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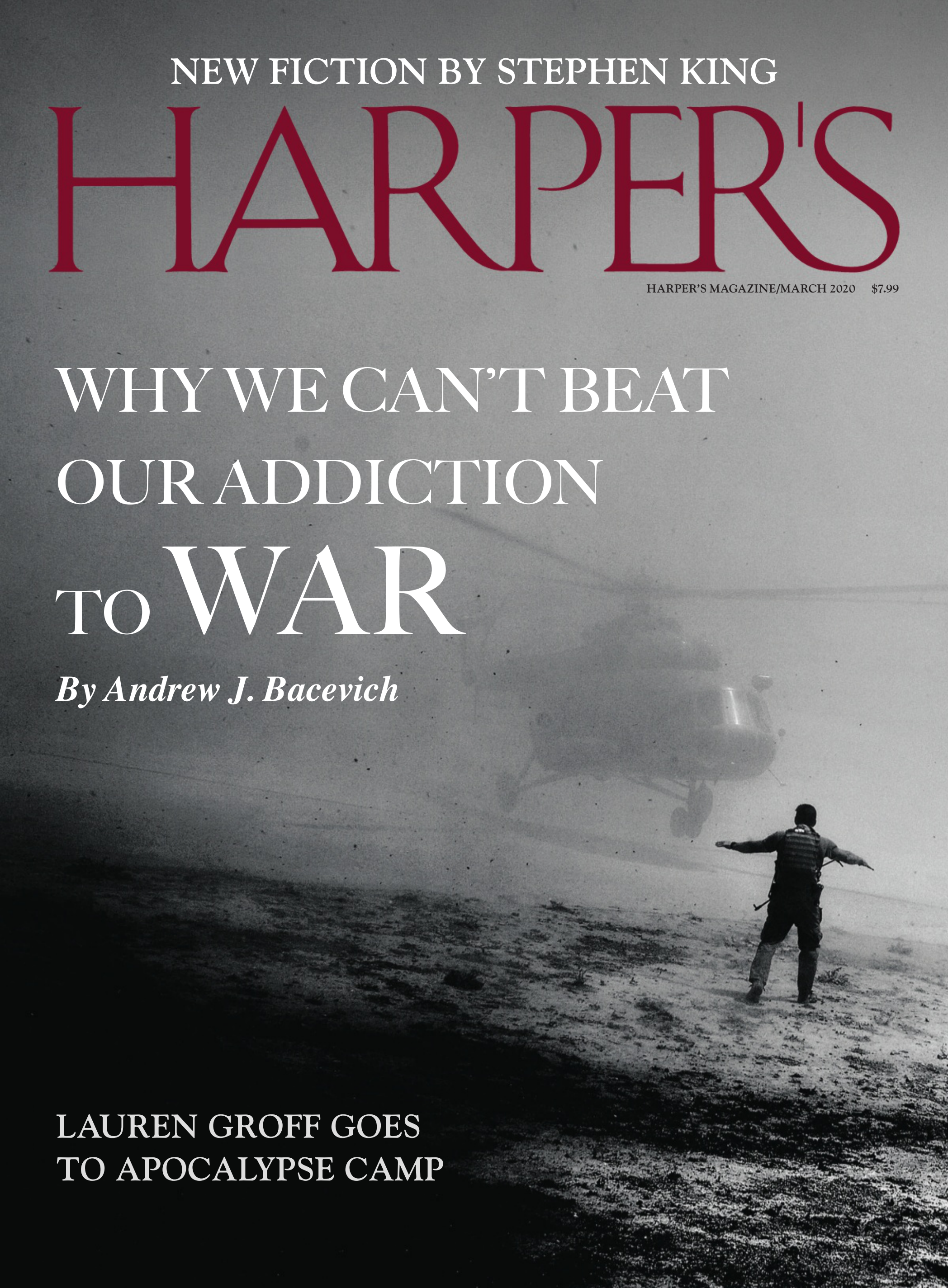
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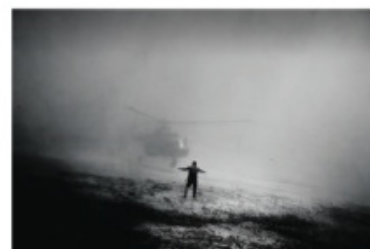
M A G A Z I N E

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MARCH 2020

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LETTERS

Breaking the News

It was gratifying to see Greg Jackson revive the ideas of Neil Postman in his meditation on the media ["Vicious Cycles," Essay, January], for Postman highlighted the degree to which broadcast journalism is driven more by profit than by civic responsibility. Because of decades of market incentives, news is beholden to the strictures of entertainment. This is not a value judgment but a description of the industry's business model. Absent systemic change, it cannot be otherwise.

Still, we may be dealing here with something even more powerful and resistant to change than markets. As Jackson suggests, when we seek news sources that reinforce our own worldviews, we are looking for validation of who we are and why we are here. "When we turn away from the news, we will confront a startling loneliness," he writes. "It is the loneliness of life. The loneliness of thinking, of

having no one to think for us, and of uncertainty."

Aware of our own inevitable death and irrelevance, we hunger for a story that might give us meaning and anchor us in an unknowable universe. Ideology can provide that story. We cling to our narratives with white-knuckled determination because our psychic survival depends on it.

Harry Hamilton
Columbia, Md.

Jackson's essay helps account for the strangeness I feel while watching the news with my parents, who watch two or three cable newscasts per night. Not a regular viewer myself, I'm left wondering who exactly decided what these shows should cover, and what they were thinking. In a country of almost 330 million people, why is it that this specific high-speed chase or political gaffe merited airtime?

"The formal message of the news," Jackson writes, "is simultaneously the vital importance and utter triviality of everything that is happening." The format encourages a conflation of arbitrary content with objective reality. As a consequence, we abandon the idea that the news might have some real

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pedagogical function. We are left instead with, as Jackson puts it, “the illusion that we had a place in history.”

Evan Warfel
San Francisco

Politics as Usual

Kevin Baker believes that Senator Elizabeth Warren’s campaign “tells us where her heart lies, what her core values and principles are” [“On Courage,” *Easy Chair*, January]. Having read the senator’s three books on public policy, I can’t say that I agree.

In 2003’s *The Two-Income Trap*, for instance, Warren inveighs against the notion of government subsidies, arguing that they result in higher costs, unintended consequences, and an increase in cronyism. But in her subsequent books, written after she had become a politician, she advocates for a range of substantial subsidies, without explaining why her former reasoning has become invalid.

In the first book, Warren tells a compelling story about urging Hillary Clinton to persuade her husband to veto a bankruptcy bill. Warren is understandably embittered when, months later, as a newly elected senator from New York, Clinton votes for an equivalent bill. Warren criticizes this about-face in her book, attributing it to campaign contributions and politics as usual. But in her own policy reversals, Warren herself could be said to exhibit the same sort of hypocrisy.

I share Baker’s frustration with the current crop of Democratic candidates, who—with few exceptions—have seemingly little to offer beyond a return to suboptimal normalcy. Baker’s policy preferences are undoubtedly different from mine. But even by the reasonable standards Baker articulates, Warren is not the candidate he seeks.

D. Eric Schansberg
Jeffersonville, Ind.

Ecce Dafoe

David Gordon’s article about the Wooster Group [“The Forty-Year Re-

hearsal,” *Letter from SoHo*, January] brought back a surreal memory from my time in New York. In the 1980s, I lived in the same SoHo loft building as Elizabeth LeCompte, Willem Dafoe, and Spalding Gray. I didn’t know any of them well, but because it was a small building, I would see them come and go, and we’d exchange the occasional greeting. They weren’t particularly well known when I moved in; by the time I moved out, all of them were famous.

One Yom Kippur morning I headed out for a walk and said hello to Dafoe, who was picking up his mail. Dafoe’s most recent movie role had been as Jesus in Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Leaving the building and walking up West Broadway, I nearly collided with Harvey Keitel, who had played Judas in the same film. For whatever reason, I felt compelled to tell him, “Hey, I just saw Jesus getting his mail.” As one might assume, Keitel had no response to this but discomfort. Nervously, he turned and practically jogged off in the other direction.

Louis Erlanger
Brattleboro, Vt.

Corrections

“Click Here to Kill” [Report, January] incorrectly stated that members of Amy Allwine’s family have criticized the FBI’s handling of the online assassination order against her. In fact, they have not commented on the investigation, and *Harper’s Magazine* did not speak with them before publication.

The December 2019 Index incorrectly stated that 49 percent of women and 62 percent of men over thirty receive financial assistance from their parents. These figures are accurate for men and women between the ages of thirty and thirty-four. Additionally, the Index stated that 29 percent of adults over fifty-five did freelance work in 2019. This is true only for those adults over fifty-five who had worked for pay in the past year.

We regret the errors.

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EASY CHAIR

Losing My Religion

By Kevin Baker

In the Seventies, when I came of age politically, being a lefty was all about believing that “the people” would always save us, if they just knew the truth. We were still immersed in the Century of the Common Man. We believed, as Henry Wallace once put it, that “the march of freedom of the past one hundred and fifty years has been a long-drawn-out people’s revolution.” The moral arc of the universe might be long, but the people, united, were pushing us more and more quickly along it.

This view was bred in the bone, our national religion from “We the People” through Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man,” to Carl Sandburg’s *The People, Yes*:

Yes to the paradoxes of democracy,
Yes to the hopes of government
Of the people by the people for the
people,
No to the debauchery of the public
mind,
No to personal malice nursed and
fed ...

That all the peoples of the world, gathered here in peace and in freedom, would know what to do: this was the bedrock faith of America. Yes there was slavery, yes there was the destruction of the Indian nations—there were many horrors and mistakes—but these were just the inherited ills of the Old World. Never before had there been anything like America, and we the people would make it work. *The People, Yes*.

It is a hard notion to let go. For the past three years, it has been almost touching to see how tenaciously so many commentators on the political scene still cling to it. Since 2016, there has been a steady drumbeat from com-

mentators insisting that something must have gone very wrong for the people to have allowed the election of Donald Trump. Something must have been done to them, the people, to make them so desperate that they would empower a president as puerile, unqualified, and openly venal as this one.

“America’s working class is in desperate shape,” wrote the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof. In another op-ed, he noted that mortality rates for working-class whites had soared in the twenty-first century, surpassing those of black Americans. “Democrats didn’t do enough to address this suffering, so Trump won working-class voters—because he at least faked empathy for struggling workers,” Kristof explained. What’s more, he has written, Democrats “have a knack for antagonizing the working class by coming off as condescending, angry elitists” with a “progressive wing [that] has tarred all Trump voters as racists, idiots and bigots.” The trouble is that “many Democrats live in an urban blue bubble, without a single Trump-supporting friend” and their “hatred for Trump voters also leaves the Democratic Party more removed from working-class pain.”

Elsewhere on the *Times* op-ed page, Timothy Egan informed us that “Democrats can no longer connect to the white working class.” He cited a sister who ekes out a living in a janitorial job but who is convinced that “many Democrats ... are dismissive of her religious beliefs and condescending of her lot in life. She’s turned off by the virtue-signaling know-it-alls,” he wrote. So are “many others [who] simply feel insulted and dismissed” and hence won’t so much as listen to Dem-

ocratic plans to better their material circumstances with proposals such as free health or child care, or an affordable college education.

“For decades, Democrats, intoxicated with the elixir of global trade and its stock market wealth, ignored the cries of the Rust Belt,” the journalist Mike Kelly wrote in *USA Today* last December, reporting as part of a three-year project of traveling around the country and listening to Trump voters. He went on:

Democrats promised to retrain factory workers and miners. But to what end? Some coal miners I met were earning more than \$100,000 a year. Can training programs, dreamed up by office-bound intellectuals in Brooks Brothers suits or Eileen Fisher dresses, find jobs to match those salaries? ... Bet on the Rust Belt voting for Trump until the Democrats figure out how to get their hands dirty and actually pay a visit.

The crowning example of such analyses came, predictably enough, from David Brooks, who in a *Times* column last October created a fictional dialogue between two characters designated as “Urban Guy” and “Flyover Man.” The virtuous, working-class, Midwestern Flyover Man rages against the Democrats—simultaneously socialists and elites—who have abandoned him to economic penury, and declares undying devotion to Trump, telling Urban Guy, “See ya’ in hell, brother.”

The fact is, though, that the average Trump supporter today is neither a raging nihilist nor a blameless victim, and that he or she did not turn to the Republicans out of

desperation. Such assumptions are the real condescension, robbing Trump voters of agency and responsibility. The hard truth of the matter is that Donald Trump and his party are exactly what much of white America has wanted for a long, long time.

The charges of the columnists are so outlandish that it's hard to know where to begin. Democrats abandoned working people? The *only* economic group that Hillary Clinton carried in 2016 was Americans making \$50,000 or less. The working class in this country includes many African Americans, Hispanics, and other people of color, a fact that so many journalists seem to have trouble getting their heads around (*Whites are living as bad as black people do now! Something must be done!*).

The idea that working Americans are, as Kristof puts it, reeling from “the mockery of Democrats who deride them as ignorant bumpkins” is one manufactured largely by Fox News and other right-wing media outlets. Bernie Sanders—among the major candidates, probably the least favored by the national columnists—speaks rapturously of working people as his heroes. Deindustrialization and our conversion to a globalized, high-tech economy have indeed devastated great swaths of America and millions of the country's working families. Who opposed this? Not Ronald Reagan, nor the Bushes, nor any other leading Republican in the past half-century. Not Republican Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, who was recently revealed to be firmly in the corporate pocket of his wealthy Chinese in-laws. Between the two major parties, the only serious objections to offshoring the American economy over the past few decades came from liberal Democrats such as David Bonior and Dick Gephardt. No Republicans rallied to their cause.

Today the only governmental proposals designed to help working-class Americans, white or black, are contained in the dozens of bills that Nancy Pelosi's Democratic House shoots over to McConnell's Senate, where they are dead on arrival. “Infrastructure Week” has become a tired joke. Nobody is yelling “Rebuild our roads!” or “Give us health care!” at Trump rallies. In-

stead they're still chanting “Lock her up!” about Hillary Clinton or, infinitely worse, “Send her back!” about the Somali-born Democratic congresswoman Ilhan Omar, of Minnesota. Or, as Trump's “very fine people” have shouted at other rallies, “You will not replace us!”

So determined are otherwise intelligent commentators to believe in the people that it warps their political judgment. Their favored candidates in the Democratic presidential primary hail from the very same “elitist,” “globalist” Clinton-Obama wing of the party that supposedly drove the working class to Donald Trump: Joe Biden, who has spent decades carrying water for the banks and credit-card companies of Delaware; Mayor Pete Buttigieg of South Bend, Indiana, the son of college professors who reads novels in Norwegian; and Mike Bloomberg, a billionaire businessman from New York who is the very archetype of the overweening, nanny-state elitist, trying to ban your Big Gulp and your gun while waging an open “war on coal.” Last summer, Timothy Egan lauded former president Barack Obama for his recent scolding of Democratic radicals and urged Democrats “to rebuild the Obama coalition.”

The Obama coalition? With all due respect, that coalition had the life span of a mayfly. Obama was probably the most admirable individual ever to be elected president, a paragon of moderation who spent eight years trying to reach across the aisle to Republicans. They responded with an avalanche of ugly, racist slurs. (*But don't call them bigots!*) And during Obama's presidency, Democrats lost both houses of Congress, most of the nation's governorships, and a stunning 968 seats in state legislatures around the country.

Donald Trump, for his part, has proved himself to be nothing if not a master political anatomist. In his short time in politics, he has neatly dissected the modern Republican Party, cutting away what were supposedly its most revered principles like so much obfuscatory blubber.

Respect for the military? Trump spent the 2016 campaign and much of his term gibing at a dying John McCain (“I like people who weren't

captured”) and the family of Humayun Khan (“I think I've made a lot of sacrifices”). The party of faith? (“I don't like to have to ask for forgiveness ... I drink my little wine—which is about the only wine I drink—and have my little cracker.”) The party of national security? Of morality, of basic civility and public decency? All that has been sliced away, without a word of complaint from the Republican base.

What is left? Race, in a word.

This should not surprise us. For all the advice proffered about what exactly the Democrats should or should not do to bring the white working class back into the fold, only one Democratic presidential nominee, Lyndon Johnson in 1964, has won a plurality of the white vote since the last run of the old Roosevelt coalition.

Democrats lost the white vote to Richard Nixon and George Wallace at the nadir of Vietnam and urban unrest, in 1968. Jimmy Carter—a white, moderate, Southern evangelical, running amid a recession and in the wake of the Watergate scandal—lost the white vote to Gerald Ford, an unelected president whose approval rating never recovered from his decision to pardon Nixon. Another white, Southern moderate, Bill Clinton, lost it to fusty old Bob Dole in 1996, and Al Gore lost it to George W. Bush, by 13 points in 2000, at a time of peace, prosperity, and unchallenged, worldwide American hegemony. Donald Trump's 2016 victory over Hillary Clinton came by a margin of 58–37 percent among whites, though for all of Trump's supposed magic, he actually received 1 percent less of the white vote than Mitt Romney did in 2016.

Call white voters bigots or don't. But in good times and in bad, in peacetime and in war, in sunshine or in shadow, white America votes for those candidates it believes are most likely to keep people of color “in their place”—either outside the country altogether, or in the most servile and subordinate condition possible within it.

There is another, early narrative of the people, one voiced by Benjamin Franklin in support of that same document that begins so boldly with “We the People.” It was an odd speech, a backhanded

defense of the Constitution that he and the other Founding Fathers had just drafted, in which Franklin admitted that he did “not entirely approve of this Constitution at present,” but that “the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own Judgment, and to pay more Respect to the Judgment of others.”

Besides, Franklin conceded, any form of government “may be a Blessing to the People if well administered, and I believe farther that this [Constitution] is likely to be well administered for a Course of Years, and can only end in Despotism as other Forms have done before it, when the People shall become so corrupted as to need Despotic Government, being incapable of any other.”

Here is a startling idea: the *people* can be corrupted.

Have the American people been corrupted now, as so many of our commentators imply, by their suffering and desperation? But how could that be? The people have been much worse off in the past, and they have at times responded by joining together and taking action. A handful of bankrupt men started the original Populist movement in a humble Texas farmhouse one night in 1877, when the nation’s farm economy collapsed. Workingmen occupied General Motors’ Flint plant in 1937, in the midst of the Great Depression—the culmination of a labor movement that had struggled for decades to win workers’ rights. Women won the vote for themselves after seventy years of agitation.

Another thesis is that social media, tilted with the help of the Russians, has polarized us, “tribalized” us, as we have not been divided since the Civil War. Yet we have always been divided.

“All right we are two nations . . . America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have bought the laws,” John Dos Passos wrote, on the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927. But were Dos Passos’s strangers really strangers?

America has always hung in the balance. America is exceptional in that there is no other place where so many people have come from so many other places to live in relative peace and democracy for so long. People all over the world have seen the United States as a light unto the nations, and

with their strength our country has done many great and good things in the world. But we did not banish human nature.

That other America has always been with us, too: those “strangers” who have invariably seen America—the land and its other peoples—as something to be exploited, to be subjugated. The idea of America has often been a close-run thing between us, with the same battles for human freedom and dignity needing to be fought again and again, and in that sense, our nation is not exceptional at all.

There have always been the Nativists, the Know-Nothings, the Klan, the John Birchers, the Knights of the Golden Circle, the Tea Party, the Proud Boys. All the believers in manifest destiny, and the white man’s burden, and a thousand conspiracy theories, going all the way back to Jamestown and Plymouth Colony.

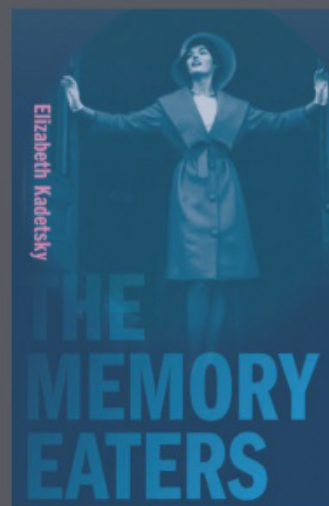
It’s true enough that most white conservatives are not monsters, and that some of them are not bigots—though they have demonstrated no unease whatsoever with the bigotry of their leaders. It’s true that we should go on trying to persuade them, with restraint and respect. Contrary to what every columnist in the country seems to believe, no one I know lives in a “blue bubble.” We have right-wing acquaintances, relatives, even friends, and we listen to what they have to say.

But it’s important to understand that they have been voting the way they have for decades not out of despair or bruised feelings but to get what they want. It does no good to pretend otherwise. A people can be corrupted as well as a man, and our people can be corrupted as much as any other people. Red America is responsible for most of their own problems—and ours—thanks to the policies and the candidates they have supported for decades. But rather than acknowledge any of that they have simply doubled down, foisting upon us this wretched, hollow man, this constant liar who vulgarizes all he touches, who smears and mocks, and who sells himself at every turn, even to foreign dictators. The people, yes—they did this. ■

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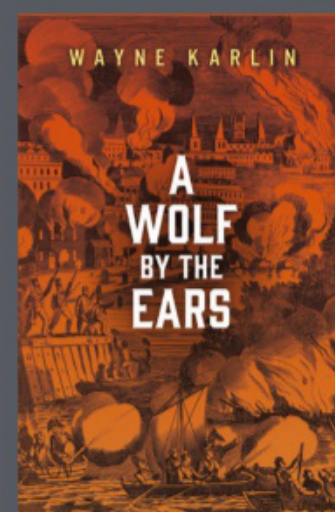
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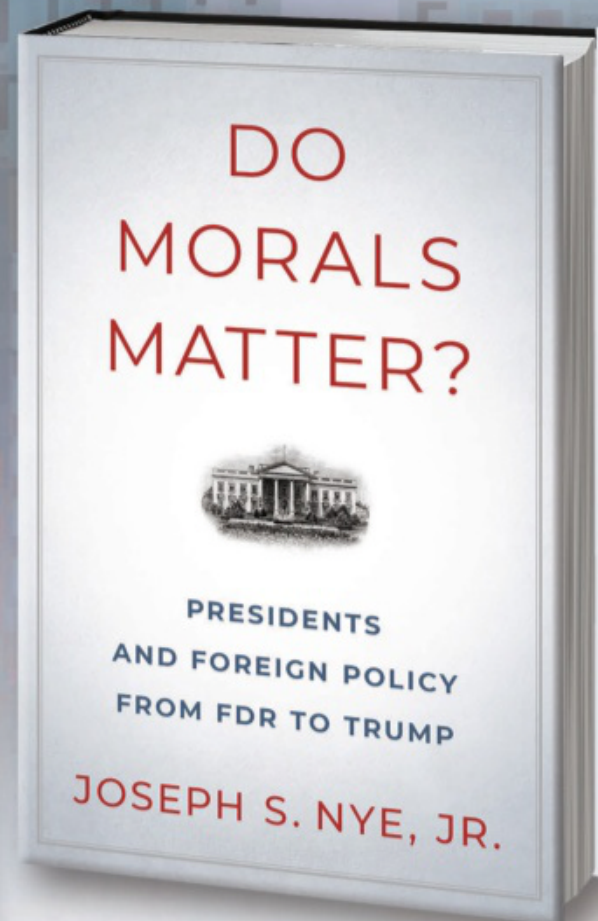
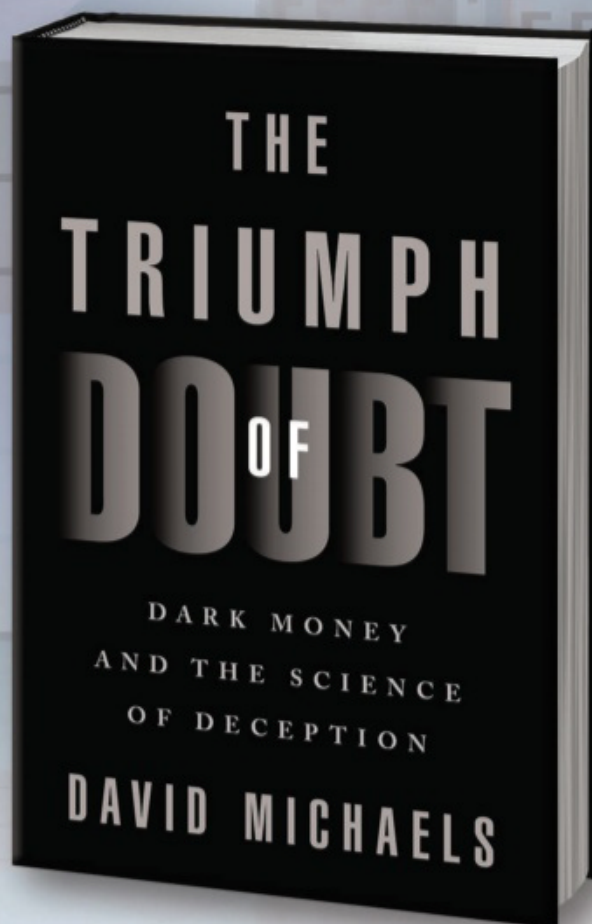
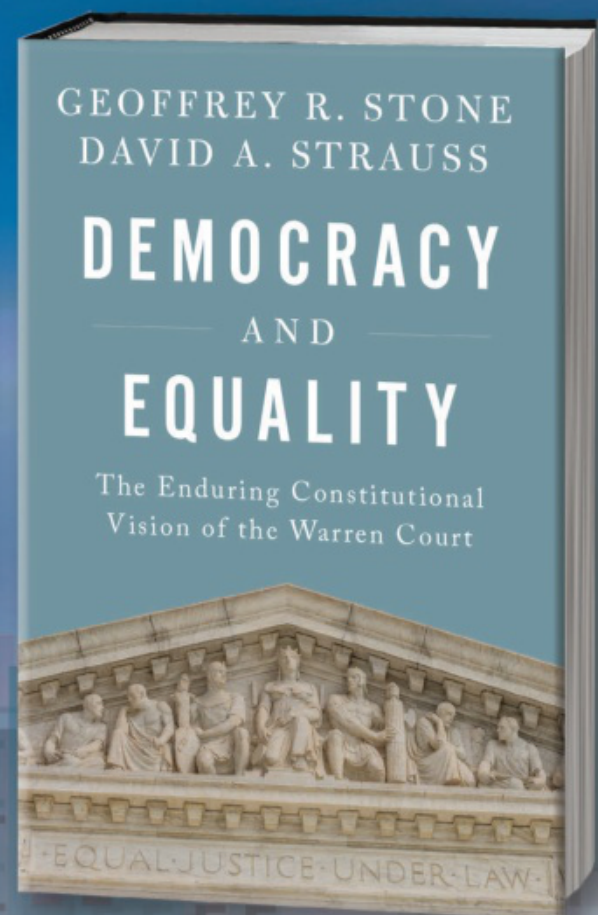
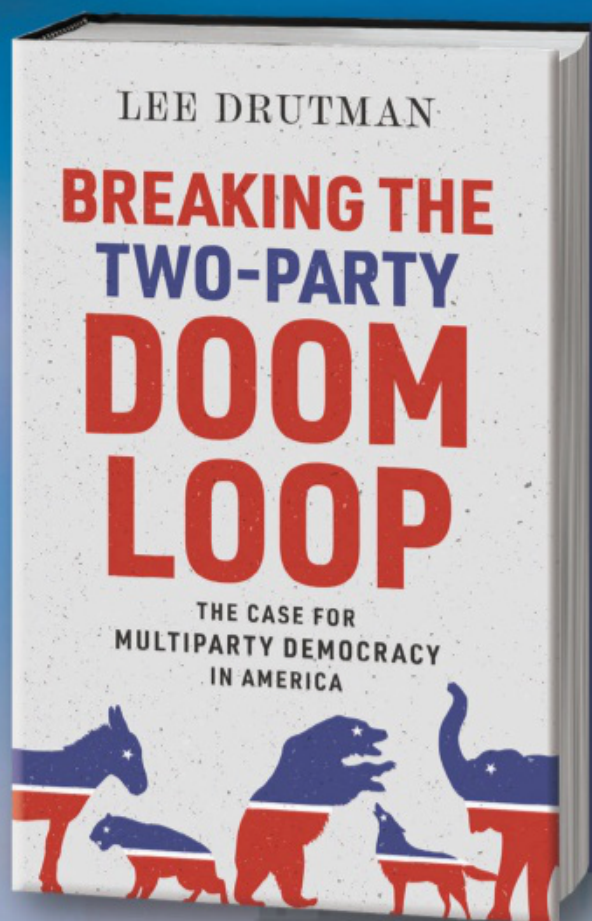
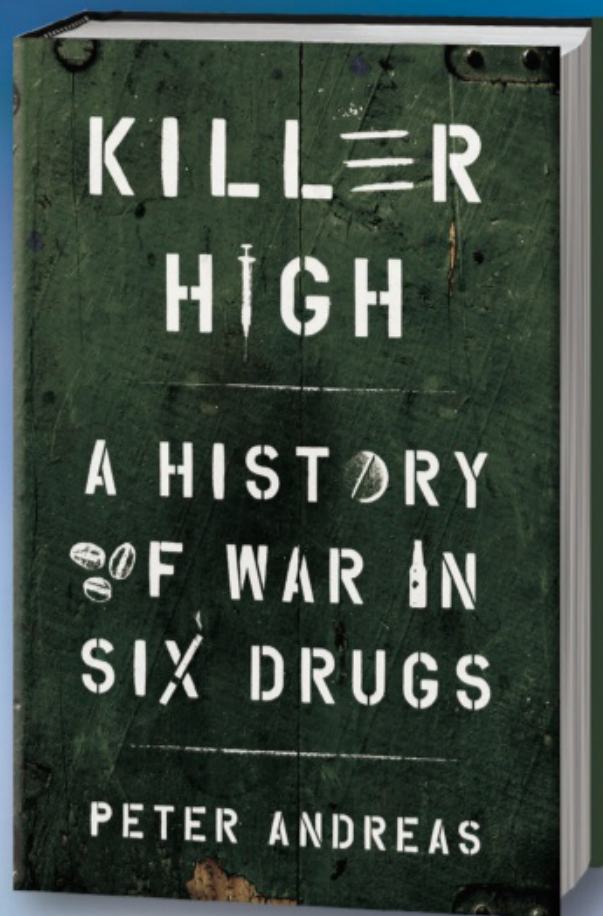


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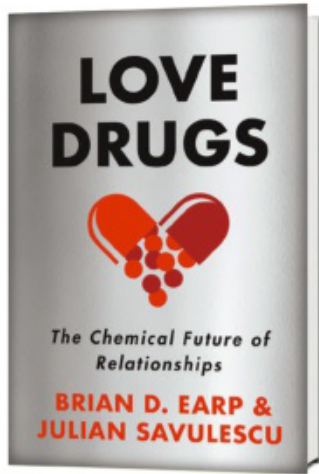
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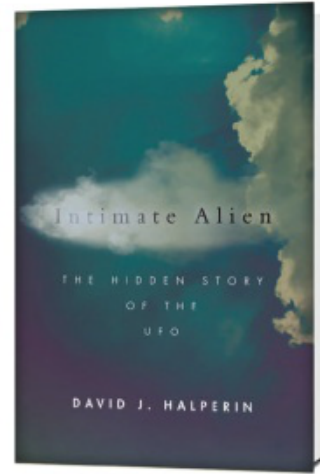
Percentage of sexually active Americans who say that their “skills in the bedroom” have improved over the past year : 57
Who say that 2019 was their “best year of sex” : 44
Number of years by which the average age of a North or South American nation’s leader has increased since 1950 : 10.5
By which the average age of a European nation’s leader has decreased since then : 2.5
Number of European nations whose leader is 45 years old or younger : 15
Percentage of U.S. Protestants who have “a lot” of confidence in their clergy’s ability to provide useful parenting advice : 49
Of U.S. Catholics who do : 23
Percentage by which the median length of U.S. black Protestant sermons exceeds that of U.S. Catholic homilies : 286
Factor by which evangelical Christian sermons are likelier than those of other Christian traditions to include the phrase “eternal hell” : 3
Average percentage of their fortunes that the twenty richest Americans gave to charity in 2018 : 0.8
Median amount owed by U.S. renters evicted between 2014 and 2016 for failing to pay rent : \$1,253
Percentage of those evicted who owed less than \$500 : 12
Percentage of U.S. manufacturing jobs that required a bachelor’s degree in 1983 : 14
That required one in 2018 : 31
Projected percentage growth over the next year in the office-chair market : 10
In the gaming-chair market : 30
Chance that an American aged 19 to 34 is prediabetic : 1 in 4
Average percentage by which an obese person contributes more carbon emissions than someone in the “normal-weight” range : 20
Rank of SUVs among contributors to the increase in carbon emissions over the past decade : 2
Rank of the power industry : 1
Percentage of total retail sales made in 2018 that were returned : 10.6
Amount, in tons, of annual carbon emissions that can be attributed to retail returns : 16,500,000
Percentage of American travelers who say they cut back on flying in 2019 for environmental reasons : 38
Percentage of the world’s cities with populations over 500,000 that experience periodic water shortages : 47
Number of people injured in a volcanic eruption in New Zealand in December : 13
Amount of human skin, in square footage, subsequently ordered by New Zealand from the United States : 516
Factor by which the portion of Americans dying at home has increased since 1972 : 2
Percentage of U.S. school districts in which the portion of Latino teachers equals or exceeds that of Latino students : 0.1
Year in which the NFL first required teams to interview candidates of color for every available head coaching job : 2003
Number of head coaches of color employed by the NFL at the time : 3
Number who are today : 4
Percentage by which men are more likely than women to frame research findings in top scientific journals with positive adjectives : 21
By which the use of a positive adjective in a paper title or abstract increases subsequent citations in those journals : 13
Percentage of Americans who think that the Chinese government is sometimes or very often a source of disinformation : 36
Who think that CNN is : 36
Number of fact-checking organizations that were active in 2014 : 103
That are active today : 225
Rank of Donald Trump among the most admired men in America : 1
Of Barack Obama : 1

*Figures cited are the latest available as of January 2020. Sources are listed on page 51.
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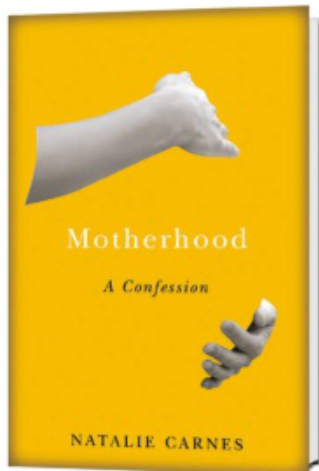


Love Drugs
*The Chemical Future
of Relationships*
Brian D. Earp and
Julian Savulescu

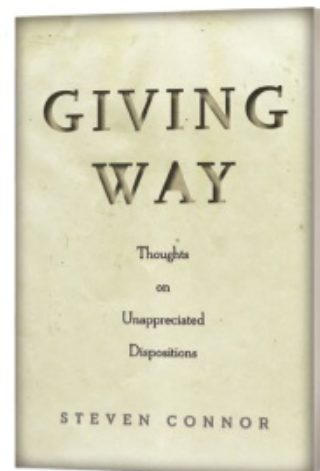
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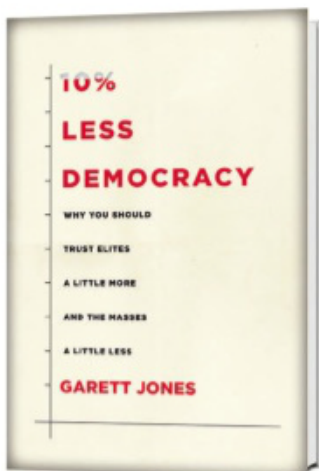
Intimate Alien
*The Hidden Story of
the UFO*
David J. Halperin



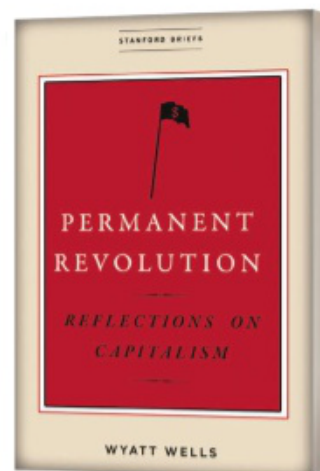
Motherhood
A Confession
Natalie Carnes



Giving Way
*Thoughts on
Unappreciated Dispositions*
Steven Connor

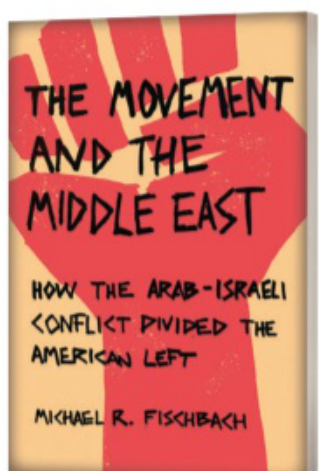


**10% Less
Democracy**
*Why You Should Trust
Elites a Little More and
the Masses a Little Less*
Garrett Jones

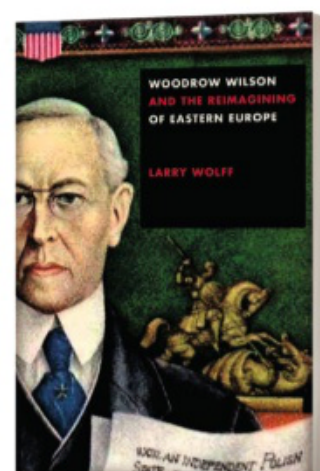


**Permanent
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Reflections on Capitalism
Wyatt Wells

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**The Movement
and the Middle East**
*How the Arab-Israeli
Conflict Divided
the American Left*
Michael R. Fischbach



**Woodrow Wilson
and the Reimagining
of Eastern Europe**
Larry Wolff



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READINGS

[Essay]

RING OF FIRE

By Jordan Kisner, from “Phone Calls from the Apocalypse,” an essay in the collection *Thin Places*, which will be published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Nearly every day now, my phone rings from numbers unknown to me. The area codes are always Californian, and always different. The calls started from cities in or near Los Angeles: Culver City, Inglewood, Marina del Rey. Then, once I stopped picking them up, they’d come from farther north: Merced, Turlock, Patterson, Stockton.

My parents still live in California, so when I’d see these unlisted California numbers, I’d think that one of them was in the hospital and I was being notified. I’d pick up, worried, and hear a long silence. Then a man’s voice would say: “First they deceived you, then they oppressed you.”

The voice is clearly a recording—there’s something scratchy about the line, some ambience that sounds canned. The man’s diction is familiar to me from memories of old televangelists and Pentecostal preachers, though I can’t tell from his voice where in the country he might be from. The way he speaks is stylized; every consonant is rhythm, every word is beaten through the teeth. He sounds as though he’s trying to exorcise you over the phone.

“There is a person keeping you in this situation,” he says, every time. “Press the numerical button 1; press 1 now.” From there the messages

deviate, but they’re variations on a theme. Here’s what he said on October 2: “There is someone you must rebuke that is attacking you. Press the numerical button 1 now; press 1 now. There is an individual causing this situation that you must rebuke; press 1, press 1. You must rebuke the snake that is controlling the person to cause this mess; press 1. It has even been affecting people in your household. Press 1 now; press 1.”

The first time I got the call, I was so stunned by his vehemence that I didn’t hang up. I sat there, clutching my cell phone to my ear all the way through the man’s exhortations to press the numerical button 1 until the line seemed to go dead. Then, another man’s voice came on the line, someone who was speaking normally, like any regular telemarketer. “If you’d like to continue, press 1 now. If you’d like to no longer receive these calls, press 4.”

I hesitated. The obvious thing to do would be to press 4, but I was curious. I badly wanted to see what would happen if I pressed 1, but that way lay the robocall deluge. Instead, I did nothing and waited. Eventually, the call disconnected.

I began receiving these calls almost a year ago. Sometimes I pick up, sometimes I don’t. They’ve started to become part of the cadence of my week, a visitation from some other corner of the country. Sometimes my phone will ring in the middle of dinner with friends and I’ll check it, only to put the phone back down when I see the unfamiliar California number. “It’s just the apocalyptic preacher calling.”

The scripts of the calls aren’t always precisely apocalyptic, but they are always formulated as a

[Patient History]

MAMMARY LAPSE

From a testimonial submitted to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration last summer. In July, the pharmaceutical company Allergan issued a worldwide recall of its textured breast implants, which have been linked to nearly five hundred cases of a rare form of lymphoma.

My first symptoms were migraines. They lasted three days and occurred three times a month. Then, weakness in my right leg, numbness in my right arm, tingling in both, a sore shoulder and neck—to a point where I couldn't turn it. My family doctor gave me Maxalt for migraines, inflammation meds, and suggested massage. Nothing was helping. I started to have swelling in my feet and ankles and hands, my doctor said watch what you eat. I then went on water pills—I don't know why. My feet turned blue with broken blood vessels, joints all over started hurting; I couldn't stand up from bed. I had to stop working. I started tripping a lot. My doctor said, "It's your shoes." I fell in the bathroom and bruised my tailbone. I got shingles on my hip and horrible breakouts on my face. Sore joints, even elbows. My balance started to be way off; I fell going down three steps. My doctor then sent me to a neurologist. At this point, I had to get a cane. I asked if my implants could cause this and she laughed at me. Then I went to another neurologist, same thing. I looked up my symptoms online and realized it was breast implant illness. I called the plastic surgeon who put my implants in and his head nurse said, "Oh my goodness, you need them out." The next day she called and said the doctor doesn't take them out. I asked for records, and she said they had been destroyed. She said don't worry about it. I begged her for the name of the brand so I could find another doctor to remove them. She told me they were Allergan textured saline implants. I really thought I was dying. Finally, I found a doctor who would take them out. He said, "You have the ones that cause cancer." After surgery, my feet went back to a normal color. My twitching is almost gone; the numbness in my arms is gone. I'm still walking with a cane. When my implants came out, they were orange with black specks, I'm thinking mold. There are thirty different toxins in silicone shells—that plus saline in a ninety-eight degree body can grow mold. Well, that's my story. I have pictures but they won't upload.

warning. I got a call from Oakland as I was walking up Sixth Avenue in the West Village. "Hello?"

"I saw the spirit of witchcraft; someone was trying to manipulate you. Press the numerical button 1."

Visiting my brother in Los Angeles, I got a call from Fresno. "There is someone who has your name in their mouth. Press the numerical button 1. You have always been uneasy about them and this is why; press 1. You used to be around them and things are coming up now. Ushebe—press 1, press 1. We must break this thing before sundown; please press the numerical button 1 now."

Your situation is bad, the caller wants to convince you. You sensed it, and you were right

Someone is trying to cause you harm, and they're succeeding.

It's all very strange, but there were years when it might have seemed stranger. The news is only vaguely less eschatological. Mass shootings are carried out weekly at schools, synagogues, concerts: eleven dead, fifty-nine dead, seventeen dead. The deceased owner of a brothel called the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is posthumously elected to the Nevada state legislature. Nearly nine million acres burn; "historic" floods; "once in a generation" storms. So many people die of opioid overdoses that the national life expectancy falls for the first time in fifty years. North Korea brags that its missiles can easily reach Hawaii, and the United States dissolves a nuclear arms control treaty with Russia. Climate scientists revise an earlier prediction that a 2-degree rise in the earth's temperature would be irreversibly catastrophic to say that, actually, 1.5 degrees will do the trick—a point of no return for the planet that they're expecting to arrive not in fifty years but in fifteen.

In such days, the phone calls sound almost reassuringly in touch with the spirit of the times: this is going badly.

Even the language the evangelist uses in his pitch for "the numerical button one" sounds familiar. This was the call from Oakland on September 25: "They can no longer mess with your stuff. This has happened because of what they tried to mess with that is *yours*. Press the numerical button 1 now. God is about to go before you to fight what they're trying to do to you; press the numerical button 1 now. These are individuals that the enemy is using and institutes that the enemy is using to come against you. Press 1, press 1."

And another, on October 13, from Calistoga: "They will not take anything else from you. They tried to take your family your money your joy your peace your happiness—press 1, press 1—they will not be able to take anything else from you; this is the end of it; enough is enough. Press



The Occult Enthusiast, a painting by Hernan Bas, whose work was on view in January at Lehmann Maupin, in New York City.

the numerical button 1. You thought you would have been out of it by this year, you thought you would have been taken care of by now; press 1, press 1."

This is the era of being "robbed," the year of the con artist, the time of everyone losing out to someone else. Immigrants are coming to take your jobs, Republicans are coming to take your health care, angry women are coming for men's reputations and careers, straight white men are coming for your bodily autonomy, the police are coming for your life, trans people are coming for your bathrooms, the Democrats are coming for your guns, Silicon Valley is coming for your privacy, left-wing snowflakes are coming for your free speech, oil companies are coming for your land, and on and on. It's an incomplete and uneven list—some are valid fears, some are hate barely disguised—but the rhetoric of persecution

has become the national common denominator. The apocalyptic telephone preacher knows this. Someone is taking away from you what is rightfully yours, he says. There is someone to blame for your troubles, and I know who it is.

I keep waiting for this man to ask me for money. It's curious that a call of this nature doesn't come right out with a request, something along the lines of "For only six hundred and sixty-six dollars you can know the name of this usurper and I'll smite him for you." I can only assume that if I were ever to go ahead and press the numerical button 1, I'd be transferred to some kind of donation hotline or my number would be sold to hundreds of other evangelists, since, further research shows, robo-evangelism is its own cottage industry. But he never comes right out and asks. Instead he says simply, I know what ails you. You can know, too.



© THE ARTIST. COURTESY GAGOSIAN. PHOTO: FLORIAN KLEINFERN

Untitled, pencil and bleach on paper mounted on canvas from the series *Les dessous*, by Tatiana Trouwé, whose work was on view in January at Gagosian, in Beverly Hills, California.

Lately, it doesn't seem like what ails any one of us is simple enough for that. It's a big, ailing world, and like an idiot I keep picking up the phone. Not every day, but often enough that it's irrational. I keep wondering what he'll say.

[Recollection]

KOFTAESQUE

From an account told to Witold Szablowski by Abu Ali, a former cook for Saddam Hussein. The story is included in Szablowski's book *How to Feed a Dictator: Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Enver Hoxha, Fidel Castro, and Pol Pot Through the Eyes of Their Cooks*, which will be published in April by Penguin Books. Translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

One day, President Saddam Hussein invited some friends onto his boat. He took along sev-

eral bodyguards, his secretary, and me, his personal chef, and we set off on a cruise down the river Tigris. At the time, we weren't at war with anyone, everyone was in a good mood, and Salim, one of the bodyguards, said to me, "Abu Ali, sit down, you've got the day off today. The president says he's going to cook for everyone. He's going to make *koftas* for us."

"A day off." I smiled, because I knew that in Saddam's service there were no such words. And because there were going to be *koftas*, I started getting everything ready for the barbecue. I minced some beef and lamb and mixed them with tomato, onion, and parsley, then put it all in the fridge so that it would stick well to the skewers later on. Only then did I sit down.

In Iraq every man thinks he knows how to barbecue meat. He's going to do it even if he doesn't know how. And it was the same with Saddam: people often ate the things he cooked out of politeness; after all, you're not going to tell the president you don't like the food he has made. I didn't like it when he got down to cooking. But that time I thought to myself, "It's almost impossible to ruin *koftas*."

Half an hour later, Salim came back carrying a plate of *koftas*. “The president made some for you too,” he said. I thanked him and said it was very good of the president, broke off a bit of meat, and wrapped it in pita bread. I tried it and felt as if I’d burst into flames! “Water, quick, water!” I threw a glass of water down my throat, but it didn’t help. “More water!” My cheeks and jaw were burning, and there were tears pouring from my eyes. I was terrified. Poison? I thought. But why? What for? Or maybe someone was trying to poison Saddam, and I’ve eaten it?

I am still alive. So it wasn’t poison. But in that case, what was he playing at?

That was my first encounter with Tabasco sauce. Saddam had been given it by someone as a gift, but because he didn’t like very spicy food, he decided to play a joke by trying it out on his friends. And on his staff. Everyone on the entire boat was running around pouring water down their throats while Saddam sat and laughed.

Twenty minutes later, Salim came back to ask if I’d liked the food. I was furious, so I said, “If I’d spoiled the meat like that, Saddam would have kicked me in the butt and told me to pay for it.”

He did that sometimes. If he didn’t like the food, he’d make you give back the money. For the meat, the rice, or the fish. “This food is inedible,” he’d say. “You’ve got to pay fifty dinars.”

I never expected Salim to repeat this to the president. But when Saddam asked him how I’d reacted, that’s what he had said, in front of all Saddam’s guests. Saddam sent Salim back to fetch me. I was terrified. I had no idea how Saddam was going to react. You did not criticize him. Not the ministers, nor the generals, let alone a cook.

Saddam and his friends were sitting at the table. Some of the guests had red eyes; evidently, they’d eaten the Tabasco-flavored *koftas*, too. “I hear you didn’t like my *koftas*,” said Saddam, in a very serious tone. Everyone was looking at me. I couldn’t suddenly start praising the food; they’d know I was lying.

I started thinking about my family. I had no idea what might happen. But I wasn’t expecting anything good.

“You didn’t like them,” Saddam said again. And suddenly he started to laugh. Then all the people sitting at the table started laughing, too. Saddam took out fifty dinars, handed them to Salim, and said, “You’re right, Abu Ali, it was too spicy. I’m giving back the money for the meat I wasted. I’ll cook you some more *koftas*, but without the sauce this time. Would you like that?”

I said yes.

So he cooked me some *koftas* without any Tabasco. This time they were very good, but I tell you: it’s impossible to ruin *koftas*.

[Account]

AT THE MIND’S LIMITS

From transcripts of interviews conducted by David Stavrou with Sayragul Sauytbay, a Uighur woman from the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, where the United Nations estimates that between one and two million Uighurs were held in internment camps in 2018. When Sauytbay was released in March 2018, after five months of imprisonment, she fled to Kazakhstan and reunited with her husband and children. The family was granted asylum in Sweden, where they now live. Portions of the interview were published in Haaretz in October of last year.

In November 2017, I was ordered to report to an address in the city’s suburbs, to leave a message at a phone number I had been given and to wait for the police. I did this, and when four armed men in uniform arrived, they covered my head and bundled me into a vehicle. After an hour’s journey we arrived at an unfamiliar place. I soon learned that this was a reeducation camp. I was told I had been brought there to teach Chinese and was immediately made to sign a document. I was very afraid to sign. It said that if I did not fulfill my task, or if I did not obey the rules, I would receive the death penalty. The document stated that I was forbidden to speak with the prisoners, forbidden to laugh, forbidden to cry, and forbidden to answer questions from anyone. I signed it because I had no choice, and then I received a uniform and was taken to a tiny bedroom with a concrete bed and a thin plastic mattress. There were five cameras on the ceiling—one in each corner and another one in the middle.

The other inmates lived in crowded sixteen-square-meter rooms occupied by twenty prisoners each. There were cameras in their rooms, too, and also in the corridor. Each room had a plastic bucket for a toilet. Every prisoner was given two minutes a day to use the toilet, and the bucket was emptied only once a day. If it filled up, you had to wait until the next day. The prisoners wore uniforms, their heads were shaved, and their hands and feet were shackled even as they slept. There were twenty-five hundred prisoners in the camp, all of them Uighur or Kazakh. The oldest person I met was a woman of eighty-four; the youngest, a boy of thirteen.

During the day, which started at 6 AM and ended at midnight, inmates had to learn Chinese, sing party songs, confess their crimes and moral offenses, and recite Communist Party propaganda slogans like “Thank you to the

Communist Party,” “I am Chinese,” and “I love Xi Jinping.”

We received three meals a day. All the meals included watery rice soup or vegetable soup and a small slice of Chinese bread. Meat was

[Lyrics]

MR. ME TOO

From lyrics referring to Donald Trump in rap songs catalogued by Genius.com.

Rich
Well-known
Over-tan
Orange
Pink
All-American
High drama
Living large
On the links
On the news
Making big money
Stacking paper
Grabbing tits
Running for office
Not equipped to take this country over
Got a lot of votes
Might actually be the president
Our president
POTUS
Ain't deserve that position
Got the nukes
Taunting K. Jong
Tweeted something
Arguing about nonsense
Calling favors
Taking dollars from y'all
Trying to build a fucking fence
Building the wall to stop the dope
Making racist remarks
Supporting white supremacists
Spreading that hatred
Fired his chief of staff
Bringing back the Reagan era
Might bring slavery back
The new Hitler
Not as bad as they say he is
Wants to make everything better
Talks real estate
Trying to make America great
My hero

served on Fridays, but it was pork. The inmates were compelled to eat it, even if they were religiously observant. Refusal brought punishment. There was no medical treatment, and they gave us pills that they told us prevented diseases, but the nurses secretly told me that the pills were dangerous and that I should not take them. Some prisoners who took the pills were cognitively weakened. Women stopped getting their period and there were rumors that men became sterile.

The only room that didn't have cameras was the Black Room, which was used to torture the prisoners. Some were hung on the wall and beaten with electrified truncheons. There were prisoners who were made to sit on a chair of nails. I saw people return from that room covered in blood. Some came back without fingernails.

The fate of the women in the camp was particularly harsh. On an everyday basis the policemen took the pretty girls with them, and the girls didn't come back to the rooms all night. The police had unlimited power. They could take whomever they wanted.

One day, the police told us they were going to check to see whether our reeducation was succeeding, whether we were developing properly. They took two hundred inmates outside—men and women—and told one of the women to confess her sins. She stood before us and declared that she had been a bad person, but now that she had learned Chinese, she had become a better person. When she was done speaking, the policemen ordered her to disrobe and raped her, one after the other, in front of everyone. While they were raping her, they checked to see how we were reacting. People who turned their heads or closed their eyes, and those who looked angry or shocked, were taken away, and we never saw them again. After that happened, it was hard for me to sleep at night.

[Vision]

A WALK TO REMEMBER

By Fenton Johnson, from At the Center of All Beauty: Solitude and the Creative Life, published this month by W. W. Norton.

When I imagine my death, I do not see myself surrounded by loved ones with music gently playing in the background, in a hospital



"A Little Piece of My Heart," a photograph by Giovanni Ozzola, whose work is on view this month at Galleria Continua, in Boissy-le-Châtel, France.

or a hospice or even in my own room, wherever it may be. I see myself alone. Animals, who are so much wiser than we and who so often know their time to die, do not seek out their owners or playmates or offspring, but find a remote corner or glade where they can accomplish this most private act in solitude.

In death I see myself alone, in a landscape where there is still winter. In my imagination I am standing outside the house in Kentucky, the house my parents built. On a cold, clear night after a great tongue of arctic air from Canada has passed through and the stars glitter against the infinitude of dark sky, I set out to walk the half mile or so to the river, the humble Rolling Fork of my childhood, crossing the flagstone patio, past the limestone table and the shop and the dead brown stalks of the frostbitten garden, climbing the fence—some advance planning is called for here, since the aged joints will balk—walking over the frozen, rutted field toward the bare-branched water maples and sycamores that

line the riverbank—trees that have populated my novels. There must be a moon, so let us have a moon, rising full over the frosted fields, their glitter matching that of the stars. Along the way I shed clothes, pausing long enough to fold each item neatly, leaving civilization behind, until I arrive at the river unclothed, naked to the stars. I want to think that I will have courage to do this with no more reinforcement than a shot of bourbon—enough to brighten but not dull the senses—in honor of those who came before and made my life possible, and in hopes that I have accomplished a small measure of the same for those who follow. There you will find my body, come the cold, bright blue morning, leaning against the great mottled sycamore of my dreams, happy to have left this world as I came into it, alone but not alone, content to join the company of those who have gone before, who made me who I am and who welcomed me back with open arms to our true and perfect home.

[Vocab]

TROYS AND GIRLS

By Anne Carson, from Norma Jeane Baker of Troy, a version of Euripides' *Helen*, published last month by New Directions. The play was performed last spring at the Shed's Griffin Theater, in New York City.

τραῦμα: wound

War creates two categories of persons: those who outlive it and those who don't. Both carry wounds.

CHANGING ATTITUDES: An ancient Homeric catalogue of battlefield trauma would include wounds to the eyeball, nose, palate, forehead, throat, collarbone, back of skull, nape of neck, upper arm, forearm, heart, lungs, liver, spleen, thigh, knee, shin, heel, ankle. Lasting psychological damage, however keen a concern of modern research, does not seem to have interested the ancient poet.

CONTINUITIES: On the other hand, Homer has given us Achilles, who went berserk in the midst of battle (*Iliad*), and Odysseus, who went berserk afterward (*Odyssey*), while Euripides makes a hero out of Helen, who was brutalized by merely staring at war too long.

TEACHABLE MOMENT: In Euripides' play *Helen*, we watch Helen watch her husband, Menelaus, as he ambushes and slaughters a boatload of unarmed people. She cheers him on, shouting, "Where is the glory of Troy? Show it to these barbarians!"

DISCUSSION TOPICS: Compare and contrast catching a spear in the spleen with utter mental darkness. Consider ancient vs. modern experience. Consider whether any of these is what is meant in poetry by "a beautiful death."

παλλακή: concubine

How do you define dirt? Here is what the ancient Greeks thought of it: dirt is matter out of place. The poached egg on your plate at breakfast is not dirt. The poached egg on page 202 of the Greek lexicon in the library of the British Museum is dirt. Dirt is something that has crossed a boundary it ought not to have crossed. Dirt confuses categories and mixes up form.

APPLICATIONS: Use this spatial hygiene to explain certain neoliberal neuroses. Because

the spooky thing about dirt, if you're a neoliberal, is that dirt is not passive. Dirt is coming to get you.

CASE STUDY: The noun for "concubine" in Greek comes from the verb that means "to sprinkle." A concubine is a stranger who sprinkles herself into someone else's household—as Helen does when she follows Paris to Troy—hoping to assimilate herself to the texture there. Helen does not belong in the house of Priam. She comes in tracking Greek mud all over the floor.

CAN YOU PASS: Assimilation is tricky. You have to invent a new self in a new household. Even Marilyn Monroe had trouble at the start. "When I signed my first autograph, I had to go slow. I wasn't too sure where the y went or where you put the i."

TEACHABLE MOMENT: Helen's very first appearance in history and literature, at verse 126–129 of the third book of Homer's *Iliad*, shows her sitting in her chamber in the palace of Priam, weaving. She is weaving a vast tapestry that depicts, minute by minute, the battle going on outside her window. Notice that Homer uses the verb "sprinkle" to describe how she embroiders the dooms of men into her web. Helen knows dirt. Helen is a death-sprinkler.

BATTLEFIELD CLICHÉ: Her thread is deep, dark red.

καιρός: opportunity

Think about bronze. It was the Bronze Age when the war at Troy took place (if it took place at all). Killing a man in full bronze armor—helmet, breastplate, greaves—was not an easy task. Two relatively small targets affording maximum bloody access were the neck and the groin, i.e., exposed areas at the top and bottom of the breastplate. A person wounded there would bleed out in a few hours. But for instant, certain death, you would aim your sword or spear or arrow or sharpened stick at the place where the helmet stopped above the eyes, the temple of the head. These three locations were called *καιρία*, mortal spots, from *καιρός*, which means "the exact right place and time for something to happen, the critical juncture, the perfect opportunity."

NOT YET IRONY: Notice *καιρός* has its accent on the final syllable. This same word with accent moved to the initial syllable, *καῖρος*, was a technical term from the art of weaving to

indicate the thrums of the web or, more specifically, that critical point in space and time when the weaver must thrust her thread through a gap that momentarily opens in the warp of the cloth.

TEACHABLE MOMENT: We have already reflected on Helen's first appearance in Homer's *Iliad*, where she sits in her room live-streaming the war at Troy onto a tapestry. Her thread weaves in and out of living skulls.

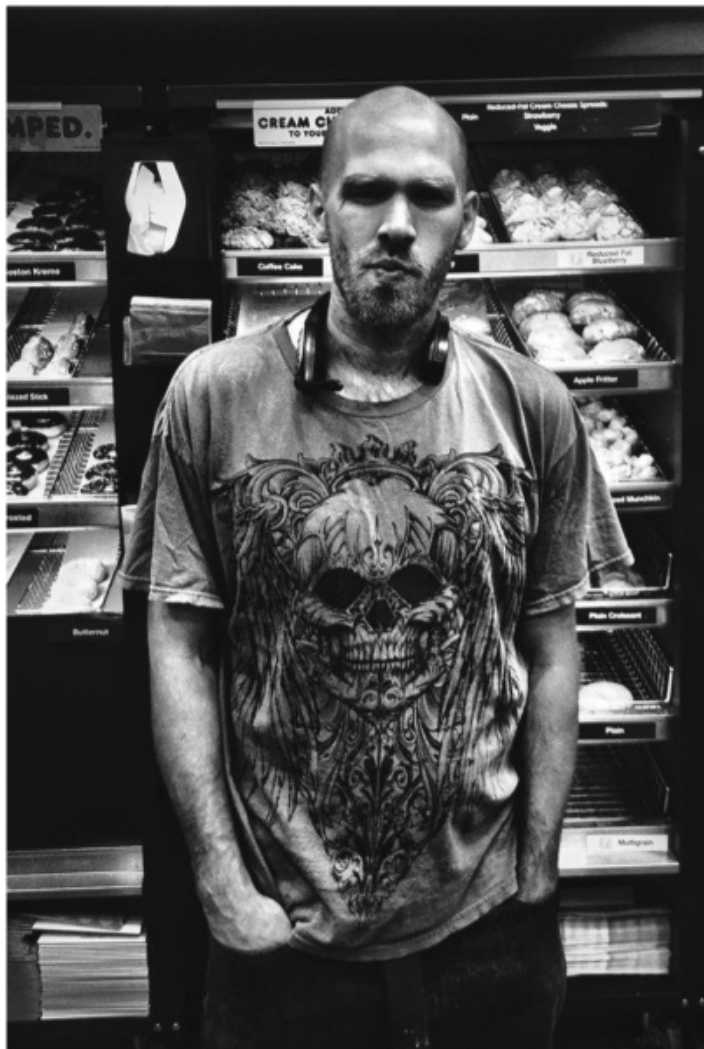
[Profiles]

NIGHTHAWKS AT THE DUNKIN'

By Jeff Sharlet, from *The Brilliant Darkness*, out last month from W. W. Norton. The book is composed of short essays about encounters Sharlet had while photographing strangers.

MIKE

The night shift is for me a luxury, the freedom to indulge my insomnia by writing at a Dunkin' Donuts, one of the only places open at midnight



where I live, up north on the river between Vermont and New Hampshire. Lately, though, my insomnia doesn't feel like such a gift. Too much to think about. So click, click goes the camera—the phone—looking for other people's stories to fill the hours. This is Mike; he's thirty-four, he's been a night baker for a year, and tonight's his last shift. Come 6 AM, "no more uniform." He says he's going to be a painter. What kind? "Well, I'm painting a church ..." He means the walls. The new job started early, too. "So I'm working, like, eighty-hour days." He means weeks. He's tired. He doesn't like baking. Rotten pay, rotten hours, rotten work. "You don't think. It's just repetition." Painting, you pay attention. "You can't be afraid up there." The ladder, up high. "I'm not afraid," he says. "I can do anything." He says he could be a carpenter. "But it hasn't happened." Why does he bake? "Couldn't get a job." Work's like that, he says—there are bad times. Everything's like that, he says. There are bad times.

"Who's the tear for?" The tattoo by his right eye.

"For my son," he says, "who died when he was two months old."

KELLY

Kelly's twenty-seven. She started baking doughnuts when she was seven. "My mother was the night baker before me," she says. "If I was, you know, 'naughty,' she took me with her."

Kelly followed that routine for years. She quit. She returned. She's been working here a year and a half, a night baker like her mother.

She takes her smoke breaks out front, because there's no camera out back. "We've been robbed," she says. A man walked in the back door, emptied the safe. Kelly wasn't working. "I'm just lucky," she says.

She's quitting again in two weeks. She's going to be a security guard, night shift. "Fifteen dollars an hour." The sum makes her marvel. She won't mind the hours. She doesn't like days.

"The night shift," she says, "I'm wired for it." She's a natural. But she'll back, she says. For coffee. "I don't eat doughnuts anymore."

THE NURSE

Night nurse for thirteen years and that was enough, at least for a while. She was good with difficult children. The troubled ones, the violent ones: she knew how to calm them. Night nurse thirteen years; she couldn't take it anymore. "But I'll go back," she says. "This is just for a little while."

She and her wife used to live in the city. Manchester, New Hampshire. "It's a tough town," she says. "We didn't want to do it anymore." They decided to move to the country, roughly speaking; they have an apartment near the highway and the hospital. "What changed was my daughter," she says. "My daughter is three years old. I didn't want



her growing up around that." Manchester, New Hampshire. "It can be a very tough town."

Night shift at Dunkin' Donuts, a few months now. "I shouldn't be here," she says. But she is. "My daughter will be safer."

PERI

Peri likes her curves. When she visits Dunkin' Donuts, she finds she needs to do a lot of stretching. Lean, arch, twist. She smiles; she

flirts a little with Mike behind the counter. I wanted to take a picture of her pretty like that, happy. 1:15 AM.

She's the night manager at the Taco Bell next door. She trades Taco Bell for Dunkin', quesadillas for coffee, two or three cups a shift. She used to manage a Wendy's down in Dover,



New Hampshire. "I'm a city girl," she says. Concord, then New Jersey, then Dover, then here, which is the least like a city of all.

She was at Wendy's for eight years. One night, smoke break, Peri got robbed. "2:38 AM," she says. She wraps herself in her arms. A man with a gun and zip ties. He said there were more men waiting. Peri screamed. He took \$3,000. He took somebody's truck. Peri waited for him to be gone. "I could smoke," she says. Hands zip-tied together, she'd held on to her cigarette. That's what she remembers. And: "I thought about my daughter." One year old. Peri couldn't take chances anymore. That night, zip-tied, she decided to move. That's how she came here. She says they caught the stickup man. "He said he did it for his family." She doesn't believe him.

[Fiction]

SPELLBOUND

By Fernanda Melchor, from the novel Hurricane Season, which will be published this month by New Directions. Translated from the Spanish by Sophie Hughes.

They say she never really died, because witches don't go without a fight. They say that, at the last minute, just before those kids stabbed her, she transformed herself into something else:

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a lizard or a rabbit, which scurried away and took cover in the heart of the bush. Or into the giant raptor that appeared in the sky in the days following the murder: a great beast that swept in circles above the crops and then perched on the branches of the trees to peer at the people below with its red eyes, as if wanting to open its beak and speak to them.

They say there was no shortage of people who entered that house looking for the treasure after her death. The moment they heard whose body had been found floating in the irrigation canal, they raced with shovels and picks and sledgehammers to demolish the walls and dig holes like trenches in the floor looking for hidden doors, for secret rooms. Rigorito's men were the first to show up; on the chief's orders they even broke down the door to the room at the end of the hallway, the room belonging to the Old Witch that had remained locked ever since she'd disappeared years earlier. They say that neither Rigorito nor his men could stand the spectacle awaiting them there: the black mummy of the Old Witch lying supine in the middle of the solid oak bed, the corpse that began to flake and crumble right before their eyes, ending up a heap of bone and hair. They say those pussies skipped town, never to return; although some people claim that's not true, that what really happened was that Rigorito and his men did in fact discover the famous treasure hidden in the Old Witch's room—gold and silver coins, priceless jewels, and that ring with a rock so big anyone would assume it was glass—and that they swiped the lot before taking off in Villa's sole police car. They say that, at some point after driving through Matacocuile, greed made Rigorito lose his senses and he decided to kill his men so that he wouldn't have to share the bounty. They say he told them to hand over their guns and then shot each one in the back; they say he cut off their heads narco-style to

throw the authorities off the scent and then sped off with all that money to an unknown destination. But others say that's impossible and that Rigorito's men killed him first, six against one; probably what happened was that those policemen came face-to-face with the first of the Raza Nueva crew making their way down from the north, sweeping up the mess that the Grupo Sombra left behind at the oil fields, and that they were the ones who knocked off those officers and probably also the chief himself, whose body will turn up before long at the scene of some shootout, perhaps

[Poem]

ELECTRIC

By Emily Skillings, from a manuscript in progress.

In the dream I wrote this poem called "Electric."

Somehow I got the *t* in the middle of the title

to wiggle. All the words of the poem

were crossed out with clay-colored lines

that ran through like fences or wires.

I could only see the tops and bottoms of the letters.

When I scraped the words of the poem with a knife

like a scratch card, the text remained hidden

behind opalescent scars

which hovered and shifted, "cloudlike,"

wherever my eyes rested. I put the shavings

under a big lens, and it seemed to me that was the real poem.

I remain unsure of what it said. The sound attached was red,

almost "a berry caught in an engine." I do not think

I want to write anymore. I haven't in many months.

One line occurs to me and repeats. It will not make way.

But here, still, is the knife in my right hand.

also mutilated, showing signs of torture and bearing cardboard signs with messages for Cuco Barrabás and the other members of the Grupo Sombra clan.

They say the place is hot, that it won't be long before they send in the marines to restore order in the region. They say the heat's driven the locals crazy, that it's not normal—May and not a single drop of rain—and that hurricane season's coming hard, that it must be bad vibes, jinxes, causing all that bleakness: decapitated bodies; maimed bodies; rolled-up, bagged-up bodies dumped on the roadside or in hastily dug graves on the outskirts of town. Men killed in shootouts and car crashes and revenge killings between opposing clans; rapes, suicides, “crimes of passion,” as the journalists call them. Like that twelve-year-old kid who killed his girlfriend in a jealous rage on discovering that she was pregnant with his father's baby, down in San Pedro Potrillo. Or the farmer who shot his son when they were out hunting and told the police he'd mistaken him for a badger, even though everyone knew the father had his eyes on the son's wife—he'd

even been creeping around with her behind the kid's back. Or that headcase from Palogachó, the one who said her children weren't her children, that they were vampires out to suck her blood, which is why she bashed those kiddies to death with planks of wood that she wrenched from the table, and with the wardrobe doors, and even the television set. Or that other miserable bitch who suffocated her little girl, jealous of all the attention the husband gave her, so she just took a blanket and held it over the girl's face until she stopped breathing. Or those bastards from Matadepita who raped and killed four waitresses and whom the judge let off because the witness never showed, the one who'd accused them. They say he was bumped off for being a snitch, and

those cunts are still out there, like nothing ever happened ...

They say that's why the women are on edge, especially in La Matosa. They say that, come evening, the women gather on their porches to smoke filterless cigarettes and cradle their youngest babes in their arms, blowing their peppery breath over those tender crowns to shoo away the mosquitoes, basking in what little breeze reaches them from the river, when at last the town settles into silence and you can just about make out the music coming from the highway brothels in the distance, the rumble of the trucks as they make their way to the oil fields, the baying of dogs calling to one another like wolves from one side of the plain to the other; the time of evening when the women sit around telling stories with one eye on the sky, looking out for that strange white bird that perches on the tallest trees and watches them with a look that seems to want to tell them something. That they mustn't go inside the Witch's house, probably; that they mustn't walk past or peek through the yawning holes that now stud its walls. A look warning them not to let their children go searching for that treasure, not to dream of going down there with their friends to rummage through those tumbledown rooms or to see who's got the balls to enter the room upstairs at the back and touch the stain left by the Old Witch's corpse on the filthy mattress. To tell their children how others have run screaming from that place, faint from the stench that lingers inside, terror-stricken by the vision of a shadow that peels itself off the walls and chases you out of there. To respect the dead silence of that house, the pain of the miserable souls who once lived there. That's what the women in town say: there is no treasure in there, no gold or silver or diamonds or anything more than a searing pain that refuses to go away.

[Trash]

MOBY SICK

From items found in the stomachs of dead whales since 2010, as described in news reports.

Fishing nets
Bundles of rope
Corrugated tubing
Duct tape
Shopping bags
Banana bags
Rice sacks
Yogurt containers
Instant-noodle packaging
Bottles
Cups
Plates
Flower pots
Towels
Flip-flops
Shoe soles
Gloves
Sweatpants
Laundry detergent



Heaven Is a Place, a painting by Arghavan Khosravi, whose work was on view last month at Stems Gallery, in Brussels.

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THE OLD NORMAL

Why we can't beat our addiction to war

By Andrew J. Bacevich



Addressing the graduating cadets at West Point in May 1942, General George C. Marshall, then the Army chief of staff, reduced the nation's purpose in the global war it had recently joined to a single emphatic sentence. "We are determined," he remarked, "that before the sun sets on this terrible struggle, our flag will be recognized throughout the world as a symbol of freedom on the one hand and of overwhelming force on the other."

At the time Marshall spoke, mere months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, U.S. forces had sustained a string of painful setbacks and had yet to win a major battle. Eventual victory over Japan and Germany seemed anything but assured. Yet Marshall was already looking beyond the immediate challenges to define what that victory, when ultimately—and, in his view, inevitably—achieved, was going to signify.

Andrew J. Bacevich is president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft and a contributing editor to Harper's Magazine. His new book, The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory, was published earlier this year.

AMERICA WAS HENCEFORTH
TO REPRESENT FREEDOM AND
POWER—NOT IN A SINGLE REGION
BUT THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

This second world war of the twentieth century, Marshall understood, was going to be immense and immensely destructive. But if vast in scope, it would be limited in duration. The sun would set; the war would end. Today no such expectation exists. Marshall's successors have come to view armed conflict as an open-ended proposition. The alarming turn in U.S.–Iranian relations is another reminder that war has become normal for the United States.

The address at West Point was not some frothy stump speech by a hack politician. Marshall was a deliberate man who chose his words carefully. His intent was to make a specific point: the United States was fighting not to restore peace—a word notably absent from his remarks—nor merely to eliminate an isolated threat. The overarching American aim was preeminence, both ideological and military: as a consequence of the ongoing war, America was henceforth to represent freedom *and* power—not in any particular region or hemisphere but throughout the world. Here, conveyed with crisp military candor, was an authoritative reframing of the nation's strategic ambitions.*

Marshall's statement captured the essence of what was to remain America's purpose for decades to come, until the presidential election of 2016 signaled its rejection. That year an eminently qualified candidate who embodied a notably bellicose variant of the Marshall tradition lost to an opponent who openly mocked that tradition while possessing no qualifications for high office whatsoever.

Determined to treat Donald Trump as an unfortunate but correctable aberration, the foreign-policy establishment remains intent on salvaging the tradition that Marshall inaugurated back in 1942. The effort is misguided and will likely prove futile. For anyone concerned about American statecraft in recent years, the more pressing questions are these: first, whether an establishment deeply imbued with Marshall's maxim can even acknowledge the magnitude of the repudiation it sustained at the hands of Trump and those who voted him into office (a repudiation that is not lessened by Trump's failure to meet his promises to those voters); and second, whether this establishment can muster the imagination to devise an alternative tradition better suited to existing

conditions while commanding the support of the American people. On neither score does the outlook appear promising.

General Marshall delivered his remarks at West Point in a singular context. Marshall gingerly referred to a “nationwide debate” that was complicating his efforts to raise what he called “a great citizen-army.” The debate was the controversy over whether the United States should intervene in the ongoing European war. To proponents of intervention, the issue at hand during the period of 1939 to 1941 was the need to confront the evil of Nazism. Opponents of intervention argued in the terms of a quite different question: whether or not to resume an expansionist project dating from the founding of the Republic. This dispute and its apparent resolution, misunderstood and misconstrued at the time, have been sources of confusion ever since.

Even today, most Americans are only dimly aware of the scope—one might even say the grandeur—of our expansionist project, which stands alongside racial oppression as an abiding theme of the American story. As far back as the 1780s, the Northwest Ordinances, which created the mechanism to incorporate the present-day Midwest into the Union, had made it clear that the United States had no intention of confining its reach to the territory encompassed within the boundaries of the original thirteen states. And while nineteenth-century presidents did not adhere to a consistent grand plan, they did pursue a *de facto* strategy of opportunistic expansion. Although the United States encountered resistance during the course of this remarkable ascent, virtually all of it was defeated. With the notable exception of the failed

* Although Marshall was speaking that day to a fairly small group, his words eventually reached millions. Each segment of the film series *Why We Fight*, the masterpiece of propaganda that Frank Capra created under the auspices of the War Department, displays a quotation from Marshall's West Point speech.

attempt to annex Canada during the War of 1812, expansionist efforts succeeded spectacularly and at a remarkably modest cost to the nation. By midcentury, the United States stretched from sea to shining sea.

Generations of Americans chose to enshrine this story of westward expansion as a heroic tale of advancing liberty, democracy, and civilization. Although that story certainly did include heroism, it also featured brute force, crafty maneuvering, and a knack for striking a bargain when the occasion presented itself.

In the popular imagination, the narrative of “how the West was won” to which I was introduced as a youngster has today lost much of its moral luster. Yet the country’s belated pangs of conscience have not induced any inclination to reapportion the spoils. While the idea of offering reparations to the offspring of former slaves may receive polite attention, no one proposes returning Florida to Spain, Tennessee and Georgia to the Cherokees,

or California to Mexico. Properties seized, finagled, extorted, or paid for with cold, hard cash remain American in perpetuity.

Back in 1899, the naturalist, historian, politician, sometime soldier, and future president Theodore Roosevelt neatly summarized the events of the century then drawing to a close: “Of course our whole national history has been one of expansion.” When T.R. uttered this truth, a fresh round of expansionism was under way, this time reaching beyond the fastness of North America into the surrounding seas and oceans. The United States was joining with Europeans in a profit-motivated intercontinental imperialism.

The previous year, U.S. forces had invaded and occupied Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Pacific island of Luzon, and annexed Hawaii as an official territory. Within the next two years, the Stars and Stripes was flying over the entire Philippine archipelago. Within four years, with Roosevelt now in the White House, American troops arrived to garrison the Isthmus of Panama, where the United States, employing considerable chicanery, was setting out to build a canal. Thereafter, to preempt any threats to that canal and other American business interests, successive U.S. administrations embarked on a series of interventions throughout the Caribbean. Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson had no desire to annex Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic; they merely wanted the United States to control what happened in those small countries, as it already did in nearby Cuba. Though President Trump’s recent bid to purchase Greenland from Denmark may have failed, Wilson—perhaps demonstrating greater skill in the art of the deal—did persuade the Danes in 1917 to part with the Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands) for the bargain price of \$25 million. At least until Trump moved into the White House, Wilson’s purchase of the Virgin Islands appeared to have sated the American appetite for territorial acquisition. With that purchase, the epic narrative of a small republic becoming an imperial behemoth concluded and was promptly filed away under the heading of Destiny, manifest or otherwise—a useful turn, since Americans were and still are disinclined to question those dictates of God or Providence that work to their benefit.

Yet rather than accept the nation’s fate as achieved, President Wilson radically reconfigured American ambitions. Expansion was to continue but was henceforth to emphasize hegemony rather than formal empire. This shift included a seldom-noticed racial dimension. Prior to 1917, the United States had mostly contented itself with flexing its muscles among non-white peoples. Wilson sought to encroach into an arena where the principal competitors were

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UNTIL 1917, STEERING CLEAR
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CONSTITUTED A SACRED PRECEPT
OF AMERICAN STATECRAFT



white. Pacifying “little brown brothers” (Taft’s disparaging term for Filipinos) was like playing baseball in Rochester or Pawtucket. Now the United States was ready to break into the big leagues.

For Americans today, it is next to impossible to appreciate the immensity of the departure from tradition that President Wilson engineered in 1917. Until that year, steering clear of foreign rivalries had constituted a sacred precept of American statecraft. The barrier of the Atlantic was sacrosanct, to be breached by merchants but not by soldiers.

“The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations,” George Washington had counseled in his Farewell Address, “is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.” This dictum had applied in particular to U.S. relations with Europe. Washington had explicitly warned against allowing the United States to be dragged into “the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.”

The Great War persuaded President Wilson to disregard Washington’s advice. At the war’s outset, in 1914, Wilson had declared that the United States would be “neutral in fact, as well as in name.” In reality, as the conflict settled into a bloody stalemate, his administration tilted in favor of the Allies. By the spring of 1917, with Germany having renewed U-boat attacks on U.S. shipping, he tilted further, petitioning Congress to declare war on the Reich. Congress complied, and in short order over a million doughboys were headed to the Western Front. In terms of sheer roll-the-dice boldness, Wilson’s decision to go to war against Germany dwarfs Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 escalation of the Vietnam War and George W. Bush’s 2003 invasion of Iraq. It was an action utterly without precedent.

And as with Vietnam and Iraq, the results were costly and disillusioning. Although U.S. forces entered the fight in large numbers only weeks before the armistice in November 1918, American deaths exceeded 116,000—this when the total U.S. population was less than one third what it is today. Happy to accept American help in defeating the Hun, British and French leaders wasted little time once the fighting had stopped in rejecting Wilson’s grandiose vision of a peaceful world order based on his famous Fourteen Points. By the time the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the Versailles Treaty, in November 1919 and again in March 1920, it had become evident that Wilson’s stated war aims would remain unfulfilled. In return for rallying to the Allies in their hour of need, the United States had gained precious little. In Europe itself, meanwhile, the seeds of further conflict were already being planted.

A deeply disenchanted American public concluded, not without reason, that the U.S. entry into the war had been a mistake, an assessment that found powerful expression in the fiction of Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and other interwar writers. The man who followed Wilson in the White House, Warren G. Harding, agreed. The principal lesson to be drawn from the war, “ringing” in his ears, “like an admonition eternal, an insistent call,” Harding declared, was, “It must not be again!” His was not a controversial judgment. During the 1920s, therefore, George Washington’s charge to give Europe wide berth found renewed favor. According to legend, the United States then succumbed to two decades of unmitigated isolationism.

The truth, as George Marshall and his military contemporaries knew, was more complicated. From 1924 to 1927, Colonel Marshall was stationed in Tianjin, China, where he commanded the 15th Infantry Regiment. The year

1924 found Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur presiding over the U.S. Army's Philippine Division, with headquarters at Manila's Fort Santiago. Around the same time, Dwight D. Eisenhower was serving in Panama while George S. Patton was assigned to the Hawaiian Division, at Schofield Barracks. Matthew Ridgway's duty stations between the world wars included stints in China, Nicaragua, and the Philippines. In 1935, MacArthur returned to Manila for another tour, this time bringing Ike along as a member of his staff.

The pattern of assignments of these soon-to-be-famous officers was not atypical. During the period between the two world wars, the Army kept busy policing outposts of the American empire. The Navy and Marine Corps shouldered similar obligations: to maintain its "Open Door" policy, the United States deployed a small flotilla of warships at its "China Station," headquartered in Shanghai, for example, while contingents of U.S. Marines enforced order across the Caribbean. Marine Major General Smedley Butler achieved immortality by confessing that he had spent his career as "a high class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers." While hyperbolic, Butler's assessment was not altogether wrong.

It isn't possible to square the deployment of U.S. forces everywhere from the Yangtze and Manila to Guantánamo and Managua with any plausible definition of isolationism. While the United States did pull its troops out of Europe after 1918, it maintained its empire. So the abiding defect of U.S. policy during the interwar period was not a head-in-the-sand penchant for ignoring the world. The actual problem was overstretch compounded by indolence. Decision-makers had abdicated their responsibility to align means and ends, even as the world drifted toward the precipice of another horrific conflict.

Nonetheless, those who advocated going to war against Germany in the "nationwide debate" to which Marshall alluded in his West Point speech charged their adversaries with being "isolationists." The tag resonated—though, in point of fact, isolationism no more accurately described U.S. foreign policy at the time than it does that of the Trump Administration today. (And President Trump is no more an isolationist than he is a Presbyterian.)

Proponents of intervention between 1939 and 1941 were diverting attention from the real issue, which was a debate on whether to remember or to forget. To go to war with Germany a second time meant swallowing the bitter disappointments wrought by having done so just two decades before.

The interventionist case came down to this: given the enormity of the Nazi threat, it was incumbent on Americans to get over their vexations with the recent past. It was time to get back to work. For their part, the anti-interventionists were disinclined to forget. They believed that the Allies had taken the United States to the cleaners—as indeed they had—and they did not intend to repeat the experience. Anti-interventionists insisted that fulfilling the American appetite for liberty and abundance did not require further expansion. They believed that the domain the United States had already carved out in the Western Hemisphere was sufficient to satisfy the aspirations specified in the Preamble to the Constitution. Expansion, in their view, had gone far enough. In December 1941, Adolf Hitler settled this issue, seemingly for good, when he declared war on the United States after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The Nazi dictator effectively wiped the slate clean, rendering irrelevant all that had occurred since 1917, including Marshall's own prior service on the Western Front and in the outer provinces of the American imperium. Thanks to Hitler, the path forward seemed clear. Only one thing was needed: the mobilization of Marshall's "great citizen-army" as an expression of both freedom and power.

THE ABIDING DEFECT OF U.S.
POLICY DURING THE INTERWAR
PERIOD WAS OVERSTRETCH
COMPOUNDED BY INDOLENCE



MARSHALL'S DICTUM OF
PREEMINENCE HAS REMAINED
THE IMPLICIT PREMISE OF THE
AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY

This is the path that the United States has followed, with only occasional deviations and backslides, ever since. As if by default, therefore, Marshall's dictum of preeminence has remained the implicit premise of the American grand strategy: a stubborn insistence that freedom is ours to define and that America's possession of (and willingness to use) overwhelming force offers the best way to ensure freedom's triumph, if only so-called isolationists would get out of the way. So nearly eighty years later, we are still stuck in Marshall's world, with Marshall himself the unacknowledged architect of all that was to follow.

In our so-called Trump Era, freedom and power aren't what they used to be. Both are undergoing radical conceptual transformations. Marshall assumed a mutual compatibility between the two. No such assumption can be made today.

Although the strategy of accruing overwhelming military might to advance the cause of liberty persisted throughout the period misleadingly enshrined as the Cold War, it did so in attenuated form. The size and capabilities of the Red Army, exaggerated by both Washington and the Kremlin, along with the danger of nuclear Armageddon, by no means exaggerated, suggested the need for the United States to exercise a modicum of restraint. Even so, Marshall's pithy statement of intent more accurately represented the overarching intent of U.S. policy from the late 1940s through the 1980s than any number of presidential pronouncements or government-issued manifestos. Even in a divided world, policymakers continued to nurse hopes that the United States could embody freedom while wielding unparalleled power, admitting to no contradictions between the two.

With the end of the Cold War, Marshall's axiom came roaring back in full force. In Washington, many concluded that it was time to pull out the stops. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1992, General Colin Powell, arguably the nation's most highly respected soldier since Marshall, anointed America "the sole superpower" and, quoting Lincoln, "the last best hope of earth." Civilian officials went further, designating the United States as history's "indispensable nation." Supposedly uniquely positioned to glimpse the future, America took it upon itself to bring that future into being, using whatever means it deemed necessary. During the ensuing decade, U.S. troops were called upon to make good on such claims in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans, and East Africa, among other venues. Indispensability imposed obligations, which for the moment at least seemed tolerable.

After 9/11, this post-Cold War posturing reached its apotheosis. Exactly sixty years after Marshall's West Point address, President George W. Bush took his own turn in speaking to a class of graduating cadets. With splendid symmetry, Bush echoed and expanded on Marshall's doctrine, declaring, "Wherever we carry it, the American flag will stand not only for our power, but for freedom." Yet something essential had changed. No longer content merely to defend against threats to freedom—America's advertised purpose in World War II and during the Cold War—the United States was now going on the offensive. "In the world we have entered," Bush declared, "the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act." The president thereby embraced a policy of preventive war, as the Japanese and Germans had, and for which they landed in the dock following World War II. It was, in effect, Marshall's injunction on steroids.

We are today in a position to assess the results of following this "path of action." Since 2001, the United States has spent approximately \$6.5 trillion



on several wars, while sustaining some sixty thousand casualties. Post-9/11 interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere have also contributed directly or indirectly to an estimated 750,000 “other” deaths. During this same period, attempts to export American values triggered a pronounced backlash, especially among Muslims abroad. Clinging to Marshall’s formula as a basis for policy has allowed the global balance of power to shift in ways unfavorable to the United States.

At the same time, Americans no longer agree among themselves on what freedom requires, excludes, or prohibits. When Marshall spoke at West Point back in 1942, freedom had a fixed definition. The year before, President Franklin Roosevelt had provided that definition when he described “four essential human freedoms”: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. That was it. Freedom did not include equality or individual empowerment or radical autonomy.

As Army chief of staff, Marshall had focused on winning the war, not upending the social and cultural status quo (hence his acceptance of a Jim Crow army). The immediate objective was to defeat Nazi Germany and Japan, not to subvert the white patriarchy, endorse sexual revolutions, or promote diversity.

Further complicating this ever-expanding freedom agenda is another factor just now beginning to intrude into American politics: whether it is possible to preserve the habits of consumption, hypermobility, and self-indulgence that most Americans see as essential to daily existence while simultaneously tackling the threat posed by human-induced climate change. For Americans, freedom always carries with it expectations of *more*. It did in 1942, and it still does today. Whether more can be reconciled with the preservation of the planet is a looming question with immense implications.

When Marshall headed the U.S. Army, he was oblivious to such concerns in ways that his latter-day successors atop the U.S. military hierarchy cannot afford to be. National security and the well-being of the planet have become inextricably intertwined. In 2010, Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared that the national debt, the prime expression of American profligacy, had become “the most significant threat to our national security.” In 2017, General Paul Selva, Joint Chiefs vice chair, stated bluntly that “the dynamics that are happening in our climate will drive uncertainty and will drive conflict.”

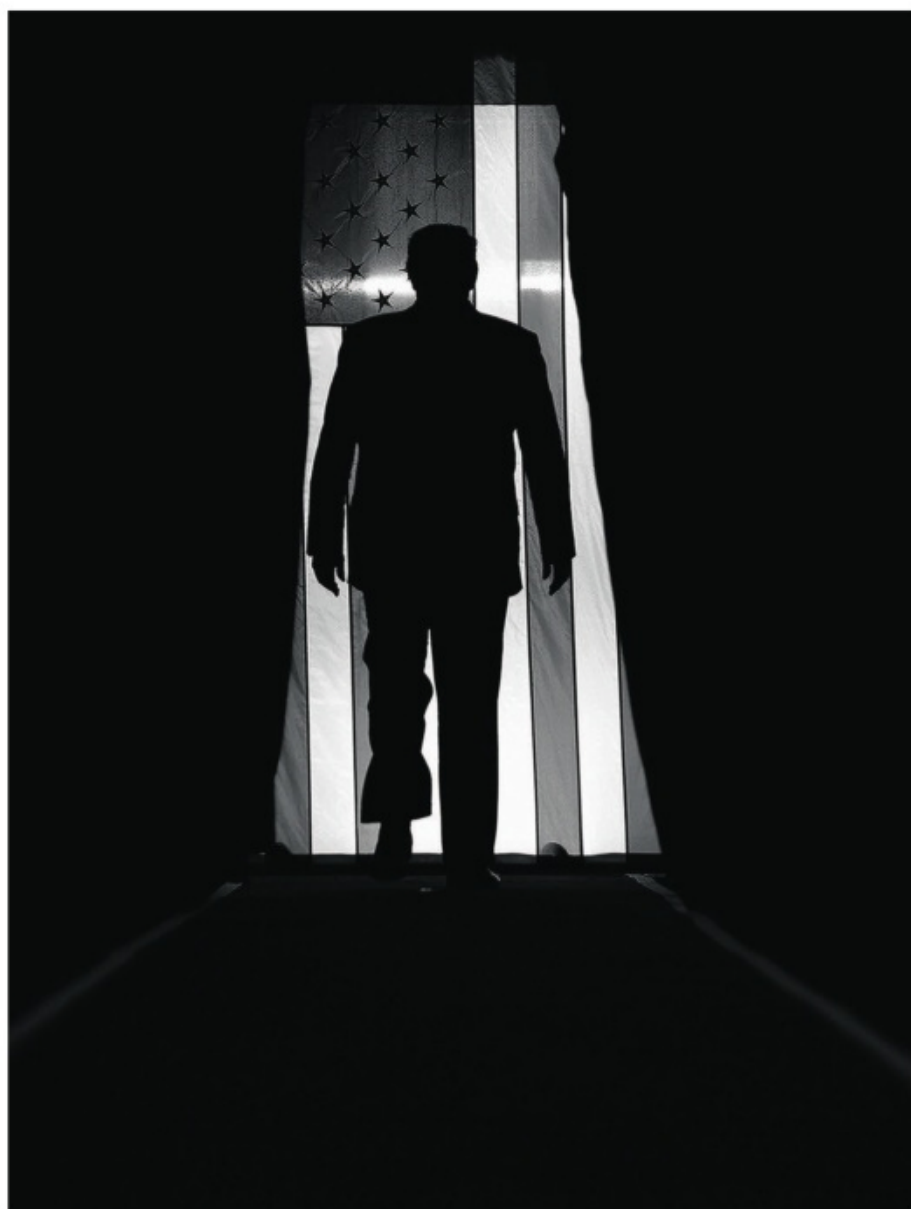
As for translating objectives into outcomes, Marshall’s “great citizen-army” is long gone, probably for good. The tradition of the citizen-soldier that Marshall considered the foundation of the American military collapsed as a consequence of the Vietnam War. Today the Pentagon relies instead on a relatively small number of overworked regulars reinforced by paid mercenaries, aka contractors. The so-called all-volunteer force (AVF) is volunteer only in the sense that the National Football League is. Terminate the bonuses that the Pentagon offers to induce high school graduates to enlist and serving soldiers to re-up, and the AVF would vanish.

Furthermore, the tasks assigned to these soldiers go well beyond simply forcing our adversaries to submit, which was what we asked of soldiers in World War II. Since 9/11, those tasks include something akin to conversion: bringing our adversaries to embrace our own conception of what freedom entails, endorse liberal democracy, and respect women’s rights. Yet to judge by recent wars in Iraq (originally styled Operation Iraqi Freedom) and Afghanistan (for

IN THE TRUMP ERA, BOTH FREEDOM AND POWER ARE UNDERGOING CONCEPTUAL TRANSFORMATIONS



LED BY A FOREIGN-POLICY
ESTABLISHMENT SUFFERING FROM
TERMINAL INERTIA, WE HAVE
LOST OUR STRATEGIC BEARINGS



years called Operation Enduring Freedom), U.S. forces are not equipped to accomplish such demanding work.

This record of non-success testifies to the bind in which the United States finds itself. Saddled with outsized ambitions dating from the end of the Cold War, confronted by dramatic and unanticipated challenges, and stuck with instruments of power ill-suited to existing and emerging requirements, and led by a foreign-policy establishment that suffers from terminal inertia, the United States has lost its strategic bearings.

Deep in denial, that establishment nonetheless has a ready-made explanation for what's gone wrong: as in the years from 1939 to 1941, so too today a putative penchant for isolationism is crippling U.S. policy. Isolationists are ostensibly preventing the United States from getting on with the business of amassing power to spread freedom, as specified in Marshall's doctrine.

Consider, if you will, the following headlines dating from *before* Trump took office: "Isolationism Soars Among Americans" (2009); "American isolationism just hit a fifty-year high" (2013); "America's New Isolationism" (2013, twice) "Our New Isolationism" (2013); "The New American Isolationism" (2014); "American Isolationism Is Destabilizing the World," (2014); "The Revival of American Isolationism" (2016). And let us not overlook "America's New Isolationists Are Endangering the West," penned in 2013 by none other than John Bolton, Trump's recently cashiered national security adviser.

Note that when these essays appeared U.S. military forces were deployed in well over one hundred countries around the world and were actively engaged in multiple foreign wars. The Pentagon's budget easily dwarfed that of any plausible combination of rivals. If this fits your definition of isolationism, then you might well believe that President Trump is, as he claims, "the master of the deal." All the evidence proves otherwise.

Isolationism is a fiction, bandied about to divert attention from other issues. It is a scare word, an egregious form of establishment-sanctioned fake news. It serves as a type of straitjacket, constraining debate on possible alternatives to militarized American globalism, which has long since become a source of self-inflicted wounds.

Only when foreign-policy elites cease to cite isolationism to explain why the "sole superpower" has stumbled of late will they be able to confront the issues that matter. Ranking high among those issues is an egregious misuse of American military power and an equally egregious abuse of American soldiers. Confronting the vast disparity between U.S. military ambitions since 9/11 and the results actually achieved is a necessary first step toward devising a

serious response to Donald Trump's reckless assault on even the possibility of principled statecraft.

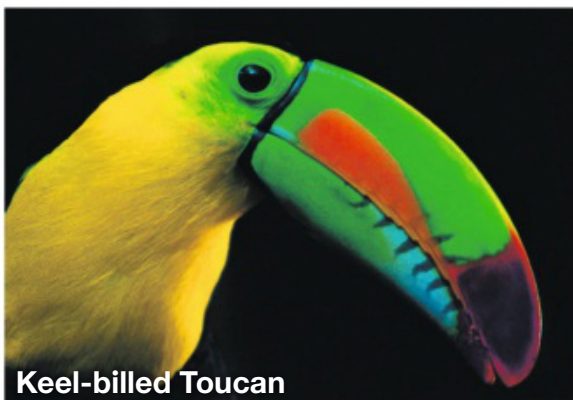
Marshall's 1942 formula has become an impediment to sound policy. My guess is that, faced with the facts at hand, the general would have been the first to agree. He was known to tell subordinates, "Don't fight the problem, decide it." Yet before deciding, it's necessary to see the problem for what it is and, in this instance, perhaps also to see ourselves as we actually are.

For the United States today, the problem turns out to be similar to the one that beset the nation during the period leading up to World War II: not isolationism but overstretch, compounded by indolence. The present-day disparities between our aspirations, commitments, and capacities to act are enormous.

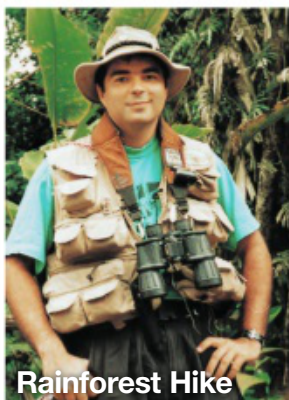
The core questions, submerged today as they were on the eve of U.S. entry into World War II, are these: What does freedom require? How much will it cost? And who will pay? ■



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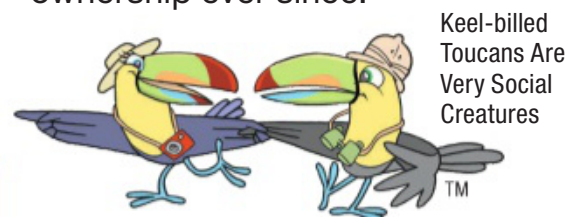
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THE MOST HATED NATION

By John Dos Passos

It was the foggy end of a drizzly day. Along the lunch counter of the Ferry Dock Tavern, gray-haired men in overalls and leather jackets were eating oyster stew. A set of hamburgers sizzling on the electric plate sent little wisps of the smell of scorched beef up through the cigarette smoke. From outside, through the loosely slapped-together boards of the frame building, came the hoots and howls of steamboat whistles. Through every crevice, the fog seeped into the tavern, bringing with it a tang of rotting evergreens and giving faint ruddy halos to the bare electric light bulbs.

Across from the lunch counter, every stool along the bar was taken. Behind the seated drinkers stood a row of men waiting for places. A skinny yellow-haired waitress with buckteeth moved back and forth with trays of beer between the end of the bar and the booths at the back of the room. Now and then the barkeep, a weazened, grizzled man, made a hoarse, exasperated noise like a seal's bark to get the thronging customers who were waiting to quench their thirst at the bar to make way for the girl and her tray of empties.

In front of me a stocky, black-jowled man in a tightly buttoned pea jacket was addressing a very young blank-faced sailor who sat on the next stool.

"You are the most hated nation on the face of the earth," he was shouting in the sailor's ear. The sailor gave a gulp and looked down glumly into his glass. The black-jowled man raised his beer thoughtfully against

the light and drank it down and wiped his mouth with the hairy back of a hand that had the points of the compass tattooed on it in red, green, and blue, and made the assertion again, louder: "You are the most hated nation on the face of the earth and don't you forget it."

"I only said mebbe it ud be a short war," mumbled the very young sailor.



"Short war hell!" shouted the black-jowled man, scowling under the visor of his seagoing cap that had weathered to a streaky green. "It's goin' to be all war from now on ... Another beer, Joe," he added in a hoarse, pleading aside in the direction of the barkeep, who was staring at him with a sour look. "And you're asking me," the black-jowled man went on, looking up and down the row of weather-worn faces, "you are asking me why you are the most hated nation. I'll tell you; it's because you got the most to eat, and the most to drink, and the most to wear. You can sit down with the war on

and eat a turkey dinner if you want one. You can sit down and drink a glass of beer."

I went out and leaned over the parapet of the observation platform. The blue-gray Pacific was clear far out to where a fogbank smudged the horizon. A gray patrol boat showed white teeth as it chewed its way seaward into the long swells. A few gulls circled screaming over the platform.

Beside me three black G.I.s stood in a huddle staring out at the ocean. Farther along two sailors had their backs turned to the view and were watching with envious looks a boy and girl who were giggling and horsing around. A Marine sergeant, very snappy in his greens, strutted out of a building that houses slot machines; a girl with a blue handkerchief tied round her head was holding onto his arm with both hands. For a couple of minutes the two of them stared hard out to sea as if their eyes could pierce the fogbank. Then they hurried back indoors to the slot machines.

Leaning on the parapet over the hushed and heaving expanse of misted indigo that marks for most Americans the beginning of the Pacific Ocean, I wondered what these two had been thinking. I suppose there's the same question in all our minds when we look westward over the Pacific. Beyond the immense bulge of the world, is the ocean ours or is it theirs? When we've made it ours, what will we want to do with it? ■

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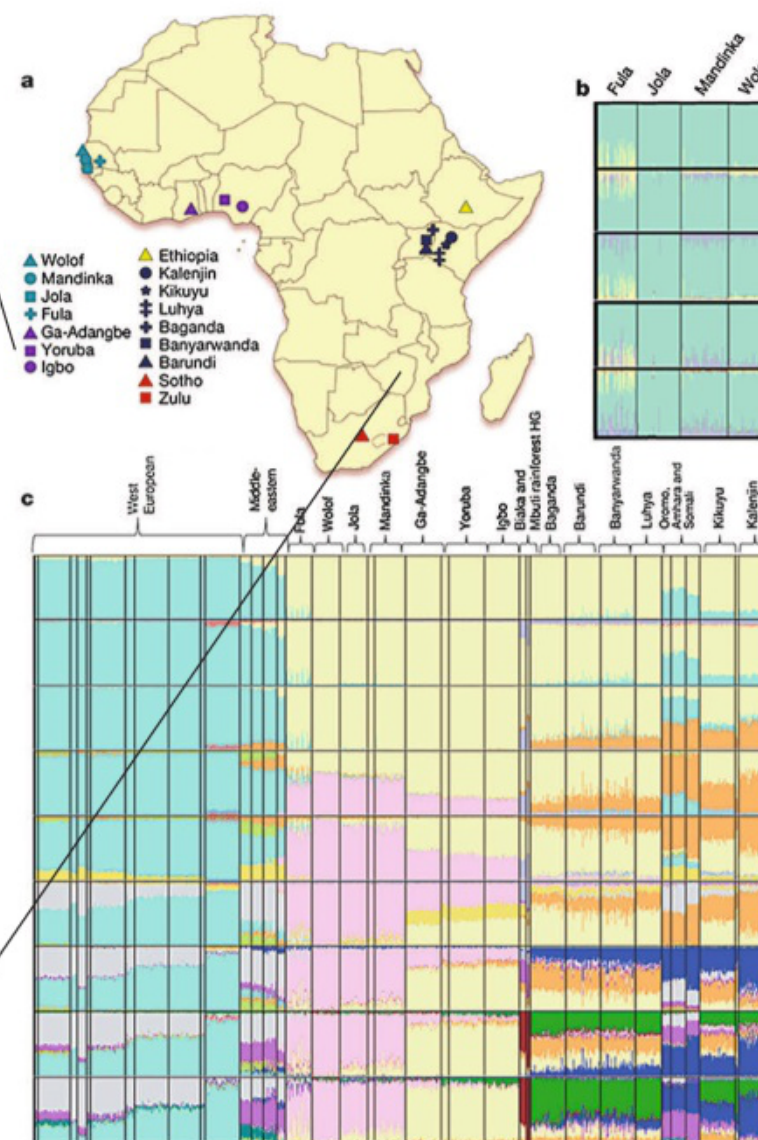
From "San Francisco Looks West," which appeared in the March 1944 issue of Harper's Magazine. The complete essay—along with the magazine's entire 169-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.

OUT OF

The legacy of colonialism threatens

By Oscar

In 2014, Deepti Gurdasani, a genetic epidemiologist at the Wellcome Sanger Institute in England, coauthored a paper in *Nature* on human genetic variation in Africa, from which this image is taken. A recent study had found that DNA from people of European descent made up 96 percent of genetic samples worldwide, reflecting the historical tendency among scientists and doctors to view the male, European body as a global archetype. “There wasn’t very much data available from Africa at all,” Gurdasani told me. To help rectify the imbalance, her research team collected samples from eighteen African ethnolinguistic groups across the continent—such as the Kalenjin of Uganda and the Oromo of Ethiopia—most of whom had not previously been included in genomic research. They analyzed the data using an admixture algorithm, which visualizes the statistical genetic differences among groups by representing them as color clusters. The top chart shows genetic differences among the sampled African populations, in increasing degrees of granularity from top to bottom, and the bottom chart shows how they compare with ethnic groups in the rest of the world. The areas where the colors mix and overlap imply that groups commingled. The Yoruba, for instance, show remarkable homogeneity—their column is almost entirely green and purple—while the Kalenjin seem to have associated with many populations across the continent.



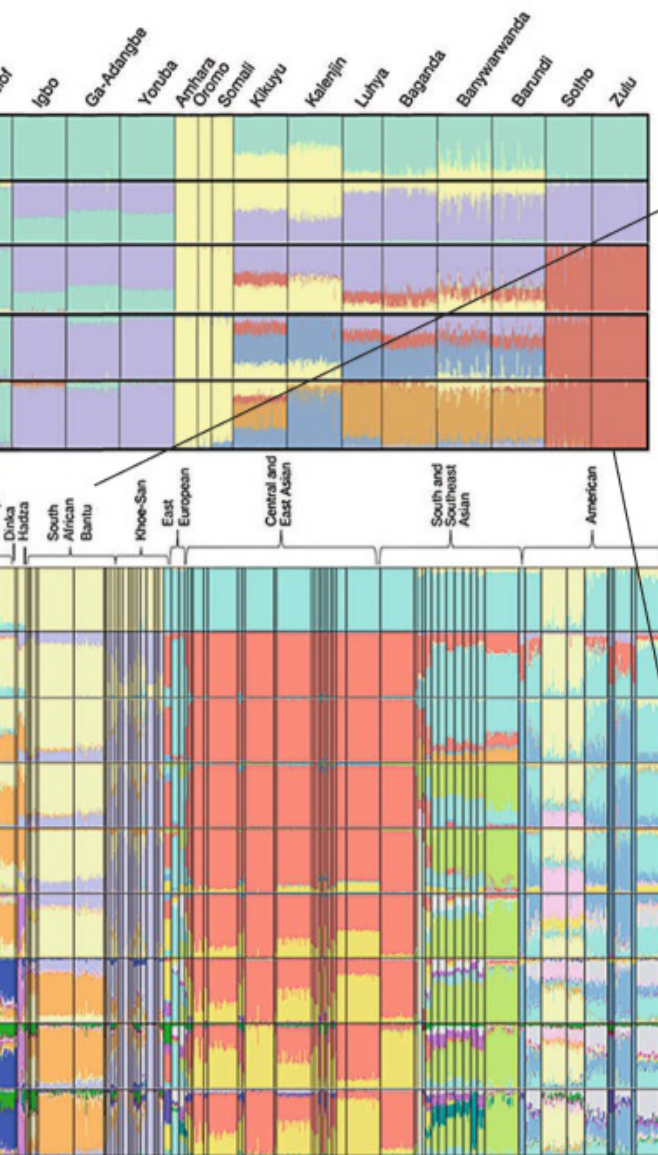
Fifteen years earlier, scientists at a medical center in Dallas had begun searching for people with mutations in a gene known as PCSK9. Previous studies had found that a mutation that activated this gene leads to excessive cholesterol in the blood, causing waxy, yellow clumps to accumulate under the skin. When a mutation inhibited the expression of PCSK9, however, cholesterol levels were lower, even in people with lifestyle risks such as smoking cigarettes or eating high-fat foods. For researchers working in the emerging field of genetic medicine, PCSK9 was a promising lead. If they could find people with the inactive mutation on both copies of the gene, they might be able to develop a safe medication to prevent coronary heart disease, which is responsible for one in eight deaths in the United States. But the search would not be easy. The inactive PCSK9 mutation was most common in people of African ancestry. In the available data, scientists could find only one person who carried a double inactive mutation of PCSK9: a thirty-two-year-old, African-American aerobics instructor in Dallas. As they had hoped, the instructor had astoundingly low cholesterol levels—around one seventh the amount of the average adult. A year later, researchers in South Africa identified another case—a twenty-one-year-old woman, who was in a maternity ward in Zimbabwe—that confirmed the Dallas findings. Studying her genome led to the development of two effective drugs for managing cholesterol.

The reason African genomes are so important in drug discovery has to do with the history of human evolution and migration. According to the “Out of Africa” model, when small groups of *Homo sapiens* began to leave the continent around one hundred thousand years ago, they passed through a population bottleneck. The migrant communities had far fewer people with whom they could reproduce, which greatly diminished the gene pool in these geographically dispersed populations. To this day, people of African descent—whose ancestors did not pass through the population bottleneck—carry more genetic diversity than people of non-African ancestry. African genomes, therefore, offer researchers a depth of genetic information that non-African genomes simply don’t have. In the years after the PCSK9 studies, which over-sampled people of African descent to increase the chances of finding the relevant mutation, many prominent geneticists realized that progress in the field would slow dramatically unless general sampling practices were expanded to include African ancestral groups. Genetic databases would need to be radically diversified.

AFRICA

ens the future of genetic research

Schwartz



Researchers founded diversity initiatives, including the 1000 Genomes Project, which sampled people across five continents, and All of Us, which focused on minority communities in the United States. These projects claimed to serve the interests of under-sampled groups, but for some they evoked a fraught history of medical exploitation. Many African Americans remembered the story of Henrietta Lacks, a black woman whose cancer cells were taken and used, without her consent, to develop the polio vaccine in the 1950s. Unethical research on non-white subjects has continued into the twenty-first century. In 2010, an international team of geneticists published an article analyzing blood samples from four elders of the San people, hunter-gatherers who are indigenous to southern Africa, without obtaining proper authorization. The Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa wrote a letter to the journal excoriating the researchers, who, they said, had displayed “absolute arrogance, ignorance, and cultural myopia.” Gurdasani believes that some research institutes and pharmaceutical companies use the issue of diversity to justify a neocolonial approach to sampling—plundering the genomes of Africa. “They are interested in studying genetic diversity in Africa so they can develop drugs that can be marketed across the world,” she said.

Gurdasani and her team at the Sanger Institute were determined to do things differently. They obtained consent on a village-by-village basis and built clinics to ensure that people who were diagnosed with genetic conditions during the sampling process had access to follow-up treatment. Gurdasani hoped to use the African data they had collected to develop a gene chip—a high-density assemblage of synthetic molecules on a solid surface the size of a postage stamp—that would allow researchers to examine African genomes in the lab. The scientists planned to consult with the relevant communities to ensure that they consented to, and would benefit from, any attempt to share the data derived from their genetic material. But in 2017 Sanger went ahead and produced seventy-five thousand chips in partnership with Thermo Fisher Scientific, a biotechnology company, before an agreement had been reached. “This was not a naïve mistake,” Gurdasani told me. “They probably thought that none of the African institutes or communities had the money or legal infrastructure to really challenge them. So they just did it.” Outraged, Gurdasani and three other scientists lodged a formal whistle-blower complaint. Emails and documents from that year strongly suggest that Sanger intended to manufacture the chips for commercial sale. But after a six-month investigation, outside counsel hired by the institute concluded that there had been no wrongful exploitation of scientific work. “There was never any attempt or proposal to attempt commercialisation of genetic material from African communities,” a Sanger spokesperson said.

Since then, the four whistle-blowers have left the institute—Gurdasani, who is now a researcher at Queen Mary University of London, maintains that she was fired. Stellenbosch University in South Africa, which was a partner in the project, requested that Sanger return the genome samples it had contributed from people of Nama ancestry. This type of data restitution has become increasingly common as a way for indigenous groups to resist exploitation. Since 2017, the National Centre for Indigenous Genomics in Australia has repatriated hundreds of blood samples taken from Aboriginal Australians; the Navajo Nation in the United States has had a moratorium on genetic research since 2002; and the San people have established their own code of ethics for use by medical researchers. Some geneticists worry that these protective efforts will hamper progress in medical genetics and ultimately hurt under-sampled communities. “I think it’s a massive mistake and a massive missed opportunity,” Carlos Bustamante, a professor of genetics at Stanford University, told me. “You don’t participate, you won’t benefit.” But Gurdasani believes that the responsibility lies with researchers and pharmaceutical companies to establish consent. What remains to be seen, she says, is whether the field of genetic medicine can diversify its research without resorting to the extractive logic of colonialism.

Oscar Schwartz lives in Brooklyn.

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WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

Apocalypse camp at the dawn of the Great Extinction

By Lauren Groff



1.

*A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he.**

I rose long before dawn, too thrilled to sleep, and set off to find my tribe. North from Greenville in

* All italicized quotations are from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance."

Lauren Groff's most recent book is the story collection Florida.

the dark, past towns with names like Sans Souci and Travelers Rest, over the border into North Carolina, through land so choked by kudzu that the overgrown trees in the dark looked like great creatures petrified in mid-flight. The weirdness of this scene would, by the end of the weekend, show itself to be appropriate: my trip would be all about romanticism, and romanticism is a human collision with place that results, as Baudelaire put it, "neither in

choice of subject nor exact truth, but in a way of feeling." My rental car's engine whined as it climbed the mountains. Day was just breaking when I nosed down a hill to Orchard Lake Campground, where tents were still being erected in the dimness.

I had come to this place just outside the town of Saluda, forty miles south of Asheville, for Prepper Camp, a three-day weekend gathering that would draw twelve hundred people to learn how to

survive what they call TEOTWAWKI, or The End of the World as We Know It. The camp was started in 2014 by a husband-and-wife team, Rick and “Prepper Jane” Austin, celebrities in the doomsday field. Its sixth iteration would take place on a late-September weekend with downpours forecast for all three days—I had bought waterproof everything—but which would turn out to be so uncannily hot that it could have been full-blown summer.

In a still-dark field, a man wearing an orange shirt that read I’M A PARKING CONE guided my car into place. The sky in its slow dawning revealed high blue shards of clouds, hills rich with goldenrod, a pond scummy at the edges. I reclined my seat to rest and to watch the preppers pass by. They were mostly male, between their late fifties and early seventies, with such an abundance of paunch that the only possible reaction was to marvel. These men were straight-up gravid. They seemed proudly working-class and most were former military, a fact made clear by the patches and medals they wore like over-the-hill Eagle Scouts. Nearly everyone was white. Over the weekend, I would count exactly nine visibly non-white preppers, three of whom were presenters. The camp’s organizers were surely aware of their target demographic; one volunteer had made up a little cartoon character named Pappy Prepper, a bearded old white man in camouflage pants, who in a promotional video for the gathering sang a song to the tune of “My Favorite Things”:

Ways to store water and defensive shooting
Grow secret gardens and stop folks from looting ...

As the day came on around me, I listened to the human parking cone cheerfully directing traffic. “You handicapped?” he shouted toward a giant pickup.

From the truck there was a hemming. At last, one of the men inside shouted, “He’s too proud to tell you he’s a wounded veteran.”



“Aren’t we all!” said Parking Cone. A river of grim and portly old men flowed by, and I felt shy in my civilian womanhood and comparative youth. I

waited until I saw a pair of women in hiking boots and flak vests, and gathered my courage to follow them out into the cluster of tents optimistically called the Prepper Camp Shopping Mall. Nearly all the

instructors and speakers this weekend would be unpaid, trading their expertise for the opportunity to sell their books and other goods and to market their survivalist services. There were tents peddling batteries, huge water-

PREPPERS ARE NOTORIOUSLY PRIVATE; A LITERARY INSIDER IN THEIR MIDST MIGHT BE CONSIDERED A DOUBLE AGENT

storage tanks, medical equipment, army-navy surplus, and something called colloidal silver, which purportedly had antibiotic properties. (When I asked how it worked, the woman selling it gestured vaguely and said, “It just does!”) An angel-faced woman named Mary in a doeskin skirt advertised a *permaculture* school. An eager young man from a company called Ten Foot Wall sold a USB drive that can create virtual, hermetic computers within your computer, in order to block people and software from tracking your online movements and purchases. There was a table displaying weaponry, and propped at the edge of the nearby pond, there was a target in the shape of a human body. Even early in the morning, the pond was full



of children tooling around in kayaks and canoes.

Prevalent iconography included eagles, crosses both Celtic and Latin, the Don’t Tread on Me snake flag (aka the Gadsden flag), and the Confederate Stars and Bars. There were MAGA hats galore, so many that by Sunday I would lose the thrill of fury at seeing one. There were T-shirts bearing such phrases as: WE ARE THE VIRUS THEY WANT TO DESTROY; PRO-GOD, PRO-GUN; LIVE FREE OR DIE HARD; THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM. The right shoulder sleeves of many shirts featured backward flags, which I took to have sinister intent until I discovered that this was a convention of military uniforms, meant to show the banner flying as though in a breeze. My favorite tee depicted Ronald Reagan unbuttoning his dress shirt to reveal a chest made out of the American flag.

A sweet-faced woman beaming over a basket of apples invited me to take one. COME HEAR A DRAMATIC READING OF THE BEST-SELLING BOOK IN HISTORY! a sign behind her read. The Bible? I guessed. Her face fell a little, but then she laughed. She was pushing her husband’s self-published disaster-survival fiction series; she’d put up the sign to lure people in. I said I’d love a reading. He, one Timothy A. Van Sickel, was a good sport and read to me in a sonorous voice from Genesis, and then from his own work. He read very nicely, I told him. One day three years ago, he said, he’d come

home from his contracting job with the epiphany that his true mission was fiction—survivalist fiction, in particular. He’d published five books since then. Five books in three years! I marveled. I felt for him: he had the eager, shy desperation all authors feel when they have to hawk their souls in public. I wanted to tell him that boy howdy I could empathize, but I couldn’t out myself so early. Preppers are notoriously private, keeping their end-of-the-world plans so fe-

thize, but I couldn’t out myself so early. Preppers are notoriously private, keeping their end-of-the-world plans so fe-

rociously guarded that they even have a name for their secrecy: OPSEC, operational security. Self-published writers could be trusted because they worked outside the system; a literary insider in the preppers' midst might be considered a double agent. Which of course, I had begun to see, I was.

It was already too late to blend in, though. I hadn't known before I arrived that at Prepper Camp camo and olive drab were the markers of belonging. Even very old ladies who certainly had never seen active duty wore camouflage sun hats and plastic clogs. I watched the people around me with a creeping sense of dismay. With a jolt, I saw that I was also being watched in return. I understood then that being a woman alone in this place was already unusual; far worse, I was wearing East Coast liberal-arts-college clothes, a Patagonia fleece, and a North Face backpack. I looked like a good bourgeoisie, the kind of woman who drinks kombucha and does yoga and reads *Harper's* before bed.

A blond giant with a militiaman's face and two sullen-looking girls in their early twenties with blurry blue tattoos on their arms milled nearby. They were staring me down hard. "Well," said the Viking. "Guess it takes all kinds." The girls snorted. I blushed with a shame the intensity of which I hadn't felt since I was a bullied middle schooler, and fled to the white open-sided tents around the pond where the classes would be held.

2.

I hope in these days we have heard the last of conformity and consistency. Let the words be gazetted and ridiculous henceforward.

Perhaps I should have expected to feel wildly out of place at Prepper Camp. I am a vegetarian agnostic feminist in a creative field who sits to the left of most American

socialists: I want immediate and radical action to halt climate change; Medicare and free public higher education for all; abortion pills offered for pennies in pharmacies and gas stations; the eradication of billionaires; the destruction of capitalism; and the rocketing of all the planet's firearms into the sun.

And yet I am also, in the darkest corners of my heart, a doomsday prepper myself. I live in Florida, where hurricane season runs officially from June through November, and both the Gulf and the Atlantic are regularly beset by calamitous storms. It just makes sense, living on that vulnerable spit of land between two roiling, unpredictable bodies of water, to ensure that one's house has at least a two-

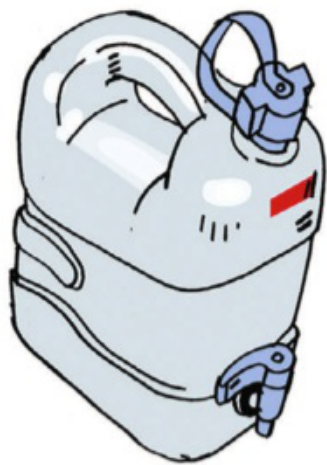
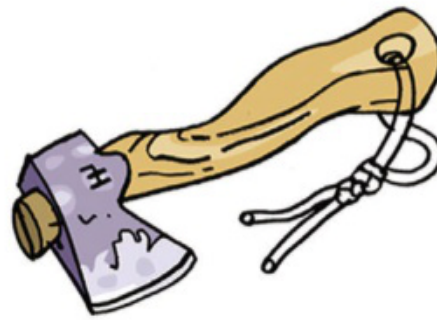
month supply of food and at least nine modes of procuring drinking water in case society breaks and city services are cut off. (My family's are: a rain barrel [1]; filtration straws [2]; a sun oven to pasteurize water with solar heat [3]; a Sawyer Squeeze water-filtration system [4]; a hundred-gallon airtight bladder, to be filled at the first sign of trouble [5]; a gas grill for boiling [6] and, in a

pinch, dew collection [7]; iodine tablets [8]; and a tub with a tarp over it to let evaporation run off into a clean bowl [9].) We have medical kits in both of our cars and bug-out bags prepared for each family member, in case we have to flee in minutes. This kind of preparation is all still somewhat in the realm of the normal. Less so: I have negotiated for my family a hideout in New England with a fully stocked tiny house that has a woodstove and solar heat, with forests around it for firewood and cleared land for gardening. There are established fruit trees, water sources, and

plenty of wildlife, if necessity forces us to set aside our moral revulsion and kill our fellow creatures for sustenance. In both Florida and New England, I have libraries of foraging and food-storage books; if I don't always have direct knowledge, I know where to find it. I take boxing classes for self-defense; I have made my children learn archery. I have signed them up, for years, with the Boy Scouts so they will know how to build fires and handle knives safely, even though its soft-focus, quasi-Hitler Youth nationalism makes me queasy.

It is not that I have horrendous visions of an electromagnetic pulse taking out the world's power grids, or of oil and gas production ceasing and leaving seven billion humans to revert to the pre-industrial era, or even of World War III being launched on an otherwise normal day because Trump can't resist the urge to push the big red button. But I can see how fragile the institutions of society are and how ever-more frayed they are becoming under the weight of late-stage capitalism. I see in vivid near-hallucinations how climate change will exacerbate every human-rights issue until we cannibalize ourselves. There will be mass displacement, pandemics, tribalist violence, genocide, food and water scarcity, deforestation, desertification, cities underwater. The warming planet, the mass extinction that has already begun, the fact that I need my children to live at least beyond the span of my own life: these things murmur in my ears, give me waking nightmares. Such profound eschatological horror can only be slain by action. I ready myself for as many possibilities as I can so that I may keep my raging anxiety under control.

And so, in the depths of my climate-grief insomnia, I read my little library of books and go online to prepper blogs and Reddit threads to find new and more efficient modes of



survival. But it is lonely to lurk on the internet, a diabolical invention that isolates people even as it feigns connection. Also, a novelist is already a professional autodidact; when it comes to the survival of the human race, I want to be told the things I don't know enough about to seek them out myself. Hence Prepper Camp. I was so excited about the tidal wave of information I would be facing among my doomsday peers that I couldn't sleep for a week beforehand. All that weekend, my children would tell my friends in Florida with wild grins that no, I wasn't home: Mommy is at Apocalypse Camp!

3.

An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.

When I was still at home, the classes on the schedule had seemed a bizarre blend of two types: hippie homesteading and paranoid militarism, without a great deal of intersection between the two. I was far more interested in the hippie classes, as they might give me useful practical knowledge and would not involve discussion of killing my fellow humans. One of my first classes was "SHTF (Shit-Hits-the-Fan) Intelligence," which I believed was going to be about the extremely rarefied things one needed to know in a catastrophe: how to plan escape routes ahead of time, where to buy laminated maps, how to use a compass, and how to gauge whether to stay put or flee depending on what one understood of the catastrophe at hand. Instead, the instructor, a former soldier named Samuel Culper who heads up an organization called Forward Observer, described how his group tracks civil unrest via social media, police scanners, and on-the-ground observers.

I couldn't understand how tracking protests against police violence from a tent somewhere had anything to do with prepping. But I regained some sense of my enthusiasm by proceeding to classes on permaculture, which I believe in deeply. Industrial agriculture is poisoning the planet

and our bodies; we're all better off growing as much of our own food as possible. Our host, Rick Austin, sweating through his khaki shirt in a circle from shoulder to sternum, gave such a thrilling talk about "Secret Gardens and Greenhouses" that I bought his book, *Secret Garden of Survival*, at the prepper mall afterward. Austin had been a commercial farmer, growing apples in New Hampshire and oranges in Florida, when he realized that agriculture's traditional rows of plants were not designed for the plants' sake, but for the sake of the machinery that sows and harvests it; in a post-doomsday world without heavy machinery, and

I COULDN'T SEE WHAT TRACKING PROTESTS AGAINST POLICE VIOLENCE HAD TO DO WITH PREPPING

with smaller-scale, nonindustrial agriculture, farmers would do better to plant crops the way crops want to grow.

Austin showed pictures of the evolution of a garden on his mountain-side homestead, first stripped to the topsoil, then planted in "guilds" of fruit or nut trees surrounded by symbiotic plantings of berries and vines and useful nitrogen fixers. The result within only a few years was a garden so lush and productive it now doesn't look like a garden, doesn't need weeding, watering, pesticides, or nutrients, and provides many pounds of food per square foot.

Gladness had taken root in me again. Next was a talk on "Frugal Homesteading" by a man who would end up being my favorite of all the instructors, John Moody, a goofy, smart guy who quickly got the audience on his side by calling one of the volunteers passing by a "discount Fabio." Moody told us he had once attended seminary; had cured himself of duodenal ulcers with food; and had bought a farm with his family that initially had less than 0.5 percent viable soil and was now a functioning homestead. He was one of the few instructors

who seemed willing to think beyond standard prepper lore. One of his tips was that survivalists often prioritized the wrong things. They may spend years prepping for an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) from the sun that would in theory take out communication systems and thus all of civilization, though, as Moody said, "Most people in this room are going to die of diabetes and heart disease." At this, the audience gasped in audible dismay.

But to me, it felt a little validating to hear Moody say this: I had been astonished at how physically unfit nearly every attendee at Prepper Camp appeared to be. Even many of the younger preppers were obese, and health problems were visible and rampant. There were more canes and hiking sticks than athletic bodies. Moody said that when he heard an unfit man bragging, "I'm up to seven Glocks," he wanted to reply, "Well, sell two and get a membership to Gold's Gym." Did people think they could fire a gun into a tornado, a storm surge, a wildfire? Most attendees very clearly couldn't run a single mile to escape disaster, and fitness is among the most essential tools for flight. (For that matter, I wondered why there were no classes on how to get sick or disabled people to safety. Were they planning to leave Grandma behind with a semiautomatic and a fistful of beef jerky and hope she'd still be there when they crept back a few weeks later?)

Next up was "Anti-kidnapping and Hostage Survival," where two "barrel-chested freedom fighters," a man named Billy Jensen (former Green Beret and surveillance officer turned antiterrorism instructor) and a woman named Check Freedman (held hostage and raped at sixteen, she'd become a federal agent and "police asset") taught us how not to get taken. I looked around the room at the aged and the infirm and the unfamous, the salt of the earth, wondering who, exactly, the intended audience was for this talk: Weren't the people who got kidnapped usually journalists, or the wealthy, or the children of the powerful?



4.

At “Getting Your Head Right,” Benjamin Raven Pressley wore an olive vest with spangled wings on it, said he was part Cherokee, and called himself a “spiritual guide coach.” At “Gold and Silver,” Keith Iton, one of two African-American presenters I noted, urged us to collect gold and silver for the End Times. At “Homestead Herbals,” Suzanne Upton free-associated about which herbs were good for which diseases. Basil for high cholesterol, *Spilanthes* for numbing, bloodroot for warts, dandelion for the liver, pine pollen for androgens, sweet gum for the lungs. And so on, for an hour.

Finally, at the “Sun Cooking” demonstration, there was the weekend’s first (and, it turned out, only) discussion of concerns outside the scope of the individual. Paul Munsen, president of Sun Ovens International, showed off his miracle

cookers, which need only solar heat to work. In addition to his descriptions of baking bread and boiling eggs with the sun, he talked about climate change; deforestation; and the fact that 2.5 billion people today still cook over fires, which takes a huge amount of time, contributes to environmental collapse, and gives people respiratory diseases. He had met Nelson Mandela and spoke fondly of him. He even said the word “progressive” as though it were a good thing, bless him. I was shaken to realize that this was the first discussion of climate change I had heard all day; that though there was plenty of talk about defense against kidnappers and nuclear, biological, or chemical warfare, the actual calamity bearing down on humanity, that great elephant in the room pressing us all to the wall, had been almost entirely ignored.

I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong.

During the brief dinner break, I went with a misty head to set up my tent in the overflow campground. The other preppers were just hanging out; they watched without speaking as I struggled with my equipment. I tried to be as quiet as possible—a mouse. God forbid they search my camp when I was gone, I thought. They’d find books of poetry. I began to think that it was perhaps an oversight to have brought no weapons, not even a multi-tool, to this place that now seemed very obviously teeming with them.

Because I didn’t trust myself to make a campfire while others were watching, I had brought food that I

didn't have to cook: oranges, granola and almond milk, peanut butter and jelly. I ate in my tent, and with my hand-crank flashlight, I read Rick Austin's book. It didn't take more than twenty minutes; I finished pretty bummed out that I had spent \$35 on the thing. Though it contains some good ideas, it suffers the lack of editorial attention typical of self-published works, offering only the vaguest recommendations, with eccentric punctuation and terrible photography, and it included the only instance of overt racism (putting aside the MAGA gear and Confederate flags) that I saw all weekend: a photo of the "zombie hordes" that Rick Austin believes will be swarming the land and stealing his food during the apocalypse, credited to the Associated Press, actually depicts desperate brown people wading with their children to dry land.

I thought back to something Jensen had said at the anti-kidnapping class: "As a soldier, though I'm a Christian, I have to dehumanize the people I'm fighting against." All day, I had been set back on my heels by the survivalists' suspicious attitude toward others. You could only treat suffering people as "zombies" if you stripped them of all their humanity.

5.

To be great is to be misunderstood.

I went back out into the dusk, sad and lonely. The air was hazy with smoke from campfires and smelled of delicious hot food. The campers had hooked up their phones and speakers to electrical outlets and were playing classic rock while they cooked. Boxer dogs seemed to be the favorite animals of these survivalists. Little kids rode along zip lines. The faint smell of sewage came off the pond, and a tulip tree by its edge was shedding yellow leaves. Older children jumped off the dock; parents called for them to come back to eat dinner.

It would all have been so ordinary if it hadn't been for the End Times hanging like a sword over our heads.

The first part of the night's official entertainment was the episode of National Geographic's *Doomsday Preppers* that featured the Austins. It was called "You Said It Was Non-Lethal," and in it Rick and Jane describe their decision to flee suburbia after their neighborhood's economic ruin—to the point that some nearby single-family homes were being shared by four and five families and Jane was carjacked while leaving work.

Watching the episode, I felt a little hurt on behalf of the pair: the tone of the show was impressed—by the preppers' ingenuity and the genius of their great hidden garden full of food—but it was also very clearly poking fun at them. Jane came across as wild-eyed and manic, showing off a hygienic invention in case toilet paper is no longer available

in the future: a pump-action garden sprayer filled with an herbal tisane and called a "heinie hydrant." Rick and Jane were shown in goggles, thick rubber gloves, and respirators, making a Mace-like spray out of extremely hot peppers from their garden; then weeping and spitting and hacking when their protection proved insufficient. At the end of the episode, the couple was given a grade of 89 out of 100 for preparedness and a twenty-month initial survival time, which, I think, made the onscreen Rick a little sad. I don't know whether the Austins had registered the ridicule in the way they had been depicted, though if they had, I have a hard time understanding their screening the episode for a group of people who admired them.

Doomsday Preppers was followed by a feature film: 2018's *Death of a Nation*, by Dinesh D'Souza, a work whose promotional materials featured an image of Abraham Lincoln's face split with Donald Trump's, the man least like him in temperament and policy ever to set foot in the White House.

The film's premise is that, just as Democrats worked against Lincoln, they are now working to retard the social progress represented by Donald Trump. When we reached the part presenting Adolf Hitler and the Nazis as liberals—"this is done by the do-gooders ... the people who want to improve society"—I sat in the viewing tent surrounded by angry survivalists, swarmed by mosquitoes, and felt my grasp of reason and history assaulted.

And as the spectacle proceeded, I found language for the questions that had been growing in me all day. What in the world did right-wing conspiracy theories have to do with preparing for disaster? What was the purpose of this exhibition of baseless propaganda? I looked around me, but the faces I saw were rapt: Why did it seem that I was

the only person who saw how incredibly stupid this film was?

My loneliness drifted into fear when I imagined what would happen if my poker face slipped and the preppers could see all the disdainful liberal thoughts bouncing around in my head.

At a certain point, something began to seem more wrong with the film than merely its lies. The music was pompous and loud, but the dramatization of Hitler and Eva Braun's suicides took place with no explanation, as though it were an old-time silent movie. D'Souza was depicted onscreen first during a reenactment of his childhood in India; then as the adult D'Souza in New York City, speaking gravely. This is when it became obvious that some of the strangeness of the film was due to a technical problem: the spoken track was missing entirely, and only the background music was playing. D'Souza just flapped his lips. This felt appropriate.

I left before the volunteers resolved these difficulties, trudging with my windup flashlight through the darkness to my campsite. I had



set myself up between the tiny one-person tent of a man named Buddy, a construction worker from New Jersey who would later show me his femur-length machete, and the larger tent of a middle-aged man named Troy and his three bearded sons. Troy and Sons had a campsite so elaborate—with tables and chairs and a gas grill and fancy outdoor cots and lanterns—that I envied them. They were playing cards and eating filet mignon under golden lamplight. We spoke briefly, but all I wanted was to be alone, to let my pretenses fall away and read my goddamn poetry by flashlight. Once inside my own tent, I began shaking with relief after the long day of pent-up anxiety—that of being recognized and called out for the prepper imposter I had, this day, become aware that I was.

6.

All things are dissolved to their center by their cause, and, in the universal miracle, petty and particular miracles disappear.

The campsite was loud, and it was impossible to sleep given the inadequate pad beneath me, the giant ants crawling over my hands and neck, and my neighbors on both sides chatting away happily: *What's the diff between kerosene and propane?* I heard. *I got some extra steak if you want,* I heard. *My credit has been froze for three years,* I heard. Something way off in the woods screamed girlishly and either Troy or a Son of Troy grunted “Fox” in explanation. *Raise. Call. Fold.* They were playing poker. But the thrill in the blood from the screaming fox made me think of emergencies, of Rick and Jane in their armed 360-degree eagles’ aerie in their overgrown Garden of Eden, with the chicks and coffee plants in the hidden greenhouse, and of what they would do if civilization really were blown to smithereens. It went against everything I knew about the essential altruism of humanity to imagine one of those people taking a potshot at some bewildered hiker who had gone up the wrong road. How terribly lonely it would be for Rick and Jane waiting out the apocalypse with their animals.

I wondered what exactly could bring a person to that point where they were willing to hole up and just stop caring for their fellow man. One thing I do know about humans is that the stories we tell about ourselves are the people we become. And the American narrative of macho self-reliance, which the preppers had been preaching all day, is an extremely old story; it is, in fact, one of the oldest stories of this hemisphere, emerging out of the moral gymnastics it took for ostensible Christians to sail across the Atlantic and commit acts of genocide, rape, and war against other human beings in order to allow themselves to enslave them and to seize and control land that was never their own. These new Americans needed a way to frame their actions as heroic and inevitable, and they found it in the narrative of the noble frontiersman, the solitary figure pitched against the exigencies of unpredictable nature. This type existed before *Robinson Crusoe*, notably in real-life survival tales told by captured, enslaved, or castaway men and women; but it was Daniel Defoe’s 1719 novel—about a seventeenth-century slaver capsized and stranded for twenty-eight years on an island near the Orinoco River, in South America—that solidified the specimen into an archetype. It’s no accident that the book is counted among the first English novels: it is a work of purest fiction—as fictional as Dinesh D’Souza’s movie, though both were packaged as documentaries.

It is easy to be intoxicated by Robinson Crusoe, the character, even if one sees, through twenty-first-century eyes, the book’s broken moral compass. In his extreme emotional continence, inventiveness, almost impossible industry, he is the pinnacle of self-reliance. The reader—wooed by these virtues, which we have been told repeatedly are the height of manliness—cares deeply about Crusoe’s plight. We read anxiously of his parrot, his struggles with gunpowder, the way he slowly builds a miniature England on the island he makes his.

And it is easy in all this wonder to forget that Crusoe’s predicament began



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with a mission to bring slaves back to the New World; he was an unapologetic murderer of the island's cannibals; he imposed his language and religion on his young slave, Friday. Crusoe reappeared by other names in later fictions: in the stories about the historical figures Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, who both became elevated to legend through folklore; in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, returning as Natty Bumppo, aka Hawkeye, aka Leatherstocking, aka Deerslayer. Bumppo was also called La Longue Carabine—being a manly man, of course his rifle had to be enormous. Out of the West came an equivalently violent gunslinger: a type that was taciturn, competent, and living beyond the scope of social systems. John Wayne; Cormac McCarthy's characters. In these pages in September 1968, Larry McMurtry wrote: "Cowboys are romantics, extreme romantics, and ninety-nine out of a hundred of them are sentimental to the core." (This tracks with the preppers at camp. Although ostensibly preparing for the future, they were mostly concerned with the monsters of former eras—nuclear war or the loss of the electrical grid—not the far more monstrous contemporary threat of climate change ending all human life.)

In non-fiction form, this romantic strain metamorphosed into the peculiar, homegrown utopian philosophy of transcendentalism, which gave flesh-and-blood Americans a codification of the laws of manhood. A notable inspiration for preppers, and a foundational text for the kind of libertarians who read, is Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1841 essay "Self-Reliance."

In my tent, I pulled the work up on my phone and slowly reread it.

Emerson was still a relatively young man of thirty-eight when he published the essay, and it's so full of passionate disdain that I have a hard time reading it in anything but a Holden Caulfield voice. But this is unfair. "Self-Reliance"

is a profoundly poetic work, strange and circuitous, full of startling imagery and chockablock with aphorisms so constantly recycled in American daily life that a reader can feel déjà vu in encountering the full text for the first time. Emerson's essay holds up the self as the bedrock from which all other authority rises. Those

who view Emerson as a libertarian prototype cite his glorification of the individual, as when he says, "The only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against

IT'S EASY TO BE INTOXICATED BY ROBINSON CRUSOE; HE IS THE PINNACLE OF SELF-RELIANCE

it"; his opposition to institutions like government and religion; and his idea that community is a distraction. But I think this distills Emerson's argument into something far smaller than its actual, and truly gigantic, oddness. Emerson's argument is less libertarian than it is anarchic. He is not after the deification of the self—self as sun around which the planets of other people must orbit—but rather the radical de-emphasis of the institutions that bind and constrict an individual's true use and purpose. Emerson's philosophy is the opposite of the libertarian celebration of greed and selfishness and social Darwinism, the ideology's fixation on personal freedom to the detriment of social security or collective advancement: Emerson posits a sort of Buddhist attention to the moment and awareness so deep it calls into question the structures that inhibit social

change, the very things that lead to inequality. Self-reliance is not the same thing as self-interest.

7.

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.

I was bleary from sleeplessness, smelly from not wanting to go into the showers used by a few hundred other souls. I ate with glum slowness; I had not talked to anyone for longer than a few minutes in over forty-eight hours, and my solitude was wearing.

The day before, I had been so gladdened by John Moody that I nearly ran to the first class of the day—his discussion of elderberries. He quoted Pliny the Elder, Hippocrates, and Hans Christian Andersen. He explained that the Count from *Sesame Street* had a historical basis: in medieval times vampires were thought to have OCD, and if you put elderberries on your windowsills, any vampires would be so entranced by counting them that they wouldn't come into your house. He so beautifully extolled the endless medical and diet-related benefits of elderberries that I was seduced into believing that all people with even ten square feet of soil should be growing them. (I bought his book, and back at home, I ordered elderberry plants.)

Then I went on a "Wild Edible Survival" foraging walk with Richard Cleveland of the Earth School in nearby Hendersonville: we moved a few feet down the road as a mass of sixty or seventy people and plucked and sampled sassafras, plantain (nature's Benadryl),

dandelion, sour grass, and violet.

At "Concealed Carry and Defensive Shooting," the instructor, David Stutts, talked about "playing with guns," and showed a video in which a child who looked to be under the age of twelve shot at a silhouette, from a table, as though he



were in a restaurant. It filled me with nausea and grief; why should children be taught to kill other humans? Stutts also said that after homeowners had incapacitated robbers or looters by shooting them in the legs, and the malefactors were on the floor, bleeding, the vigilante homeowners could decide for themselves whether to wait for the police or just “finish the job.” He made it clear with a big clownish wink what he would do.

“How to Build a Medical Kit” was presented by the Skinny Medic, a boyish paramedic who had named himself when he weighed 120 pounds following a high dose of prednisone. Now that he was healthy, he joked that he should be called the Dad Bod Medic. He listed what ought to be in a medical supply kit: headlamp, box of gloves, shears and hemostat, Betadine or iodine, saline flush, superglue, horse tack, Ace wraps, Combat Application Tourniquet, stretch gauze, plastic bag to seal chest wounds, Mylar space blanket, generic pain meds, and so on. This felt deeply helpful; my fingers ached from taking notes.

Thunder sounded overhead. The skies darkened, and a very light rain drizzled down. Black flies descended with the rain and began to bite.

At my next class, “Primitive Wilderness Survival,” I learned how to go “beyond prepping to recognize and utilize the resources in nature”: how to find water from the source and build a debris shelter. The instructor joked about his worst night in a shelter: “I slept like a baby—I cried all night and pooped my pants.” On to the Old Grouch’s “Simple and Quick Shelters,” where I learned how to make a different kind of shelter out of a poncho.

My last class of the day was “Psychological Warfare.” The instructor was a super-fit black man named Hakim Isler, whose movie-star charisma made sense when I learned that he had been on *Naked and Afraid* and other survivalist television shows; he

calls himself the Black MacGyver. He, too, was former military, from the SERE—or Survival, Escape, Resistance, and Evasion—school, a combat veteran, and a fourth-degree black belt in To-Shin Do, which had led him to write a book called *Ninja Survival*.

Isler took us through the idea behind psychological operations, or psyops, which he learned when he was in MISO, or military information support operations. He spoke of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the five tenets of survival (there’s always an agenda, know what makes you tick, psyops is a two-way street, take notes, be flexible and open to change), and the four strategies of the field (fortify, align, divide, and overcome).

I began to think that perhaps Isler was himself here to engage in psyops—to discover what makes preppers tick, to track their psychology, to understand the needs and weaknesses of this community, with the ultimate aim of somehow using that knowledge. Perhaps this class was a way of hiding in plain sight, being so brazen about his presence that nobody would ever suspect him of having an agenda. I thrilled

to the idea; I felt, for the first time since the disillusionment of the day before, that there might be someone in this place who wasn’t a libertarian. Perhaps I wasn’t as lonely in my politics as I had felt. Or perhaps I was losing my mind.

8.

The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pules and whines.

Another sad dinner of PB&J and oranges, and back into the night to hear the keynote speaker. I needed all the resilience I could muster. The speaker was a man named Curtis Bowers, whose films, *Agenda: Grinding America Down* and *Agenda 2: Masters of*



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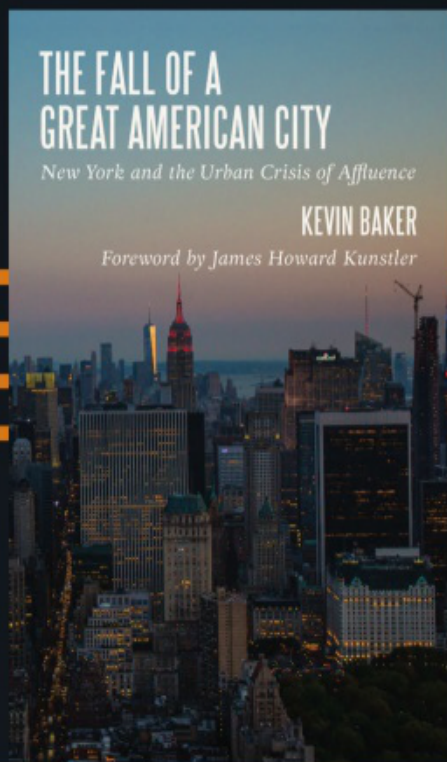
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Deceit, tracked (to quote Prepper Camp material) the

history of the liberal, deep state, communist party agenda, to fundamentally change America to a communist country from within. The people behind this Agenda had a very detailed, 50 year plan, to destroy America, and they have achieved almost all of their goals from the 1960's to today. Come to our Key Note Address to find out how we can save this country from the liberal socialist Globalist agenda.

There was almost too much to dislike in this description, beyond the fact that the word "globalist" has long been an anti-Semitic dog whistle. I knew I would have the urge to flee, so I planted myself in the center of the audience, where I would be surrounded by people eating up this bullshit and would have to remain seated until the end.

Curtis Bowers came out. He was a mostly bald man hiding his head under a baseball cap, a former Republican state representative in Idaho, the owner of fondue restaurants, and the father of nine homeschooled children. "Doing my part to populate the earth," he joked, to applause.

He talked about reading the 1958 book *The Naked Communist* and realizing that the Communists had a long-term plan to destroy the "culture of morality" of America and to get people to "accept homosexuality and feminism." He said in a voice rich with sadness that he couldn't take his boys to Walmart because the covers of magazines show what used to be considered pornography.

Other notions Curtis Bowers promulgated that night were: That the Communists planned, as a part of their agenda, to destroy "beautiful" art, meaning figurative art, and to institute abstract art in its stead. That Senator Joseph McCarthy "did not destroy a single person's life." That public-school teachers are trying to indoctrinate students with Communism.

At the end of the talk, Bowers got a standing ovation.

I steamed back to my tent and was kept awake by the ants, the night birds, and the neighbors, who

were having a giant party at a campfire. I would have attended if I hadn't been too frightened of being inadvertently shot by a gun hoarder who'd had too many beers.

9.

Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due.

Sunday morning came cool and sunny. I ate my granola with almond milk and packed my rental car with a glad heart. The insomnia and constant orange-alert-level anxiety were wearing on me, and I had decided to run away to a hotel in Greenville after the day's sessions, to luxuriate in a pool and a soft bed and order room service. I would enjoy the benefits of modern society for as long as shit and fan remained far from me. As I was rinsing out my bowl, I heard an electric crackle and looked up to see two police cars rolling through the grounds.

Someone's in trouble, I thought. Then, in one of the more surreal moments of my life, I watched them stop beside my rental car. One cop got out with a hand on his holster. "This car's been reported stolen. You steal this car?" he said. No no no no no, I absolutely did not, I told him. I showed him the Hertz rental agreement.

All around me, preppers peeped out of their tents and pickup trucks to look at the cops, then at me, that weird lady who came to survivalist camp all alone, who kept herself quiet and apart, who had now invited cops into a camp for a group of people who had, let's say, a fraught relationship with governmental authority. I thought of the weapons they surely had hidden in their cars and campsites, how so many of those were probably untraceable if not totally illegal. One of the policemen called dispatch to try to figure out what was going on. Someone in Atlanta, he was told, had reported that her boyfriend had stolen her car. I said that I wasn't in Atlanta, I don't have a boyfriend, I

have a husband in Florida, and I'd been parked there since Friday morning. "She has, we've seen her!" one of the neighbors yelled across the way. OnStar had tracked my rental car down and disabled it remotely; no matter what, I was stuck until everything played out. One of the police officers was Sergeant Jeff Smith of the Polk County sheriff's office, a handsome blond man with an athletic build who was courteous and kind. I grew a little crush on him, but that may have just been Stockholm syndrome. Jeff and I chatted between his bouts of calling here and there, Atlanta, dispatch, the cop who'd received the original call. Nearby, tent after tent was disassembled, cars rolled away, men speed-walked up the hill, fleeing the proximity of the law. Troy, in the next campsite over, heard me say that I was a writer, and his face darkened; then he and his sons took off with nary a word to me.

Three hours passed. I missed the Sunday Christian service in the field, which would have been lovely; I'm a fan of collective action of many kinds. I missed the classes I had wanted to take that morning: "Undercover Soccer Mom," "Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Defense," "Escape from Restraints." How ridiculous it all was. Here I stood (a good liberal!) among the few attendees at Prepper Camp glad to pay hefty taxes for such agents of the nanny state as police officers, and yet I was the one who had somehow found herself squirming under the nanny state's attention. As far as the sergeant could tell, the mess-up was entirely Hertz's fault: likely some functionary had mistyped my car's VIN or license plate number. OnStar turned my car back on at last. The policemen drove off. Later, instead of apologizing, Hertz put me on a list of people banned from renting cars in the United States, for neglecting to report my car as stolen.

After the cops left, I felt vulnerable, the object of the intense curiosity of the remaining preppers at camp. I couldn't bear the weight of their suspicion, and I was so weary I knew my shell would break under

questioning. I had a vision of myself being hauled before a kangaroo court presided over by Rick Austin. Passing under the radar had been hard. Now that I had inadvertently brought the pigs to their turf, I did not feel entirely safe. Before the police cars' dust cloud blew away, I too zoomed off, down the mountain, returning to the glories of civilization for as long as we still have it.

10.

But now we are a mob.

I was terribly sad. I had found my people, perhaps, but I had not found my tribe.

It should not have been a surprise to me—though it was—how rarely actual facts were invoked at Prepper Camp: instead I had heard a great deal of fear mitigated by practical-seeming ideas, lots of baseless venom spat in the direction of imagined liberals, but almost no science to give weight to any assertions, no analysis of the larger state of the world, no evidence of statistical knowledge. Survivalists had revealed themselves to be romantics. Prepper Camp was a castle built on emotion: fear of the inchoate other was so great that the survivalists felt justified in being prepared to kill other humans to protect their material goods.

But scientists and historians who study catastrophes for a living have long known that there is, in fact, very little antisocial behavior that takes place after disasters. Rebecca Solnit's extraordinary book *A Paradise Built in Hell* describes in great detail the collective sense of "immersion in the moment and solidarity with others" that follows large-scale calamities. The common person rises to the situation to help other people, and there can be a profound experience of well-being, inventiveness, and flexibility. In fact, the worst effects in the aftermath of disasters come when institutions try to impose top-down organization, as the military might. The presumption of mass chaos, looting, murders, rapes—this comes

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from something disaster scientists call “elite panic,” when people in positions of power fear the loss of their power and so overreact in violent ways. Solnit quotes the sociologist Kathleen Tierney’s description of the phenomenon:

fear of social disorder; fear of poor, minorities and immigrants; obsession with looting and property crime; willingness to resort to deadly force; and actions taken on the basis of rumor.

Elite panic on behalf of white conservatives led to a vast increase in prepping during Barack Obama’s presidency; there was a downtick in interest after Donald Trump entered the White House—ironic, given the comparative risks of a catastrophic event then and now. Trump has made the Environmental Protection Agency into an auctioneer of public lands, which has in turn rapidly undone commonsense regulation. Not to mention that with his deregulation and outright looting of the environment in the interest of privatizing public wealth, he has pushed the Doomsday Clock much closer to midnight. But survivalism, as it exists now in America, is not rational. It is emotional. It is the twisting of hyper-masculine fear into a semblance of preparedness and rationality.

I lay in my hotel bed in Greenville, finally clean, and began to feel a strange and terrible sadness for the people I had left on the mountain. The majority of them had military backgrounds. I thought of how they had learned in the service to be powerful, effective, competent with weapons; I thought of their leaving the military and returning to a world where those virtues were far less valuable, even sometimes scorned. How strange it must be to go from the battlefield, always on high alert, capable of killing a fellow human, back to society, where people walked around nakedly vulnerable. Our support for veterans has never been strong, and it’s worsening rapidly. It must be alienating to feel devalued, to have to struggle to retain the kind of self-worth the military had built up in you, after you have given a great deal to your country. You start to believe that

institutions have failed you. And so you begin to obsess over the end of society. You stock up on guns because you’ve been trained to believe that guns can protect you, and while you’re at it, you stock up on food and water and other things. You’ve become a prepper. You begin to imagine the end of society—which you see replicated so often in zombie films, television shows, disaster flicks, and dystopian literature that you can imagine it vividly—and perhaps you start to long for the apocalypse. It would solve so much of what makes you uncomfortable about the contemporary world.

“Liberals are going to be one of the first ones to die,” Rick Austin said when he was featured in a jokey, five-minute *Daily Show* segment about liberal preppers. “Maybe in the apocalypse, there won’t be conservatives and liberals, there will just be people that survive,” the correspondent, Desi Lydic, noted hopefully. Austin nodded and said, “Exactly. And dead liberals.” (Then again, he also said, “Hillary Clinton is running the largest crime syndicate in America.”) There had been so much bitterness and fury toward the left at Prepper Camp that I began to wonder now whether preppers were actually hungry for a time of upheaval so that they could finally watch liberals get their comeuppance.

But then I saw, to my horror, an uglier truth: that I was no better than my prepper brethren. And that because of my hypocrisy, I was probably even worse.

Perhaps doomsday libertarians do secretly long for a chance to rid the earth of people who threaten their supremacy; but there is something equally anarchic in me that longs for society to break so that we can rebuild it to be kinder, more generous, more equitable. Deep down, perhaps I am a prepper because I believe that the only way we are going to pry the world’s wealth out of the greedy, grasping hands of the billionaires who are willfully killing the environment is through a total collapse of the status quo. Perhaps I am a prepper because I have had enough: I am goddamn ready for the guillotines.

Maybe on both sides this secret death wish is born of an error, the conflation of society and the social fabric, which are in fact separate phenomena: society is made of the institutions that work together to ease human life; the social fabric is the beautiful anarchic bedrock of community and goodwill between human strangers. It is true that society is in deep trouble, but the social fabric is innate and strong, and this should be taken into consideration when preparing for a possible disaster. I was making the same mistake as people who had a vision of the world turned 180 degrees from my own. I was discounting the social fabric. All along, I had been making my survival preparations in a state of isolated intellectualization. I didn't trust myself to make a pathetic little fire in front of other humans who knew how to do so better than I did. Faced with preppers who didn't look or talk like me, I had become suspicious and afraid. My survivalism before Prepper Camp was revealed to be a paltry thing; it did not come from a community or out of a larger collective effort.

In the months after Prepper Camp, I have come to believe that liberals need to begin preparing in earnest for disaster situations. Libertarians and radical conservatives seem to own disaster preparedness, but liberals and progressives, equally made of tender, breakable flesh and bone, are just as much subject to the whims of nature. We need to use our knowledge, to apply to disaster preparations an understanding of science and fact; we need to develop real and actionable survivalism so that regular people can be as useful as possible in catastrophic situations. Everyday citizens should be taking classes in emergency health care. They should learn to store food and forage and make shelters. Every household should have stocks of food that will last for at least two weeks, the means to find water, an escape plan, a bug-out bag.

Individual action is good. Even better would be to counter individual self-obsession, to override the pervasive libertarian impulse to

concentrate solely on the needs and desires of the self. Americans need to wake up to the necessity of immediate, powerful collective action. Self-reliance works only in stable civilizations, in which angry individualists like those I met at Prepper Camp have the leisure to concentrate on their own needs, to pretend that the concerns of the larger world simply don't exist. I am here to tell you that we absolutely need the right-wing preppers' decades of deep thought, their anxieties transformed into the everyday mastery of survival. Beyond learning from their mastery, we need to find a way to pull the loudest, angriest, most militant individualists into the collective, to make them understand the necessity of the common good.

We have pushed ourselves beyond the point in the human narrative when we can worry only about ourselves. We have fucked ourselves into a massive die-off, killing half the world's species. California is on fire, Australia is on fire; we are already suffering, with displaced populations and major failures to the electrical grid. Doomsday is here now. We need to act collectively, we need to act fast, if all humans—libertarian or progressive or the hapless masses of the unprepared—are going to have a chance to survive this warming world. ■

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IN HARM'S WAY

A plague of unsolved femicides haunts Mexico

By Seth Harp

Ten yards was the nearest we could get to the river. Any closer and the smell was too much to bear. The water was a milky gray color, as if mixed with ashes, and the passage of floating trash was ceaseless. Plastic bags and bottles, coffee lids, yogurt cups, flip-flops, and sodden stuffed animals drifted past, coated in yellow scum. Amid the old tires and mattresses dumped on the riverbank, mounds of rank green weeds gave refuge to birds and grasshoppers, which didn't seem bothered by the fecal stench.

El Río de los Remedios, or the River of Remedies, runs through the city of Ecatepec, a densely populated satellite of Mexico City. Confined mostly to concrete channels, the river serves as the main drainage line for the vast

Seth Harp lives in Austin, Texas. This article was supported by the MacDowell Colony.



monochrome barrios that surround the capital. That day, I was standing on a stretch of the canal just north of Ecatepec, with a twenty-three-year-old photographer named Reyna Leynez. Reyna was the one who'd told me about the place and what it represents. This ruined river, this open sewer, is said to be one of the largest mass graves in Mexico.

When we visited, last September, the most recent discoveries included

the body of a woman whose whole head had been wrapped in bandages; a teenage girl, between thirteen and seventeen years old, in a black plastic bag; and a woman about whom the police disclosed no information, except that she'd been "executed onsite."

El Río de los Remedios is not the only dumping ground in Ecatepec. During the first half of 2019, the bodies of at least twenty women ap-

peared on street corners and sidewalks and vacant lots known as *baldíos*. Near a public park, the police found a mother and daughter who had been raped and beheaded. On Apatzingán Street, officers were summoned to open a sack that contained two legs, one thigh, and part of a thorax. In a trash-filled ditch in the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood, a body was found in a transparent plastic bag, naked but for a red coat. At an



abandoned construction site in the middle of a cornfield, a motorist stopped on the side of the road discovered a woman with her pants around her ankles, missing an arm. Her hair had been burned off.

Most of the women in these cases have not been identified. No one knows their names, where they came from, or why they were killed. El Río de los Remedios has become emblematic of a plague of unsolved murders—more than a thousand in the past year—that is being described as a *feminicidio*, or femicide. This is happening not just in Ecatepec but throughout the State of Mexico, a smoggy and mountainous region that borders Mexico City on three sides. The causes of the epidemic are not well understood, and its relationship to organized crime is ambiguous. The government is disinclined to acknowledge its existence.

Reyna and I hiked downstream, walking along a path through yellow-flowering weeds, with dandelion seeds blowing over us. The afternoon sky was overcast but luminous. Underfoot were shampoo bottles, nylon backpacks,

phone cords, razor blades, paint rollers, and discarded blister packs. The ground was spongy and uneven where the earth had healed over earlier deposits of garbage. A light rain began to fall, mercifully suppressing the fumes.

At a bend in the channel, Reyna stopped to photograph a beach made up entirely of trash. Reyna describes herself as a “post-punk lesbian dominatrix.” She doesn’t shave her armpits, and she keeps her jet-black hair in a vamp bob that looks like a wig. I’d met her the week before at a feminist rally in the capital, held to protest the government’s inaction in the face of rising violence against women. She said then that she was planning to go to the river to take photos, and I suggested that I go with her. Our plan was to leave well before dark, and it was nearly five o’clock. Reyna descended to a lower level of the embankment to get a better shot, and came back gagging. “I’m going back to the car,” she said. “I can’t stand the smell.”

We hiked up the hillside, which was strewn with busted appliances. Waiting for us up top, patiently smoking, was the man who had driven us here,

a native of Ecatepec whom I’ll call Joaquín—a friend of a friend who was doing this favor for little more than gas money. In his early twenties he had been a dreadlocked pothead and a volunteer at a turtle refuge. Now thirty-one, he was a maintenance man for Ecatepec’s cable-car company, Mexicable. He wore a mustache, a khaki work shirt, thick plastic eyeglasses, and a screen-printed trucker hat that commemorated two deceased friends. He kept the cord of his headphones draped over one ear at all times.

We got into his car, a battered little four-banger, one fender of which was painted in gold glitter. On the drive back, Joaquín, who was something of a joker—twice he’d made cracks about having me kidnapped—asked Reyna if she considered herself a “feminazi.”

“How can you compare us to Nazis?” she said. “Have we killed people?”

“No, just set fire to the metro,” he replied.

“If we march peacefully, you all just make fun of us.”

The grin on Joaquín’s face amounted to an admission of this. Having yielded

the point, he returned his attention to driving. Far be it from him to argue that things weren't messed up in Mexico. He lit another cigarette.

"We need safe spaces," Reyna continued. "I was thirteen when I was attacked for the first time, on the metro. The guy was like thirty years old. Another guy followed me for more than a kilometer on the street. I was terrified."

"Did you report him?" Joaquín asked.

"Yes. We report and report, and they do absolutely nothing. You know this." She recited a litany of recent atrocities, cases in which terrible things were done and no one was punished, speaking so rapidly that I couldn't always follow her Spanish. She asked how it could be that there is nowhere in Mexico where a woman is safe from rape. "We're not asking politely anymore," she said. "We're demanding justice."

Of the thousands of femicides that have taken place in the State of Mexico over the past decade, about a dozen cases have come to represent the phenomenon. These are the faces that appear on placards at protests, the portraits that are stenciled in spray paint, the names that stand for the far more numerous unnamed. One such case is that of Fátima Varinia Quintana Gutiérrez, whose mother, Lorena, has spent the past five years hoping to see her daughter's killer convicted. She now lives in hiding in another part of the country, but I managed to reach her by phone in early September. Lorena spoke with force and eloquence, her sentences ordered and deliberate, her command of the facts precise.

Asked to describe Fátima, Lorena thought for a moment and said that if you were to go into the evidence room of the state prosecutor's office and look inside her daughter's backpack, which still sits on a shelf there, you would know exactly what kind of girl she was. She always kept her books and notebooks organized, without so much as a dog-eared page. She was a perfectionist, preoccupied with tidiness, who spent most of her time reading. Her favorite books were the Hunger Games trilogy, the Chronicles of Narnia series, and *The Book Thief*. Her favorite

poem was "A Margarita Debayle," by Rubén Darío. "She didn't have a ton of girlfriends," Lorena said. "She went everywhere with her little brother. She didn't like to sleep alone. She was afraid of the dark."

Fátima's shyness comes across in photos. In one, she stands diffidently before the camera, hands clasped together, dressed in a navy peacoat over a teal dress. She's tall for her age, and she resembles her mother. They lived in a rural part of the State of Mexico, in the terraced and deforested mountains west of Mexico City. The name of their tiny hilltop town was La Lupita Casas Viejas, in the municipality of Lerma, just east of Toluca, the state capital.

On the afternoon of February 5, 2015, Lorena was cooking lunch for her family when she realized that Fátima was an hour late coming home from school. Children are expected to adhere to strict timetables in Mexico, so this constituted an emergency. Lorena grabbed her husband, Jesús Quintana Vega, and ran out of the house without pausing to tie her shoes.

Fátima's bus stop was on the edge of Casas Viejas, where the asphalt road descends into Lerma. A pair of brothers



named Luis Ángel and Misael Atayde Reyes lived in the house nearest to it, overlooking the street. Three times in the course of her frantic search that afternoon, Lorena went to the Atayde place to ask if they had seen Fátima pass by on her way home from school. Three times the brothers denied it, as did a

third young man who was at the house, José Juan Hernández de Cruceño. By the side of the house, Lorena noticed a bucket of water that looked pink, as if it had been used to clean up blood. "By this time," she told me, "I had no doubt that those three had done something to my daughter."

The Atayde brothers had known Fátima since the day she was born. Hernández de Cruceño, however, was new in town, and had the look of a *malandro*, or hoodlum. Photos taken before the incident show three young men mean-mugging for the camera, throwing up cholo mudras and middle fingers, smoking weed and drinking beer. Misael and Luis Ángel were seventeen and nineteen years old, respectively. Hernández de Cruceño was twenty-three. "He had been telling everyone that he liked Fátima," Lorena said. "Asking my son to introduce him. She was twelve years old."

Only about three hundred people live in Casas Viejas, and more than half of them came out to look for the missing girl. The search party turned into a lynch mob when they found her body in a ditch behind the Atayde residence. "They had stabbed her more than ninety times," Lorena said. At first her telling of the story was matter-of-fact, but by the time she finished she was crying, practically moaning the words, as if to ask how it was possible that any of this was true. "The cut across her face was ten centimeters. The cut across her neck, ten centimeters. They had broken her shoulder. They fractured her wrists and ankles. All three of them raped her, vaginally and anally. All three of them. They bashed in her teeth. They put out one of her eyes. They did all of this while my daughter was still alive, still conscious. They killed her by stoning. How could they have such hatred for a twelve-year-old girl?"

The Atayde brothers and Hernández de Cruceño tried to run, but they couldn't escape the outraged crowd that had formed around the house. In the absence of reliable law enforcement, mob justice is rife in Mexico, especially in rural areas. By the time the police arrived, an hour after they'd been called, the suspects

had been soundly beaten and doused in gasoline. They escaped being burned alive only because a state marshal convinced Lorena and Jesús to intercede with the crowd. Bruised, bloodied, and reeking of fuel, the three men were handcuffed in the back of a police truck and driven to a hospital in Toluca.

If she could do it over again, Lorena said she would have let the people of Casas Viejas exact a fiery retribution then and there. Her family's descent into hell, she told me, was just beginning.

The word “*feminicidio*” first came into usage in Mexico in the late Nineties, amid a similar epidemic of unsolved killings in and around Ciudad Juárez, on the border with El Paso. Nearly four hundred murders between 1993 and 2005 left the city with an enduring reputation

as a dark necropolis, a land of pink crosses in the desert. Those deaths are thought to have been caused by sex trafficking and forced prostitution, violence around drug smuggling, lax law enforcement, an elevated level of domestic abuse, and the deplorable conditions in the shantytowns that developed around the border factories known as *maquiladoras* after the passage of NAFTA. But no one has been able to fully explain the savage mutilations and sometimes bizarre details that characterized many of the killings. Several bodies were found with one breast sliced off and the opposite nipple bitten off; others had symbols carved into their scalps; still others appeared to have been dressed after their deaths, sometimes in multiple layers of clothing.

Gang members performing initiation rites, organ thieves, Satan worshippers,

and snuff-film producers have all been hypothesized. The idea that Juárez might have been some kind of sick playground for one or more foreign-born serial killers became a prominent theme in literary treatments of the crimes, particularly after local authorities arrested an Egyptian chemist named Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif—a violent rapist with a long rap sheet—and charged him with several murders. In Roberto Bolaño's thousand-page novel *2666*, which was in part inspired by the killings, a Mexican congresswoman uncovers a sinister sex-trafficking ring that caters to narcos, generals, bankers, and politicians. The prime suspect, however, is an enigmatic German-American computer-store owner, whose blue eyes may be able to see into the future.

In 2011, partly in response to international condemnation of the killings in Juárez, the Mexican Congress passed a federal law making femicide a distinct category of murder that carries harsher punishment, not unlike a hate crime in the United States. (Several other countries in Latin America, including Argentina and Honduras, have similarly amended their penal codes.) Femicide is defined as the killing of a woman for gender-based reasons, including murder committed in connection with rape or kidnapping; murder preceded by stalking, harassment, or abuse; murder committed by a romantic partner; murder characterized by sexual violence, degrading injuries, or desecration; and murder followed by display of the body in a public place.

According to a judicial ruling issued in 2015, authorities must investigate every violent death of a woman as a potential femicide, but police and prosecutors do not apply these criteria in any systematic way, and the rec-



ords kept are flawed and incomplete. Nevertheless, it is clear that the rate of femicide has at least doubled in Mexico over the past four years, and has risen even more precipitously since 2017. One of the most severely affected states continues to be Chihuahua, where Juárez is located; the killings there never really ended, only leveled off. The cartel battleground states of Nuevo León and Veracruz are even more dangerous, judging by the official numbers. But nowhere is femicide more common than in the State of Mexico. According to the federal government, there have been 368 cases in the past three years, and that is almost certainly an undercount, as even the officials in charge of record keeping admit. There's reason to believe that the true number is closer to four hundred or five hundred a year. Ecatepec today is an order of magnitude deadlier for women than turn-of-the-century Juárez.

Yet, a few days after visiting El Río de los Remedios, I met a cabinet-level official who told me straightforwardly that the problem of femicide was overblown. "It's statistically insignificant," he said. According to his records, there were 33,753 homicides in Mexico in 2018, an unprecedented number, and 92 percent of the victims were male. For the past thirteen years, Mexico has been caught in an interminable meatgrinder of a dirty war, instigated by the United States and fed by American guns and money, that ranks among the twenty-first century's deadliest conflicts. The Mexican military has recently disengaged to some degree, but fighting among the cartels is raging hotter than ever. In northern Mexico, homicide is now the leading cause of death for men under the age of thirty. At a national level, then, Mexico's falling life expectancy looks



more like an androicide: the systematic killing of men and boys. "The overall problem that's happening is *sicarios* and drug dealers fighting among themselves," the official said. "That is the issue we have to address."

His boss, Mexico's new president, the social democrat Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was elected in 2018 on a promise to demilitarize the narco war, eradicate corruption in the government, and reform the army and police, among other herculean tasks. The administration has created a commission on femicide, appointed experts to study it, and issued a number of "gender alerts"—a toothless protocol similar to the United States' terror alert level—but violence against women is a subject that López Obrador rarely mentions in his famous harangues. When questioned about femicide directly, he tends to pivot to the more general theme of reestablishing public security.

Mexico's feminist movement is broadly aligned with López Obrador, but activists criticize the administration's failure to take the problem of femicide seriously. "López Obrador doesn't see femicide, only generalized violence," said María de la Luz Estrada, director of the National Citizen Observatory on Femicide. "But one kind is committed by men fighting for territory. Sexual violence is different." According to her, the real reasons authorities are reluctant to acknowledge the epidemic are their unwillingness to investigate organized crime and the complicity of the military and police in sex trafficking. The authorities in places such as Ecatepec are wary of the stigma that became attached to Ciudad Juárez, so they deny or downplay any comparison, though the similarities are plain. "Of the ten murders of women a day, five have characteristics of femicide," María said, citing the bodies left in public places, deliberately

exhibited with legs spread, pants pulled down, or in a fetal position, having been burned, tortured, or otherwise desecrated in an intentional display of *desprecio*, or contemptuous devaluation. She told me that in Juárez, they would sometimes find victims wearing three pairs of underwear, which someone must have put on them after death. Strange, fetishistic details like those, the kind that baffled and obsessed Bolaño's fictional reporters in 2666, indicate a different species of violence from narco killings.

One clue as to the killers' motivations comes from Lydiette Carrión, a journalist who wrote a book about Ecatepec and El Río de los Remedios, titled *La Fosa de Agua*, or *The Watery Grave*. When I asked her about the seemingly irrational sadism on display, she brought up Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, in which a band of revolutionaries commits a murder, one purpose of which, she said, is to "reinforce the bonds of complicity." "Typically, the aggressors in these cases are very young guys, in precarious neighborhoods, who grew up alone. When gangs form, they have initiation rituals." She alluded to analogous rites among football teams, fraternities, and the like. "In the case of criminal groups," she said, "how do you establish complicity? Commit a crime. When it's a femicide, when corpses are mutilated, it doesn't have so much to do with her. It's a message between them, within the band. It's something symbolic, done to the body of a woman."

In June 2017, the elder Atayde brother was convicted of Fátima's murder and sentenced to seventy-three years in prison. The younger got off with five years because he was a minor at the time of the crime. But Hernández de Cruceño turned out to be connected to organized crime. According to Lorena, prosecutors told her that he and his family were involved with the New Generation Jalisco Cartel, known as the CJNG, the most powerful criminal militia in Mexico. Based in Jalisco, the CJNG is a nationwide paramilitary alliance of hundreds of armed gangs and corrupt military and police units, chiefly dedicated to trafficking drugs and stealing oil and gas from the state.

Shortly after Hernández de Cruceño was arrested, unfamiliar vehicles were spotted around Casas Viejas. One night, as Lorena's family slept, the front windows of their house were shot out. A short time later, Jesús, a bus driver, was on his usual route when a truck cut him off and another pulled up alongside, boxing him in. The men inside didn't say anything, but their purpose was clear: "To show me they knew where I worked," Jesús said. He quit the same day and hasn't held a steady job since. Fátima's little brother had to be withdrawn from school, at the request of the teachers, for the safety of the other children. Lorena still insisted on giving testimony against Hernández de Cruceño, even after the state's special prosecutor for femicide warned her in private that she was risking her life. "The government wants

"BITCH, YOU BETTER BE SHAKING,"
HE SAID. "YOU ALREADY SIGNED
YOUR OWN DEATH SENTENCE"

me to shut up," Lorena said. "Of course I'm not going to."

Lawyers with offices in the wealthy Polanco neighborhood of Mexico City arrived to defend Hernández de Cruceño in court. "Very expensive, very good lawyers," Jesús told me. They introduced a video purporting to show the defendant at his job as a security guard at the time of Fátima's killing, in the town of San Mateo, about half a day's drive from Casas Viejas. Lorena said the video's metadata had been manipulated, an easy trick. "The whole town saw him here," she said. "The whole town beat him up. He was admitted to the hospital." Nevertheless, on the basis of the supposed alibi, a judge found him innocent and ordered his release. The defendant's father stood up in the courtroom and pointed at Lorena. "Bitch, you better be shaking," he said. "You already signed your own death sentence."

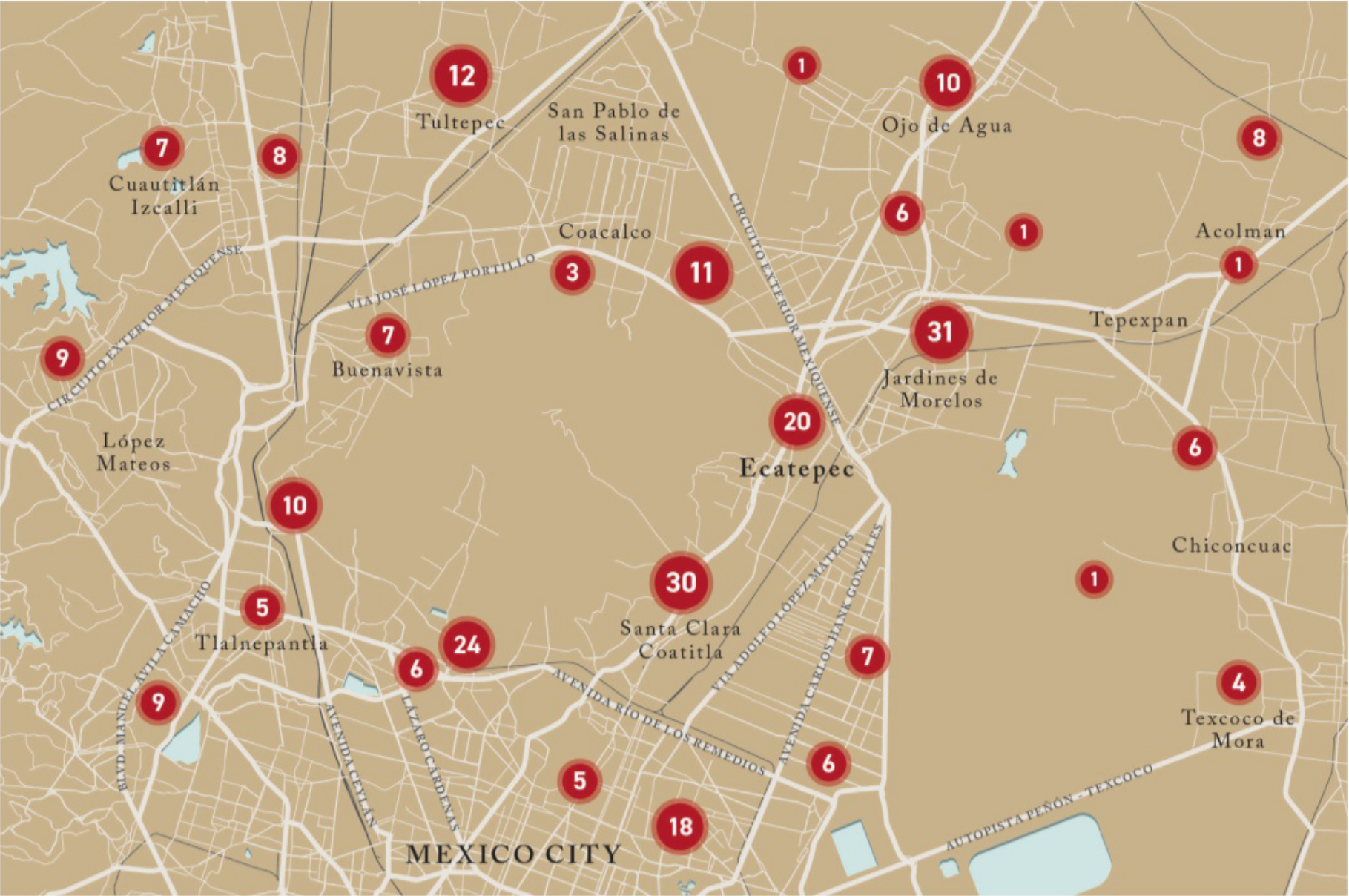
Fátima's entire family—parents and siblings and nephews, seven adults and five children—fled Casas Viejas for Toluca, and later left the State of Mexico altogether, fearing retribution

from the CJNG. The family has a place to stay near the U.S. border, at least for the time being, but the children must remain indoors, with little to do but play video games. It's not safe for them to walk to the park, much less enroll in school. Jesús found a job at an establishment willing to pay him in cash under the table, but the work is not much more than mopping floors. They can't have phones, or anything else that could be used to track them. The youngest boy, Fátima's constant companion in life, needs counseling. He was there when they found her body. He has spoken little since.

Ecatepec is an enormous municipality, covering nearly as much area as Mexico City, with no real center and an outline like a bomb blast. To identify the streets or neighborhoods where the most femicides have been recorded, I turned to an activist named María Salguero Bañuelos, who has created a digital map that is far more detailed and complete than the government's records.

María is a forty-year-old engineer who studied geophysics at Mexico's most prestigious polytechnic school, but she still lives in the rough neighborhood in downtown Mexico City where she was raised. When we met at a coffee shop in La Roma, she arrived on a bicycle, and was still wearing her helmet as she took a seat. I congratulated her on being named to *Forbes's* 2019 list of the most powerful women in Mexico. "My pockets don't reflect it," she said with a grin.

María started work on the map in 2016, after noticing news reports of sharply rising numbers of femicides all over Mexico, and seeing little recognition of the problem by the government. She drew on police statements, newspaper articles, and a network of informants to keep her map up-to-date, working long hours for no pay. Her efforts have earned her media coverage, threats from the CJNG, and a job offer from the new presidential administration that turned out to be illusory. For "bureaucratic reasons," she said, sounding disappointed. "Nothing has changed since the election of López Obrador, nothing at all." In fact,



Top: A map of the distribution of femicides in Mexico between January 2017 and December 2019
Bottom: The distribution of femicides in Ecatepec and its surrounding region in the same period
Maps by Mike Hall. Source map © María Salguero Bañuelos. All numbers accurate as of January 2020

LETTER FROM ECATEPEC 59

since he assumed office on December 1, 2018, the pace of femicides across the country has increased markedly. María scoffed at the government's claim that there were only 112 femicides in the State of Mexico in 2018. According to her count, there were 456, and she expects the yearly totals to continue to rise. "The authorities have no idea how many there have been," she said, placing her arms on the table for emphasis. "Ni idea."

I pulled up her map on my laptop. The whole country appeared carpeted in red pins, each one representing a case of femicide. I zoomed in on Ecatepec, with 1.7 million inhabitants, the largest of the moons orbiting Mexico City. In the satellite image, the surface of the earth here looked scraped to the bone. "Ecatepec is a trash can for human beings," she said. "A dumping ground for corpses. Many people say it's the worst part of the country." When the government subdivided Ecatepec, it did so without planning, she said. "Everything is spread out. People have to travel two hours to get into Mexico City. There is no street lighting. You have to cross vacant lots. It gives refuge to predators."

Forty percent of the victims María has identified had a man in their family or social circle involved in organized crime. She calls these "*feminicidios por pertenencia de un enemigo*," femicide related to an enemy, often distinguishable, she said, by the use of high-powered American weapons such as AR-15s and semi-automatic handguns. "It's a way of damaging an opponent, to kill their women. This pattern is common in Ecatepec." According to María, the victims of femicide get younger with every passing year. She said the state prosecutors are saturated with cases and carry out very few investigations. Police lack the resources to order DNA tests and are untrained in the basics of investigative practice. Instead, María said, "They blame the victim. They say she wasn't in school, she was taking

drugs, she got pregnant and ran off with a boyfriend. Or they'll say she committed suicide." She estimated that there were around four thousand orphans as a result of femicide. "No one knows where they are, with whom, if they're eating, if they're going to school, if they're with the family of the aggressor. Sometimes the children of victims are sold."

Asked to identify the most violent part of town, María narrowed it down to two neighborhoods on the east side of the city with a combined area of three and a half square miles, where the digital pins were most concentrated: fifteen cases in the roughly hexagonal barrio of Ciudad Cuauhtémoc and twelve in the triangular Jardines de Morelos subdivision. This





swath of Ecatepec is said to be a redoubt for gangs of armed robbers, where every business establishment and form of transport is subject to the *derecho de piso*, an illegal tax imposed by a dozen-odd local mafias—some old-school, some newer—working under the aegis of two or three major cartels, predominantly the CJNG. This part of the city is considered too

dangerous to visit, off-limits to outsiders, abandoned by the police, a “black hole,” as it was described to me on more than one occasion. But the next time I talked to Joaquín, he said he could take me there safely because he worked for the cable-car company. Everyone knew his vehicle, with its one glittery fender, its trunk that wouldn’t shut, and its deeply

tinted rear windows, sufficiently opaque to obscure the pale visage of a gringo. I decided to take him up on the offer one day in mid-September.

We met at the Mexicable station on the south side of Ecatepec, the farthest that an Uber would venture. Our driver for the day was Joaquín’s buddy, also thirty-one, who went by the nickname Pelón. He wore a long T-shirt thoroughly stained with engine grease, equally greasy sweatpants, and disintegrating sneakers. He had a tattoo of the evil clown from the movie *It* on one forearm, the drawing skillfully done but incomplete. “I’m waiting for the sequel,” he explained.

Driving into Cuauhtémoc, Joaquín told us about a party he went to at the house of a trafficker in exotic animals, where someone had offered to sell him a girl of about seven or eight for two thousand *varos*, or bucks. “The girl was just sitting there, not talking,” he said. “She was indigenous, *morenita*.”

“Everyone here has a family member who has disappeared,” said Joaquín. His sixteen-year-old niece went missing a few years ago. “I hope she’s dead,” he said, without apparent emotion. “I don’t want to imagine her life if she’s not.”

Joaquín pointed out a slaughterhouse and hastened to roll up his window. There are many industrial sites in Ecatepec—including canning and bottling facilities, a limestone mine, and a thermoelectric plant—but none smell as bad as the meat-processing facilities, they told me. We drove by the La Costeña factory where they pickle

the jalapeños I buy at my grocery store in Austin. Behind the building, Joaquín said, was a “lost world,” a makeshift encampment of drug users and underage sex workers.

As we entered Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, there were no armed men to be seen. I spotted only one police vehicle, stationed at an intersection: an armored truck with a machine-gun

New York Revisited BY HENRY JAMES

IN *NEW YORK REVISITED*, FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1906 BY *HARPER'S MAGAZINE*, HENRY JAMES DESCRIBES TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY NEW YORK IN VIVID DETAIL. IT IS AS PERTINENT TODAY AS IT WAS MORE THAN A CENTURY AGO.



Enhanced with period
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introductory essay by
LEWIS H. LAPHAM

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turret that looked like it had been through battle. The main avenues were bleak expanses of concrete, lined with billboards. There were gas stations every few blocks, and the sky was smudged with brown exhaust.

The pedestrians looked like the working class anywhere in Mexico: wearing jeans and sneakers, carrying backpacks or plastic bags, trudging to the bus stop or buying food from street vendors. Despite the neighborhood's forbidding reputation, there were few obvious signs of organized crime. Joaquín indicated a handful of *chacas*, or crooks, hanging out on a street corner, but to me they looked more pitiful than intimidating. "The really bad guys come out at night," Pelón said. Robbery is the most pervasive crime around here. "With a gun, not with a knife," he added. Whole blocks were closed off by barred gates, and in the parking lots, cars were locked in cages. I saw only one drug dealer, an old man in filthy clothes crouched on the sidewalk methodically wrapping rocks of crack cocaine in aluminum foil. If he wasn't worried about the police, it was likely because he had paid his weekly bribe of 2,500 pesos, about \$140. "There may be a city in Mexico where the police aren't corrupt," Pelón said. "I don't know where, but it's possible."

We passed a series of pulque stands, a soap factory, auto shops and garages, and an overpopulated graveyard where faded pinwheels spun. A sad little garden plot in the median of the road had a hand-painted sign that read: NO SE ROBAN LAS PLANTAS ("Do not steal the plants").

Other than palms, the only trees were invasive eucalypti and chinaberries that looked dusty and sick. Bougainvillea was a colorful relief, as were the street murals. One next to a mechanic's shop depicted frogs and birds and jaguars arrayed around an indigenous warrior in a headdress, a spray-painted memorial to the pre-Columbian paradise that once existed here. It wasn't a coincidence that every feminist I met in Mexico was also an environmentalist. A few days earlier, I'd seen graffiti scrawled across the side of a building in Mexico City: "The killing of

Mother Earth is the biggest femicide of all."

Now in Jardines de Morelos, we slowed to a stop in front of a plain concrete house near a vacant lot. On the sidewalk down the street was a taco stand where a man in a soiled apron was chopping raw chicken on a table. As we got out of the vehicle, my guides traded jokes about cannibalism. This used to be the home of Juan Carlos Hernández Bejar, better known as the Monster of Ecatepec, and his accomplice wife, Patricia Martínez Bernal. The pair killed at least twenty women—the real number may be closer to fifty—some of whom they cooked and ate.

We stood on the far side of the street, wary of getting any closer. We had all read about the Monster of Ecatepec in the tabloids. Long before he was arrested, in October 2018, the neighbors had noticed strange things about Juan Carlos and Patricia. They had almost no furniture, just cardboard boxes and black plastic bags. They came and went at odd hours, sometimes pushing a stroller. A bad smell hung over the empty lot nearby. Reeking fluids sometimes trickled into the gutter. They made money selling secondhand clothes and used cell phones.

There are serial killers everywhere, but Mexico's homicide crisis gives them cover by greatly reducing the chance that any given murder will lead to an investigation. When the couple's next-door neighbor, Arlet Samanta Olguín, went missing in April 2018, the police made her mother, María Guadalupe Hernández López, wait three hours to file a report. Then they saw her for five minutes and told her to come back the next morning. Three months of bureaucracy, delay, and inaction followed. "From April to June, the story was, 'Don't worry, we're working on it,'" María Guadalupe told me. "But nothing happened with the file." Another young woman who lived nearby disappeared in July, and a third in September. "Three cases with the same pattern of characteristics," she said: "Young, single mothers, all of them dark-eyed brunettes with long hair." María Guadalupe learned from a local tabloid reporter

that the other two women were last known to have answered an advertisement for secondhand clothes that Patricia had placed. The mothers of the victims and the reporter took the information they had gathered to the police. "The prosecutor wouldn't listen to us," María Guadalupe said. "We told them, 'It's Juan Carlos. Arrest him.' They said, 'We don't have proof.'"

That October, a vigilante posse including María Guadalupe returned to the police station to inform the authorities that they intended to deal with the couple on their own. It must have been clear that they were serious, because the police finally sent officers to check out the house. When they arrived, they happened to catch the pair outside pushing their baby stroller. Inside were chopped-up body parts. It would later be reported that Patricia had served her husband tamales made with flesh from Samanta's body. They had sold her bones to a practitioner of Santería.

Both husband and wife were swiftly convicted on multiple counts of femicide and murder. While I was in Mexico, they were sentenced to a combined 327 years in prison. There's a video online of a police psychologist questioning Juan Carlos about his motivations and state of mind. The Monster of Ecatepec is stocky, *moreno*. He sits in a chair, handcuffed, wearing faded jeans and a black T-shirt. "I'm completely sane and well," he says. In the twelve-minute clip, he rants about what a whore his mother was, brags about how smart he is and how many women he's had sex with, sobs until his whole body shakes, and talks about a head injury he suffered as a child.

After Juan Carlos was sentenced, María Guadalupe had the opportunity to confront him in court. "I told him he was a coward because he only killed women. He answered me, 'I also killed men.' I told him my daughter was a queen, unlike the nameless thing at his side, who calls herself a woman and is an embarrassment to our gender. He said, 'Your daughter is never coming back.' I don't know where I got the strength to speak to him without crying. He said he hates women. Because his mother did very

ugly things, and at times his girlfriends had cheated on him. And since then he's hated women. He said it in open court. That he couldn't bear to see us go on breathing."

On a cloudy afternoon later in September, I knocked on the door of a publishing house in La Condesa, a tranquil and tree-lined enclave of Mexico City. I had come to meet four members of a collective called Marabunta, an "*asamblea autodefensa feminista*" whose name evokes a swarm of ants. Three of the four women were recent graduates of Mexico's biggest and best university, known as UNAM. Part of their ethos is not to discuss the collective, but they agreed to talk about their individual participation in the protests that had disrupted downtown Mexico City over the previous two months. We settled into a lamp-lit conference room, where they arranged themselves on a couple of couches. They were fashionably attired in baggy sweaters and jackets, ripped jeans, and chunky boots and sneakers.

The largest demonstration of the summer had taken place on August 12, incited by the rape of a seventeen-year-old girl by four Mexico City police officers. What appeared to be one or two thousand self-described radical feminists had shown up, mostly college-age women, many of them hooded or masked, wearing the green bandannas that symbolize the movement. They marched to Paseo de la Reforma carrying portraits of murdered women, tagged sidewalks and walls with spray paint, and left broken glass everywhere they went. "*Verga violadora, a la licuadora*," they chanted. (The translation, "Rapist member, into the blender," greatly understates the profanity of the original.) The police formed a cordon around the attorney general's office and stoically withstood being berated at close range and hit with handfuls of glitter. Fires were set. The riot culminated in the vandalism of the Angel of Independence, a grand obelisk at the city center. MÉXICO FEMINICIDIO was painted across the plaque of the pedestal. On the monument's base was written ESTADO VIOLADOR:

A PORTRAIT OF **VALOR** FROM A LION OF **THE LEFT**

With an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich

MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE



**The World War II Diary of
GEORGE MCGOVERN**

BEFORE HE BECAME A CELEBRATED POLITICIAN, **GEORGE MCGOVERN** SERVED IN WORLD WAR II AS A B-24 BOMBER PILOT. HE FLEW IN THIRTY-FIVE COMBAT MISSIONS AND EARNED THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS FOR HIS INGENUITY IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY. **MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE**, A FACSIMILE OF THE DIARY MCGOVERN KEPT BETWEEN 1944 AND 1945, VISUALLY EVOKES THE ERA AND PROVIDES A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT OF THE ALLIED BOMBING OF NAZI-OCCUPIED EUROPE.

INTRODUCTION BY
ANDREW J. BACEVICH,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF
HARPER'S MAGAZINE

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rapist state. It took the city weeks to clean up.

Aleida Salazar, a thirty-year-old director of content at a software company, said it was the first time she had ever seen a group of men move out of her way with fear in their eyes. "Normally, it's the reverse," she said, to the laughter of her friends. "Honestly, I enjoyed it."

I asked if they could rightly compare the dangers and annoyances they face here in the city to the horrors stalking poor working women in the surrounding state. "The situation of women in La Condesa is not the same as in Ecatepec, but in general the situation of women in Mexico is terrible," said Aura García-Junco, a thirty-one-year-old writer. The rest of the group chimed in. Even rich women are at risk in their mansions, they told me. "The so-called suicides," said Irasema Fernández, a twenty-nine-year-old artist. The others murmured knowingly. "It mostly affects the most vulnerable women, but it's also something that can happen to you at any time," Aleida said. "Your husband, someone in your family." In November, a woman was gunned down not far from my hotel in Coyoacán; her abusive ex-husband, formerly the CEO of Amazon Mexico, is accused of ordering the hit.

Femicide is distinct from the cartel violence that constitutes the bulk of homicides in Mexico, according to Sujaila Miranda Moreno, who was twenty-three and had recently completed a degree in literature. "Men don't suffer this kind of triple death," she said. "One, they violate and destroy your sexuality. Second, they annul you completely as a person, by murdering you. Third, they mutilate your body, as a final objectification."

They believe that femicide is only the most extreme manifestation of Mexican machismo, an attitude of exaggerated masculinity, virility, and dominance over women. At its most quotidian, machismo manifests as street harassment, which is pervasive in Mexico City. "I can't go one day without being accosted in public," Irasema said. I interrupted, slightly skeptical, and asked what had happened today, for example. She replied:

"On the way here, I passed a guy on the sidewalk, and he goes, 'Move it,' like, 'move that ass.'"

"Whenever we complain, the first question they ask us is, 'Did you report him?'" Aura said. "It's always the same thing."

"The police are just going to revictimize you," said Sujaila. "They'll ask, 'Why were you wearing those clothes? Why were you walking by yourself?'"

"They would never ask a robbery victim, 'Why were you carrying valuables?'" Aura interjected.

"Their attitude is that if you weren't killed, don't worry, take it easy," said Irasema. "The reality is that the ones who are supposed to protect us are the first to attack us. It's well known—the violence of the police, the army, the marines, the state."

In the case of the rape that provoked the August 12 march, the four accused police officers were initially put on leave but were ultimately allowed to return to the force. "The law is totally patriarchal," Aura said. "The institutions are permeated by machismo." That may be why, when asked to articulate their specific demands on society and the government, they fell uncharacteristically quiet. "Recognizing the problem is the first thing," Irasema said. "They must no longer disguise the number of femicides. They must properly classify them. Just this first step will require a great deal."

Mexico remains socially conservative, in the grim Iberian tradition. The most elaborate social rituals include the quinceañera, the wedding, and the beauty pageant. Women with tattoos and dyed hair marching in the street are seen as importing a global culture that is alien to traditional values. On the first day of one of her classes, Sujaila recalled, the professor asked those students who identified as feminists to raise their hands. Only two did, including her. "And it was a course on feminist literature," she said.

Attitudes toward feminism are even more hostile outside Mexico City. But the mothers I interviewed who had lost a daughter to femicide all had good things to say about the *chicas feministas* who had been set-

ting off smoke bombs and lighting trash cans on fire to draw attention to the killings. "Of course they are helping," Lorena said when I asked her opinion. "*Ni una más*," she added, echoing their rallying cry: not one more.

Lorena has not given up trying to hold Hernández de Cruceño accountable for her daughter's murder. Over the past three years, she has made frequent, grueling bus trips to and from Mexico City. She has attended marches and protests, contacted journalists, and given interviews. Articles about Fátima have proliferated online. In November 2017, the Observatory on Femicide, the organization led by María de la Luz Estrada, agreed to take up the case. Lawyers associated with the Observatory filed a petition in federal court to force the State of Mexico to reopen criminal proceedings against Hernández de Cruceño. After more than a year of litigation, they succeeded in having the charge of femicide reinstated. On July 10, 2019, he was jailed pending the outcome of the case, which is now on appeal in Mexico City.

In late September, I arranged to meet Lorena and Jesús during their trip to the capital to attend the hearing. At their request, we chose a crowded public place, the grand plaza beside the Palacio de Bellas Artes. There were fountains flowing, kids screaming, and hurdy-gurdy men cranking barrel organs. On Avenida Juárez, sanitation workers were scrubbing graffiti from the latest green-bandanna rally, which had taken place the week before. Lorena and Jesús arrived on time, looking like an ordinary, tired-out, middle-aged couple, wheeling a pair of suitcases. We settled on a concrete bench. They had three hours before the eighteen-hour bus trip back north, followed by a taxi ride and a long walk to the place where they live as inconspicuously as possible, telling no one their real names. "We don't live, we survive," Lorena said. "We are the walking dead. We are prisoners in our own country."

They were not trying to reach the United States. They had no money

to pay a smuggler. In any case, the passage was too dangerous these days. Especially for children, Jesús added. “We think Canada is a more peaceful country,” Lorena said. They had gone to the Canadian Embassy but were not allowed past the gates. They had only a vague understanding of the process of applying for asylum. “We need help getting out of here,” she said. “And if they won’t take me and my husband, at least take the children. Because they will kill us all here in Mexico.” They feared they could disappear at any time. A truck would pull up and men would step out and that would be it. They would be driven to a desolate place, perhaps a river filled with trash, perhaps a desiccated cornfield, or one of those military bases where the ground is packed with bones. “All Mexico is a mass grave,” Lorena said. “A vast, vast lake of blood.”

“Sometimes I think it’s all a conspiracy,” she continued, half to herself. “Not just of this government, but governments of all the world. They don’t realize what they’re doing. We, the women, are the ones who give life. If they destroy us, they destroy everything.”

The family will never go back to Casas Viejas. “Fátima was murdered in 2015,” Lorena said. “They are killing twice as many women and girls now. Every day the murders get more sadistic, more frightening.” In October and November, the instances of femicide in and around Ecatepec that María Salguero added to her map included a woman in her thirties whose naked body looked to have been mauled by a pack of dogs and a woman of unknown age found beaten and gagged on the side of a highway. In December, a woman was thrown from a van and set on fire, and an eighteen-year-old girl’s body was found alongside a footpath on a weed-grown lot. She had been *arteramente asesinada*, “artfully” or cunningly murdered, in the ambiguous phrasing of María Salguero’s informant, in a manner said to have caused “indignation” in the neighborhood. The girl’s name was Anayeli. The other women have not been identified. ■

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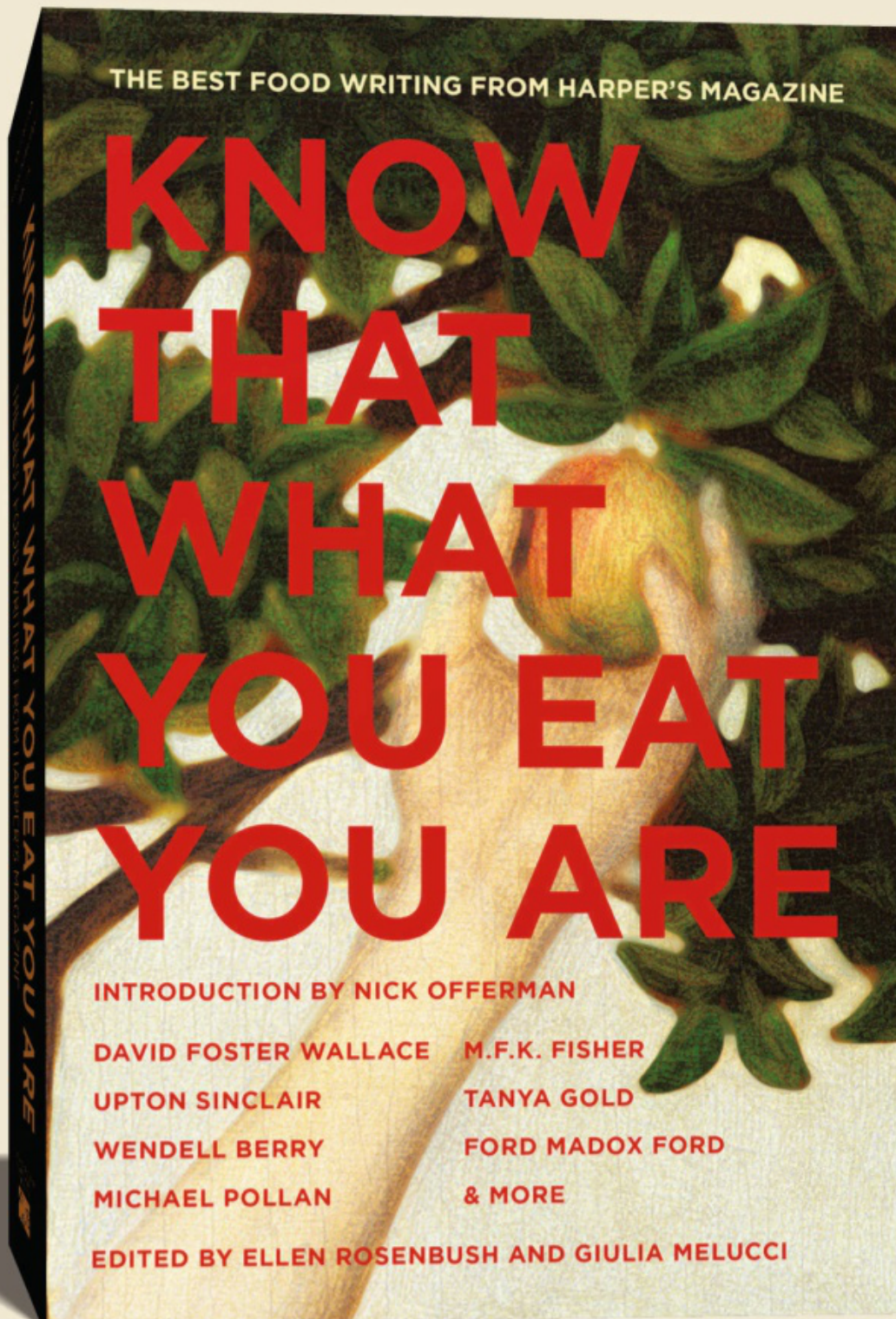
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N	O	R	M	N	E	R	O	Y	T	U	A	E
A	D	Z	E	S	K	E	B	O	O	T	E	R
T	E	R	R	A	I	N	A	L	N	R	M	E
E	A	U	T	S	E	C	R	E	T	I	O	N
N	N	B	A	L	L	E	T	O	M	A	N	E

ACROSS: 1. pullet surprise; 11. pe(w[esson])t-ER-ER; 12. ni(cot-1)ne; 13. mar-[i]t; 14. hidden; 16. moo-ch.; 17. in(st)ability; 19. F-a-med; 20. a-r[o]gue; 22. A-n-n; 23. feta complet; 26. skull(C)aps*; 28. A.(the-is)M.; 30. hidden; 31. first letters; 32. re(ferend*)a*; 34. boo sounds; 40. N-or-M; 41. hidden; 42. ad[d]-zes[t]; 43. two mnsgs.; 44. *; 47. homophone; 48. *; 49. ballot ptomaine.

DOWN: 1. p-on-tiffs; 2. UN-10-n; 3. lox myth; 4. tetra-d; 5. zwieba(c)k*; 6. *; 7. premiu*-M[ets]; 8. *; 9. Zi(RC)on; 10. youth in Asia; 15. Sir Cumference; 18. tethe*-r; 21. *; 22. Alar[m]; 24. *; 25. I.P.O-D; 27. yore-L. (rev.); 28. ah nuttin'; 29. two mnsgs; 30. pun, two-ton; 33. EZ-E-kiel*; 35. *; 36. Ho(B)art*; 37. nut-air (rev.); 38. *; 39. seren[ad]e; 45. two mnsgs.; 46. two mnsgs.

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THE FIFTH STEP

By Stephen King

Harold Jamieson, once chief engineer of New York City's sanitation department, enjoyed retirement. He knew from his small circle of friends that some didn't, so he considered himself lucky. He had an acre of garden in Queens that he shared with several like-minded horticulturists, he had discovered Netflix, and he was making inroads in the books he'd always meant to read. He still missed his wife—a victim of breast cancer five years previous—but aside from that persistent ache, his life was quite full. Before rising every morning, he reminded himself to enjoy the day. At sixty-eight, he liked to think he had a fair amount of road left, but there was no denying it had begun to narrow.

The best part of those days—assuming it wasn't raining, snowing, or too cold—was the nine-block walk to Central Park after breakfast. Although

Stephen King's story "Batman and Robin Have an Altercation" appeared in the September 2012 issue of Harper's Magazine.



he carried a cell phone and used an electronic tablet (had grown dependent on it, in fact), he still preferred the print version of the *Times*. In the park, he would settle on his favorite bench and spend an hour with it, reading the sections back to front, telling himself he was progressing from the sublime to the ridiculous.

One morning in mid-May, the weather coolish but perfectly adequate

for bench sitting and newspaper reading, he was annoyed to look up from his paper and see a man sitting down on the other end of his bench, although there were plenty of empty ones in the vicinity. This invader of Jamieson's morning space looked to be in his mid to late forties, neither handsome nor ugly, in fact perfectly nondescript. The same was true of his attire: New Balance walking shoes, jeans, a Yankees cap, and a Yankees hoodie with the hood tossed back. Jamieson gave him an impatient side-glance and prepared to move to another bench.

"Wait," the man said.

"I sat down here because I need a favor. It's not a big one, but I'll pay." He reached into the kangaroo pouch of his hoodie and brought out a twenty-dollar bill.

"I don't do favors for strange men," Jamieson said, and got up.

"But that's exactly the point—the two of us being strangers. Hear me out. If you say no, that's fine. But please hear me out. You could ..." He cleared his throat, and Jamieson realized the

guy was nervous. Maybe more, maybe scared. "You could be saving my life."

Jamieson considered, then sat down, but as far from the other man as he could while still keeping both butt cheeks on the bench. "I'll give you a minute, but if you sound crazy, I'm leaving. And put your money away. I don't need it, and I don't want it."

The man looked at the bill as if surprised to find it still in his hand, then put it back in the pocket of his sweat-shirt. He put his hands on his thighs and looked down at them instead of at Jamieson. "I'm an alcoholic. Four months sober. Four months and twelve days, to be exact."

"Congratulations," Jamieson said. He guessed he meant it, but he was even more ready to get up. The guy seemed sane, but Jamieson was old enough to know that sometimes the woo-woo didn't come out right away.

"I've tried three times before and once got almost a year. I think this might be my last chance to grab the brass ring. I'm in AA. That's—"

"I know what it is. What's your name, Mr. Four Months Sober?"

"You can call me Jack, that's good enough. We don't use last names in the program."

Jamieson knew that, too. Lots of people on the Netflix shows had alcohol problems. "So what can I do for you, Jack?"

"The first three times I tried, I didn't get a sponsor in the program—somebody who listens to you, answers your questions, sometimes tells you what to do. This time I did. Met a guy at the Bowery Sundown meeting and really liked the stuff he said. And, you know, how he carried himself. Twelve years sober, feet on the ground, works in sales, like me."

He had turned to look at Jamieson, but now he returned his gaze to his hands.

"I used to be a hell of a salesman—for five years I headed the sales department of ... well, it doesn't matter, but it was a big deal, you'd know the company. Now I'm down to peddling greeting cards and energy drinks to bodegas in the five boroughs. Last rung on the ladder, man."

"Get to the point," Jamieson said, but not harshly; he had become a little interested in spite of himself. It was

not every day that a stranger sat down on your bench and started spilling his shit. Especially not in New York. "I was just going to check on the Mets. They're off to a good start."

Jack rubbed a palm across his mouth. "I liked this guy I met at the Sundown, so I got up my courage after a meeting and asked him to be my sponsor. In March, this was. He looked me over and said he'd take me on, but only on two conditions: that I do everything he said and call him if I felt like drinking. 'Then I'll be calling you every fucking night,' I said, and he said, 'So call me every fucking night, and if I don't answer talk to the machine.' Then he asked me if I worked the Steps. Do you know what those are?"

"Vaguely."

"I said I hadn't gotten around to them. He said that if I wanted him to be my sponsor, I'd have to start. He said the first three were both the hardest and the easiest. They boil down to 'I can't stop on my own, but with God's help I can, so I'm going to let him help.'"

Jamieson grunted.

"I said I didn't believe in God. This guy—Randy's his name—said he didn't give a shit. He told me to get down on my knees every morning and ask this God I didn't believe in to help me stay sober another day. And if I did, he said for me to get down on my knees before I turned in and thank God for my sober day. Randy asked if I was willing to do that, and I said I was. Because I'd lose him otherwise. You see?"

"Sure. You were desperate."

"Exactly! 'The gift of desperation,' that's what AAs call it. Randy said if I didn't do those prayers and said I was doing them, he'd know. Because he spent thirty years lying his ass off about everything."

"So you did it? Even though you don't believe in God?"

"I did it and it's been working. As for my belief that there's no God ... the longer I stay sober, the more that wavers."

"If you're going to ask me to pray with you, forget it."

Jack smiled down at his hands. "Nope. I still feel self-conscious about the on-my-knees thing even when I'm by myself. Last month—April—Randy told me to do the Fourth Step. That's

when you make a moral inventory—supposedly 'searching and fearless'—of your character."

"Did you?"

"Yes. Randy said I was supposed to put down the bad stuff, then turn the page and list the good stuff. It took me ten minutes for the bad stuff. Over an hour for the good stuff. When I told Randy, he said that was normal. 'You drank for almost thirty years,' he said. 'That puts a lot of bruises on a man's self-image. But if you stay sober, they'll heal.' Then he told me to burn the lists. He said it would make me feel better."

"Did it?"

"Strangely enough, it did. Anyway, that brings us to this month's request from Randy."

"More of a demand, I'm guessing," Jamieson said, smiling a little. He folded his newspaper and laid it aside.

Jack also smiled. "I think you're catching the sponsor-sponsee dynamic. Randy told me it was time to do my Fifth Step."

"Which is?"

"Admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs," Jack said, making quote marks with his fingers. "I told him okay, I'd make a list and read it to him. God could listen in. Two birds with one stone deal."

"I'm thinking he said no."

"He said no. He told me to approach a complete stranger. His first suggestion was a priest or a minister, but I haven't set foot in a church since I was twelve, and I have no urge to go back. Whatever I'm coming to believe—and I don't know yet what that is—I don't need to sit in a church pew to help it along."

Jamieson, no churchgoer himself, nodded his understanding.

"Randy said, 'So walk up to somebody in Washington Square or Central Park and ask him to hear you list your wrongs. Offer a few bucks to sweeten the deal if that's what it takes. Keep asking until someone agrees to listen.' He said the hard part would be the asking part, and he was right."

"Am I ...?" *Your first victim* was the phrase that came to mind, but Jamieson decided it wasn't exactly fair. "Am I the first person you've approached?"

"The second." Jack grinned. "I tried an off-duty cab driver yesterday and he told me to get lost."

Jamieson thought of an old New York joke: Out-of-towner approaches a guy on Lexington Avenue and says, "Can you tell me how to get to City Hall or should I just go fuck myself?" He decided he wasn't going to tell the guy in the Yankees gear to go fuck himself. He would listen, and the next time he met his friend Alex (another retiree) for lunch, he'd have something interesting to talk about.

"Okay, go for it."

Jack reached into the pouch of his hoodie, took out a piece of paper, and unfolded it. "When I was in fourth grade—"

"If this is going to be your life story, maybe you better give me that twenty after all."

Jack reached into his hoodie with the hand not holding his list of wrongdoings, but Jamieson waved him off. "Joking."

"Sure?"

Jamieson didn't know whether he was or not. "Yes. But let's not take too long. I've got an appointment at eight-thirty." This wasn't true, and Jamieson reflected that it was good he didn't have the alcohol problem, because according to the TV meetings he'd attended, honesty was a big deal if you did.

"Keep it speedy, got it. Here goes. In fourth grade I got into a fight with another kid. Gave him a bloody lip and nose. When we got to the principal's office, I said it was because he'd called my mother a dirty name. He denied it, of course, but we both got sent home with a note for our parents. Or just my mom in my case, because my dad left us when I was two."

"And the dirty name thing?"

"A lie. I was having a bad day and thought I'd feel better if I got into a fight with this kid I didn't like. I don't know why I didn't like him—I guess there was a reason, but I don't remember what it was. Only that it set a pattern of lying."

"I started drinking in junior high. My mother had a bottle of vodka she kept in the freezer. I'd swig from it, then add water. She finally caught me, and the vodka disappeared from the freezer. I knew where she put it—on a high shelf over the stove—but I left it alone after that. By then it was probably mostly water, anyway. I saved my allow-

ance and chore money and got some old vino to buy me nips. He'd get four and keep one. I enabled his drinking. That's what my sponsor would say."

Jack shook his head.

"I don't know what happened to that guy. Ralph, his name was, only I thought of him as Wretched Ralph. Kids can be cruel. For all I know, he's dead and I helped kill him."

"Don't get carried away," Jamieson said. "I'm sure you have stuff to feel guilty about without having to invent a bunch of might-have-beens."

Jack looked up and grinned. When he did, Jamieson saw that the man had tears in his eyes. Not falling, but brimming. "Now you sound like Randy."

"Is that a good thing?"

"I think so. I think I'm lucky I found you."

Jamieson discovered he actually felt lucky to have been found. "What else have you got on that list? Because time's passing."

"I went to Brown and graduated cum laude, but mostly I lied and cheated my way through. I was good at it. And—here's a big one—the student adviser I had my senior year was a coke addict. I won't go into how I found that out, like you said, time's passing, but I did, and I made a deal with him. Good recommendations in exchange for a key of coke."

"As in kilo?" Jamieson asked. His eyebrows went up most of the way to his hairline.

"That's right. He paid for it and I brought it in through the Canadian border, tucked into the spare tire of my old Ford. Trying to look like any other college kid who'd spent his semester break having fun and getting laid in Toronto, but my heart was beating like crazy and I bet my blood pressure was red-lining. The car in front of me at the checkpoint got tossed completely, but I got waved right through after showing my driver's license. Of course things were much looser back then." He paused, then said, "I overcharged him for the key, too. Pocketed the difference."

"But you didn't use any of the cocaine yourself?"

"No, that was never my scene. I did a line or two once in a while, but what I really wanted—still want—is grain alcohol. When I got a job, I lied to my bosses, but eventually that gave out. It

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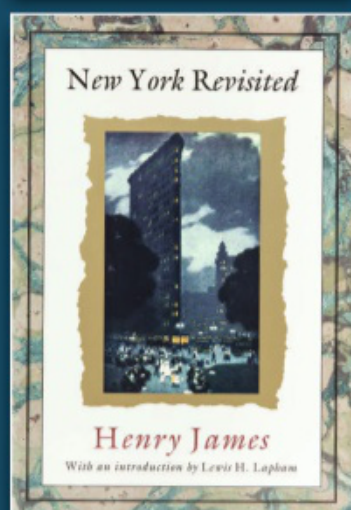
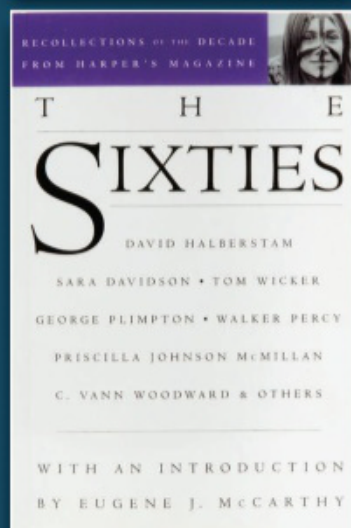
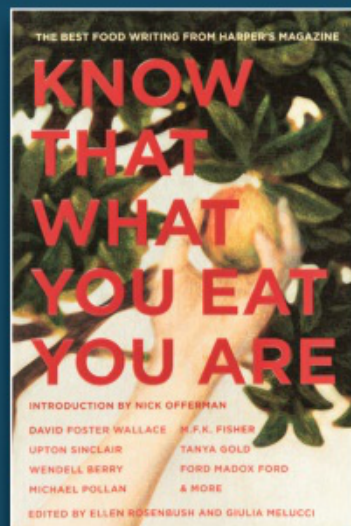
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wasn't like college, and there was nobody to mule coke for. Not that I found, anyway."

"What did you do, exactly?"

"Massaged my sell-sheets. Made up appointments that didn't exist to explain days when I was too hungover to come in. Jiggered expense sheets. That first job was a good one. The sky was the limit. And I blew it."

"After they let me go, I decided what I really needed was a change of location. In AA that's called a geographic cure. Never works, but I didn't know that. Seems simple enough now; if you put an asshole on a plane in Boston, an asshole gets off in L.A. Or Denver. Or Des Moines. I fucked up a second job, not as good as the first one, but good. That was in San Diego. And what I decided then was that I needed to get married and settle down. *That* would solve the problem. So I got married to a nice girl who deserved better than me. It lasted two years, me lying right down the line about my drinking. Inventing nonexistent business appointments to explain why I was home late, faking flu symptoms to explain why I was going in late or not at all. I could have bought stock in one of those breath-mint companies—Altoids, Breath Savers—but was she fooled?"

"I'm guessing not," Jamieson said. "Listen, are we approaching the end here?"

"Yes. Five more minutes. Promise."

"Okay."

"There were arguments that kept getting worse. Stuff got thrown occasionally, and not just by her. There came a night when I came home around midnight, stinking drunk, and she started in on me. You know, all the usual jabber, and all of it was true. I felt like she was throwing poison darts at me and never missing."

Jack was looking at his hands again. His mouth was turned down at the corners so severely that for a moment he looked to Jamieson like Emmett Kelly, that famous sad-faced clown.

"You know what came into my mind while she was yelling at me? Glenn Ferguson, that boy I beat up in the fourth grade. How good it felt, like squeezing the pus out of a boil. I thought it would be good to beat *her* up, and for sure no one would send me

home with a note for my mother, because my mom died the year after I graduated from Brown."

"Whoa," Jamieson said. His good feeling about this uninvited confession took a hike. Unease replaced it. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear what came next.

"I left," Jack said. "But I was scared enough to know I had to do something about my drinking. That was the first time I tried AA, out there in San Diego. I was sober when I came back to New York, but that didn't last. Tried again and *that* didn't last, either. Neither did the third. But now I've got Randy, and this time I might make it. Partly thanks to you." He held out his hand.

"Well, you're welcome," Jamieson said, and took it.

"There is one more thing," Jack said. His grip was very strong. He was looking into Jamieson's eyes and smiling. "I did leave, but I cut that bitch's throat before I did. I didn't stop drinking, but it made me feel better. The way beating up Glenn Ferguson made me feel better. And that wino I told you about? Kicking him around made me feel better, too. Don't know if I killed him, but I sure did bust him up."

Jamieson tried to pull back, but the grip was too strong. The other hand was once more inside the pocket of the Yankees hoodie.

"I really want to stop drinking, and I can't do a complete Fifth Step without admitting that I seem to really enjoy..."

What felt like a streak of hot white light slid between Jamieson's ribs, and when Jack pulled the dripping ice pick away, once more tucking it into the pocket of the hoodie, Jamieson realized he couldn't breathe.

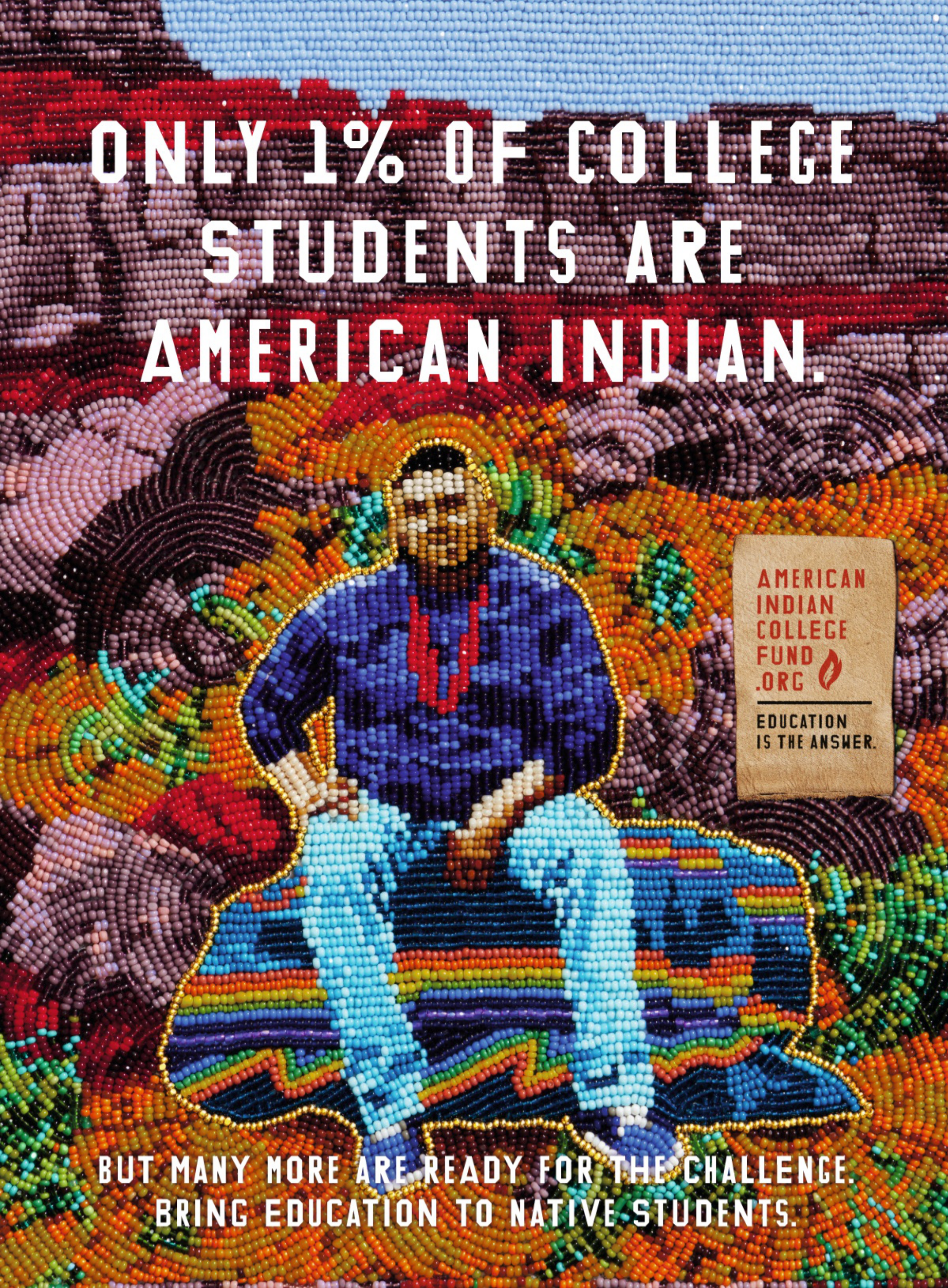
"... killing people. It's a character defect, I know, and probably the chief of my wrongs."

He got to his feet.

"Thank you, sir. I don't know what your name is, but you've helped me so much."

He started away toward Central Park West, then turned back to Jamieson, who was grasping blindly for his *Times* ... as if, perhaps, a quick scan of the Arts and Leisure section would make everything okay.

"You'll be in my prayers tonight," Jack said. ■



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NEW BOOKS

By Lidija Haas



Witch hunts have always been a tool of those in power. As such, they shed light, primarily, on the needs and fears of the ruling classes. Court proceedings on witchcraft and other devilry, however colorful, rarely tell us much about the accused, even when they show defendants prevailed upon to confess (an admission under duress, after all, generally sticks to the required script). Now, with Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln's **OLD THIESS, A LIVONIAN WEREWOLF** (University of Chicago Press, \$25), a glorious corrective has arrived: the full testimony, translated for the first time, of a loud, proud, self-described werewolf.

It's 1691, a year before the Salem witch trials, in a small courtroom in what is now Latvia, when our hero, aged eighty or so, saunters onto the scene. He's there to make a statement in someone else's case, a matter of petty theft, but the proceedings take a turn when another witness scoffs at the notion that Old ThieSS (a nickname for Matīss) should be asked to swear an oath, given that he is a known werewolf. His wolfishness, which he affirms without hesitation, thereafter steals the show, and the reader witnesses a rare and fascinating reversal of the familiar dance: instead of being trapped in a double bind, incriminated no matter what he says, the peasant nimbly takes control of the discussion. Rather than

deny the charge, he reclaims it and schools the court in an alternative mythology in which werewolves are "God's hounds," entering hell regularly, but only to fight sorcerers and protect the harvest for everyone else. When court officials try to get him to repent his presumed pact with the devil, he insists that the devil "cannot bear" werewolves and "has them driven off with iron goads," and that he himself had his nose broken by a sorcerer a few years back, as they can check in the records of a previous trial. He won't name werewolf names, and when caught in a white lie or forced to admit that he hasn't been the most observant churchgoer, he shrugs that he's old and imperfect, and that "a gracious God might still be gracious to him."

The transcript of the trial is accompanied by a sampling of historians' reactions to the case, and readers may enjoy the debates in subsequent chapters: the source material can be read as evidence that bands of bloodthirsty Aryan youth in wolf pelts once roamed Northern Europe by night and laid the foundations of the nation-state (as the Austrian scholar and Nazi Otto Höfler insisted in an uncannily influential 1934 book), or taken to suggest that earlier inhabitants of the region espoused unrecorded shamanistic beliefs about wolf-men (as Ginzburg, a microhistorian and a son of the great novelist Natalia Ginzburg, has argued in several captivating works excerpted in *Old ThieSS*), or treated as an illuminating snapshot of seventeenth-century social and political dynamics (as Lincoln, a historian of religion, more cautiously and rather more persuasively does).

Regardless, the book's true appeal is the fantastical creature Old ThieSS. Though careful to show some tactical humility, at one point he

said that he understood [the matter] better than the Herr Pastor, who was still young, and he lost his temper at the Herr Pastor's speech, adding that what vexed him so much was that previously no one else had been prosecuted, although he was not the first and would not be the last who had practiced these same things. If it was evil, why had they let others get away with it?

It's clear from the transcript that by this stage Old Thies has got the authorities on the back foot, as

the court further urged him to change his mind, alternating kindness and threats, urging him to recognize the many misdeeds he had committed and his grievous crimes, or at least their bad results.

They're too confused to convict him, and by the time another judge does so, a year later, anxiety about his status as a folk hero among the peasants is still palpable. He's given only a few lashes in punishment, and the court's hope that he might be changed "into an object of noteworthy aversion by public flogging" is so evidently vain, it has a pathos all its own.

Scapegoats must be as old as human history. In the fifth century BC, Herodotus, who himself recorded rumors of a people who could now and then transform into wolves, cast doubt on Homer's *cherchez la femme* account of the Trojan War, claiming that Helen never actually made it to Troy and instead waited out

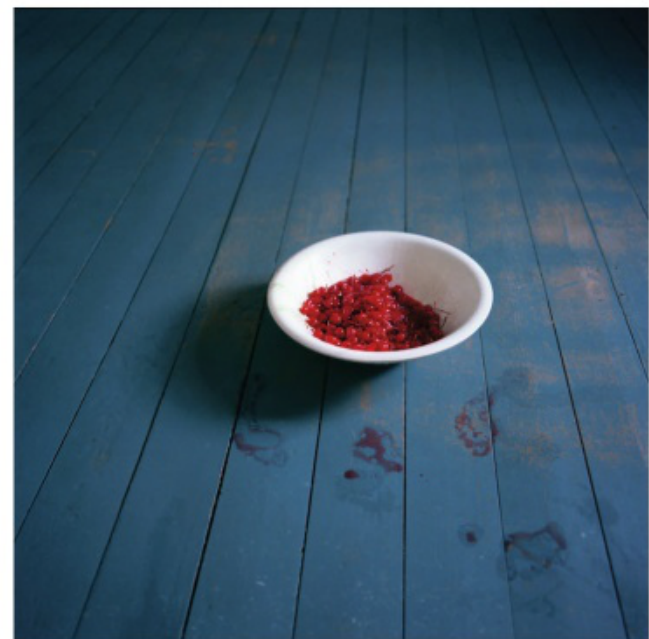


those years stranded in Egypt with a bunch of similarly stolen Spartan property, till Menelaus came to fetch her on the way home. "I am myself inclined to regard [this version of the story] as true," ungallant Herodotus wrote, "for surely neither Priam, nor his family, could have been so infatuated as to endanger their own persons, their children, and their city, merely that Paris

might possess Helen." It's also the version Euripides drew from for his 412 BC tragedy, *Helen*, which has been reinvented by today's most insouciant classicist, Anne Carson, as a quite different play—**NORMA JEANE BAKER OF TROY** (New Directions, \$12.95). The work was first performed, under Katie Mitchell's direction, for the opening of the Shed at Hudson Yards last year, and many found it too slight and strange. Admittedly, Carson's version—in which the heroine, held captive in L.A.'s Chateau Marmont to learn lines for Fritz Lang's *Clash by Night*, must escape to New York with Arthur Miller—is both. But it's all the truer to its source for that: the Euripides play reads more like proto-Shakespearean romance than tragedy. To enlist *Helen*, rather than the more popular *The Trojan Women*, for an antiwar theme makes sense especially in the wake of the conflict in Iraq: *Helen* posits that a decade-long war was fought and a civilization destroyed over a mirage, an eidolon.

It also makes for a more ambiguous Helen—in *The Trojan Women*, though she defends her life with all the subversive energy of an Old Thies, she's very much presented as "a nasty bitch evil-intriguing" (to quote her self-description in Richmond Lattimore's translation of Homer). Here, Carson does repeat a joke from her translation of *Orestes* in which Helen is called "that weapon of mass destruction," but the character is of interest expressly for the conflicting ways she has been interpreted. Hence the link with Marilyn Monroe (aka Norma Jeane Baker). Like witches in the ages between them, both women are symptomatic figures, endlessly accreting the stories a culture wants to tell about itself. (And again like witches, they're both emblems of misogyny's ever-green appeal; one of the only jokes in Greek tragedy is supposed to have been Menelaus' question in *The Trojan Women*, when warned not to let Helen on his ship, about whether she'd gained weight since last he saw her.)

It's always a pleasure to watch Carson's mind at play, and her minor



works can have a swift, casual sharpness. Here's Norma Jeane soliloquizing on "what most people mean by faking it":

They just mean acting. Well, in the first place, acting is not fake. And, number two, acting has nothing to do with desire. Desire is about vanishing. You dream of a bowl of cherries and next day receive a letter written in red juice. Or, a better example: you know I'm not a totally *bona fide* blonde ... so I get a bit of colour every 2 weeks from a certain Orlando in Brentwood and I used to wonder *shouldn't I dye the hair down there too*, you know, make it match, but the thing is—talk about a bowl of cherries—most men like it dark. Most men like what slips away.

Naturally this isn't the real Marilyn, whoever that may have been, and it doesn't aim to be. Yet Carson's slapdash Norma Jeane captures some qualities underestimated in too many conjurings of the original—the intellectual energy, Bolshie rebellion, and crude humor that underpinned her blonde-clown antics and helped make them indelible onscreen.

More proof that minor works by great writers can offer particular delights is found in **GARDEN BY THE SEA** (Open Letter, \$15.95), a novel by the celebrated Catalan author Mercè Rodoreda (1908–83), who is best known for *The Time of the Doves*, her account of the inner life of a working-class woman during the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. Like that novel and the one that followed it, *Camellia Street*, which inhabits the mind of a Barcelona streetwalker, *Garden*

by the Sea was published in the 1960s, after the twenty years of silence and poverty that accompanied Rodoreda's postwar exile, but has now been translated into English for the first time by Maruxa Relaño and Martha Tennent. Less ambitious than *Doves* and gentler than *Camellia Street*, it treats strong emotion with restraint, often approaching it indirectly via description of the setting's landscape and its vegetation. The narrator is an aging widower who works as the gardener for a seaside estate, witnessing the seasonal high jinks and occasional tragedies of his wealthy



employers and their friends. Set a few years before the Spanish Civil War, it's full of a melancholy sense of what will last and what won't: the gardener feels an admiring affinity with the eucalyptus tree, which "does not change ... with each leaf like a sickle, and each bud a lead box holding a velvety red flower."

The mistress of the estate, Senyoreta Rosamaria, in marrying Senyoret Francesc, appears to have made the same kind of brute economic choice in love that faces Cecília, the narrator of *Camellia Street*. In *Garden by the Sea*, a slow-motion melodrama plays out, but, filtered through the eyes of the servants, it's kept at a distance. Rosamaria's perspective and those of several other young women are mostly occluded, so that they can each be read in almost as many directions as Helen of Troy or Norma Jeane Baker—though, again, all roads lead, if not to ruin, then to pain and shame. The physical place occupies

the foreground—the colors of plants tended or mistreated, and the frame of the vast, ever-changing sea.

Another coastal elegy, still more ravishing in its precision and restraint, is **LATER: MY LIFE AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD** (Graywolf Press, \$16), Paul Lisicky's memoir of the complicated idyll that Provincetown offered gay men at the start of the 1990s. The work progresses in small, casually linked episodes, though an intricate structure makes itself felt toward the end—so that the form enacts on the reader some of Lisicky's inward experience, the perspectival shifts that marked him then and in the decades since. He describes his years there on a writer's fellowship, surrounded by dunes and by sea on three sides, as well as by a type of queer community that couldn't exist elsewhere and that was already on the edge of extinction.

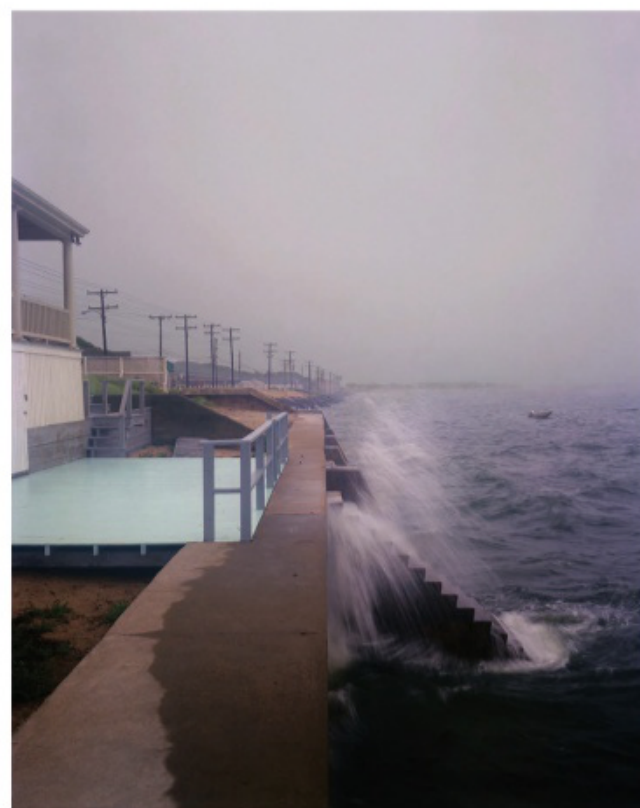
What's affecting here is Lisicky's preservation of a multitude of subtle, ambivalent feelings, of small kindnesses and cruelties. Nothing is simplified in a bid for universal resonance, and the text is richer for that. It bristles with pinprick observations. At one moment, Lisicky accompanies a Canadian boyfriend on a road trip to visit his family, and the two men must seek a border agent's approval by affecting not to do so, answering questions "tersely, without any inflection or any eagerness to please. We're performing what we believe he wants of men, especially two men sharing one car." At another time, Lisicky catches himself, at the painful end of a relationship, thinking, "I don't know how to deal with the fact that we're both probably going to live." Or there's the night when he can't tell his friend, the writer Lucy Grealy, that the sexual performance in her dancing is alienating the gay men around them—this "Sarah Lawrence dancing," he calls it, that "puts sex in quotes," while the men keep "some distance between the bodies, because the possibility of fucking is scary, is real."

Lisicky is disciplined about keeping past and future in their places. On the rare occasions—say, at a friend's funeral—when

"the time line breaks, scrambles," as he describes it, the effect is profound. Likewise, since he avoids presuming much about other people's inner lives, the odd exception he allows himself is powerful, such as the train of thought he follows when a man he's seen around but doesn't know stands up during a screening of the bland, well-meaning *Philadelphia*, "crying like a baby, a baby boy, and it wouldn't be so wrenching if he weren't such a tough-looking guy, leather vest, Levi's." "His friends," Lisicky speculates, entertaining one possibility among many,

have bailed on him before and they'll bail on him again, and what should he expect when he's loved them for their spontaneity and quick passion and unreliability? Dependable people, as he knows, are boring people, and he knows what it's like to abandon others too.

Though AIDS shadows and distorts everything, Lisicky is also attentive to far smaller pains—the ebbing of desire between lovers, for instance—resisting the temptation to idealize even those people and relationships under immediate threat. Lisicky's mother, who appears in the opening scene and is mostly absent thereafter, haunts the book. A huge variety of people and even animals are given consideration and respect, including those who appear only on a few scattered pages. You're reminded that looking closely can be a form of love. ■



FUN WITH PROBLEMS

The life of Robert Stone

By Charles Baxter

Discussed in this essay:

Child of Light, by Madison Smartt Bell. Doubleday. 608 pages. \$35.

Robert Stone: Dog Soldiers, A Flag for Sunrise, Outerbridge Reach, by Robert Stone, edited by Madison Smartt Bell. Library of America. 1,216 pages. \$45.



The novelist Robert Stone once said that his subject was “America and Americans.” Indeed, as Madison Smartt Bell writes in his new biography of Stone, *Child of Light*, Stone’s fiction depicts “the evolution of America’s sense of itself—from the naïve ebullience of the 1950s to the tenebrous uncertainties of the post-9/11 twenty-first century,” and it did so in a way that was “always just a little ahead of the curve.”

That almost prophetic quality is perhaps most evident in his first novel,

Charles Baxter teaches at the University of Minnesota. His most recent short-story collection is There’s Something I Want You to Do.

A Hall of Mirrors (1967), a depiction, eerily familiar in our own era, of the far right’s use of mass media to exploit Americans’ racist fears. The book follows a failed clarinetist named Rheinhardt as he goes to work as a Limbaugh-ish political commentator at a New Orleans radio station, WUSA. His boss, Bingamon, a businessman—large, tanned, and seemingly ageless—advises his new employee that the task of radio will now be, and should be, the speaking aloud of the unspeakable. Breaking through barriers of propriety is the way to success. To get an audience, Bingamon asserts, you first have to give voice to the audience’s prejudices

and its lowest fears and angers. “Because there is a pattern,” Bingamon tells Rheinhardt.

They feel it, they pick up a trace of it here and there.... People can’t see because they don’t have the orientation, isn’t that right? And a lot of what we’re trying to do is to give them that orientation.

After *A Hall of Mirrors* and its mordant portrait of American racial anxieties, Stone’s subjects ranged widely. Next came *Dog Soldiers* (1974), one of the great Vietnam novels, centered on a drug deal gone awry. With *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), Stone turned to American adventurism in Central America, and from there, in *Children of Light* (1986), to the story of a schizophrenic actress in cocaine-addled 1980s Hollywood. *Damascus Gate* (1998) focused on America’s relations to the Middle East, and particularly Israel. His final novel, *Death of the Black-Haired Girl* (2013), was a campus thriller.

In a world ruled by dramatic ironies observed by athletes of perception, to use one of Stone’s key phrases, the agents of goodness and mercy are few, and nature is no help at all. His protagonists tend to be wild, intelligent charmers in the grip of a singular preoccupation. His novels take the form of hallucinatory realism, the typical narrative invariably starting in the real world but usually traveling to Stone’s particular version of Oz, where things are not what they seem and, to quote a character from *A Hall of Mirrors*, “Something fucking awful is happening all the time.” Intricately plotted and often suspenseful, his fiction tends to run a low-grade fever generated by ambition, racism, fear, drugs, and alcohol, con-

veyed in a tone that has the odd property of being both frightening and disconcertingly funny. In this particular mode, Stone was unsurpassed, and at least two of his novels, *A Flag for Sunrise* and *Outerbridge Reach* (1992), about an amateur sailor who enters a solo race around the world, have a political scope, eloquence, and cultural knowingness that qualifies them as great novels.

Mania rules in many American classics. Like it or not, in what has been taken to be our national literature, the notable white male characters are often in the grip of obsession. From Captain Ahab, to Frank Norris's *McTeague*, Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, Faulkner's *Thomas Sutpen*, Nabokov's *Humbert Humbert*, Philip Roth's *Portnoy*, and James McBride's *John Brown*, we are in the presence of men who want only one thing and have sold their souls to get it. These people are outcasts of one sort or another. They can be polite, but polite society is nothing to them. They are visionaries in the best and worst ways, and when they self-destruct, as they usually do, they take others with them.

Given this set of conditions, the truest literary ancestor of Robert Stone may be Nathanael West, whose novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939) concludes with a riot that may have been the model for the violent Trumpian rally at the end of *A Hall of Mirrors*. Here is West's description of the rioting crowd:

They were savage and bitter, especially the middle-aged and the old, and had been made so by boredom and disappointment. All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs.... Where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?... They get tired of oranges.... They watch the waves come in at Venice. There wasn't any ocean where most of them came from, but after you've seen one wave, you've seen them all.... [Newspapers and movies] fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars.... The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titil-

late their jaded palates.... They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing.

West and Stone both employ a form of lyrical, sour wit that is omnipresent but often just below the radar: you can feel it working its way through the plot like a demonic influence, but you can't quite pinpoint its origin. As Bell writes, contrasting Stone with Norman Mailer, Stone was "an artist of extreme indirection."

Where Mailer liked to butt into the big issues of his time head-on, Stone was more inclined to ambush them. Stone's work included a take on most of the seismic social changes of his time, but as an artist he was less interested in political and cultural events per se than in the movements of chthonic forces underlying them.

Stone's fiction is not uplifting and cheerful, nor does it make you feel better about yourself. It offers, instead, narratives of disillusion, in which we discover what we really are.

Bell knew and obviously loved Robert Stone. His lengthy and detailed biography, whose publication arrives at the same time as the reissue of three of Stone's novels in a Library of America edition, views its subject with an offhand, tolerant affection. Stone is called "Bob" all the way through, liquor is often referred to as "grog," and very little critical distance exists between the biographer and his subject.

This devotion softens, slightly, the harrowing narrative of Stone's early life. If misfortune constitutes a writer's gift from the gods, Stone was remarkably blessed. An only child, born in Brooklyn in 1937 to a schizophrenic or bipolar mother and an absent father ("I really don't know who he was," Stone once said), he lived with his mother in a succession of single-room-occupancy hotels and shelters around New York. After fleeing to Chicago and then returning to New York, they briefly lived on the rooftop of an apartment building on Lexington Avenue. During some of this time, Stone was enrolled in a Catholic school run by the Marist brothers, St. Ann's Academy, which he later

described, in a story, as having "the social dynamic of a coral reef."

"Everybody was very unhappy there," Stone remembered. "[The Marist brothers] certainly slapped people around right and left." His sense of oppression never quite left him, nor did the compulsion to find an escape hatch. Along the way, he learned Latin, a gift that stayed with him as an adult, and he read poetry in Latin for pleasure. The other details of Stone's upbringing are dispiriting: in adolescence, he repeatedly showed up to school drunk, joined a New York street gang, and was expelled in the middle of his senior year. At the age of seventeen, he joined the Navy.

Stone found the Navy a step up in civility, despite his experience of fighting off a rape aboard ship by using a chain to defend himself. In 1956, having been sent to Port Said on the U.S.S. *Chilton* at the outbreak of the Suez Crisis, Stone saw the corpses of Egyptians killed by French bombers floating in the water. The sight seems to have been a turning point of sorts. Years later, he described his response to it: "I always thought that the world was filled with evil spirits, that people's minds teemed with depravity and craziness and weirdness and murderousness, that that basically was an implicit condition, an incurable condition of mankind." That same night in Egypt, he recalled, he had this insight: "This is the way it is. There is no cure for this. There is only one thing you can do with this. You can transcend it. You can take it and make it art."

Stone's lifelong challenge was to find ways of slipping the wildest and most frenzied visions into what seemed like plausible narratives, and his greatness as a writer is a reflection of how often he succeeded. Near the end of Stone's *Outerbridge Reach*, for example, the book's protagonist, Owen Browne, is stranded on an "icy stone island" in the Southern Hemisphere after his shoddily made boat falls to pieces during the race. By now "in the grip of something powerful and unsound," he enters an abandoned house and feels something "trying to direct his attention toward the window." The sentences

that follow shimmer with exactitude and madness.

Finally, broken-willed, he consented to turn, dreading the thing that might confront him in the window. There, in place of the declining sun, he saw innumerable misshapen discs stretched in limitless perspective to an expanded horizon. It was a parody of the honest mariner's sighting. Each warped ball was the reflection of another in an index glass, each one hung suspended, half-submerged in a frozen sea. They extended forever, to infinity, in a universe of infinite singularities. In the ocean they suggested, there could be no measure and no reason. There could be neither direction nor horizon. It was an ocean without a morning, without sanity or light.

By the time Bell's biography reaches the tragedy at Port Said, we are only thirty-two pages into a six-hundred-page work. Stone soon gets out of the Navy ("I actually had a pretty good time in the Navy," he later said), tries journalism, gets married, goes to New Orleans, sells encyclopedias, and witnesses overt Southern racism up close. He works as a census taker, and gives jazz-poetry readings. ("Sometimes," he recalled of those readings, "after Tulane football games, the players would come in and throw bananas at us. This cost them nothing, since the bananas, in bunches off the dock, were hung from the ceiling and the bar pillars.") By 1962, he and his wife have moved to San Francisco, where he falls in with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters and spends some time traveling with them and getting high and noting what hallucinogens do to the psyche—in one case, causing him to see physical manifestations of the notes Coltrane played during a concert, unaware meanwhile that he had stepped on a nail. ("When I took my shoe off it seemed that my sock was drenched in blood—bright blood, the color of John Coltrane's soprano sax riffs.")

He also has a stroke of luck: the woman he married, Janice Burr, was a loving and loyal companion, and mother to two of his children. Early on, she recognized that for him, "drinking was already a necessity," and she emerges in this biography as a support

to him throughout his life. The story of Robert Stone's career is consequently, at least in large part, about their marriage, as well as, with his increasing stature following the success of *Dog Soldiers* and *A Flag for Sunrise*, the attendant book tours, the teaching, the screenwriting, the awards, the friendships, and—perhaps most of all—the substance abuse.

No one can smoke, drink "heroically" (Bell's word for it), and do drugs with any regularity without some unwholesome systemic results, and the last third of this biography tells the inevitable story of Stone's physical decline. It is not an account for the faint of heart. What's remarkable is that despite his afflictions, Stone was still able to do so much good work before his death in 2015. At the time of the completion of *Bay of Souls*, in 2003, Bell observes, Stone had "been to hell" and "had come to the edge of losing absolutely everything—not just Janice and his marriage but his very life and breath."

Stone's struggle with alcohol informed much of his writing. In *A Hall of Mirrors*, once Rheinhardt accepts the job at the conservative radio station, the boss, Bingamon, seals the deal by offering Rheinhardt a glass of Southern Comfort, which he reluctantly drinks. What follows is a paragraph that only an alcoholic could write, and it fuses power, vision, and the demonic.

When it was down he knew it had been a mistake. After the first warm relaxation he felt the sudden careening of his brain, the dives; standing a foot from Bingamon with the glass in his hand, the foolish smile still on his face, he was plunging headlong into the dives, the whirling breathless curves that led, always to the lights—he could see them down at the bottom, flashing yellow and red. He had to get out now, he told himself. He had to get out.

That's what a devil's bargain looks like, and there's no escape; you don't get out of it.

Few other American writers of his period, with the notable exception of Denis Johnson, seem to have believed in demons as firmly as did Stone. At the beginning of *Dog Sol-*

diers, a journalist named John Converse finds himself on a bench in Vietnam with a middle-aged woman, a missionary. She tells him that up north in Ngọc Linh they worship Satan. When Converse informs her that, like most people, he doesn't believe in Satan, because it's too "spooky," the woman replies, "People are in for an unpleasant surprise."

The English novelist Wyndham Lewis wrote in his novel *Self Condemned* (1954) that, "like all good Americans they"—his British characters—"came to realize that it was only the comic that mattered," and if Stone's work is notable for its darkness, that darkness also served him as a resource for wild laughter. Consider, in *A Flag for Sunrise*, the protagonist Holliwell's drunken speech to an angry university audience in a fictional Central American nation: "'In my country we have a saying—Mickey Mouse will see you dead.' There was silence. 'There isn't really such a saying,' Holliwell admitted."

In 2010, I found myself dining alone in a little northern Minnesota restaurant and had brought along Stone's second collection of stories, *Fun with Problems* (2010), for company. He was a wonderful short-story writer, and his story "Helping" has been widely anthologized. While waiting for my fish sandwich, I began reading the volume's fourth story, "The Wine-Dark Sea," and came to a passage in which a character named Eric, "a few weeks out of rehab" and driven by wine and what the narrative calls the "spell of his demon," begins to expound to his friends the truth behind appearances. In the attack on the World Trade Center, he claims, there were no actual planes. We were all fooled and deluded by "fractal imaging." Inspired and lifted up, Eric begins to sound like someone on midnight AM radio or like the shabby stranger who sits down next to you in the waiting room for an enlightening chat.

"You guys heard about history being mere fiction. That's the way it's always been. Heard of the Romans?" Eric demanded. "They never existed!" He raised his voice. "It's baloney. I mean,

there's Rome, right. But there never were any Romans with togas and shit, and helmets and feathers. A fairy tale out of the Vatican Library. They even dreamed up the idea of a Vatican Library. There isn't one!... The Greeks! There weren't any Greeks, not ever. I know there are Greeks, but they're not *the* Greeks. I've been to so-called Greece. Plato? Mickey Mouse's dog. Babylonians. Israelites! The pyramids are like forty, fifty years old... This shit is all made up by the government. Once more unto the breach, dear friends—what a laugh. You think people in iron suits rode around on horses? Horse *shit* is more like it. Don't give up the ship? I mean—come on!"

On page seventy-six of my copy, a brown stain marks where I started laughing so hard that I spat out my coffee, to the consternation of my waitress.

The only other time I can remember laughing that hard at a passage in a book was when I read Stone's memoir of the Sixties, *Prime Green*. I had reached chapter eleven, an account of Stone's period of employment at a cheap tabloid, which he calls *National Thunder*. One of his jobs was to come up with outrageous headlines, and his triumph was "Sky-Diver Devoured by Starving Birds." Stone was so proud of that headline that much later he wanted to use it as a title for a book.

One finishes Bell's biography, which could almost have been titled *Darkness and Laughter*, with a renewed respect for its subject and a feeling of awe for the love he inspired in his biographer, wife, children, and friends. Writing in an essay about Malcolm Lowry, author of *Under the Volcano* and also an alcoholic, Stone observed,

In *Under the Volcano* Lowry used the grim experiences he had gone through to express his love for the world. He applied his considerable learning and generosity of spirit to a hundred things beyond his own despair, even if the experience of despair informs it.

"So we pardon Lowry his unhappy life," Stone goes on. "The alcohol was bad luck." ■

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A VIEW TO A KRILL

The first history of the most remote ocean

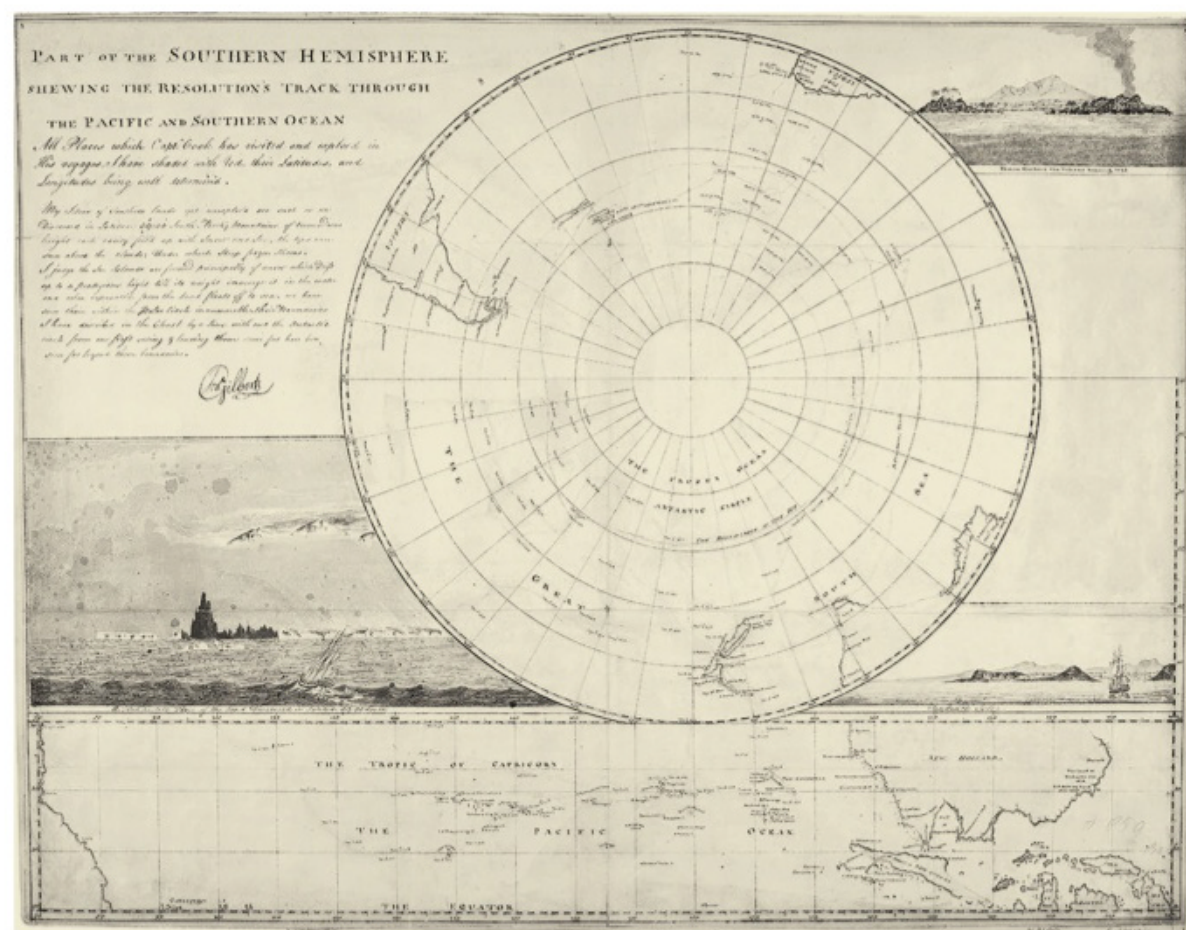
By Lucy Jakub

Discussed in this essay:

Wild Sea: A History of the Southern Ocean, by Joy McCann. University of Chicago Press. 256 pages. \$28.

The Curious Life of Krill: A Conservation Story from the Bottom of the World, by Stephen Nicol. Island Press. 216 pages. \$30.

Vanishing Fish: Shifting Baselines and the Future of Global Fisheries, by Daniel Pauly, foreword by Jennifer Jacquet. Greystone Books. 304 pages. \$29.95.



If you book a cruise to the Antarctic Peninsula today, you will see ice floes loaded with the expected penguins and seals, situated in a landscape that appears to be a pristine blank. The region seems to erase its own edges from the map, sending up a shroud of mist at the boundaries where the sun-warmed South Seas meet the icy waters of the Southern Ocean, which flows continuously around Antarctica and drives the surprising profusion of life on its shores. Changes to this environment are dif-

ficult to discern unless you know its history. For both scientists and historians, discovering what the Antarctic was like before humans altered it means piecing together much fragmentary data, stashed in the archives of many countries.

To the environmental historian Joy McCann, who grew up on the southern coast of Australia, the Southern Ocean is familiar yet “wild and elusive ... a difficult ocean to pin down.” Her new book, *Wild Sea*, is a sensitive portrait of a complex ecosystem, from krill to blue whales, and of the ice, winds, and currents that are critical to the circulation of the world’s oceans.

Drawing on ships’ logs, captains’ diaries, scientific reports, and correspondence, McCann also gives a meticulous accounting of the effects of human involvement in the Antarctic over the past two hundred years, as scientific research rushed to keep pace with its breathtaking exploitation.

The ecological havoc wrought by sealing, whaling, and fishing in the Southern Ocean hasn’t dispelled the myths of the region as a last frontier of wilderness and limitless marine abundance. But although the Antarctic is even more remote in the mind than it is in distance, the effects of climate change there will be globally felt.

Various tribes have made their homes on the Southern Ocean’s northern shores for thousands of years, along the tip of South America, and in New Zealand, where the Maori considered whales their guides between the islands of the South Pacific. But the ocean lay beyond the reach of European sailors until the seventeenth century, when merchants sought new trade routes that forced them into the uncharted waters around the great capes. James Cook was the first European explorer to circumnavigate the Southern Ocean, on a ship called the *Endeavour*, discovering that its main current flowed clockwise continuously around the pole. His overt mission on his first voyage, in 1768, was to measure the transit of Venus, but it was also an excuse to claim territory for the British crown. The greatest prize was not the islands that Cook encountered in the South Pacific, but the Great Southern Land that philosophers supposed must exist at the South Pole to counterbalance the weight of the other continents. Alexander Dalrymple, the first hydrographer for the British Admiralty, was obsessed with finding Terra Australis Incognita, estimating that it must have fifty million inhabitants.

McCann writes that, “under Cook’s command, the ambitions of science and empire seamlessly converged.” Johann Reinhold Forster, the irascible naturalist on Cook’s second voyage, aboard the *Resolution*, had departed England with a blessing from Linnaeus that “the eyes and minds of all botanists” were turned toward his findings in the Antarctic.

Lucy Jakub is a master’s student at the Graduate Program in Science Writing at MIT.

Chart by Joseph Gilbert showing the path of Captain Cook’s second voyage to the Southern Ocean, from 1772 to 1775. From *The Sea Journal: Seafarers’ Sketchbooks*, by Huw Lewis-Jones, which will be published in May by Chronicle Books. Courtesy the U.K. Hydrographic Office, Taunton, England



Most of his observations, however, were of the composition of samples of seawater and ice. Eighteen months into the expedition, he counted all the icebergs on the horizon (186). He wrote of the disappointing voyage, “Instead of meeting with any object worthy of our attention after having circumnavigated very near half the globe, we saw nothing, but water, Ice & Sky.”

Sediments frozen in the icebergs suggested the existence of a landmass beyond the ice, but the *Resolution* did not sail near enough to confirm it. The only lands it encountered on its journey were the remote islands that are distributed like a trail of bread crumbs along the path of the ocean’s current. Turning around at latitude seventy-one degrees south, Cook said of the elusive Southern Land, “I make bold to declare that the world will derive no benefit from it.”

The Southern Land did turn out to be inhabited, though not as Dalrymple had imagined.

On the *Beagle*’s second voyage to Tierra del Fuego, in 1832, Charles Darwin was amazed at the variety of life found in the sea

off the relatively barren archipelago: snails, starfish, sea spiders, and fish abounded in rafts of seaweed. Several years later, Joseph Hooker, the botanist with James Clark Ross’s Antarctic expedition and a friend of Darwin’s, appreciated the power of an even greater marine forest: diatoms, the microalgae armored in silica that stain the water and ice yellow and brown. “The universal



significance of such an invisible vegetation as that of the Antarctic Ocean, is a truly wonderful fact,” he wrote. “The end these plants serve in the great scheme of nature is apparent, on inspecting the stomachs of many sea-animals.” We know today that phytoplankton, kicked up in sea spray, act as aerosols that make that ocean the world’s cloudiest region.

Wild Sea is organized around the various elements of the Southern Ocean: wind, coast, ice, deep, current, and convergence. Each chapter has its delegate species. “Coast” begins on South Georgia’s Salisbury Plain, where McCann is approached by a king penguin:

As I step from boat to beach, an individual separates itself from its companions and waddles up to me. I stand to attention and await inspection. It feels like I am being greeted by a long-lost friend saying “Is it really you?”

This scene is echoed in the accounts of various expeditions encountering Adélie penguins as they forced their ships through the sea ice. Animals in the Antarctic had not yet learned to fear humans, and penguins especially exhibited a social



tuary, in 1933, one of the first conservation victories in the Antarctic.

In the nineteenth century, the Southern Ocean became the stage for the revival of the whaling industry, which over four thousand years had depleted whale populations in the Northern Hemisphere. It first established itself in force on the coasts of Tasmania and mainland Australia, where southern right whales went to breed. In 1847, Ross wrote sanguinely of the cetaceans he sighted off the Antarctic coast:

Hitherto, beyond the reach of their persecutors, they have here enjoyed a life of tranquillity and security; but will now, no doubt, be made to contribute to the wealth of our country, in exact proportion to the energy and perseverance of our merchants.

The first explorer to make landfall on Antarctica was Norwegian Carl Anton Larsen, in 1902. His mission was to ascertain the advantage of establishing a commercial whaling base below the Antarctic Circle. He built Grytviken, a factory and settlement,

curiosity that captivated explorers, so much that some men admitted to missing the company when they found themselves adrift in empty stretches of sea ice for weeks on end. But McCann notes that most interspecies meet-cutes, however mirthful, ended with the birds' slaughter, "either to supplement the men's diet with fresh meat or to be preserved as specimens." "It seems a terrible desecration to come to this quiet spot only to murder its innocent inhabitants and stain the white snow with blood," observed the Royal Navy officer Robert Falcon Scott, "but necessities are often hideous."

Necessity often led to desecration in the extreme environments of the Antarctic, though most instances were justified by profit rather than survival. After Cook reported that Kerguelen Island was crowded with, as his biographer John Cawte Beaglehole writes, "seals whose lack of sophistication made it easy to club them for their oil," sealing gangs set out to locate other tiny subantarctic isles and skin every fur seal they could find, bringing pelts to luxury markets in New York, London, and Canton. William Smith, who discovered the South Shetland Islands and claimed them for Britain in 1819, said that he had taken sixty thousand pelts. When Henry Forster visited the islands on the *Chanticleer* a decade later, they were lifeless. As southern fur seal populations declined from be-

tween one and two million to fewer than a thousand animals, elephant seals attracted attention with their prodigious blubber, which could be melted down for lighting oil.

Penguins, too, were taken for their oil. McCann recounts a particularly rapacious industry on Macquarie Island, which today is marked by a layer of soil bristling with avian bones. Joseph Hatch, a British pharmacist whose previous ventures were in bone milling and rabbit skins, leased the entire island from the Tasmanian government and boiled three million king and royal penguins in large cylindrical digesters between 1890 and 1920. Hatch, who had been a member of the New Zealand parliament, faced growing public pressure to shut down his penguin-oiling operations. Only after his death was the island declared a bird and seal sanc-



Top: Photograph of fishermen casting for macroplankton with a dip net, by Frank Hurley. Courtesy the State Library of New South Wales. Bottom: *Océan*, by Adolphe Philippe Millot, from *Nouveau Larousse illustré*, 1898

on a South Georgia beach littered with try-pots abandoned by sealers. Larsen's first financial backer was whaling captain Svend Foyn, an inventor of the grenade-harpoon gun, which had made whaling possible on an industrial scale when it was introduced in the mid-nineteenth century. Blue whales were especially prized, and were larger and faster than the right whale, but were no match for Larsen's fleets. Other businessmen followed, setting up shop in the South Shetland, South Orkney, and South Sandwich Islands. The unregulated industry left carcasses to rot on the beaches.

Right whales and pregnant females of all species were protected by new regulations in 1914, just as demand for whale oil soared with the onset of World War I. Whale oil greased the war machine. It was used to produce nitroglycerin explosives, and also protected soldiers from trench foot. Between 1915 and 1916, nearly twelve thousand whales were caught off South Georgia, and humpbacks went commercially extinct. McCann describes an emerging pattern:

As one species was hunted to the brink of extinction the whalers turned to another, converging on areas where their prey gathered to breed or feed, then slaughtering and extracting precious oils until the beaches were silent and the waters empty.

In 1925, the British introduced steam-powered factory whaling ships, which could flense a whale and boil its blubber in less than an hour, without needing to return to land. The same year, the British government, fearing for the continued productivity of whale stocks, launched the Discovery Investigations, a series of scientific voyages to study the life cycles, diets, and migration patterns of whales, and to observe firsthand the effects of the industry. Francis Downes

Ommanney, a naturalist with the program, reflected on his visit to Grytviken:

What an outcry there would have been long ago, as Sir Alister Hardy has remarked, if herds of great land mammals, say elephant or buffalo, were chased in armored vehicles firing explosive grenades from cannon, and then hauled close at the end of a line and bombarded again until dead.

By 1930, there were forty-one factory ships in the Southern Ocean, taking

in response to pressure from Greenpeace and indigenous activist groups to halt the last holdouts.

By 1959, twelve nations had signed the historic Antarctic Treaty, which set aside the continent for "peaceful" use, protecting its flora and fauna and the access of scientists, as well as specifically prohibiting the testing of nuclear bombs. Fifty-four nations now abide by it. Yet perhaps the only animal wholly protected by the treaty is the continent's single native insect, a



nearly thirty thousand blue whales in a single season. Within five years, that species, too, was commercially extinct.

Whaling abated during World War II but resumed in force after that conflict's end. The newly formed United Nations established the International Whaling Commission to conserve what was left of whale stocks, which no longer supplied lighting fuel but rather the essential ingredient in margarine. By the mid-Sixties, however, fin and sei whales were slim pickings in the Antarctic, and the industry inevitably shuttered. An international ban on commercial whaling wasn't imposed until 1986,

flightless midge that can survive partial freezing—an antipodal analogue of the Arctic's woolly bear moth. This is because, as Sylvia Earle says wryly in *The Last Ocean*, a 2012 documentary about the Antarctic biologists who successfully lobbied to make a marine reserve in the Ross Sea, "half a century ago, nations were wise enough to come to an agreement to forestall exploiting the land around Antarctica, and weren't wise enough to do the same thing for the ocean." The management of the ocean was left to the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), a body of

delegates from the Antarctic Treaty's member nations. Like the treaty, the success of the CCAMLR has depended on compromise. Its conservation agenda allows for "rational use" of marine resources, a loophole for commercial fishing. This past November, the commission failed for the eighth year in a row to establish a marine preserve in the Weddell Sea.

A species that doesn't receive special treatment in McCann's book is the Antarctic toothfish, more commonly known by its market name, Chilean sea bass. The few species of fish that can thrive in the Southern Ocean are specially equipped: icefish and Antarctic toothfish produce antifreeze in their blood, and icefish are the only vertebrates that lack hemoglobin, absorbing oxygen through their skin. Both species are fished commercially in the Ross Sea. Like the rest of the Southern Ocean's fauna, the toothfish's value lay in its crucial adaptation to the cold. Chefs found its flesh—laced with fats that make the toothfish buoyant and able to traverse the water column without a swim bladder—

impossible to overcook. It was introduced in 1997 as a delicacy in American supermarkets and upscale restaurants. McCann notes that the baited longlines used to hook toothfish also attract and ensnare albatross and other seabirds (on memorable occasions, they have also hooked colossal squid), though she doesn't mention its importance in the food web as the prey of orcas and seals, and as a voracious predator in its own right, the largest fish in an ocean without sharks.

But the most important link in the ecosystem of the Southern Ocean—its "fluttering heart," in McCann's lovely phrase—is a crustacean, about two and a half inches long, that grazes on algae and swarms like an



ton into a movable feast. A blue whale can eat four tons of krill in a day.

But naturalists in the Antarctic have long pushed against the characterization of krill merely as whale food. Ommanney wrote sensually of their charms in 1938:

The "krill" is a creature of delicate and feathery beauty.... It swims with that curiously intent purposefulness peculiar to shrimps, all its feelers alert for a touch, tremulously sensitive, its protruding black eyes set forward like lamps.

The Scottish biologist James Marr, in a monumental 1962 treatise, asserted that krill, "far from remaining a passive drifter, has on the contrary become a creature of great agility, powers of locomotion, purposeful intent, and not a little awareness."

With his book from 2018, *The Curious Life of Krill: A Conservation Story from the Bottom of the World*, Stephen Nicol, a krill biologist at the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies at the University of Tasmania, continues the work of his forebears with enthusiasm. His life's research has involved tracking, catching, and counting an evasive quarry. Krill defy easy measurement; in lean seasons they downsize, molting and regrowing smaller exoskeletons, confounding estimates of their age (a krill in captivity named Alan lived as long as eleven years). But knowing how many krill are in the Southern Ocean—and how that number is changing—is vital to understanding the future of the ecosystem.

The ardor of the Discovery Investigation naturalists had an outcome that some surely did not intend: krill began



Left: *In the Wake of Scott & Shackleton*, 2018, a drawing by Peter Anderson, of a voyage inspired by the early-twentieth-century expeditions led by Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton © The artist
Right: Krill feeding on phytoplankton in the South Atlantic © Paul Nicklen/National Geographic Creative

to tempt the nations that had hunted whales near to extinction. It was reasoned that krill must have become especially plentiful in the absence of their largest predators and were therefore ripe for human exploitation. The Soviet Union led the way with its super trawlers, taking nearly 500,000 metric tons of krill at the peak of its efforts in the 1980s and turning it into krill paste, krill cheese, and krill flakes, feeding it to livestock, and spreading it over their fields. A 1975 article in the *New York Times* lauded krill as an answer to world hunger, citing an Australian scientist's calculations that krill "could provide 20 grams of animal protein daily for a billion people."

Continued optimism over the most abundant source of animal protein in the world notwithstanding, krill have proved difficult to crack. When a krill dies, the powerful enzymes in its belly that dissolve diatoms turn on and swiftly autodigest the body. Catches must be processed immediately to keep the meat fresh. In 1979, krill products were found to contain toothpaste-high quantities of fluoride, a compound that concentrates in krill shells, which further set back attempts to create a palatable krill cuisine. Aquaculture meal and omega-3 supplements are the two commercially viable products that remain. Perhaps because the market for these products increasingly overlaps with consumers who care about environmental sustainability, the major krill-fishing nations today—Norway, Chile, South Korea, and China—have begun over the past few years to limit their operations during the breeding season on the Antarctic Peninsula, where they often compete directly with seals and penguin colonies.

As Nicol notes,

companies continue to fish for krill for a variety of reasons—some political, some because there is a belief that krill will become more valuable in the future, and some just because they want to go krill fishing, and hang the expense.

Much has changed in the Antarctic over the past two hundred years. In the 1950s, a group of Australian biologists toured

the subantarctic islands and took note of the species that had rebounded, as well as those that had struggled to return to their former numbers, in some cases over a century after the sealers and whalers had left. The legacy of those sealers and whalers has been continued, unintended, by the stowaways that arrived with their ships. Invasive rodents and the cats introduced to control them have taken a heavy toll on island birds; since cats were eradicated on Marion Island, off South Africa, it has once again been overrun with house mice. During the meager winters, adult albatross, apparently unable to defend themselves, are routinely nibbled to death by bands of mice. Rabbits, left by sealers to breed on Macquarie, have eaten so much grass that they've caused landslides onto penguin nests. On South Georgia, Lapland reindeer were introduced to provide sport hunting for the homesick men at Grytviken. After the station closed in 1966, the reindeer grazed unmolested, devastating the island's native plants, including the tussock grasses in which seabirds nest. Between 2013 and 2014, an eradication team of Norwegian marksmen removed almost seven thousand reindeer from the island and sold the meat to cruise ships.

Nicol tours Grytviken and is astonished by how much remains of the factory in King Edward Cove. Whalebones and harpoons are strewn everywhere, and the corroded boilers, tanks, and cranes remind him of Blake's "dark Satanic Mills." Considering not just whales but the repercussions of their absence on the larger ecosystem, he writes,

To the modern visitor to the Antarctic region it is difficult to comprehend how different the Southern Ocean must have looked a hundred years ago. Accounts of the abundance of whales seem almost mythical.

The alleged boom in krill populations, which was supposed to have followed the decline of the whales, has turned out to be largely unsupported. Nicol, whose institute holds the world's largest trove of whale poop in its freezers, has embraced an alternative theory—that whales fertilize



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the ocean with iron-rich dung that promotes the growth of diatoms, and in turn the growth of krill.

The krill fishery, worth approximately \$69.5 million globally, may be sustainable, but it's important to consider why krill are harvested at all. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's 2016 assessment, 90 percent of global marine resources were being fished at or beyond their capacity. The historical trajectory of global fishing has been to move southward in pursuit of new stocks as those in northern waters are depleted. The other trend has been to fish down the food chain: after large predators run out, industries move on to their smaller, more plentiful prey.

These shifts can mask the destruction of ecosystems, and are patterns that fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly has been intent on exposing for decades. His newly collected essays, *Vanishing Fish: Shifting Baselines and the Future of Global Fisheries*, are frank, readable testimony of the shortcomings of fisheries management. Pauly—founder of the Sea Around Us institute and creator of a remarkable online cache of fish information, called FishBase—is best known for his concept of shifting baseline syndrome, an attempt to explain how the world's fisheries have reached the brink of collapse. Though commercial fisheries in many countries are now required to report detailed catch statistics to regulatory bodies, catch data from before fifty years ago is fragmentary, unreliable, or nonexistent. Even less is known

about how populous species were before they began to be fished. Without coherent and continuous historical data, Pauly argues, each successive generation has only its own witness to serve as a reference for future changes. The decline of fish stocks over a lifetime may represent the tip of an iceberg of loss that stretches back hundreds of years.

The greatest current stressors on Antarctic krill are warming seas and the retreat of ice around Antarctica rather than overfishing. Sea ice and the algae that grows on its dimly illuminated underside provide an essential habitat for immature krill. Krill populations in the waters just off the Antarctic Peninsula—the region where sea ice has been decreasing most dramatically—have declined between 70 and 80 percent since the 1970s.

In her closing chapter, Joy McCann asks whether it is possible to cultivate an "ocean consciousness": "How can we truly know a place that we cannot inhabit?" The question is urgent on many fronts, as the oceans change under the pressures of industrial fishing, plastics accumulation, acidification, and warming. Pauly's keenest insights into the decline of fisheries come because he acknowledges the relevance of other kinds of records, including historical anecdotes of the kind McCann sifts through. Nicol, too, attests that "science operates by developing stories (we call them conceptual models) about the natural world." These narratives help us to keep our bearings in the world's last wild places. ■

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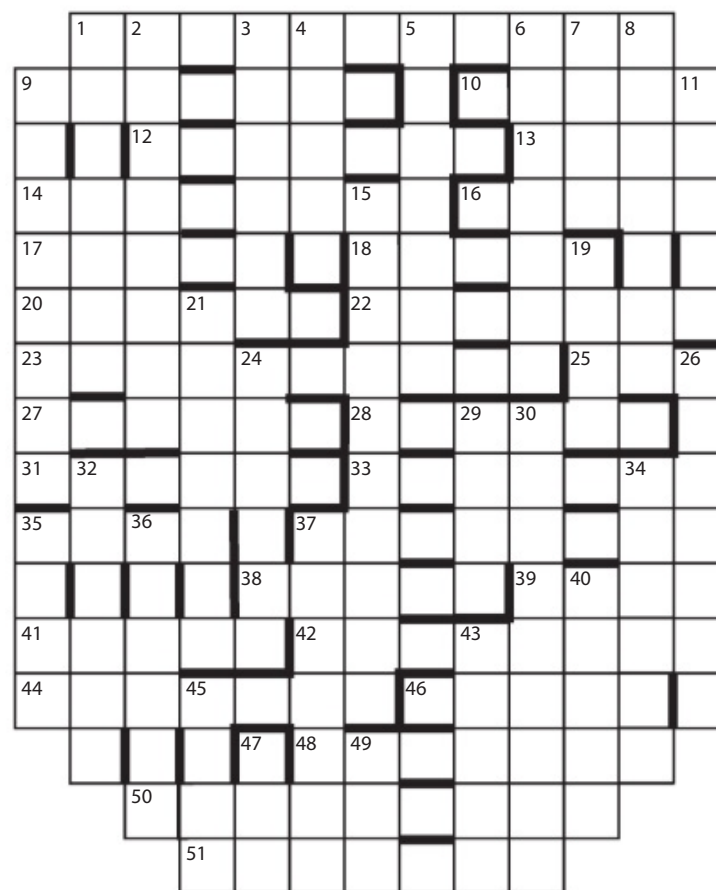
PUZZLE

MAIL CALL

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

The diagram is a 15 Down, appropriately enough, since ten of the other unclued entries are contributors to a 1 Across. Some of these unclued entries may require a trip to a dictionary. Remember dictionaries?

Clue answers include nine proper nouns and one foreign word. Answers at 9A and 37A are uncommon, and 21D is an alternate spelling. As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 65.



ACROSS

1. See instructions (4,2,5)
9. What Mary had is leaning with its head to the right (7)
10. Certain springs and summers in Europe, after the first of June (5)
12. Clever verbal traps upsetting to church gaining fuel on the borders (7)
13. Magazine issue that reads like it's in Hebrew! (4)
14. See instructions (8)
16. See instructions (5)
17. A giant in any way? (2,3)
18. At first, something's not odd, but then again it is! (5)
20. See instructions (6)
22. See instructions (7)
23. Creates a bond in false teeth (10)
25. Be good and be appealing (3)
27. Stoner tripping from sage (6)
28. See instructions (6)
31. See instructions (6)
33. Nerve center initially shed—zap, it's off (7)
35. First signs of spring easily reported by European (4)
37. Mobile cell in zoo hid PR releases (8)
38. Wary, like a dirty look? (5)
39. She appears finally in lion saga, all gaga (4)
41. In some loveless entanglement? It's the pits! (5)
42. See instructions (8)
44. One about to die from heat? Just the opposite! (7)
46. Flash judgment—from the start, questionable (5)
48. Antihero is narcissistic and, deep inside, is sick (7)
50. See instructions (9)
51. Broadway composer who sounds like a lot of other composers? (7)

DOWN

1. See instructions (7)
2. Reschedules gurus and takes off a watch (8)
3. Famous football player? Just a little bit (6)
4. Père's "Frère Jacques" is translated as "clone" (5)
5. Lay in trauma, distressed, needing infusion of a vitamin (7)
6. Trades in timers, bursting with energy, coming in second (7)
7. Company that has its ups and downs? Oh, it is! (4)
8. Bad feeling relative to a code (7)
9. Fighting and winning (8)
11. Last of eggs not quite fresh? Send it back—we're enthralled (5)
15. See instructions (10)
19. Number on a five-dollar bill tells where you live, colloquially (4)
21. Part of vegetable that you can reach? (7)
24. Characters in love in *North and South*, and such like? (6)
26. "Change tone imperceptibly"—great ad for makeup (7)
29. 'S a machine gun, says this girl (4)
30. Deadpan demeanor often aces being moved (5,4)
32. Recall concerning getting laid up (6)
34. See instructions (6)
35. I'm into the stock index, getting dope (4)
36. Flushing person partial to being kosher in service (6)
37. Rally recap? (7)
40. A life-changing role for Michael Caine (5)
43. Dan Brown's albino sails off (5)
45. Petitions from others like 29D? (4)
47. Something you have a right to see? (3)
49. Online volume not OK for some Africans (3)

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to "Mail Call," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by March 6. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the May issue. The winner of the January puzzle, "Theme and Variations," is Katherine Unterman, Bryan, Tex.



FINDINGS

Jimi Hendrix was cleared of responsibility for the proliferation of London's non-native parakeet population, whereas humans were found solely responsible for the extinction of the United States' only native parrot. The collapse of Norse colonies in Greenland was blamed on walrus depletion that in turn arose from falling wholesale prices for walrus ivory. Eighty-five-hundred-year-old human tooth pendants were found at Çatalhöyük. The earliest known use of lead-tin-yellow pigment predating 1300 AD was found in sixth-century BC limestone reliefs, which also contain Egyptian blue, from the Palace of Apries. In a gold-lined tomb next to that of the Griffin Warrior, archaeologists found a gold pendant of the Egyptian goddess Hathor. Runologists determined that the nine riddles of the Rök stone bespeak Vikings' fear of another Fimbulwinter, and a star-shaped magnetic anomaly resulting from an ancient lightning strike was discovered at the Calanais Standing Stones' Airigh na Beinne Bige. Megadroughts encouraged farmers to clear and cultivate Andean cloud forests. The last remaining Pacific glaciers between the Himalayas and the Andes were expected to melt in the coming decade. In the past two hundred years, American men have cooled by a temperature of 1° F.

Established brands are resilient against fake news, which was also found to implant false memories. Fish farmers freed a bald eagle from an octopus. In Australia, hypersaline effluent at the Sydney Desalination Plant was found to have increased the local population of one-spot puller. The sounds of underwater pile-driving elicit signs of both alarm and habituation in longfin squid, and the medium-term stress level of fish can be determined by plucking their scales and testing for cortisol. Illuminating bat caves disturbs bats. European zoologists urged the preservation of tree cavities

to accommodate honeybees, and a reward remained on offer for information leading to the poisoner of seven million Florida bees. Military interrogators at the end of World War II were found to have improperly disregarded Nazis' claims of having invented a form of DDT much safer for mammals.

Italics fonts were rated more liberal than boldface ones, and a feeling of vulnerability to disease was found to predict political conservatism. Liberals are likelier than conservatives to experience caring emotions in their chests, whereas conservatives are likelier to experience them in their faces. Patients from the McLean Hospital Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Institute who each had one of their real hands and a rubber hand stroked synchronously by Harvard doctors who then dabbed fake feces on the rubber hand before returning to stroking both hands displayed nearly twice as much facial disgust as patients whose real and rubber hands were stroked asynchronously. A study in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* reported the stress-relieving effects of "enjoyed flirtation" in the workplace. Sexually exploitable men are less attractive to straight women than sexually exploitable women are to straight men. Women, but not men, experience better orgasms with worse socioeconomic circumstances. Female Chinese university students who shift their vocal pitch up are perceived as more attractive, whereas male counterparts who shift their pitch down become less attractive. Baboons' clear articulation of proto-vowels led scientists to conclude that speech could have begun developing twenty million years earlier than was previously thought. Mantled howler monkeys howl for longer in the resource-rich interiors of forests than in areas impacted by human activity. Japanese macaques were recolonizing the abandoned zone around Fukushima. ■

"Moon Shadow 4" and "Moon Shadow 2," photographs by Luca Missoni. Courtesy the artist and Benrubi Gallery, New York City



Emily Winfield Martin



Sarah Utter



Yellow Owl Workshop



Little Truths Studio



Rilla Alexander



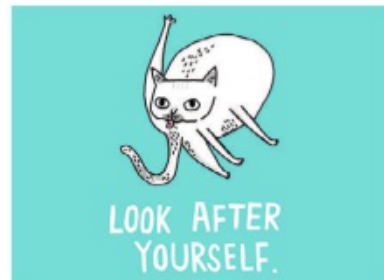
Ryan Berkley



Carson Ellis



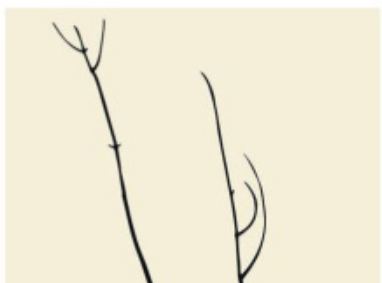
Sean Tejaratchi



Gemma Correll



Michelle Rial



Nikki McClure



Kate Bingaman-Burt



Modern Women



Adam JK



Notes to Self



Nikki McClure



Victory Garden



Bee's Knees



Molly Mendoza



Hiller Goodspeed



Papio Press



Slow Loris



Loose Leaves



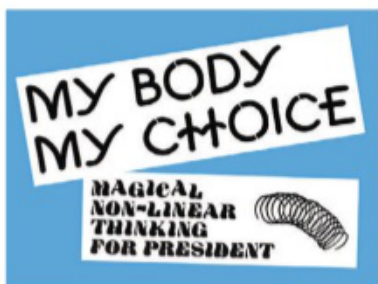
Will Bryant



Jill Bliss



Susie Ghahremani



Nicole Lavelle



The Galek Sea