

The Atlantic

An Icon's Fall
From Grace
By Ben Rhodes

My Lyme Disease
Nightmare
By Meghan O'Rourke

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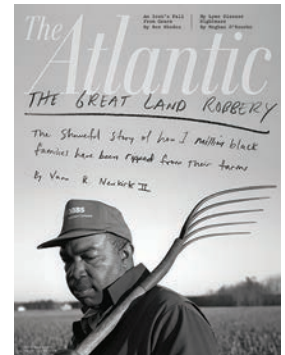
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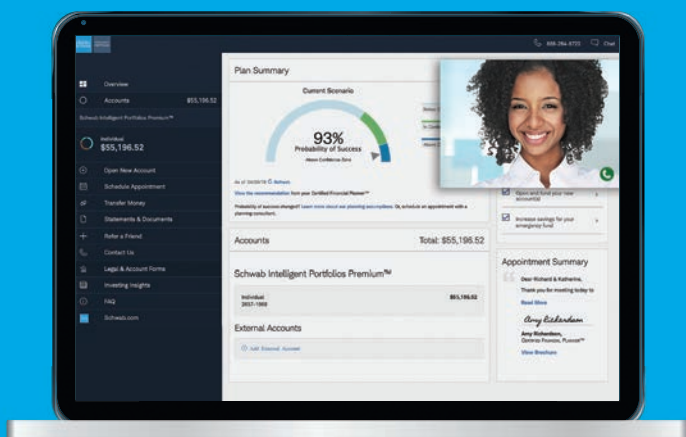
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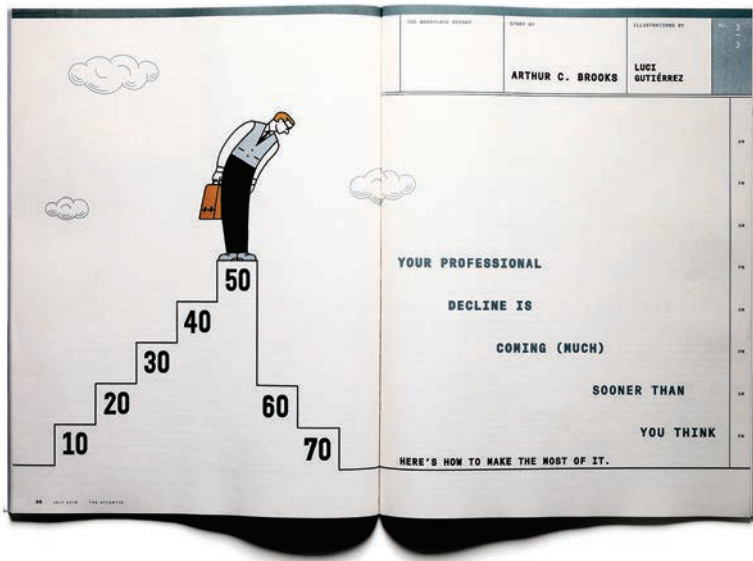


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• THE CONVERSATION

Your Professional Decline Is Coming (Much) Sooner Than You Think

In July, Arthur C. Brooks wrote about how to make the most of it.

Arthur C. Brooks's insightful piece really hit home for me. I was a primary-care physician for 33 years before closing my office to concentrate on elder and end-of-life care five years ago, when I turned 65. I had started feeling my fluid intelligence ebb, even as I was treating an ever more demanding caseload in a setting of corporatized health care.

My solution was to turn my practice over to a capable younger physician and embrace long-term-care geriatrics, where I have time to indulge my patients and lead from my heart.

I work with an excellent hospice team and facility staff. Not a week goes by when I don't hold the hand of a dying person or sign a death certificate. My goal is to bring my patients the comfort and peace that

allow heartfelt communication and that is only possible with reconciliation. Like the Buddha Mr. Brooks encountered, I have contemplated death and no longer find it threatening.

John Jefferys Bandola, M.D.
KINGSTON, R.I.

The article by Arthur Brooks is magnificent. As an 85-year-old professional, I have already experienced the world of angst he is now entering. Take his advice, please. He is especially right about the desire to explore spirituality, which professionals tend to neglect in their early years.

W. R. Klemm
BRYAN, TEXAS

I seem to have intuited and followed most of Arthur Brooks's precepts. During my

quite successful academic career, I gradually shifted from research to teaching, and from graduate to undergraduate teaching. I retired at 66. Ten years later, I keep my hand in research, but purely for my own intellectual pleasure, and to keep my brain active and healthy. I don't even have an office at the university; I work at home in my pajamas.

The only item of Brooks's advice I disagree with is *Sannyasa*, the "focus on more transcendently important things." The material world is wonderful, and I now get to enjoy it in ways I never could before. I will not "leave my office horizontally," but I may be taken horizontally off a cruise ship.

A demigod of my vocation, John Maynard Keynes, is

supposed to have expressed only one regret toward the end of his life: "I did not drink more champagne." This seems a worthy goal for all economists, indeed for high achievers in all careers, and much more enjoyable than *Sannyasa*.

Avinash Dixit
PRINCETON, N.J.

I am an 85-year-old male who retired at "the top of my game" at age 62. The retirement decision was based on family considerations: Our married daughter, a soon-to-be mother, lived in Portland, Oregon, and asked that my wife and I move to her town. The first six months of settling into our new home kept me occupied, so I did not feel an identity crisis. But soon I began to wonder whether we had retired too soon, and to feel a bit lost and depressed.

My wife suggested that I return to playing the clarinet. It did not take me long to realize that having the time to rehone my playing skills was a gift. I got engaged in Portland's music community, and eventually became principal clarinetist in two orchestras. My greatest compliments come from other, often younger musicians who attend my recitals and consistently tell me that I continue to improve.

Jules Elias
PORTLAND, ORE.

Arthur Brooks omits an important point about professional decline after age 50. For skill-based professions, waning creativity is outweighed by increasing experience and judgment. Chesley Sullenberger was 58 when he landed a jet on the Hudson River. For heart surgeons like me, the 50s are generally peak years.

Moreover, it is baffling that Brooks picked Darwin as an example of someone who "stagnated" after age 50. Darwin published *On the*

Origin of Species in 1859 at age 50, but he published *The Descent of Man* in 1871, books on reproduction in plants in 1876 and 1877, and his final book in 1881, the year before his death, at 73. By then, deteriorating health had confined him to his house and garden, so he wrote about earthworms.

A better example of declining creativity would have been Albert Einstein. His “miracle year” came in 1905, at age 26, and he published his theory of general relativity in 1915, at 36. Nothing thereafter came close, and his lifelong ambition, a unified field theory, escaped him.

Lawrence I. Bonchek, M.D.
LANCASTER, PA.

Arthur Brooks writes almost entirely of the experience of men (and of men of a certain era, socioeconomic class, and race). Although a reader might be able to infer something of the experience of women in his article, he effectively ignores them.

So what of the women whose careers have moved forward in fits and starts, due to time spent parenting or the need to counter legal, cultural, societal, or institutional restrictions? What of the women who never had the chance at a career, if indeed they wanted one? Do they feel the same sensations of decline? To what stage do they now move?

Shana Judge
ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.

The Worst Patients in the World

Americans are hypochondriacs, yet we skip our checkups. We demand drugs we don't need, and fail to take the ones we do. No wonder the U.S. leads the world in health spending, David H. Freedman wrote in July.

I found this article to be a refreshing departure from

most writing about health care. Of course culture matters. As a medical anthropologist, however, I thought David H. Freedman missed a key factor in health outcomes. Many people who have the worst compliance rates and outcomes (Freedman lists smokers, diabetics, and people with sedentary lifestyles as examples) also have the same socioeconomic status. In other words, they're broke or too busy to do everything they're supposed to.

While I agree that more attention needs to be paid to how American culture affects our health-care choices, I'd hate to see money and social class fall out of the analysis. These factors also affect how people perceive their doctors. I grew up in farm country and my family—who often couldn't afford all the recommended treatments or travel the two hours it would take to see specialists—viewed hospitals and clinics with suspicion. Local cultures and medical institutions affect and shape each other. Both have to change for Americans to have any chance at a better health-care system.

Theresa MacPhail
BROOKLYN, N.Y.

We can all acknowledge that a sedentary lifestyle, poor nutrition, and “toxic” habits contribute to abysmal American health-care outcomes. But maybe the American attitude toward health care is not the fundamental cause. This attitude might be a reflection of larger social and cultural forces in our country.

Americans have long been known for entitlement and a flair for dramatic heroism. Our health-care system amplifies those traits, with its emphasis on high-cost and high-intervention care over preventative care and lifestyle changes. We demonize figures

of authority and are inherently skeptical of advice from experts. Easily offended, we insist on ensuring comfort rather than knowing truth.

Creating cultural change will require far more than simply modifying health-care incentives. Treating the problem is usually more difficult than treating the symptoms.

David J. Berman, M.D.
BALTIMORE, MD.

Formal international comparisons consistently point to the much higher prices paid in the United States for medical services as the primary culprit behind our high medical spending. Prices paid in the U.S. far exceed those paid abroad even as Americans consume fewer units of service (such as doctor visits) relative to the OECD average. Were overconsumption the cause of our overspending, we might argue about why—are Americans, as David Freedman contends, both unhealthy and too demanding, or are we the victims of pill pushers, greedy doctors, and the wasteful disorganization of health care?

But one cannot possibly attribute overpricing to unhealthy behaviors. In fact, our behaviors are no less healthy than peer countries'. Yes, we lead the developed world in obesity (though Europe is not far behind), but we have one of the lowest smoking rates and consume less alcohol per capita than most European countries.

Jon Kingsdale, Ph.D.
JAMAICA PLAIN, MASS.

For the most part, David Freedman hits the nail on the head. As a neurosurgeon, I know all too well how difficult some patients can be.

Mr. Freedman postulates that Medicare for All would provide an incentive to push “patients to embrace care that's less flashy but may do more good” by “refusing to pay for

unnecessarily expensive care.” Unfortunately, it's not that simple. The problem is that much of medicine falls outside of established clinical guidelines. Very few conditions have treatment algorithms that have been tested in well-designed studies. In fact, physicians are surprised when patients seem to adhere to the “textbook.”

Decisions regarding medical care come about through the patient-physician relationship. As Mr. Freedman says, this relationship isn't always healthy. However, inserting governmental control to artificially diminish “unnecessarily expensive care” will only strain this relationship further and lead to greater dissatisfaction on both sides. Mr. Freedman correctly identifies one of the problems in American health care; he is just incorrect when he alludes to a solution.

Anthony DiGiorgio, D.O., M.H.A.
NEW ORLEANS, LA.

It's one thing for a medical-data wonk (or a physician who follows what these wonks say blindly) to declare that a treatment is unnecessary and/or expensive. It's quite another thing for the patient. Say you're a patient who desires a treatment that will extend your life by only a few months to a year, is very expensive, has nasty side effects, and may not succeed. But it's really, really important for you to see a family member graduate from high school or college; to attend a family member's wedding or a reunion; to cross off items on your bucket list. It doesn't matter if your “quality of life” as defined by some arbitrary measure declines.

Even if your chance of survival is only 20 percent, 15 percent, 10 percent, or 5 percent, why should you be denied that chance?

Sue McKeown
GAHANNA, OHIO

David H. Freedman replies:

To say U.S. health care is expensive because, as Jon Kingsdale notes, its prices are high is nearly a tautology. Why are they high? If the cause were an evil, greedy health-care industry, then the industry must be raking in massive profits not seen in other countries. But most hospitals are nonprofits, insurance companies (which cover just two-thirds of Americans) have profit margins around 5 percent, and Big Pharma companies are multinationals that sell their drugs all over the world—are they evil and greedy only in the U.S.? There are in fact many reasons for high prices here, and the evidence makes clear that a big one is the demanding, neglectful attitudes of American patients. (Though, yes, lower rates of alcohol consumption and smoking are relative bright spots in an otherwise troubling picture.)

Education Isn't Enough

Like many rich Americans, Nick Hanauer used to think better schools could heal the country's ills—a belief system he calls “educationism.” As Hanauer wrote in July, he has come to believe that he was wrong; fighting inequality must come first.

It's about time somebody spoke up and named the elephant in the room. That the person who wrote this article is essentially the “elephant” makes it all the more laudable. I commend Nick Hanauer for taking on this issue, as it is *the* issue concerning educational inequality and the “achievement gap” so often spoken of. I sincerely hope that he sparks a real national dialogue about the treacherous of wealth inequality, and that

the obvious response is a fundamental redistribution of wealth.

Catherine Jones
HAMDEN, CONN.

There is undeniably a problem with income inequality in this country, and I feel it personally as a middle-class engineer. However, I still consider myself an educationist. Nick Hanauer is dead right in saying that “a college diploma is no longer a guaranteed passport into the middle class,” but it does produce a better-informed electorate that is demonstrably less likely to vote for politicians or policies that just aren't functional. Most pragmatically, education policy is perhaps the major institutional change (besides infrastructure improvement) most likely to get past the legislative graveyard that Congress has become.

Robert Hodge
GEORGETOWN, COLO.

I agree with all the points made in this article. However, in one sense the failure of our education system is responsible for the state of our economy and society: the consistent lack of civics education. We have, both by design and through inattention, produced two generations ignorant of how our society and government should work. The lack of civic engagement allows the wealthy and powerful to disenfranchise huge masses of Americans.

Howard Schneider
PORTLAND, ORE.

Nick Hanauer's article highlighted the chicken-or-egg dilemma of education and income. However, without addressing deliberate efforts that keep certain portions of

our society poor, his “fixes” won't work. Racial animus is one of the most powerful drivers of inequality. Not until we truly have education equity along with nonbiased policing, no redlining of communities, a realistic tax system, reproductive rights, and full voter agency for all citizens will we have income equity.

Sharon Feola
HANSVILLE, WASH.

“Educationism” as described by Nick Hanauer is a belief we are all too familiar with and guilty of ourselves as philanthropic leaders. Too often we jump to solutions before examining the root causes of the inequities that are present in our education system.

While household income is a predictor of educational attainment, structural racism is the enduring impediment that undergirds the wealth and educational opportunity gaps across our country. If we truly want to address economic inequality and fix our schools, we need to examine why such gaps exist.

Nick Donohue
PRESIDENT AND CEO, NELLIE MAE
EDUCATION FOUNDATION
QUINCY, MASS.

John H. Jackson
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
SCHOTT FOUNDATION FOR
PUBLIC EDUCATION
QUINCY, MASS.

Finally, a fresh, realistic perspective on what is really going on in many of our underperforming schools. I taught elementary school in Boulder, Colorado, and Erie, Pennsylvania. The experiences were night and day. Both schools, in my opinion, had adequate economic resources; the

difference was the income and education levels of the students' parents. In Boulder I wanted for nothing, and going to school each day was a joy. It's easy to be a great teacher when you have super-prepared children. In Erie I saw firsthand how money in schools doesn't negate the effects of poverty. All the stressors in the home come right to school, which is something no amount of money can change.

Tina Brown
MOORPARK, CALIF.

Rather than simply acknowledge that his “educationism” approach to improving public education might have been wrong, Nick Hanauer concludes that his investment in education was wrong.

I agree with Hanauer that our education system can't compensate for a failing economic system, but strategic interventions and investments can strengthen existing public schools in ways that afford poor children access to the same high-quality educational opportunities that their middle-class and wealthy counterparts have. I hope Hanauer will reassess his investment in education and understand that economic and educational equality are intrinsically linked.

Caro G. Pemberton
SANTA ROSA, CALIF.

Correction

“Raj Chetty's American Dream” (August) stated that the Mayo Clinic is located in Minneapolis. The clinic's Minnesota campus is in Rochester.

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You may be skeptical that an electronic jingle can make doing the dishes a life-affirming endeavor—or even bind you, emotionally, to your dishwasher. But companies are betting otherwise. — Laura Bliss, p. 22



DISPATCHES

IDEAS & PROVOCATIONS

SEPTEMBER 2019



• SOCIETY

MERITOCRACY'S MISERABLE WINNERS

The system that's widened the gap between the rich and everyone else has also turned elite life into an endless, terrible competition. Maybe there's a way out.

BY DANIEL MARKOVITS

IN THE SUMMER OF 1987, I graduated from a public high school in Austin, Texas, and headed northeast to attend Yale. I then spent nearly 15 years studying at various universities—the London School of Economics, the University of Oxford, Harvard, and finally Yale Law School—picking up a string of degrees along the way. Today, I teach at Yale Law,

where my students unnervingly resemble my younger self: They are, overwhelmingly, products of professional parents and high-class universities. I pass on to them the advantages that my own teachers bestowed on me. They, and I, owe our prosperity and our caste to meritocracy.

Two decades ago, when I started writing about economic inequality, meritocracy seemed more likely a cure than a cause. Meritocracy's early advocates championed social mobility. In the 1960s, for instance, Yale President Kingman Brewster brought meritocratic admissions to the university with the express aim of breaking a hereditary elite. Alumni had long believed that their sons had a birthright to follow them to Yale; now prospective students would gain admission based on achievement rather than breeding. Meritocracy—for a time—replaced complacent insiders with talented and hardworking outsiders.

Today's meritocrats still claim to get ahead through talent and effort, using means open to anyone. In practice, however, meritocracy now excludes everyone outside of a narrow elite. Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale collectively enroll more students from households in the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from households in the bottom 60 percent. Legacy preferences, nepotism, and outright fraud continue to give rich applicants corrupt advantages. But the dominant causes of this skew toward wealth can be traced to meritocracy. On average, children whose parents make more than \$200,000 a year score about 250 points higher on the SAT than children whose parents make \$40,000 to \$60,000. Only about one in 200 children from the poorest third of households achieves SAT scores at Yale's median. Meanwhile, the top banks and law firms, along with other high-paying employers, recruit almost exclusively from a few elite colleges.

Hardworking outsiders no longer enjoy genuine opportunity. According to one study, only one out of every 100 children born into the poorest fifth of households, and fewer than one out of every 50 children born into the middle fifth, will join the top 5 percent. Absolute economic mobility is also declining—the odds that a middle-class child will outearn his parents have fallen by more than half since mid-century—and the drop is greater

among the middle class than among the poor. Meritocracy frames this exclusion as a failure to measure up, adding a moral insult to economic injury.

Public anger over economic inequality frequently targets meritocratic institutions. Nearly three-fifths of Republicans believe that colleges and universities are bad for America, according to the Pew Research Center. The intense and widespread fury generated by the college-admissions scandal early this year tapped into a deep and broad well of resentment. This anger is warranted but also distorting. Outrage at nepotism and other disgraceful forms of elite advantage-taking implicitly valorizes meritocratic ideals. Yet meritocracy itself is the bigger problem, and it is crippling the American dream. Meritocracy has created a competition that, even when everyone plays by the rules, only the rich can win.

But what, exactly, have the rich won? Even meritocracy's beneficiaries now suffer on account of its demands. It ensnares the rich just as surely as it excludes the rest, as those who manage to claw their way to the top must work with crushing intensity, ruthlessly exploiting their expensive education in order to extract a return.

No one should weep for the wealthy. But the harms that meritocracy imposes on them are both real and important. Diagnosing how meritocracy hurts elites kindles hope for a cure. We are accustomed to thinking that reducing inequality requires burdening the rich. But because meritocratic inequality does not in fact serve *anyone* well, escaping meritocracy's trap would benefit virtually everyone.

ELITES FIRST CONFRONT meritocratic pressures in early childhood. Parents—sometimes reluctantly, but feeling that they have no alternative—sign their children up for an education dominated not by experiments and play but by the accumulation of the training and skills, or human capital, needed to be admitted to an elite college and, eventually, to secure an elite job. Rich parents in cities like New York, Boston, and San Francisco now commonly apply to 10 kindergartens, running a gantlet of essays, appraisals,

and interviews—all designed to evaluate 4-year-olds. Applying to elite middle and high schools repeats the ordeal. Where aristocratic children once reveled in their privilege, meritocratic children now calculate their future—they plan and they scheme, through rituals of stage-managed self-presentation, in familiar rhythms of ambition, hope, and worry.

Schools encourage children to operate in this way. At one elite northeastern elementary school, for example, a teacher posted a “problem of the day,” which students had to solve before going

“Bankers’ hours” have given way to the ironically named “banker 9-to-5”—from 9 a.m. one day to 5 a.m. the next.

home, even though no time was set aside for working on it. The point of the exercise was to train fifth graders to snatch a few extra minutes of work time by multitasking or by sacrificing recess.

Such demands exact a toll. Elite middle and high schools now commonly require three to five hours of homework a night; epidemiologists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have warned of schoolwork-induced sleep deprivation. Wealthy students show higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse than poor students do. They also suffer depression and anxiety at rates as much as triple those of their age peers throughout the country. A recent study of a Silicon Valley high school found that 54 percent of students displayed moderate to severe symptoms of depression and 80 percent displayed moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety.

These students nevertheless have good reason to push themselves as they do. Elite universities that just a few decades ago accepted 30 percent of their applicants now accept less than 10 percent. The shift at certain institutions has been even more dramatic: The University of Chicago admitted 71 percent of its applicants as recently as 1995. In 2019 it admitted less than 6 percent.

The contest intensifies when meritocrats enter the workplace, where elite opportunity is exceeded only by the competitive effort required to grasp it. A person whose wealth and status depend on her human capital simply cannot afford to consult her own interests or passions in choosing her job. Instead, she must approach work as an opportunity to extract value from her human capital, especially if she wants an income sufficient to buy her children the type of schooling that secured her own eliteness. She must devote herself to a narrowly restricted class of high-paying jobs, concentrated in finance, management, law, and medicine. Whereas aristocrats once considered themselves a leisure class, meritocrats work with unprecedented intensity.

In 1962, when many elite lawyers earned roughly a third of what they do today, the American Bar Association could confidently declare, “There are ... approximately 1,300 fee-earning hours per year” available to the normal lawyer. In 2000, by contrast, a major law firm pronounced with equal confidence that a quota of 2,400 billable hours, “if properly managed,” was “not unreasonable,” which is a euphemism for “necessary for having a hope of making partner.” Because not all the hours a lawyer works are billable, billing 2,400 hours could easily require working from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. six days a week, every week of the year, without vacation or sick days. In finance, “bankers’ hours”—originally named for the 10-to-3 business day fixed by banks from the 19th century through the mid-20th century and later used to refer more generally to any light work—have given way to the ironically named “banker 9-to-5,” which begins at 9 a.m. on one day and runs through 5 a.m. on the next. Elite managers were once “organization men,” cocooned by lifelong employment in a corporate hierarchy that rewarded seniority above performance. Today, the higher a person climbs on the org chart, the harder she is expected to work. Amazon’s “leadership principles” call for managers to have “relentlessly high standards” and to “deliver results.” The company tells managers that when

they “hit the wall” at work, the only solution is to “climb the wall.”

Americans who work more than 60 hours a week report that they would, on average, prefer 25 fewer weekly hours. They say this because work subjects them to a “time famine” that, a 2006 study found, interferes with their capacity to have strong relationships with their spouse and children, to maintain their home, and even to have a satisfying sex life. A respondent to a recent Harvard Business School survey of executives



proudly insisted, “The 10 minutes that I give my kids at night is one million times greater than spending that 10 minutes at work.” Ten minutes!

The capacity to bear these hours gracefully, or at least grimly, has become a criterion for meritocratic success. A top executive at a major firm, interviewed by the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild for her book *The Time Bind*, observed that aspiring managers who have demonstrated their skills and dedication face a “final elimination”: “Some people flame out, get weird because they work all the time ... The people at the top are very smart, work like crazy, and don’t flame out. They’re still able to maintain a good mental set, and keep their family life together. *They* win the race.”

A person who extracts income and status from his own human capital places himself, quite literally, at the disposal of others—he uses himself up. Elite students desperately fear failure and crave the conventional markers of success, even as they see through and publicly deride mere “gold stars” and “shiny things.” Elite workers, for their part, find it harder and harder to pursue genuine passions or gain meaning through their work. Meritocracy traps entire generations inside demeaning fears and inauthentic ambitions: always hungry but never finding, or even knowing, the right food.

THE ELITE SHOULD NOT—they have no right to—expect sympathy from those who remain excluded from the privileges and benefits of high caste. But ignoring how oppressive meritocracy is for the rich is a mistake. The rich now dominate society not idly but effortfully. The familiar arguments that once defeated aristocratic inequality do not apply to an economic system based on rewarding effort and skill. The relentless work of the hundred-hour-a-week banker inoculates her against charges of unearned advantage. Better, then, to convince the rich that all their work isn’t actually paying off.

They may need less convincing than you might think. As the meritocracy trap closes in around elites, the rich themselves are turning against the prevailing system. Plaintive calls for work/life balance ring ever louder. Roughly two-thirds of elite workers say that they would decline a promotion if the new job demanded yet more of their energy. When he was the dean of Stanford Law School, Larry Kramer warned graduates that lawyers at top firms are caught in a seemingly endless cycle: Higher salaries require more billable hours to support them, and longer hours require yet higher salaries to justify them. Whose interests, he lamented, does this system serve? Does anyone really want it?

Escaping the meritocracy trap will not be easy. Elites naturally resist policies that threaten to undermine their advantages. But it is simply not possible to get

rich off your own human capital without exploiting yourself and impoverishing your inner life, and meritocrats who hope to have their cake and eat it too deceive themselves. Building a society in which a good education and good jobs are available to a broader swath of people—so that reaching the very highest rungs of the ladder is simply less important—is the only way to ease the strains that now drive the elite to cling to their status.

How can that be done? For one thing, education—whose benefits are concentrated in the extravagantly trained children of rich parents—must become open and inclusive. Private schools and universities should lose their tax-exempt status unless at least half of their students come from families in the bottom two-thirds of the income distribution. And public subsidies should encourage schools to meet this requirement by expanding enrollment.

A parallel policy agenda must reform work, by favoring goods and services produced by workers who do not have elaborate training or fancy degrees. For example, the health-care system should emphasize public health, preventive care, and other measures that can be overseen primarily by nurse practitioners, rather than high-tech treatments that require specialist doctors. The legal system should deploy “legal technicians”—not all of whom would need to have a J.D.—to manage routine matters, such as real-estate transactions, simple wills, and even uncontested divorces. In finance, regulations that limit exotic financial engineering and favor small local and regional banks can shift jobs to mid-skilled workers. And management should embrace practices that distribute control beyond the C-suite, to empower everyone else in the firm.

The main obstacle to overcoming meritocratic inequality is not technical but political. Today’s conditions induce discontent and widespread pessimism, verging on despair. In his book *Oligarchy*, the political scientist Jeffrey A. Winters surveys eras in human history from the classical period to the 20th century, and documents what becomes of societies that concentrate income and wealth in a narrow elite. In almost every instance, the dismantling of such inequality has been accompanied by societal collapse, such as military defeat (as in the Roman empire) or revolution (as in France and Russia).

Nevertheless, there are grounds for hope. History does present one clear-cut case of an orderly recovery from concentrated inequality: In the 1920s and ’30s, the U.S. answered the Great Depression by adopting the New Deal framework that would eventually build the mid-century middle class. Crucially, government redistribution was not the primary engine of this process. The broadly shared prosperity that this regime established came, mostly, from an economy and a labor market that promoted economic equality over hierarchy—by dramatically expanding access to education, as under the GI Bill, and then placing mid-skilled, middle-class workers at the center of production.

An updated version of these arrangements remains available today; a renewed expansion of education and

a renewed emphasis on middle-class jobs can reinforce each other. The elite can reclaim its leisure in exchange for a reduction of income and status that it can easily afford. At the same time, the middle class can regain its income and status and reclaim the center of American life.

Rebuilding a democratic economic order will be difficult. But the benefits that economic democracy brings—to everyone—justify the effort. And the violent collapse that will likely follow from doing nothing leaves us with no good alternative but to try. **A**

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• VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

Where Migration Is a Civil Religion



NO COUNTRY has worked harder than the Philippines to export its people, and no people have proved more eager to go. Since the mid-1970s, the government has trained and marketed overseas workers, not just drumming up jobs but fashioning a brand—casting the Filipino as a genial hard worker, the best in low-cost labor. In 1977, *Wingtips*, the magazine of Philippine Airlines, insisted that “Filipinos don’t pose the problems that guest workers from, say, the Mediterranean belt have in Western Europe.” They wouldn’t riot or strike. Critics later called the sale of the happy, hardworking Filipino infantilizing, an effort to turn people into remittance machines, but most Filipinos liked that their country was known as the HR department of the world.

More than 2 million Filipinos depart each year, enough to fill a dozen or more Boeing 747s a day. About one in seven Filipino workers is employed abroad, and the \$32 billion that they send home accounts for 10 percent of the GDP. Migration is to the Philippines what cars once were to Detroit: the civil religion. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* runs nearly 600 stories a year on overseas Filipino workers, or “OFWs.” Half have the fevered feel of gold-rush ads. Half sound like human-rights complaints:

“Remittances Seen to Set New Record.”
 “Happy Days Here Again for Real Estate Sector.”
 “5 Dead OFWs in Saudi.”
 “We Slept With Dog, Ate Leftovers for \$200/Month.”

• Adapted from *A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves: One Family and Migration in the 21st Century*, by Jason DeParle, published by Viking in August

• SKETCH

THE SEX-SCENE COACH

Onscreen intimacy is endangered.
Can Alicia Rodis save it?

BY KATE JULIAN

Rodis, who in a previous life was an actor and a stuntwoman, still has headshot-ready blond ringlets and a performer's lithe physicality. That day, a Wednesday, she was working from her home office in Astoria, Queens, preparing for shoots on various shows. Among them was *The Deuce*, the David Simon and George Pelecanos drama about sex work in 1970s Times Square and the birth of modern porn, which begins its third and final season this month. Rodis's bookshelves were packed with volumes about theater, sex, and sword fighting; across from her desk hung a certificate from the Society of American Fight Directors identifying her as a stage-combat teacher and a bulletin board covered with photos, cartoons, and buttons with slogans like "No does not mean *Convince me*."

We sat down on a couch and Rodis turned on an episode from *The Deuce*'s second season. She fast-forwarded to a scene that takes place on a porn set done up with a kitschy *Arabian Nights* look. Like many scenes in *The Deuce*, it is sexually graphic but deliberately unsexy, in this case comically so. As the movie-shoot-within-a-TV-episode unfolds, the porn director barks commands at an actor named Tyler (played by Justin Stiver), who appears to be naked save for a gold lamé turban. Tyler is having sex with a porn actor named Shana, and the director wants him to raise her hips six inches for a better camera angle; Shana resists indignantly, offering a vivid description of what the requested

a person rather than to an undergarment. "We take a Shibue, open it up, and put a silicone guard underneath so everyone becomes like a Barbie doll."

Rodis wants both to shield sensitive body parts and to make their contours undetectable. She explained that costume departments know all about the items in her kit, but she doesn't like to leave anything to chance. If she's new on a set, she will bring Shibues in a full range of human skin tones and some silicone guards, too. She waved a lavender package containing one (brand name: Silicone Valley), then continued riffling through her supplies. "Knee pads or elbow pads in case someone's on a hard floor. Sticky tape, moleskin. Wet Ones, tissues, breath mints. Baby oil so they can take anything that's adhesive off. Razors—though usually I'll talk with actors beforehand and ask, 'Could you shave your bikini line so we know that you're not going to get a free spa treatment when we take off the Shibue?'" She held up a Hibue. "The same thing, but for someone who has a penis."

For a fight scene, choreographers mapped out every beat. Why weren't sex scenes governed by the same approach?

position will mean for her insides. "I don't want to hurt her!" Tyler protests.

When I asked Rodis how she'd facilitated the scene, she explained that she'd briefed both actors on the planned nudity and physical interaction, and on what type of wardrobe assistance—or lack-of-wardrobe assistance—they

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HIS IS MY KIT." Alicia Rodis, who since early last year has been HBO's lead intimacy coordinator, a new title that translates roughly to chief sex-scene coach, held up a clear vinyl case filled with what at first glance appeared to be toiletries and packages of pantyhose. On closer examination, though, the products and their names were mysterious. *Shibue. Hibue. Stanga.*

"Let's say we're coming in to do a sex scene," she said. "They're simulating sex and they're excluding genitals—we are going to see someone fully naked, but not their genitals—and they're in the bed, with sheets. So what do we need to make *sure*?" Here she picked up a Shibue ("she-boo"), which looks like a panty liner except that it's meant to adhere to

should expect. The day of the shoot, the three met in person to discuss in more detail who would be touching whom, how, and where. A conversation like this, Rodis explained, can also involve choreographic elements, such as “setting the number of pumps.” Once she had established that everyone was comfortable with the plan and made sure both actors had robes to wear before and after the scene, it was finally time for filming.

HOWEVER BASIC ALL of this might seem, Rodis’s work represents a major departure from how sex scenes have historically been planned—or, as has often been the case, improvised. Rodis, who is 38, began acting onstage in her teens and continued through her 20s, when she added some TV acting and also took up fight directing and stunt work. On TV sets, she found, actresses were sometimes expected to shed their shirt without advance notice. As for sex scenes,

performers were often left to muddle their way through the action. Some directors had an attitude of, as she put it, “I want to discuss what your character does for everything *until* it gets to anything sexual, and then just go for it.” The message that sends to actors is: “‘You know how to kiss; kiss how *you* kiss.’ But no one should give a shit about how the *actor* kisses”—or comports himself sexually—“it should be about the *character*.” At best, this inattention produced lackluster sex scenes. At worst, it suggested an unserious attitude that could leave performers feeling confused if not traumatized.

Rodis was struck by how much more care went into staging physical interactions that were violent or dangerous than into staging those that were sexual. For a fight scene, choreographers mapped out every beat, helping actors work through each movement in slow motion, over and over, until they were automatic. In stunt work, a focus on safety was considered

“nonnegotiable.” Why weren’t sex scenes governed by the same approach?

When Rodis heard that a fellow fight choreographer, Tonia Sina, had begun offering what she called intimacy direction and choreography services, she reached out to her. In 2015, the two women joined forces with a third actor turned fight director, Siobhan Richardson, to found their own company, Intimacy Directors International. Initially most of their work was in the theater, where a series of scandals had focused attention on the question of how sex was performed onstage.

By late 2017, however, the nascent #MeToo and Time’s Up movements were drawing similar scrutiny to the TV and film industry, with allegations of on- and off-set wrongdoing leveled at actors including Kevin Spacey, Jeffrey Tambor, and Jeremy Piven. Then, in January 2018, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article in which several women accused the *Deuce* executive producer and lead actor James Franco of behavior on film sets that was “inappropriate or sexually exploitative.” One woman said he had removed protective guards from actresses’ genitals during an oral-sex scene. (Franco’s attorney disputed the women’s stories and told the paper, “The allegations about the protective guards are not accurate.”)

The next month, shortly before *The Deuce* was scheduled to begin taping its second season, Rodis got a message from a producer on the show. “He was like, ‘I’m looking at a website, and, um, it says that you do a service?’” She called him back, and two days later—after binge-watching the first season of the show—she went to Silvercup Studios in Queens to meet with David Simon and nine or 10 long-faced HBO producers and executives, each of whom had a copy of her résumé. “You could tell something was up,” she said dryly.

For the show’s first season, Nina K. Noble, an executive producer and a longtime collaborator of Simon’s, had taken various steps to ensure actors’ comfort, from personally reviewing scripts with them to improvising intimacy barriers out of yoga mats. But after #MeToo’s allegations and revelations, Noble told me, some of the cast members had asked the producers to do more, and she agreed that it was time for outside help. (I asked Noble whether the decision was related to the allegations against Franco; she denied



that it was.) Rodis was asked to explain exactly what she might bring to the show, so she described the objectives of her theatrical work—including choreography, consent and safety, and cultivating a connection between actors so as to promote chemistry. Here, Simon jumped in. “We don’t *want* them to be connected,” Rodis remembered him saying. “This is transactional sex, and shame on us if we try to make that look glorified in any way.” She emphatically agreed. That night, she was offered the job.

IN THE OPENING SEASON of *The Deuce*, Emily Meade’s character, Lori, has a lot of sex—all of it transactional, none of it glorified. Upon arriving in New York from Minnesota, she signs up with a pimp named C.C. and becomes a prostitute and later a porn actor. Both jobs are detailed graphically. Before *The Deuce*, Meade’s career had included several difficult sex scenes (the first, when she was 16, involved her character’s rape by an older man)—but she had powered through them with gritted teeth. Approaching Season 2, however, she felt ill: She now knew just how dense with difficult sex *The Deuce* could be, and #MeToo had brought back memories of sexual trauma she had suffered in her own life.

The first time Meade worked closely with Rodis was for a scene in which her character travels to Los Angeles for the Adult Film Association of America Awards. There she meets a talent scout named Greg, played by Ryan Farrell; they flirt, pile into the back of his limousine, snort some cocaine, and—fully clothed—make out. By any standard, let alone *The Deuce*’s, the scene is tame. Meade was nonetheless anxious. She didn’t know Farrell, and the atmosphere on TV and movie sets had recently grown tense. “This is right when we came back to work, right after Time’s Up. Everyone’s walking on eggshells,” she told me. “Obviously any decent man is going to feel uncomfortable just grabbing at my breast.” Farrell told me that he was, in fact, concerned about Meade’s well-being, but wasn’t sure how to effectively convey that concern. “If you keep telling somebody you’re not a creep, it’s kind of creepy,” he said.

Ahead of the shoot, the episode’s director, Steph Green, explained her vision of the scene to Rodis, who called the actors to run through a proposed plan. Afterward,

Rodis made sure that each actor’s contract had a rider stipulating that Farrell would touch Meade’s clothed breasts, and Meade would grab Farrell’s crotch through his pants, under which he’d be wearing a prosthetic penis. The day of filming, Green, Rodis, and both actors met in private to prepare. (Green has long run trust- and chemistry-building exercises before intimacy scenes.) Before rehearsing the scene, she and Rodis asked the actors to hold each other’s gaze for a long interval. The actors also took turns inviting each other to touch agreed-upon body parts: hand, knee, thigh, and so on.

When it was time to shoot, the aforementioned prosthetic was produced. “It was an actual fake penis that they use in some of the scenes,” Farrell said. “I was like, ‘That’s pretty extreme!’” He put it in his pants. “Emily got to actually feel it when it was on top of me,” he said, “and when things like that start happening, it’s an icebreaker, and everybody loosens up a bit.”

Farrell and Meade got in the back of the limo, together with a cameraperson, while Rodis and Green watched the scene via monitor. (By long-standing tradition, TV and movie sex scenes are filmed on closed sets, without any unnecessary people milling around.) Early in the proceedings, they paused to fine-tune the way Farrell was touching Meade’s breast. “His hand was sort of flat,” Meade recalled. As a result, Rodis said, it looked as if Farrell’s character was pinning Lori down instead of caressing her. “If you give your hand just a little bit of a cup to it and bring it underneath,” she told Farrell, “it isn’t going to look like you’re forcing her down.” The small adjustment didn’t require added contact or pressure, Rodis said, but it made the scene into “an intimate moment and not something that he was pushing her into.” In the context of Lori’s story line, that was a crucial distinction. For all her sexual encounters up to this point in the series, this is the first one we see unfold entirely outside her pimp’s clutches—the first one she appears to actually want.

More graphic scenes call for different measures. In the new season, another actor performs oral sex on Meade’s

character. “I’ve had to do that multiple times, and every time it’s been either someone inappropriately close or awkwardly far away,” she said. Rodis, by contrast, “was able to fully structure it—how he arched his back and where he put his hands; for him to put his mouth or his face toward my left leg in a certain way so it *looked* like he was doing that, without it being inappropriate.” The goal is to minimize, not eliminate, awkwardness.

When Rodis first arrived at HBO, she sensed that some veteran actors and directors suspected that *intimacy coordinator* was code for “censor.”

“It’s still awkward, no matter what,” Meade said. “You have somebody’s head in your *crotch*.”

Fundamental to Rodis’s approach is her comfort talking about human bodies and the things they can do together. “It is a skill just to speak freely and technically about sex scenes,” Green said, adding: “How can we figure out where this can all go wrong until we can talk about what it is in the first place?” When Rodis first arrived at HBO, such frankness wasn’t necessarily what people were expecting; to the contrary, she sensed that some veteran actors and directors suspected that *intimacy coordinator* was code for “censor”—that “the Millennials were coming to sanitize everything.” Rodis is sensitive and chooses her words carefully—she is capable of saying bloodless things like “rear backside nudity” with a straight face. But she is also, as Meade put it, “completely down for the raunchy silliness of it all.” This combination of candor and lightheartedness allows everyone around her to speak frankly, too. And that, far from sanitizing sex, enables richer and more realistic depictions of it.

IN RETHINKING its approach to sex scenes, HBO is motivated by more than benevolence toward its actors. It is scrambling to salvage an essential element of its identity, not to mention its bottom line, in the face of new realities.



• BUSINESS

WHY ARE WASHING MACHINES LEARNING TO PLAY THE HARP?

Appliance makers believe more and better chimes, alerts, and jingles make for happier customers. Are they right?

BY LAURA BLISS

THE ROAR OF the MGM lion. NBC's iconic chimes. The godlike C-major chord of a booting Apple computer. Companies have long used sound to distinguish their brands and to create a sense of familiarity with, and even affection for, their products. Microsoft went so far as to tap the ambient-sound legend Brian Eno to score the six-second overture for Windows 95, a starry ripple trailed by a fading echo. Lately, however, the sounds have proliferated and become more sophisticated. Amazon, Google, and Apple are racing to dominate the smart-speaker market with their voice assistants. But a device need not speak to be heard.

No longer do household machines merely *bing* or *plink* or *blamp*, as they might have in a previous era when such alerts simply indicated that the clothes were dry or the coffee was brewed. Now the machines play snippets of music. In search of ever more tailored accompaniment, companies have turned to experts such as Audrey Arbeeny, the CEO of Audiobrain, which composes notifications for devices and machinery, among many other audio-branding pursuits. If you've heard the start-up *pongs* of an IBM ThinkPad or the whispery greeting of Xbox 360, you know her work. "We don't make noise," Arbeeny told me. "We create a holistic experience that brings about better well-being."

You may be skeptical that an electronic jingle, however holistic, can make doing the dishes a life-affirming endeavor—or even one that might bind you, emotionally, to your dishwasher. But companies are betting otherwise, and not entirely without reason.

HUMAN BEINGS have always relied on sound to interpret stimuli. A good crackle is a sure sign that wood is burning well; the hiss of cooking meat might be the original branded audio experience. Pre-digital machines offered their own audio cues: Clocks ticked; camera shutters clicked. The noises may not have been intentional, but they let us know that stuff was working.

An early example of a device that communicated data through sound was the Geiger counter. Invented in 1908 to measure ionizing radiation, it makes an audible snap to signal the presence of alpha, beta, or gamma particles. (Viewers of HBO's *Chernobyl* will understand why

this is useful: The person operating the device can simultaneously observe the surroundings for visual cues of radiation.) Decades later, a researcher at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory studying machine interfaces popularized a term for sounds that act as vessels for easily recognizable information: *earcon*. Like an icon, but aural instead of visual.

In the 1950s and '60s, advances by Japanese manufacturers in piezoelectric technology—squeezing crystals between metal plates to generate energy—helped usher beeps into the consumer market. One of the first musical notifications by a household machine was inspired by the Prohibition-era lyric “How dry I am,” featured in the 1952 Westinghouse D-5 Dryer. By the 1980s, kitchen appliances around the globe were emitting monophonic beeps to alert us to the progress of our coffee, dishes, and laundry. (So, too, were in-home smoke detectors, digital watches, and a host of other new devices.)

The digital revolution—and the shrinking size and cost of computer chips—means that consumer goods are now capable of playing MP3-quality audio files. Some of these sounds remain fairly plain: You’ve perhaps heard an LG washing machine play a little ditty at start-up (*do-di-deedle-di-di!*). But the trend is toward more complicated compositions with loftier ambitions (and not only for household appliances, but for automobiles, credit-card readers, food-delivery robots).

At Audiobrain’s Creamsicle-colored offices in Manhattan, I listened to some of Arbeeney’s recent work for Whirlpool. One machine, the Whirlpool Smart All-in-One Washer & Dryer, is designed to complete full loads in a single machine. Arbeeney was tasked with composing sounds that would amplify Whirlpool’s “Every Day, Care” campaign, a marketing scheme intended to evoke feelings of familial tenderness and acts of love (because nothing says love like laundry). To suggest an intimate touch, Arbeeney recorded fingertips drumming on denim. The washer’s start-up theme is a bubbly harp melody. Another product, the KitchenAid Smart Oven+, is geared toward “any cook looking to unlock their creativity”: When starting up it plays a trill of custom-made kalimba; the tick of its digitized timer is reminiscent of a clinking spoon.

Arbeeney contrasts the layered, polyphonic compositions she’s created for these appliances with the grating bleeps of microwaves past. They’re softer, for one, and more personal. “It makes you feel like there’s a human playing that harp for you, plucked by human hands,” she said. Inside the conference room where we sat, we could hear an air conditioner groan. “And it doesn’t sound like that,” she added.

The sounds are still intended to be functional. Our machines prod us—ever so gently!—through our tasks. But they also set a mood. The person washing socks becomes the “hero” in a domestic drama, Brandon Satanek, the global senior manager of product and digital user-experience design at Whirlpool, told me. An appliance’s notifications provide the soundtrack to that movie, which follows an emotional arc. When the KitchenAid Smart Oven+ finishes preheating, it plays a hopeful phrase (*da-da-di?*), while a finished bake is accompanied by a triumphant *da-di-dum!* Likewise with the washer/dryer. “There are certain happy events in those situations,” Satanek said. “When you’ve finished washing your clothes, and you’re ready to smell those clean clothes, it’s a moment to celebrate. We want to reinforce those things in a really positive way with the sounds.” Cue the harps.

THESE COMPANIES BELIEVE that bespoke sounds deepen customer loyalty: If you like what you hear, Satanek explained, you will develop brand allegiance, replacing a Whirlpool with a Whirlpool, and seeking out other members of its product family.

Whether this is a realistic bet or wishful thinking is an open question. Sound is more visceral than sight, Daniel Levitin, the celebrated neuroscientist and author of *This Is Your Brain on Music*, told me. We’re more easily startled by sound because, unlike vision, it’s processed directly in the brain stem. But first, sound waves cause our eardrums to vibrate. “They sound like they’re coming from inside our heads,” Levitin said. “That’s very intimate.” In the 1990s, Levitin researched how sound might be built into Microsoft’s operating systems,

which were trying to keep up with Apple’s earcons—the intuitive crumple of an emptying trash can, the pleasing whoosh of outgoing email.

A wealth of studies in consumer psychology attests to the power of sound to affect our decision making. In one famous experiment from the '90s, British wine shoppers bought five times as many French bottles as German bottles when

The person washing socks becomes the “hero” in a domestic drama. The machine provides the soundtrack.

French accordions played in the store; when an oompah band sounded, German wine outsold the French. Still other studies have suggested that slot-machine noises, often high-pitched and in major keys, can nudge gamblers to keep playing and can even encourage riskier bets.

A kitchen isn’t a casino, however. Can a well-considered score really make consumers more likely to buy a Whirlpool over a GE? Will the sock washer still feel heroic the 50th time he runs the machine—or merely annoyed? Audio UX, an audio-branding studio based in New York, recently commissioned a study that found that custom-made “premium” sounds, as opposed to “generic” ones, were likelier to be associated with the correct action (e.g., turning on a dishwasher) by test users, most of whom also said they’d prefer to own the brand that offered the customized cues. Those results serve the interests of the company that produced them, but the findings tracked with some of the academic work in this field. Vijaykumar Krishnan, the chair of the marketing department at Northern Illinois University, has found that changing a product’s sonic logo to a more distinctive composition can increase how much a consumer is willing to pay for the product.

But specialized sounds for household goods must be in keeping with a customer’s expectations for them, the academics warned. Too many audible flourishes

from an oven—an appliance that doesn't usually make much noise—could stand out in a bad way. "A coffee machine or a vacuum cleaner with a ringtone would be a marker of inauthenticity," which can irritate people, says Nicolai Jørgensgaard Graakjær, a professor of music and sound in market communication at Denmark's Aalborg University. In a Whirlpool showroom, I found the tones Arbeeney composed for the smart oven cheerful and unobtrusive. But in an actual kitchen, with a jingle emanating from the dishwasher, Slack notifications clacketing from an open laptop, text-message alerts pinging from an iPhone, and some Tchaikovsky burbling from an Amazon Echo, a harried cook might be forgiven for failing to appreciate the finer points of the KitchenAid's preheat composition.

Too many sounds, carefully designed though they may be, runs the risk of turning into an irritant, or worse. Dexter Garcia, a co-founder of Audio UX, pointed me to a 2010 article in *The Boston Globe* describing "alarm fatigue." Nurses at Massachusetts General Hospital had become so bombarded by constant alerts, they ignored the critical beeps signaling a dying patient. The problem is pervasive: In a study at Johns Hopkins Hospital, nearly 60,000 alarms were recorded over 12 days—that's 350 alarms per patient, per day, hammering staff ears.

Most households aren't quite there yet. Even as their notifications have grown more baroque, machines themselves have become quieter overall, engineered to mute hums, drones, and grinding motors. Arbeeney sees her work as battling ill-considered walls of noise, and improving upon the clunky piezoelectric blurbs of old. In the abstract, she is undoubtedly realizing that goal. But as ever more appliances seek to distinguish themselves aurally, a cacophony seems inevitable, one in which even the most carefully wrought melody might be drowned out by the din. Sonic branders may be in the business of selling sound, but perhaps the first question a product designer should ask is: Could it be quiet instead? In the near future, the smartest machines might turn out to be the ones that know when to hold their peace. **A**

Laura Bliss is the West Coast bureau chief for CityLab.

• STUDY OF STUDIES

Laws of Attraction

Beards, scars, red clothes, and other scientifically proven sources of sex appeal

BY BEN HEALY

HOT OR NOT? The question of whom we're attracted to and why has long confounded humankind's greatest philosophers, scientists, and reality-show contestants.

Scads of studies suggest that those of us looking for Mr. or Ms. Right may actually be looking for Mr. Facial Symmetry or Ms. Ideal Waist-to-Hip Ratio (about 0.7 for women). **[1, 2]** But other research suggests that whether a trait is attractive depends on the type of connection you're looking for. For example, women in one study found men with facial scars more appealing than other men for short-term relationships, but not for long-term ones. **[3]** In another study, men with beards had an edge among women seeking long-term relationships—a finding that might give clean-shaven guys with scars an idea about how to turn a one-night stand into something lasting. **[4]** (If all of this sounds heteronormative, it is: Almost all research on attraction involves straight people.)

Should two people seek lasting happiness, they may want to define the relationship, especially if they're already friends. As any Harry or Sally can tell you, while women often mistake males' indications of sexual interest for expressions of friendliness, men consistently mistake females' expressions of friendliness for sexual interest. **[5-7]** This might help explain why men are more likely to report attraction toward opposite-sex friends than are women. **[7]** Further complicating matters, University of Virginia and Harvard researchers found that women were most attracted to men whose level of interest in them was ambiguous. **[8]**

Those of you playing at home may have noticed that men have more



predictable (and physical) definitions of what makes a woman attractive than women do for men. **[9]** Elsewhere in the "Hey, eyes up here!" school of attraction science, people in one study tended to look at faces if seeking love, and bodies if motivated by sexual desire. **[10]** In another study, people tended to check out a romantic prospect's head and chest—while they focused on the legs and feet of someone in the friend zone. **[11]**

If two people can get it together to go out, they are likely to wear red or black, especially common choices on a first date. **[12]** No wonder: Red makes everyone seem more attractive, both to themselves and to others. **[13]** What they order matters, too. Researchers have found that a woman is more likely to find a man attractive if she's eating something that's spicy rather than sweet. **[14]** A drink may also help—but only one. In an experiment, people who had the equivalent of a glass of wine were rated more attractive than people who drank either no alcohol or more than a glass, perhaps because they seemed more relaxed, or maybe because they were attractively flushed. **[15]**

Of course, true hotness lies within, but how do you get someone to discover your inner hottie if you lack come-hither hips or piercing, symmetrical eyes? A red shirt, a glass of wine, and a little curry could be a good start. **A**

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• TECH

GAMES BOYS PLAY

How *Gears of War* helped me come out

BY SPENCER A. KLAVAN

that vision would have to be radically reconfigured once I told him I'd only ever had romantic feelings for other boys. I was 16. We were playing *Spider-Man 3*, and somehow, that made it easier.

Video games were something we always did together—half an hour or so

every weeknight. The normalcy of that ritual was comforting to me. The game also gave us something to focus on, so we wouldn't have to look each other in the eye. I still felt icky using the word *gay* about myself ("I'm ... not straight" is what I said). It would have been intolerable to tell him face-to-face; I almost certainly would have choked up, as I had while telling my mom earlier that day. Coming out felt emasculating enough. Crying would have been utter humiliation.

He took it great, as I'd predicted, but I think we were both glad to have something in front of us that we could look at while we talked. The task of swinging on webs through *Spider-Man*'s pixelated streets absorbed enough of our attention that, looking at him with my peripheral vision, I could tell him this raw truth.

Men are good at relating to each other in this way. We get along well when there's a project in front of us—when we're side by side looking at some third thing. All of the classic "male bonding" activities are like this—when you're hunting, or working on a car, or shooting free throws, you can look together at the deer, or the transmission, or the basket, and talk. The

I CAME OUT to my dad while we were playing *Spider-Man 3* on PlayStation 2. People ask me if it was hard—he's a political conservative and a Christian, and they wonder if I was afraid he would condemn me. I wasn't. My father is an artist from a family of New York intellectuals. On social issues, he takes a *laissez-faire* stance: Live and let live, just don't hurt anyone. I was pretty sure he'd react all right.

But it was still hard, because coming out to your dad is hard. Sons want to be like their fathers—they just do—and fathers want to see their sons become men. Marrying a nice girl and getting her good and pregnant is part of that, just like playing catch in the backyard is. He teaches and shows, you watch and learn, and a vision of your future life emerges, a picture of successful manhood that is in some ways the most cherished thing you and your dad share. At the very least,



common objective gives you something to talk *about*, and not having to face each other means you don't have to lay the full weight of your emotions on each other.

I suspect that's why so many of my closest male friendships have evolved at least in part around gaming. My three best buddies in high school all played. As grunty teenagers to whom conversation didn't come easy, we could spend hours on the Nintendo GameCube in my family's back room. After my parents, they were among the first people I came out to, and boy was that scary: What if they thought I had a crush on one of them?

They didn't. They were in fact models of maturity. It was my first time really being vulnerable with them, and they showed themselves to be the stand-up guys they have remained ever since.

After what felt to me like an explosive revelation, the routines of our friend group took on new significance. Wandering around town, going to action movies, calling one another gross names—the mere fact that we kept doing that stupid stuff showed me I was still their pal.

That's another important feature of male friendship, I think: the unspokenness of it. Your bros show up for you without calling attention to it, and you never have to thank them. In fact, they'd probably prefer if you didn't, otherwise things might get awkward. My high-school friends demonstrated their care for me in a thousand tiny ways, most of them involving swift and gruesome death at their digital hands.

That they didn't go easy on me may be what I appreciated most. They schooled me at *Halo* and shot my head clean off in *Gears of War*. They continued to give me endless shit, too. Verbal abuse is another way to show affection indirectly, and we were ruthless because (though we would never have said it) we loved each other. Being gay was another thing for them to make fun of me about, the way I made fun of them for having acne or being short.

Our verbal roughhousing was egalitarian: One of us had obsessive-compulsive disorder; we made fun of him for how long he spent going back over every level to pick up all the ammo. One of us was a first-generation immigrant; we used to say that he couldn't understand English when he got a

game's instructions wrong. And I know how this sounds, but I would have been devastated if I hadn't gotten called *faggot* a couple of times. It was how I knew my friends weren't going to treat me differently, and that meant everything was going to be okay.

That kind of insensitive banter has fallen out of fashion; in some circles it has become anathema. I get it. Kids can be cruel, and bullying can have terrible consequences. I understand the impulse to defuse it at all costs. But in my own case, policing schoolyard taunts would have been counterproductive. Goading one another was part of how my friends and I were able to connect. You couldn't have stopped us without blocking off one of our main routes to true friendship.

IN THE PAST 50 YEARS, Americans have moved from stigmatizing homosexuality to tolerating or even celebrating it. When progressives tell that story, they often cast straight, cisgender males as the villains: Change would have come sooner if society weren't so hidebound with outdated notions of manhood. We should therefore expunge traditional forms of masculinity from our public life so gay people can be liberated, along with women and anyone else who might feel alienated. Video games, according to that narrative, are breeding grounds of the boorishness and exclusivity that can make maleness so harmful.

None of that rings true for me. Like everything else, video games and masculinity can go wrong—if unchecked, they can foster aggression or even violence. But those are corruptions of things that are, to me, inherently good. The playful belligerence, the bravado, and the intense competition with which my friends and I gamed together weren't obstacles to our acceptance of one another; they were how we formed and expressed that acceptance. I know plenty of other guys who came out as gay, or bi, or trans with a controller in hand. For many of us, gaming is a way of talking and relating to other men that feels normal and relaxed—a way to be one of the guys while still finding space to open up.

My boyfriend, Josh, is a gamer too. He and I have been separated by the Atlantic Ocean for much of our relationship, and playing together online is one of the ways we deal with the distance. We spent a formative few months playing *Diablo III*, a collaborative game in which you slay undead demons. Most of the time we played with two other guys, who are also a couple. I'd stumble to my laptop in the dark at 5 a.m. in England, while Josh and our friends would settle in at 9 p.m. in Los Angeles. Over a four-way Skype connection, we'd alternate between strategizing and small talk.

Sometimes, as the hours wore on, we'd find ourselves tackling tougher subjects: our dissatisfactions at work, or our fears about coming out to folks who might not respond well. We joked that we were taking down CGI demons in the game and personal demons in our conversations, helping one another defeat whatever we were facing, online or in real

My friends showed their care for me in a thousand ways, most involving swift and gruesome death at their digital hands.

life. These bizarre and distinctly modern get-togethers were like virtual double dates—part hangout, part support group, part romance. We called ourselves “The Boys Who Fight Hell.”

Josh and I also started playing online with my father, so that the two most important men in my life could get to know each other. I couldn't help thinking back to that day playing *Spider-Man 3*, when I had told my dad the secret I feared might change everything. Here we were 12 years later, and it seemed as if almost nothing had changed between us. It was still him and me, talking and laughing and playing games. Only now it was him and me and Josh. **A**

Spencer A. Klavan is a freelance writer who recently completed his doctorate in ancient-Greek language and literature at Oxford's Magdalen College.



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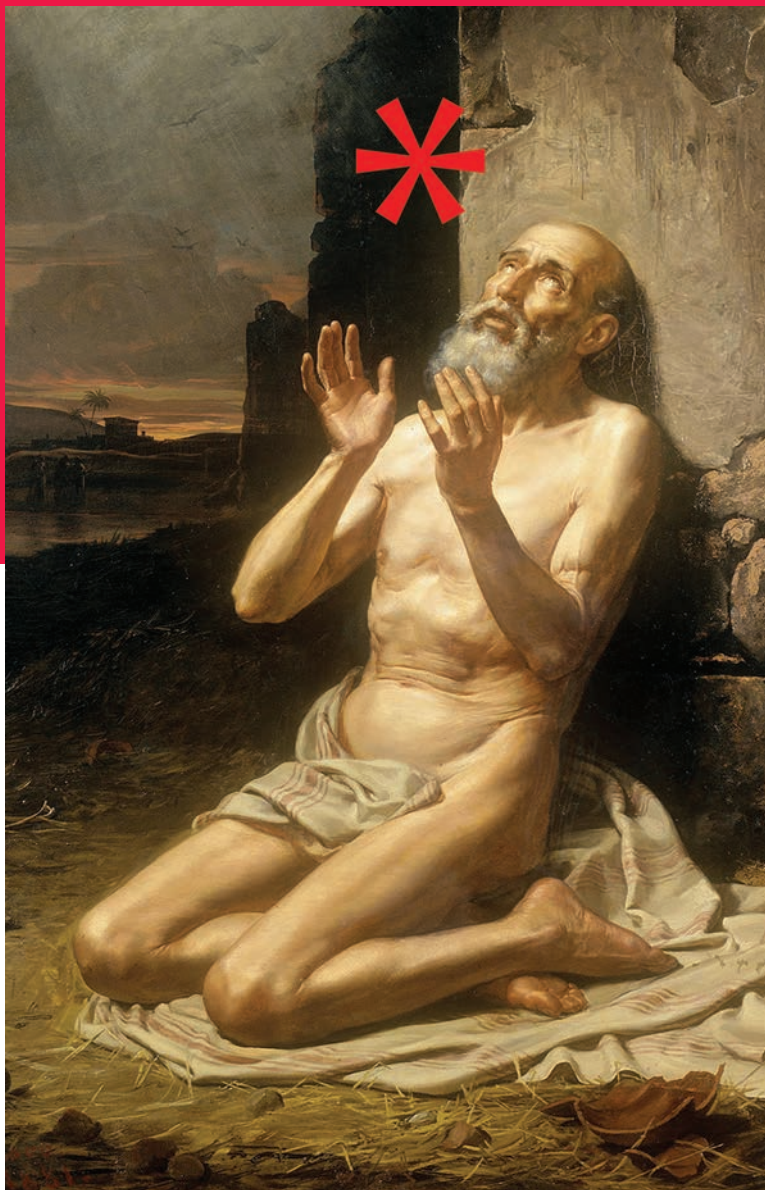
THE OMNIVORE

**Sorry,
 Not Sorry**

In a new translation of the Book of Job, the famously repentant hero gives God a piece of his mind.

BY JAMES PARKER

SO GOD SAYS to Satan, “You there, what have you been up to?” And Satan says, “Oh, you know, just hanging around, minding my own business.” And God says, “Well, take a look at my man Job over there. He worships me. He does exactly what I tell him. He thinks I’m the greatest.” “Job?” says Satan. “The rich, happy, healthy guy? The guy with 3,000 camels? Of



course he does. You’ve given him everything. Take it all away from him, and I bet you he’ll curse you to your face.” And God says, “You’re on.”

That—give or take a couple of verses—is how it starts, the Book of Job. What a setup. The Trumplike deity; the shrewd and loitering adversary; the cruelly flippant wager; and the stooge, the cosmic straight man, Job, upon whose oblivious head the sky is about to fall. A classic Old Testament skit, pungent as a piece of absurdist theater or a story by Kafka. Job is going to be *immiserated*, sealed into sorrow—for a bet. What is life? It’s a bleeping and blooping Manichaeian casino: You’re up or you’re down, in God’s hands or the devil’s. Piped-in oxygen, controlled light, keep the drinks coming. We, the readers and inheritors of his book, know this. Job, poor bastard, doesn’t.

After his herds have been finished off by marauders and gushes of heavenly fire, and his children have been flattened by falling masonry, and he himself has been covered in running sores from head to toe—after all this happens to the blameless man, he cracks. He sits on an ash heap, seeping and scratching, and reviles the day he was born. “Let that day be darkness,” as the King James Version has it. “Let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it.”

Howls of despair are a biblical staple, but Job’s self-curse—the special physics of it, the suicidal pulse that he sends backwards, like a black rainbow,

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DAVID ROONEY, THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

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IN THEATERS AUGUST 30TH



toward the hour of his own conception—is singular. Dispossessed of everything, he is choosing nothing. That first prickle of my existence, the point of light with my name on it? Turn around, All-Fathering One, and eclipse it. *Delete.*

Edward L. Greenstein's new translation of the Book of Job is a work of erudition with—as we shall see—a revolutionary twist. A professor emeritus of Bible studies at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, Greenstein is not going for the deep-time sonorities of the Authorized Version. His language is lumpy with scholarly fidelity to the text. But the shock of repudiation is undiminished. "Why couldn't I die after leaving the womb—just go out the loins and stop breathing?" his Job demands. "For what did knees have to receive me? For what were the breasts that I sucked?" And later: "Why have you made me your target?" This is where we moderns, we dopes marooned in the universe, love Job and find brotherhood with him. Because he's been in us since the beginning, since the first germ of our separateness from everything else—a man confronting the mystery, as if there was a strand of our DNA in the shape of a question mark: *Why?*

Now some friends of Job appear and offer, one after another, the conventional pieties: God is great, Job must have done something wrong, how dare he question the ways of the Lord, etc. They're hard to take, these friends—Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar, droning away. Job rejects their arguments, and it's here, as the debate goes windily back and forth, that a 21st-century reader reaches for his phone. The stark, existential lines of the drama have gotten spoiled; the Kafka-voltage has dropped.

But then: enter God. "Up speaks YHWH," as Greenstein puts it, momentarily folksy—a voice "from the windstorm." "Bind up your loins like a man," God warns Job, before stamping on the effects pedal and delivering perhaps the most shattering speech ever recorded. Question after question, power chord after power chord: "Where were you when I laid earth's foundations? ... Can you tie the bands of the Pleiades, Or loosen the cords of Orion? ... Do you give the horse its bravery?" No explanation; no answer for Job; no moral or theological content whatsoever. It's the interrogation of consciousness by pure Being, by the Logos, by the unstoppable, unmediated act of creation itself. Do not try this at home. "Does the falcon take flight through your wisdom, As it spreads its wings toward the south?" The human intellect shrinks before the onslaught. The language is incomparable. God, it turns out, is the greatest poet; no one can touch him.

And it's at this point, with Job reduced to a pair of smoking sandals and the divine megamologue still ringing in the vaults of the firmament, that Greenstein and centuries of tradition diverge. He has produced his new translation

Here for us in 2019, right on time, is a middle- finger Job.



JOB: A NEW
TRANSLATION
EDWARD L.
GREENSTEIN
Yale University Press

of Job, he tells us in the introduction, to "set the record straight." Every version of the Bible that you have read puts Job, in the wake of God's speech, in an attitude of awestruck contrition or reconversion. "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes," he says in the King James. "I'm sorry—forgive me," he says in Eugene H. Peterson's million-selling plain-language adaptation, *The Message*. "I'll never do that again, I promise!" Greenstein's Job, however, stays vinegary to the end. "I have heard you," he tells God, "and now my eye has seen you. That is why I am fed up." The Hebrew phrase commonly rendered as some form of *I repent*, Greenstein translates as *I take pity on*. *Dust and ashes*, meanwhile, is for Greenstein a biblical epithet meaning humanity in general. So the line becomes "I take pity on 'dust and ashes.'" Job's last word: What a world you've made, God. I feel sorry for *everyone*.

What does it mean? This newly revealed Job, writes Greenstein, "is expressing defiance, not capitulation ... If God is all about power and not morality and justice, Job will not condone it through acceptance." Upon the scholarly merits of this approach, I am unable to pronounce; as an idea, I'll consider it. We don't read the Bible, it's been said; the Bible reads us. It searches us. And here for us in 2019, right on time, with tyranny back in style and riding its behemoth through the streets, is a middle-finger Job, a Job unreconciled to the despotism of experience. He's been shattered by life-shocks; then God, like a wall of terrible noise, fills and overfills his mind. His response: *Thank you, but no.*

Gloria Dei est vivens homo, wrote Saint Irenaeus: The glory of God is a living man. Might not the Author of Life look with favor upon this brilliantly resistant creature, this unappeasable critical thinker, this supremely lonely and dissenting figure, this Bartleby with boils—unswayed by the sublime, scratching his scabs in the land of Uz? That might be the rankest heresy: Let me know, bishops. But consider what Greenstein's nonpenitent, polarity-reversed Job has done to the ending of the book. As before, with the experiment over, Job is blandly restored to a state of health and wealth; as before, God upbraids the sententious friends, the Bildads and the Eliphazes and the Zophars, and sends them off to make some burnt offerings, "for you did not speak about me in honesty as did my servant Job." The quality or valence of this honesty, however, has turned upside down. It has become a kind of white-knuckle existential tenacity, a refusal to disown oneself even in the teeth of the windstorm. Maybe that's what this God, faced with this Job, is telling us: Bring it all before him, the full grievance of your humanity. Bring him your condition, loudly. Let him have it. **A**

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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BOOKS

How the Dismal Science Broke America

What the rise, and wrong turns, of economists and Wall Street dealmakers reveals about our future

BY SEBASTIAN MALLABY

ALITTLE MORE THAN a generation ago, a stealthy revolution swept America. It was a dual changing of the guard: Two tribes, two attitudes, two approaches to a good society were simultaneously displaced by upstart rivals. In the world of business, the manufacturing bosses gave way to Wall Street dealmakers, bent on breaking up their empires. “Organization Man,” as the journalist William H. Whyte had christened the corporate archetype in his 1956 book, was ousted by “Transaction Man,” to cite Nicholas Lemann’s latest work of social history. In the world of public policy, lawyers who counted on large institutions to deliver prosperity and social harmony lost influence. In their place rose quantitative thinkers who put their faith in markets. It was *The Economists’ Hour*, as the title of the *New York Times* editorial writer Binyamin Appelbaum’s debut book has it.

Together, Lemann and Appelbaum contribute to the second wave of post-2008 commentary. The first postmortems focused narrowly on the global financial crisis, dissecting the distorted incentives, regulatory frailty, and groupthink that caused bankers to blow up the world economy. The new round of analysis broadens the lens, searching out larger political and intellectual wrong turns, an expansion that reflects the morphing of the 2008 crash into a general populist surge. By excavating history, Lemann and Appelbaum remind us that Transaction Man and his economist allies were not always ascendant, and that they won’t necessarily remain so. This frees both writers to ask whether an alternative social contract might be imaginable, or preferable.

The first section of Lemann’s elegant history conjures up the corporatist order that preceded Transaction Man’s arrival. The story is shaped around Adolf Berle, a lawyer who, with the statistician Gardiner Means, wrote *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, a classic study of the concentration of power in the hands of company managers. Before the publication of that masterpiece, in 1932, other authors had drawn attention to what one of them called the “prestidigitation, double shuffling, honey-fugling, horn-swagging, and skullduggery” employed by corporate executives to dupe their supposed masters, the shareholders. Berle went further. He laid out in detail how shareholders, being so dispersed and numerous, could not hope to restrain bosses—indeed, how nobody could do so. Enormous powers to shape society belonged to company chieftains who answered to no

one. Hence Berle’s prescription: The government should regulate them.

Berle’s pro-regulatory stance won him an introduction to Franklin D. Roosevelt, and he became an influential New Dealer. But his vision truly triumphed after World War II, when regulation of corporate behavior was supplemented by the rise of labor unions. In the winter of 1945–46, more than 300,000 members of the United Auto Workers union staged a successful strike at General Motors that lasted 113 days, and a few years later, in 1950, the company resolved that further confrontations would be too painful. In what became known as “the Treaty of Detroit,” GM’s bosses granted workers regular cost-of-living pay increases, a measure of job security, health insurance, and a pension—benefits that were almost unheard-of. General Motors had “set itself up as a comprehensive welfare state for its workers,” in Lemann’s succinct formulation.

Berle celebrated the Treaty of Detroit by propounding a pro-corporate liberalism. The corporation had become the “conscience-carrier of twentieth-century American society,” he marveled. Many contemporaries agreed. “The large mass-production plant is our social reality, our representative institution, which has to carry the burden of our dreams,” the rising management theorist Peter Drucker wrote. Anticipating the “end of history” triumphalism of a later era, the sociologist Daniel Bell feted the corporatist order in a book titled *The End of Ideology*.

Of course, corporatism proved less robust than these writers expected. Berle’s “clash of the titans” liberalism, built on checks and balances among big corporations, big government, and big labor, fell afoul of American individualism. Conservatives railed against big government for stifling freedom. Liberals denounced big corporations for reducing employees to automatons. Both sides came to see big labor as the protector of special interests. In 1965, as Lemann reminds us, the novelist Norman Mailer had one of his characters interrupt a lovemaking session to pluck out his partner’s diaphragm—“a corporate rubbery obstruction.”

Yet the chief threat to Berle’s vision came not from America’s suspicion of concentrated power. It came from economics.

APPELBAUM OPENS HIS BOOK with the observation that economics was not always the imperial discipline. Roosevelt was delighted to consult lawyers such as Berle, but he dismissed John Maynard Keynes as an impractical “mathematician.” Regulatory agencies were headed by lawyers, and courts dismissed economic evidence as irrelevant. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy’s Treasury secretary made a point of excluding academic economists from a review of



the international monetary order, deeming their advice useless. William McChesney Martin, who presided over the Federal Reserve in the 1950s and '60s, confined economists to the basement.

Starting in the 1970s, however, economists began to wield extraordinary influence. They persuaded Richard Nixon to abolish the military draft. They brought economics into the courtroom. They took over many of the top posts at regulatory agencies, and they devised cost-benefit tests to ensure that regulations were warranted. To facilitate this testing, economists presumed to set a number on the value of life itself; some of the best passages of Appelbaum's fine book describe this subtle revolution. Meanwhile, Fed chairmen were expected to have economic credentials. Soon the noneconomists on the Fed staff were languishing in the metaphorical basement.

The rise of economics, Appelbaum writes, "transformed the business of government, the conduct of business, and, as a result, the patterns

of everyday life." It was bound to have a marked effect on Berle's pro-corporate liberalism. Lemann hangs this part of his story on Michael C. Jensen, an entertainingly impassioned financial economist who reframed attitudes toward the corporation in the mid-'70s.

Jensen agreed with Berle's starting point: Corporate managers were unaccountable because shareholders could not restrain them. But rather than seeing a remedy in checks exerted by regulators and organized labor, Jensen proposed to overhaul the firm so that ownership and control were reunited. Executives should be rewarded more with stock and less with salary, so that they would think like shareholders and focus on the profits that shareholders wanted. Managers who failed to generate a good return would see their stock prices languish, which would create tempting take-over targets. A market for corporate control would redouble the pressure on bosses to behave like owners. Successful takeovers, in turn, would shift corporations into the hands of single, all-powerful proprietors, capable of overseeing management more effectively than scattered stockholders could. In sum, Jensen's prescriptions inverted Berle's. The market could be made to solve the problem of the firm. Government could pull back from regulation.

For ideas to have influence, Lemann observes, "there has to be a confluence between the ideas themselves, the spirit of the times, and the interests of powerful players who find the ideas congenial." Berle had been lucky that his treatise on the corporation appeared when Roosevelt was launching his run for the presidency. Jensen was equally fortunate in his own way. Shortly after the publication of his research, the invention of junk bonds made hostile takeovers the rage. During the '80s, more than a quarter of the companies on the *Fortune* 500 list were targeted. Jensen became the scholar who explained why this unprecedented boardroom bloodbath was good news for America.

And to a considerable extent, the news *was* good. Shielded from market discipline, the old corporate heads had deployed capital carelessly. They had expanded into new markets for reasons of vanity, squandered money on fancy management dining rooms, and signed labor contracts like the Treaty of Detroit, which—however statesmanlike—stored up liabilities to retirees that would ultimately hobble their companies. From 1977 to 1988, Jensen calculated, American corporations had increased in value by \$500 billion as a result of the new market for corporate control. Reengineered and reinvigorated, American business staved off what might have been an existential threat from Japanese competition.

Yet a large cost eluded Jensen's calculations. The social contract of the Berle era was gone: the unstated assumption of lifetime employment, the promise of retirement benefits, the sense of





community and stability and shared purpose that gave millions of lives their meaning. Berle had viewed the corporation as a social and political institution as much as an economic one, and the dismembering of corporations on purely economic grounds was bound to generate fallout that had not been accounted for. Meanwhile, Jensen's market-centric mind-set permeated finance, enabling opaque risks to build up in banks and other trading houses. As the collapse of Enron and other corporate darlings revealed, a good deal of non-market-related accounting fraud compounded the fragility. Even before the 2008 crash, Jensen disavowed the transactional culture he had helped to legitimize. *Holy shit*, Jensen remembers saying to himself. *Anything can be corrupted.*

THE WIDER STORY of the market-centric worldview provides the meat of Appelbaum's narrative. It is a tricky tale to tell, because many of the myths of the era fall apart on close inspection. Contrary to common presumption, the economics establishment in the 1990s and 2000s did not believe that markets were perfectly efficient. Rather, influential economists took the pragmatic view that markets would discipline financiers more effectively than regulators could. Alan Greenspan, the Fed chairman who is often painted as the embodiment of the pro-market age, had been preoccupied with the destabilizing inefficiencies in finance since the 1950s. Lawrence Summers, the Harvard economist who became Treasury secretary under Bill Clinton, had contributed to the academic literature on the limits of market efficiency. The fact that such sophisticated people presided over a dangerous buildup in financial risk suggests that something larger was at work than a naive faith in markets.

Appelbaum's strength is that he generally acknowledges these complexities. He is happy to state at the outset that market-oriented reforms have lifted billions out of poverty, and to recognize that the deregulation that helped undo Berle-ism was not some kind of right-wing plot. In the late '70s, it was initiated by Democrats such as President Jimmy Carter and Senator Ted Kennedy.

But Appelbaum makes it his mission to highlight instances where the market mind-set went awry. Inequality has grown to unacceptable extremes in highly developed economies. From 1980 to 2010, life expectancy for poor Americans scandalously declined, even as the rich lived longer. Meanwhile, the primacy of economics has not generated faster economic growth. From 1990 until the eve of the financial crisis, U.S. real GDP per person grew by a little under 2 percent a year, less than the 2.5 percent a year in the oil-shocked 1970s.

As Appelbaum shows, economists have repeatedly made excessive claims for their discipline. In

The Trump administration and its foreign analogues have largely dispensed with economic advisers.

the '60s, Kennedy's and Johnson's advisers thought they had the business cycle tamed. They believed they could prevent recessions by "fine-tuning" tax and spending policies. When this expectation was exposed as hubris, Milton Friedman urged central banks to focus exclusively on the supply of money circulating in the economy. This too was soon discredited. From the '90s onward, economists oversold the benefits of targeting inflation, forgetting that other perils—the human cost of unemployment, the destabilization wrought by financial bubbles—might well be worse than rising prices. Meanwhile, Greenspan and Summers ducked the political challenge of buffering new kinds of financial trading with regulatory safeguards. To be fair, the Wall Street lobbies presented more of an obstacle to regulation than critics acknowledge. Still, Greenspan and Summers miscalculated.

The upshot was the whirlwind of the past decade: the greatest financial crash in recent memory, and a crisis of legitimacy in the world's advanced democracies. After decades in which economists' influence expanded rapidly, the striking thing about the Trump administration and its foreign analogues is that they have largely dispensed with economic advisers. The United States has lived through the era of corporatism, the era of transactionalism, and the economists' hour. The intellectual marketplace awaits a fresh approach to the structuring of work and the good society.

LEMANN AND APPELBAUM wisely don't pretend there are easy solutions. The benevolent corporatism of the Treaty of Detroit reflected a world in which American industry faced little foreign competition and new technologies were generally developed by firmly established businesses. By contrast, today's fierce international competition and disruptive innovation oblige businesses to cut costs or go under. The dilemma is that, even as they compel efficiency, globalization and technological change exacerbate inequality and uncertainty and therefore the need for a compassionate social contract.

Lemann explores one response to this dilemma through the figure of Reid Hoffman, who founded the online professional network LinkedIn and is the third starring character in Lemann's history of grand conceptions. It is an inspired piece of casting. As a stalwart of Silicon Valley, Hoffman hails from the complex of start-ups that are intent on disrupting what remains of the old-line corporate establishment. At the same time, as the creator of LinkedIn, he represents a purported antidote to the insecurity that results from the disruption.

The promise of online professional networking is that, by building a raft of cyberconnections, workers will safely navigate the rapids of the new economy. Each person's network, not any one firm, will be the

guarantor of employment. Corporations are freed to pursue efficiency as they see fit; individuals nonetheless enjoy some of the security of the old corporatist era, because they have a new tool to help them. LinkedIn thus becomes the psychological center of the world of work—the successor to the corporation. One of Hoffman’s books is titled, rather appropriately, *The Start-Up of You*. Whereas Transaction Man treated workers as costs on a spreadsheet, Network Man wants to empower them.

One in four American adults says they use LinkedIn, and many recruiters go to the site regularly. But LinkedIn is not a solution to worker insecurity writ large, still less to inequality. On the contrary, a world in which people compete to gather connections may be even less equal than our current one. A few high-octane networkers will attract large followings, while a long tail of pedestrians will have only a handful of buddies. At one point in its evolution, LinkedIn published the size of each user’s network as a spur to add to the total. Later, realizing the anxiety this bred, the site capped the number of connections it published at 500 per member.

Lemann is under no illusions that online networks are the answer to the search for security and dignity, and he concludes with a different proposal. It is a sort of anticonception conception: Rather than buy in to a single grand vision, societies should prefer a robust contest among interest groups—what Lemann calls pluralism. Borrowing from the forgotten early-20th-century political scientist Arthur Bentley, Lemann defines *groups* broadly. States and cities are “locality groups,” income categories are “wealth groups,” supporters of a particular politician constitute “personality groups.” People inevitably affiliate themselves with such groups; groups naturally compete to influence the government; and the resulting push and pull, not squabbles among intellectuals about organizing concepts, constitutes the proper stuff of politics. Lemann has a particular respect for the interest groups that fight for Chicago Lawn, the struggling working-class neighborhood that appears at intervals throughout his book, mostly as the victim of some remote transaction. Organizing in one’s interests, he suggests, “is the only effective way to get protection against the inevitable lacunae in somebody else’s big idea.”

Lemann is aware of the risks in this conclusion. He cites the obvious objection: “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.” In a contest of competing interest groups, the ones with the most money are likely to win. Rich seniors will protect their health benefits at the expense of public housing; the estate tax will vanish, and so will the dream of good preschools for poor children. Appelbaum notes in passing how the beer magnate Joseph Coors helped found the Heritage Foundation to promote a

conservative pro-business agenda, and how another businessman, Howard Jarvis, spearheaded the California proposition that reduced property taxes. For those who regard inequality as a challenge, an interest-group free-for-all is a perilous prescription.

Lemann’s pluralism also prompts a deeper reservation. His vision frames politics as a zero-sum affair, dismissing as futile the quest for “a broad, objectively determined meliorist plan that will help everyone.” But this postmodernist pessimism goes too far. Some policies are better than others, and to give up on this truth is to throw away the sharpest sword in the fight against inequality. The government should bankroll good schools because, objectively speaking, good schools will boost both economic growth and social equity. Likewise, competition is generally a force that gets the best out of people, whether they are public-school teachers or tech monopolists. America’s health-care system is ripe for reform because it is both socially unjust and scandalously costly.

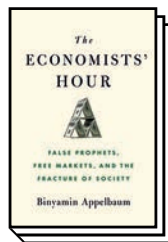
At the close of his book, Appelbaum presents a series of persuasive recommendations, confirming that Lemann is wrong to despair of reasoned, technocratic argument. If policy makers want ordinary Americans to appreciate the benefits of open trade, they must ensure that displaced workers have access to training and health care. Because some interest groups are weaker than others, government should correct the double standard by which the power of labor unions is regarded with antipathy but the power of business monopolies is tolerated. Well-heeled professional cartels, such as associations of real-estate agents who extract 6 percent commissions from hapless home sellers, should be eyed with suspicion. Progressives should look for ways to be pro-competition but anti-inequality.

Yet however reasonable Appelbaum’s arguments, readers are also left with a question about the future. Although he sets out to write the story of the economists’ hour—an hour that he thinks ended in 2008—it isn’t so clear that the economists have departed. They may not have the ear of populists, but their resilience shouldn’t be underrated. Indeed, throughout Appelbaum’s narrative, many of the knights who slay the dragons of bad economic ideology are economists themselves. The story of the past generation is more about debates among economists than about economists pitted against laypeople. Perhaps, with a bit of humility and retooling, the economists will have their day again. If they do not come up with the next set of good ideas, it is not obvious who will. **■**

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**TRANSACTION MAN:
THE RISE OF
THE DEAL AND THE
DECLINE OF THE
AMERICAN DREAM**
NICHOLAS LEMANN
FSG



**THE ECONOMISTS'
HOUR: FALSE
PROPHETS, FREE
MARKETS, AND
THE FRACTURE OF
SOCIETY**
BINYAMIN APPELBAUM
Little, Brown

BOOKS

Edna O'Brien's Lonely Girls

The setting of her new novel is terror-ridden Nigeria, a world away from her native Ireland, but the psychic territory is familiar.

BY TERENCE RAFFERTY

THE NOVEL IS SHORT and spare, and its title, *Girl*, sounds abstract, even generic. The setting of the story is unspecified, though it's clear enough. It's Nigeria, and more or less now, during the reign of terror of the Islamist insurgency group Boko Haram, here referred to simply as the Jihadis. The girl of the title, however, does have a name, Maryam, and so do many of the other suffering girls and boys and men and women whose stories are told in passing in this mournful book—people roused from their homes or, like Maryam, from their schools; people captured or set wandering in an unforgiving landscape. Their oppressors and even their putative saviors in the government and the army remain anonymous. The beleaguered and the beset-upon are the ones who count in *Girl*, as always in the stories Edna O'Brien has been telling for the past six decades. "We were at the rim of existence and we knew it," Maryam says at one point, and that scary place, where a girl is alone with herself and a dubious future, has ever been O'Brien's favored territory—her unnameable home.

When she made her sensational debut as a novelist, with *The Country Girls* (1960), O'Brien was telling the story of girls much like herself, growing up in the beauty and superstition and stifling piety of Ireland's west country and trying to fight their way to another sort of life. That novel, which





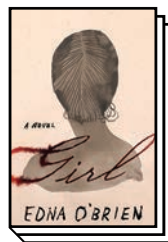
was a wee bit franker about the sexual longings of nice Irish Catholic girls than her countrymen were used to, was promptly banned in Ireland, as were its two sequels—*The Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964)—and, for good measure, her next three novels as well. (Years later, she discovered that her own mother had redacted her personal copy of *The Country Girls*, blacking out offending words and phrases.) Like her contemporary Philip Roth, who later became a fast friend, O'Brien wrote about the messiness of sex and the paradoxes of cultural identity in ways that seemed to get under people's skin, in language so luxuriant and intimate that you couldn't deny the power of the feelings being described. And like Roth, she never quite cast off the whiff of scandal that clung to her earliest fiction. She learned, as he did, to wear it with a certain bemused pride.

O'Brien scandalizes by other means now. Her two most recent novels, *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) and *Girl*, find her taking on subjects that a writer of her years and stature might sensibly avoid as too grim: Serbian war crimes in *The Little Red Chairs*, and now the barbarities of Boko Haram. In *Girl* she even makes the daring choice to tell this terrible tale in the protagonist's own words—an 88-year-old Irish woman speaking in the voice of a barely pubescent Nigerian girl. (Maryam isn't quite sure how old she is.)

That choice feels natural because, despite the obvious contrasts in circumstances, this girl isn't so different from O'Brien's young Irish heroines. She lives in a world that's testing her, daring her to survive. And she survives, in part, by the act of writing about her ordeals. In a scrupulously hidden diary, she enters the stark details of what she endures, records the nightmares she has while sleeping and awake. "From dream to waking and back again," she writes. "I cannot tell the difference." Her matter-of-factness is heartbreaking, as she describes a brutal kidnapping, genital mutilation, repeated rapes, a forced marriage, a painful childbirth, a terrified flight through the forest, the puzzling remoteness of family and friends and officials, the anguish of believing that her baby is dead—and, ever present, chaos, hunger, fear, and self-doubt. The story her furtive diary entries tell has a stunned, muted tone, the flat affect of someone in shock.

This is Maryam's voice, in *Girl*'s first sentences: "I was a girl once, but not any more. I smell. Blood dried and crusted all over me, and my wrapper in shreds. My insides, a morass. Hurtled through this forest that I saw, that first awful night, when I and my friends were snatched from the school." It's the deadened, illusionless voice of innocence abruptly lost, quickened here and there by little verbal sparks like *morass* and *hurtled*, signal flares of the soul. O'Brien has often written about women

That scary place, where a girl is alone with herself and a dubious future, has ever been O'Brien's favored territory.



GIRL
EDNA O'BRIEN
FSG

who are victims, but her women, even the very young ones like Maryam, are never only victims. They're always fighting, often with no weapon but language, to keep hold of themselves and find a way home.

Girl isn't the book to read for the history of Boko Haram and its long assault on the peaceful citizens of Nigeria, or for a nuanced analysis of the country's volatile politics. Scott MacEachern's *Searching for Boko Haram: A History of Violence in Central Africa* (2018) does those jobs admirably, and *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (2016), by the Nigerian novelist Helon Habila, supplies more detail about the 2014 schoolgirl abductions on which O'Brien's novel is loosely based. *Girl* is the book to read for the sights and sounds and, yes, smells of some Nigerians' harrowing experiences, and for a general sense of what it's like to live in a world of radical, deadly unpredictability. Everything in *Girl* seems to happen suddenly, out of the blue or in the darkness of deep night. The novel hurtles, as its heroine is hurtled, from one thing to another and another and another, with deranging, near-hallucinatory speed.

The random-seeming quality of the storytelling is something new for O'Brien, whose usual pace is more measured and contemplative. The effect is disorienting, and it's meant to be. I can't think of another writer who so late in her career has so thoroughly reimagined herself and the practice of her art. She appears to have decided that the only way to do justice to her subject is this helter-skelter narrative style, in which events have no apparent logic, dreams and reality interpenetrate, and other voices, telling different stories or reciting learned myths and legends, keep bobbing up in the choppy course of Maryam's tale.

We hear, in his own words, how a little boy named John-John was captured by the Jihadis; in her own words, how a schoolmate of Maryam's made her escape; how an "oldish" man named Daran found his way to a crowded refugee camp; how the grandfather of a pilgrim called Esau slew a bull; and many other snatches of story, song, and even scripture, all recorded by the wandering girl Maryam as they were told to her. The rhythm of *Girl* is intermittent and fearsomely strong; reading this novel is like riding the rapids.

And that, it seems to me, is what living in one of the world's too-numerous war-ravaged places must be like. The violence is awful, but just as awful, in a way, is the day-to-day accommodation to relentless illogic and unreason—the creeping sense, at every moment, of certain disruption and displacement, sudden exile and loss. *Girl* captures that sort of existential dread as well as any war novel I know. Early on, Maryam describes the day of her kidnapping: "We enter dense jungle, trees of all kinds, meshed



together, taking us into their vile embrace. Nature had gone amok here.” That feeling of wrongness in nature is entirely new to her. Later, we learn that she had won a prize at school for an essay about trees, which did not seem then to embrace her vilely. Quite the contrary: “In our country we depend on trees for our lives,” she wrote.

For shelter in rain and for shade in sun. For food of many kinds. They are our second home ... But the most important aspect of the tree is the Tree Spirit. Ancestors who have died live there and govern lives. They ward off evil. If these sacred trees are harmed or lopped or burnt, ancestors get very angry and sometimes take revenge. Crops fail and people go hungry. “Don’t step on the spirits,” my brother Yusuf would say when we did spells in there, tiptoeing over the bony roots that wound and knitted together. It was always at evening time. Birds did not roost there, but at certain times sang some song that was both inexplicably sweet and melancholy.

She dreams of this essay, at a moment when the very trees—her second home—have turned alien to her, malign. And when she wakes, in the Jihadis’ camp, she tells her diary: “I will never get out. I am here forever. I am asking God to please give me no more dreams. Make me blank. Empty me of all that was.”

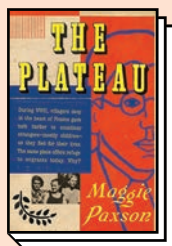
This is a vision of hell: a girl, hardly begun in her life, wishing to be emptied of all that was. O’Brien has always been singularly alert to that sort of bleak emotion, especially when the despair is visited upon the young. It’s no more of a stretch for her to imagine the feelings of a Nigerian teenager than it was for her 16 years ago to find her

I can’t think of another writer who so late in her career has so thoroughly reimagined herself and the practice of her art.

way into the mind of another girl undone by war, in her play *Iphigenia*, adapted from Euripides. Is the experience of a contemporary African girl really less accessible to a European writer of the 21st century than the Trojan War and the worldview of the ancient Greeks? Iphigenia discovers in the course of the play that her father, King Agamemnon, means to sacrifice her in order to appease the gods and, he hopes, reverse the flagging fortunes of the restive military he commands. That’s a girl whose world has turned on her. Iphigenia naturally pleads with her father at first: “Do not destroy me before my time ... I love the light ... do not despatch me down to the netherworld ... hell is dark and creepy and I have no friends there ... I am your child ... I basked in your love.” But by the inevitable end, she’s telling her mother, “One must not love life too much.” She’s been emptied.

War does that to people, and war, O’Brien knows, is a constant in history. Not all conflicts are the same, but their effects on the human spirit have a terrible sameness. It would be a shame if her attempt to assume the voice of an African girl were to be seen only, or even primarily, as an act of cultural appropriation. O’Brien’s understanding of, and sympathy for, girls in trouble transcends culture—the place she’s made for them in her fiction is practically a country of its own. But if *Girl* earns her a scolding from some quarters, or even stirs up a bit of a scandal, that’s something she has spent her whole long career learning to live with. She’ll survive, in that room of her own where the words come to her, out on the rim with all her lonely girls. **A**

Terrence Rafferty is the author of The Thing Happens, a collection of writings about movies.



COVER TO COVER

The Plateau

MAGGIE PAXSON
RIVERHEAD

“COULD THERE be communities that were somehow resistant to violence, persistent in decency?” That question, which drives Maggie Paxson’s one-of-a-kind book, sounds wishful,

especially these days. But who doesn’t yearn for an answer?

If ever a place could claim to be an incubator of rare goodness, Paxson seems to have found it: a small plateau in

south-central France called Vivarais-Lignon, where a long tradition of extraordinary kindness to strangers peaked during the Nazi occupation. Town and rural folks risked their lives giving refuge to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people, many of them Jewish and most of them young. Group homes for children, who arrived from all over Europe, sprang up. A forebear of hers, Paxson discovered,

took charge of one in the fall of 1942. Daniel Trocmé, still a restless soul at 30, seized the chance “not because it’s an adventure,” he wrote to his parents, “but so that I would not be ashamed of myself.”

An anthropologist by training, Paxson hoped that fieldwork among the many rescuers’ descendants might help reveal how a group ethos of “uncommon decency” thrives. But her social-science

quest propelled her onto fraught, personal terrain. Trocmé’s moral odyssey roiled and inspired her. So did a growing need not to analyze, but to engage her “very own soul,” as she does with asylum seekers who now find refuge in the area. The result is a lyrical book, by turns ungainly and graceful, dark and uplifting—right in step with the struggle “to be good when it’s hard to be good.”

— Ann Hulbert



BOOKS

Deconstructing Clarence Thomas

The justice's reactionary legal philosophy rests on faith in the power of adversity to fuel black progress.

BY MICHAEL O'DONNELL

THE FIRST THING to know about Clarence Thomas is that everybody at the Supreme Court loves him. Surprisingly, given his uncompromising public persona and his near-total silence during oral arguments, Thomas cultivates a jovial presence in the building's austere marble hallways. Unlike most of his colleagues, he learns everyone's name, from the janitors to each justice's law clerks. He makes fast friends at work, at ball games, and at car races, and invites people to his chambers, where the conversations last for hours.

Thomas's booming laugh fills the corridors. He passes silly notes on the bench. As the legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin wrote in 2007, with his "effusive good nature," Thomas is "universally adored."

This buoyancy marks a man whose career as a judge is a study in brutalism. Thomas is by far the most conservative justice on a very conservative Court. He advances a reactionary legal philosophy that would take America back to the 1930s. That won't happen: Unwilling to compromise and often unable to attract the vote of a single colleague, Thomas frequently writes only for himself. He also endured the most searing confirmation battle of any modern American public servant, an ordeal that put race, sex, and power in the national spotlight. By all accounts, including his own, the experience nearly destroyed him—not to mention what it did to Anita Hill, who accused him of sexual harassment. Thomas has since nursed a long list of grievances, vowing to "outlive" his critics and writing in his 2007 memoir, *My Grandfather's Son*, about a host of antagonists: "posturing zealots," "sanctimonious whites," and—of Hill—"my most traitorous adversary."

Revanchist politics and a list of enemies to rival Arya Stark's: These things do not pair naturally with bonhomie at the office. Yet such are the contradictions of Clarence Thomas. He is a baffling figure. The nation's second African-American Supreme Court justice and the successor to Thurgood Marshall, Thomas opposes most policies that seek to combat discrimination or help minorities. He disfavors integration and even seems to resist desegregation. A former black activist and onetime follower of Malcolm X, he champions a criminal-justice system suffused with racism, and has rejected claims of cruel and unusual punishment made by prisoners. Thomas's most uncomfortable contradiction, though, rests on an abstraction. He is the Supreme Court's foremost originalist—that is, he purports to interpret the Constitution as the Founders understood it in 1789. Yet how can a black man make such a commitment when the Founders wrote slavery into the Constitution's very text?

IN HIS PROVOCATIVE new book, *The Enigma of Clarence Thomas*, Corey Robin, a political scientist at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, seeks to answer this vexing question. Robin's thesis is that Thomas's immersion in black nationalism in the 1960s and '70s profoundly shaped his conservatism. Demands for a black state and a unified black culture don't figure on his agenda, but he is staunchly dedicated to a separatist position rooted in individual attainment, achievement without assistance from whites, and self-determination in the tradition of Booker T. Washington. He rejects laws and programs designed to help black people, because he views white paternalism and



its attendant stigma as the greatest impediment to black advancement. At the heart of Robin's book is this extraordinary argument: Thomas "sees something of value in the social worlds of slavery and Jim Crow," not because he endorses bondage "but because he believes that under those regimes African Americans developed virtues of independence and habits of responsibility, practices of self-control and institutions of patriarchal self-help, that enabled them to survive and sometimes flourish."

On its face, this argument seems almost as offensive as the "Uncle Tom" slurs that Thomas regularly faces. *Something of value?* At a minimum, Robin's perspective is vulnerable to the charge of overstatement. Whatever his views, Thomas has said that he became a lawyer "to help my people." He has fiercely attacked the standing of white pundits who question his commitment to the advancement of African Americans. On the Court, he has forcefully addressed the topic of America's racist past. For instance, in the 2003 case *Virginia v. Black*, he wrote a solo dissent to the Court's decision protecting cross burning under the First Amendment. In Thomas's view, given its racist connotations and associations with the Ku Klux Klan, cross burning is a "profane" act of racial terrorism that deserves no constitutional protection. Many of his judicial opinions turn on the assertion that his methodology would produce better results for black people than the prevailing liberal orthodoxy. Thomas has written vividly about "the totalitarianism of segregation" and "the dark oppressive cloud of governmentally sanctioned bigotry." Robin collects and quotes these lines, but they don't deter him from painting their author as an upside-of-slavery kind of judge.

Still, Robin is not hurling insults. He is deconstructing a sphinx, and his point carries the uncomfortable ring of truth. If Thomas wants to take America back to its founding, that project entails reconciling slavery and the law. Perhaps this simply cannot be done. For his part, Thomas has not tried, interpreting the post-Civil War amendments far more narrowly than other justices. *The Enigma of Clarence Thomas* therefore deserves credit for attempting to understand the worldview of a jurist who at times can seem almost willfully perverse.

"For every mountain of hardship Thomas cites" from the Jim Crow past, "he has a matching story of overcoming," Robin writes. "Indeed, the entire point of these mentions of past adversity is to narrate an attendant tale of mastery." Here Thomas's dramatic personal narrative takes on relevance. He was raised by his harsh and inflexible grandfather, Myers Anderson, who maintained a middle-class life through ownership of a modest fuel-delivery business. Anderson wouldn't let Thomas or his brother wear work gloves on the family farm as they cut sugar cane or helped butcher livestock. He never praised the boys or showed them affection. "He

feared the evil consequences of idleness," Thomas wrote in *My Grandfather's Son*, "and so made sure that we were too busy to suffer them. In his presence there was no play, no fun, and little laughter."

Thomas briefly attended seminary but dropped out because of what he felt was the Catholic Church's indifference to racism. Anderson proceeded to throw him out of the house. Thomas recounts the scene in his memoir, writing of his grandfather: "He'd never accepted any of my excuses for failure, and he wasn't going to start now. 'You've let me down,' he said." Their relationship suffered for years; Anderson refused to attend Thomas's graduations or wedding. Where others might never have forgiven such slights, Thomas went on to adopt this very rigidity as his own watchword, praising Anderson as "the greatest man I have ever known."

Small wonder that a jurist who learned at the knee of such a taskmaster would reject leniency for vagrants, mercy for criminals, and even integration measures. Nor does it come as a surprise that Thomas would open a dissenting opinion on affirmative action (which he opposes) with these lines from Frederick Douglass:

What I ask for the negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply *justice*. The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us ... I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us!

Thomas may not, like his fellow conservatives, believe that the world, or the Constitution, is colorblind. But he advocates a similar result, arguing that the best way forward for African Americans is with a clean slate, rather than clumsy attempts at redress that only add more insidious obstacles to progress.

Robin's book establishes that Thomas has a serious vision, however quixotic, for the African American community, and that it deserves to be taken in good faith—even if progressives can demolish it on the merits. Robin proceeds to do just this, as he paraphrases Thomas's libertarian outlook and then pillories it as a fairy tale:

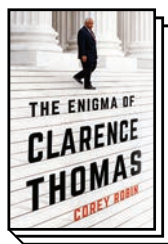
In a market freed of government constraints, extraordinary black men like Myers Anderson will emerge. If Myers could succeed in the market despite Jim Crow, others can do so too. Every bit of reality would suggest that this is a fantasy on Thomas's part, that the odds are overwhelmingly against African Americans, that the market clearly privileges whites. But that's how all romance, including capitalism, works: One Cinderella will be chosen, a special someone will succeed, and that will make all the difference.

Thomas argues that the best way forward is with a clean slate, rather than clumsy attempts at redress.

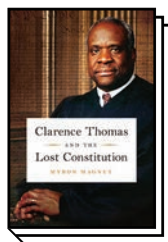
This magical thinking informs Thomas's judicial approach, too. As even his admirers acknowledge, Thomas stands alone in making his argument. In his recent and admiring book, *Clarence Thomas and the Lost Constitution*, the journalist and historian Myron Magnet devotes a chapter to what he considers Thomas's best opinions as a justice. They are all dissents or concurrences, because Thomas rarely has the chance to write for the Court in politically sensitive cases. Partly this has to do with his exceptionally conservative views, but above all his isolation reflects his disregard for the Court's precedents. He is willing to abandon whole lines of case law, many of them generations old, and start fresh. Though Thomas's supporters see him as a constitutional purist writing for the ages, his method reflects a level of antipragmatism that approaches self-sabotage. Adherence to precedent, or *stare decisis*, is one of the foundational principles of our legal system, promoting stability and order. It is also the way of the world, as elemental to the judiciary as the fact that judges wear robes.

THE LONELINESS OF Thomas's constitutional approach made headlines in another context this past spring, when he filed a concurring opinion in *Box v. Planned Parenthood* linking early birth-control advocates to the eugenics movement. Multiple scholars highlighted the flaws of his armchair history. Thomas dispensed with any pretense of dispassionately analyzing the Indiana abortion law under review, describing women who seek abortions as "mothers" and drawing a rebuke from Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Once again he wrote only for himself. The opinion displayed Thomas's long-evident disdain for women, from his legal career back to his origin story as the scion of Anderson, a powerfully self-sufficient patriarch. Thomas has spoken disparagingly of his sister, whom Anderson did not take in, and who was instead raised by an aunt and deprived of the middle-class upbringing and private education that Thomas enjoyed. In the justice's worldview, Robin writes, "the effects of being raised by a woman versus a man were devastating." Racial progress crucially depends on "the saving power of black men," as Robin puts it.

Which leads, inevitably, to Anita Hill. No discussion of Clarence Thomas, least of all in the era of Justice Brett Kavanaugh and the #MeToo movement, can overlook her. Robin devotes only three pages to Hill, citing the reporting of Jill Abramson in *New York* magazine and Marcia Coyle in *The National Law Journal* and stating, "If it wasn't clear to everyone at the time, it's since become clear that Thomas lied to the Judiciary Committee when he stated that he never sexually harassed Anita Hill. The evidence amassed by investigative journalists over the years is simply too great to claim otherwise."



THE ENIGMA OF
CLARENCE THOMAS
COREY ROBIN
Metropolitan



CLARENCE THOMAS
AND THE LOST
CONSTITUTION
MYRON MAGNET
Encounter

This is absolutely correct, but the evidence bears repeating. Abramson and Jane Mayer established in their indispensable 1994 book, *Strange Justice: The Selling of Clarence Thomas*, that Thomas's behavior toward Hill was part of a pattern, that despite his denials before the Senate he was obsessed with pornography, and that his penchant for extreme, vulgar sex talk was well known among his friends. *Strange Justice* also reminds us that Hill passed a lie-detector test, while Thomas refused to take one.

When it comes to race, Thomas's ideas deserve a substantive hearing. But on the topic of sex he has earned no such deference, having forfeited the lectern through misconduct and deceit. The good intentions that underlie his stark vision for African Americans do not extend to his views on women, leaving only a voting record that is consistently hostile to their interests. Presumably the Founders would not object, gender equality having been far from their minds at the Constitutional Convention. That's good enough for an originalist. The hundreds of millions of women who have lived in the United States in the intervening centuries understandably demand more. Thomas may be an enigma in his approach to racism. On America's other original sin, sexism, he is just wrong. **A**

Michael O'Donnell is a lawyer in the Chicago area. His writing also appears in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Nation.



Mark Jarman's most recent collection is *The Heronry* (2017).

MEMORY SONG

Day after.
Remembered laughter.

Day before.
Even score.

Day of.
Hand in glove.

Day for night.
Twilight.

Night for day.
Star spray.

Day in. Day out.
Whisper. Shout.

— Mark Jarman



Secrets and lies
in the school
cafeteria

BY SARAH
SCHWEITZER

The Lunch Ladies of New Canaan

LATE ON A FALL AFTERNOON, a skeleton crew staffed the cafeteria at New Canaan High School, in Connecticut. Custodial workers cleaned up the day's remains while one of the cooks prepped for the evening's athletic banquet.

A woman entered quietly through the back door, the one designated for deliveries and employees. She wore a jacket over a loose gown. She clutched something to her chest that appeared to be a bag connected to an IV.

"What are you doing here?" one of the workers asked.

The woman said nothing. She shuffled to her small office. The door clicked shut. The workers exchanged looks. They'd heard that Marie Wilson had been undergoing treatment for breast cancer. She had every right to stay home and rest. Yet here she was, hobbling into the kitchen near sunset, reporting for duty.

There would be more days like this one. Days when Wilson endured life's worst moments—a grandson's leukemia diagnosis, successive surgeries for a wrenched wrist, a foreclosure. On every one, without fanfare, she made an appearance in the cafeteria.

To some, Wilson's unfailing attendance was an act of dedication, the fastidiousness of a woman charged with helping to feed some of the country's wealthiest children. The job didn't lend itself to missteps. This was New Canaan, a sylvan place of old-money mansions and modern farmhouses built with Wall Street bonuses. Standards were high—for the students, for the teachers, for the administration. The cafeterias were no exception.

Headed by Bruce Gluck, a classically trained chef, the kitchens of the New Canaan public schools served farm-to-table fare before such a label existed. Gluck pushed his workers hard, demanding that they achieve his formidable vision. The workers were largely immigrant women, many of them Italians for whom English was a second language. Clashes inevitably arose, and when they did, Gluck turned to his second in command. Wilson knew how to talk to the women; she could explain what he wanted.

Wilson had grown up in neighboring Stamford; her father was an Italian immigrant and trash hauler whose everlasting advice to his children was that they surround themselves with respectable people. After a deli she owned shut down, Wilson got a job in a school cafeteria in New Canaan and moved into a modest house there. A year after Wilson was hired, her

younger sister, Joann Pascarelli, got a cafeteria job there too. Together, they rose in the ranks, Wilson to assistant director of food services, and Pascarelli to manager of the middle school's cafeteria.

For two decades, the sisters ran the cafeterias with an iron fist. Workers bore them grudging respect. But resentment bubbled too, and curiosity: Every year at Christmas, at the party Wilson hosted, the women stared in amazement at her house, and her Mercedes—unremarkable for New Canaan but stunning to workers who wondered how she could afford her lifestyle on a cafeteria salary.

The sisters clung to their hard-earned places, absorbing Gluck's stormy criticism and serving as his enforcers. They gained Gluck's trust, which gave them a degree of power magnified by the district's faith in Gluck. The arrangement appeared to produce remarkable success: The New Canaan kitchens attracted national attention, upending the notion that school-cafeteria food was made only to be mocked. There was a sense that something special was being created, something best not meddled with.

THE STUDENTS OF NEW CANAAN

are the sons and daughters of hedge-fund principals and corporate executives who make their homes there, drawn by the town's guarded seclusion. New Canaan sits at the end of a commuter-rail branch, latticed by stone walls and woods, fortified by strict zoning. The town is content to play the role of country squire to its splashier waterfront neighbors, Westport, Greenwich, and Darien. Continuity is prized; headlines are avoided.

When Wilson and Pascarelli first walked through the doors of New Canaan's schools, in the late 1980s, the cafeterias served the institutional fare that is the bane of schoolchildren everywhere: fried this, fried that, droopy everything else. In a district where superlative was the norm, the cafeterias were outliers. Wilson herself wrote a letter to administrators threatening to quit over the quality of the food.

In 1994, the administration announced a new hire. Bruce Gluck had grown up in the Bronx and graduated from the Culinary Institute of America. He arrived with the passion of an evangelist. "Baby steps are great in certain situations," he told Amy Kalafa, the author of *Lunch Wars: How to Start a School Food Revolution and Win the Battle for Our Children's Health*. "But

when it comes to the health of our children, you have to act now."

Gluck preached the gospel of fresh food. His philosophy was "nature provides"—meaning food should be unprocessed, sourced from local sellers, seasonal, and organic when possible. He eliminated junk food from the cafeterias. Canned food went too. He successfully pushed the district to cut ties with the National School Lunch Program. The program boxed him into the Department of Agriculture food pyramid in return for subsidies the wealthy district didn't need.

Free to roam, Gluck explored far-ranging culinary fields. Souvlaki, hummus, and quinoa tabbouleh appeared on menus. Pizza took the form of flaxseed crusts topped with freshly made sauce and mozzarella. "I roast the ducks the Chinese way, hanging in the oven," he told Kalafa. "We

One woman, a diabetic, passed out after a meeting in Gluck's office. Another was so thrown by his rage when she tried to take home uneaten pizza that she wet herself.

develop our own recipes here. I use buffalo and ostrich, too." Vegetables were the real deal: leafy greens, roasted squash. Old standbys slipped in if they could be converted usefully, like chicken fingers made with rice flour to become a gluten-free option. Desserts were low-sugar confections, yogurt parfaits and puddings made with block chocolate and fresh whipped cream.

For a time, Gluck considered excising the holy grail of school lunches: milk. He told Kalafa it was a myth that older kids needed milk the way babies did. He relented only after he found a hormone-free, grass-fed, minimally pasteurized option.

The overhaul met with bewilderment from some parents. But Gluck had his cheerleaders, moms and dads who advocated for the new offerings. More kids began buying meals. Higher revenue offset increased costs. "I don't have to struggle to find the pennies to meet my budget," Gluck boasted to consultants from the Greenwich school district who came inquiring.

It hardly mattered that there were no Michelin stars to be earned in the cafeterias. Gluck exhorted workers to bring him their ideas, to share in his passion. He wanted everyone on board, everyone working to create restaurant-quality food.

"I'll look at something and say to the lead cook, 'Let me ask you a question: Would you serve this at home?' And if they even hesitate I say, 'Throw it away. Why would you sell it here?' And that's what we've been pounding into their heads."

BUT ACCORDING TO a federal lawsuit filed by one of the cafeteria workers, Gluck ran his kitchens with a petty tyranny that verged on caricature. He was a culinary artist, a Leonardo of the lunchroom, lashing workers for errors large and small. He would later laugh, recalling the time a worker attempted to serve cucumber gazpacho hot. But in the moment, mistakes rarely struck him as funny. He slammed doors, threw papers on the floor, pounded a wall, cursed, called workers "stupid" and "fucking bitch." (Gluck denies all of these allegations. The lawsuit was settled for undisclosed terms.)

The workers were a tight group, and they tried warning one another when they saw his "ugly" eyes and beard coming. "He used to come in, don't say good morning, not a smile ... He used to look around like we were doing something wrong all the time," one woman testified. "Like an animal. He used to walk in and then always mad."

When food was not prepared to Gluck's liking, another woman said, "the expression he have in the face, still today, I still have in my mind. Mean. Mean. Mean. Mean. He gets so red, so angry, you know, and then he threw the stuff on the floor and he run in the office."

Tears were common. One woman, a diabetic, passed out after a meeting in his office. Another fell backwards into a chair as he barged toward her, screaming. Wilson heard the woman yell "*Castigare!*," as if to say, "A pox on your children." Yet another worker was so thrown by his rage

when she tried to take home uneaten pizza that she wet herself.

But Wilson and Pascarelli didn't shrink when Gluck barked. They didn't cry when he vented. Between them, Wilson had the tougher exterior. Pascarelli was more yielding, and from a young age had followed the lead of her older sister. But there was a stoicism in both women, an ability to withstand Gluck's outbursts.

With her office next to Gluck's, Wilson endured his storming in and yelling loud enough for workers on the meat slicer to hear him. "I was a buffer, meaning if there was a complaint between him and a person, I would get the complaint and I would go fix it," Wilson testified in a deposition for the lawsuit.

Her fixes, according to the workers, were punishments doled out with tiered precision: dish duty for first-time offenders, a school transfer for repeat offenders. After a worker fractured her neck in a car accident and missed a week and a half of work, Wilson assigned her dish duty. The worker handed in a doctor's note saying she needed light work. But Wilson would not relent, and the worker assumed that seeking help from the union would be pointless: Pascarelli was the union president. Eventually, the woman quit. (Both Wilson and Gluck deny punishing

workers and say there is no such thing as light work in a cafeteria.)

Wilson's willingness to run interference for Gluck made her essential. He came to consider her a close friend, even as he bore down on her. She often said she was going to work for the school district until she retired. When there was trouble, it was either her job on the line or someone else's—and it wasn't going to be hers. Her stance was that of a woman who looked out for herself, as the Italian women saw it, her sternness a kind of hardness, like that of a man.

But phone calls from the New Canaan mothers undid her. Gluck himself disdained the mothers. "I don't understand these fucking women in this town. They put their little tennis skirts [on] and they go and play," he said, according to the testimony of Antonia Torcasio, who managed one of the elementary-school cafeterias. "And then they want me to worry about if the kids have to eat gluten-free or not gluten-free."

So it was Wilson who listened to them.

"They are good for nothing but just spending their money," Wilson would say after hanging up, Torcasio told me. "They are rich and lazy. They don't know how to cook or do anything." On and on she went, as though she'd found a place to put everything that Gluck dumped on her. (Gluck and Wilson deny saying these things.)

IT TOOK AMY KALAF multiple phone calls and some persistence to arrange an interview with Gluck. He was in high demand. His program was the envy of other districts. Food-services directors from across

Marie Wilson (*left*) and Joann Pascarelli (*right*) arrived in the New Canaan cafeterias in the 1980s and rose through the ranks.





the country sought his advice. His cafeterias landed on best-of lists.

When Kalafa finally visited Gluck at the high school in November 2010, he was stunningly blunt—federal regulations were stupid, wellness committees worthless, Michelle Obama incremental.

Kalafa's account was admiring; she described Gluck in her book as a passionate visionary, a curmudgeon in all the ways a changemaker has to be. Yet from atop the mountain, Gluck was struggling. The catering business he operated on the side shut down, and in 2012 he and his wife filed for bankruptcy. The paperwork paints a portrait of collapsed finances and

unmet obligations: \$140 in cash on hand, a negative balance in a checking account, 79¢ in a savings account, unpaid rent, and debt running pages and pages.

The sisters were in turmoil too. Their brother alleged that while their mother, Alba, was battling cancer, Pascarelli and Wilson were siphoning money from properties she owned. The fight grew ugly; one night in 2001, the brother rammed Wilson's Mercedes with his dump truck. Both sisters denied stealing from Alba, but she cut them out of her will before she died in 2002.

Pascarelli opened credit card after credit card. In 2010, she declared bankruptcy

on debts of more than \$900,000. She says her husband was ill and they had racked up medical bills. Still, a neighbor told me that, years later, so many UPS trucks made deliveries to her house, she assumed Pascarelli ran an Etsy shop.

Meanwhile, Wilson took her brother to court in a property dispute over her New Canaan home. The case dragged on for eight years before they bitterly settled in 2012, with Wilson agreeing to pay him money she believed she didn't owe.

A REIGNING PRESUMPTION IN New Canaan was that the town finances were well in order. Such was the prerogative

of a place home to so many of the nation's leading financiers. For nearly two decades, outside auditors had validated that view, issuing annual reports that gave the town a clean bill of financial health.

In 2012, however, the town decided a fresh look was needed. A new auditing firm came on board and delivered a rude surprise. The firm found numerous problems with the town's practices, from sloppy record keeping to a lack of checks and balances. Taken together, the problems meant New Canaan was wide open for fraud.

"You have every right to be nervous," the auditor told residents during a presentation, according to the *New Canaan Advertiser*.

An outcry went up. The town's deep bench of financial talent clamored to help. The town convened a committee staffed with not one but two former CEOs of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, the accounting giant. But even with such high-powered expertise, bringing the town into compliance proved challenging. After a year of work, the committee scolded the school board for ignoring its recommendations. In a letter, the committee members announced that they would suspend their work, citing a lack of "cooperation, trust and transparency between the Board of Education and the Town."

The district charged its newly hired director of finance and operations, Jo-Ann Keating, with fixing what the auditors had flagged. She zeroed in on the obvious—the cafeterias.

School cafeterias can be financial briar patches. They are businesses unto themselves, taking in large sums in chaotic conditions. So tricky is cafeteria oversight that many schools outsource it. New Canaan had gone another route. It kept both food preparation and financial management in-house and tasked the food-services director with oversight of both. Its cafeterias raked in some \$2 million a year, most of it through prepaid accounts, but about 5 percent arriving as cash.

Keating concluded that the cafeterias' cash-handling procedures were lax, and she mandated new, tighter rules. At the start of the 2016-17 school year, the district also installed software on all cash registers that provided end-of-day cash tallies for each machine to Keating but not to cashiers. In Keating's words, the system was a good, clean check—she could tell if a register's tally differed

from the amount reported to be in the drawer at day's end.

Soon after, Keating started noticing problems at the high school.

ANTONIA TORCASIO FIT a familiar profile in the kitchens—a daughter of Italy, she grew up working in its fields, immigrated in 1970, became a homemaker, and, when her children were grown, took a job in New Canaan. She would claim in court that she was a frequent object of Gluck's ire. She would get her revenge.

According to Torcasio's version of events, in October 2013, Wilson called her into Gluck's office, where he accused her of complaining to the school principal about her workload. He warned her not to speak with administrators, teachers, or staff. Then he turned to Wilson and said, "You deal with her." Wilson said she was going to transfer Torcasio to a different school. (Wilson and Gluck dispute Torcasio's account of the meeting.)

Years earlier, Torcasio would have let the incident go. But her daughter had become a human-resources manager, and told her mother she had options.

Sergeant Casey had been a correctional officer at Rikers Island. Now his office was a repository of some 1,600 pages of documents related to missing cafeteria money.

Torcasio filed two lawsuits. One was against Wilson, claiming that she had put her hands on Torcasio's shoulder after the meeting with Gluck and shoved her. A jury found in Wilson's favor. Torcasio also filed a federal lawsuit against Gluck, the town of New Canaan, and the school

board alleging that Gluck had created a hostile work environment and discriminated against female workers.

The town stood behind Gluck. "A sense of 'How dare you go up against us?' permeated the whole thing," Richard Pate, Torcasio's attorney, told me. He recalled district officials being united in their defense of Gluck. "Everyone praised this guy. Everyone thought he was incredible."

But a federal judge ruled in March 2017 that the suit could go forward, citing evidence showing that "Gluck mistreated many or all of his employees" and "laughed and boasted about making employees cry." (The school-board chair declined to comment for this article.)

The parties settled the case for undisclosed terms. Gluck stepped down at the end of the school year and moved to Vermont.

WILSON SHOULD HAVE BEEN a natural candidate to succeed Gluck; she'd been his deputy for more than 20 years. But about a month before the start of the 2017-18 school year, the district passed her over and hired an outside candidate. The new director was told to keep an eye on cash handling in the cafeterias.

In November, the new food-services director alerted Keating to an argument between employees at the middle school. It had escalated quickly, faster than it should have, as if there were something more at root. Keating decided to pay a visit.

Pascarelli, the manager, was under a great deal of stress outside of work. Her husband had filed for divorce and would later accuse her of changing the locks on their home while he was in the hospital for heart-transplant surgery; renting out the home without his permission; and clearing out their bank account, leaving him with \$46. (Pascarelli's attorney declined to comment on these allegations.)

Keating, during her visit, handed out her business card and invited workers to contact her if they wanted to talk privately. Less than a week later, at 7 p.m., she received an email from a worker. They met the next day, and Keating listened as the woman shared her complaints. Of particular interest to Keating were her concerns about cash handling.

SERGEANT KEVIN CASEY WAS a 23-year veteran of the New Canaan Police Department. Before joining the force, he'd been a correctional officer at Rikers Island, in New York City. Now his office was a repository of some 1,600

pages of documents related to missing cafeteria money.

District officials had contacted police after Keating met with the middle-school employee and further investigation revealed what she called “significant trends.” By then, both sisters had been put on leave. In early December, Wilson resigned. Ten days later, Pascarelli did too.

One afternoon in February 2018, a cafeteria worker arrived at police headquarters for an interview with Casey and another detective. The worker was nervous, reluctant to talk. But the detectives reassured her that they already knew what was happening at the school, according to an affidavit.

Tentatively, the worker began. She said she had seen things at the middle-school cafeteria that she thought were weird. Like Pascarelli telling her that when students paid with cash she was not to enter the amounts into her register. And Pascarelli removing large bills from her register between lunch periods. And, at the end of the day, Pascarelli taking her register drawer and forcing her to sign a deposit slip showing a cash amount far lower than what she knew she’d taken in.

It appeared that things might change after the district installed the new software and a representative from the software company trained workers on the new system. He showed them how to count their drawers at the end of the day, sign a deposit slip, and put the cash into a bank bag. But when he was gone, she said, Pascarelli told the workers to continue using the old method of not entering cash into the system. She said it took too long. She also kept counting workers’ drawers herself and filling out the deposit slips. Bank bags never arrived, the employee said.

Over the next few weeks, worker after worker sat for police interviews. They came from the middle school and the high school. Their accounts were remarkably consistent, with employees accusing Wilson of essentially the same cash-handling practices allegedly used by Pascarelli. (Wilson and Pascarelli both deny mishandling cash. The school district declined to comment on an ongoing criminal investigation.)

The district tallied its losses. Nearly half a million dollars had gone missing from the middle- and high-school cafeterias over the previous five years. That was as far back as the statute of limitations—and the investigation—went. If the sisters were indeed responsible, there was no telling how much they’d taken. They’d

been working in the cafeterias for some 30 years.

WILSON WASN’T SLEEPING. In April, she showed up unannounced at police headquarters. Casey had already questioned her and Pascarelli, and both had steadfastly denied knowledge of any wrongdoing. But now here she was, telling Casey she was exhausted. She lay awake at night worried that he would arrest her. According to an affidavit

Wilson wasn’t sleeping. She lay awake at night worried that Casey would arrest her.

describing the encounter, Casey asked if she wanted to get something off her chest. She said she did.

Seated in the interview room, Wilson wasted no time. Bruce Gluck was the culprit, she said. Starting in 2006, he’d insisted she give him \$100 every day out of the cash collected from the registers. She said if she didn’t give it to him, he would search her desk to find it. Gluck’s daily demand continued until he left. Wilson began to cry. She shouldn’t have helped him, she said, but she’d been afraid of him and didn’t want to lose her job. So she gave him the money.

Six weeks later, Wilson returned for a third interview. Casey said her explanation didn’t add up, according to his affidavit. If Gluck had been taking \$100, that still left money unaccounted for. Was it possible that Gluck had taken \$100 a day, and she and Pascarelli also had each taken \$100?

Wilson remained adamant: Gluck took the money. All she’d ever done was put up with her mercurial boss. But her denials didn’t settle the matter. In August 2018, the sisters were charged with larceny.

Soon after, a woman contacted the New Canaan police. She said she’d observed the high-school cafeteria up close back in 2000, when the medical facility where she worked was undergoing remodeling and its staff shared use of the high-school kitchen. In Marie Wilson’s office she’d seen desk drawers filled with cash, she told police. The money was loose, like someone had dumped bags of cash into the drawers. She also said she’d seen Gluck, who was still operating his catering business at the time, pull his Volvo up to the loading dock and fill it with cases of food from the school. (Gluck says he was moving the food to another school, making room for the medical-facility workers.)

ON A NOVEMBER MORNING in 2018, Wilson and Pascarelli sat side by side in a crowded courtroom for a hearing in their criminal case.

News of their arrests had shocked New Canaan. Parents thought perhaps the alleged cafeteria thieves had covered up the stolen cash by double-charging students’ electronic accounts, and they bombarded school-board members with calls demanding to know whether they’d been fleeced.

I approached the sisters while they waited for the judge. Wilson was stiff and contained, her strict gray bob shielding her face and her purse strap kept squarely on her shoulder. Pascarelli was nervously chatty and seemed stunned as she glanced around the courtroom, eyeing the sea of other criminal defendants. She told me she didn’t think any money had gone missing. What had actually happened was that the new food-services director had taken a dislike to her. “[She] had an attitude and decided to get rid of people,” she said. Or perhaps it was the kids’ fault. They caused so much confusion, Pascarelli said. They used one another’s PINs to run up charges on their electronic cards and parents were always aghast, saying, “Not my child!”

The sisters had taken pride in their work. Now they were the object of ridicule in New Canaan. A few weeks earlier, nine boys at the high school had donned hairnets and white aprons over prison-orange jumpsuits with cash taped on them. A local paper featured a photo of the smiling boys with a headline announcing, “Exclusive: New Canaan ‘Lunch Ladies’ Seen at High School.” The caption called the gag “a little parody.”

Whatever had happened with the money, both sisters agreed, Gluck should have known about it. And where was he?

Investigators, it turned out, were wondering the same thing. In the spring of 2018, Casey had tried to track him down. They had scheduled an interview for mid-March, but Gluck had canceled a few days beforehand. In May, Gluck's lawyer emailed detectives to say that Gluck would not consent to an interview about the missing money. His stonewalling left police with only Wilson's claim that Gluck was the thief.

But then search warrants unearthed Gluck's bank records, showing that he'd made suspicious cash deposits from 2012 to 2017—more frequent in the school year and dropping off in the summer, according to a report cited in an affidavit. They totaled nearly \$40,000. Investigators could identify no legitimate source of income for the money. (Gluck says his wife had other sources of income.)

In April 2019, police arrested Gluck for larceny and conspiracy to commit larceny. The criminal cases are now chugging through the court system in Stamford. All three defendants have pleaded not guilty. By email, Gluck's lawyer said that his client had no involvement in misappropriating funds from the school district and looks forward to clearing his name in court.

When I visited Gluck's Vermont home hoping to speak with him, his wife ordered

me off the property, following me across the yard and yelling, "Fuck off!"

THE ALLEGED THEFTS PERPLEXED New Canaan—the notion that so much money could go missing with no one noticing. New Canaan is not a community used to being taken. Yet somehow, the town presented the opportunity and people seized it.

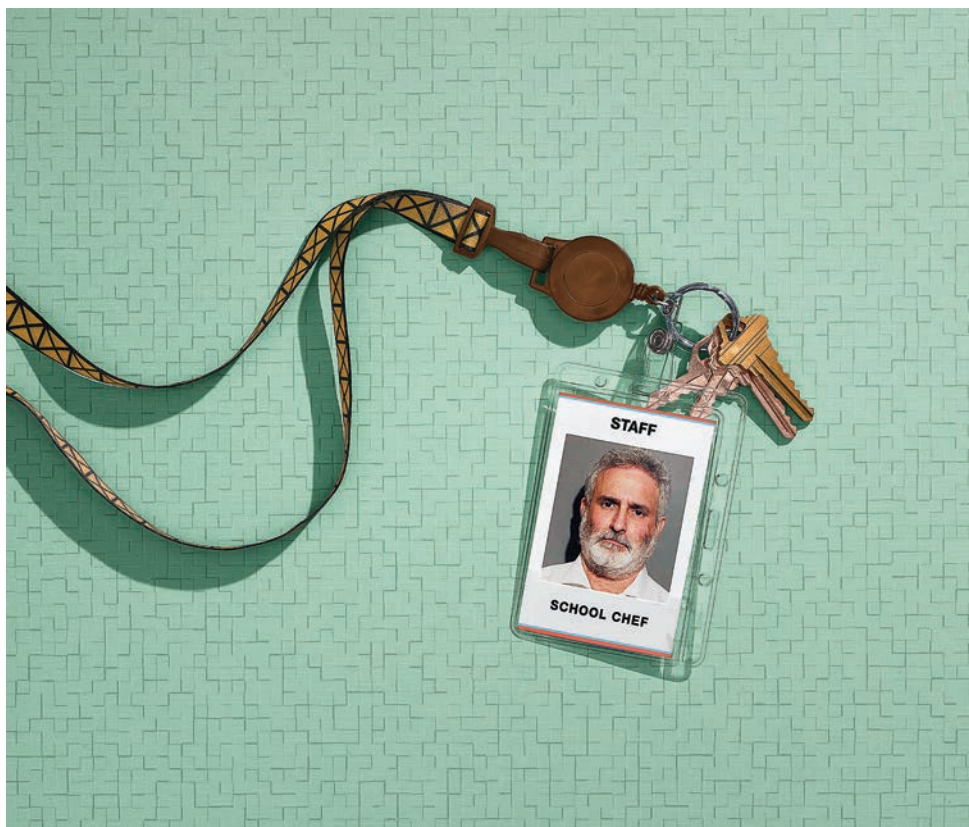
"It's curious there were no systems in place," one parent told me through the rolled-down window of her Land Rover as she waited for her daughter outside the high school. When I pressed her for her feelings about the alleged thefts, she demurred: "It's a topic." Then her daughter climbed in and she had to go.

In the cafeterias, Gluck's buffalo and roasted duck are gone, replaced by standard fare such as cheese pizza, mac and cheese, and paninis. At the middle school, lunch one day in June was a hot dog.

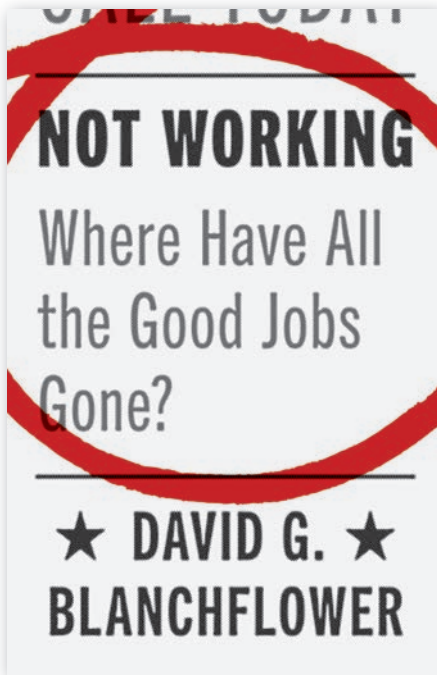
The cafeteria workers remain on edge, fearful that they, too, might be accused of stealing. School officials told them not to talk to reporters. Those who did speak with me, though, said they're glad the jig is finally up. Anyone paying attention knew something was wrong. For years, they'd talked among themselves. But they'd been too afraid to report their suspicions. They had no hard evidence, only observations.

"Your grandson almost die and you don't take a day off?" Torcasio said. She paused, then added, "Because maybe she wanted to do her money." **A**

Sarah Schweitzer is a writer based in New Hampshire.



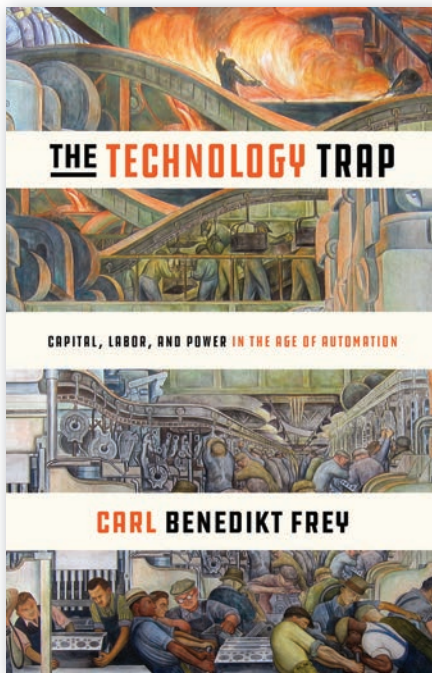
Bruce Gluck transformed the New Canaan school cafeterias, but investigators later discovered suspicious deposits in his bank records.



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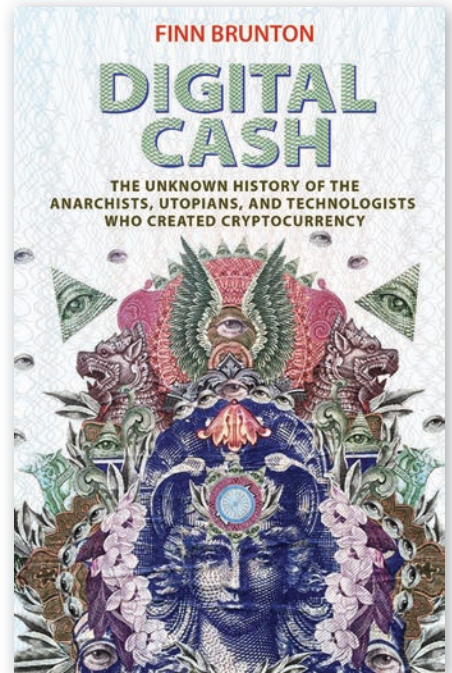
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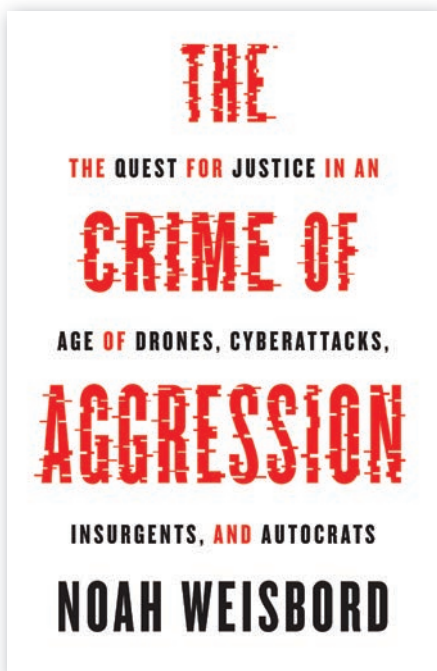
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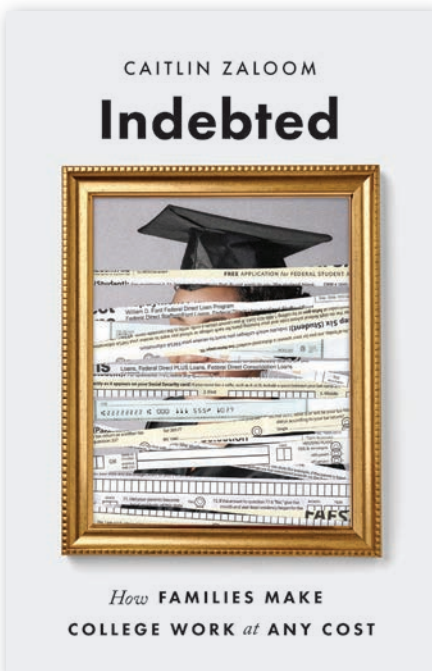


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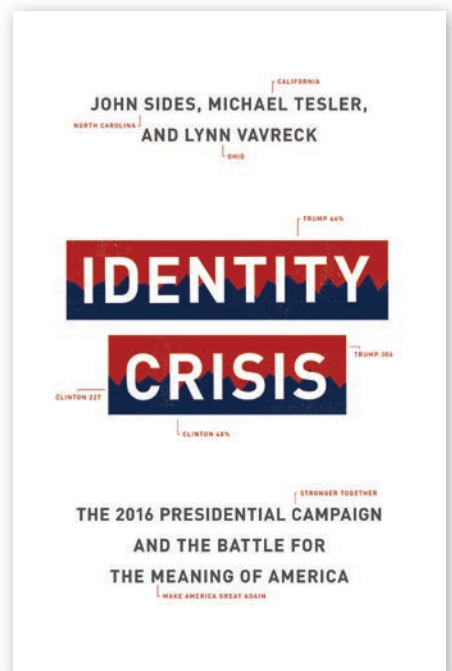
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L I F E W I T H L Y M E



After years of being ill, I found myself with one of medicine's most bitterly contested diagnoses—a baffling disease that has pitted experts against one another and against patients. But new insights are at last accumulating.

By Meghan O'Rourke

IN THE FALL OF 1997, after I graduated from college, I began experiencing what I called “electric shocks”—tiny stabbing sensations that flickered over my legs and arms every morning. They were so extreme that as I walked to work from my East Village basement apartment, I often had to stop on Ninth Street and rub my legs against a parking meter, or else my muscles would begin twitching and spasming. My doctor couldn’t figure out what was wrong—dry skin, he proposed—and eventually the shocks went away. A year later, they returned for a few months, only to go away again just when I couldn’t bear it anymore.

Over the years, the shocks and other strange symptoms—vertigo, fatigue, joint pain, memory problems, tremors—came and went. In 2002, I began waking up every night drenched in sweat, with hives covering my legs. A doctor I consulted thought, based on a test result, that I might have lupus, but I had few other markers of the autoimmune disease. In 2008, when I was 32, doctors identified arthritis in my hips and neck, for which I had surgery and physical therapy. I was also bizarrely exhausted. Nothing was really wrong, the doctors I visited told me; my tests looked fine.

In 2012, I was diagnosed with a relatively mild autoimmune disease, Hashimoto’s thyroiditis. Yet despite eating carefully and sleeping well, I was having difficulty functioning, which didn’t make sense to my doctor—or to me. Recalling basic words was often challenging. Teaching a poetry class at Princeton, I found myself talking to the students about “the season that comes after winter, when flowers grow.” I was in near-constant pain, as I wrote in an essay for *The New Yorker* at the time about living with chronic illness. Yet some part of me thought that perhaps this was what everyone in her mid-30s felt. Pain, exhaustion, a leaden mind.

One chilly December night in 2012, I drove a few colleagues back to Brooklyn after our department holiday party in New Jersey. I looked over at the man sitting next to me—a novelist I’d known for years—and realized that I had no idea who he was. I pondered the problem. I knew I *knew* him, but who was he? It took an hour to recover the information that he was a friend. At home, I asked my partner, Jim, whether he had ever experienced anything like this. He shook his head. Something was wrong.

By the following fall, any outing—to teach my class, or to attend a friend’s birthday dinner—could mean days in bed afterward. I hid matters as best I could. Debt piled up as I sought out top-tier physicians (many of whom didn’t take insurance)—a neurologist who diagnosed neuropathy of unclear origin, a rheumatologist who diagnosed “unspecified connective-tissue disease” and gave me steroids and intravenous immunoglobulin infusions. I visited acupuncturists and nutritionists. I saw expensive out-of-network “integrative” doctors (M.D.s who take a holistic approach to health) and was diagnosed with over-exhaustion and given IV vitamin drips. Many doctors, I could tell, weren’t sure what to think. *Is this all in her head?* I felt them wondering. One suggested I see a therapist. “We’re all tired,” another chided me.

I was a patient of relative privilege who had access to excellent medical care. Even so, I felt terrifyingly alone—until, in the fall of 2013, I found my way to yet another doctor, who had an interest in infectious diseases, and tested me for Lyme. I had grown up on the East Coast, camping and hiking. Over the years, I had pulled many engorged deer ticks off myself. I’d never

gotten the classic bull’s-eye rash, but this doctor ordered several Lyme-disease tests anyway; though indeterminate, the results led her to think I might have the infection.

I began to do research, and discovered other patients like me, with troubling joint pain and neurological problems. To keep symptoms at bay, some of them had been taking oral and intravenous antibiotics for years, which can be dangerous; one acquaintance of mine was on her fifth or sixth course of IV drugs, because that was the only treatment she’d found that kept her cognitive faculties functioning. I read posts by people who experienced debilitating exhaustion and memory impairment. Some were so disoriented that they had trouble finding their own home. Others were severely depressed. Along the way, nearly all had navigated a medical system that had discredited their testimony and struggled to give them a diagnosis. Many had been shunted by internists to psychiatrists. The stories were not encouraging.

After a decade and a half in the dark, I at last had a possible name for my problems. Yet instead of feeling relief, I felt I had woken into a nightmare. I wasn’t sure whether the disease I had really *was* untreated Lyme. Even if I did have Lyme, there was little agreement about how to treat a patient like me—whose test

*I looked over at the man sitting
next to me—a novelist I’d
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results were equivocal and who had been diagnosed very late in the course of the disease—and no guarantee that I would get better if I tried antibiotics.

It was a scary path to walk down. My own doctor cautioned that the label *Lyme disease* was easy to pin on one’s symptoms, because the tests can be inaccurate. I understood. I’d gotten my hopes up before. My experience of medicine had led me to conclude that specialists often saw my troubles through their particular lens—an autoimmune disease! a viral issue! your mind! And I worried that if I were to go see a Lyme specialist—an internist with a focus on the disease—he would say I had it no matter what.

In the absence of medical clarity, I had to decide what to do. Was I going to become a Lyme patient? If so, whom was I to trust, and how far would I go? Then one night, in my rabbit-hole searching, I stumbled on a thread of Lyme patients describing the same electric shocks that had bedeviled me for years. The back of my neck went cold. For nearly 20 years I had tried to find a doctor who would think the problem was something other than dry skin. I had asked friends if they had any idea what I was talking about. No one ever did. I had thought I was imagining it, or being oversensitive—or was somehow at fault. To see my ordeal described in familiar, torturous detail jolted me to attention.

I knew then that I needed to learn more about the complex reality of Lyme disease and tackle the near-impossible task of sorting out what was understood and what wasn't. I didn't yet know that simply by exploring whether untreated Lyme disease could be the cause of my illness, I risked being labeled one of the "Lyme loonies"—patients who believed that a long-ago bite from a tick was the cause of their years of suffering. They'd

LYME DISEASE WAS DISCOVERED in Connecticut in the mid-1970s. Today it is a major, and growing, health threat, whose reach extends well beyond its initial East Coast locus. Reported cases increased almost fivefold from 1992 to 2017, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that annual incidences have risen to more than 300,000, and may even range above 400,000. Step into parks in coastal Maine or Paris, and you'll see ominous signs in black and red type warning of the presence of ticks causing Lyme disease. In the summer in the eastern United States, many parents I know cover their children from head to toe—never mind the heat—for a hike in the woods or a jaunt to a grassy playground. On a recent trip to my brother's new country house in Vermont, a few weeks before his partner woke up one morning with a dramatic bull's-eye rash, I chased my toddler sons around, spraying them so often with tick repellent that they thought we were playing a special outdoor game.

By now, just about everyone knows someone who's been diagnosed with Lyme disease, and most of us know to look for the telltale rash (often described as a bull's-eye, many Lyme rashes are solid-colored lesions) and to ask for a prompt dose of antibiotics. For most of those who get swiftly diagnosed and treated, that will be the end of the story. But lots of Americans have also heard secondhand reports of people who stayed sick after that course of antibiotics. And lots know of cases in which no rash appeared and a diagnosis came late, when damage had already been wrought. Plenty of others, upon discovering an attached deer tick, have encountered doctors who balk at prescribing antibiotics to treat a possible Lyme infection, wary of overdiagnosis.

The degree of alarm and confusion about such a long-standing public-health issue is extraordinary. The consequences can't be overestimated, now that Lyme disease has become an almost "unparalleled threat to regular American life," as Bennett Nemser, a former Columbia University epidemiologist who manages the Cohen Lyme and Tickborne Disease Initiative at the Steven & Alexandra Cohen Foundation, characterized it to me. "Really anyone—regardless of age, gender, political interest, affluence—can touch a piece of grass and get a tick on them."

been called that in a 2007 email sent by the program officer overseeing Lyme grants at the National Institutes of Health. The now-infamous phrase betrayed just how fiercely contested the disease is—"one of the biggest controversies that medicine has seen," as John Aucott, a physician and the director of the Johns Hopkins Lyme Disease Clinical Research Center, later described it to me.

Even as changes in the climate and in land use are causing a dramatic rise in Lyme and other tick-borne diseases, the American medical establishment remains entrenched in a struggle over who can be said to have Lyme disease and whether it can become chronic—and if so, why. The standoff has impeded research that could help break the logjam and clarify how a wily bacterium, and the co-infections that can come with it, can affect human



PREVIOUS SPREAD: RICKY KRESSLEIN/GETTY; SCOTT W. BAKER/GETTY

bodies. After 40 years in the public-health spotlight, Lyme disease still can't be prevented by a vaccine; eludes reliable testing; and continues to pit patients against doctors, and researchers against one another. When I got my inconclusive diagnosis, I knew better than to dream of a quick cure. But I didn't know how extreme the roller coaster of uncertainty would be.

LYME DISEASE CAME INTO PUBLIC VIEW when an epidemic of what appeared to be rheumatoid arthritis began afflicting children in Lyme, Connecticut. A young rheumatologist at Yale named Allen Steere, who now conducts research at Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston, studied the children. In 1976 he named the mysterious illness after its locale and described its main symptoms more fully: a bull's-eye rash; fevers and aches; Bell's palsy, or partial paralysis of the face, and other neurological issues; and rheumatological manifestations such as swelling of the knees. After much study, Steere realized that the black-legged ticks that live on mice and deer (among other mammals) might be harboring a pathogen responsible for the outbreak. In 1981, the medical entomologist Willy Burgdorfer finally identified the bacterium that causes Lyme, and it was named after him: *Borrelia burgdorferi*.

B. burgdorferi is a corkscrew-shaped bacterium known as a spirochete that can burrow deep into its host's tissue, causing damage as it goes and, in laboratory conditions at least, morphing as needed from corkscrew to cystlike blob to, potentially, slimy "biofilm" forms. Because of this ability, researchers describe it as an "immune evader."

Once it hits the human bloodstream, it changes its outer surface to elude an immune response, and then quickly moves from the blood into tissue, which poses problems for early detection. (Hard to find in the bloodstream and other body fluids, the *B. burgdorferi* spirochete is hard to culture, which is how bacterial infections are definitively diagnosed.) If it goes untreated, *B. burgdorferi* can make its way into fluid in the joints, into the spinal cord, and even into the brain and the heart, where it can cause the sometimes deadly Lyme carditis.

By the mid-'90s, a mainstream consensus emerged that Lyme disease was relatively easy to diagnose—thanks to the telltale rash and flulike symptoms—and to treat. Infectious diseases are the kind of clear-cut illness that our medical system generally excels at handling. Evidence indicated that the prescribed treatment protocol—a few weeks of oral antibiotics, typically doxycycline—would take care of most cases that were

caught early, while late-stage cases of Lyme disease might require intravenous antibiotics for up to a month. That assessment, made by the Infectious Diseases Society of America, formed the basis of the IDSA's treatment guidelines from 2006 until recently. (In late June, a revised draft called for, among other things, a shorter course—10 days—of doxycycline for patients with early Lyme.)

Yet the picture on the ground looked far murkier. A significant percentage of people who had Lyme symptoms and later tested positive for the disease had never gotten the rash. Others had many characteristic symptoms but tested negative for the infection, and entered treatment anyway. Most startling, a portion of patients who had been promptly and conclusively diagnosed with Lyme disease and treated with the standard course of doxycycline



didn't really get better. When people from each of these groups failed to recover fully, they began referring to their condition as "chronic Lyme disease," believing in some cases that the bacterium was still lurking deep in their bodies.

Frustrated with the medical system's seeming inability to help them, patients emerged as an activist force, arguing that Lyme disease was harder to cure than the establishment acknowledged. Family physicians in Lyme-endemic areas, confronted with patients who weren't getting better, tried out other treatment protocols, including long-term oral and intravenous antibiotics, sometimes administered for months or years. They also started testing assiduously for tick-borne co-infections, which were appearing in some of the sickest patients. Many of these doctors rotated drugs in the hope of finding a more effective regimen. Some patients responded well. Others didn't get better. In 1999, these doctors banded together to form the International Lyme

and Associated Diseases Society. Highlighting the problems with Lyme-disease tests and citing early evidence that bacteria could persist in animals and humans with Lyme disease even after they'd been treated, ILADS proposed an alternative standard of care that defined the illness more broadly and allowed for more extensive treatment.

But some prominent Lyme-disease researchers were skeptical that the infection could persist after treatment—that bacteria could remain in the body. They argued that many chronic Lyme-disease patients were being treated for an infection they no longer had, while others had never had Lyme disease in the first place but had appropriated the diagnosis for symptoms that could easily have other causes. Chronic Lyme disease, in the Infectious Diseases Society of America's view, was a pseudoscientific diagnosis—an ideology rather than a biological reality. Under the sway of that ideology, it contended, credulous patients were needlessly being treated with dangerous IV antibiotics by irresponsible physicians. (It didn't help when a Lyme patient in her 30s died from an IV-related infection.)

To make its case, the IDSA cited a handful of studies indicating that long-term antibiotic treatment of patients with ongoing symptoms was no more effective than a placebo—proof, in its view, that the bacterium wasn't causing the symptoms. The IDSA also highlighted statistics suggesting that the commonly cited chronic Lyme symptoms—ongoing fatigue, brain fog, joint pain—occurred no more frequently in Lyme patients than in the general population. In the press, experts in this camp implied that patients who believed they had been sick with Lyme disease for years were deluded or mentally ill.

The antagonism was “fierce and alienating for the patients,” Brian Fallon, the director of the Lyme and Tick-Borne Diseases Research Center at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, told me. Hostilities continued to intensify, not just between patients and experts, but between community doctors and academic doctors. In 2006, the IDSA guidelines for patients and physicians argued that “in many patients, posttreatment symptoms appear to be more related to the aches and pains of daily living rather than to either Lyme disease or a tick-borne co-infection.” This message rang hollow for many. “Researchers were saying, ‘Your symptoms have nothing to do with Lyme. You have chronic fatigue syndrome, or fibromyalgia, or depression,’” Fallon told me. “And that didn't make sense to these patients, who were well until they got Lyme, and then were sick.”

BY THE TIME THE DOCTOR first floated the possibility, in 2013, that I might have Lyme, my headaches, brain fog, and joint pain had gotten much worse, and tiny bruises had bloomed all over my legs and arms. I was so dizzy that I began fainting. A black ocean, it seemed, kept crashing over me, so that I couldn't catch my breath. I could no more touch the old delights of my life than a firefly could touch the world beyond the jar in which it had been caught.

When I returned to the doctor's office two weeks later to go over the test results, I didn't know what I was in for. Imperfect diagnostics lie at the core of the whole debate over Lyme disease. Standard Lyme tests—structured in two tiers, to minimize false positives—can't reliably identify an infection early on or determine whether an infection has been eradicated. That's because the tests are not looking for the “immune evader” itself—the *B. burgdorferi* spirochete—in your blood. Instead, they assess indirectly: They look for the antibodies (the small proteins

our bodies create to fight infection) produced in response to the bacteria. But antibody production takes time, which means early detection can be hard. And once produced, antibodies can last for years, which makes it difficult to see whether an infection is resolved, or even whether a new one has occurred. What's more, antibodies to autoimmune and viral diseases can look like the ones the body makes in response to Lyme.

For a thorough interpretive reading, some doctors will send blood to several different labs, which can deliver results that don't always agree with one another. And the CDC—which recommends that only a specific pattern of antibodies, agreed on by experts in 1994, be considered indicative of a positive test—suggests that, when needed, doctors should use their judgment to make what's called a “clinical diagnosis,” based on symptoms and likelihood of exposure, along with the lab tests.

I was confused. My doctor showed me mixed results from three labs. Two had a positive response on one part of the test but not the other, while the third had a negative response on both parts. Because of my medical history as well as particular findings on my tests, she concluded that I probably did have Lyme disease. But she also noted that I had a few nasty viruses, including Epstein-Barr.

Chronic Lyme disease, in the view of the infectious-disease establishment, was a pseudoscientific diagnosis—an ideology rather than a biological reality.

In addition, the test may have been picking up on autoimmune antibodies, given my earlier diagnosis.

At the recommendation of a science-writer friend, I finally went to see Richard Horowitz, a doctor in upstate New York who specializes in Lyme disease and had earned a reputation as a brilliant diagnostician. Horowitz, who goes by “Dr. H” with many of his patients, is a practicing Buddhist, with bright-blue eyes and an air of brimming eagerness. He recently served as a member of the Tick-Borne Disease Working Group convened by the Department of Health and Human Services, which in 2018 issued a report to Congress outlining problems with the diagnosis and treatment of Lyme patients.

I told him that I wasn't sure I had Lyme disease. I had brought along a stack of lab results nearly half a foot tall—a paper trail that would scare off many doctors. He perused every page, asking questions and making notes. Finally, he looked up.

“Based on your labs, your symptoms, and your various results over the years, I highly suspect you have Lyme,” he said. “See these?”—he bent over a set of results from Stony Brook laboratory—“these bands are specific for Lyme.”

In his waiting room, I had completed an elaborate questionnaire designed to single out Lyme patients from a pool of patients with other illnesses that affect multiple biological systems. (It has since been empirically validated as a screening tool.) Now Dr. H did a physical exam and ordered a range of tests to rule out further

thyroid problems, diabetes, and other possible causes of my symptoms. Because I had night sweats and the sensation that I couldn't get enough air into my lungs—a symptom known as “air hunger”—he proposed that I might have a co-infection of babesia, a malaria-like parasite also transmitted by ticks. Curious, I told him that I had always thought of Lyme as a primarily arthritic disease, whereas I had many neurological and cognitive symptoms. He explained that *B. burgdorferi* is now known to come in different strains, which are thought to produce different kinds of disease.

“The funny thing is, I think you're actually a very strong and healthy person, and that's why you did okay for so long,” he continued. “Now your body needs help.”

Dr. H prescribed a month of doxycycline, and warned me about something I'd read online. When I began the antibiotic, I might at first feel worse: As the bacteria die, they release toxins that create what's known as a Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction—a flulike response that Lyme patients commonly refer to as “herxing.” But over time, he said, I should feel better. If not, we were on the wrong track.

Over dinner that night, back in Brooklyn, I told Jim that despite what Horowitz had urged, I wasn't sure I wanted to take the antibiotics. I didn't have a cut-and-dried positive test for Lyme, and I knew how damaging antibiotics are to the microbiome. “What do you really have to lose?” he asked, in disbelief. “You're sick, you're suffering, and you've tried everything else.”

The next morning, I took a dose of the doxycycline, along with Plaquenil, which is thought to help the antibiotics penetrate cells better. I took another dose that night with dinner. I went to bed and woke up feeling like hell. My throat was sore and my head was foggy. My neck was a fiery rebar.

Two days later, we went out to get lunch. I was still groggy and unwell. It was a heavy, gray day, with low clouds. Returning home, it rained all over my bare arms. I told Jim we should hurry.

“Why?” he said.

“It's raining!”

“It's not raining,” he said. “It's just cloudy.” I raised my hands to show him the raindrops. A dozen pips of cold popped along my arm. But there was no rain. As we walked home, cold drops rushed all over my body, my skin crawling as if a strange, violent water were cleansing it.

Several days later, though, I felt excited to fly to a conference in Chicago, rather than exhausted by the prospect. For three

more weeks, I took the drugs and supplements Dr. H had prescribed. The doxycycline made me allergic to the sun. One late-spring morning, I forgot to put sunblock on my right hand before taking a walk with a friend, holding a coffee cup. It was 9 o'clock and cloudy. By the time I got home, my hand felt tender. Over the next few days a second-degree burn developed, blistering into an open wound.

After a month of antibiotic treatment, I took the train back up to Dr. H's office. On his questionnaire, I rated my symptoms as less severe than I had a month earlier, but my total score still fell in the high range. Dr. H changed the protocol, adding an



antimalarial drug. He was concerned about my continued night sweats and air hunger.

When I started taking the new drugs, in June 2014, I was nearly as sick as I had ever been. I flew to Paris to teach at NYU's summer writing program. Within two days of arriving, I could barely walk down the street. Violent electric shocks lacerated my skin, and patches of burning pain and numbness spread up my neck. I shook and shivered. The reaction lasted five days, during which panic mixed with the pain. How was I to know whether this was herxing and a *positive* reaction to the drugs as they killed bacteria and parasites, or a manifestation of the disease itself? Or were weeks of antibiotics themselves causing problems for me?

"I know you think you're doing the right thing," a concerned colleague said, "but aren't you just making yourself sicker?"

On the sixth day, I was sitting on the couch in my rented apartment and the shocks were so violent, racing across my forearms and thighs and calves, that when I looked up at the tall open windows, the sun streaming through them, it occurred to me that I could jump out of them and find relief.

The next morning I woke up to the same bright sun, feeling better than I had in ages. Stunned by my energy, I went out for a run. I wasn't exactly racing down the sidewalk, but 40 minutes later, for the first time in years, I had run three miles.

As the weeks passed, I felt better and better. My drenching night sweats vanished. The air hunger was gone. I had loads of energy. I took antibiotics for several more months, and each month I had fewer symptoms. After eight months of treatment, Dr. H decided that I could stop. It was the spring of 2015.

That fall I got pregnant, at the age of 39. At Dr. H's urging, I took antibiotics on and off during my pregnancy. In the summer of 2016, I delivered a healthy baby boy.

BY THE TIME I started treatment, the fact that Lyme disease causes ongoing symptoms in some patients could no longer be viewed as the product of their imaginations. A well-designed longitudinal study by John Aucott at Johns Hopkins showed the presence of persistent brain fog, joint pain, and related issues in approximately 10 percent of even an ideally treated population—patients who got the Lyme rash and took the recommended antibiotics. Other studies found these symptoms in up to 20 percent

of patients. The condition, christened "post-treatment Lyme disease syndrome," or PTLDS, is now recognized by the CDC. (Of course, the term doesn't apply to patients like me, who never had a rash or a clearly positive test.) Even so, the condition is hotly contested, and plenty of high-level people in the field—as well as the Infectious Diseases Society of America itself—still don't recognize it as an official diagnosis. Perhaps most important, crucial questions about the cause of ongoing symptoms remain unanswered, due in part to the decades-long standoff over whether and how the disease can become chronic. As Sue Visser, the CDC's associate director for policy in the Division of Vector-Borne Diseases, acknowledges, "Many are very rightfully

frustrated that it's been decades and we still don't have answers for some patients."

Recently, though, a host of new studies has freshly tackled a lot of those questions: Why do Lyme symptoms persist in only some patients? What don't we know about the behavior of the *B. burgdorferi* bacteria that might help explain the variation in patients' responses to it?

There isn't much federal funding to study Lyme disease, and what there is often goes to research on prevention and transmission. (The NIH spends only \$768 on each new confirmed case of Lyme, compared with \$36,063 on each new case of hepatitis C.) Much of the money to investigate PTLDS has come from private foundations, including the Steven & Alexandra Cohen Foundation, the Global Lyme Alliance, and the Bay Area Lyme Foundation. The CDC and the NIH recently reached out to these groups, officials told me, spurred on in part by the 2018 Tick-Borne Disease Working Group report to Congress outlining major holes in the scientific understanding of Lyme disease.

In a conversation I had with him, Bennett Nemser of the Cohen Foundation laid out some of the hypotheses that are currently being explored. The complexity is daunting. A patient with ongoing symptoms may actually still have a Lyme infection, and/or a lingering infection from some other tick-borne disease. Or the original infection might have caused systemic damage, leaving a patient with recurring symptoms such as nerve pain and chronic inflammation. Or the Lyme infection might have triggered an autoimmune response, in which the immune system starts attacking the body's own tissues and organs. Or a patient might be suffering from some combination of all three, complicated by triggers that researchers have not yet identified.

One way or another, an intricate interplay of the infection and the immune system, new research suggests, is at work in patients who don't get better. The immune response to the Lyme infection, it turns out, is "highly variable," John Aucott told me. For example, some research has suggested that ongoing symptoms are a result of an overactive immune response triggered by Lyme disease. Recently, though, a study co-authored by Aucott with scientists at Stanford found that, in patients who developed PTLDS, the Lyme bacteria had actually inhibited the immune response.

By now, accumulating evidence suggests that in many mammals, Lyme bacteria can persist after treatment with antibiotics—leading more scientists to wonder if the bacteria can do the same in humans. In 2012, a team led by the microbiologist Monica Embers of the Tulane National Primate Research Center found intact *B. burgdorferi* lingering for months in rhesus macaques after treatment. Embers also reported that the macaques had varying immune responses to the infection, possibly explaining why active bacteria remained in some. The study drew criticism from figures in the IDSA establishment; in their view it failed to prove that the bacteria remained biologically active. But Embers told me that this year, in their work with mice, she and her team have managed the feat of culturing *B. burgdorferi*, showing that it was viable after a course of doxycycline. New studies looking into possible bacterial persistence in humans—conducted by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, part of the NIH—are under way.

Meanwhile, several researchers, including Ying Zhang at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, have proposed another explanation for how *B. burgdorferi* can remain after treatment: the presence of what are called "persister bacteria," similar to those found in certain hard-to-treat staph infections but long thought not to exist in Lyme. In the case of Lyme disease, persister bacteria are a subpopulation that enters a dormant state, allowing



them to survive a normally lethal siege of antibiotics. These persister bacteria, Zhang's team found, caused severe symptoms in mice, and the current single-antibiotic Lyme protocols didn't eradicate them—which makes sense: Doxycycline functions not by directly killing bacteria, but by inhibiting their replication. Thus it affects only actively dividing bacteria, not dormant ones, relying on a healthy immune system to dispatch any *B. burgdorferi* that remain.

The big outcome, though, was that when Zhang's team treated the mice with a three-antibiotic cocktail, including a drug known to work on persistent staph infections, the mice cleared the persistent *B. burgdorferi* infection. "We now have not only a plausible explanation but also a potential solution for patients who suffer from persistent Lyme-disease symptoms despite standard single-antibiotic treatment," Zhang said. Taking the next step, Kim Lewis at Northeastern University, who has had a distinguished career studying persister bacteria, is about to conduct a study, in collaboration with Brian Fallon, looking at whether a compound that specifically targets persister cells can help patients with PTLDS.

Of course, even if active bacteria do remain in some Lyme patients, they may well not be the cause of the symptoms, as many in the IDSA have long contended. Paul Auwaerter, the clinical director of infectious diseases at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and a former president of the IDSA, points out that Lyme bacteria can leave behind DNA "debris" that may trigger ongoing "low-grade inflammatory responses." Lewis told me that the overarching question—"whether the pathogen is there and is slowly causing damage, or has already left the body and has wrecked the immune system"—has yet to be settled, in his view. But, he said, "I'm optimistic that we and others are going to find a cure for PTLDS."

WHEN MY SON was seven months old, my interlude of feeling energetic and mostly symptom-free abruptly ended. He was not a good sleeper, and months of waking at night had worn me down. In early April 2017, we both got sick, and I didn't recover. My body ached. My brain got foggy. My primary-care doctor noted that the Epstein-Barr virus was active in my system again. Dr. H suggested that the Lyme infection had recurred, and that I

needed another course of antibiotics, but I hesitated. I wasn't sure whether to believe that the Lyme infection could persist, and I attributed my ill health to an autoimmune flare or post-viral fatigue. For months I stalled, but soon the electric shocks were back, zapping my arms and legs, and life became a slog. I started antibiotics. Within five days, my energy returned and I



felt almost completely well again. A month later, feeling better than I had in almost 20 years, I got pregnant with my second son.

Could this recovery be attributed to the placebo effect?, I wondered. If so, it was the only placebo that had ever worked for me.

Meanwhile, my father, who lived in Connecticut, had begun to suffer drenching night sweats, fatigue, and aches and pains. His tests were negative for Lyme but suggestive of ehrlichiosis, another tick-borne infection, and his doctor—in the heart of Lyme country—decided to treat what seemed like a plausible culprit and its co-infection. My father was put on doxycycline for five months. He didn't improve, which surprised me, given that I had seen immediate results. Then one day my brother found him at home, on the verge of collapse, and took him to an ER, where batteries of tests revealed that he had a different problem. He was suffering from Stage 4 Hodgkin's lymphoma.

In 2018, my father died of complications from pneumonia, after recovering from the cancer. I couldn't help wondering how much those lost months had perhaps cost him, as the cancer advanced and weakened him—all because Lyme had seemed like an obvious enough explanation, and the testing was sufficiently murky, that his doctor did not pursue other diagnoses. Though promising new diagnostic technologies are on the horizon, we still can't reliably sort out who has a tick-borne disease and who doesn't.

ON A BRISK MARCH DAY THIS YEAR, the kind of day that can't decide whether it's warm or cold, I visited a research laboratory at Massachusetts General Hospital directed by Allen Steere, the rheumatologist who discovered Lyme disease and helped establish the testing parameters for it. A slim, gray-haired man with an intense gaze, he has become, in the eyes of many Lyme patients, an embodiment of the medical system's indifference, because he has long suggested that some chronic Lyme patients were incorrectly diagnosed in the first place. He has been shouted down at conferences and ambushed by people purporting to be journalistic interviewers. Scientists who disagree with him had nonetheless singled him out to me for his commitment to studying Lyme. I wanted to hear his perspective on the disease and on the debate after four decades of immersion in both.

While underscoring that medicine can be humbling, and that Lyme disease is complex, Steere spoke with the calm air of someone setting a child straight. Emphasizing that in many people Lyme disease can resolve on its own without antibiotics, he carefully described a disease that in the United States frequently follows a specific progression of stages if untreated, beginning with an early rash and fever, then neurological symptoms, and culminating later in inflammatory arthritis. The joint inflammation can continue for months or even years after antibiotic treatment, but not, he believes, because the bacteria persist. His research on patients who have these continuing arthritis symptoms has revealed one cause to be a genetic susceptibility to an ongoing inflammatory response. This discovery has led to effective treatment for the

*In a week, or a month, or six months,
I will start feeling less well. Sharp
electric shocks will start running
along my legs and arms, for minutes,
then hours, then days.*

longer-term challenges of Lyme arthritis, using what are called disease-modifying anti-rheumatic agents.

After I told him a little about my case, he struck a note of similarly solicitous firmness. He told me that in his view, late-stage Lyme (which is what I had been diagnosed with) usually

does not cause a lot of “systemic symptoms,” such as the fatigue and brain fog I had experienced. “I want you to free yourself from the Lyme ideology,” he said. “You clearly were helped by antibiotic therapy. But I don't favor the idea that it was spirochetal infection. Of course, there are other infectious agents,” he continued, noting that some of them trigger complex immune responses.

I left Steere's office unnerved, thinking that if I had met a doctor with some version of this view in 2014, I would never have started doxycycline and gotten better. Could it really be that I had some condition other than Lyme that turned out to respond to antibiotics? He was an expert who had devoted his entire career to studying the mechanics of the disease; I was a patient who happens to be temperamentally both exacting and excitable, and scientifically curious—a layperson craving evidence.

That night I curled up with my computer in my hotel room and reread a 1976 *New York Times* article about the discovery of Lyme. New things struck me, in particular Steere's growing suspicion back then that bacteria couldn't be the cause, because this microorganism wasn't *acting* like a bacterium:

The bacterial infections that are known to cause arthritis leave permanent joint damage, and bacteria are easy to see in body fluids and easy to grow in test tubes. Every effort to culture bacteria from fluids and tissues from the patients has failed.

Steere had moved on to a new possibility: “A virus is the most likely candidate,” he told the *Times*. “Just because we haven't found one yet doesn't mean it isn't there. We'll keep looking.” When I recently wrote to ask him if he had been “fooled” by Lyme disease back in the 1970s, he reminded me of how much he and others *had* learned, in just a few years, about this then-new infection. He went on to remind me that science can “lead to one ‘dead end’ after another. One needs to learn from these dead ends and continue trying.”

ANYONE WHO SAYS they really understand the pathophysiology of what's going on is oversimplifying to some degree,” said Ramzi Asfour, a physician and member of the Infectious Diseases Society of America with notably open views on Lyme disease, when I reached him on the phone in his Bay Area office. Asfour has found that a one-size-fits-all approach to Lyme diagnosis and treatment is inadequate for most patients in his medical practice. We don't know enough yet about diseases that are characterized by abnormal activity of the immune system, he emphasized. But, alongside the usual standardized protocols, they clearly call for the tactics of personalized medicine, because the immune system is so complex—and so individualized. For example, autoimmune diseases can be triggered by stressors that include trauma or infection. And standard lab reports don't always capture early stages of disease. Listening to patients is crucial.

“Being an infectious-disease doctor is usually pretty rewarding in the conventional sense,” Asfour said. “The patient is in the ICU; you grow a bacteria, and you see it; then you give them a magic pill. They get better and walk home. It's very satisfying.” The experience of Lyme patients challenges that model. As the surgeon Atul Gawande once wrote of the medical profession, “Nothing is more threatening to who you think you are than a patient with a problem you cannot solve.”

THE LESS WE UNDERSTAND about a disease, as Susan Sontag argued years ago in *Illness as Metaphor*, the more we tend to psychologize or stigmatize it. In the midst of the current debate over Lyme, I can't help thinking about other illnesses that modern medicine misunderstood for years. Multiple sclerosis was once called hysterical paralysis, and ulcers were considered "a disease of tense, nervous persons who live a strenuous and worrisome life," as one mid-century medical manual put it, outlining a notion that remained common until the 1980s. In fact, ulcers are caused by bacteria—though when a researcher proposed as much in 1983, he was almost literally laughed out of a room of experts, who swore by the medical tenet that the stomach was a sterile environment. Doctors now also know that not everyone with the bacteria gets an ulcer—it's caused by a complex interplay of pathogen and host, of soil and seed, perhaps like post-treatment Lyme disease syndrome.

It is true that *Lyme disease* has become a term that stands for more than itself. If not an ideology, it is a metonym for all tick-borne illness, for embattled suffering, for the ways that medicine has fallen short of its promised goal of doing no harm—in this case by dismissing and mocking suffering patients. As Wendy Adams of the Bay Area Lyme Foundation put it to me, "We now have incontrovertible data that says these people are legitimately sick." Just because a symptom is common and subjective—as fatigue is—doesn't mean that a patient can't tell the difference between a normal version of it and a pathological one. After all, we're able to distinguish between the common cold and a case of the flu. When I was very ill, I felt like a zombie—more important, I felt categorically different from myself. By contrast, today I have aches and pains, and I'm tired, but I am more or less "me."

Recently, I called Richard Horowitz and several other Lyme experts to ask them, once again, if they really thought it was likely that I had Lyme. "Meghan. You *have* Lyme disease," Dr. H said. "You have had multiple Lyme-specific antibodies show up on your tests. You had all the symptoms that led to a clinical diagnosis. And you got better when you took antibiotics." Others echoed his conclusion.

I live in uncertainties, as the poet John Keats put it while he was dying of an infection then thought to be a disease of sensitive souls, which we now know is tuberculosis. But I am fairly sure of one thing. In a week, or a month, or six months, I will start feeling less well. My head will get foggier, my energy level will sink. When I wake in the morning, I will have a severe headache. Sharp electric shocks will start running along my legs and arms, for minutes, then hours, then days. My older son will stop eating his breakfast as I twitch in pain, and say, "What's wrong, Mommy?" And once again I will ask Dr. H for antibiotics.

While writing this article, it happened. I took the antibiotics. I felt worse, and then I felt dramatically better. In a few months, when I have stopped nursing my younger son, I will try Dr. H's new anti-persister regimen. Consisting of three different drugs, including antibiotics used to treat persister bacteria found in diseases like TB and leprosy, it has put some of his most challenging patients into remission for nearly two years now.

I can't know for sure that I have Lyme disease. But to imagine that I might never have found the treatment that has saved my

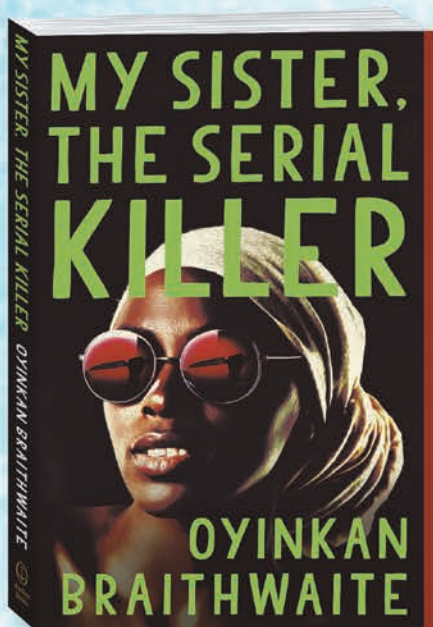


life in every sense—restoring its joy—terrifies me. I think often about patients who are less fortunate, whose disease, whatever it may be, has gone unrecognized. One of the bitterest aspects of my illness has been this: Not only did I suffer from a disease, but I suffered at the hands of a medical establishment that discredited my testimony and—simply because of my search for answers, and my own lived experiences—wrote me off as a loon. In the throes of illness, cut off from the life you once lived, fearing that your future has been filched, what do you have but the act of witness? *This is what it is like. Please listen, so that one day you might be able to help.* **A**

Meghan O'Rourke is the editor of The Yale Review and the author of The Long Goodbye, among other books. She is working on a book about contested chronic illnesses.



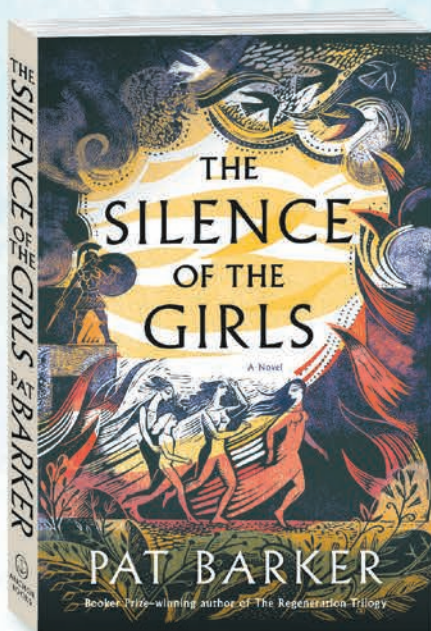
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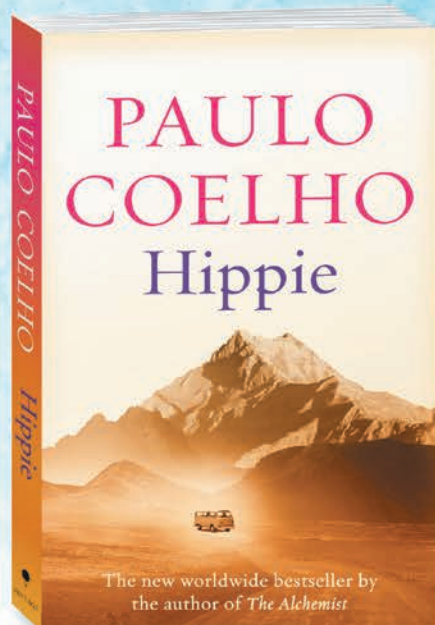
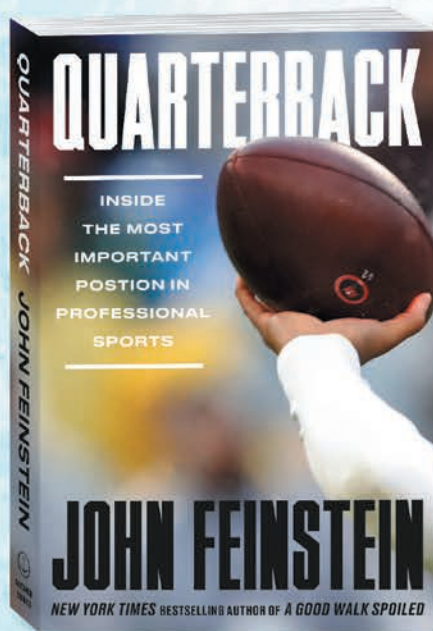
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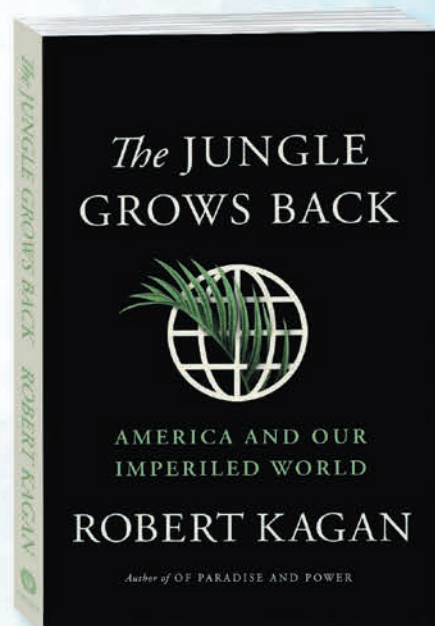
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WHAT HAPPENED

TO

AUNG SAN SUU KYI?



*She was a human-rights icon, a secular saint mentioned
in the same breath as Nelson Mandela. Now she
serves a government that has been accused of genocide.
An inquiry into her fall from grace.*

BY BEN RHODES

ILLUSTRATION BY ARINZE STANLEY



1. ICON

was doing in Parliament, challenging the military and learning the intricacies of parliamentary maneuvers—the nuts and bolts of the democracy she said she wanted to build. In her years as a political prisoner, Suu Kyi—the daughter of Aung San, who led the country to the brink of independence in the 1940s—had become a potent symbol, an international icon of resistance against the military junta and the repository of the Burmese people’s remaining hopes. But she spoke to us as though she had no interest in being an icon. “I have always been a politician,” she told Obama firmly in her British-accented English.

After the meeting, as Obama’s motorcade snaked through a throng of Suu Kyi’s supporters, many of them holding posters with her face on it, he said something in the back of the limo that has stuck in my mind. “I used to be the face on the poster,” he said. “The image only fades.”

At the time, that seemed unlikely: Suu Kyi’s reputation still put her at the celestial heights occupied by the likes of Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa, and Nelson Mandela. Since joining the country’s political resistance in 1988, she had survived detention, house arrest, and attacks on her life by the ruling junta; her bravery, eloquence, and persistence had won her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and made her the world’s most prominent dissident. “The only real prison is fear,” she famously wrote, “and the only real freedom is freedom from fear.”

But Obama was prescient. The government Suu Kyi is now a part of—in April 2016 she became state counselor, a role similar to prime minister, after her party won a national election—has curtailed civil liberties and press freedoms, and carried out what the United Nations high commissioner for human rights has called “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” Others have called it a genocide. Since 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingya

The first time I met Aung San Suu Kyi, she embodied hope. It was November 2012, and we were in her weathered house at 54 University Avenue, in Yangon, where she’d been held prisoner by the ruling Burmese junta for the better part of two decades. She sat at a small, round table with Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Derek Mitchell, who had recently been named the first U.S. ambassador to Myanmar in more than 20 years. At 67, Suu Kyi was poised and striking, a flower tucked into her long black hair, which was streaked with gray. Looking up at the worn books on the shelves behind her, I imagined the hours she must have spent reading them in enforced solitude. A picture of Mahatma Gandhi looked down with a serene smile.

The meeting was a high-water mark for three historic figures. Obama had just decisively won a second term as president. Clinton, then secretary of state, was about to prepare her own run for the presidency. Released from house arrest in November 2010, Suu Kyi had just been elected to the Myanmar Parliament in a by-election that her party had won in a rout. In a country where any unauthorized assembly had until recently been illegal, tens of thousands of people had greeted Obama’s motorcade. Later, he would address the Burmese people at the University of Yangon, which had been shuttered since shortly after students were gunned down in the pro-democracy protests that followed Suu Kyi’s 1988 entry into politics. It felt as if a heavy shroud was being lifted off the country.

At her house, Suu Kyi spoke with pride about the work that her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD),



SHE HAD SURVIVED
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AND PERSISTENCE
HAD WON HER THE
NOBEL PEACE PRIZE.

Muslims have been forced across the border to Bangladesh, into refugee camps, where disease is rampant and the children are malnourished and have almost no access to education.

Myanmar—formerly Burma (the junta changed the name in 1989)—is a complicated country with a complicated history. The ancient kingdoms of Burma had frontiers that for thousands of years ebbed and flowed with the fortunes of its neighbors. In 1948, after more than a century of British rule followed by years of brutal Japanese occupation, the country achieved independence; since then, it has endured continuous and overlapping civil wars—the longest-running in the world—between the military and the country’s various ethnic groups. (Some 65 percent of the population is ethnic Bamar, but there are more than 100 other ethnicities, dozens of which have taken up arms over the years.) The military has ruled the country either directly or indirectly since 1962. In 2011, stifling martial law gave way to a partial opening: Political prisoners were released, relatively free elections were held, and the government began to plug Myanmar into the internet and the global economy. But modern Myanmar has never known peace or controlled all of its borders.

The status of the Rohingya, who live in Rakhine State—which borders Bangladesh to the north and the Bay of Bengal to the west—has long been at issue. Many Burmese deny that the Rohingya are a distinct ethnic group, referring to them as Bengalis—unauthorized immigrants from Bangladesh. This was codified into law in 1982, when legislation denied citizenship to anyone who had come to Myanmar during British rule; the junta used this law to deny citizenship to all Rohingya. In the late ’70s and again in the early ’90s, the military launched operations that brutally drove more than 300,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh.

Many Burmese resent people of South Asian descent, in part because when Britain governed Myanmar (then Burma) as part of India, it put Indians in positions of authority. And many Burmese Buddhists fear the fate of countries such as Afghanistan and

Indonesia, where an intolerant strain of Islam—at times financed by Saudi Arabia—has supplanted Buddhism. (Suu Kyi has spoken with me of those fears herself.) As an ethnic minority, as Muslims, and as people who came from the Indian subcontinent, the Rohingya are thrice vulnerable. A Rohingya human-rights activist named Wai Wai Nu, who was imprisoned by the junta for several years, told me, “It’s all about power—keeping Burmese Buddhist power.”

A few months before Obama’s 2012 meeting with Suu Kyi, Muslim men in Rakhine State had allegedly raped a Buddhist woman. In response, Rakhine Buddhists attacked the Rohingya, burning their villages; ultimately more than 100,000 Rohingya were displaced into squalid camps. Conditions for the estimated 1.1 million Rohingya in Rakhine State became more precarious. In late 2016 and early 2017, attacks by Rohingya insurgents led to wildly disproportionate responses by the Burmese military, culminating in the systematic expulsion of those 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh amid allegations of horrifying violence.

Suu Kyi has done little to stop the atrocities. Her seemingly callous indifference has felt to many outsiders like a betrayal. How can Suu Kyi, an avatar of human rights for so many years, stand by while her government violently tramples them? Western politicians and media have heaped criticism on her; many of the organizations that championed her cause are rescinding the awards they once rushed to give her. But Suu Kyi has refused to shift course. “The obstinacy that made her into an icon makes her dig in,” a Western diplomat who has worked with her told me. “She likes the adulation and the prizes—but in the end she thinks she’s right and they’re wrong.”

During my eight years in the Obama administration as a deputy national security adviser, I met with Suu Kyi a number of times, in a variety of places: at her family home in Yangon; at the Parliament and her state counselor’s suite in Naypyidaw, the capital; and in Washington, D.C. I believed her commitment to human rights was sincere. But then, Suu Kyi has always been good at making people believe the things she says—at making people believe in her. And many in the West were too eager to anoint her as a savior. Looking back, I realize, she has always contained multitudes—the idealist, the activist, the politician, the cold pragmatist.

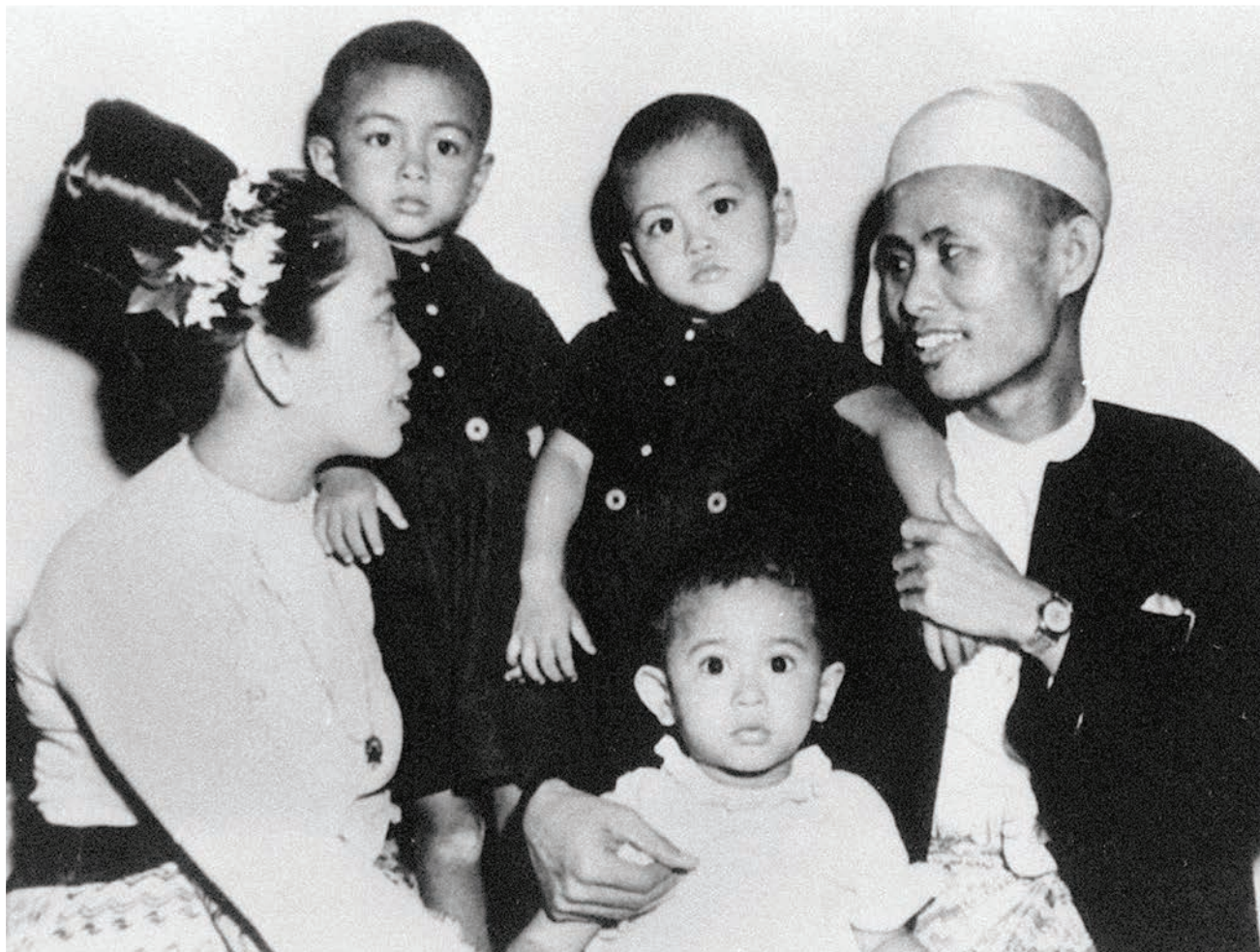
“She always called it a second Burmese revolution,” Ambassador Mitchell said to me, referring to the political resistance that she helped fuel in 1988. “Now that she is in a position of power, what did it mean? What was it all about?”

2 . DISSIDENT DAUGHTER

One key to understanding Aung San Suu Kyi and her appeal in Myanmar is familial: She is her father’s daughter.

Aung San founded the modern Burmese military in 1941. He fought alongside the Japanese to rid Burma of British colonialism, then fought alongside the British to rid Burma of Japanese domination, then negotiated Burma’s freedom from the British. As the country approached independence, he was seen as the only figure with the stature to potentially unite its political factions and

Barack Obama and Aung San Suu Kyi arrive at a press conference at her residence in Yangon. November 14, 2014.



ethnic groups. But in 1947, he was assassinated at the age of 32. Unlike Mao Zedong or Jawaharlal Nehru or Suharto, Aung San would never be diminished by power. As Burma descended into civil war, dictatorship, and grinding poverty, he would remain forever uncorrupted, a symbol of the lost promise of independence.

When her father was killed, Aung San Suu Kyi was 2. She went on to attend school in India, then studied at Oxford, where she met her husband, Michael Aris. She had two sons and settled down in England with plans to get a doctorate in Burmese literature. Her entry into politics was an accident. In the spring of 1988, Suu Kyi traveled back to Yangon to be with her mother, who had just suffered a stroke. At that same time, Burmese students—infuriated by repression and by a monetary policy that had wiped out people’s savings—were organizing underground cells and public protests. The junta responded with force, shutting down the universities and shooting students in the streets. Many of the wounded were taken to the hospital where Suu Kyi had been caring for her mother, giving her a bloody, close-up view of the regime’s brutality.

Learning that the daughter of Burma’s national hero had returned to her homeland, the students—who would become known as “the 88 Generation”—recruited Suu Kyi to their cause. Aung Din was one of the students who met with her at her house on University Avenue. “She was smart,” he told me recently. “She listened. She was completely different from the politicians we’d seen. She didn’t have any agenda. She just loved the country.” She agreed to speak at a rally at Shwedagon Pagoda,

a sprawling complex of Buddhist temples. “We didn’t realize it would be quite this big,” Aung Din said, chuckling as he recalled the scene. Half a million people showed up to see her. Standing in front of her father’s portrait, Suu Kyi called for multiparty democracy and spoke perhaps the most famous words in the history of Burmese politics: “I could not, as my father’s daughter, remain indifferent to all that is going on. This national crisis could in fact be called the second struggle for national independence.” The students started the movement; she became its hero.

The junta cracked down. Students were beaten and rounded up, and some were killed. In April 1989, Aung Din was arrested and put into solitary confinement. Meanwhile, Suu Kyi quickly took to her role as a principled opponent of the regime. During the run-up to an election that the junta permitted in 1990, she gave thousands of speeches around the country. In the town of Danubyu, a line of soldiers cocked their weapons, pointed them at her, and commanded her to leave. She kept walking toward the soldiers even after they had been given the order to fire, demanding that she be allowed to pass. The soldiers stood down. The daughter of Aung San would not be martyred.

Suu Kyi (front center) at age 2, in 1947, with her father, Aung San; her mother, Daw Khin Kyi; and her brothers. Her father was assassinated later that year.

The NLD won the 1990 election in a landslide, but the junta ignored the results. Over the next two decades, Suu Kyi spent most of her days under house arrest at 54 University Avenue, where her mother had lived until her death in 1988. The military ran propaganda campaigns against her, painting her as a prostitute and a tool of the West. In Myanmar, where even saying her name was for a long time a crime, people called her “The Lady.” Beyond Myanmar’s borders, she acquired a mystique that grew out of her self-sacrifice: She refused repeated offers from the military to let her return to England. With the help of the internet, pro-democracy activists used the template of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa to build what one Burmese intellectual calls an “organizational superstructure” around her.

Derek Mitchell first met her in 1995, when he was working for the National Democratic Institute, an international nonprofit. He sat in her house, nestled on the shore of Inya Lake, a peaceful body of water ringed by the homes of prominent people—including, in those days, Ne Win, the military dictator who had ordered Suu Kyi’s imprisonment. “We were interested in what she was interested in, which was democracy,” Mitchell told me. “She made us feel like we were a part of her movement, and you got a sense of this incredibly strong person holding up an incredibly sad, broken country,” he recalls. “So I think a lot of people came away feeling, *How can we help her? We have to help her.*”

“Don’t forget us,” Suu Kyi told him. “There’s a light shining on me because I was just released, but then it will fade.”

She was right. The rising democratic tide of the 1990s did not reach Myanmar. In 1999, her husband died of cancer in Britain. The junta denied his dying wish to visit her, and she refused to leave her country to be with him. She was placed back under house arrest, often in extreme isolation. During another of her brief releases, in 2003, the junta unleashed a mob of more than 1,000 men to engulf her motorcade. She narrowly escaped violence that killed dozens of people, but was again imprisoned.

Through the ’90s and 2000s, Suu Kyi lost her family, her freedom, and any semblance of normalcy. She had no way of knowing whether her story would have a happy ending. She had every reason to fear that the military her father had founded would end her life. But she leaned on an inner fortitude. She once explained how central her father was to this strength, saying, “I would come down at night and walk around and look up at his photograph and feel very close to him ... *It’s you and me, Father, against them.*”

SHE WOULD LOOK
UP AT HER FATHER’S
PHOTOGRAPH
AND THINK: *IT’S
YOU AND ME, FATHER,
AGAINST THEM.*

In November 2010, as the junta took the first tentative steps toward enhancing its popular standing at home and improving relations with the United States and the West, Suu Kyi was once again released from house arrest. She remained wary. When Kevin Rudd, who was then Australia’s foreign minister, traveled to see her, she told him that she wouldn’t campaign for a seat in Parliament unless the Burmese government provided assurances that her security would be guaranteed, which it subsequently did, in writing. “She was petrified that she’d be killed,” Rudd told me recently. But she ran anyway, and won.

3 .

OPPOSITION LEADER

“Well, what is it you want to say to me?” Aung San Suu Kyi asked with a distinct chill. It was the summer of 2013, and I had come to Myanmar carrying a letter from President Obama. The crisp white envelope sat, unopened, on a table between us. We were in Naypyidaw, sitting on couches in an anteroom of the Burmese Parliament. As the leader of the opposition in Parliament, she was unhappy that Obama had welcomed Thein Sein, then the president of Myanmar, to the Oval Office. One purpose of my visit was to reassure her that the Obama administration’s policy was still focused on bolstering democracy, whose successful future in Myanmar she—and most Burmese—believed was dependent on her.

Myanmar was in transition. The junta’s decision to open up the country was related to events and trends that went beyond Suu Kyi and the Western sanctions aimed at supporting her: In 2008, Cyclone Nargis had killed tens of thousands of people and exposed the ineptitude of the government; the relative prosperity of Southeast Asian neighbors such as Singapore and Vietnam suggested that connection to the outside world was better than isolation; and public resentment of Myanmar’s dependence on China was putting pressure on the regime.

But Thein Sein was liberalizing the country faster than expected—perhaps even faster than the military intended. By early 2012, most of Myanmar’s political prisoners had been released, and exiles had been welcomed home. The government was beginning to respect free-speech rights, as well as the freedom to assemble and to form unions. A peace process with more than a dozen separate ethnic insurgencies was on the cusp of yielding cease-fires. In response, the U.S. and other countries had begun to lift sanctions. “Part of Suu Kyi’s anger with Thein Sein,” Richard Horsey, a Myanmar-based political analyst, told me recently, was that “he was doing all the things that she’d imagined she should be doing. *She* was going to be the person who brought about the rapprochement with the West. *She* was going to be the one who did all the reform—and then suddenly she found there was this guy doing it and getting a lot of credit for it.”

A glaring exception to this democratic progress was the government’s handling of the Rohingya. Before my 2013 meeting with Suu Kyi, I had met with U Soe Thein, the president’s closest adviser. When I pressed him on the Rohingya, he detailed the government’s steps to reduce tensions, permit humanitarian access for groups such as Doctors Without Borders, and allow

individuals to apply for citizenship—but the government would issue citizenship cards only to those who stopped calling themselves Rohingya, and few would do that. “The situation is very complicated,” U Soe Thein told me. “We aren’t going to change the views of the local Rakhine or the people in Burma.”

In my meeting with Suu Kyi, I told her that the Obama administration still supported a full transition to democracy, as well as amendments to the constitution to restore civilian control of the military. But I emphasized the importance of the ongoing peace process with the ethnic groups and told her that the U.S. was concerned about the plight of the Rohingya. “We will get to those things,” she said. “But first must come constitutional reform.” To her, progress on human rights was inseparable from her core agenda. “We cannot have human rights without democracy,” she insisted.

In formal meetings, Suu Kyi’s whole body seemed to reflect her stoic discipline; she sat with ramrod posture and moved with care, as though conserving energy. But when the conversation shifted toward small talk she relaxed, smiled easily, and became a charming host, talking warmly about the Obama family’s dogs. “I am sure they are more behaved than my own dog,” she said. Suu Kyi loves pets and pop culture with the intensity of someone long denied simple pleasures. She was happy that Ambassador Mitchell and I had brought along a DVD she had requested: *Glory*, the underdog story of an all-black regiment during the United States’ Civil War.

Suu Kyi was one of the few people I met while in government—others include the Queen of England, Raúl Castro, and the Dalai Lama—who made exactly the impression on me I expected them to. Her regal manner, elegant Burmese clothes, and Oxford English, along with the ever-present flower in her hair, lent her a kind of ethereal charisma. She seemed to straddle different worlds—East and West, inexperienced in government yet accomplished, imprisoned and free. Her stubbornness and her flashes of temper only reinforced this: *Given what she’s been through*, I would think, *no wonder she’s angry and stubborn*. Her lack of specificity—her idealism can be platitudinous—allowed others to project their own beliefs onto her, and made them feel that her cause was their own.

4. CANDIDATE

In 2015, I again traveled to Myanmar as an emissary of President Obama; a general election was just a few months away, and I was there to urge the government to hold a credible vote—and to respect the results. In cavernous government buildings, I sat opposite senior Burmese officials in rooms the size of football fields. My first trip to Myanmar had come soon after the Arab Spring, when countries seemed to be shaking off the yoke of autocracy; this time, the Burmese inquired about U.S. relations with Egypt and Thailand—two countries that had recently experienced military coups. President Thein Sein seemed exasperated by my entreaties on behalf of the Rohingya, but like the other ruling-party officials I met with, he committed to respecting the result of an election that was almost certain to go against him.

In her house in Yangon, Aung San Suu Kyi was energized, once again embracing the role of an outsider. For weeks, she’d

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been campaigning across the country. She made no secret of the fact that while her party, the NLD, was running a slate of candidates, she saw the election as being about her. She took a particular interest in the communications role I had played in Obama’s 2008 campaign. “How did you make sure all your people were communicating the same message?” she asked me. Like two campaign strategists, we discussed how to coordinate surrogates.

Suu Kyi’s main concern was whether the United States would call the upcoming elections “free and fair.” From her perspective, the elections could not be free and fair, because the military still refused to reform the constitution. I assured her that we would not refer to them that way—though largely because the Rohingya were still prevented from voting under the 1982 citizenship law.

On election day, the mood in the country was—as David Mathieson, who worked for Human Rights Watch in Myanmar for many years, put it to me—a kind of “Fuck them, we did it!” euphoria. Before the results were even known, people celebrated in the streets. Car horns honked. For the first time in their lives, people cast a consequential vote against the military. The NLD won more than 80 percent of the vote—enough for an outright majority in Parliament but, given the military’s entrenched position and prescribed 25 percent bloc of votes, not enough to reform the constitution. After a futile postelection effort to negotiate constitutional changes that would have allowed Suu Kyi to be president—she remains constitutionally barred from the office by an amendment written specifically with her in mind (it prohibits those with non-Burmese children from being president)—the NLD created the position of state counselor, which granted her what powers the party could. But even those powers were limited: The constitution also prevents civilian control of the military, and leaves the military responsible for the three ministries—Defense, Border, and Home Affairs—that subsequently carried out the attacks on the Rohingya.

Still, Myanmar had its first peaceful transfer of power in more than half a century. It seemed to be a miraculous transition in a world where democratic miracles no longer happen.



5 . STATE COUNSELOR

In the summer of 2016, I once again met with Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw. Now she was one of the officials occupying a cavernous government building, surrounded by the trappings of power. When she became state counselor, the Obama administration urged her to lay out a vision for the country. Instead, she largely retreated into isolation in Naypyidaw. As one of her advisers told me, Suu Kyi's mind-set was: "People will judge us for what we do, not what we say." She launched a peace process modeled on her father's efforts to unite the ethnic groups—cease-fires that would lead to negotiations and, ultimately, a federal system in which each ethnic group had a formal degree of autonomy while still being part of a national union. And she began efforts to reform Myanmar's deeply dysfunctional economy, which had been set up on a command-and-control basis so the military could guard its resources and remain in power. While she'd long been in favor of the U.S. maintaining some sanctions on Myanmar, she had come to recognize that they had a crimping effect on the investment the country needed to reform its economy. I told her that, with her assent, the Obama administration would likely lift the sanctions.

When I said the administration was concerned that the Burmese government's treatment of the Rohingya was both a

humanitarian crisis and a threat to the country's broader transition to democracy, she told me she was appointing a commission, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, to study the issue and make recommendations. "I told Kofi that I wouldn't ask him to do this if I wasn't serious about it," she said. Sounding like the idealistic Aung San Suu Kyi I'd long admired, she also said she wanted to initiate a dialogue between Rohingya women and Buddhist women in Rakhine State. Unlike most of the military officials I'd met, she never referred to the Rohingya as Bengalis. (Neither has she referred to them as "Rohingya" in public, however. She instead calls them "Muslims in Rakhine State.")

As she walked me out of the building, she talked about her workload and how she'd looked to the example of Margaret Thatcher, who worked notoriously long hours at the center of a male-dominated system. She also asked me about the upcoming U.S. election. Hillary Clinton, I assured her, would continue to be focused on Myanmar. "Yes," she said with a somewhat scolding tone. "But you don't know who is going to win."

By the time she visited Washington a few weeks later, in September 2016, the White House had decided to lift the sanctions. During a breakfast at Vice President Joe Biden's residence, she made the case to congressional leaders that Myanmar "could stand on our own." Watching her, I saw deft political skill—she

Suu Kyi at a ceremony marking the 100th birthday of her father, the hero of Burmese independence. February 13, 2015.

6 . F A D E D I C O N

asked Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell about his horses, and Representative Joe Crowley of New York about his mother. Yet she spoke icily to Senator Bob Corker, from Tennessee, about a U.S. decision to publicly chide Myanmar for its poor handling of child trafficking. “We will take care of our own children, Senator,” she concluded, after a long lecture. She wanted Western support, but she was adamant about national sovereignty.

The U.S. decision to lift sanctions was controversial; some people have blamed it for the escalation of violence involving the Rohingya. In October, the newly established Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked three Burmese border posts, killing nine police officers, and raising fears of further attacks. The military—which had been caught unawares—responded with brute force, displacing some 30,000 Rohingya. Lifting the sanctions “gave a real sense of impunity to the military,” Sarah Margon, who runs the Washington, D.C., office for Human Rights Watch, told me. Others, such as Wai Wai Nu, the Rohingya activist, have told me the same thing.

I understand this argument, but I’m skeptical that sanctions are ever an effective deterrent. I have come to believe that sanctions are generally overused by Washington; the bad guys know how to evade them, so they hurt only the wrong people. In Myanmar, this means bad actors thrive in the dark economy of trading drugs, rubies, and jade while the broader public stagnates in a sclerotic economy that can’t attract investment. Moreover, a Myanmar that is economically stymied by the U.S. is more likely to fall into the arms of China, which won’t raise any human-rights concerns about the Rohingya.

In August 2017, the commission chaired by Kofi Annan issued a comprehensive set of recommendations—including lifting all restrictions on the Rohingya, and offering them a path to citizenship—that, if implemented, could go a long way toward improving the Rohingya’s safety and legal standing in Myanmar. But two days after the report was released, ARSA attacked more than 30 police posts, killing another 12 Burmese security personnel; in all, 71 people died. This time the military was ready. “They had nine months to think about what they would do if a bigger attack came,” Richard Horsey, the political analyst, told me. “They decided they would strike back extremely hard, and that if ARSA was going to hide among the villages, then there would just be no villages.” Throughout the fall of 2017, this scorched-earth campaign against largely defenseless Rohingya allegedly included mass rape and sexual assault, extrajudicial executions, and the destruction of hundreds of villages; this was no mere counterinsurgency campaign. Of the 700,000 Rohingya who were driven into overcrowded camps in Bangladesh, 400,000 were children.

It’s possible that the military wanted to embarrass and undermine Suu Kyi, who did not have the formal power to stop the attacks. But Suu Kyi has not shown any empathy for the Rohingya and has taken little action to help them: Her public comments have downplayed the abuses, and she’s allowed herself to become something of a shield for a military that wants to keep the international community out of Myanmar’s affairs. “She has not only failed to protect this population, but she supported the military agenda,” Wai Wai Nu told me. Despite Suu Kyi’s rhetoric on human rights, since becoming state counselor “she has never met with any Rohingya political leaders, even though she knows them very well,” he noted.

One of those leaders is Wai Wai Nu’s father. “Once we are in power,” he said Suu Kyi had told his father years ago, “these things will be solved.”

I returned to Myanmar in January. The impact of the country’s opening to the West was visible in the new glass buildings filling Yangon’s skyline, and in the heavy traffic from the airport. The impact of the Rohingya crisis was evident in the vacancies at the new downtown hotel I stayed in; though economic sanctions have been lifted, news coverage of the country as a place of atrocities has caused Western tourism and investment to dry up. I walked by 54 University Avenue. The house was empty; Suu Kyi lives most of the time in Naypyidaw. Two booths outside the property were manned by a small group of police officers who chatted on folding chairs. Feral dogs roamed the sidewalk. Signs for the NLD were on display, along with a picture of Suu Kyi.

Down the street, in a coffee shop that wouldn’t be out of place in Brooklyn, I met Cheery Zahau, a human-rights activist and an ethnic Chin, a persecuted Christian minority in Myanmar. Though the very fact that we were meeting represented an advance of freedom—a few years ago, our conversation would have been illegal—Cheery Zahau was critical of the pace of liberalization and the lack of protection for the Rohingya. She



complained that the West did not probe beneath Suu Kyi's rhetoric about human rights. "Your government never asked tough questions," she told me. "The EU did not do it. The UN did not do it. We ethnic people did not do it. Nobody." She believes Suu Kyi's main preoccupation has been her own ascent, cloaked in the language of human rights, and that she was now jockeying for power with Than Shwe, the 86-year-old former junta leader who still wields enormous influence. "Than Shwe and Aung San Suu Kyi compete for a chair," she said. "It's not a matter of how to improve things. It's a matter of who gets to sit on that chair and be the boss."

I heard variations of this critique throughout Yangon. The former student leader Aung Din, who had devoted much of his life since 1988 to bringing democracy and human rights to Myanmar's people, told me civil-society organizations that had been key supporters of the NLD could no longer count on the support of Suu Kyi's government.

Aung Zaw, one of Suu Kyi's student bodyguards in 1988, ended up fleeing the country and helped found *The Irrawaddy*, a prominent independent newspaper. Around the time Suu Kyi was elected to Parliament in 2012, he—like many others—returned to the country filled with optimism. That optimism has given way to weariness. "We had much more space during Thein Sein's government," he told me. The previous day, prison sentences for two Reuters journalists who reported on Rohingya massacres had been upheld. (They've since been pardoned as part of a general amnesty.)

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Some say that this backsliding on civil liberties can be attributed to the military reasserting itself and drawing Suu Kyi into protracted political jockeying in the capital city. After imprisoning her in her home for decades, "now they've detained her in Naypyidaw," Aung Zaw joked. Many people close to Suu Kyi speculate that she is quietly negotiating constitutional changes with Than Shwe. But some critics see her as embracing a kind of royalism: Her decision making is centralized, and a tight circle of advisers limits the information that reaches her. More than one person I spoke with suggested that while Nelson Mandela was both a hero and a politician, Suu Kyi is more of a queenlike figure.

On a Monday morning in Naypyidaw, the nearly empty highway from the airport—which yawns to a seemingly impossible 20 lanes—posed a stark contrast to Yangon's clogged arteries. Concrete bleachers lining the road hint at the grand, North Korean-style military parades that the junta once had in mind: The city was built in secret, unveiled in a surprise announcement by the military in 2006.

I met with Thaug Tun, whom Suu Kyi had appointed as both national security adviser and minister for investment and foreign economic relations. A former diplomat, he emphasized that a gradual shift from military to civilian control was happening. Within days, he said, the General Administration Department—a bureaucracy that helps run the country down to the village level—would be moved from military to civilian authority, a tangible albeit incremental achievement. Other Suu Kyi advisers made the case to me that she'll be in a stronger position to advance her agenda after the 2020 Burmese election, so she's biding her time until then.

I asked Thaug Tun about the Rohingya. They would be welcomed back from the camps, he said, but would have to prove

A portrait of Suu Kyi's father hangs in a coffee shop in Yangon, at a time when the ruling military junta had made such images illegal. January 1, 2009.



that they are from Myanmar. “You have the same issue in the southern United States,” he said. “If they want to come, it has to be an orderly process ... In Texas they say, ‘We need this wall because we can’t have them all coming in, but we need some of them to come in and work.’”

This wasn’t the only creative interpretation I heard about what is happening in Rakhine State. When I sat down with Aung Tun Thet, an economist Suu Kyi appointed in 2018 to yet another commission investigating the Rohingya crisis, he called allegations of atrocities “only allegations based on anecdotes from the refugees in Bangladesh.” This ignores the fact that the UN and other organizations had to rely on anecdotes because the government of Myanmar denied access to Rakhine State. “The issue is a complex one and not a black-and-white case,” he said. “The crisis began with the armed attacks by the terrorist group ARSA, and the response of the security forces which resulted in the mass movement into Bangladesh.”

The government official responsible for managing the repatriation of the Rohingya is Win Myat Aye, the minister of social welfare, relief, and resettlement. We sat in a large room featuring a mural that depicted a goddesslike figure in a gold helmet pulling a young girl from a stormy sea. The minister told me the government of Myanmar is committed to taking back the refugees. But then he listed the obstacles he faced: Some of the Rakhine people don’t want the Muslims to come back, he said; relations with Bangladesh are strained; only two reception centers are in operation. Thus far, a mere 200 Rohingya have returned. When I pressed him on the insecurity that awaited the rest, he spoke of the need for “social cohesion” and “economic development.” When I asked about the scale of the challenge—resettling hundreds of thousands of displaced people—he seemed overwhelmed, and broke from his talking points. “We are always trying our best,” he said, pointing out the work of his office during natural disasters such as floods and storms. “When we meet with the Muslims, these people are our friends.”

I walked out into a silent and largely empty parking lot. Naypyidaw can be eerily quiet; the powerful are out of sight, tucked away in ministry buildings and mansions built by the generals. The chilling truth is that the moral stain of the ethnic cleansing may prompt international condemnation, but it hasn’t caused Suu Kyi to pay much of a price at home or to alter her approach to politics. Indeed, I could see her logic: proceed cautiously, court the old guard, get the military comfortable with civilians running the government, create a broader base for economic growth, don’t rock the boat. Aung Zaw cautioned me against reading too much into the dissatisfaction with Suu Kyi in urban areas, because she maintains deep support in the countryside. “Outside of the cities,” he said, “people are patient.”

As her decades of resistance showed, Aung San Suu Kyi is more than capable of being patient.

Whether or not Suu Kyi has changed, the world around her has. Democratizing Myanmar “would have been easier two decades ago,” says Thaug Tun. He’s right. Twenty years ago, democracy was on the march, authoritarian China wasn’t yet flexing its muscles, neighboring India hadn’t turned decisively to Hindu nationalism, a liberal United States was the sole underwriter of the international order, terrorism was a peripheral threat, and the Pandora’s box of social media had not yet been opened.

Chinese influence in Myanmar is growing. One of China’s biggest projects—part of its signature Belt and Road Initiative—is the construction of a deep-sea port on the coast of Rakhine State. China’s ambitions for Myanmar also feature oil and gas pipelines

to feed its insatiable energy needs. One of the pipelines cuts right through Rakhine State—suggesting an incentive for the Burmese military’s aggressiveness against the people living there.

The Rohingya crisis presents an opportunity for China. As Myanmar faces Western condemnation, it will become more reliant on China for investment, and for protection at the UN. “If we are rejected by our friends from the West,” Thaug Tun told me, “then we will have to look elsewhere.” China also offers an autocratic model for dealing with Muslim minorities, justifying poor treatment on counterterrorism grounds: Reportedly at least 1 million Uighurs—a Turkic, predominantly Muslim minority—are being held in what the Chinese government calls “counterextremism training centers” but one UN panel has called “something resembling a massive internment camp,” in Xinjiang province.

If China represents unbridled authoritarianism, Facebook has spread the perils of unbridled openness. In Yangon, I met with Jes Kaliebe Petersen, a Danish entrepreneur who works in the emerging Burmese tech sector. He explained how telecommunications reform in 2014 transformed Myanmar, which leapfrogged from minimal internet access to almost 90 percent penetration in less than five years. People don’t have computers, so the internet is accessed almost entirely through the Facebook app on phones. The result has been an explosion of hate speech. Imagine living with little access to nonstate media, and then suddenly believing you had access to everything—only the information is sensationalist fearmongering, much of it false, driven into your feed by an algorithm. Petersen said every minority group has been targeted, particularly the Rohingya.

Looking back, I agonize over whether the Obama administration could have done more to prevent the escalation that has taken place in Rakhine State. Doing so makes me sympathetic to the paucity of good options available to the current White House: While levying punitive measures will only push Myanmar closer to China, engaging more deeply with the current government risks rewarding it. But President Donald Trump hasn’t been engaged at all; he has said nothing publicly about Myanmar or the Rohingya, nor has he spoken with Suu Kyi. His rhetoric about Muslims and illegal immigration echoes what you hear in Naypyidaw, and his closed door to refugees undercuts U.S. leadership in resettling displaced peoples. The Burmese

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national security adviser, echoing his American counterpart, John Bolton, dismisses the International Criminal Court, a potential source of leverage against perpetrators of ethnic cleansing. The ICC, he told me, “should not apply to the U.S., Israel, or Myanmar.”

Nationalism, the spread of authoritarianism, an illiberal American administration, fears of terrorism, a society ravaged by social media—as these roiling currents swirl around Myanmar, Suu Kyi has been unwilling to rise above them. In June, she met with Viktor Orbán, the autocratic leader of Hungary, publicly allying with him on the challenge of managing Muslim immigration.

7. THE FUTURE OF MYANMAR?

Some seven years after I first met her, I’m left with a question: What does Aung San Suu Kyi want?

There is no doubt that she wants to be the president of Myanmar; she wants to sit in the chair. But why? One answer is that she just wants power over a Buddhist Burma—to claim her rightful inheritance as Aung San’s daughter, to realize her destiny as the heiress who has sacrificed for the throne; democracy, in this view, is just a means to realizing a personal ambition. Acting on behalf of the Rohingya could imperil that goal by undermining her political standing.

A more charitable answer is that she truly does want to transform the country into a democracy—to restore civilian control over the military, to make peace among the ethnic groups, to build a country where people’s lives steadily improve and where ethnic cleansing is unthinkable—and that requires patience and unsavory compromises.

Both answers, I believe, are accurate. In my encounters with her over the years, I have seen both the idealism she embodies and her will to power. I can recall a woman who spoke of the imperative of national reconciliation; who stressed nonviolence and dialogue; who insisted that she was not an icon, merely a politician trying to lead a political party in a messy, emerging democracy—the woman who asked for a DVD of *Glory*, a story of tragic heroism in pursuit of freedom and equality. I can also recall a woman who had a persistent habit of steering the conversation back to her own ambitions; who easily discarded old liberal allies who had stood by her while she was imprisoned; whose rhetoric about human rights and the rule of law was often gauzy and laced with the language of sovereignty—the woman who, the last time we talked, told me she was interested in *The Crown*, the drama about the life of the British monarch.

David Mathieson, who supported her for years at Human Rights Watch, told me that Suu Kyi’s fall from grace offers a lesson about resting all of our hopes in one individual—the weight of a country is too heavy to place on one person’s shoulders, no matter how alluring her story. This rings true to me, and speaks to a failure by many of us in the West, who are guilty of sometimes viewing political dilemmas in complicated countries as simple morality plays with a single star at the center. But that doesn’t absolve Suu Kyi of the stark betrayal of what she once wrote: “Fear of losing

power corrupts those who wield it, and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.”

The situation in Myanmar is not hopeless, but it depends on investing our aspirations in more than one person. I believe that what Suu Kyi once embodied now resides in those who have picked up her torch. Zin Mar Aung, an NLD parliamentarian and former political prisoner who spent nine years in solitary confinement, still believes Suu Kyi’s example can be a “message for the next generation ... With all of the conflicts in our country’s history, we don’t want to solve the problems using force.” Activists are more critical, but have a similar perspective. Suu Kyi “is not consistent with what she was saying; she’s not following her own words. That breaks our heart,” a young activist named Thinzar Shunlei Yi told me. “And we now, internalizing her words, cannot accept it. We truly think that somebody who had strong principles, who kept on going whatever the situation—that’s how we are doing. That’s how, as an advocate, as a human-rights defender, we have to be.”

Nearly everyone I spoke with said Myanmar had been traumatized by more than half a century of repression—trauma from which it would take a long time to heal. “Every generation since independence is worse off than the one before,” the historian Thant Myint-U told me. “That’s a tremendous psychological burden.” Another pro-democracy activist told me that after 1988, “people died inside”; they became, she said, “small mice in a laboratory.” We should not underestimate the damage that such enduring oppression might have done to Suu Kyi herself, as many people I spoke with in Myanmar suggested sotto voce.

The best scenario would have Suu Kyi spending her remaining years as a bridge to an imperfect yet more developed, and less traumatized, democracy and society. This will not be easy—not at a moment when the world is being overwhelmed by authoritarianism and tribalism; not in a country that has already been divided, manipulated, and bludgeoned by tribal appeals for generations. I asked Cheery Zahau, the human-rights activist, what she thought the future held for Myanmar. She told me about how deeply rooted the pain is, how it could even lead the Chin Christian minority she is a part of to turn on a Muslim minority.

“Some Chin pastor called me,” she recounted, “and he said, ‘Cheery, why are you so supportive of the Rohingya? They are Muslims.’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, they are human beings first of all.’ And he said, ‘But the Muslims kill Christians in Syria.’”

She paused, letting this sink in. “What do these two things have to do with each other—ISIS killing Christians in Syria, and the Rohingya being poor in their village?” Her voice rose in anger.

Nine months pregnant, she ran a hand over her stomach. “As a society, we really need to heal ourselves ... We are so traumatized” by ethnic division, “or just because we have different political aspirations, or just because we have a different faith, or language, or culture ... For Burman people like Aung San Suu Kyi or 88 people, they have been oppressed; they’ve been traumatized because they want a different political system. And a large, large population of this country is traumatized from poverty ... So all of us have this trauma, and we have not healed. And this is why, for me, human rights is so important as a pathway to improve and heal the society.”

A younger Aung San Suu Kyi would have agreed with that. If the current one does, she will no longer say so. **A**

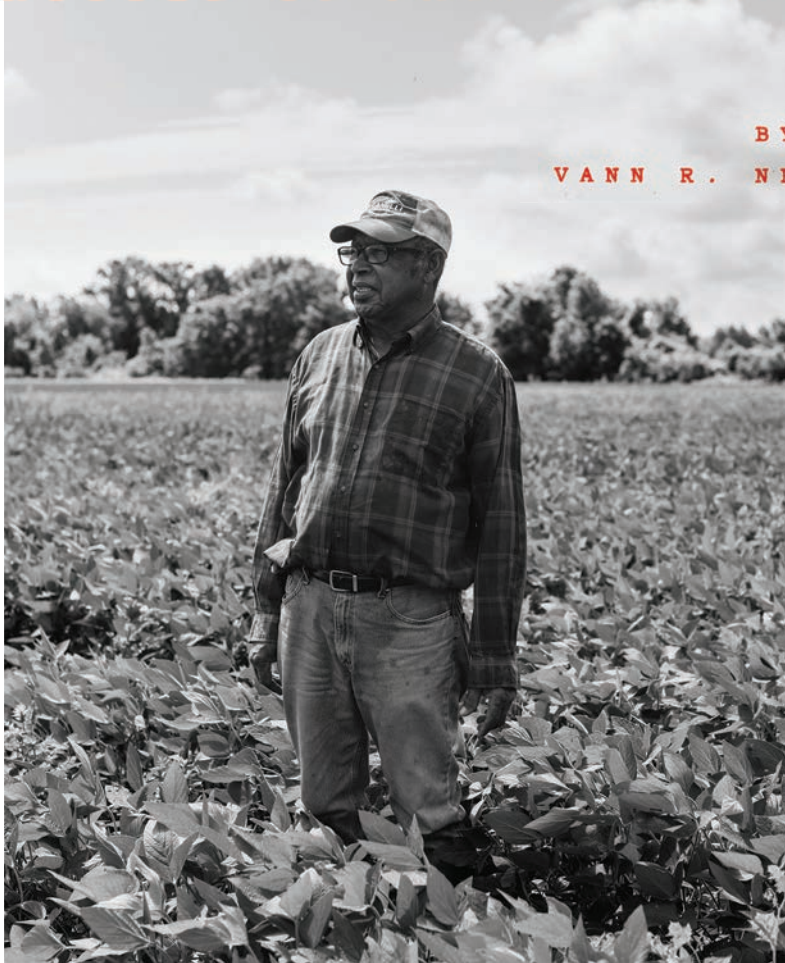
Ben Rhodes is a co-host of Pod Save the World, a foreign-policy podcast, and the author of The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House.



This Land Was Our Land

HOW NEARLY 1 MILLION BLACK FARMERS
WERE ROBBED OF THEIR LIVELIHOOD

BY
VANN R. NEWKIRK II



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ZORA J. MURFF

I. WIPED OUT

“You ever chop before?” Willena Scott-White was testing me. I sat with her in the cab of a Chevy Silverado pickup truck, swatting at the squadrons of giant, fluttering mosquitoes that had invaded the interior the last time she opened a window. I was spending the day with her family as they worked their fields just outside Ruleville, in Mississippi’s Leflore County. With her weathered brown hands, Scott-White gave me a pork sandwich wrapped in a grease-stained paper towel. I slapped my leg. Mosquitoes can bite through denim, it turns out.

Cotton sowed with planters must be chopped—thinned and weeded manually with hoes—to produce orderly rows of fluffy bolls. The work is backbreaking, and the people who do it maintain that no other job on Earth is quite as demanding. I had labored long hours over other crops, but had to admit to Scott-White, a 60-something grandmother who’d grown up chopping, that I’d never done it.

“Then you ain’t never worked,” she replied.

The fields alongside us as we drove were monotonous. With row crops, monotony is good. But as we toured 1,000 acres of land in Leflore and Bolivar Counties, straddling Route 61, Scott-White pointed out the demarcations between plots. A trio of steel silos here. A post there. A patch of scruffy wilderness in the distance. Each landmark was a reminder of the Scott legacy that she had fought to keep—or to regain—and she noted this with pride. Each one was also a reminder of an inheritance that had once been stolen.

Drive Route 61 through the Mississippi Delta and you’ll find much of the scenery exactly as it was 50 or 75 years ago. Imposing plantations and ramshackle shotgun houses still populate the countryside from Memphis to Vicksburg. Fields stretch to the horizon. The hands that dig into black Delta dirt belong to people like Willena Scott-White, African Americans who bear faces and names passed down from men and women who were owned here, who were kept here, and who chose to stay here, tending the same fields their forebears tended.

But some things have changed. Back in the day, snow-white bolls of King Cotton reigned. Now much of the land is green with soybeans. The farms and plantations are much larger—industrial operations with bioengineered plants, laser-guided tractors, and crop-dusting drones. Fewer and fewer farms are still owned by actual farmers. Investors in boardrooms throughout the country have bought hundreds of thousands of acres of premium Delta land. If you’re one of the millions of people who have a retirement account with the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association, for instance, you might even own a little bit yourself.

TIAA is one of the largest pension firms in the United States. Together with its subsidiaries and associated funds, it has a portfolio of more than 80,000 acres in Mississippi alone, most of them in the Delta. If the fertile crescent of Arkansas is included, TIAA holds more than 130,000 acres in a strip of counties along the Mississippi River. And TIAA is not the only big corporate landlord in the region. Hancock Agricultural Investment Group manages more than 65,000 acres in what it calls the “Delta states.” The real-estate trust Farmland Partners has 30,000 acres in and around the Delta.

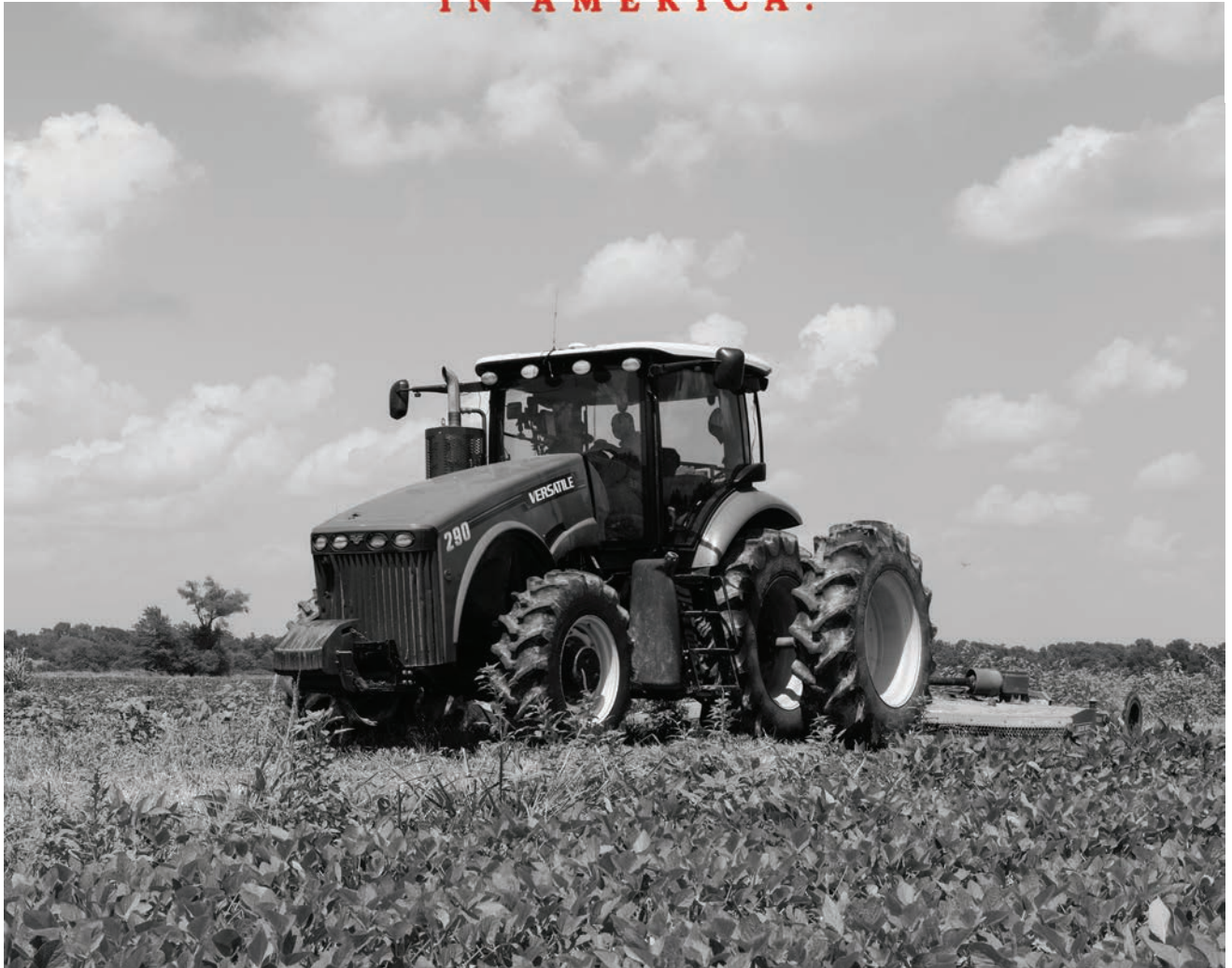
AgriVest, a subsidiary of the Swiss bank UBS, owned 22,000 acres as of 2011. (AgriVest did not respond to a request for more recent information.)

Unlike their counterparts even two or three generations ago, black people living and working in the Delta today have been almost completely uprooted from the soil—as property owners, if not as laborers. In Washington County, Mississippi, where last February TIAA reportedly bought 50,000 acres for more than \$200 million, black people make up 72 percent of the population but own only 11 percent of the farmland, in part or in full. In Tunica County, where TIAA has acquired plantations from some of the oldest farm-owning white families in the state, black people make up 77 percent of the population but own only 6 percent of the farmland. In Holmes County, the third-blackest county in the nation, black people make up about 80 percent of the population but own only 19 percent of the farmland. TIAA owns plantations there, too. In just a few years, a single company has accumulated a portfolio in the Delta almost equal to the remaining holdings of the African Americans who have lived on and shaped this land for centuries.

This is not a story about TIAA—at least not primarily. The company’s newfound dominance in the region is merely the topsoil covering a history of loss and legally sanctioned theft in which TIAA played no part. But TIAA’s position is instrumental in understanding both how the crimes of Jim Crow have been laundered by time and how the legacy of ill-gotten gains has become a structural part of American life. The land was wrested first from Native Americans, by force. It was then cleared, watered, and made productive for intensive agriculture by the labor of enslaved Africans, who after Emancipation would come to own a portion of it. Later, through a variety of means—sometimes legal, often coercive, in many cases legal *and* coercive, occasionally violent—farmland owned by black people came into the hands of white people. It was aggregated into larger holdings, then aggregated again, eventually attracting the interest of Wall Street.

Owners of small farms everywhere, black and white alike, have long been buffeted by larger economic forces. But what happened to black landowners in the South, and particularly in the Delta, is distinct, and was propelled not only by economic change but also by white racism and local white power. A war waged by deed of title has dispossessed 98 percent of black agricultural landowners in America. They have lost 12 million acres over the past century. But even that statement falsely consigns the losses to long-ago history. In fact, the losses mostly occurred within living memory, from the 1950s onward. Today, except for a handful of farmers like the Scotts who have been able to keep or get back some land, black people in this most productive corner of the Deep South own almost nothing of the bounty under their feet.

A WAR WAGED BY DEED OF TITLE HAS
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IN AMERICA.



Above: Willena Scott-White's son Joseph White cutting grass at the edge of a field on Scott-family land, Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Previous spread: A sign on a utility pole to deter hunters, near the old Scott-family homestead, Drew, Mississippi; Willena's brother Isaac Daniel Scott Sr. amid soybeans in Mound Bayou.

II. "LAND HUNGER"

Land has always been the main battleground of racial conflict in Mississippi. During Reconstruction, fierce resistance from the planters who had dominated antebellum society effectively killed any promise of land or protection from the Freedmen's Bureau, forcing masses of black laborers back into de facto bondage. But the sheer size of the black population—black people were a majority in Mississippi until the 1930s—meant that thousands were able to secure tenuous footholds as landowners between Emancipation and the Great Depression.

Driven by what W. E. B. Du Bois called "land hunger" among freedmen during Reconstruction, two generations of black workers squirreled away money and went after every available and affordable plot they could, no matter how marginal or hopeless. Some found sympathetic white landowners who would sell to them. Some squatted on unused land or acquired the few homesteads available to black people. Some followed visionary leaders to all-black utopian agrarian experiments, such as Mound Bayou, in Bolivar County.

It was never much, and it was never close to just, but by the early 20th century, black people had something to hold on to. In 1900, according to the historian James C. Cobb, black landowners in Tunica County outnumbered white ones three to one. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there were 25,000 black farm operators in 1910, an increase of almost 20 percent from 1900. Black farmland in Mississippi totaled 2.2 million acres in 1910—some 14 percent of all black-owned agricultural land in the country, and the most of any state.

The foothold was never secure. From the beginning, even the most enterprising black landowners found themselves fighting a war of attrition, often fraught with legal obstacles that made passing title to future generations difficult. Bohlen Lucas, one of the few black Democratic politicians in the Delta during Reconstruction (most black politicians at the time were Republicans), was born enslaved and managed to buy a 200-acre farm from his former overseer. But, like many farmers, who often have to borrow against expected harvests to pay for equipment, supplies, and the rent or mortgage on their land, Lucas depended on credit extended by powerful lenders. In his case, credit depended specifically on white patronage, given in exchange for his help voting out the Reconstruction government—after which his patrons abandoned him. He was left with 20 acres.

In Humphreys County, Lewis Spearman avoided the pitfalls of white patronage by buying less valuable wooded tracts and grazing cattle there as he moved into cotton. But when cotton crashed in the 1880s, Spearman, over his head in debt, crashed with it.

Around the turn of the century, in Leflore County, a black farm organizer and proponent of self-sufficiency—referred to as a "notoriously bad Negro" in the local newspapers—led a black populist awakening, marching defiantly and by some accounts bringing boycotts against white merchants. White farmers responded with a posse that may have killed as many as 100 black farmers and sharecroppers along with women and children. The fate of the "bad Negro" in question, named Oliver Cromwell, is uncertain. Some sources say he escaped to Jackson, and into anonymity.

Like so many of his forebears, Ed Scott Sr., Willena Scott-White's grandfather, acquired his land through not much more than force of will. As recorded in the thick binders of family history that Willena had brought along in the truck, and that we flipped through between stretches of work in the fields, his life had attained the gloss of folklore. He was born in 1886 in western Alabama, a generation removed from bondage. Spurred by that same land hunger, Scott took his young family to the Delta, seeking opportunities to farm his own property. He sharecropped and rented, and managed large farms for white planters, who valued his ability to run their sprawling estates. One of these men was Palmer H. Brooks, who owned a 7,000-acre plantation in

Mississippi's Leflore and Sunflower Counties. Brooks was uncommonly progressive, encouraging entrepreneurship among the black laborers on his plantation, building schools and churches for them, and providing loans. Scott was ready when Brooks decided to sell plots to black laborers, and he bought his first 100 acres.

Unlike Bohlen Lucas, Scott largely avoided politics. Unlike Lewis Spearman, he paid his debts and kept some close white allies—a necessity, since he usually rejected government assistance. And unlike Oliver Cromwell, he led his community under the rules already in place, appearing content with what he'd earned for his family in an environment of total segregation. He leveraged technical skills and a talent for management to impress sympathetic white people and disarm hostile ones. "Granddaddy always had nice vehicles," Scott-White told me. They were a trapping of pride in a life of toil. As was true in most rural areas at the time, a new truck was not just a flashy sign of prosperity but also a sort of credit score. Wearing starched dress shirts served the same purpose, elevating Scott in certain respects—always within limits—even above some white farmers who drove into town in dirty overalls. The trucks got shinier as his holdings grew. By the time Scott died, in 1957, he had amassed more than 1,000 acres of farmland.

Scott-White guided me right up to the Quiver River, where the legend of her family began. It was a choked, green-brown gurgle of a thing, the kind of lazy waterway that one imagines to be brimming with fat, yawning catfish and snakes. "Mr. Brooks sold all of the land on the east side of this river to black folks," Scott-White told me. She swept her arm to encompass the endless acres. "All of these were once owned by black families."

III. THE GREAT DISPOSSESSION

That era of black ownership, in the Delta and throughout the country, was already fading by the time Scott died. As the historian Pete Daniel recounts, half a million black-owned farms across the country failed in the 25 years after 1950. Joe Brooks, the former president of the Emergency Land Fund, a group founded in 1972 to fight the problem of dispossession, has estimated that something on the order of 6 million acres was lost by black farmers from 1950 to 1969. That's an average of 820 acres a day—an area the size of New York's Central Park erased with each sunset.





Members of the extended Scott family. From the right: Isaac Daniel Scott Sr. and his wife, Lucy Chatman-Scott; Willena Scott-White; and Willena's son Joseph White, with his daughter, Jade Marie White.

could offer better loan terms to risky farmers than banks and other lenders, and mostly outcompeted private credit. In his book *Dispossession*, Daniel calls the setup “agrigovernment.” Land-grant universities pumped out both farm operators and the USDA agents who connected those operators to federal money. Large plantations ballooned into even larger industrial crop factories as small farms collapsed. The mega-farms held sway over agricultural policy, resulting in more money, at better interest rates, for the plantations themselves. At every level of agrigovernment, the leaders were white.

Major audits and investigations of the USDA have found that illegal pressures levied through its loan programs created massive transfers of wealth from black to white farmers, especially in the period just after the 1950s. In 1965, the United States Commission on Civil Rights uncovered blatant and dramatic racial differences in the level of federal investment in farmers. The commission found that in a sample of counties across the South, the FmHA provided much larger loans for small and medium-size white-owned farms, relative to net worth, than it did for similarly sized black-owned farms—evidence that racial discrimination “has served to accelerate the displacement and impoverishment of the Negro farmer.”

Black-owned cotton farms in the South almost completely disappeared, diminishing from 87,000 to just over 3,000 in the 1960s alone. According to the Census of Agriculture, the racial disparity in farm acreage increased in Mississippi from 1950 to 1964, when black farmers lost almost 800,000 acres of land. An analysis for *The Atlantic* by a research team that included Dania Francis, at the University of Massachusetts, and Darrick Hamilton, at Ohio State, translates this land loss into a financial loss—including both property and income—of \$3.7 billion to \$6.6 billion in today's dollars.

This was a silent and devastating catastrophe, one created and maintained by federal policy. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal life raft for agriculture helped start the trend in 1937 with the establishment of the Farm Security Administration, an agency within the Department of Agriculture. Although the FSA ostensibly existed to help the country's small farmers, as happened with much of the rest of the New Deal, white administrators often ignored or targeted poor black people—denying them loans and giving sharecropping work to white people. After Roosevelt's death, in 1945, conservatives in Congress replaced the FSA with the Farmers Home Administration, or FmHA. The FmHA quickly transformed the FSA's programs for small farmers, establishing the sinews of the loan-and-subsidy structure that undergirds American agriculture today. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy's administration created the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, or ASCS, a complementary program to the FmHA that also provided loans to farmers. The ASCS was a federal effort—also within the Department of Agriculture—but, crucially, the members of committees doling out money and credit were elected locally, during a time when black people were prohibited from voting.

Through these programs, and through massive crop and surplus purchasing, the USDA became the safety net, price-setter, chief investor, and sole regulator for most of the farm economy in places like the Delta. The department

In Sunflower County, a man named Ted Keenan told investigators that in 1956, local banks had denied him loans after a bad crop because of his position with the NAACP, where he openly advocated for voting rights. The FmHA had denied him loans as well. Keenan described how Eugene Fisackerly, the leader of the White Citizens' Council in Sunflower County, together with representatives of Senator James Eastland, a notorious white supremacist who maintained a large plantation there, had intimidated him into renouncing his affiliation with the NAACP and agreeing not to vote. Only then did Eastland's man call the local FmHA agent, prompting him to reconsider Keenan's loan.

A landmark 2001 investigation by the Associated Press into extortion, exploitation, and theft directed against black farmers uncovered more than 100 cases like Keenan's. In the 1950s and '60s, Norman Weathersby, a Holmes County Chevrolet dealer who enjoyed a local monopoly on trucks and heavy farm equipment, required black farmers to put up land as collateral for loans on equipment. A close friend of his, William Strider, was the local FmHA agent. Black farmers in the area claimed that the two ran a racket: Strider would slow-walk them on FmHA loans, which meant they would then default on Weathersby's loans and lose their land to him. Strider and Weathersby were reportedly free to run this racket because black farmers were shut out by local banks.

THOUSANDS OF INDIVIDUAL DECISIONS
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Analyzing the history of federal programs, the Emergency Land Fund emphasizes a key distinction. While most of the black land loss appears on its face to have been through *legal* mechanisms—"the tax sale; the partition sale; and the foreclosure"—it mainly stemmed from *illegal* pressures, including discrimination in federal and state programs, swindles by lawyers and speculators, unlawful denials of private loans, and even outright acts of violence or intimidation. Discriminatory loan servicing and loan denial by white-controlled FmHA and ASCS committees forced black farmers into foreclosure, after which their property could be purchased by wealthy landowners, almost all of whom were white. Discrimination by private lenders had the same result. Many black farmers who escaped foreclosure were defrauded by white tax assessors who set assessments too high, leading to unaffordable tax obligations. The inevitable result: tax sales, where, again, the land was purchased by wealthy white people. Black people's lack of access to legal services complicated inheritances and put family claims to title in jeopardy. Lynchings, police brutality, and other forms of intimidation were sometimes used to dispossess black farmers, and even when land wasn't a motivation for such actions, much of the violence left land without an owner.

In interviews with researchers from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in 1985, Henry Woodard Sr., an African American who had bought land in the 1950s in Tunica County, said he had managed to keep up for years through a combination of his own industry, small loans from the FmHA and white banks, and the rental of additional land from other hard-pressed black landowners. Then, in 1966, the activist James Meredith—whose 1962 fight to integrate Ole Miss sparked deadly riots and a wave of white backlash—embarked on the famous March Against Fear. The next planting season, Woodard recalled, his white lenders ignored him. "I sensed that it was because of this march," he said. "And it was a lady told me—I was at the post office and she told me, she said, 'Henry, you Negroes, y'all want to live like white folks. Y'all don't know how white folks live. But y'all are gonna have to be on your own now.'"

Woodard's story would have been familiar to countless farmers in the Delta. In Holmes County, a crucible of the voting-rights movement, a black effort to integrate the local ASCS committees was so successful that it was subject to surveillance and sabotage by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, an official agency created by Governor J. P. Coleman in 1956 to resist integration. Black landowners involved in running for the committees or organizing for votes faced fierce retaliation. In 1965, *The New Republic* reported that in Issaquena County, just north of Vicksburg, the "insurance of Negroes active in the ASCS elections had been canceled, loans were denied to Negroes on all crops but cotton, and ballots were not mailed to Negro wives who were co-owners of land." Even in the decades after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, formal and informal complaints against the USDA poured out of the Delta.

These cases of dispossession can only be called theft. While the civil-rights era is remembered as a time of victories against disenfranchisement

and segregation, many realities never changed. The engine of white wealth built on kleptocracy—which powered both Jim Crow and its slave-state precursor—continued to run. The black population in Mississippi declined by almost one-fifth from 1950 to 1970, as the white population increased by the exact same percentage. Farmers slipped away one by one into the night, appearing later as laborers in Chicago and Detroit. By the time black people truly gained the ballot in Mississippi, they were a clear minority, held in thrall to a white conservative supermajority.

Mass dispossession did not require a central organizing force or a grand conspiracy. Thousands of individual decisions by white people, enabled or motivated by greed, racism, existing laws, and market forces, all pushed in a single direction. But some white people undeniably would have organized it this way if they could have. The civil-rights leader Bayard Rustin reported in 1956 that documents taken from the office of Robert Patterson, one of the founding fathers of the White Citizens' Councils, proposed a "master plan" to force hundreds of thousands of black people from Mississippi in order to reduce their potential voting power. Patterson envisioned, in Rustin's words, "the decline of the small independent farmer" and ample doses of "economic pressure."

An upheaval of this scale and speed—the destruction of black farming, an occupation that had defined the African American experience—might in any other context be described as a revolution, or seen as a historical fulcrum. But it came and went with little remark.

IV. THE
CATFISH BOOM

World War II transformed America in many ways. It certainly transformed a generation of southern black men. That generation included Medgar Evers, a future civil-rights martyr, assassinated while leading the Mississippi NAACP; he served in a segregated transportation company in Europe during the war. It included Willena's father, Ed Scott Jr., who also served

in a segregated transportation company. These men were less patient, more defiant, and in many ways more reckless than their fathers and grandfathers had been. They chafed under a system that forced them to relearn how to bow and scrape, as if the war had never happened. In the younger Scott's case, wartime service sharpened his inherited land hunger, pushing him to seek more land and greater financial independence, both for himself and for his community. One of his siblings told his biographer, Julian Rankin, that the family's deepest conviction was that "a million years from now ... this land will still be Scotts' land."

Upon his return to the Delta, Scott continued down his father's hard path, avoiding any interface with the FmHA and the public portions of the agri-government system, which by that time had spread its tendrils throughout Sunflower and Leflore Counties.



The official opening of the processing plant for Scott's Fresh Catfish, February 1983. Seated, far left: Ed Scott Jr., founder and owner. Next to Scott: Jim Buck Ross, Mississippi's longtime commissioner of agriculture and commerce.

He leaned on the friendships he and his father had made with local business owners and farmers, and secured credit for growing his holdings from friendly white bankers. Influenced by the civil-rights movement and its emphasis on community solidarity and activism, Scott borrowed from Oliver Cromwell's self-sufficiency playbook too. He used his status to provide opportunities for other black farmers and laborers. "Daddy said that everyone who worked for us would always be able to eat," Willena Scott-White told me. He made sure of more than that. Scott sent relatives' and tenants' children to school, paid for books,

helped people open bank accounts and buy their own land. When civil-rights activists made their way down for Mississippi's Freedom Summer, in 1964, he packed up meals and brought them to rallies.

When Scott-White thinks of her father, who died in 2015, she seems to become a young girl again. With allowances for nostalgia, she recalls a certain kind of country poorness-but-not-poverty, whereby children ran barefoot and worked from the moment they could walk, but ate well, lived in houses with solid floors and tight roofs, and went to high school and college if they showed skill. "We lived in something like a utopia," Scott-White told me. But things changed at the tail end of the 1970s. Plummeting commodity prices forced highly leveraged farmers to seek loans wherever they could find them. Combined with the accelerating inflation of that decade, the beginnings of the farm-credit crisis made farming at scale without federal assistance impossible. Yet federal help—even then, two decades after the Civil Rights Act—was not available for most black farmers. According to a 2005 article in *The Nation*, "In 1984 and 1985, at the height of the farm crisis, the USDA lent a total of \$1.3 billion to nearly 16,000 farmers to help them maintain their land. Only 209 of those farmers were black."

As Rankin tells it in his biography, *Catfish Dream*, Scott made his first visit to an FmHA office in 1978. With the assistance of Vance Nimrod, a white man who worked with the black-owned Delta Foundation, a nonprofit promoting economic advancement for black Mississippians, Scott secured an operating loan for a season of soybeans and rice from the FmHA agent Delbert Edwards. The first time was easy—although, crucially, Nimrod accompanied him to the Leflore County office, in Greenwood. When Scott returned the next year without Nimrod, driving a shiny new truck the way his father used to, Edwards asked where Nimrod was. According to Rankin, Scott told the agent that Nimrod had only come to help secure that first loan; he wasn't a business partner. When Edwards saw Scott's vehicle, he seemed perplexed. "Who told you to buy a new truck?" he asked. Edwards ended up denying the requested loan amount.

At the same time, Edwards and the FmHA were moving to help local white farmers weather the storm, often by advising them to get into raising catfish. Commercial catfish farming was a relatively new industry, and it had found a home in the Delta as prices for row crops crashed and new legislation gave the

USDA power and incentive to build up domestic fish farming. FmHA agents pushed white farmers to convert wide fields on the floodplain into giant catfish ponds, many of which would become contract-growing hubs for Delta Pride Catfish, a cooperative that quickly evolved into a local monopoly. The federal government poured millions of dollars into the catfish boom by way of FmHA loans, many of which were seized on by the largest white landowners, and kept those white landowners solvent. Mississippi became the catfish capital of the world in the 1970s. But the FmHA did not reach out to Scott, nor is there evidence that it supported the ambitions of any black farmers who might have wanted to get into catfish.

Scott decided to get into catfish anyway, digging eight ponds in fields where rice had grown the season before. He found his own catfish stocks



and learned the ins and outs of the industry pretty much on his own. Scott finished digging his ponds in 1981, at which point, according to Rankin, Edwards of the FmHA visited the property and told him point-blank: “Don’t think I’m giving you any damn money for that dirt you’re moving.” The Mississippi FmHA would eventually compel Edwards to provide loans for Scott’s catfish operation for 1981 and 1982. But as court records show, the amount approved was far less than what white catfish farmers usually got—white farmers sometimes received double or triple the amount per acre that Scott did—and enough to stock only four of the eight ponds. (Edwards could not be reached for comment on any of the episodes recounted here.)

Scott’s Fresh Catfish opened in 1983. As a marker outside the old processing shed now indicates, it was the first catfish plant in the country owned by an African American. But discrimination doomed the enterprise before it really began. Without enough capital, Scott was never able to raise fish at the volume he needed. He claimed in court and later to Rankin that he had also been denied a chance to purchase stock in Delta Pride—a requirement to become a contract grower—because he was black. Without access to a cooperative, he had to do the processing and packaging himself, adding to the cost of his product. In 2006, Delta Pride and Country Select Catfish were combined into a new business entity, Consolidated Catfish Producers. When reached for comment, a spokesperson for Consolidated Catfish said that no employee at the new company could “definitively answer” questions about Scott or alleged discrimination against him.

Scott was in his 60s by the time his plant got off the ground. The effort took a toll. He slowly went blind. Arthritis claimed his joints. His heart began to fail. The plant limped quietly through the ’80s and then shut down. Lenders began the process of foreclosing on some of Scott’s cropland as early as 1983. In 1995, the FmHA approved a request from Scott to lease most of his remaining acres. The USDA itself had claimed most of his land by the late 1980s.

The downfall of the Scott catfish enterprise was proof of the strength and endurance of what the federal government would later state could be seen as a federally funded “conspiracy to force minority and disadvantaged farmers off their land through discriminatory loan practices.” The Scotts were not small-timers. They had the kind of work ethic and country savvy that are usually respected around the Delta. When the powers that be finally prevailed over Ed Scott Jr., they had completed something decisive, something that even today feels as if it cannot be undone.

But land is never really lost, not in America. Twelve million acres of farmland in a country that has become a global breadbasket carries immense value, and the dispossessed land in the Delta is some of the most productive in America. The soil on the alluvial plain is rich. The region is warm and wet. Much of the land is perfect for industrialized agriculture.

Some white landowners, like Norman Weathersby, themselves the beneficiaries of government-funded dispossession, left land to their children. Some sold off to their peers, and others saw their land gobbled up by even larger white-owned farms. Nowadays, as fewer and fewer of the children of aging white landowners want to continue farming, more land has wound up in the hands of trusts and investors. Over the past 20 years, the real power brokers in the Delta are less likely to be good ol’ boys and more likely to be suited venture capitalists, hedge-fund managers, and agribusiness consultants who run farms with the cold precision of giant circuit boards.

One new addition to the mix is pension funds. Previously, farmland had never been a choice asset class for large-scale investing. In 1981, what was then called the General Accounting Office (now the Government Accountability Office) released a report exploring a proposal by a firm seeking pension-investment opportunities in farmland. The report essentially laughed off the prospect. The authors found that only about one dollar of every \$4,429 in retirement funds was invested in farmland.

But commodity prices increased, and land values rose. In 2008, a weakened dollar forced major funds to broaden their search for hedges against inflation. “The market in agricultural land in the U.S. is currently experiencing a boom,” an industry analyst, Tom Vulcan, wrote that year. He took note of the recent entry of TIAA-CREF, which had “spent some \$340 million on farmland across seven states.” TIAA, as the company is now called, would soon become the biggest pension-fund player in the agricultural real-estate game across the globe. In 2010, TIAA bought a controlling interest in Westchester Group, a major agricultural-asset manager. In 2014, it bought Nuveen, another large asset-management firm. In 2015, with Nuveen directing its overall investment strategy and Westchester and other smaller subsidiaries operating as purchasers and managers, TIAA raised \$3 billion for a new global farmland-investment partnership. By the close of 2016, Nuveen’s management portfolio included nearly 2 million acres of farmland, worth close to \$6 billion.

Investment in farmland has proved troublesome for TIAA in Mississippi and elsewhere. TIAA is a pension company originally set up for teachers and professors and people in the nonprofit world. It has cultivated a reputation for social responsibility: promoting environmental sustainability and respecting land rights, labor rights, and resource rights. TIAA has endorsed the United Nations-affiliated Principles for Responsible Investment, which include special provisions for investment in farmland, including specific guidelines with regard to sustainability, leasing practices, and establishing the provenance of tracts of land.

The company has faced pushback for its move into agriculture. In 2015, the international nonprofit Grain, which advocates for local control of farmland by small farmers, released the results of an investigation accusing TIAA’s farmland-investment arm of skirting laws limiting foreign land acquisition in its purchase of more than half a million acres in Brazil. The report found that TIAA had violated multiple UN guidelines in creating a joint venture with a Brazilian firm to invest in farmland without transparency. The Grain report alleges that when Brazil tightened laws designed to restrict foreign investment, TIAA purchased 49 percent of a Brazilian company that then acted as its proxy. According to *The New York Times*, TIAA and its subsidiaries also appear to have acquired land titles from Euclides de Carli, a businessman often described in Brazil as a big-time *grileiro*—a member of a class of landlords and land grabbers who use a mix of legitimate means, fraud, and violence to force small farmers off their land. In response to criticism of TIAA’s Brazil portfolio, Jose Minaya, then the head of private-markets asset management at TIAA, told WNYC’s *The Takeaway*: “We believe and know that we

are in compliance with the law, and we are transparent about what we do in Brazil. From a title perspective, our standards are very focused around not displacing individuals or indigenous people, respecting land rights as well as human rights ... In every property that we have acquired, we don't just do due diligence on that property. We do due diligence on the sellers, whether it's an individual or whether it's an entity."

TIAA's land dealings have faced scrutiny in the United States as well. In 2012, the National Family Farm Coalition found that the entry into agriculture of deep-pocketed institutional investors—TIAA being an example—had made it pretty much impossible for smaller farmers to compete. Institutional investment has removed millions of acres from farmers' hands, more or less permanently. "Pension funds not only have the power to outbid smaller, local farmers, they also have the long-term goal of retaining farmland for generations," the report noted.

Asked about TIAA's record, a spokesperson for Nuveen maintained that the company has built its Delta portfolio following ethical-investment guidelines: "We have a long history of investing responsibly in farmland, in keeping with our corporate values and the UN-backed Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI). As a long-term owner, we bring capital, professional expertise, and sustainable farming practices to each farm we own, and we are always looking to partner with expansion-minded tenants who will embrace that approach and act as good stewards of the land." The company did not comment on the history of any individual tract in its Delta portfolio.

But even assuming that every acre under management by big corporate interests in the Delta has been acquired by way of ethical-investment principles, the nature of the mid-century dispossession and its multiple layers of legitimization raise the question of whether responsible investment in farmland there is even possible. As a people and a class, black farmers were plainly targets, but the deed histories of tax sales and foreclosures don't reveal whether individual debtors were moved off the land because of discrimination and its legal tools.

In addition, land records are spotty in rural areas, especially records from the 1950s and '60s, and in some cases it's unclear exactly which records the investors used to meet internal requirements. According to Tristan Quinn-Thibodeau, a campaigner and organizer at ActionAid, an anti-poverty and food-justice nonprofit, "It's been a struggle to get this information." The organization has tried to follow the trails of deeds and has asked TIAA—which manages ActionAid's own pension plan—for an analysis of the provenance of its Delta portfolio. Such an analysis has not been provided.



Grain bins on Scott-family land, in Drew, once used for rice and now for soybeans. The Scott family's farms reflect a larger economic pattern in the Mississippi Delta: the shift away from cotton, once predominant, toward other crops.

What we do know is that, whatever the specific lineage of each acre, Wall Street investors have found a lucrative new asset class whose origins lie in part in mass dispossession. We know that the vast majority of black farmland in the country is no longer in black hands, and that black farmers have suffered far more hardships than white farmers have. The historian Debra A. Reid points out that "between 1920 and 1997, the number of African Americans who farmed decreased by 98 percent, while white Americans who farmed declined by 66 percent." Referring to the cases studied in their 2001 investigation, Dolores Barclay and Todd Lewan of the Associated Press observed that virtually all of the property lost by black farmers "is owned by whites or corporations." The foundation of these portfolios was a system of plantations whose owners created the agrigovernment system and absorbed thousands of small black-owned farms into ever larger white-owned farms. America has its own *grileiros*, and they stand on land that was once someone else's.

EACH BLACK FARMER WHO LEFT

THE REGION REPRESENTED

A TINY WITHDRAWAL FROM ONE SIDE OF A COSMIC

BALANCE SHEET AND A

DEPOSIT ON THE OTHER SIDE.



Clockwise from the left: *Johnny Jackson, a seasonal worker employed by the Scott family; a Roundup sprayer; Willena talking with her brother Isaac—up in the tractor cabin—as he works a field in Mound Bayou. Opposite page: The Scott-family cemetery.*



VI. A DEEPER EXCAVATION

As we drove through the patchwork remnants of the Scotts' land, Willena Scott-White took me to the site of Scott's Fresh Catfish. Gleaming steel silos had turned into rusting hulks. The ponds were thick with weeds and debris. The exterior walls of the plant itself had collapsed. Rusted beams lay atop ruined machinery. Fire ants and kudzu had begun nature's reclamation.

Late in Ed Scott Jr.'s life, as he slipped into Alzheimer's, Willena and his lawyer, Phil Fraas, fought to keep his original hopes alive. In the *Pigford v. Glickman* lawsuit of 1997, thousands of black farmers and their families won settlements against the USDA for discrimination that had occurred between 1981 and the end of 1996; the outlays ultimately reached a total of \$2 billion. The Scotts were one of those families, and after a long battle to prove their case—with the assistance of Scott-White's meticulous notes and family history—in 2012 the family was awarded more than \$6 million in economic damages, plus almost \$400,000 in other damages and debt forgiveness. The court also helped the Scotts reclaim land possessed by the department. In a 1999 ruling, Judge Paul L. Friedman of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia acknowledged that forcing the federal government to compensate black farmers would "not undo all that has been done" in centuries of government-sponsored racism. But for the Scotts, it was a start.

"The telling factor, looking at it from the long view, is that at the time of World War I there were 1 million black farmers, and in 1992 there were 18,000,"

Fraas told me. The settlements stemming from *Pigford* cover only specific recent claims of discrimination, and none stretching back to the period of the civil-rights era, when the great bulk of black-owned farms disappeared. Most people have not pushed for any kind of deeper excavation.

Any such excavation would quickly make plain the consequences of what occurred. During my drive with Scott-White, we traveled through parts of Leflore, Sunflower, and Washington Counties, three of the counties singled out by Opportunity Insights, a Harvard University research group, as among the worst in the country in terms of a child's prospects for upward mobility. Ten counties in the Delta are among the poorest 50 in America. According to new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on all 74,000 U.S. census tracts, four tracts in the Delta are among the lowest 100 when it comes to average life expectancy. More than 30 tracts in the Delta have an average life expectancy below 70. (The national average is 79.) In some Delta counties, the infant mortality rate is more than double the nationwide rate. As if to add gratuitous insult to injury, a new analysis from ProPublica finds that, as a result of the Internal Revenue Service's intense scrutiny of low-income taxpayers, the Delta is audited by the IRS more heavily than any other place in the country. In sum, the areas of deepest poverty and under the darkest shadow of death are the ones where dispossession was the most far-reaching.

The consequences of dispossession had long been predicted. Fannie Lou Hamer, a Sunflower County activist whose 1964 speech to a Democratic National Convention committee galvanized support for the Voting Rights Act, spoke often of the need for land reform as a precondition for true freedom. Hamer's utopian Freedom Farm experiment stressed cooperative landownership, and she said the concentration of land in the hands of a few landowners was "at the base of our struggle for survival." In her analysis, mass dispossession should be seen as mass extraction. Even as the U.S.

government invested billions in white farmers, it continued to extract wealth from black farmers in the Delta. Each black farmer who left the region, from Reconstruction onward, represented a tiny withdrawal from one side of a cosmic balance sheet and a deposit on the other side. This dynamic would only continue, in other ways and other places, as the Great Migration brought black families to northern cities.

This cosmic balance sheet underpins the national conversation—ever more robust—about reparations for black Americans. In that conversation, given momentum in part by the publication of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations” in this magazine in 2014, I hear echoes of Mississippi. I hear echoes of Hamer, the Scotts, Henry Woodard Sr., and others who petitioned the federal government to hold itself accountable for a history of extraction that has extended well beyond enslavement. But that conversation too easily becomes technical. How do we quantify discrimination? How do we define who was discriminated against? How do we repay those people according to what has been defined and quantified? The idea of reparations sometimes seems like a problem of economic rightsizing—something for the quants and wonks to work out.

Economics is, of course, a major consideration. According to the researchers Francis and Hamilton, “The dispossession of black agricultural land resulted in the loss of hundreds of billions of dollars of black wealth. We must emphasize this estimate is

conservative ... Depending on multiplier effects, rates of returns, and other factors, it could reach into the trillions.” The large wealth gap between white and black families today exists in part because of this historic loss.

But money does not define every dimension of land theft. Were it not for dispossession, Mississippi today might well be a majority-black state, with a radically different political destiny. Imagine the difference in our national politics if the center of gravity of black electoral strength had remained in the South after the Voting Rights Act was passed.

Politics aside, how can reparations truly address the lives ruined, the family histories lost, the connection to the land severed? In America, land has always had a significance that exceeds its economic value. For a people who were once chattel themselves, real property has carried an almost mystical import. There’s a reason the fabled promise that spread among freedmen after the Civil War was not a check, a job, or a refundable tax credit, but 40 acres of farmland to call home. The history of the Delta suggests that any conversation about reparations might need to be *more* qualitative and intangible than it is. And it must consider the land.

Land hunger is ineffable, an indescribable yearning, and yet it is something that Americans, perhaps uniquely, feel and understand. That yearning tugged at me hardest as Willena Scott-White rounded out her tour of the fields, the afternoon slipping away. Out among the Scotts’ fields is a clearing with a lone, tall tree. In the clearing is a small cemetery. A handful of crooked, weathered tombstones stand sentinel. This is where Ed Scott Jr. is buried, and where some of Willena’s older siblings now rest. Willena posed for a picture beside her parents’ grave. She told me that this is where her own bones will rest after her work on Earth is done.

“This is *our* land,” she said. 

Vann R. Newkirk II is an Atlantic staff writer. He is the host of a forthcoming Atlantic podcast about Hurricane Katrina.



The The
Quickening Quickening

A story of two births

By LESLIE JAMISON
Photograph by Hannah Whitaker



WHEN YOU were the size of a poppy seed, I sat in the bathroom of a Boston hotel room and peed on a stick I'd bought from an elderly man at a drugstore near Fenway Park. I laid the plastic on the cold tiles and waited for it to tell me if you existed. I wanted you to exist so badly. It had been a year of chipper emails from my fertility app, asking if I'd had sex on the right nights, and a year of sunken hearts whenever I spotted blood: at work, at home, in a sandy bathroom on a chilly beach just north of Morro Bay. Each rusty stain took away the narrative I'd spent the past few weeks imagining—that *this* would be the month I found out I was having a baby. My body kept reminding me that it controlled the story. But then, there you were.

A week later, I sat in a movie theater and watched aliens hatch from their human hosts in a spaceship mess hall. Their dark, glistening bodies broke open rib cages and burst through the torn skin. An evil robot was obsessed with helping them survive. When the captain asked him, "What do you believe in?" the robot said: "Creation." This was just before the captain's chest ripped apart to show its own parasite baby: horrific, beetle-black, newly born.

When a nurse asked me to step on a scale at my first prenatal appointment, it was the first time I had weighed myself in years. Refusing to weigh myself had been one way to leave behind the days I'd spent weighing myself compulsively. Standing on a scale and actually *wanting* to see that I'd gained weight—this was a new version of me. One of the oldest scripts I'd ever heard about motherhood was that it could turn you into a new version of yourself, but that promise had always seemed too easy to be believed. I'd always believed more fully in another guarantee—that wherever you go, there you are.

WHEN I WAS a freshman in college, I walked into my dorm-room closet every morning to step on the scale I kept hidden there. It was embarrassing to starve myself, and so for the ritual of weighing I retracted into the dark, out of sight, tucked into the folds of my musty winter coats. Since my growth spurt at 13, it seemed like I'd been looming over everyone. Being tall was supposed to make you confident, but it just

made me feel excessive. There was too much of me, always, and I was always so awkward and quiet, failing to earn all the space I took up.

In the years since those days of restriction, I have found that usually when I try to articulate this to people—I *felt like I wasn't supposed to take up so much space*—they understand it absolutely or not at all. And if a person understands it absolutely, she is probably a woman.

Those hungry days were full of Diet Cokes and cigarettes and torch songs on Napster; a single apple and a small allotment of crackers each day; long walks through frigid winter nights to the gym and back again; trouble seeing straight

*People would say:
"You don't look pregnant
at all!" They meant it
as a compliment. The female
body is always praised for
staying within its boundaries.*

as dark flecks crowded the edges of my vision. My hands and feet were always cold. My skin was always pale. It was as if I didn't have enough blood to go around.

During my pregnancy, 15 years later, my gums bled constantly. I thought I'd heard a doctor say it was because my body was circulating more blood—four pounds more of it—to satisfy the tiny second set of organs. This extra blood swelled me. It heated me. My veins were feverish highways, thick with that hot red syrup, flooded with necessary volume.

WHEN YOU WERE about the size of a lentil, I flew to Zagreb for a magazine assignment. As our plane banked over Greenland, I ate a huge bag of Cheez-Its and wondered if this was the week your brain was being forged, or your heart. I pictured a heart made of Cheez-Its beating inside me, inside you. Much of that

first trimester was spent in awe and terror: astonished that a tiny creature was being gathered in my inner reaches, petrified that I would somehow knock you loose. What if you died and I didn't know it? I obsessively Googled *miscarriage without bleeding*. I kept my hand over my abdomen to make sure you stayed. You were my bouquet of cells, my soft pit of becoming. I cried when I found out you would be a girl. It was as if you had suddenly sharpened into focus. The pronoun was a body forming around you. I was a body forming around you.

When I told my mom I was flying to Croatia, she asked me to consider staying home. "Take it easy," she said. But she also told me that when she was five months pregnant with my oldest brother, she'd swum the length of a bay in Bari while an elderly Italian man, worried, followed her the whole way in his rowboat.

On our plane to Zagreb, a toddler cried ahead of us, and then another toddler cried behind. I wanted to tell you, *I know these waiters are your people*. I wanted to tell you, *The world is full of stories*: the men in hand-knit yarmulkes who had delayed our takeoff for an hour because they wouldn't sit next to any women; the man across the aisle who'd stabbed himself with a blood-sugar needle right after eating his foil-wrapped square of goulash, who watched the little icon of our plane creep over the dull blue screen of the North Atlantic. Who could know what he was dreaming? What beloved he was flying toward? I wanted to tell you, *Baby, I've seen such incredible things in this life*. You weren't a baby yet. You were a possibility. But I wanted to tell you that every person you'd ever meet would hold an infinite world inside. It was one of the only promises I could make to you in good conscience.

WHEN I WAS starving myself, I kept two journals. One tallied the number of calories I consumed each day. The other described all the food I imagined eating. One notebook was full of what I did; the other was full of what I dreamed of doing. My hypothetical feasts were collages made from restaurant menus and saturated with the minute attention of desperation: not just mac and cheese but *four-cheese* mac and cheese; not just burgers but burgers with melted cheddar and fried eggs; molten chocolate lava cake with ice cream pooling around its gooey heart. Restricting made me fantasize

about the possibility of a life where I did nothing *but* eat. I didn't want to eat normally; I wanted to eat constantly. There was something terrifying about finishing, as if I had to confront that I hadn't actually been satisfied.

In those days, I filled my mouth with heat and smoke and empty sweetness: black coffee, cigarettes, mint gum. I was ashamed of how desperately I wanted to consume. Desire was a way of taking up space, but it was embarrassing to have too much desire—in the same way it had been embarrassing for there to be too much of me, or to want a man who didn't want me. Yearning for things was slightly less embarrassing if I denied myself access to them, so I grew comfortable in states of longing without satisfaction. I came to prefer hunger to eating, epic yearning to daily loving.

But during pregnancy, years later, the ghost of that old skeletal girl sloughed off like a snakeskin. I moved toward chocolate-chip muffins of unprecedented size. At the coffee shop near my apartment, I licked the grease from an almond croissant off my fingers and listened to one barista ask another, "You know that girl Bruno was dating?" She squinted at her cellphone. "I know she's pregnant, but ... what the fuck is she eating? Horses?"

It took me five or six months to show. Before that, people would say: "You don't look pregnant *at all!*" They meant it as a compliment. The female body is always praised for staying within its boundaries, for making even its sanctioned expansion impossible to detect.

WHEN YOU WERE the size of a blueberry, I ate my way through Zagreb, palming handfuls of tiny strawberries at the outdoor market, then ordering a massive slice of chocolate cake from room service back at my hotel, then inhaling a Snickers bar because I was too hungry to wait for the cake to arrive. My hands were always sticky. I felt feral. My hunger was a different land from where I'd lived before.

As you grew from lime to avocado, I ate endless pickles, loving their salty snap between my teeth. I drank melted ice cream straight from the bowl. It was a kind of longing that did not imply absence. It was a longing that belonged. The word *longing* itself traces its origins back to pregnancy. An 1899 dictionary defines it as "one of the peculiar and often whimsical desires experienced by pregnant women."

When you were the size of a mango, I flew to Louisville to give a talk and got so hungry after my daily vat of morning oatmeal that I decided to walk to brunch, and got so hungry on the walk to brunch that I stopped on the way for a snack: a flaky slice of spanakopita that stained its paper bag with islands of oil. By the time I got to brunch, I was so hungry that I couldn't decide between scrambled eggs with biscuits, or sausage links blistered with grease, or a sugar-dusted stack of lemon pancakes, so I got them all.

This endless permission felt like the fulfillment of a prophecy: all those imaginary menus I had obsessively transcribed at 17. Eating was fully permitted now that I was doing it for someone else. I had never eaten like this, like I ate for you.

WHEN I WAS living on crackers and apple slices, I didn't get my period for years. It made me proud not to bleed. The absence lived inside me like a secret trophy. Blood leaking out of me seemed like another kind of excess. Not bleeding was an appealing form of containment. It was also, quite literally, the opposite of fertility. By thinning my body, it was as if I'd vanquished my physical self. Starving myself testified to the intensity of my loneliness, my self-loathing, my simultaneous distance from the world and my hopeless proximity, a sense of being—at once—too much and not enough.

When I got pregnant at the age of 24, a few years after I started getting my period again, I saw the telltale cross on the stick and felt flooded not by fear or wariness—as I'd imagined—but by wonder. I was carrying this tiny potential life. Even as I knew intellectually that I would get an abortion, I still felt a sharp rising lift of awe in my gut. That awe planted something deep inside me, a tether. It said: *Someday you'll be back.*

It was only after I'd gotten the abortion that I started to notice babies on the street. Their little faces watched me from their strollers. They had my number. It wasn't regret. It was anticipation. I'd been magnetized. I didn't want to hold other people's babies; I just knew that I wanted eventually to hold my own—wanted to watch her bloom into consciousness right in front of me, apart from me, beyond me; wanted to be surprised and mystified by a creature who had come from me but was *not* me.

During the year I spent trying to get pregnant, a decade after my abortion,

my friend Rachel told me about watching her infant son have a febrile seizure. Her description of her own terror was humbling. It wasn't something I could fully understand. I'd always resisted the idea that parenting involves a love deeper than any love you've ever felt before, and some part of me wanted to give birth just so I could argue against that belief, just so I could say: *This love isn't deeper, just different.* But another part of me knew it was possible I'd simply become another voice saying: *There is no love as deep as this.*

Once I finally got pregnant, my gratitude was sharpened by the wait. My body had decided to bestow this little purse of organs when it could have just as easily withheld it. This second heartbeat was nothing I could take for granted. After my first ultrasound, I got on the subway and looked at every single passenger, thinking, *You were once curled up inside another person.*

AS YOU GREW to the size of a turnip, then a grapefruit, then a cauliflower, I wanted to build you from joy: summer rainstorms and fits of laughter; the voices of women in endless conversation. With my friend Kyle, I swam naked in a pool at night, under eucalyptus trees shushing in the hot breeze, while your kicks swelled under my skin like waves. With Colleen, I drove to a rickety old house perched on a hill above a post office, where rattling trees tapped our windows. By lamplight, we ate eggs with bright-yellow yolks. She left the sink full of their broken shells, just as she had when we lived together, after both our hearts had been broken.

In Los Angeles, your grandmother had a Cameroonian refugee staying with her. What can I say? This was hardly surprising. It made me clench my fists with longing, how much I wanted you and your grandmother to have a thousand years together in this world, nothing less. My hunger for my mother during pregnancy was like my hunger for fruit, for a second Snickers bar, for the scrambled eggs and the sausage links and the lemon pancakes. There was no bottom to it. She told me she could still remember looking at the snow piled on the branches outside the window of her doctor's office when he told her I would be a girl, as if all her longing had gathered on those branches—impossibly beautiful, utterly ordinary.

I wanted to give you the best parts of my love for your father—how we rented a house in a tiny town in northern



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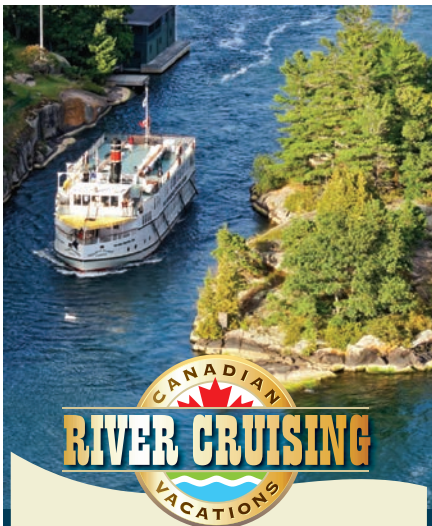


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Connecticut, that summer I was pregnant with you, and lay on a big white bed listening to the wail of the trains and the patter of rain on the creek and imagined it falling on the blue tarp covering the hot-dog stand across the road. We ate hamburgers at a roadside shack and swam in Cream Hill Lake, where the teenage lifeguards almost kicked us out because we weren't members. We barely deserved that deep blue water, those shores thick with trees, those wooden buoys dappled with sunshine. We'd had our whispered resentments, our nights of fighting. But I want you to picture us there: our voices bantering, our laughter entwined. I want you to know you were built from medium-rare meat and late-afternoon light.

WHEN I FINALLY got treatment, it gave me a sudden, liquid thrill to glimpse the diagnosis written on one of my medical forms: *eating disorder*. It was as if there was finally an official name for how I felt—the sense of inadequacy and dislocation—as if the words had constructed a tangible container around those intangible smoke signals of hurt. It made me feel consolidated.

The psychiatrist who diagnosed me wasn't interested in that consolidation. When I told her about being lonely—probably not the first college student to do so—she said, “Yes, but how is starving yourself going to *solve* that?” She had a point. Though I hadn't been trying to solve the problem, only express it, maybe even amplify it. But how to translate these self-defeating impulses into the language of rational actors? I'd failed to justify the disorder with a Legitimate Reason, like failing to supply a parent's note excusing my absence from school.

For 15 years after that appointment, I kept looking for that note. I kept trying to explain myself to that doctor, kept trying to purge my shame about the disorder by listing its causes: my loneliness, my depression, my desire for control. All of these reasons were true. None of them was sufficient. This was what I'd say about my drinking years later, and what I came to believe about human motivations more broadly: We never do anything for just one reason.

The first time I wrote about the disorder, six years after getting help, I thought if I framed it as something selfish and vain and self-indulgent, then I could redeem myself with self-awareness, like

saying enough Hail Marys to be forgiven for my sins. I still thought of the disorder as something I needed to be forgiven for.

When I submitted that early jumbled attempt to a writing workshop, another graduate student raised his hand during the discussion to ask if there was such a thing as too much honesty. “I find it incredibly difficult to like the narrator of this essay,” he said. I found his phrasing amusing, *the narrator of this essay*, as if she were a stranger we could gossip about. It was my first nonfiction class, and I wasn't used to the rules of displacement—all of us pretending we weren't also critiquing one another's lives. After class, the same man who'd found it difficult to like my narrator asked me if I wanted to get a drink. In my head I said, *Fuck you*, but out loud I said, “Sounds great.” The less you liked me, the more I wanted you to.

By getting pregnant, it seemed as if I had finally managed to replace “the narrator of this essay”—a sick girl obsessed with her own pain, difficult to like—with a nobler version of myself: a woman who wasn't destroying her own body, but using her body to make another body she would care for. A stubborn internal voice was still convinced that the eating disorder had been all about the “I,” all about whittling myself to the shape of that tall rail. Now pregnancy promised a new source of gravity: the “you.” Strangers smiled at me constantly on the street.

At my ob-gyn, once a patient was pregnant, she got to ascend to the second floor. I no longer visited the regular gynecological suites on the lower level. I got to glide up an atrium staircase instead, destined for ultrasounds and prenatal vitamins, leaving behind those gonorrhea tests and birth-control prescriptions—as if I were advancing to the next level of a video game, or had earned a ticket to the afterlife.

BY THE TIME you were the size of a coconut, I was audibly huffing my way up the subway stairs. My belly was a 20-pound piece of luggage I carried everywhere. My ligaments stretched and snapped, painful enough to make me gasp. Each evening, my legs were overcome by a maddening fidgeting sensation, something my doctor would call “restless legs syndrome.” At a movie one night, I kept compulsively crossing and recrossing them, unable to hold still, so I left the theater to sit in a bathroom stall for 10 minutes. My legs jerked and stretched as if they were being

commanded by someone else, as if the tiny being inside had already taken control.

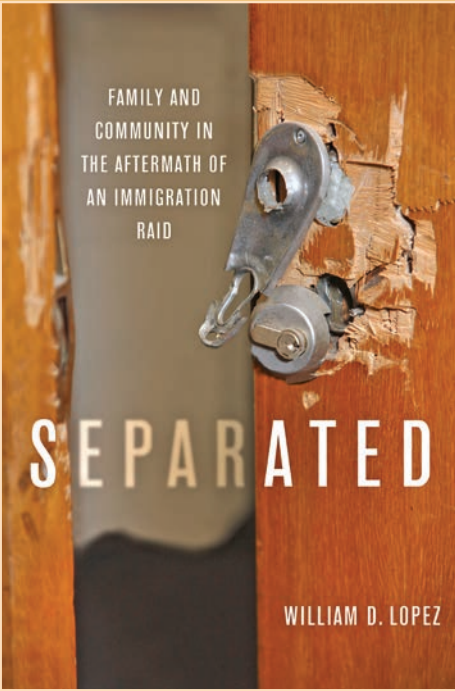
When I was in the middle of a three-month-long cold, my mother chided me for refusing to alter the pace of my life. “I know you don’t want to disrupt your plans,” she told me, “but there will be a point when you won’t have a choice. You will go into labor, and your plans will be disrupted.” It was what I was most afraid of—being disrupted. It was also what I craved more than anything.

In a way, I was grateful for the physical difficulty of my third trimester. It made me feel like I was doing my job. During the first few months, when morning sickness hadn’t shown up, it had been like failing to cry at a funeral. Wasn’t I supposed to feel my boundaries flooded by pregnancy? Wasn’t I supposed to hurt? Wasn’t that

*I’d always resisted the idea
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and some part of me wanted
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deeper, just different.*

Eve’s original punishment? *I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.*

Some part of me craved pain as proof that I was already a good mother, long-suffering, while another part of me wanted to reject hardship as the only possible proof of devotion. I’d been so eager to fall in love with pregnancy as a conversion narrative, promising to destroy the version of myself who equated significance with suffering and replace her with a different woman altogether—someone who happily watched the numbers on



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Our program, one of the oldest, most prestigious and selective in the country, has been placed among the top ten creative writing programs by *The Atlantic* magazine, which ranked our faculty and alumni among the top five. In a room overlooking the Charles River, Robert Lowell once led a seminar in which Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and George Starbuck were students, and more recently Leslie Epstein worked with Ha Jin, Jhumpa Lahiri and Peter Ho Davies, and Robert Pinsky worked with Erin Belieu, Diane Mehta and Carl Phillips. Poetry workshops are now led by Karl Kirchwey, Robert Pinsky, and Nicole Sealey and those in fiction are led by Leslie Epstein, Ha Jin, and Sigrid Nunez.

All admitted students will receive full-tuition funding and a stipend. Thanks to a generous donor, we are able to offer each student the opportunity to travel, live and write for three months anywhere outside of the United States as part of our Global Fellowships Program. At BU, our students have the opportunity to pursue world language study and literary translation, giving our program a truly international reach. You can follow our Global Fellows’ blogs at blogs.bu.edu/world.

It is always hard to measure a student’s—or a writer’s—success in the world, or the value of an MFA program to a writer. But our poetry alumni have won the Whiting Award, the Norma Farber First Book Award, the “Discovery”/The Nation Prize (three times), and the National Poetry Series (twice); our fiction alumni have won the Pulitzer Prize, the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, and the PEN/Faulkner, PEN/Hemingway, and National Book Awards. Our graduates routinely place their work with major trade and nonprofit publishers and some, like Arthur Golden and Sue Miller, have spent a good deal of time on the bestseller lists. In the past decade, we have placed more than twenty of our graduates in tenure-track positions at leading universities, and some have gone on to direct creative writing programs at the University of Michigan, Washington University (St. Louis) and Florida State University.

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the scale grow bigger, who treated herself well, and focused on her baby, and devoted herself wholly to unconflicted calories and virtuous gratitude.

But as it turned out, pregnancy wasn't a liberation from prior selves so much as a container holding every prior version of myself at once. I didn't get to shed my ghosts so fully. It was easy to roll my eyes at people saying, "You don't look pregnant at all," and harder to admit the pride I felt when I heard it. It was easy to call my doctor absurd when she chided me for gaining five pounds in a month (rather than four!), and harder to admit that I'd honestly felt shamed by her in that moment. It was harder to admit the part of me that felt a secret thrill every time a doctor registered concern that I

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one of my medical forms:
eating disorder.*

was "measuring small." This pride was something I'd wanted desperately to leave behind. I worried that it was impeding your growth, which was really just the distillation of a deeper fear—that I would infect you with my own broken relationship to my body, that you would catch it like a dark inheritance.

WHEN YOU WERE the size of a pineapple, I wrote a birth plan. This was part of my birth class, but it was also a species of prophecy: telling the story of a birth before it happened.

The birth-class teacher pointed triumphantly at a model pelvis made of plastic. She said, "People think there's not that much room for the baby's head to pass through. But there's actually *a lot* of room." I squinted at the pelvis. Not *that* much room.



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In a way, we all lived toward that pain. It wasn't just about suffering; it was about knowledge. It was impossible to understand the pain until you'd undergone it. That opacity compelled me. *In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.* The pain had been punishment for eating the apple, for wanting to know. Now the pain itself had become the knowledge. Soon I would become someone who had a birth story. I just didn't know what that story would be. It was understood, of course, that there were no guarantees. Anyone could have a C-section. It cast its shadow across everything. It was what you tried to avoid. The pushing—the *labor*—was what made the delivery real. That's the implicit equation I'd absorbed.

In writing my birth plan, I saved my strongest language for the golden hour. That was what they called the first hour after birth, when your new body would rest against mine. The phrase itself sounded like a chiming bell. If I wanted this golden hour, I was told, I needed to insist on it: *I would like immediate uninterrupted skin-to-skin contact with her until the first feeding is accomplished*, I wrote in

my plan. It was like casting a spell. I would bring you into the world. You would live against my skin. You would eat.

WHEN YOU WERE larger than a honeydew but smaller than a watermelon, the new year brought a blizzard. It was three weeks before my due date. My doctor was worried you were too small, so she had scheduled another growth scan. I trudged through piles of snow to get to her office in Manhattan, wrapping my arms around the swaddled globe of my belly, around a coat that would not zip, and saying, *Mine, mine, mine.* My sense of ownership was sharpened by the icy flurry all around me. It was primal.

At her office, my doctor said it was a funny thing about storms—some people believed they made a woman's water more likely to break. It had to do with the drop in barometric pressure. This seemed like something one midwife might whisper to another in the barn, while the sky filled with clouds, and like a fairy tale it came true that night. I woke at three in the morning, stepped out of bed, and the hot warmth gushed out.

My mother's first birth, with my oldest brother, had also begun this way. It was almost biblical, I told myself: *As it was for the mother, so it shall be for the daughter.* There was a pleasing symmetry.

My birth-class teacher had recommended going back to sleep if my water broke in the middle of the night, because I would need the rest. I did not go back to sleep. I could not even imagine the version of myself that might go back to sleep. Plus, I still seemed to be leaking. I sat on the toilet with my laptop on my legs and felt the amniotic fluid leave my body while I edited an essay about female rage. When I sent it to my editor, I added at the bottom: "PS: I am in labor." By the time we took a cab to the hospital the following afternoon, my body was knotting with pain every few minutes as we headed up that glorious stretch of the highway beside the East River, lined by docks and basketball courts and gleaming skyscrapers looming across the water.

The pain meant my body knew what it needed to do to bring you here. And I was grateful that my body knew, because my mind did not. It was now the body's

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humble servant, begging with its crudest, truest words: *Please do this. I want this more than I've ever wanted anything.*

After we got to the hospital, I labored through the early evening and into the night. A monitor above my bed showed two lines: my contractions, and your heartbeat. My doctor started to get worried, because when the first line spiked, the second plummeted. That wasn't supposed to be happening. Your heartbeat always came back up, my doctor said. But we needed to stop it from dropping. It was supposed to stay between 160 and 110. *Don't drop*, I willed the graph. *Don't drop*. I watched the monitor vigilantly. It was as if I believed I could keep your heart rate above the danger line through sheer force of will. Belief in willpower was another familiar ghost, one of the gospels of my hungry days.

WHEN YOUR HEART RATE stabilized, it felt like we were working together—you and I—as if you'd heard me calling out, as if you'd felt my stubborn insistence that you be okay settle like a sturdy floor beneath you. The contractions were an exploded version of the hot, twisting cramps I'd felt during the nights following my abortion. But really the pain was exactly like everyone had described it: impossible to describe. Someone had told me to picture myself lying on a sandy beach, that each contraction would be a wave washing over me with pain, and in between those waves my job was to soak up as much warmth as I could from the sun. But very little in that delivery room felt like waves, or sand, or sun. I asked for an epidural: a helicopter that would spirit me away from the shore entirely. Approximately ten thousand minutes passed between my saying "I'd like an epidural" and actually getting one.

Early in my pregnancy, your father told me that his first wife had been determined to have a natural birth. "With you," he said, "I imagine it being more like, *Give me all the drugs you've got.*" I was indignant, but couldn't argue. The story of the woman determined to have a natural childbirth felt nobler than the story of the woman who asked for all the drugs right away, just as the story of the pregnant woman felt nobler than the story of the woman who starved herself. There was something petty or selfish or cowardly about insisting on too much control, about denying the body its size or its discomfort.

Around two in the morning—nearly 24 hours after my water broke, following several hours of sweet epidural haze—a nurse I didn't know came into the room. "What's going on?" she said. "Looks like you're having problems with the fetal heart rate." Her tone sounded accusatory. It was as if I'd been withholding this information.

"What's wrong with her heart rate?" I said. I thought you and I had managed to bring it up. But when I looked at the monitor, it was just below 110—and dipping further.

Another nurse came in. "Could you use another pair of hands?" she asked, and the first nurse said: "I could definitely use another pair of hands."

Why do you need so many hands? I wanted to ask, but I didn't want to distract them from whatever their hands needed to do. More nurses arrived. They told me they needed a better measurement of your heart rate. They stuck a wand inside me. They had me roll onto one side, then the other. They stuck the wand inside me again. They asked me to get on all fours.

"We're not finding it," the first nurse said, her voice more urgent, and I wanted to ask: *It's not there? Or you can't hear it?* It was the only question in the world.

Then my doctor was in the room. She told me they were seeing what they didn't want to see. She said, "Your baby's heart rate is dropping and it's not coming up."

Everything happened very quickly after that: 10 people in the room, 15, many of them rolling me onto a gurney, my legs still paralyzed from the epidural. Your father grabbed my hand. A voice called out, "It's in the 60s!" And another, "It's in the 50s!" I knew they were talking about your heart. Then they were pushing me down the hallway on the gurney, running. A nurse fit a surgical cap onto my doctor's head as she ran.

In the operating room, a man pinched my abdomen and asked if I could feel him pinching. I said I could. He seemed annoyed. I said they should just go ahead and cut me open anyway. He put something else in my IV and the next time he pinched me I didn't feel anything. My doctor said I was going to feel pressure,

not pain. Everything would happen on the other side of the blue curtain, where the rest of my body was.

Your father sat on a stool beside the operating table—worried, in a blue surgical cap—and I watched his face like a mirror, trying to read your fate. It was only when I heard the doctor's voice say, "Hey there, cutie-pie" that I knew they had opened me up and found you waiting there, ready to be born.

If the work of starvation had been as small and airless as a closet, then the work of birth was as wide as the sky.

It expanded with all the unknowns of a life that would happen in the body that my body had made possible.

EVERY BIRTH STORY is the story of two births: The child is born, and the mother is born, too—constructed by the story of how she brought her child into the world, shaped by the birthing and then again by the telling. My birth plan stayed folded in my hospital duffel bag. It was the story of a thing that never happened.

Instead, a team of doctors separated my mind from my womb with a blue tarp. The hands of another woman reached in to pull you out. My body went from collaborator to enemy. It was no longer laboring; it had failed. It needed to be cut open. The process needed to be saved by

other people, because I hadn't managed it myself. I'm not saying this is the truth about C-sections. I'm saying this is the truth of what I felt. I felt betrayed.

I'd always heard labor described in terms of triumphant capacity, but giving birth to you was a lesson in radical humility. My story was disrupted. My body was disrupted. You arrived and showed me that pain had never been my greatest teacher. You arrived and showed me I'd never been in control. Giving birth to you didn't matter because my body had been in pain, or because it hadn't been in enough pain. It mattered because you showed up glistening and bewildered and perfect. You were still part of me. You were beyond me.

If the work of starvation had been as small and airless as a closet, then the work of birth was as wide as the sky. It expanded with all the unknowns of a life that would happen in the body that my body had made possible.

For much of the first hour after you were born, I was still lying on the gurney, asking if I could hold you. Your father reminded me that I was still in surgery. He was right. My abdomen was still gapping open. My body was still shaking from all the drugs they'd given me to numb the things that had gone right, and then the things that had gone wrong.

I didn't know I would keep shaking for hours. I knew only that your father was pointing to one corner of the room, where they were carrying a tiny bundle to the incubator. One little leg stuck out, impossibly small. My whole body vibrated with the need to hold you. I kept saying: "Is she okay? Is she okay?" The doctors' hands were in my belly, rearranging my organs—pressure, not pain; pressure, not pain—and then your wailing filled the room. At your surging voice, I heard my own crack open. "Oh my God."

There you were: an arrival, a cry, the beginning of another world. **A**

Leslie Jamison is the author of The Empathy Exams and The Recovering: Intoxication and Its Aftermath. This essay will appear in Make It Scream, Make It Burn.

Q:

What is the greatest movie quote of all time?

Tracy Clayton, host, *Strong Black Legends* podcast

Nas's character in the movie *Belly* is trying to get his girlfriend, played by T-Boz of TLC, to go to Africa with him. Her response is stunning in its simplicity: **"Africa is far."** Indeed, young T-Boz! Africa is far (from New York City, the movie's setting). Black folks in America are emotionally and spiritually removed from Africa. So what looks like just a simple and obvious response is actually deep and thought-provoking.



A. O. Scott, *New York Times* film critic and author, *Better Living Through Criticism*

I grew up watching *The Wizard of Oz* on a black-and-white television set, so it wasn't until my 20th viewing or so that I discovered that it was in color—the Oz por-

tions, anyway. Which is why the line that Dorothy utters when she steps out into that enchanted world defines, for me, the inexhaustible magic of movies: **"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."**

Jenny Han, author, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* "As if!", from *Clueless*. Short and to the point. It gave girls a language for dealing with unwanted attention from creepy guys, in a way that was clear and bold but also funny.

READER RESPONSES

Michael E. Zuller, *Great Neck, N.Y.*

Humphrey Bogart's toast to Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*: **"Here's looking at you, kid."** Fraught with bittersweet regret, a groundswell of longing, and, just maybe, a glint of hope.

Alan Ruttenberg, *Englewood, N.J.*

"Gentlemen! You can't fight in here! This is the war room!", from *Dr. Strangelove*. It's both absurd and deadly serious. And the sardonic use of the word *Gentlemen* is priceless.

Dan Fredricks, *Janesville, Wis.*

In *Jaws*, Police Chief Brody's humorous one-liner to Quint after his experience with the great white: **"You're gonna need a bigger boat."**



Tom Quigley, *Garden City, N.Y.*

"The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place and ... it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit; it's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done."

—*Rocky Balboa*

Daniela Zini, *Oviedo, Fla.*

"But to make yourself feel nothing so as not to feel anything—what

a waste!" Michael Stuhlbarg's heartbreaking speech as Elio's father in *Call Me by Your Name* feels like cool rain on scorched earth. He tells his son that he accepts him as he is, that his heartbreak will pass—and that he shouldn't regret his first love. The speech reminds us that heartbreak is a product of our ability to feel, and should not be taken for granted.

Kevin Morales, *Edinburg, Texas*

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne says to Red: **"I guess it comes down to a simple choice, really. Get busy living, or get busy dying."**

Frank Tokarsky, *Kettering, Ohio*

A special honor should go to the *Godfather* movies for their body of memorable quotes: **"I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse"; "Leave the gun. Take the cannolis"; "Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes"; "Never hate your enemies—it affects your judgment."**

Want to see your name on this page? Email bigquestion@theatlantic.com with your response to the question for our November issue: **If you could go back in time and change one thing, what would it be?**

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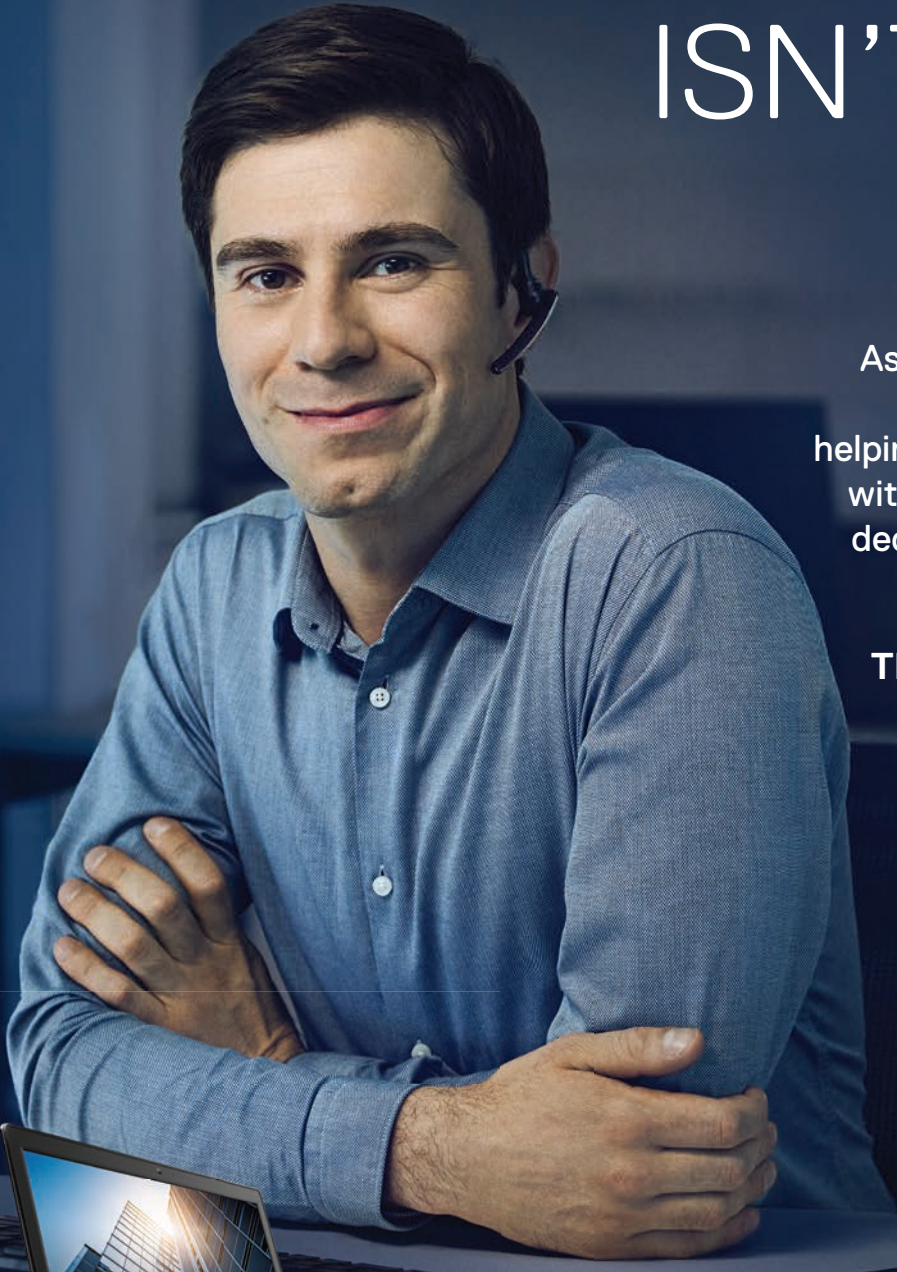




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