundred OxyContin.’ ”

Anastasio was locked in a cycle of indulgence and repentance. “What would happen is we’d go home, and I would do yoga and go to the gym, run on the treadmill, get my shit together,” he said. “Then we’d go out, play one set, and, *bam*, it was back. Because it was fun. Everyone was having so much fun. There goes the people-pleasing. You don’t want to be the one to say the party’s over.” On May 25th, Anastasio posted a note to Phish.com announcing that Coventry (the band’s seventh festival, held at a small airfield in Vermont) would be their last show. “We all love and respect Phish and the Phish audience far too much to stand by and allow it to drag on beyond the point of vibrancy and health,” he wrote. His language was defensive: “For the sake of clarity, I should say that this is not like the hiatus, which was our last attempt to revitalize ourselves. We’re done.”

“If you want to talk about the statement, you’d have to talk to Trey, because that was where his head was,” McConnell told me. But not, I ventured, where McConnell’s head was? “No,” he said. “I was sad. I wasn’t, like, *This is the wrong decision*. I just thought, *This is the decision*. It wasn’t going well for any of us, really, but especially not for Trey. And Trey’s the locomotive that drives this thing.”

Fishman recalled a distraught Anastasio telling the rest of the band that if he didn’t get out of Phish he was going to die. “What I remember is Trey saying, ‘I just can’t keep doing this,’ ” Gordon said. “And Page and Fish saying, ‘Yeah, I think you’re right.’ And me saying, ‘I don’t agree.’ I went through this grieving period, which was really hard. And I would have these dreams—we’re still together, and we’re playing, maybe it’s Ohio or something. There’s a hillside. It’s grassy, and there’s a long dirt road. And there’s already a few thousand people there. I get into the building, and I’m backstage, and there’s a river right out the back door. And I get into this

little gondola.” Gordon’s eyes were wet. “It felt like a river within my soul. That’s what I was grieving. That’s what was gone.”

Coventry is still a sensitive topic among Phish fans. Torrential rains flooded the festival grounds in the days prior; sixty-eight thousand fans showed up anyway. Many of them left their cars on the side of Interstate 91 and hiked the rest of the way. (The state of Vermont cleaned up the highway afterward and sent the band a bill for thirty-five thousand dollars; Phish paid it.) The sets had their ups and downs: some of the improvisations were gorgeous, but the more composed elements felt messy. “It was really obvious that the band was sick,” Fishman said. There was rancor in the crowd. Fans blamed Anastasio for pulling the plug. “There was this backlash of loathing online, directed at me,” he said. “It was so shocking, and it fucked me up so bad. Maybe I deserved it. But it was an experience that I was not prepared for.”

In December, 2006, when he was forty-two, Anastasio was arrested in the early morning, while driving through Whitehall, New York, a small town a few miles from the Vermont border. The officer who pulled him over found drugs—Vicodin, Percocet, Xanax, heroin—in his car. He failed a field sobriety test. He was in ghastly shape, both physically and emotionally. “I’ll talk to people in my life and say, ‘I guess I could have died.’ And they’re, like, ‘Could have? You were fucking days from death,’ ” he said. “I think I weighed, like, ninety-seven pounds. It was horrible. You don’t even know it’s happening. You just think you’re fixing the problem. You’re not getting high—you’re just trying to stave off horror.”

The day after Anastasio’s arrest, the Whitehall police sergeant, William Humphries, told a reporter from the Rutland *Herald*, “From talking to the police chief, he told me he was very cooperative, probably one of the most cooperative people that they’ve arrested.” Anastasio pleaded guilty to attempted criminal possession of a controlled substance, and was ordered to serve fourteen months in drug court, a voluntary program for nonviolent offenders that allows them to avoid jail time. Anastasio rented an apartment near the courthouse. His license was suspended, so he bought a bicycle. “I was really immersed. For a year and a half, all I did was go to meetings. I took drivers’ ed, I did my community service. I had a curfew, I had to call every day at seven in the morning. It was house arrest. I was alone most of



the time,” he told me. “My family would come up during the weekends. I had little kids at the time. Whenever I talk to them about it, they say those are some of their greatest memories, because I wasn’t running off on tour.”

Anastasio spoke about the experience with an almost preternatural gratitude. “I did two hundred and eighty-odd hours at the Washington County Fairgrounds. I cleaned the toilets by hand. I parked cars. People would recognize me,” he said. “It was great, though,” he went on. “It was a relief. It was a humbling, healthy, beautiful thing.” Later, Anastasio thanked Andrew Mija, the police officer who arrested him that night. “Twice,” he said. “I sent him a letter, and then somebody said that he didn’t get it, so I sent another one.” In 2023, Anastasio and his drug-court case manager, Melanie Gulde, opened Divided Sky, a forty-six-bed residential drug-recovery program in Ludlow, Vermont, named for an early Phish song (“Divided sky / The wind blows high”).

Anastasio is now sober, and he is active as a sponsor in the recovery community. Late one night, I asked him if he ever felt haunted by it all: the mug shot, the handcuffs, court. “That’s not what haunts me,” he said. “What haunts me is what I could have done to someone else. I met a guy in jail who got in a car accident and killed two people. He was smoking a joint and crashed his car, and that was it. He hit a tree, and his friends went through the windshield. *That’s* what haunts me.”

On October 1, 2008, not long after Anastasio graduated from drug court, Phish announced its return, beginning with three shows at Hampton Coliseum the following March. It had been more than four years since Coventry. “Now the leader of the band is sober,” Fishman said. “But it wasn’t that big of a deal for the rest of us to not have that shit backstage. We just returned to how we were for the first fifteen years. In a way, it was more familiar—it was formalized by Trey’s sobriety, but in our youth that was just our work ethic. Back then, anything that affected our ability to play well was edited out.”

In Hampton, the band opened its first set with “Fluffhead,” which begins with the line “Fluffhead was a man / With a horrible disease.” Even watching the footage years later on YouTube—when the band walks out, the depth and intensity of the crowd’s roar is staggering. It goes on for more

than a minute and doesn't stop when Anastasio plays the opening notes. I brought up the moment with McConnell. "I know exactly what you're talking about," he said. "It was beyond incredible. I've gone back and listened to what that sounded like. It was a lot." He paused, choked up. "It's still a lot."

"It took us a couple of years to get our mojo back," Anastasio said. "There was a show we did in 2013, in Tahoe, where we played a long jam in 'Tweezer'—that opened up a new realm. From that point on, I think it's been improving every year."

The idea of replacing a member of Phish has always seemed impossible, but it feels especially ludicrous now. Time is a liability for most rock bands, but it has enabled Phish to communicate through a private musical language, honed and expanded over decades. "There's a 'Ruby Waves' from 2019, in Alpine Valley, that I'd put up against any jam from the nineties," Anastasio said. "There's no question to me that we're playing better now. So much has happened—we grew up. Modern-day Phish exists in a realm that none of those years can touch."

This past New Year's Eve, Phish played its eighty-seventh show at Madison Square Garden. The venue, which has a concert capacity of around twenty thousand people, has become an unlikely home base for the band. Anastasio describes his relationship to M.S.G. as intimate, from the proclivities of the staff to the particular wobble and bounce of the floor and the way that a note reverberates around the room. The New Year's show was the final gig in another sold-out four-night run.

I arrived in the early afternoon to watch the band sound-check. Each New Year's, Phish stages a "gag," or some sort of elaborate theatrical experience, at midnight. Like many things in the Phish universe, the gags are kind of hard to explain. In 2011, in the middle of a performance of "Meatstick," a boisterous song about sausage, the band began singing in Japanese. Moments later, costumed coalitions from around the world (Swedish ski bunnies, a Mexican mariachi band, Hasidic rabbis) sprinted onstage, singing about the meatstick in their native tongues. Then the band climbed into the hot dog, briefly reclaimed from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and soared around the arena. *Excuse me?* you might be thinking. Yet I am

here to tell you it happened. The band often loses money on these shows. Its management once suggested that it might as well stuff wads of cash into T-shirt cannons and fire them into the crowd.

Anastasio starts plotting the gag almost a year in advance, working closely with the artist Abigail Rosen Holmes, who often functions as a creative director for big events. (The rest of the band finds out about the gag only a few days in advance.) This year, at midnight, Phish would perform “Pillow Jets,” a song from “Evolve,” and a kind of hyped-up, E.D.M. version of “What’s Going Through Your Mind?” I’d heard bits and pieces of the “What’s Going Through Your Mind?” remix in a recording studio in Manhattan earlier that month. Anastasio had spent the weeks leading up to New Year’s in the studio, working on new material—maybe a Phish record, maybe a solo record, he wasn’t sure yet. Fishman had recently come through to add some drums.

“Pillow Jets,” which Anastasio wrote during the pandemic, was inspired by Wangechi Mutu’s “The Seated I” and “The Seated III,” two regal bronze sculptures of feminine figures, installed outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2019. It’s a buoyant song about praying for an otherworldly savior—described, in the lyrics, as a “conjurer of thunder.” The gag this year was that a thunder goddess would actually appear: an enormous golden mask with big, blinking blue eyes descending from the ceiling. There would also be a live goddess, played by the Off Broadway actress Jo Lampert, and scrums of masked-and-robed dancers. From there, the band members, wearing flight suits (except Fishman, in his dress), would play a few bars of “Auld Lang Syne” before launching into the “What’s Going Through Your Mind?” remix. In the empty arena, this all looked and sounded particularly bonkers. (A mostly blank page in my notebook says only “K-hole? Ibiza???”)

It was a lot to sound-check. Anastasio is exceptionally good-natured, but, like anyone who has wrangled a complex creative operation for several decades, he is also exacting. “Whatever was just in my ears was not remotely the mix, and that is sad,” he announced from the stage. The first night of the run hadn’t quite coalesced—the portal didn’t open. Before the second show, the band attempted a new exercise, proposed by Gordon. It

was a variation of something Phish has done for years, called “Including Your Own Hey.” The musicians begin playing a theme, and then every minute or so someone initiates a change—maybe a new key—and the rest react. When they’ve reconnected, they each say, “Hey.” The new drill was called “Never Vary,” or “We N.V.,” and it demanded the opposite: *not* changing the pattern for as long as possible. It seemed to reset something. The second night, the band played a glorious, thirty-seven-minute version of “Ruby Waves.” It led into an especially poignant “Waste,” one of my favorite Phish songs. In one verse, Anastasio sings about the hubris of wanting something big and unlikely, of understanding some latent desire as absurd but still believing in it entirely: “A dream, it’s true / But I’d see it through.”

The backstage at M.S.G. is a maze of over-lit hallways and cinder-block dressing rooms. Union guys with chewy New York accents slump on stools, eyeball credentials, and exude a kind of seen-it-all nonchalance. (I watched McConnell get stopped while attempting to return to his dressing room. “I play keyboards in this band,” he said politely, gesturing back toward the stage.) Anastasio had decided to wear a rhinestone-studded black polo sweater by the Lower East Side-based Bode, a cultish fashion brand. He showed me the top hanging in his dressing room. It glittered under the light. “I think I’m gonna wear this?” he said, and laughed. Yet it made a kind of aesthetic sense: Bode is known for repurposing vintage patchwork textiles into boxy garments, a look familiar to anyone who has ever roamed around a parking lot, eating a veggie burrito purchased from a cooler with no ice, waiting for an arena’s doors to open.

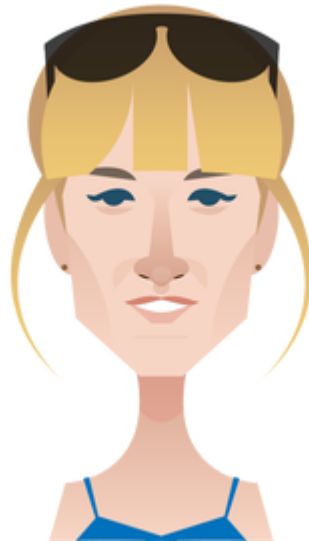
A few hours before showtime, the Garden allowed general-admission ticket holders to stream inside, single file, in timed groups. Security guards held up a yellow rope, establishing a sort of makeshift corral. People lucky enough to snag a spot in the front row started “tarping,” or spreading blankets on the floor. (Tarping is a controversial practice—too greedy.) Already, you could feel a kind of frantic hunger in the air.

I watched the show from up in the stands, where I could see everything. The thunder goddess descended, promising protection, rebirth. “Pillow Jets” is a

song about a conquering yet compassionate creature, but it is also a song about music. Help arrives on “pillow jets of sound”:

They will come  
Through smoke rings in the glare  
With mace and discus  
Slicing through the air  
Restoring light  
As the lost become the found

At midnight, there was confetti, balloons, light, a kind of ecstatic yawp. It felt, briefly, as if the crowd were a single organism. I leaned in. Around 2 A.M., the show ended, and we stumbled outside into a new year, stupefied, warm, together. ♦



[Amanda Petrusich](#) is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “[Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records](#).”

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# Takes

- [\*\*Steve Martin on Marshall Brickman's "Who's Who in the Cast"\*\*](#)

By Steve Martin | From Brickman, I learned that satire can be friendly, even cheerful, and that anything was a suitable target.

[Takes](#)

# Steve Martin on Marshall Brickman’s “Who’s Who in the Cast”

*From Brickman, I learned that satire can be friendly, even cheerful, and that anything was a suitable target.*

By [Steve Martin](#)

April 13, 2025



July 26, 1976

[\*\*New Takes on the classics.\*\* Throughout our centennial year, we’re revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.](#)

In 1976, when I read “[Who’s Who in the Cast](#),” by Marshall Brickman, I was astounded. The piece, a “casual”—which is what *The New Yorker* called its wry humor pieces—satirized a benign institution, the Broadway *Playbill*, specifically the section featuring self-written bios of cast members. The piece was dense with jokes—around one per inch:

Mishru Fek (Curley) in a long and distinguished theatrical career has appeared in over three thousand productions, from Second Avenue cabaret (*Don't Make Me Laugh, So Who Are You Kidding?, I'm Entitled, and You Should Live So Long*) to regional theatre (Chaim in *The Wild Mouse*, Vontz in *Crusts*) to Broadway, where he triumphed last season as the grief-stricken father in *Runteleh*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning musical drawn from the life of Eddie Carmel, the Jewish giant.

It was filled with atomized humor particles (a fictional movie called “Nostril from Outer Space”) and packed with names worthy of Dickens (Monroe Parch, Sir Giggling Fatbody). From Brickman, I learned that satire can be friendly, even cheerful, and that anything was a suitable target, including the innocuous pages in the back of a theatre program.

But that was not why I was astounded. I had first heard Brickman's name thirteen years earlier, when I was seventeen, and he was a bluegrass banjo player, not yet a successful comedy writer. Along with his musical partner Eric Weissberg, he had released “New Dimensions in Banjo and Bluegrass” (1963), perhaps the second or third most influential banjo record ever made. The premise was that two banjos simultaneously playing distinct harmonies—which you'd think would be awful—was beautiful, especially to a budding banjoist like me. (Listen to a track called “Reuben's Train.”)

Twenty-five years later, I moved into Brickman's Manhattan building. We connected, and one afternoon he stoically listened as I struggled to play one of his tunes, “Riding the Waves.” Finally, a little disgusted, he said, “That's not right.” Then he showed me the correct chords.

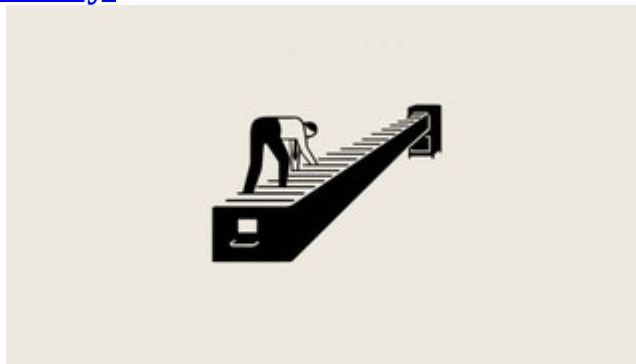
During his long, prolific career, Brickman co-wrote movies with Woody Allen, including “Annie Hall”; later, he co-wrote the books for Broadway's “Jersey Boys” and “The Addams Family.” When he died, last year, I learned that he was the originator of Johnny Carson's eternally fresh routine “Carnac the Magnificent.”

Consider this a friendly, and even cheerful, salute to Marshall Brickman. ♦

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[Read the original story.](#)



### [Who's Who in the Cast](#)

Broadway biographical notes—with apologies to Playbill.

[Steve Martin](#) is an actor, a musician, and a writer. His memoir about his career, “[Number One Is Walking](#),” was illustrated by Harry Bliss.

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# Shouts & Murmurs

- **[Bagels, Ranked](#)**

By Josh Lieb | Jalapeño and Cheddar: This is not a bagel. This is what you order to signal to the guy at the counter that you need him to call a cop.

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

# Bagels, Ranked

By [Josh Lieb](#)

April 14, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

1. **PUMPERNICKEL:** The king. Strong flavor, but not *too* strong. Dances with, rather than fights against, the cream cheese and the lox. (Or whitefish, if that's your thing. I don't judge.)
2. **PLAIN:** Not as fierce a "dancer." More submissive to the lox. Kind of kinky. Maybe you like that.
3. **POPPY-SEED/SESAME:** When they're out of plain.
4. **EGG:** Too cakelike to be a proper bagel, but possibly it reminds you of the challah your nana hand-fed you when she nursed you through polio.
5. **SALT:** You're someone who really likes salt.
6. **ONION:** You're someone who really likes onions.
7. **GARLIC:** Do you actually even like bagels?

8. *EVERYTHING*: “I can’t decide what kind of distracting shit I want on my bagel, so why don’t I add *every kind of shit* to my bagel.” Good decision-making process.

9. *BLUEBERRY*: O.K., you’ve been alive for a thousand years. You were cursed by God after stepping on a butterfly or something. You’ve seen multiple generations of your descendants grow up and live and die, painfully. You watched Rome burn. You made love to Mona Lisa. You killed Kennedy. There is nothing in this world your jaded senses haven’t experienced and become weary of. Finally, you’ve come to this.

10. *CHOCOLATE CHIP*: Do you understand what a bagel is? What purpose it serves? There’s a ninety-five-per-cent chance that you’re five years old, so maybe not. Yes, I like chocolate chips—everybody likes chocolate chips—but surely even your imperfectly matured brain can grasp that there are better conveyances for chocolate chips than a *bagel*.

11. *CINNAMON RAISIN*: You eat raisins on purpose?

12. *JALAPEÑO AND CHEDDAR*: This is not a bagel. This is what you order to signal to the guy at the counter that you need him to call a cop.

13. *WHOLE WHEAT*: How many bagels do you eat? Has your doctor said, “Sheesh, Frank—fifteen bagels a day? Better switch to whole wheat”? If so, have at it. Otherwise, I’m baffled by why you would completely ruin one of life’s small pleasures for a marginal health benefit.

14. *MULTIGRAIN*: This is me stopping. I’m not doing a comedy bit anymore. I’m just talking, like a person talking to another person. If I was at a bagel place with you, and we were lifelong friends, and your sibling or spouse had just died, and you were reaching out to me, as your oldest friend, for some comfort, and you ordered a multigrain bagel, I would absolutely punch you in the neck. Hard. ♦

*Josh Lieb* is the author of “[\*I Am a Genius of Unspeakable Evil and I Want to Be Your Class President\*](#).”

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# Fiction

- **[“Jenny Annie Fanny Addie”](#)**

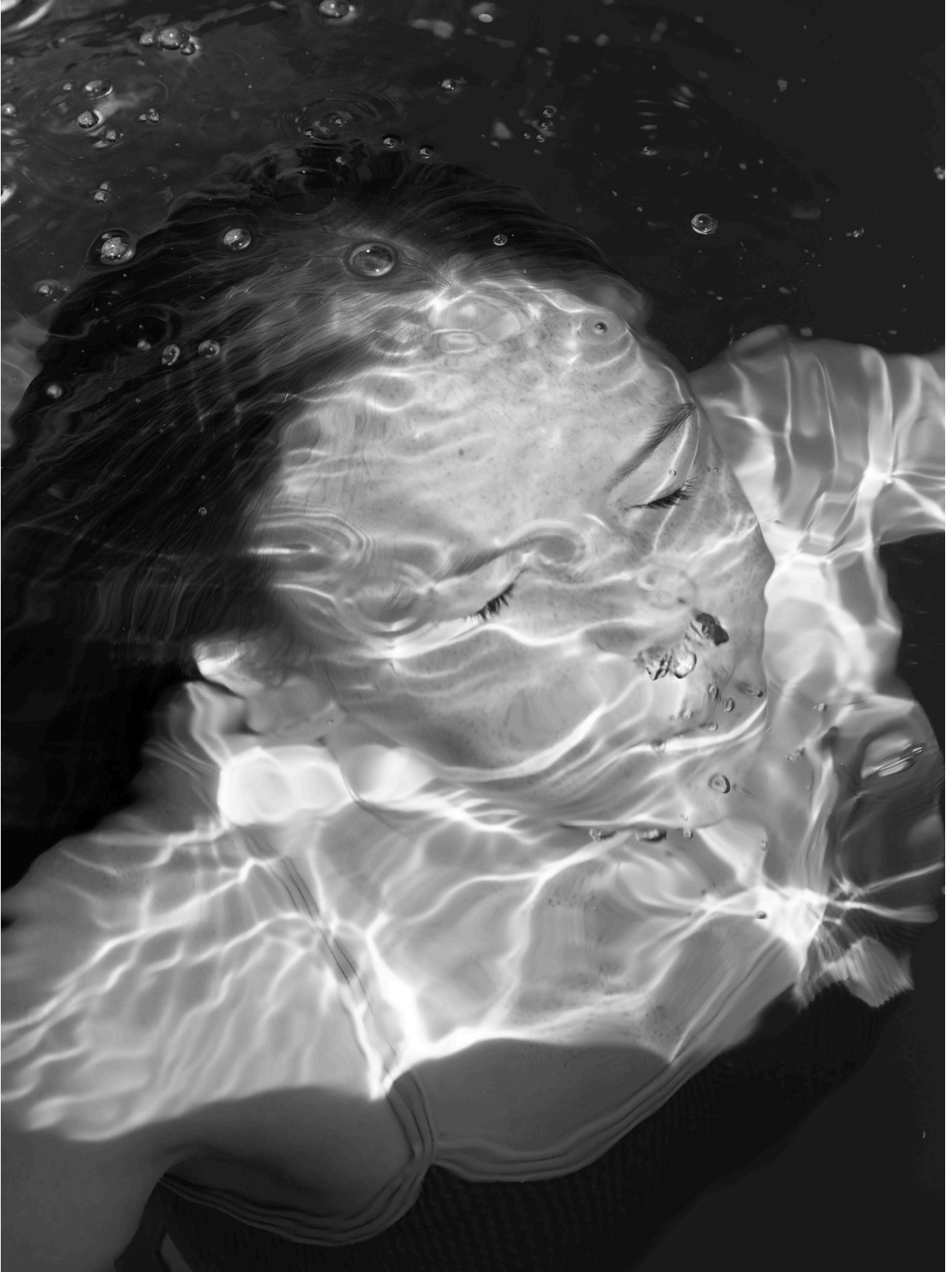
By Adam Levin | “Terminator 2” was a good choice. Throughout the whole movie I forgot about the groping.

**Fiction**

# Jenny Annie Fanny Addie

By [Adam Levin](#)

April 13, 2025



*Photograph by Andriana Nativio*



One morning at Potawatomi day camp, the summer before I became a bat mitzvah, I thought I needed to use the bathroom right in the middle of swimming lessons, but as soon as I was out of the pool I realized I didn't have to go anymore. That was new for me, and weird. I stopped to think for a second. Just stood there by the lifeguard platform, thinking. If I went back in the water and the need returned, I'd have to get out again, and that would draw attention, but then again the need might *not* return, and using the bathroom meant lowering my swimsuit then pulling it back up my body all wet, and I was trying to decide which one of the options would be less unpleasant.

I guess my nipples woke up in the breeze while I stood there. A few steps away, some of the boys in line for the high board pointed and shouted, "It's nippy out here!"

That wasn't the best, but it was no big deal. Every camper that summer shouted that phrase when they spotted hard nipples. It came from that movie "Christmas Vacation." By then it had gotten shouted so often that people barely looked up to see whose chest was being shouted about.

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

This one older boy, Harel, though, who something was wrong with—his voice was too loud, his eyes didn't move—shot out of the line at me. I braced for impact, but Harel stopped short. "Hi," I said, dumbly, and he reached with both hands and clutched my left breast while he squeezed my crotch.

I made some kind of shrieky, involuntary noise that had never before come out of my throat, and it seemed to scare Harel, who said, "Sorry, Jenny, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and sounded like he meant it, even while his eyes remained flat and distant and he wasn't letting go of me and thought my name was Jenny.

•

I can't say how long he was groping me for, but it was long enough that I had time to wonder why no one was helping me.

**Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Adam Levin read "Jenny Annie Fanny Addie."](#)

Then someone helped me. Kelly, the lifeguard, jumped off her perch and yanked Harel back, toward the lockers, by the hair.

He kind of bounced or sat down on the concrete at first. Once he had his legs beneath him again and could keep up with Kelly, who hadn't stopped pulling him, he started to cry, and the sounds of his crying were so goony and moany they sounded fake, but I saw his dead eyes were streaming real tears, and I heard myself laugh a little, just a couple chuckles that came up like coughs, and while Kelly, both fists still full of his hair, continued to pull him, she told him he was "a piece of garbage" and she'd "break [his] neck" if she ever caught him bothering anyone again, and Harel twisted free of one of her hands and tried, it seemed like, to grab at Kelly like he had at me, and with the hand that Harel had freed himself from she struck him loudly across the face, and he fell to his knees, and his mouth was bleeding, and the goony crying sounds stopped completely, and the shrieking noise that he replaced them with sounded so much like the one I'd made just moments before that I thought, for a second, he was mocking me. I looked closer at his face, though, and saw that he wasn't.

•

I don't know where Kelly took him. My counsellor wrapped me up in some towels and walked me to the nurse's.

I was given bags of ice and a bright-red Popsicle. I napped in the nap room, and when I woke up all the ice was water and my mother's soft hand was warm on my forehead.

She asked how I was. I said mostly better, just my chest hurt a little. I showed her the bruise that was under my arm. I didn't want to mention the pain in my crotch, but she asked me, and I said that it wasn't as bad, which was true.

She said that she thought we should go to lunch, so I put on my clothes—I guess someone had brought them from my locker while I slept—and we got

in the car, and I turned up the volume on the oldies station, which both of us liked, and we went to this French place that both of us liked, and we ate tomato bisque, Caesar salad, and bread, and then, for dessert, we had these cold chocolate truffles that were big enough and soft enough to fork at like cake. I don't know what we talked about before the truffles. Nothing too unusual for us, I don't think. Probably what we'd have for dinner, or my brother's latest girlfriend, or what we thought of the way the other diners looked, or the kinds of people we imagined they were.

While we ate the truffles, though, she told me I didn't have to go back to camp if I didn't want to. I asked her what we would do instead, and she suggested that I might want to just spend some time by our pool, or watch rented movies, or ride my bike around. I said that sounded fun, and she said there were only two weeks left before the start of school, anyway, and it wasn't till she said that that I understood that, when she'd said that I didn't have to go back to camp, she hadn't meant that afternoon but *ever*, and I realized she expected me to be more upset by what had just happened with Harel than I felt, and I started to cry right there at the restaurant. I pushed it a little to get myself going—I pictured noble Artax, sinking—but I meant it, too. I mean, I *was* pretty shaken. Not as much by the groping itself, I don't think, as by what came right after, those sounds Harel made, and, even more than that, by the dawning understanding that my mom wasn't just being extra nice because I'd had a bad morning but was actually worried. What had happened to me had upset *her*.

•

I mostly liked camp. I liked the story-time powwows under the parachute. I liked bombardment, the trampoline, and weaving. It seemed like maybe I shouldn't anymore, though. Like I should be afraid of Harel showing up and groping me again.

Except I wasn't afraid of that. No one would let him get near me, I thought. The whole camp would look out for me, after what had happened. I don't know why I was certain, but I was. At the same time, though, I wanted to be a good daughter, and had trouble determining what that would mean here. To say that I'd go back would tell my mother I was able to overcome what had happened—that I was “brave” and “strong.” But accepting her offer to skip

the last two weeks would allow her to think she was saving me. Or to think she was protecting me. Or to think I thought she was saving or protecting me.

What she would prefer to think was unclear.

I asked if I could take the weekend to decide. She told me that I could, and that, whatever my decision, the camp director, when he'd called her earlier, had assured her that Harel had been kicked out for good.

"That boy should be kept in a cage," my mom said.

Then she paid the waiter, and we went to the movies at Deerbrook Mall.

•

I picked "Terminator 2" because Edward Furlong, who plays a sort of young messiah in the movie, had seemed, from the trailer, like a different kind of boystar than the Coreys or Macaulay or any of the other boystars who starred in most of the movies starring boys at the time. But he wasn't any different. He was equally as whiny and in love with himself. He just had a better haircut. A Phoenix-brothers haircut. I might have even thought, when I'd seen the trailer, that he was a Phoenix.

Furlong disappointing me didn't matter, though. The movie was so much fun. Mostly, it's chase scenes, and even though they're fast and full of explosions and completely unlikely in terms of physics, you can follow the progress of their action closely, the causes and effects, which makes them convincing, which makes them tense, and makes you forget how "Terminator 2" was more expensive than any other movie and premiered in every theatre and therefore has to end well for the good guys no matter how much danger it seems like they're in.

•

So I'd made a good choice, picking "Terminator 2." Its hug-and-cry ending was cheesy and obvious, but I didn't think that *while* I watched it, and throughout the whole movie I forgot about the groping. I forgot about myself. I really disappeared.

My mom must have, too.

Before leaving the mall, we split a cinnamon bun by the fountain near the entrance and had that satisfied type of after-movie conversation where you mention certain scenes in order to relive them and impress and maybe outdo each other by being the first to name the best one of all.

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On the car ride home, when the oldies station started airing commercials, I dialled down to the classic-rock station, which was playing “The Weight,” by the band the Band, a song from the sixties that’s pretty much impossible not to like, and that, a few months before, my older brother, Len, had brought up at dinner.

He’d been teaching himself to play the guitar. “The Weight” was in the songbook he was using to learn, and he asked our mom and dad to write down what they thought the lyrics of the chorus were, and both of them wrote the exact same thing:

Take a load off, Annie  
Take a load for free  
Take a load off, Annie  
And you put the load right on me

That’s what I would have written if Len had asked me, and Len told our parents that’s what he’d have written, too, and that pretty much everyone he’d asked to write the lyrics down wrote the same thing, but everyone was wrong. He showed us the book. The song’s real lyrics were:

Take a load off Fanny  
Take a load for free  
Take a load off Fanny  
And you put the load right on me

My dad said that he had a really hard time believing the woman’s name was Fanny, that maybe the book was incorrect, and my mom said that, no, she’d actually heard that before, that the woman’s name was Fanny, but she’d never confirmed it, and Len said that everyone he’d shown the book to so far

had had one of those reactions, and that what he found interesting about people's reactions was how they mentioned only the woman's name. He found that interesting, he said, because, for him, even though discovering her name was different than he used to think it was had been a surprise, what surprised him more was that there wasn't a comma between "off" and "Fanny." He'd always, like our parents and like everyone else, thought the singer was inviting a woman (Fanny) to take a load off—whatever that means—and put the load on him (the singer), but what the singer is actually doing is telling a *listener* to take a load off a woman (Fanny) and put the load on him (the singer). So the singer's not telling Fanny to let him help her—he's not even talking to Fanny—he's telling someone else to help *him* help Fanny by taking Fanny's load off. And what was interesting about *that*, Len said, wasn't just that the song was about something different than what he and everyone he'd spoken to about the song had thought, but that the others didn't notice it. They missed what *should have been* this other surprise—the lack of comma, the way it changed the meaning—and they missed it *because* they were surprised to find out that Fanny's name wasn't Annie. Or that's how it seemed to him, at least, he said. And why *that* was interesting to him, he said, was that he would have thought it would be the opposite. He would have thought that, when people looking at the lyrics realized they'd been wrong about the woman's name all along, they'd wonder what else they might have been wrong about all along, and so they'd be on high alert for *other* things in the lyrics that they'd been wrong about all along, and they'd find the lack of comma pretty much instantly. But no one had. Realizing their first mistake didn't seem to make it easier for them to realize their second mistake; it seemed to make it harder. The first surprise, he said, should have helped expose the second, but in fact the first surprise *covered up* the second. It seemed to him that, if the woman's name on the lyrics sheet *had* been Annie, then all or at least most of the people who saw the lyrics would have noticed that there wasn't a comma after "off," but that because her name was Fanny they didn't.

Both our parents said that that was smart, and very compelling. And my mom asked Len what he made of it, and I think she might have thought the same kind of thing that I was thinking: that Len was working toward some kind of explanation or apology for having caused her and my dad to worry so much the past couple of months (he'd ditched half of tenth grade and started smoking Camels, missing curfews, that kind of stuff), and would say

something really deep and thoughtful about making mistakes, or maybe about accidentally covering up mistakes with more mistakes because realizing that you've made mistakes doesn't always help you stop making mistakes and can a lot of times cause you to make other, even worse mistakes.

But Len hadn't been going for anything like that. He said, "You know what, Mom? I don't know what to make of it. Most people are blind and stupid, I guess. I mean, they're even fuckin' dumber than I've always suspected."

"Not you, though, Addie," he turned to me and said. "You noticed there wasn't a comma, right?"

I hadn't, but I hid my red face and shrugged, like to say, Well, yeah, but I don't want to show off.

•

While "The Weight" played on the car ride home from seeing "Terminator 2," I tried to hear it both ways, and succeeded. Fanny and Annie. With comma, without. And, while I did that, I realized I'd been wrong at lunch.

I'd thought my mom had presented me with the option of quitting camp because she thought I might be groped by Harel again and she wanted to save or protect me from him, or because she thought that I was *afraid* I'd be groped by Harel again and she wanted to save or protect me from the *fear*, but neither of those could have been the reason. When she'd presented the option, she'd already known that Harel had been expelled—the camp director had told her—so she couldn't have thought that Harel might grope me again, and if she'd thought I was afraid of being groped by Harel then she'd have *started* by telling me Harel had been expelled instead of by telling me that I didn't have to return to camp.

What she'd wanted to save or protect me from, I came to understand on the car ride home, must have been the other campers: from feeling embarrassed in front of the other campers for having been groped in front of the other campers.

From a million movies and TV shows, I knew that that was something that occurred sometimes: a girl could feel embarrassed by something that she believed had humiliated her, something that was usually sexual and not her fault, and she'd be damaged for years and need to get therapy.

Those very same movies and TV shows were usually *about* how it wasn't her fault, though, how what she believed had humiliated her wasn't in any way her fault, which meant she hadn't actually been humiliated, and so she *shouldn't* be embarrassed. And that's what I'd thought, too. That's what I'd thought every time I'd watched one of those movies or shows.

And sometimes, I admit, I'd have a second, crueller thought. I'd have the thought that, because it was so obvious that the girls who felt embarrassed for having been humiliated hadn't actually been humiliated and so shouldn't feel embarrassed for having been humiliated, those girls should be ashamed for allowing themselves to feel embarrassed for having been humiliated. It was weak of them, I sometimes thought. They were weak for feeling embarrassed. I'd be ashamed of myself, I'd sometimes think, cruelly, if I were embarrassed for having been humiliated when I hadn't been humiliated—if I were embarrassed for having thought I'd been humiliated by something shitty that, through no fault of my own, had happened to me. And it had made me feel smart to think those cruel kinds of thoughts. It had given me comfort to think those cruel kinds of thoughts.

•

Before the car ride home from “Terminator 2,” I hadn't felt embarrassed for having been humiliated. I hadn't believed that I'd been humiliated. I'd thought that a shitty thing had happened to me and that it hadn't been my fault, it had been Harel's fault, and I thought that anyone with half a brain would see it that way. But my mom, who I knew for sure had a full brain and more—I thought she was smarter than anyone I knew, except for maybe Len—seemed to think that I believed I'd been humiliated and that I felt embarrassed by it.

So either I'd been too stupid to see that I had in fact been humiliated and should feel embarrassed, or my mom thought that I was so weak that I'd believe I'd been humiliated and feel embarrassed.



Or my mom wasn't as smart or as strong as I thought she was: my mom was too stupid or weak to understand that I should *not* believe I'd been humiliated or feel embarrassed, and she would have believed herself to have been humiliated and would have felt embarrassed if Harel had groped *her* in front of everyone at the pool at summer camp.

So either I shouldn't believe I'd been humiliated and shouldn't feel embarrassed but should be ashamed to be the daughter of a weak and stupid mother, or I should believe I'd been humiliated and should feel embarrassed and my mother should be ashamed to be the mother of a weak and stupid daughter.

•

None of this was speakable. It was barely thinkable.

My mother turned the volume down on the Band and said, "Anything you'd like to do before dinner?"

"No," I said.

"Scrabble?" she said.

"No," I said.

She said, "I know I'm kind of slow and boring at Scrabble, but I bet, if I called him at the office and asked, Dad would let Len off work early, and you two could play Scrabble. Do you want me to do that?"

"I want to be alone."

"Gin rummy?" she said.

I said, "Leave me alone," and turned the volume back up. I looked out the window and listened to "The Weight" and had this awful sense of being part of the world in a way that I didn't want to be. This sense of Harel, who by then I no longer had pity for—he'd ruined my mom for me, or ruined me for her, I couldn't tell the difference, or whether there was one, or who I'd rather be ruined for whom if there was—this sense of Harel being an actual person

who had his own life and his own knotty and troubling thoughts. This sense that when he was out of my sight he still existed, he wasn't just some shitty experience that had happened to me but someone who all kinds of experiences happened to, and that, while they were happening, if he thought of me at all he thought my name was Jenny.

•

At home, I fell in and out of sleep on the couch.

When I got too antsy and cold to keep lying there, I went for a walk to the end of our street, and the sunlight and grass smells burned off my grogginess.

The end of our street overlooked a ravine, and through the crowd of trees that grew off the slopes you could see the beach and sometimes you could maybe hear the waves on the lake when the wind was violent, but the sound might have only been the rustle of the branches.

I'd wondered a lot about that waves vs. branches thing.

I tried to remember why I thought it was important. ♦

[Adam Levin](#) is the author of "[The Instructions](#)," "[Hot Pink](#)," "[Bubblegum](#)," and "[Mount Chicago](#)."

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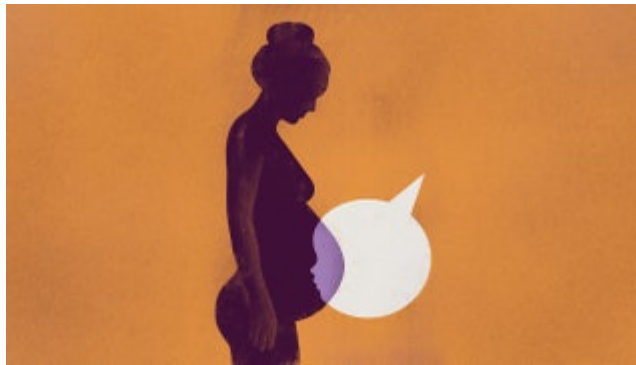
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# Does a Fetus Have Constitutional Rights?

After Dobbs, fetal personhood has become the anti-abortion movement's new objective.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

April 14, 2025



*“Personhood,” by Mary Ziegler, is a field guide to the seemingly boundless tactical resourcefulness of the anti-abortion movement. Illustration by Golden Cosmos*

In the first two years after the Supreme Court [eliminated the constitutional right to abortion](#), the number of abortions performed annually in the United States went up. On the face of it, this might seem perplexing. After all, many states seized the opportunity presented by the Court's 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* to enact daunting new restrictions on abortion: twelve adopted [near-total bans](#), and four more imposed gestational limits of six weeks, a point at which many people may not yet realize they are pregnant. Yet, suddenly, the U.S. was seeing an increase in abortions—from about nine hundred and thirty thousand in 2020 to more than a million in 2023. The best explanation for this apparent paradox was that providers and activists in states where abortion was still accessible devoted considerable energy and resources [into making it more so](#). This was especially true for medication abortions provided via telehealth. In December, 2021, the F.D.A. had lifted its requirement that

mifepristone be prescribed in person; the number of virtual clinics, which assess a patient's eligibility online or by phone, and mail out the medications, proliferated.

The post-Dobbs restrictions plainly had an effect. Some states reported that they had reduced the number of abortions to virtually zero, and they made already hard circumstances harder for patients who have to travel from, say, Texas or Kentucky to North Carolina or Illinois, in many cases pushing abortions later into desperately unwanted pregnancies. Draconian new laws compounded the risks to patients carrying pregnancies that threatened their lives or health. And the over-all number of abortions in the U.S. may eventually decrease as a result of Dobbs. (The latest annual statistics available are from 2023.) Still, it seems safe to say that an immediate rise in the number of abortions was not what activists were looking for when they campaigned to overturn Roe v. Wade.

Given that abortion has not even come close to going away, it makes sense that the anti-abortion movement hasn't, either. Dobbs was the first-round bell in a much bigger fight, for which the movement is in some ways more pumped up than ever. [Donald Trump](#)'s return to the White House is certainly invigorating. It's true that, in his most recent campaign, Trump was canny on the subject of abortion, reminding his evangelical supporters that it was his Supreme Court appointments who had given them Dobbs, while stressing, for the benefit of the majority of Americans who disapprove of the ruling, that abortion policy was now up to the states. Amid the chaotic pileup of executive orders and agency demolitions in the first months of Trump 2.0, abortion politics has not loomed especially large. Trump has not yet, for instance, instructed the Department of Justice, per Project 2025, to ban the mailing of [abortion pills](#) by enforcing the 1873 Comstock Act. Still, he hasn't exactly neglected the issue: among other things, he pardoned twenty-three people who had been arrested for blockading abortion clinics, while directing the Department of Justice to minimize the enforcement of a 1994 law prohibiting violent or intimidating clinic protests. And, of course, these are early days.

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But overturning Roe was never the ultimate goal of the anti-abortion movement, as Mary Ziegler, a law professor at the University of California at Davis, argues in her cogent book [“Personhood: The New Civil War Over Reproduction.”](#) Rather, she observes, it has “always been a fetal-personhood movement,” premised on the idea that the fetus is a “separate, unique human individual from the moment of fertilization,” and that because of this status “the Constitution gives (or at least should give) that individual rights.” Movement leaders have disagreed on how best to enforce fetal personhood—through a constitutional amendment or a federal statute that would ban abortion nationwide, for instance, or through the courts. They have differed, too, on how forcefully to push a proposition with some deeply unpopular possible ramifications: the limiting or outlawing of I.V.F. and some forms of contraception, say, or homicide prosecutions for women who choose to terminate their pregnancies. Many in the movement have opted for more incremental, and less punitive, strategies—suggesting, for instance, that women are innocent victims of abortion providers, and scarcely understand what it means to terminate a pregnancy. This was the reasoning behind so-called informed-consent laws, which compel people seeking abortions to undergo ultrasounds, so they might view the fetus, or to be presented with (often misleading) information about the physical and psychological risks of the procedure.

Yet the goal of recognizing fetal personhood, Ziegler writes, has, for more than half a century, been a “singular point of agreement in a fractious movement.” Ziegler uses the term “fetal personhood,” but “embryonic personhood” might be more accurate: for many in the anti-abortion movement, a fertilized egg, and certainly a cluster of four or eight or sixteen cells, is already a human being, and therefore, within U.S. jurisdiction, is

entitled to equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. (Strange in this context to contemplate how many of those rights-bearing fertilized eggs—as many as forty per cent—fail, through natural causes, even to implant in the uterine lining.)

It has long been a problem for both sides of the abortion debate that the Constitution does not mention the subject. Justice Harry Blackmun, in his majority opinion in *Roe*, attempted to solve that conundrum by expounding an unenumerated right implied by the Constitution, specifically the due-process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment—a right to privacy, protecting people’s decision-making in intimate matters such as reproduction and sexuality. Some people, even in the pro-choice camp, were not particularly taken by this line of reasoning; [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), for one, made it clear that she would have preferred *Roe* to be grounded in an argument about gender equality under the law. But the Constitution’s silence on abortion was trickier for jurists inclined to rule against reproductive rights—they were more likely to be originalists, and therefore to rely on justification in history and tradition, and in the specific text of the Constitution.

Justice [Samuel Alito](#), in his majority opinion in *Dobbs*, had to concede that, at the founding of the United States, abortion was allowed everywhere in the new country until the stage of quickening, when a pregnant person can detect fetal movement (usually at about sixteen to eighteen weeks). But Alito asserted that “the most important historical fact” was that at the time of the Fourteenth Amendment—which, in 1868, granted due process and equal protection of the law to all persons born or naturalized in the United States—many states had enacted laws that made abortion a crime even before quickening. The very existence of such laws, he reasoned, meant that a right to abortion could not be justified with reference to the Constitution.

Advocates of fetal personhood, meanwhile, argued that, far from protecting the right to abortion, the Fourteenth Amendment protected the right to life of the fetus, from the very moment of conception. In *National Review* in June of 2023, a group of anti-abortion leaders and legal scholars, including Kristan Hawkins, the president of Students for Life of America, and Robert P. George, a legal scholar at Princeton, published what became known as the “[new North Star letter](#),” setting a post-*Dobbs* goal of recognizing fetal

personhood. “The 14th amendment expressly forbids the states from denying to ‘any person within [their] jurisdictions the equal protection of the laws,’ ” they wrote. “No exceptions to the equal protection principle are stated, implied, or even contemplated. The principle, on its very face, extends to everyone without distinction of race, ethnicity, sex, age, size, location, stage of development, or condition of dependency.” This meant that fetal-homicide and child-endangerment laws for the “preborn” must be enforced; that “children in the womb” must be “afforded due process and legal representation,” along with child tax credits; and that frozen embryos could not be “discarded and destroyed.” In *Roe*, the Court had briefly considered whether the word “person” in the Fourteenth Amendment (and elsewhere in the Constitution) applied to fetuses, but decided that it almost always applied “post-natally.” Surely, this would be the most commonsense reading, not least because the amendment’s purpose was to extend civil and legal rights to formerly enslaved people in the aftermath of the Civil War.

There was a drive to restrict abortion in late-nineteenth-century America, but, as Ziegler points out, it did not have much to do with the Constitution or the rights of the fertilized human egg. Horatio Storer, a doctor allied with the newly formed American Medical Association, saw the regulation of abortion as a way to burnish the professional reputations of his fellow-doctors, distinguishing them from midwives and other irregular practitioners who offered medicaments and procedures to end unwanted pregnancies. (“Restoring the menses” was the euphemism.) Storer also fretted that abortion was “infinitely more frequent among Protestant women than among Catholic,” and that the new Western territories would be populated by the wrong sort. And he considered the existence of marriages in which “conception or the birth of children is intentionally prevented” to be shameful advertisements of lust. Lust, along with the urgent need to police it, was the overriding preoccupation of the anti-vice crusader Anthony Comstock when he took up the campaign against abortion, in the eighteen-sixties. In these arguments, the fetus was a recessive, even shadowy figure.

It wasn’t until the nineteen-sixties, and the birth of the modern anti-abortion movement, that fetal personhood became a central, animating doctrine for crusaders against legalization. Abortion itself had never gone away. Starting



in the nineteen-forties, a woman with the means and the determination to do so could have her case pondered by a committee of doctors with the authority to grant her a so-called therapeutic abortion in a hospital. (The committee might conclude, for example, that her reproductive organs would be damaged by childbirth or that she would be suicidal if forced to carry the pregnancy to term.) If her circumstances were rougher—if she were younger, poorer, or unmarried, for instance—she could risk going to an illegal practitioner who might or might not treat her with anything like the appropriate care. By the early sixties, Ziegler observes, nearly half the maternal deaths in New York City were the result of botched abortion. “Abortion opponents saw figures like these as further reason to suppress the procedure,” she writes, “but they struck other doctors and advocates quite differently: if the procedure could be performed safely”—and there was by then plenty of evidence that it could be—“every death due to illegal abortions was a scandal and a tragedy.” The campaign to legalize abortion was initially led by doctors who saw a chance to save lives, but they were soon joined by birth-control advocates concerned about population growth and later by feminists and sexual revolutionaries. And, as these advocates began to rack up successes, measured in new state laws and changes in public opinion, a countermovement took shape. In this movement—it would eventually call itself “pro-life”—Catholic theologians at first dominated, and the unborn took center stage.

Eugene Quay, the man Ziegler calls “the most prominent antiabortion advocate of the time,” was a well-known figure in Catholic and legal circles in Chicago. He took an extreme stance on abortion but was at pains to connect it to American morality rather than to Catholic doctrine, an association that he felt might limit its appeal. “If there could be any authority to destroy an innocent life for social considerations,” he wrote in the early nineteen-sixties, “it would still be in the interests of society to sacrifice such a mother rather than the child who might otherwise prove to be normal and decent.” In 1962, another Chicagoan, the theologian Father Francis Filas, told a newspaper reporter that “every unborn child must be regarded as a human person with all the rights of a human person from the moment of conception.”

A few years later, Robert Byrn, a law professor at Fordham University, took the argument in an au-courant direction, framing abortion in terms of discrimination against the unborn. His emphasis on due process for the unborn and his flair for the dramatic gesture—he once petitioned a court to be named the legal guardian of all the fetuses scheduled for abortion in New York City—helped set the tone for the anti-abortion movement of the future: socially conservative, and combative. As the movement grew, folding in more Protestant evangelicals—and turning, at the grassroots, to clinic blockades and, at the margins, to violence against abortion providers—it retained its focus on the rights of the fetus.

Hawkins, the thirty-nine-year-old leader of the increasingly high-profile Students for Life of America, embodies the totalizing ambitions of the post-Dobbs anti-abortion movement: its rightward shift and its revived North Star. She talks a lot about fetal personhood and opposes certain contraceptives, including the Pill. (The Pill mainly works by preventing ovulation, but it can also make the uterine lining less hospitable for a fertilized egg.) Her aims for the movement are one more piece of evidence giving the lie to the old argument—trotted out by Alito and Brett Kavanaugh for Dobbs—that overturning Roe would somehow cool the abortion debate by returning the matter to the states. In a 2023 profile on the BBC website, Hawkins described a new momentum: “Like, O.K., all of America is watching, push the gas pedal down on everything right now. More, more, more, more, more.” (In a detail that stuck with me from that profile, Hawkins, whose husband homeschools their four children, and who has been an anti-abortion activist since her teens, said that she didn’t have friends “in the traditional sense,” explaining, “Like, I don’t have girlfriends I go for brunch with. . . . What would I talk about besides ending abortion?”) Ziegler writes, “For half a century, she and her allies have seen themselves as fighting an era-defining human rights battle. It might take another generation or more to secure judicial recognition of fetal personhood, but that does not trouble the activists who had successfully destroyed *Roe v. Wade*. They have played the long game before.”

Ziegler makes the point more than once that the belief in fetal personhood is, for its proponents, sincere and fundamental, and surely it is for many in the movement. But it is striking to read how malleable this particular

argument has been, in some ways—how strategically responsive to the times. In the early sixties, when activists worried that faith-based arguments might doom them politically, and when the courts had begun recognizing the civil rights of Black Americans, Byrn and others made the argument that, as Ziegler puts it, “classifying someone on the basis of residence in the womb was analogous to racial discrimination.” In the nineteen-eighties, during the tough-on-crime Reagan era, the fetus reëmerged in some anti-abortion rhetoric as the ultimate crime victim. Toward the end of the decade, as the movement grew closer to conservative legal circles, including the Federalist Society, it drew more on constitutional-originalist arguments. And when the Supreme Court recognized corporations as persons, or uncannily personlike entities, with respect to free-speech rights exercised through campaign donations and religious-conscience exemptions, people like the influential conservative lawyer James Bopp “hoped that justices willing at times to treat businesses as persons might be willing to do the same for the unborn child,” Ziegler writes. Her “Personhood” is a field guide to the seemingly boundless tactical resourcefulness of the anti-abortion movement.

Ziegler is one of the leading historians of reproductive politics, a generous and frequent commentator in the press, and the author of several previous books that deal to a greater or lesser extent with the anti-abortion movement. The focus of this book is important, but perhaps leads her to overestimate the power of the fetal-personhood argument in a society where some of that doctrine’s logical conclusions would be profoundly objectionable to many, many Americans. I.V.F. offers a [prime example](#). In February of 2024, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that embryos created through in-vitro fertilization were to be considered children. Fearing legal action, some fertility clinics in the state promptly paused their operations. In March, the G.O.P.-led Alabama state legislature rushed to pass a bill granting civil and criminal immunity to I.V.F. providers and receivers. (Forty-two per cent of American adults say that they have availed themselves of fertility treatment or personally know someone who has, according to the Pew Research Center.) Trump was nervous enough about the fallout that he called himself, weirdly, “the father of I.V.F.” on the campaign trail, and in February he signed an executive order promising to make fertility treatment more accessible.

One snag Ziegler does not deal with here is birthright citizenship—presumably because the book was completed before Trump signed an executive order revoking it. In the Trump world view, a baby born in the United States can be a citizen only if one or both of its parents are U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents. (The executive order contradicts how citizenship is defined in the Constitution, and several federal courts have blocked enforcement of it.) But for fetal-personhood advocates an embryo is already under U.S. jurisdiction and specifically entitled to the protections of its Constitution by dint of its location in a womb on U.S. soil. For those occupying the overlapping category of Trump supporter and fetal-personhood booster, this would seem to present, at the least, a rhetorical problem.

Legislators in some states have been emboldened to push fetal-personhood bills, politically viable or not, marking a split from the mainstream anti-abortion movement's focus on punishing providers of abortion or, lately, people who assist others in obtaining one, rather than punishing the abortion patients themselves. (For a long time, movement leaders urged a "Love the sinner, hate the sin" approach.) As of March, 2025, bills redefining abortion as homicide had been introduced in at least ten states. These do not always get very far. In Iowa, for instance, G.O.P. legislators blocked a bill that would have made it a felony to "cause the death" of an "unborn person," worried, apparently, that it would generate trouble for I.V.F. But the bills have changed the rhetorical landscape.

Perhaps the biggest shot in the arm for the fetal-personhood movement came in the form of an executive order ostensibly unrelated to abortion, one with an especially unwieldy and Orwellian name: Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government. The order proclaims, with unwarranted confidence, that " 'Female' means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the large reproductive cell. 'Male' means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the small reproductive cell."

The implications were not lost on anti-abortion advocates, and it wasn't paranoia that made those on the other side sit up and take notice. At this year's March for Life rally, on a cold January day in Washington, D.C., the

mood and the language were uncompromising—every abortion facility in the country had to be shut down, and abortion had to become, as one student activist put it, “unthinkable.” When [Mike Johnson](#), the Speaker of the House, took to the stage, he brought up Trump’s executive order early in his speech: “I don’t know if you saw his executive order on gender, but it defines life as beginning at conception, rather than birth.” Johnson put invisible air quotes around “gender,” but he came down hard on the word “conception,” jabbing one finger in the air as he said it. The crowd cheered. Ideas have consequences. ♦



[Margaret Talbot](#) joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2004. She is the author, with David Talbot, of “[By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American Revolution](#).”

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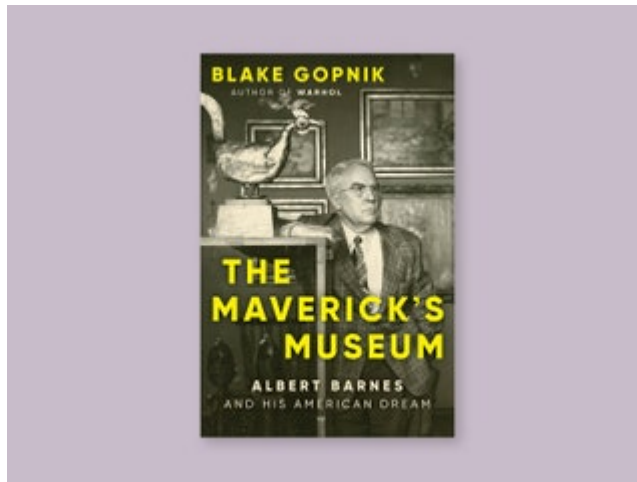
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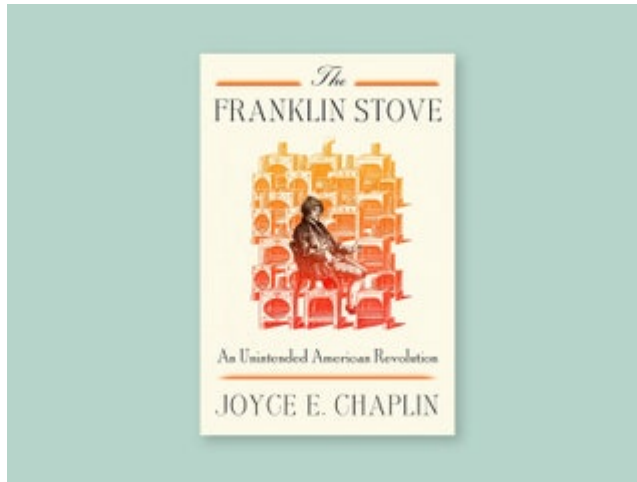
# Briefly Noted

*“The Maverick’s Museum,” “The Franklin Stove,” “The Dream Hotel,” and “Hunchback.”*

April 14, 2025



[The Maverick’s Museum](#), by Blake Gopnik (Ecco). Albert C. Barnes was born into poverty in 1872, in Philadelphia, and went on to make a fortune as the inventor of a topical antiseptic and to amass a staggering collection of modern art. Gopnik’s animated biography chronicles Barnes’s lifelong campaign to make art accessible to the working class, a democratizing impulse that found its greatest expression in the Barnes Foundation, which opened in 1925 to display his acquisitions. But the collector was also known for his irascibility, and Gopnik touches on the contradictions between his high-mindedness—Barnes was a stalwart defender of Black rights and culture—and his temper. Ultimately, Gopnik figures that “Barnes’s public cruelties might be just about balanced by private kindnesses.”



**The Franklin Stove**, by Joyce E. Chaplin (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In the mid-eighteenth century, during a period of cooling known as the Little Ice Age, Benjamin Franklin began designing a heating device that would be more efficient than the traditional fireplace. Chaplin's richly textured history documents the brilliant theories and innovations that led to the Franklin stove's creation, but it also charts the human and environmental costs: produced in part by slave labor on tribal lands, the stove eventually burned coal. This story holds numerous lessons for our era; among them, Chaplin writes, is that any "techno-optimistic" solution to the climate crisis, though it might work in the short term, may have unintended, and potentially harmful, consequences.

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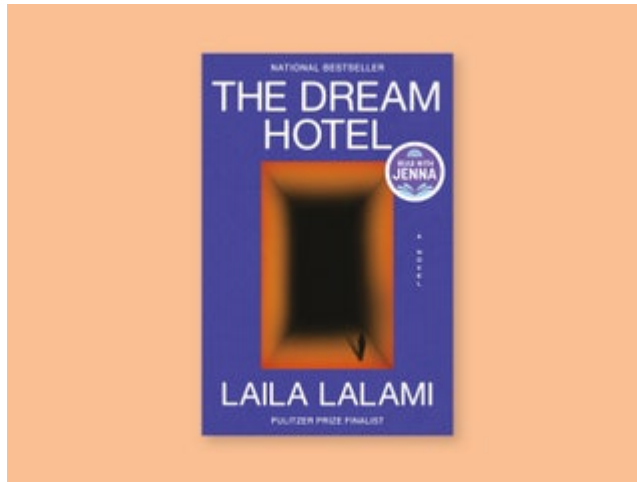
## **What We're Reading**



*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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[The Dream Hotel](#), by *Laila Lalami* (Pantheon). Sara Hussein, the protagonist of this dystopian novel, is detained by deputies of the so-called Risk Assessment Administration after a “crime-prediction algorithm” flags that she had a dream about poisoning her husband. Although Sara has not committed a crime, she is placed in a prisonlike “retention center” for observation. Lalami deftly captures Sara’s disorientation as she adapts to the rigid routines of the center, where detainees are experimented upon by a technology company that’s testing the efficacy of product placement in people’s dreams. As an official remarks, dreams are valuable because they reveal “the most private parts of ourselves, from repressed memories to future plans.”



[Hunchback](#), by *Saou Ichikawa*, translated from the Japanese by *Polly Barton* (Hogarth). This slim novel, which won Japan’s prestigious Akutagawa Prize, is told from the point of view of Shaka, a woman who,



like Ichikawa, has a congenital muscle disorder and uses an electric wheelchair and a ventilator. Shaka's condition has kept her from sexual activity, but not from developing fantasies. "My ultimate dream," she confesses, "is to get pregnant and have an abortion, just like a normal woman," and we follow her as she writes lowbrow erotica and considers paying for sex. The difficulty of managing Shaka's condition—the constant need to suction mucus and the pain of holding a book—interrupts and controls the flow of the story just as it does its narrator's life.

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## [Books](#)

# The “Lady Preacher” Who Became World-Famous—and Then Vanished

*Aimee Semple McPherson took to the radio to spread the Gospel, but her mysterious disappearance cast a shadow on her reputation.*

By [Casey Cep](#)

April 14, 2025



*McPherson’s church, in Los Angeles, hummed with volunteers, who prayed twenty-four hours a day in two-hour shifts. Photographs courtesy International Church of the Foursquare Gospel*

Aimee Semple McPherson was barefoot when she left Room 202 at the Ocean View Hotel. Wearing only a bathing suit, a dressing gown, and a swim cap, McPherson—the founder of one of America’s first megachurches and just about the most famous woman in the country—had a street waffle for lunch, then settled in the shade of an umbrella just north of Venice Beach to work on a sermon.

It was May 18, 1926, and the thirty-five-year-old McPherson was known to critics and champions alike as “[God’s Best Publicity Agent](#).” McPherson rose to prominence during the golden age of P.R., when Ivy Lee was talking up the Rockefellers and the Democratic Party and Edward Bernays was selling everything from Dixie cups to the First World War. In keeping with

the times, McPherson used mass media to make herself into a master of soul craft and self-promotion, laying hands on thousands of sick parishioners and preaching practically seven days a week to thousands more until her death, in 1944. Her sermons featured elaborate sets and musical numbers, borrowed from the nearby and nascent film industry, including boxing rings in which she knocked out the Devil and a motorcycle that she wheeled across a stage with sirens wailing while calling herself one of the Lord's patrolmen. "Half your success is due to your magnetic appeal," Charlie Chaplin once told her, "half due to the props and lights."

More recognizable than the Pope, McPherson was often besieged by followers, but the ocean offered an escape from their attention, and she liked going to the beach to read Scripture and to write, and then to take a break from both to swim. That May afternoon, she chose a title for her sermon, "Light & Darkness," and wrote for almost an hour before wading into the water. Jonah was swallowed by a whale on his way to Tarshish, and St. Paul was shipwrecked off the coast of Malta, but no one knows what happened to McPherson after she wrote the following in her notebook: "It had been that way since the beginning. The glint of the sun, gleaming light, on the tops, and shadow, darkness in the troughs. Ah, light and darkness all over the earth, everywhere."

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More than a month later, and two days after her own memorial service, the lady preacher reappeared, still barefoot but now wandering around a

Mexican desert, hundreds of miles away. McPherson never wavered in her version of what had occurred, but for the rest of her life her friends and family, her followers and detractors, the newspapers and even the courts debated where she went and what she did during the five weeks she was missing. She became—as the journalist Claire Hoffman argues in a new biography—a schismatic figure in religious history: blessed sister to some, conniving sinner to others.

McPherson's Angelus Temple, in Echo Park, still stands, although her celebrity has largely faded compared with the days when she was played by Faye Dunaway in a Hallmark movie and inspired one fictional character after another: Reno Sweeney, in Cole Porter's "Anything Goes"; Sister Sharon Falconer, in Sinclair Lewis's "Elmer Gantry"; and Mrs. Melrose Ape, in Evelyn Waugh's "Vile Bodies." Not even Pete Seeger's goofy refrains of "hi dee hi dee hi dee hi" and "ho dee ho dee ho dee ho" would reliably get the answer now that they did when the folksinger first crooned: "Did you ever hear the story of Aimee McPherson?"

With "[Sister, Sinner: The Miraculous Life and Mysterious Disappearance of Aimee Semple McPherson](#)," Hoffman has written her own ballad, resurrecting much of the glory and tragedy of McPherson's ministry, along with the origins of Pentecostalism and the early days of L.A. At the heart of every biography, though, lies a lacuna—something unknowable, no matter how candid or heavily documented the subject, no matter how familiar or diligent the biographer. There's a kind of vanishing act in the story of any life, but part of what makes "Sister, Sinner" so gripping—and leaves its author so ambivalent about essential aspects of her subject's character—is McPherson's literal disappearance, the nature of which remains contested to this day.

McPherson was born in 1890 in Ontario to Mildred Kennedy, an orphan who became a teen-age bride. When she was just twelve, Kennedy, who went by Minnie and then Ma, joined the Salvation Army, an organization not yet known for its thrift stores but storied for its promise of "soup, soap, and salvation," which Minnie needed as much as anyone until she found work as a maid for a farmer whose wife was sick. After that wife died, the

fifty-year-old farmer, James Kennedy, married the fifteen-year-old Minnie, who soon had a daughter to take with her to Salvationist meetings.

Like the future congressman John Lewis preaching to his family's chickens as a child, the young Aimee Semple McPherson loved to play church, arranging her toys as if they were a congregation, sermonizing and singing them hymns. She claimed to have memorized most of the Bible by age five, and when she started school she made a drum kit and led the other children around the schoolyard like she was a sergeant major and they her Salvation Army band. Raised by parents who eschewed alcohol, dancing, tobacco, and anything else Lucifer might like, McPherson once persuaded her father to take her to a "Holy Ghost" revival, where she hoped to see some of the charismatic Christians known as Holy Rollers—the spiritual equivalent of catching a glimpse of Elvis on "The Ed Sullivan Show." At first, she disapproved of the alarming teakettle-like shouts of "amen" and "hallelujah," but soon she found herself taken by the preaching, drawn into the shaking and the swaying, rapt when much of the room fell to the floor in the ecstasy of the Holy Spirit.

By the time that spirit found McPherson, Pentecostalism had travelled a long way from Topeka, where the preacher Charles Fox Parham founded it just after the turn of the century. One of the many strengths of "Sister, Sinner" is Hoffman's nuanced treatment of the breakaway Protestant movements of this period, when the factions of old-time and newfangled religion fought their way across the American landscape. Parham, a former Methodist married to a woman from a Quaker family, had come to Kansas from Iowa, after touring holiness camps and talking with global missionaries, some of whom told him about seeing recent converts slip into trances and speak in tongues. Convinced that these were signs of the Second Coming, Parham sought to hasten Christ's return by training his followers in gifts of the spirit like those found in the Acts of the Apostles—everything from faith healing and prophecy to glossolalia.



*Cartoon by Oren Bernstein*

Parham preached that his was a new apostolic age, and he inspired a flock of notable disciples. These included William J. Seymour, the son of former slaves, who escaped poverty in Louisiana and went on to lead the Azusa Street Revival, in Los Angeles, and Robert James Semple, an Irish department-store clerk who left the sales floor for the sawdust trail, where, in the winter of 1907, he preached Pentecostalism so passionately that McPherson fell newly in love not only with Jesus but also with him. Instead of starting her senior year of high school, she married Semple and committed herself to a life of evangelism.

In 1909, she and her husband were both ordained in Chicago. They had travelled there together from Canada, and then headed to Europe, where they met his family in Ireland, before making their way to Hong Kong to spread the Gospel. While there, they got malaria, and Semple died a month before McPherson gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Roberta. It was Minnie who took up a collection to bring her stranded daughter and granddaughter home, getting them seats on a ship called the Empress of China, which carried the pair from Shanghai to California. McPherson preached aboard the ship, and its passengers, spellbound by her blossoming charisma and moved by her plight, gathered just enough funds to buy the young widow and her baby train tickets to New York City, where Minnie would meet them in the fall of 1910. All along the route, McPherson said, the train's wheels clicked and clacked a question: "What'll you do? What'll you do? What'll you do?"

At first, the answer was: not much. Mother and daughter and granddaughter fell back into the arms of the Salvation Army, with McPherson keeping some of the coins she collected while ringing a bell in theatres up and down Broadway. She still wanted to serve God, but she had left most of her nerve and verve in the Happy Valley Cemetery, where Semple was buried. Then she met Harold McPherson—neither a charismatic preacher nor a courageous missionary but an accountant who had dropped out of a Baptist college in Missouri. She was down at the heels; he was head over heels. When Harold proposed, McPherson accepted on the condition that God would be her real husband, and should He “call me to go to Africa or India, or to the Island of the Sea, no matter where or when, I must obey God first of all.”

Harold agreed, but didn’t exactly acquiesce, hoping that his bride would simply settle into life as a happy homemaker. The newlyweds soon left New York and ended up, fittingly, in Providence, where McPherson had another baby, a boy named Rolf. Although Harold encouraged his wife to dust the furniture and feed her two children, those children watched as their mother seemed to lose her mind, shuttering all the windows, refusing to leave her bed, and crying out for Christ from behind her locked bedroom door. Within a year, her condition had become so severe that she went into the hospital, the first in a series of admissions, for vomiting and heart tremors, one nervous breakdown and then another, followed by a hysterectomy. “The poor, unconscious ‘what-there-was-left-of me’ was put back in bed,” she recalled after the surgery. “I opened my eyes on the white walls of the hospital—quivering with pain from head to foot, which, instead of growing better grew worse and worse.” Minnie was summoned more than once to her daughter’s bedside to say goodbye, but, in 1915, a different voice rescued McPherson from death and despair. “GO! Do the work of an evangelist,” she heard one winter day. “Preach the Word ‘The time is short; I am coming soon.’ ”

On this occasion, McPherson’s answer to God’s call was a definitive yes. Her pain and depression disappeared as soon as she’d said it, and she felt giddy with certainty that God not only had healed her but was calling her to new ventures; when she left the hospital, it was for the streets. She took her children, abandoned her husband, and set off to preach again, starting with

“hallelujah runs” near where she’d grown up, in Canada. She would stand silently on a chair on the sidewalk, then raise her hands toward Heaven until strangers stopped to ask what she was doing. Once a crowd formed, she’d jump down and shout, “Quick! Come with me,” and run into a nearby theatre. An usher would lock the door behind anyone who’d followed her into the venue, and she’d work to captivate the audience she had captured.

Around this time, McPherson began wearing white nursing uniforms and answering to Sister. She bought a revival tent, and then, after a few successful weeks, she invited Harold to join her. “I have tried to walk your way and have failed,” she wrote to him in a telegram. “Won’t you come now and walk my way?” Together, they graduated from travelling by foot to road-tripping, driving around New England, then expanding their circuit to the entire Eastern Seaboard. Following a prophecy that McPherson believed was calling her to Florida, of all places, they ended up buying an Oldsmobile they dubbed the Gospel Car, painting “*JESUS IS COMING SOON—GET READY*” on one side and on the other, more ominously, “*WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?*”



*McPherson’s sermons featured elaborate sets and musical numbers, borrowed from the nearby and nascent film industry.*



But McPherson mostly preached love, not fear. A novelty of sorts as a “lady preacher,” she always attracted intrigue and occasionally censure, but she was ready with a sharp defense whenever someone quoted Corinthians or Timothy to condemn female ministers. After Pentecostalism divided along racial lines, she still sometimes held integrated religious meetings, periodically pitching her tent in Black camps and even requesting that a Black preacher baptize her son. If her gender and racial politics gave certain people pause, her ministry gave many others hope, and she quickly outgrew her tents and the small municipalities where she’d first staked them. Some revival-goers said she worked the pews so hard that she ended any service soggy with sweat, water pouring out of her shoes. Her crowds multiplied exponentially once she began performing miracles—leaving arenas, opera houses, and convention centers littered with discarded canes, casts, crutches, and wheelchairs as parishioner after parishioner claimed to have been healed by her laying on of hands.

Word of mouth might have been enough for Jesus, but Minnie was relentless in promoting her daughter’s ministry, and McPherson herself embraced one medium after another for spreading her message. Mother and daughter saw to the distribution of flyers, postcards, and advertising ahead of every appearance. They wielded megaphones, started a magazine to disseminate transcripts of McPherson’s sermons, and opened a Bible college to train disciples. Calling herself Your Sister in the King’s Glad Service, McPherson published an autobiography, and told her life story on any radio station that would air it. Realizing the potential of that technology, she then started her own radio station, Kall Four Square Gospel (KFSG), becoming one of the first women in the United States to hold a broadcast license. She once told reporters to meet her at a local airfield, where she preached a short sermon, climbed into an airplane, took off, and dropped fifteen thousand leaflets advertising her next revival series, which went on to attract more than ten thousand people.

In 1918, after Roberta almost died of pneumonia, Sister Aimee heard another voice, this one telling her to pack up the family and move to California. Once again, Harold stayed behind, while she loaded her mother and two children into the Gospel Car, taking two months to travel across the country. They arrived in Los Angeles as the city’s population was booming,

transforming from a farming-and-ranching town to a modern metropolis, wild with drugs, prostitution, and gambling, just waiting for a savior.

McPherson seemed like an angel in the city that was named for them, not least because she was so physically beautiful and kept up her habit of wearing white. She collected souls as her mother counted cash, millions of dollars pouring into the offering plates while the airwaves of KFSG made their way around the world. At the same time, criticism of McPherson grew. A rival minister even published a takedown tract called “McPhersonism: A Study of Healing Cults and Modern Day ‘Tongues’ Movements.” Hoping to quiet the controversy and attract more mainstream Protestant audiences, McPherson tried distancing herself from the practices of the Holy Rollers, not only refusing to speak in tongues but also admonishing overly exuberant attendees at her services. Although she had been ordained by the Assemblies of God, she started her own denomination, which she called the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

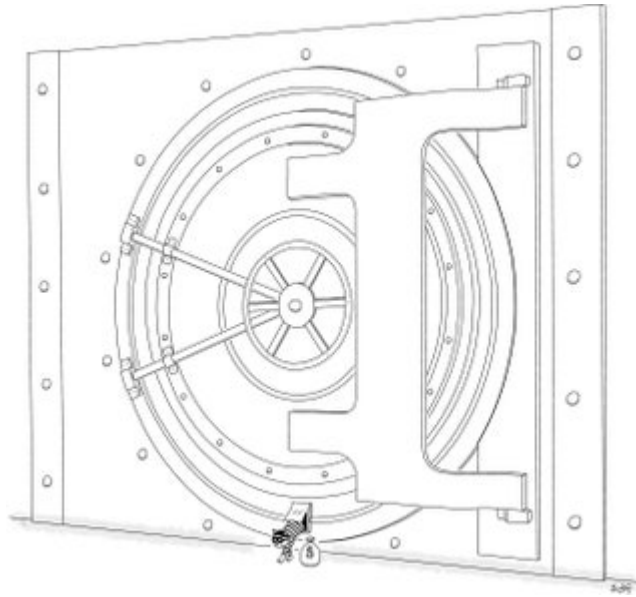
In 1921, McPherson broke ground on her megachurch, while the fed-up and upstaged Harold filed for divorce. She kept his name but nothing else, barely mentioning him in her autobiography, devoting many more pages to Angelus Temple. Where King Solomon had used cedar and cypress trees, Sister Aimee opted for concrete, marble, and steel. The sanctuary, situated on Glendale Boulevard, opened on January 1, 1923. Minnie, who had long been her daughter’s personal assistant, officially became her business partner in the newly incorporated Echo Park Evangelistic Association, overseeing a hundred employees, who helped welcome more than seven thousand people a day for multiple services seven days a week—plus a thousand children for Sunday school.

The main auditorium of Angelus Temple seated five thousand people in two balconies and rivalled Grauman’s nearby Chinese and Egyptian theatres in size and production values. McPherson’s “illustrated sermons” were performed alongside a brass band, a fourteen-piece orchestra, and a hundred-person choir. When those performances lost their novelty, she began staging “sacred operas” with even larger choirs and sets. Her charisma kept the church’s so-called Watch Tower humming with volunteers, who prayed twenty-four hours a day in two-hour shifts, and

filled the Miracle Room with almost every medical device imaginable, all of them cast aside after Sister Aimee's healings.

McPherson was at the peak of her fame when she vanished. Several weeks later, when she walked out of the desert and into the back-yard garden of a casita in Agua Prieta, just south of the Arizona border, she claimed that she had been kidnapped from Venice Beach. According to her, a couple tricked her into their car by saying that they had a baby who needed healing, then hit her over the head and drugged her before fleeing south. Her kidnappers were enraged, she said, because her preaching had made it harder for them to run their human-trafficking ring, and they threatened to sell her into slavery. It was a Joseph-type tale without an amazing Technicolor dreamcoat—or, for that matter, any clothes at all, beyond the swimsuit she'd been wearing at the beach. Despite her pristine appearance at the time of her return, McPherson insisted that she'd been tied up and tortured by her captors. She described a harrowing escape from a remote shack which involved sawing through ropes with the discarded lid of a syrup can, slipping out a window, and making her way across twenty-two miles of an arid and unforgiving landscape. Authorities observed that McPherson's lips were not chapped, that her skin was pale and unblemished, and that her feet were practically pedicured, except for two small blisters on her toes. Needless to say, they had questions.

So did the whole world. Throughout McPherson's absence, her fans and followers, as well as the merely curious, had scoured the Venice Beach area and beyond for clues about her fate. Divers, airplanes, and police boats had mobilized in the effort to find her; one rescue diver drowned, and an acolyte of McPherson's was said to have died by suicide at the scene of her vanishing. Reporters covered the story with the same avidity that they would later bring to the disappearances of the Lindbergh baby and of Amelia Earhart. Now, with McPherson abruptly un-disappeared, an even larger group of people—the relieved, the vengeful, the doubtful, and the desperate-for-a-byline—set about trying to vet her story.



*Cartoon by Seth Fleishman*

A major manhunt turned up not even a footprint of the supposed kidnappers and not a splinter of their desert shack, and it didn't take long for an alternative theory of McPherson's disappearance to materialize. Many people claimed to have seen her, or someone who looked like her, during the time she went missing, and a great many of those sightings had been in Carmel-by-the-Sea—where, it seemed, a married man with whom she was rumored to be having an affair happened to have rented an oceanside cottage. The man, Kenneth Ormiston, ran McPherson's radio station. Before the disappearance, his wife had shown up at Angelus Temple to accuse McPherson of adultery, and Minnie had tried to keep the two suspected lovers apart after congregants heard them flirting over the church's intercom.

Perhaps that is partly why even Minnie turned against her daughter. The day McPherson went missing, Minnie declared her dead, anointing Roberta, then a teen-ager, as her successor. But McPherson never wavered from her story. She insisted that her enemies were the enemies of God, seeking to undermine her integrity in order to thwart her ministry and protect many of the city's evildoers, from street gangs to corrupt Catholics. As McPherson defended herself, she wove an ever-expanding conspiracy theory that stretched all the way from Venice Beach to the Vatican.

The district attorney of Los Angeles had a less complex explanation: McPherson wanted sex, her mother wanted money; one was a Jezebel, the other a Judas. But the effort to prosecute either of them, or Ormiston, for any kind of fraud quickly devolved into chaos, with witnesses, experts, and lawyers on both sides stretching the bounds of morality, to say nothing of legality. When McPherson's case finally went to court, the resulting trial was the longest and most expensive in California history, a record broken only after the arrest of Charles Manson and his followers.

The charges were ultimately dropped, and McPherson resumed her preaching and her leadership of Angelus Temple. She got married again, too, this time to the three-hundred-pound baritone who'd played the part of Pharaoh in her staging of Exodus. During the Great Depression, she rallied her membership to the task of Christian charity, feeding and clothing more than a million and a half people at her church's twenty-four-thousand-square-foot commissary. The church also ran a community laundry, an employment office, a nursery school, and a clinic of sorts, with free medical and dental care. Even McPherson's critics had to concede that she had at least some amount of saintliness, whatever they made of her miracles, holy hustle, and notorious disappearance.

Years of investigation and interrogation failed to definitively solve the mystery of McPherson's vanishing. Her church is now even deeper in the heart of the city, which continues to sprawl around it, and plenty of people worldwide still identify as Foursquare Christians. But she made no confession before she died—in the fall of 1944, of an apparently accidental overdose of sleeping pills—and she doesn't seem to have availed herself of the afterlife to clarify what happened in Carmel-by-the-Sea, or anywhere else. If she had, Claire Hoffman would surely have found out. Her book is wonderfully thorough, the type of biography in which you learn just the right amount about everything, from the idiosyncrasies of American religious history to the idiocy of modern celebrity culture.

Before turning to books, Hoffman profiled the likes of Prince, Amy Winehouse, Jane Fonda, and Michael Jackson for this magazine, *Rolling Stone*, and the Los Angeles *Times*, so it's unsurprising that she brings the lens of celebrity to her account of McPherson's life. In this version, the

controversial evangelist is somewhere between tragic feminist icon and pioneering proto-influencer—a kind of Kabbalah Kardashian or St. Taylor Swift. “Aimee’s life story prefigures so much about the world we live in today in terms of belief, power, truth, and the corrosive nature of fame,” Hoffman writes, arguing that “this is not a story about the sins or the spectacle. Instead, I see nested inside Aimee’s story a cautionary tale about fame.” Of course, plenty of famous people manage their fame—and their infidelities, sexual or otherwise—without going so far as to stage a kidnapping hoax. “Her relationship to reality was different from that of those around her,” Hoffman writes of McPherson, as if fame was not merely explanatory but exculpatory.

But deflecting questions about McPherson’s disappearance by blaming her celebrity status and the toxic scrutiny that accompanied it is just another way that fame obscures the person it elevates. If there is a flaw in Hoffman’s book, it is that she suspends disbelief beyond belief about the central episode of the evangelist’s career, sidestepping some of the most tantalizing aspects of McPherson’s life. If you never resolve the matter of whether she lied, you never get to ask why she might have done so, and then kept doing so for decades.

Was walking away from the Ocean View Hotel a sudden impulse or a premeditated plan by McPherson to get away from her mother and get some time with her lover? Or was it actually another mother-daughter scheme, a con to refill the ministry’s coffers hatched by Minnie and then derailed by McPherson’s lust? Or was it an attempted renunciation of authority and responsibility which the fame-stricken, but also fame-addicted, preacher came to regret?

It could have been any of the above, of course—or maybe a brain worm, literal or otherwise, entered McPherson’s body between the beach and the breakwater, causing her to forsake her life’s work. Who knows? But it seems representative of the moral confusion in our own society that whether or not one of the nation’s leading religious authorities perpetrated a grand fraud on the public is not seen as a question in need of answering. Instead, Hoffman finds it more interesting to consider how the media covered the case and what happened after the charges were dropped. As a result, by the

end of this otherwise magnificent biography, McPherson has once again managed to disappear. ♦



[Casey Cep](#) is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of “[Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee](#).”

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# Kurt Weill Kept Reinventing Himself

Fresh New York stagings of “The Threepenny Opera” and “Love Life” show off the composer’s daring and range.

By [Alex Ross](#)

April 14, 2025



*Weill found commercial and artistic success on both sides of the Atlantic. Illustration by Sergiy Maidukov*

“Music is no longer a matter for the few,” Kurt Weill declared in 1928, the year he wrote “The Threepenny Opera.” In Weill’s opinion, composers educated in the classical tradition had lost touch with the broader public and sunk into obscurantism. They should make their music “simpler, clearer,



more transparent,” and they should address contemporary concerns. Seldom has an artist followed his own credo so faithfully. From “Threepenny” to “Lost in the Stars,” from Berlin to Broadway, Weill forged mass art on modern themes. The feat was all the more impressive given that the composer had to win over an entirely new audience after his flight from Nazi Germany, in 1933. Of the countless twentieth-century figures who attempted the hazardous leap from Europe to America, Weill was one of very few—Ernst Lubitsch also comes to mind—who found commercial and artistic success on both sides of the Atlantic.

In recent weeks, New York has witnessed a fortuitous mini-festival of Weill’s singular career. “Threepenny,” his epochal collaboration with Bertolt Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann, played at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in a German-language production by Brecht’s own Berliner Ensemble. “Love Life,” which Weill created with Alan Jay Lerner in 1948, had a rare revival in the Encores! series, at New York City Center. Further afield, Jonathan Groff is belting out “Mack the Knife” in “Just in Time,” a new Broadway musical about Bobby Darin. Adding to the timeliness of this welter of Weill is the composer’s reputation for political courage. Three weeks after the Nazis came to power, Brown Shirts disrupted a performance of Weill and Georg Kaiser’s “Der Silbersee,” in which the marching song “Caesar’s Death” takes clear aim at Hitler.

Weill remains omnipresent, yet his achievement is not easily grasped in full. A newcomer listening to “Threepenny” and “Love Life” in succession—one spare and brittle, the other eclectic and expansive—might well conclude that they were by different composers. For a long time, critics fretted over such differences, generally rating the German Weill above the American. In recent decades, though, scholars such as Kim H. Kowalke and Stephen Hinton have highlighted the daring of the later work. Almost all of Weill’s projects were *sui generis*, rejecting routine and experimenting anew. He wrote in 1928, “When musicians had attained everything that they imagined in their most daring dreams, they started all over again.”

The primary thesis of “Threepenny” is elementary but eternally relevant: gangsterism prevails in all spheres of power. John Gay’s “The Beggar’s Opera,” the main source of Brecht and Hauptmann’s text, had made the

same point two centuries earlier. The sybaritic highwayman Macheath maneuvers between a cutthroat capitalist milieu (Mr. and Mrs. Peachum) and a corrupt police force (led by Tiger Brown) while seducing daughters from both worlds (Polly Peachum and Lucy Brown). Weill, for his part, levels distinctions between high opera and pop styles. “Die Moritat von Mackie Messer,” or “The Ballad of Mack the Knife,” worms its way into the ears with its E-G-A-A motto, although the stress on A in a C-major context gives the song a wobbly, off-kilter air. (“Mack the Knife” became a hit only when Marc Blitzstein’s English-language adaptation downplayed the original’s intimations of serial rape and murder.)

The Berliner Ensemble’s previous take on “Threepenny,” a languid, sepulchral staging by Robert Wilson, travelled to *BAM* in 2011. The new version, first seen in 2021, emanates from the antic mind of Barrie Kosky, who has directed everything from “Das Rheingold” to “La Cage aux Folles.” Where Wilson went slow, Kosky goes fast; his performers engage in vaudevillian prancing, slapstick scampering, Chaplinesque waddling, and acrobatic clambering. (The set, by Rebecca Ringst, resembles an industrial jungle gym.) At times, the alienation effects smack of college-level Brecht, as when Macheath badgers the pit musicians and burns a fake copy of the score. Yet the score itself is treated with perfect respect. Adam Benzwi, who led the ensemble from the piano and the harmonium, combines scholarly expertise with virtuoso chops.

As Hinton has pointed out, the character of Macheath evolved as Brecht revised the text in an effort to bolster the work’s Marxist credentials. The sexy rogue that Harald Paulsen created at the première became an older, crustier mastermind who hopes to pivot from robbing to banking. Gabriel Schneider, who played the role at *BAM*, restored the roguishness, adding a dollop of sexual ambiguity; Mackie’s coterie of prostitutes includes a couple of rent boys. At the same time, Schneider avoids the sort of ersatz Weimar Republic decadence that has overrun “Threepenny” productions since the advent of Kander and Ebb’s “Cabaret.” There’s a scrawny desperation to Mackie’s swagger; you sense that he has filched and shtupped his way up from nothing. When, at the end, he is strung up at the gallows, he seems unaware that the playwright is about to grant him a reprieve; his panic in the face of death is piercing.

Kosky's cast had no weak links. Constanze Becker, as Mrs. Peachum, displayed period-perfect style, her dusky voice dripping with disdain. Tilo Nest radiated fat-cat authority as Mr. Peachum, although he struggled to animate the character's disquisitions on poverty. (Oddly, Kosky sometimes uses Brecht's lecture-prone 1931 text in place of the tighter, tarter original.) Maeve Metelka lent her hefty, Broadway-ready voice to Polly; Laura Balzer, as Lucy, exuded dazed girlishness, somewhat in the manner of the great cabaret singer Blandine Ebinger. Bettina Hoppe was a hauntingly plaintive Jenny, Kathrin Wehlisch an impishly cross-dressed Brown. Josefin Platt rasped the "Moritat" and returned twice more to sing strophes that Brecht added in later years, including the incomparable kicker: "There are those who dwell in darkness, / There are those who dwell in light / And you see the ones in lightness / Those in darkness drop from sight." As in any good "Threepenny," Kosky leaves you uncertain which are which.

The old narrative of Weill's career held that he ceased to be progressive, in either the musical or the political sense, after moving to the United States. According to the modernist mandarin Theodor W. Adorno, Weill "persuaded himself that concessions to commercial practice were not that, but merely a test of know-how." Yet, just as the radical thrust of "Threepenny" has often been overstated—in seeing gangsterism everywhere, it risks a facile cynicism—the subversive power of the Broadway musicals has long been overlooked. "Love Life" is no exception; behind its portrait of a collapsing marriage is a sly satire of American capitalist culture. In light of the Cold War paranoia that was gathering when "Love Life" was first performed, it's surprising that the work had as much success as it did—a run of two hundred and fifty-two performances, respectable but insufficient to recoup investment. Still, memories of the show lingered in a few significant minds: both Stephen Sondheim and Fred Ebb felt its influence.

"Love Life" kicks off, in semi-Brechtian style, with a Magician, who performs tricks on Sam and Susan Cooper, the main characters, levitating the former and sawing the latter in half. The action then jumps back more than a hundred and fifty years: the marriage of Sam and Susan will play out against changing American scenes from 1791 onward. The characters remain the same, but rampant industrialization and consumerism strain the

relationship. In contrast to Brecht's harangues, the broader social points are conveyed through such peppy, radio-ready numbers as "Economics" and "Progress," patterned after records by the Ink Spots and other Black groups of the thirties and forties ("One day the prices / Begin to soar! / You made a living, / Now you need more"). After the marriage has fallen apart, another framing device offers a path to reconciliation: an "Illusion Minstrel Show" first punctures Hollywood fantasy ("Mr. Right") and then argues for pragmatism in romantic relationships.

This intricate conceit poses challenges for modern audiences. For one thing, Susan's incipient feminism, on display in "Women's Club Blues," a suffragette number set in 1894, comes across as one more problem caused by Progress. The bump-and-grind swing music that Weill whips up for the occasion can't hide the condescension of Lerner's lyrics ("I toss and turn in bed alone at night, / My body aching for the right / To vote"). If the couple indeed gets back together—the ending is left open—Susan will probably have to surrender some of her newly won independence, as often happens in Hollywood romantic comedies of the period. Victoria Clark, who directed the Encores! show, successfully finessed some of these issues. Kate Baldwin, as Susan, revved up "Women's Club Blues" with a defiantly full-throated performance, winning unironic cheers from the crowd. Likewise, Brian Stokes Mitchell, as Sam, complicated the figure of the alienated husband. "This Is the Life," in which the divorced Sam sits alone in a hotel room and tries to convince himself that he is free, was a fine-tuned study in curdled bravado.

More could have been made of the work's critical subtext. In 1948, the roles of the Magician and of the minstrel-show m.c. were assumed by the vaudevillian Rex Weber, who had portrayed Peachum in the failed Broadway première of "Threepenny," in 1933. At City Center, Christopher Jordan and Andrea Rosa Guzman, who played the Coopers' kids, took over the magic act. The child actors were adorably quick-witted, but the sequence lacked bite. Still, Encores! deserves praise for restoring "Love Life" to New York stages after a seventy-six-year absence. Strangely, it struck me as the *more* political of the Weill shows on offer this spring—the one that indicts false consciousness in popular culture and hints at a way out. ♦



[Alex Ross](#) has been *The New Yorker*'s music critic since 1996. He is the author of "[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music](#)."

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[The Current Cinema](#)

# “The Shrouds” Is a Casket Case—and an Unsettling Vision of Techno-Paranoia

*In David Cronenberg’s film, billed as his most personal work, Vincent Cassel plays a grieving husband who has devised a novel way of never letting go.*

By [Justin Chang](#)

April 11, 2025



*The film is about the lingering power of grief—the possibility of moving on from it as well as the potential to commodify it. Illustration by Hokyoung Kim*

David Cronenberg’s new film, “The Shrouds,” contains the funniest and saddest blind-date sequence I’ve ever seen. Myrna (Jennifer Dale), a divorcée, is lunching with a widowed entrepreneur, Karsh (Vincent Cassel), who made his fortune as “a producer of industrial videos.” But Karsh has since moved on to other endeavors. For one, he owns the restaurant they’re in; it’s located in a cemetery, which he also partly owns. His wife, Rebecca (Diane Kruger), who died of cancer four years earlier, is buried right outside. Oh, and, before she was laid to rest, she was wrapped in a metallic shroud with a built-in high-resolution MRI-like scanner, allowing Karsh to monitor her decomposing remains via a digital app he devised, called

GraveTech. (Why the app isn't named A Tomb with a View is one of the story's more perplexing mysteries.) Pulling up a feed of Rebecca's body on his phone—or on her headstone, which has a built-in video screen—Karsh can observe the gradual discoloration of her bones and zoom in on her now hairless skull. Most grieving loved ones would be repulsed by such imagery; Karsh finds it comforting. “I can see what's happening to her,” he marvels. “I'm in the grave with her.”

It's worth noting that Myrna and Karsh were set up by their dentist, which is fitting, seeing as how their ill-fated encounter proceeds like an oral exam; there are X-ray images and signs of advanced decay, and by the end Myrna has been thoroughly whitened. Also worth noting: Cronenberg has described “The Shrouds” as his most autobiographical work. He wrote it after his longtime wife died of cancer, in 2017. Just in case we missed the personal dimension, Cassel—a Cronenberg veteran, having played a feckless Russian mobster in “Eastern Promises” (2007) and a sexually uninhibited psychoanalyst in “A Dangerous Method” (2011)—has been styled here in the director's more subdued image: he sports a silvery, upswept hairdo that is as recognizably Cronenberg as an oozing orifice or an exploding head. Karsh could be issuing a mantra for the filmmaker's career when he slyly asks Myrna, “How dark are you willing to go?”

That question betrays a hint of self-awareness, but it swiftly fades. Karsh is too consumed with his late wife's body—and, just as crucially, with the technology that makes such consumption possible—to realize, or even care, what others think. But Cronenberg is considerably more knowing, and he handles this unabashedly morbid material with a disarming drollery. Much of the dialogue has an expository flatness, which only heightens the grim comedy of the whole conceit; Cronenberg's cool, latex-sheathed touch keeps brushing up against your funny bone. He also builds in enough distance between himself and his alter ego to complicate our sense of “The Shrouds” as (merely) an auteur's intimate confessional. In a [2022 interview with Adam Nayman](#) for *The New Yorker*, Cronenberg noted that he still lives in the house he shared with his wife for many years; Karsh, by contrast, has sold his and Rebecca's home and now dwells in an apartment of Japanese-styled serenity, with a futon bed ringed by a koi-filled moat.

(The production design, not all of it quite so full of Eastern premises, is by Cronenberg's longtime collaborator Carol Spier.)

Karsh, in other words, has encased himself and his sorrow in a cocoon of tech-titan cosmopolitan chic. GraveTech is catching on globally; backed by Chinese investors, it's expanding into Icelandic graves and attracting influential clients, a terminally ill Hungarian businessman among them. But the company also has invisible enemies, and when the cemetery is vandalized—the systems hacked, the casket-cam headstones torn from their foundations—Karsh has a mystery on his hands. “The Shrouds” is unhurried and elegantly sombre, but it also shudders with mournful menace; Cronenberg, having halfway sold us on necrophilia as a business plan, now hooks us with a threat to that plan's stability. Karsh is aided in the investigation by Rebecca's sister, Terry (also Kruger), who is acerbic, affectionate, and visibly aroused by conspiracy theories. Terry's ex, Maury (Guy Pearce), is a testier and less trustworthy armchair sleuth—a tech whiz who, with nebbishy bitterness, has never stopped trying to win Terry back.

At one point, Maury asks Karsh if he ever slept with Terry, given how closely she resembles his beloved Rebecca. Karsh scoffs at the suggestion; Cronenberg quietly tucks it away for later. Eventually, another woman enters the picture—Soo-Min (Sandrine Holt), the Hungarian client's wife, who, unlike Myrna, is entirely unfazed by Karsh's line of work. Beneath its fastidiously morose surface, “The Shrouds” is about the lingering power of grief, as well as the possibility of moving on from it. In Karsh's case, the latter arrives in the form of a welcome, unexpected surge of erotic renewal. The sexual impulse, as ever with Cronenberg, is a volatile one: around the same time that it hits, Karsh begins experiencing hallucinations—or maybe memories—of Rebecca, no longer in skeletal form but in the living, breathing, soon-to-expire flesh. Cronenberg has often been hailed, reductively, as a maestro of body horror, but there is nary a flicker of revulsion in the gaze that both he and Karsh fix upon Rebecca's brittle-boned, cancer-ravaged frame—only an undimmed appreciation of her beauty, and an irrational if entirely understandable hunger to possess it again.



When “The Shrouds” premiered at [last year’s Cannes Film Festival](#), it drew a muted reception that was overshadowed by, among other things, Coralie Fargeat’s “The Substance,” a gory feminist-themed freakout that partook liberally of Cronenberg’s influence but rather less of his finesse. Fargeat is not the only French filmmaker to have recently delivered a body-horror shock to the Cannes system: in 2021, Julia Ducournau won the festival’s top prize for the thriller “Titane,” whose frenzied warpings of flesh and metal suggested a gonzo elaboration of Cronenberg’s most notorious feature, “Crash.” What a difference a few decades makes. When “Crash” played at Cannes, in 1996, it was given a backhanded accolade—a Special Jury Prize—by a notably divided and scandalized jury. Now, at eighty-two, Cronenberg has lived to see art-horror cinema achieve international acclaim and mainstream success, of a kind that has continually bypassed his own pioneering work in the genre.

Has Cronenberg, once so ahead of his time, now fallen behind it? Like the director’s previous feature, the brilliantly dystopian “Crimes of the Future” (2022), “The Shrouds” has been regarded, and in some cases dismissed, as an autumnal effort—a series of artful yet familiar variations on an auteur’s well-known preoccupations. Whether the director is replaying his own grisliest hits—or, less charitably, edging close to self-parody—his latest films have been found wanting the shock of the new. But a will to shock has never ranked high among Cronenberg’s priorities; the audience’s horror has always felt less like a goal than like a by-product of a rigorously analytical process, in which sensations are subjugated to ideas. Flesh often stretches, melts, and ruptures, yes, but always in service of core principles: one way or another, the body must react and adapt to its own irrational desires, and to the seeping, churning influences of its environment. In “Crimes of the Future,” Cronenberg sliced people open not to gross us out but to reveal biological and evolutionary irregularities—to lead us into a deeper understanding of the world we are forever inheriting and destroying.

That world looks rather less apocalyptic in “The Shrouds,” which was shot (by the cinematographer Douglas Koch) on pleasantly nondescript Toronto locations; here, bodies decay for the entirely natural, inevitable reasons of illness and death. But the threat being diagnosed is a more insidious one. What begins as a drama of grief soon morphs into a study of how grief is

exploited, manipulated, and compartmentalized. Cronenberg has made a thriller of justified technological paranoia, of the internet's myriad parasitic intrusions into the human realm. In "Videodrome" (1983), Cronenberg shoved a Betamax cassette into a man's torso; now, to make an equivalent point, he can cut to a conspicuously drawn-out closeup of Karsh using a tablet in a bathtub. One of the narrative's key players is Karsh's deceptively friendly A.I. assistant; her name, Hunny, suggests pretty immediately that she's a trap.

The story doesn't resolve so much as dissipate, in a series of almost comically perfunctory twists, reversals, and whispers of geopolitical peril. Has GraveTech become the pawn of nefarious Russian and Chinese power players, or is Karsh being used for more personal, spiteful reasons? It's unclear, and the ambiguity spreads like an e-virus. By the end, the most disturbing thing about "The Shrouds" isn't the notion of a corpse on camera; it's the possibility that the corpse might not be there at all—that it might, in fact, be an artificially confected image, there to foster a comforting illusion of emotional and narrative closure. Even when purporting to tell his own story, Cronenberg cannot help but leave us with something more expansively unsettling. Karsh peddles a vision of how we might be laid to rest in the future; his maker remains fixed on how we live now. ♦



*[Justin Chang](#) is a film critic at The New Yorker. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.*

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By Arthur Sze | “Instead of parts / of a world, I carry worlds within this world.”

- **[“Fireflies”](#)**

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[Poems](#)

# Midnight Nest

By [Arthur Sze](#)

*April 14, 2025*

1

A stag traverses the road and vanishes  
in the dusk; I ponder tuskless elephants,  
zebra stripes, a toucan's curved beak;  
I worry about skirmishes over avocados,  
ruminate on methane seas on one  
of Saturn's moons, and, despairing  
at how a chromium plume extends  
under a mesa, contaminating an aquifer,  
at how plutonium pits proliferate,  
I stride with weights tied to my ankles,  
raise my hands, find weights strapped  
to my wrists; but, when I gaze  
at a haloed moon, say to myself  
this light has no special consequence,  
the apricot trees prognosticate nothing  
though they bud, my breath deepens,  
and, in this darkening nest of night,  
the weights dissolve into the midnight air.

2

Gathering lichen off an oak, Anna's hummingbird—  
along the street, we encounter sweet gums, ginkgoes, magnolias—  
artichokes in this yard, agaves in that—  
not ideas about things, but the things themselves—  
the smell of pink tree roses at night—  
as simple as sunlight on leaves—  
as complex as what happens inside leaves—  
a squirrel runs along the top of a redwood fence—  
not ideas about ourselves, but ourselves, radiant, in our bodies—  
you peel an orange, and a mist rises into the air—  
sandpipers scurry along a tawny beach—  
I peel an orange, and a mist rises into the air—

3

Juniper pollen stings my eyes; in the back yard,  
    Scotch broom is the first to flower,  
  
while a yellow-tipped willow reaches  
    for daylight. I do not spot any crocuses,  
  
though patches of spider silk lurk in the grass;  
    listening to a ringing in my ears,  
  
I sift what I carry wherever I go:  
    the neural pathways of memories shift;

when I consider “hearth,” instead of  
a white-shuttered house I drew as a child,

I see a black-brick walkway  
leading through an adobe-walled courtyard

with straw-flecked walls; instead of parts  
of a world, I carry worlds within this world.

And as I gather wingbeats, stretch my fingers  
in this aching time on Earth,

I know minutes as active as bees,  
minutes that ooze the honey of existence.

4

In this spring night, I smell oranges and lemons  
hanging from a neighbor’s trees;

an Italian cypress  
looms in moonlight over the yard.

In the rising heat of the day,  
I stared at curled leaves on the patio,

and, as I contemplated lengthening shadows under chairs,  
a hummingbird whirred,

poised in mid-flight—  
its wings vibrating waves

I could not see;

I see how you and I have come to *this*,  
where, as a stone dropped  
into a pool ripples the water to the farthest edges,  
we ripple each other endlessly,

and poised in this orange-blossom air,  
where no bamboo xylophone sounds,  
beyond sight,

we true each other to this music.

[Arthur Sze](#) received the 2025 Bollingen Prize for lifetime achievement in American poetry. His books include “[Into the Hush](#).”

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# Fireflies

By [Maya C. Popa](#)

*April 14, 2025*

Legions those summers of your childhood,  
windshields thick with silhouettes on road trips  
past clay counties toward the English coast.  
The new air is empty, and who knew  
we'd miss even what afflicted us? We knew,  
and paid the price for June's green candles  
in bites pulsing under ice cubes, gambled  
flesh on the bridge toward pleasure.  
How modest, after all, safety's promises,  
the ground beneath us not giving out,  
not even that. Last night, a ship blinked  
as it charged into the bridge, taillights eastbound  
after graveyard shifts, tumbled moons  
put out by the tide. Long ago, the British  
failed to take the fort, and Francis Scott Key  
wrote a poem. All that happens happens  
something like this despite the lens pointed  
at soil or heaven. We two were often  
indulgent with our gifts: a chest made  
of trimmings from the Hardy tree, tokens  
from the Queen, a heyday for biographers.  
When at last we sat by the bridge, we were silent,  
your hands watchful pilgrims on my dress,  
all thought blinked out where water lapped  
the bay. How could we have lost what made  
such sense of us? I still don't know,  
but understand this much: that rain disrupts

a surface that conceals and reflects  
as divers search for bodies in the harbor,  
the promise of closure fleeing what remains  
of this extravagant, fatal, blinking life.

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## [Crossword](#)

# The Crossword: Tuesday, April 8, 2025

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*



By [Brooke Husic](#)

April 8, 2025



[Brooke Husic](#) is the crossword editor at Puzzmo.

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