

The Abortion Underground

*Inside the covert
network preparing
for a post-Roe future*

By Jessica Bruder



The Atlantic

EST. 1857

Ukraine and the End of
the Liberal World Order

By Anne Applebaum

How Social Media
Made America Stupid

By Jonathan Haidt

Europe's Ex-Royals

By Helen Lewis



THE OUTER SEYCHELLES



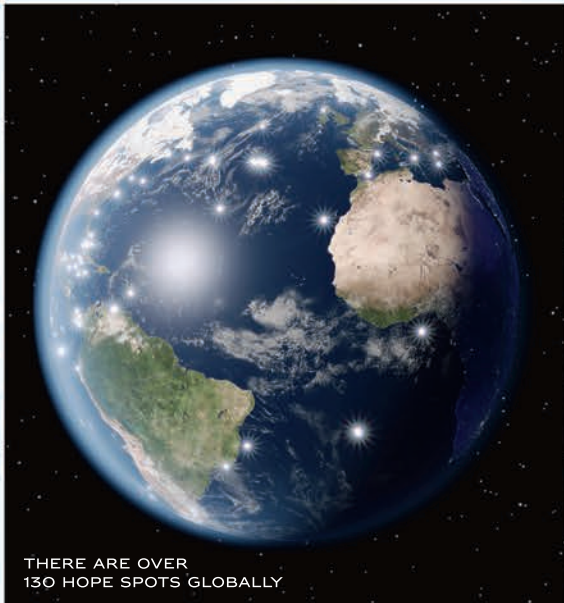
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Features

22

COVER STORY

The Abortion Underground

Inside the covert network of activists preparing for a post-Roe future

By Jessica Bruder

34

Tour Guides to a Tragedy

The killing of three civil-rights workers in Mississippi in 1964 changed America. But today, if you want to know what happened here, you need to know who to ask.

By Ko Bragg

54

After Babel

How social media dissolved the mortar of society and made America stupid

By Jonathan Haidt



44

THE SHADOW ROYALS

By Helen Lewis

Across Europe, the descendants of dethroned monarchs believe they have something to offer the 21st century.

Prince Leka II of Albania, in the royal residence in Tirana, in February

Front

6
The Commons
Discussion & Debate

Dispatches

9
OPENING ARGUMENT
There Is No Liberal World Order
Unless democracies defend themselves, the forces of autocracy will destroy them.
By Anne Applebaum

14
SOCIETY
The End of Mom Guilt
Why a mother's ambition is good for her family
By Lara Bazelon

18
VIEWFINDER
What's Bugging You?
Photographs by
Chauncey Hare

Culture & Critics

68
OMNIVORE
Better Call Saul Dared to Bore Us
Do we still have time for slow TV?
By Spencer Kornhaber

72
BOOKS
Change the Map, Change the Moral
A global view of World War II turns a battle for freedom into a battle for empire.
By Daniel Immerwahr

76
BOOKS
Sex for Art's Sake
Elif Batuman's curious experiment in fiction
By Jennifer Wilson

80
BOOKS
Privacy Isn't Dead
But who gets to keep a secret in a hyperconnected world?
By Sarah E. Igo

84
Oral History
A poem by Elisa Gabbert

Back

86
ESSAY
Winslow Homer's America
What the painter saw, and why it still speaks to us
By Susan Tallman

96
Ode to Hotel Rooms
By James Parker

On the Cover

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION
BY OLIVER MUNDAY

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Behind the Cover: In her cover story this month, Jessica Bruder reports on the clandestine network preparing for a post-*Roe* America (“The Abortion Underground,” p. 22). Such networks existed before the 1973 Supreme Court decision, and never entirely disappeared. For many Americans, “*Roe* already feels

meaningless,” Bruder writes. “Nearly 90 percent of U.S. counties lack a clinic that offers abortions.” The cover shows an unseen woman’s silhouette, evoking a future in which women who seek to end pregnancies must do so in the shadows.

— Oliver Munday, *Design Director*

THE

The Satisfaction Trap

*No matter what
we achieve or attain,
Arthur C. Brooks
wrote in March, our
biology always leaves
us wanting more.
But there’s a way out.*

make his point, but his claim that they “were saying the same thing” misses the mark. Buddhism teaches that detachment is the goal. Desire is the problem. Thomism, however, teaches that humans were created to desire God. When our desire is disordered, we seek satisfaction in other things instead. As it turns out, Saint Thomas and the Buddha have very different answers to the question “Why should I stop desiring more possessions?”

Stewart Clem
St. Louis, Mo.

I enjoyed Arthur C. Brooks’s article on satisfaction and how to foster it. As I read, I couldn’t help but think of a more contemporary lyricist whose words would apply well here. On the first track of Billie Eilish’s latest album (aptly titled *Happier Than Ever*), she sings: “Things I once enjoyed / Just keep me employed now. / Things I’m longing for / Someday, I’ll be bored of.” Seemed to me a great description of the hedonic treadmill, and one that Brooks’s daughter might appreciate more than Mick Jagger’s.

Ella Riley-Adams
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Letters

M

Maybe Arthur C. Brooks spent too much time in hyper-ambitious D.C. and hyper-competitive Cambridge, Massachusetts. His view that people are constantly seeking success and admiration does not describe the world I live in. People hope for meaningful jobs but settle for ones that pay the bills. This is not a failure to find joy; it is just what most of us must do. We then hope that we can store away enough money and/or job benefits so that we can live a satisfying life in retirement, downsizing

as we go. Yes, some people get fascinated by the shiny things and fail to appreciate the day-to-day. But I do not think this is true of as many people as Mr. Brooks supposes.

Martha Lemmond
Williamstown, N.J.

Arthur C. Brooks’s “The Satisfaction Trap” contains much wisdom. Contrary to what we often tell ourselves, possessing more things will not bring satisfaction. Brooks draws upon insights from Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Buddha to

While Arthur C. Brooks is very likely correct that the good feeling from (at long last) having a letter published in *The Atlantic* is likely fleeting, composing them gives me satisfaction. Coming full circle with the rock-and-roll theme, Sheryl Crow chimes



in with Thomas Aquinas, the Buddha, and Mick Jagger by observing that “it’s not having what you want. / It’s wanting what you’ve got.” Professor Brooks provides an excellent road map to guide us out of the maze of dissatisfaction.

Gene Alldredge
Tuscaloosa, Ala.

attempts to prevent its spread, and was also at the root of resistance to desegregation.

Gellman quotes Steve Bannon making clear both how central and how serious this idea is to the antidemocratic movement. Bannon says: “The state legislatures are the center of gravity ... People are going

back to the original interpretation of the Constitution.” Unfortunately, many citizens can likely be convinced that he’s right. It will be incumbent on media institutions like this magazine to lay out the stakes clearly: Either we as a country believe in democracy, or we believe in several archaic

institutions and the legitimacy of ideas that have only ever been used for ill ends.

Benjamin Olneck-Brown
Washington, D.C.

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

January 6 Was Practice

Donald Trump is better positioned to subvert an election now than he was in 2020, Barton Gellman argued in the January/February issue.

Among many frightening aspects of Barton Gellman’s excellent article, the scariest may be the “independent state legislatures” doctrine being developed by conservative legal activists. It strikes me that this idea—that state legislatures can overturn their voters’ will and choose how to conduct elections without federal influence—is nothing more than a new “nullification doctrine.” It harkens back to a very old idea in U.S. politics: that states, not citizens, are the fundamental unit of participation in the republic, and that no voter or federal official can tell them what to do. This idea was most famously used to defend slavery against federal

FROM THE ARCHIVE

For her feature “The Shadow Royals” (p. 44), the staff writer Helen Lewis traveled to Tirana, Albania, to meet Prince Leka II, heir to the country’s defunct throne. When Mussolini invaded Albania, in 1939, Leka’s grandfather King Zog fled with his family, and was later barred from returning by Enver Hoxha’s Communist regime. (Leka was 20 when his family returned to Albania, in 2002.)

Most non-Communists had no way of visiting the country during Hoxha’s reign. But in 1963, a writer for *The Atlantic* found a way in. The British journalist James Cameron had written a book on China and “moved through all the Communist states,” he wrote, but Albania—“the last Marxist paradise”—was “the one that seemed impenetrable.” So when he heard about an opportunity to travel there with a tour group leaving from Munich, he jumped at the chance to satisfy his “collector’s curiosity.”

Cameron’s resulting *Atlantic* dispatch is one-third geopolitical analysis and two-thirds travelogue. Hoping to disguise himself as a tourist, Cameron arrives in Tirana without a notebook or any ability to speak the language, and swiftly offends officials by sending a telegram to a London newspaper describing the country as “isolated.” The article reveals as much about Cameron as it does about the place he’s visiting. He complains about the “totally undrinkable wine” and the “indescribably terrible” food, and

about having nothing to read (his books were confiscated upon arrival by Communist officials). Albania, he concludes, is “a tough place in which to feel at home.”

Today, Tirana is a very different city; parts of it would be unrecognizable to Cameron. The area where Hoxha and his politburo once “sealed themselves away from a discontented populace,” Lewis reports, is now “the city’s most fashionable district, where you can drink espresso and eat sushi in the sunshine.”

—Will Gordon,
Associate Editor

Corrections: “Loving the Bald Eagle to Death” (March) misspelled the name of a Native American tribe; the correct spelling is Te’pota’ahl. “The Betrayal” (March) misstated Alex McCoy’s role in the organization Common Defense; McCoy is the group’s co-founder and was, until September, its political director. Due to an editing error, the article also included an incorrect list of the forms required for a Special Immigrant Visa.

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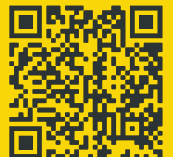


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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THERE IS NO LIBERAL WORLD ORDER

*Unless democracies
defend themselves,
the forces of autocracy
will destroy them.*

BY ANNE
APPLEBAUM

In February 1994, in the grand ballroom of the town hall in Hamburg, Germany, the president of Estonia gave a remarkable speech. Standing before an audience in evening dress, Lennart Meri praised the values of the democratic world that Estonia then aspired to join. “The freedom of every individual, the freedom of the economy and trade, as well as the freedom of the mind, of culture and science, are inseparably interconnected,” he told the

burghers of Hamburg. “They form the prerequisite of a viable democracy.” His country, having regained its independence from the Soviet Union three years earlier, believed in these values: “The Estonian people never abandoned their faith in this freedom during the decades of totalitarian oppression.”

But Meri had also come to deliver a warning: Freedom in Estonia, and in Europe, could soon be under threat. Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the circles around him were returning to the language of imperialism, speaking of Russia as *primus inter pares*—the first among equals—in the former Soviet empire. In 1994, Moscow was already seething with the language of resentment, aggression, and imperial nostalgia; the Russian state was developing an illiberal vision of the world, and even then was preparing to enforce it. Meri called on the democratic world to push back: The West should “make it emphatically clear to the Russian leadership that another imperialist expansion will not stand a chance.”

At that, the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, Vladimir Putin, got up and walked out of the hall.

Meri’s fears were at that time shared in all of the formerly captive nations of Central and Eastern Europe, and they were strong enough to persuade governments in Estonia, Poland, and elsewhere to campaign for admission to NATO. They succeeded because nobody in Washington, London, or Berlin believed that the new members mattered. The Soviet Union was gone, the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg was not an important person, and Estonia would never need to be defended. That was why neither

Bill Clinton nor George W. Bush made much attempt to arm or reinforce the new NATO members. Only in 2014 did the Obama administration finally place a small number of American troops in the region, largely in an effort to reassure allies after the first Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Nobody else anywhere in the Western world felt any threat at all. For 30 years, Western oil and gas companies piled into Russia, partnering with Russian oligarchs who had openly stolen the assets they controlled. Western financial institutions did lucrative business in Russia too, setting up systems to allow those same Russian kleptocrats to export their stolen money and keep it parked, anonymously, in Western property and banks. We convinced ourselves that there was no harm in enriching dictators and their cronies. Trade, we imagined, would transform our trading partners. Wealth would bring liberalism. Capitalism would bring democracy—and democracy would bring peace.

After all, it had happened before. Following the cataclysm of 1939–45, Europeans had indeed collectively abandoned wars of imperial, territorial conquest. They stopped dreaming of eliminating one another. Instead, the continent that had been the source of the two worst wars the world had ever known created the European Union, an organization designed to find negotiated solutions to conflicts and promote cooperation, commerce, and trade. Because of Europe’s metamorphosis—and especially because of the extraordinary transformation of Germany from a Nazi dictatorship into the engine

of the continent’s integration and prosperity—Europeans and Americans alike believed that they had created a set of rules that would preserve peace not only on their own continents, but eventually in the whole world.

This liberal world order relied on the mantra of “Never again.” Never again would there be genocide. Never again would large nations erase smaller nations from the map. Never again would we be taken in by dictators who used the language of mass murder. At least in Europe, we would know how to react when we heard it.

But while we were happily living under the illusion that “Never again” meant something real, the leaders of Russia, owners of the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, were reconstructing an army and a propaganda machine designed to facilitate mass murder, as well as a mafia state controlled by a tiny number of men and bearing no resemblance to Western capitalism. For a long time—too long—the custodians of the liberal world order refused to understand these changes. They looked away when Russia “pacified” Chechnya by murdering tens of thousands of people. When Russia bombed schools and hospitals in Syria, Western leaders decided that that wasn’t their problem. When Russia invaded Ukraine the first time, they found reasons not to worry. Surely Putin would be satisfied by the annexation of Crimea. When Russia invaded Ukraine the second time, occupying part of the Donbas, they were sure he would be sensible enough to stop.

Even when the Russians, having grown rich on the kleptocracy we facilitated, bought Western politicians, funded

far-right extremist movements, and ran disinformation campaigns during American and European democratic elections, the leaders of America and Europe still refused to take them seriously. It was just some posts on Facebook; so what? We didn’t believe that we were at war with Russia. We believed, instead, that we were safe and free, protected by treaties, by border guarantees, and by the norms and rules of the liberal world order.

WITH THE THIRD, more brutal invasion of Ukraine, the vacuity of those beliefs was revealed. The Russian president openly denied the existence of a legitimate Ukrainian state: “Russians and Ukrainians,” he said, “were one people—a single whole.” His army targeted civilians, hospitals, and schools. His policies aimed to create refugees so as to destabilize Western Europe. “Never again” was exposed as an empty slogan while a genocidal plan took shape in front of our eyes, right along the European Union’s eastern border. Other autocracies watched to see what we would do about it, for Russia is not the only nation in the world that covets its neighbors’ territory, that seeks to destroy entire populations, that has no qualms about the use of mass violence. North Korea can attack South Korea at any time, and has nuclear weapons that can hit Japan. China seeks to eliminate the Uyghurs as a distinct ethnic group, and has imperial designs on Taiwan.

We can’t turn the clock back to 1994, to see what would have happened had we heeded Lennart Meri’s warning. But we can face the future with honesty. We can name the challenges and prepare to meet them.



There is no natural liberal world order, and there are no rules without someone to enforce them. Unless democracies defend themselves together, the forces of autocracy will destroy them. I am using the word *forces*, in the plural, deliberately. Many American politicians would understandably prefer to focus on the long-term competition with China. But as long as Russia is ruled by Putin, then Russia is at war with us too. So are Belarus, North Korea, Venezuela, Iran, Nicaragua, Hungary, and potentially many others. We might not want to compete with them, or even care very much about them. But they care about us. They understand that the language of democracy, anti-corruption, and justice is dangerous to their form of autocratic power—and they know that that language originates in the democratic world, our world.

This fight is not theoretical. It requires armies, strategies, weapons, and long-term plans. It requires much closer allied cooperation, not only in Europe but in the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. NATO can no longer operate as if it might someday be required to defend itself; it needs to start operating as it did during the Cold War, on the assumption that an invasion could happen at any time. Germany's decision to raise defense spending by 100 billion euros is a good start; so is Denmark's declaration that it too will boost defense spending. But deeper military and intelligence coordination might require new institutions—perhaps a voluntary European Legion, connected to the European Union, or a Baltic alliance that includes Sweden and Finland—and different thinking about where

and how we invest in European and Pacific defense.

If we don't have any means to deliver our messages to the autocratic world, then no one will hear them. Much as we assembled the Department of Homeland Security out of disparate agencies after 9/11, we now need to pull together the disparate parts of the U.S. government that think about communication, not to do propaganda but to reach more people around the world with better information and to stop autocracies from distorting that knowledge. Why haven't we built a Russian-language television station to compete with Putin's propaganda? Why can't we produce more programming in Mandarin—or Uyghur? Our foreign-language broadcasters—Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio Martí in Cuba—need not only money for programming but a major investment in research. We know very little about Russian audiences—what they read, what they might be eager to learn.

Funding for education and culture needs rethinking too. Shouldn't there be a Russian-language university, in Vilnius or Warsaw, to house all the intellectuals and thinkers who have just left Moscow? Don't we need to spend more on education in Arabic, Hindi, Persian? So much of what passes for cultural diplomacy runs on autopilot. Programs should be recast for a different era, one in which, though the world is more knowable than ever before, dictatorships seek to hide that knowledge from their citizens.

Trading with autocrats promotes autocracy, not democracy. Congress has made some progress in recent months in

the fight against global kleptocracy, and the Biden administration was right to put the fight against corruption at the heart of its political strategy. But we can go much further, because there is no reason for

PERHAPS WE
CAN LEARN
SOMETHING
FROM THE
UKRAINIANS.
THEY ARE
SHOWING
US HOW TO
HAVE BOTH
PATRIOTISM
AND LIBERAL
VALUES.

any company, property, or trust ever to be held anonymously. Every U.S. state, and every democratic country, should immediately make all ownership transparent. Tax havens should be illegal. The only people who need to keep their houses, businesses, and income secret are crooks and tax cheats.

We need a dramatic and profound shift in our energy consumption, and not only because of climate change. The billions of dollars we have sent to Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia have promoted some of the worst and most corrupt dictators in the world. The transition from oil and gas to other energy sources needs to happen with far greater speed

and decisiveness. Every dollar spent on Russian oil helps fund the artillery that fires on Ukrainian civilians.

Take democracy seriously. Teach it, debate it, improve it, defend it. Maybe there is no natural liberal world order, but there *are* liberal societies, open and free countries that offer a better chance for people to live useful lives than closed dictatorships do. They are hardly perfect; our own has deep flaws, profound divisions, terrible historical scars. But that's all the more reason to defend and protect them. Few of them have existed across human history; many have existed for a time and then failed. They can be destroyed from the outside, but from the inside, too, by divisions and demagogues.

Perhaps, in the aftermath of this crisis, we can learn something from the Ukrainians. For decades now, we've been fighting a culture war between liberal values on the one hand and muscular forms of patriotism on the other. The Ukrainians are showing us a way to have both. As soon as the attacks began, they overcame their many political divisions, which are no less bitter than ours, and they picked up weapons to fight for their sovereignty and their democracy. They demonstrated that it is possible to be a patriot and a believer in an open society, that a democracy can be stronger and fiercer than its opponents. Precisely because there is no liberal world order, no norms and no rules, we must fight ferociously for the values and the hopes of liberalism if we want our open societies to continue to exist. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



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THE END OF MOM GUILT

Why a mother's ambition is good for her family

BY LARA BAZELON

There was a drawer in a cabinet in my bedroom where my mother kept the congratulatory cards she'd received after I was born. When I was little, I liked to take them out and look at them.

My favorite card had a drawing of a mother and child. The mother's soft white arms cradled the baby to her bosom. Her pretty profile—delicate nose, long-lashed eyes—was focused entirely on the small, sleeping bundle. She had lustrous golden hair that rippled and encircled the baby. She had created a world just for the two of them.

My actual mother was nothing like this woman. My mother's hair was dark, almost black, cut short in the same no-nonsense style for decades. Her skin was olive, and her arms were naturally sinewy. Her embraces were quick and hard, her eyes focused on the next task in front of her. I never doubted that my mother loved me or that I was important to her, but I rarely felt the radiant force that I imagined the child on the card experiencing: undivided and all-encompassing maternal attention. It just wasn't possible. In addition to having three other children, my mother had a full-time job, as a psychiatrist.

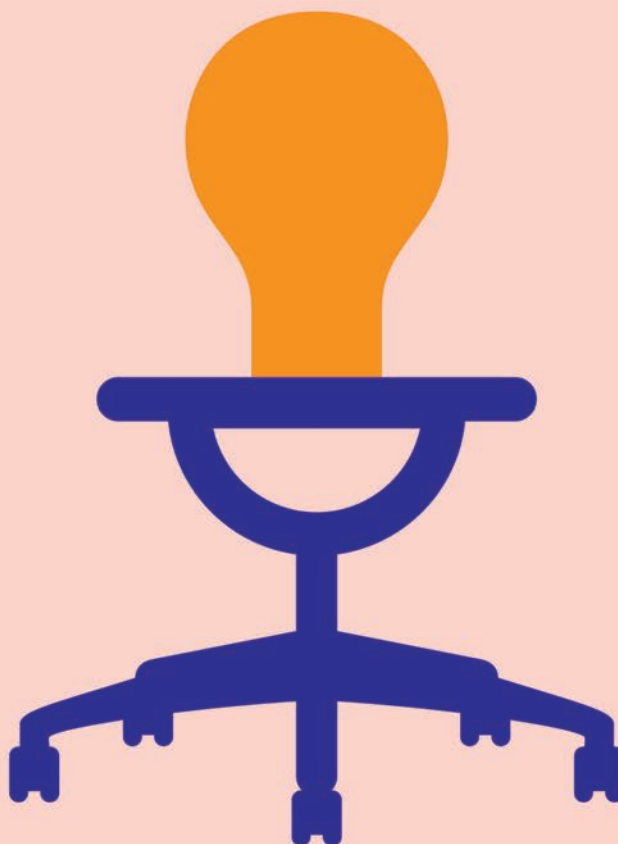
So why did the card hold such sway over me? Why does it still? Four decades later, I can readily call up the image and the feelings it evoked: a nostalgic longing for something that I never experienced but that I felt sure existed for other children.

I believed I knew such a mother growing up. Gretchen was the mother of my childhood best friend, Tamara. In my child's-eye view, Gretchen was everything my mother was not. She was always home, it seemed, baking a pie or sewing an exquisite doll's dress. Gretchen wasn't a doctor—she was married to one.

She seemed impossibly perfect, and it was hard not to make invidious comparisons. Tamara's Halloween costumes were works of art; everyone exclaimed over them. One year, I wanted to be a tiger for Halloween, in honor of the stuffed animal I carried everywhere. When I asked my mother to make me that costume, we were standing in my little sister's room, which was in the process of being redone as she transitioned from a crib to a bed. My mother gestured to a roll of yellow-and-white-striped wallpaper that was lying on the ground. "Why don't you just wrap yourself up in some of that?" she suggested.

Was Gretchen the icon of motherhood I had believed her to be—the ever-nurturing, always-present mother on the card? Tamara moved away from Philadelphia before eighth grade, and we did not keep in touch. When I typed her mother's name into Google several years ago, I was wholly unprepared for what I found. Gretchen was a professor emerita of international education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a co-author of 10 books, and an internationally recognized expert on education reform.

With some trepidation, I cut-and-pasted her email address and started typing. "Dear Gretchen," I wrote. "This request may seem bizarre, but I am writing to see if I can interview you." I wasn't sure if she would even remember me. She replied with a kind note assuring me that she did and asking that I send her the topics I wanted to cover. I responded with a long list, like a lawyer probing a witness. "I have very particular memories of you," I wrote, "but I don't know if they are real."



My memories, it turned out, were both real and not real. The whole time I had been friends with Tamara, Gretchen had been pursuing a doctorate in education. She

came from a family of academics; her father was a well-known economist at MIT. Her mother had a bachelor's degree in economics but stayed at home. "That's where I learned

all the crafty stuff," she told me over Zoom. "She was always knitting and jamming and preserving and making cookies. But I think she was very frustrated with that life."

In 1968, shortly after receiving her master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Gretchen met her husband, Milt, who was a medical student. They were married the

following year. Gretchen was 24. She gave birth to their first daughter, Dara, in 1971, and Tamara followed in 1974.

"I think I was a pretty good stay-at-home mom," she said. "I did what was expected of me, but it wasn't enough. I needed to do something for myself." In 1977, when Dara was 6 and Tamara was 3, she returned to Penn to get her Ph.D.

After a stint as an adjunct professor, Gretchen decided she wanted to teach full-time at a university. When she learned that UMass was hiring for a tenure-track position in its graduate department of education, she said, "it sent shivers up and down my spine. It was like they wrote the position for me." But Milt had a thriving career as a professor of medicine and had no intention of moving. Gretchen took the job anyway. She spent the first semester splitting her week between the two cities, trying to make things work. Then she gave up. "It was all very rational," she said. "We did the divorce ourselves and divided everything up equally." Tamara moved to Amherst with Gretchen after seventh grade; Dara stayed in Philadelphia with Milt.

I now understood that Gretchen was more like my own mother than I ever could have guessed. They were both conflicted strivers, acceding to and struggling against convention. But the lengths Gretchen took to follow her ambition—she prefers to call it her "longing for achievement"—made her even more of an outlier. To pursue her career, she left behind her marriage, her home, a daughter.

THE WOMEN OF my generation were told that we wouldn't have to make the stark choice

Gretchen ultimately did: family or career. And yet as I listened to Gretchen tell her story, I recognized my own experience in it.

I'm a criminal-defense lawyer, a law professor, and a mother of two. When my children were young and I was offered professional opportunities that separated me from them—a case hundreds of miles from home, an academic presentation out of state—I took them. The work gave shape and purpose to my life. And yet. Because time is finite, deficits added up on the other side of the ledger. I missed family dinners, birthday parties, and, yes, Halloween. My ambition was also a source of tension with my husband, Matt. We fought about my preoccupation with my career and my feeling that he was failing to support me in its pursuit.

Eventually, my devotion to my work proved incompatible with my marriage. Like Gretchen, I had the financial security to strike out on my own and start a new life. But that did little to dull the heartbreak of the split. I came to feel that ambition and motherhood were no more compatible in the second decade of the 21st century than they'd been in the 1970s. The mother on the card, and all that she represented, still had a powerful hold over me.

IT DIDN'T HELP that my approach to parenting was scattered and slapdash. None of my children's friends mistook *me* for a happy homemaker. For a time, this was a source of guilt. Gradually, though, I came to a different view. For all of my failures at home *ec*, I knew my son and daughter felt loved, just as I had felt loved

by my own ambitious mother. That recognition led me, in turn, to wonder why for so long I'd thought of ambition as antithetical to good mothering. Prioritizing your career—not all the time, but some of the time—models valuable lessons for children, including independence and resilience.

Research shows that the children of full-time working mothers fare no worse than the children of stay-at-home mothers. A 2018 study of more than 100,000 people across 29 countries found that the daughters of working mothers were more successful in their own careers than the daughters of stay-at-home mothers, and just as happy. For sons, there was no discernible effect on their professional lives, although sons of working moms performed more housework in their own marriages and reported more egalitarian views on gender.

One grown son of a full-time working mother described parenthood to me as "sliding weights from one end of the scale to the other; family to work, work to family, with rare times in perfect balance." A perfect balance is wonderful when you can strike it. But periods of imbalance are healthy and necessary, too. They demonstrate to children that the burdens and sacrifices of caregiving should not be a mother's to bear alone, and help them understand why mothers can't always lavish them with undivided attention.

My kids have at times resented my commitment to my career. They were 11 and 9 in March 2020, and if there were benefits to the three of us spending every day together in the early months of the pandemic, they were not immediately obvious to any of us. Once,

when I was on a video call with a judge and a passel of lawyers, my daughter opened the refrigerator door behind me, exposing its contents to everyone, then scolded me for forgetting to buy maple syrup. It felt—it was—profoundly unprofessional. I missed the quiet and privacy of my own space.

Yet there were unexpected upsides to having my kids routinely peering over my shoulder and popping up in the background. They came to understand what I do, and why I do it. My clients and colleagues, meanwhile, glimpsed the life I lead away from court and the classroom—they saw why I cannot always be at their disposal either.

The feminism of my mother's generation was rightly focused on equal pay at work; eradicating the abuses that drove women out of the workforce or caused them to switch to lower-paying, part-time work; and, eventually, equal division of labor at home. That project is far from complete. But feminism today must be about more than these structural changes. We have to redefine what it means to be a good mother.

The truth is that motherhood is as beautiful as it looks on the congratulations cards, but it can also be a mess. It's important to be honest about this. No real change is possible until working mothers stop trying to be all things to all people—perfect at work, perfect as partners, and perfect as mothers, with each role kept entirely separate. Rather than hermetically sealing motherhood off from workplace struggles and triumphs, women should embrace the seepage between their worlds. For themselves, but also for their sons and daughters.

I AM KEENLY AWARE that my own experience of motherhood does not resemble that of most women. But over the past few years, I've talked with dozens of women of different races, classes, and sexual orientations, and I've found that the desire to square ambition with motherhood is widely shared.

Daphne LaSalle Jackson is an Air Force lieutenant colonel and judge advocate general. When she had her first son, in 2013, she was part of a team of defense lawyers representing Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a Guantánamo Bay detainee accused of bombing the U.S.S. Cole. The military refused to let her bring her son to Cuba, but Daphne did bring her breast pump, determined not to give up the case. "I pumped in the detention facility, I pumped on air-planes, I pumped in between client meetings," she told me.

Daphne now has three children. She is an attentive and frighteningly efficient mother. The first time we talked, on FaceTime, she was in the middle of changing her daughter's diaper. She answered my questions as she finished up, kissed her husband and two sons goodbye, got into her minivan, and drove to nearby Maxwell Air Force Base, in Montgomery, Alabama.

Advancement in the military has continued to require that Daphne leave her family behind for long stretches, including, most recently, for an eight-month deployment to Qatar, where she had to get up at 4:30 a.m. to say good-night to her kids by Zoom. Seizing such opportunities has never been easy. But she's kept saying yes, for herself but also for her kids. "Their whole

lives, they have seen me get up every day and put on a uniform," she told me. "They know the power of their mom. They see my sacrifice and my dedication to my country." She has been determined to set an example for other women in the Air Force as well: "I wanted to be that mentor, that Black face in a sea of white faces, a female face in a sea of non-female faces."

I also talked with a woman named Diana, who immigrated to California from Vietnam when she was 15. Enrolled at a large public high school, she learned English by carrying a heavy dictionary in her backpack and looking up the words she didn't know. She also watched every episode of *Friends*.

After high school, Diana married her high-school sweetheart and began working as an aesthetician at a salon. "I worked and worked," she told me, "double- and triple-booked sometimes, and even if a client came in 15 minutes before closing, my boss would say, 'Take them,' so I was always coming home late." The hourly pay was meager, but the tips made up for it; Diana earned about \$130 a day.

For years, she managed to get by. But around the time her children were 10 and 12, her job became untenable. Her boss told her that she had to work as a receptionist two days a week as well as open and close the salon. The additional labor meant longer hours and fewer clients. "Every day when I came home, I was so tired; I was like a dead body," she said.

An opportunity arose in 2018. One of Diana's customers owned a hair salon nearby. The aesthetician who

had rented the back room had recently retired; the space was now empty. Diana, mindful that her co-workers might overhear, bent down and whispered in the woman's ear, "Can I go there and take a look?"

When Diana came home from work that night, she was

FEMINISM
TODAY MUST
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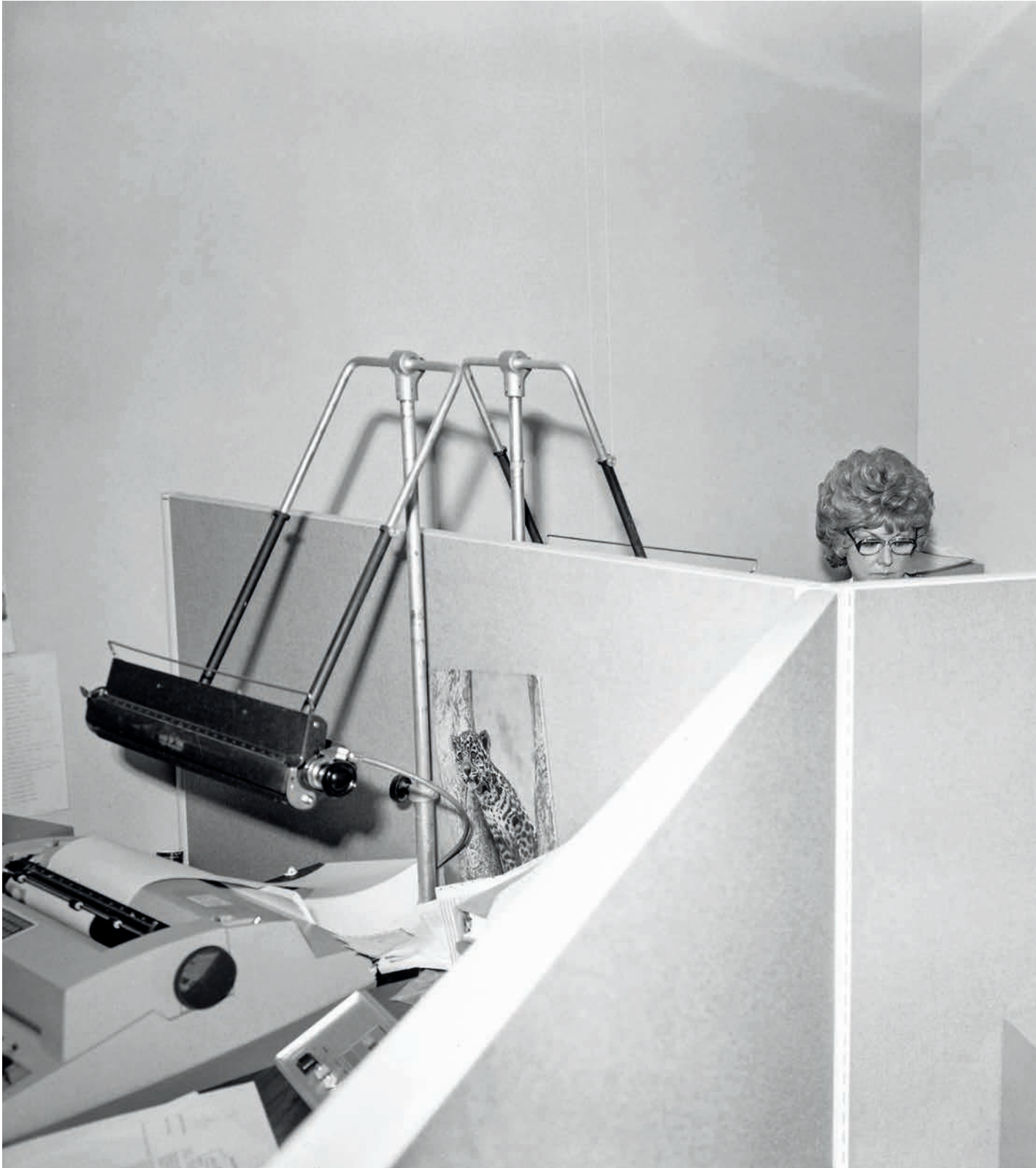
bubbling with enthusiasm. "I just knew that this was my opportunity, and I know my clients are loyal and they will come with me." But her husband, she said, saw only risk. "He keeps saying to me, what if I fail? I told him, 'I am confident; I feel like I can do it.'" He responded by telling Diana to try to negotiate better terms with her boss at the salon. Diana refused. After years of making concessions to her family, it was time to take a stand. "A few days later," she said, "he is thinking it over

and he says, 'You know what? If that makes you happy, you can just go for it.' And I said, 'Thank you. Finally.'"

In the weeks leading up to her departure from her job, Diana let her clients know of her plans. Though she never offered it, many clients asked for her cellphone number. Soon after she opened her own business, her phone started ringing. "My kids would get so excited every time a client called for an appointment at the new place. It made me feel so good." She looked joyful as she told me this story. Her children had seen, and appreciated, the fruit of her ambition.

Of course, successes like Diana's remain too rare, and they can be fleeting. The pandemic has changed what work looks like for tens of millions of Americans, many of them women. In its earliest months, the coronavirus drove 3.5 million mothers from the workplace, as jobs vanished in female-dominated industries like retail and hospitality. One of them was Diana's; she was forced to stop seeing clients. Her husband's part-time income was not enough to support them, and only by digging deeply into savings Diana had set aside was the family able to stay afloat. But Diana has since reopened her business. When I caught up with her in February, she told me she's busier than ever. *A*

*Lara Bazelon is a professor at the University of San Francisco School of Law and the author of *Ambitious Like a Mother: Why Prioritizing Your Career Is Good for Your Kids*, from which this essay has been adapted.*





What's Bugging You?

*Photographs by
Chauncey Hare*

Photography started as a hobby for Chauncey Hare. For 27 years, he worked as a chemical engineer at the Standard Oil Company of California, using his camera to escape the tedium of the office. By 1977, he couldn't take it anymore. But before he declared himself a "corporate dropout" and committed to art full-time, Hare trained his camera on the world he hoped to leave behind.

The working people in the series of photographs he shot at Standard Oil sit in mundane, if vaguely menacing, office environments, boxed in—sometimes even obscured—by a labyrinth of cubicles and other corporate furniture. They rarely look directly at the camera; many of his photographs seem to be taken from above. To look at these workers is to supervise, to surveil. Still, close inspection reveals glimpses of personality in the otherwise dreary tableaux—a playful cheetah print here, a holiday wreath there.

Paradoxically, the same medium that once served as a respite from the banality of Hare's professional life soon came to feel oppressive in its own right. In *Quitting Your Day Job*, a forthcoming critical biography of Hare, the scholar Robert Slifkin connects Hare's sly, arresting portraiture to the artist's critiques of capitalist power

*Head of Female Worker Seen Over
Office Cubicle, Standard Oil Company
of California, 1976–77*



This page: *Self-Portrait at EPA*, 1980.
 Opposite page (top): *Office Worker Seated at a Desk*, *Standard Oil Company of California Refinery*, Richmond, California, 1976–77.

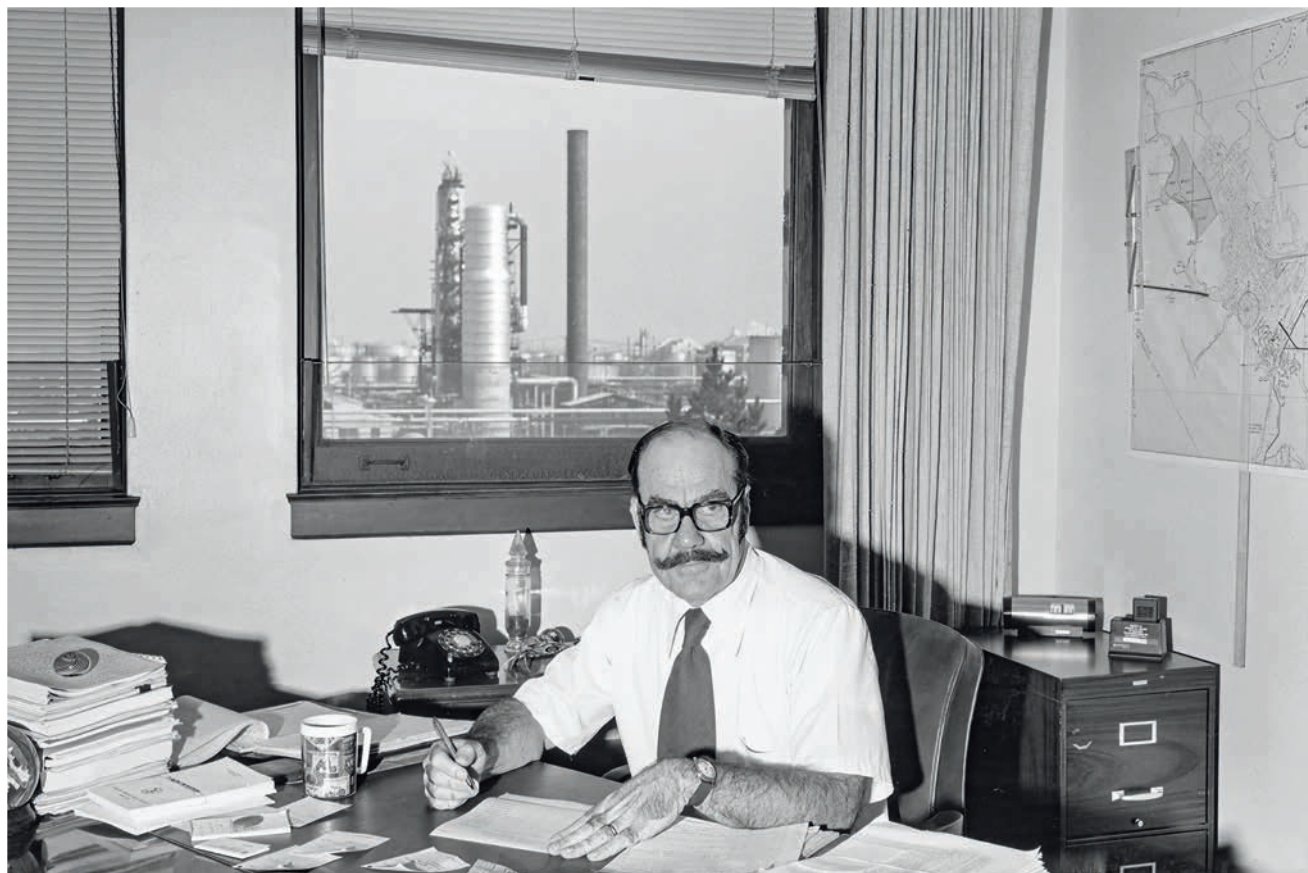
Opposite page (bottom): *Room With Document Storage Boxes*, *Standard Oil Company of California*, 1976–77.

structures, including the cultural institutions that embraced him. (Hare won three Guggenheim fellowships.) The photographer went on to disavow “official art” and accept a part-time job at the Environmental Protection Agency to support himself. A self-portrait from that time shows Hare back in an office environment, where a poster hanging on a cubicle wall poses a question that its surroundings implicitly answer: *WHAT’S BUGGING YOU?* By 1985, Hare had given up photography altogether and become a therapist specializing in “work abuse.”

Before Hare died, in 2019, he saw to it that any future publication of his work would include the following disclaimer: “These photographs were made to protest and warn against the growing domination of working people by multinational corporations and their elite owners and managers.”

Despite his fears that they were being turned into drones, the men and women in Hare’s photographs remain distinctly themselves.

— *Hannah Giorgis*



THE ABORTION
UNDERGROUND

By
Jessica Bruder

*Inside the
covert
network of
activists
preparing
for a
post-Roe
future*

I.

One bright afternoon in early January, on a beach in Southern California, a young woman spread what looked like a very strange picnic across an orange polka-dot towel: A mason jar. A rubber stopper with two holes. A syringe without a needle. A coil of aquarium tubing and a one-way valve. A plastic speculum. Several individually wrapped sterile cannulas—thin tubes designed to be inserted into the body—which resembled long soda straws. And, finally, a three-dimensional scale model of the female reproductive system.

The two of us were sitting on the sand. The woman, whom I'll call Ellie, had suggested that we meet at the beach; she had recently recovered from COVID-19, and proposed the open-air setting for my safety. She also didn't want to risk revealing where she lives—and asked me to withhold her name—because of concerns about harassment or violence from anti-abortion extremists.

Ellie snugged the rubber stopper into the mason jar. She snipped the aquarium tubing into a pair of foot-long segments and attached the valve to the syringe's plastic tip. In less than 10 minutes, Ellie had finished the project: a simple abortion device. It looked like a cross between an at-home beer-brewing kit and a seventh-grade science experiment.

The two segments of tubing protruded from the holes in the stopper. One was connected to a cannula, the other to the syringe. Holding the anatomical model, Ellie traced a path with the tip of the cannula into the vagina and through the cervix, positioning it to suction out the contents of the uterus. Next, to show more clearly how the suction process works, she placed the cannula into her coffee. When she drew back the plunger on the syringe, dark fluid coursed through the aquarium tubing and into the mason jar, collecting slowly within the diamond-patterned glass.

I had read about such devices before. But watching the scene on the beach towel brought history into focus with startling clarity: Women did this the last time abortion was illegal.

Ellie didn't invent this device. That distinction goes to Lorraine Rothman, an Orange County public-school teacher and activist. In 1971, members of her feminist self-help group had been familiarizing themselves with the work of an illegal abortion clinic in Santa Monica. The owner, a psychologist named Harvey Karman, had designed a slender, flexible straw—now known as a Karman cannula, and a standard piece of medical equipment—which he used to draw the contents of a uterus into a large syringe. Karman's method took only a few minutes and had been nicknamed a "lunch-hour abortion" because patients could return to regular activities afterward. It was less invasive than dilation and curettage, a procedure that uses a surgical instrument to scrape the uterine walls.

Two years before the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* changed the legal landscape for abortion in the United States, Rothman was developing her own version of Karman's apparatus, rummaging around aquarium stores and chemistry labs for parts. She added a bypass valve to prevent air from accidentally being pumped back into the uterus, and a mason jar to increase the holding capacity. The result was an abortion device that was easy to make and suitable for ending pregnancies during most of the first trimester.

For purposes of plausible deniability, Rothman promoted the device as a tool for what she referred to as "menstrual extraction": a technique a woman could use to pass her entire period at once, rather than over several days. In October 1971, she embarked on a Greyhound-bus tour with a fellow activist, Carol Downer, to spread the word. In six weeks, they visited 23 cities, traveling from Los Angeles to Manhattan and calling themselves the West Coast Sisters. Soon women all over the country were making the device, which Rothman and Downer had called a Del-Em. (When I met Downer, now 88, earlier this year, I asked her about the meaning of the name; she said it was an "inside thing" and "not to be shared.")

One might have expected the Del-Em to have disappeared after *Roe* affirmed the constitutional right to an abortion everywhere in America. Yet the Del-Em remained quietly in use here and there, conveyed from one generation to the next. This was in part because of continued fears that abortion rights would again be curtailed—an event that may now be imminent if the Supreme Court upholds statewide bans. But it was also because of a desire among some women to maintain control over their bodies, without oversight from the medical profession, regardless of *Roe's* status.

Activists are still tinkering with Rothman's design. One added a second valve. Another upgraded the suction using a penis pump (a vacuum device used to stimulate an erection), explaining, "It's like going from a pogo stick to a Lamborghini." An American midwife living in Canada told me about repurposing an automotive brake-bleeding kit: "You just add a cannula onto the end." She estimated that she had performed hundreds of abortions, using the Del-Em but also other methods, including medical-grade manual vacuum-aspiration kits and pharmaceuticals. The midwife is part of a network of self-described "community providers"—a term for people who perform abortions and offer other reproductive-health-care services outside the medical system. Before the coronavirus pandemic, she traveled and taught in-person workshops throughout the U.S. and Canada. She now teaches online. Ellie learned to build a Del-Em in one of her classes.

For Ellie, the Del-Em was more symbolic than pragmatic—an amulet from the past to carry into an uncertain future. After all, pharmaceuticals can now be used to end pregnancies in the first trimester, when more than 90 percent of legal abortions occur. (Almost 99 percent of abortions occur within the first 20 weeks.) There are also modern, mass-produced manual vacuum-aspiration devices for doing what the Del-Em does. Community providers have talked about stockpiling such supplies in case *Roe* falls. Ellie has coined a term for people who share that outlook: "vaginal preppers."

Given the uncertainties, she suggested, it couldn't hurt to have a do-it-yourself tool like the Del-Em. "Just knowing the

people who came before you had other ways of managing these things, not necessarily through a doctor or condoned by a government—there’s something really powerful in that,” she said.

As Ellie packed her supplies back into a tote bag, she told me to take the Del-Em. She gave me the speculum, too.

II.

There is a lot of talk about prepping these days. *Roe v. Wade* could well be further weakened or overturned by late June, when the Supreme Court is expected to hand down a decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. At issue is a Mississippi law banning nearly all abortions past 15 weeks of pregnancy. This is a direct challenge to both *Roe* and the Court’s follow-on decision, nearly two decades later, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. In these two decisions, the Court has held that states can ban abortion (except when the mother’s health or life is threatened) only past the point of fetal viability, which *Casey* found to be when a woman is roughly 23 to 24 weeks pregnant. Prior to that point, the Court’s holdings permit states to impose limited restrictions on abortion, so long as they don’t pose an “undue burden” on a woman’s right to an abortion. The Court now has a 6–3 conservative majority. By upholding the Mississippi ban, it would, in essence, nullify *Roe*’s recognition of the constitutional right to an abortion prior to viability. According to a 2021 Gallup poll, fewer than one in three Americans supports that outcome. The legality of abortion would largely be left to the states. Twelve states have “trigger bans” on the books—laws that will take effect the moment *Roe* is overturned. More than half of all states are certain or likely to attempt to ban abortion if the Supreme Court provides legal space to do so, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a pro-abortion-rights research organization.

For many Americans, *Roe* already feels meaningless. Nearly 90 percent of U.S.

counties lack a clinic that offers abortions. States have passed more than 1,300 restrictions on abortion since it was made a constitutional right; for people struggling to get by, those restrictions can be insurmountable. Obtaining an abortion often means traveling long distances, which also means finding money for transportation, lodging, and child care, not to mention taking time off from work. In some states, people may reach a clinic only to learn that they are legally required to make two visits—one for counseling, the second for the abortion—with a mandatory waiting period of up to three days in between. The cost of an in-clinic abortion ranges from about \$500 in the first trimester to more than \$1,000 if the pregnancy is further along; that expense is ineligible for federal funding under a long-standing restriction called the Hyde Amendment, which makes abortions inaccessible for many low-income people.

A sprawling grassroots infrastructure has already grown in the cracks created by such challenges, even with *Roe* still the law of the land. More than 90 local organizations known as abortion funds raise money to pay for procedures and related expenses. Practical-support groups offer rides to medical facilities, along with housing, child care, and translation services. Clinic escorts guide patients past throngs of angry protesters. Doctors and other abortion providers travel hundreds of miles to work in underserved areas that are openly hostile to abortion.

This improvised safety net doesn’t catch everyone, though. Below the grass roots is the underground: a small network of community providers who connect with abortion seekers by word of mouth. This network, too, is growing. Its ranks include midwives, herbalists, doulas, and educators. When necessary, they are often willing to work around the law.

Even before the pandemic, with state restrictions mounting, the grass roots and the underground struggled to meet the demand for help. Then, as the coronavirus was first surging, a dozen states—most of them in the South, but also including Alaska, Iowa, and Ohio—moved to suspend nearly all access to abortion, describing it as a nonessential procedure. A handful of those efforts were temporarily successful, creating what felt to some like

For many Americans, Roe already feels meaningless. Nearly 90 percent of U.S. counties lack a clinic that offers abortions.

a dress rehearsal for the end of *Roe*. That feeling returned last fall when Texas used a creative legal strategy to ban most abortions after roughly six weeks’ gestation. Legal challenges to the law have so far failed.

The impact of the Texas law was immediate. Neighboring states experienced a swell of people seeking help, creating bottlenecks and forcing local patients to go out of state themselves in a secondary wave of migration. A term gained currency: “abortion refugees.”

Ellie told me she was disgusted by the developments in Texas. “Our reproductive rights are not given to us by the government,” she said. “They’re not given to us by anyone. We inherently have them.” Her belief in that sort of independence was formed long before the current debate; her family, she explained, was always interested in alternative medicine and, by age 7 or 8, she wanted to become a midwife. As a pre-teen, she read a novel called *The Red Tent*, set in biblical times, whose title refers to a place where women find refuge during menstruation and childbirth. In high school, classmates brought her their awkward questions about sex. After college, Ellie attended a retreat for sex educators that rekindled her old interests. She took jobs providing midwives and doulas with logistical support and eventually started a business in reproductive health—a red tent of her own.

III.

It seems hard to imagine now, but America was not always so sharply divided over abortion. In the early decades of American independence, the states drew guidance from traditional British common law, which did not recognize the existence of a fetus until the “quickening”: the moment a woman felt the fetus move, usually during the second trimester. Before that, even if pregnancy was suspected, there was no way to confirm it. Women could legally seek relief from what doctors characterized as an “obstructed menses,” soliciting treatments from midwives or home-health manuals and in many cases making use of herbs that had been employed since antiquity (and that are sometimes used today).

Through the first third of the 19th century, as the historian James Mohr has noted, abortion was widely seen as the last resort of women desperate to avoid the disgrace of an illegitimate child. Over the next few decades, the incidence of abortion rose. Mohr explains that the impetus came largely from “white, married, Protestant, native-born women of the middle and upper classes who either wished to delay their childbearing or already had all the children they wanted.” By mid-century, newspapers were full of advertisements for patent medicines such as Dr. Vandenburg’s Female Renovating Pills and Madame Drunette’s Lunar Pills, which claimed—with a knowing arch of the eyebrow—to restore menstrual cycles. Some of the commercial preparations were dangerous; the first abortion statutes, passed in the 1820s and ’30s, were mostly poison-control measures aimed at regulating these products.

The effort to regulate abortion more explicitly, which began some years later, was less civic-minded. At the time, American physicians were working to organize and consolidate their profession. After forming the American Medical Association, in 1847, they began lobbying against

abortion—ostensibly on moral grounds but also in part to neutralize some of the competition from midwives and homeopaths. Within a generation, every state had laws criminalizing the practice, pushing it into a netherworld and inviting dangerous procedures. In 1930, some 2,700 women died from abortions, according to the Guttmacher Institute. While some providers—including physicians—managed to offer safe, sometimes clandestine care, many women resorted to shady practitioners or self-managed abortions. By 1965, fatalities caused by illegal abortions still accounted for nearly a fifth of maternal deaths.

As the women’s-rights movement gained momentum, doctors, lawyers, and public-health advocates began lobbying to reform abortion laws. Some activists, tired of waiting for change, took matters into their own hands. Underground abortion-referral services began to operate across the country. The Army of Three, a trio of California activists, traveled nationwide, holding workshops; they also distributed lists of well-vetted abortion providers in other countries. The Clergy Consultation Service—a group numbering 1,400, mainly Protestant ministers but also including rabbis and Catholic priests—connected countless women with abortion providers. Their work is a reminder that the abortion debate, often presented in stark terms of religious faith versus personal freedom, has always been one where people weigh competing values in complex ways.

Women like Lorraine Rothman and Carol Downer, meanwhile, were spreading the news about the Del-Em; before *Roe*, menstrual-extraction groups were active all across the country. Such work was part of a larger mission that activists called self-help: teaching women how to take charge of their own reproductive health. In Chicago, volunteers with a group called the Jane Collective started out by referring patients to abortion providers, then learned how to perform the procedure themselves. The group performed about 12,000 abortions from 1969 to 1973.

American women weren’t alone in pushing back against abortion restrictions. In Brazil, where abortion has been a crime since the late 19th century, women found another way to resist. In the 1980s, they

discovered an off-label use for a drug called misoprostol, sold under the brand name Cytotec, which was marketed for treating stomach ulcers. It had a potent side effect: heavy uterine contractions that could expel an early pregnancy. This discovery led to misoprostol’s adoption as an abortifacient by the medical community. In 2005, the World Health Organization added misoprostol to its list of essential medicines, along with another abortifacient, mifepristone, better known as RU-486. The drugs have become a major focus of the American abortion underground today.

IV.

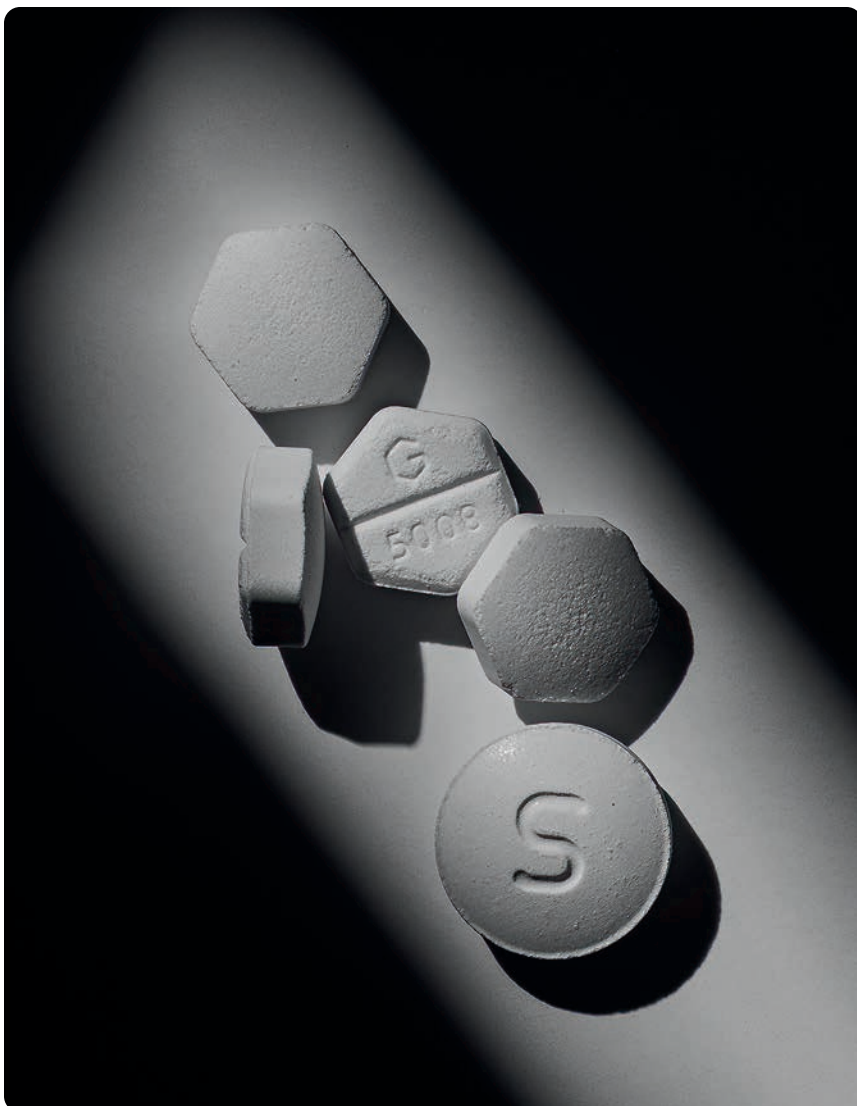
One December afternoon on a Zoom call conducted from Cambridge, Massachusetts, a dozen participants tucked Skittles and M&M’s into their cheeks, then looked at one another awkwardly. I was among them. We had been told to position the Skittles and M&M’s with care: two on each side of the lower jaw, nestled into the buccal cavity, the pouch running along the gums. This is a method for taking misoprostol. Absorbing the drug in this manner—or alternatively, by means of vaginal insertion—means it bypasses the digestive system, going directly into the bloodstream. Chipmunk-faced, we awaited further instructions.

“Keep them there for 30 minutes,” instructed Susan Yanow, a reproductive-rights advocate. “What we’re going to learn right now is that’s easier said than done—to not chew, to not swallow.” In real life, she added, the pills would melt even more slowly than the candies. And they would taste like cardboard.

The audience had logged on from eight states, as well as from Poland and Peru, to learn about ending pregnancies with legal drugs and without medical supervision. In other words: self-managed abortion by means of pharmaceuticals. “The knowledge you’re going to get today is very empowering,” Yanow told the



Tubing, stopper, cannula, syringe: the makings of a Del-Em, a device created for early-stage abortions in the pre-Roe era



A round mifepristone pill and hexagonal misoprostol pills—the pharmaceuticals used in medication abortion

group. “But the real power is in sharing it.” If *Roe* is overturned, she said, more people will need access to this information, and fast. Part of Yanow’s job is spreading the word. She is the spokesperson for SASS—Self-Managed Abortion; Safe and Supported—a project of the global advocacy group Women Help Women, which had developed the day’s curriculum. The class was designed to self-replicate with a model called “train the trainer,” turning students into future teachers.

Abortion pills—mifepristone and misoprostol, colloquially called “mife” (pronounced “miffy”) and “miso”—are remarkably effective and medically safer than acetaminophen and Viagra. They’re FDA-approved for ending pregnancies up to 10 weeks’ gestation. The WHO has protocols for using them to end pregnancies up to 12 weeks’ gestation, and even later. (Taking them further along, however, can raise the risk of complications.) Misoprostol is often used on its own to induce an abortion. But the most effective

protocol calls for both drugs in sequence, and with time in between—first mifepristone, then misoprostol. The combination is available online, for prices that typically range from \$150 to as much as \$600, depending on one’s state and insurance. In many states, it can legally be prescribed by telemedicine and delivered by mail.

Some reproductive-rights activists point to pharmaceuticals as the best fallback plan for a post-*Roe* era. Ending a pregnancy with pills, also known as medication abortion, already accounts for more than half of all abortions in the U.S. But most American adults don’t even know the option exists. Only about one in five has heard of medication abortion, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey published in 2020. Among adult women of reproductive age, it’s about one in three.

That knowledge gap can have serious consequences. Laurie Bertram Roberts is the executive director of the Alabama-based Yellowhammer Fund, which offers financial support for abortion seekers. In recent years, she told me, she has encountered or heard about situations in which pregnant women drink bleach or turpentine, “jab a coat hanger up into themselves,” or “ask their boyfriends to beat them up.” She believes that if more people knew about abortion pills—particularly women of color and the poor, who will be disproportionately affected by a *Roe* reversal—they would be far safer. “To me, as a Black person, it just makes sense,” she said.

Pills are not a one-size-fits-all solution—no drug or medical procedure ever is. Any form of intervention requires care and common sense, and attention to other health issues. People with certain medical conditions, including bleeding disorders and adrenal failure, are unable to use abortion pills. And not everyone reacts to the medication the same way. In most cases, the contents of the uterus are expelled within four hours, and almost certainly within two days, but the process can take as long as a week. (In contrast, vacuum-aspiration methods are also used for terminating early pregnancies, but typically take less than 30 minutes.)

Laws governing access to the medications are in constant flux and differ wildly around the country; erecting roadblocks

to abortion is a clear motivation behind much of the legislation. Thus, 19 states bar the use of telehealth for medication abortion or require patients to consume mifepristone in the physical presence of a clinician; some do both. That eliminates the cheaper and more convenient option: a consultation online or by phone, then receiving pharmaceuticals in the mail. In Texas, patients seeking a medication abortion must make three in-person visits: one for counseling, another to receive the pills, and a third for a medical check afterward.

Self-managed abortion is currently banned outright in three states. Its status is legally murky in many others. At the start of her three-hour class, Yanow opened a PowerPoint presentation. She showed us a map of the U.S. with 22 states shaded in orange. In those places, Yanow said, self-managed abortion had led to people being investigated. Some were charged with felonies under laws that were not actually intended to target abortion, including murder in Georgia and abuse of a corpse in Arkansas. In Indiana, a woman named Purvi Patel was convicted of feticide and given a 20-year sentence. The conviction was later overturned, but only after Patel had already served three years in prison. Yanow drove the message home: Anyone who helped those people could have been charged, too, as accessories to a crime.

If it were possible to feel the air go out of a Zoom room, we would have felt it then. But, Yanow continued, there was a simple way to stay safe legally. That was to only share information, rather than give explicit advice, encouragement, or assistance.

Yanow described the availability of misoprostol and mifepristone. Mife is tightly regulated and can cost more than \$100 a pill. Miso is much cheaper and easier to find. It is used to treat stomach ulcers in humans as well as in cats, dogs, and horses. Pharmacies in Mexico sell misoprostol under its Cytotec brand name. The pills come in blue-and-white boxes with fuchsia accents and have a shelf life of about two years. “The last time I was in Nuevo Progreso, a tiny border town, they were stacked up on the counter like chocolate bars would be here,” Yanow recalled. “As if for an impulse buy.”

Yanow matter-of-factly described what people taking the two-drug combination can expect. The regimen starts with mife, a progesterone blocker that stops the pregnancy from growing. It continues one or two days later with miso, which makes the uterus contract and expel gestational tissue. The experience is like having a spontaneous miscarriage. There can be heavy cramping and bleeding, with the possibility of passing clots up to the size of a lemon. The possible side effects include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and fatigue. Complications are very rare, and generally resemble those associated with a miscarriage; there is a small risk of hemorrhage or retaining tissue (which may have to be removed by a medical provider). Bleeding through more than two maxi pads in two hours is considered excessive, warranting medical attention. For the unprepared, a hospital visit could mean legal complications, too.

Yanow told the story of a woman named Jennifer Whalen, in Pennsylvania, who bought mife and miso online for her pregnant 16-year-old daughter. After the teenager took the pills, her miscarriage began. She became frightened when stomach pains hit, so Whalen drove her to an emergency room and told doctors about the pills. The daughter was fine, but Whalen was charged and pleaded guilty to offering medical advice without a license. She was given a jail sentence of nine to 18 months.

People in similar situations need to know how to present themselves to doctors, Yanow said. “They can say they’re having a miscarriage, or they’re bleeding and they don’t know why,” she explained. According to Paul Blumenthal, a professor emeritus of obstetrics and gynecology at Stanford University, it is safe for patients to self-report this way; a medication abortion is clinically indistinguishable from a spontaneous miscarriage and treated in the same fashion.

Later in the class, it was time to role-play. Yanow gave each of us a part. Some of us were six weeks pregnant and seeking abortion pills. Others had information to share and a mission: Pass it along. The goal was to avoid giving direct advice, because that could be construed as the unauthorized practice of medicine, a criminal offense. The key, Yanow said, was avoiding “that forbidden three-letter word: *y-o-u*.”

V.

No matter how the word is passed, more autonomy is coming, at least eventually—both in places that attempt outright bans and also where abortion remains legal. The weakening or overturning of *Roe* would of course have an impact, and it would be significant. Statewide bans on abortion would cause a rise in maternal deaths—of women with complicating health issues and of women who resort to dangerous methods. Maternal deaths will also rise because women who want an abortion can’t get one—childbirth is far riskier than ending a pregnancy.

But other forces are also at play. A post-*Roe* world will not resemble a pre-*Roe* world. Women already have different options. In Blumenthal’s view, the future doesn’t lie in Planned Parenthood (which in addition to education and advocacy offers abortion services through a network of clinics). “I think the future lies in more self-managed care and alternative distribution schemes,” he told me. Pharmaceuticals are a big part of that future—the work-around of first resort and one that’s hard for authorities to stop. Blumenthal’s confidence in the safety of medication abortion, including when it is self-managed, is the medical consensus, supported by the WHO, the FDA, and numerous studies.

In circumstances where pharmaceuticals may not be appropriate, he believes that laypeople can be instructed to wield manual vacuum-aspiration devices, including the Del-Em, with little risk of infection. Technicians without medical degrees, he added, have been using such tools safely for decades in South and Southeast Asia. “This is not a complicated procedure,” Blumenthal said. Vacuum aspiration outside a clinical setting is not “self-managed” the way pills can be—it requires assistance. Although specific studies are few, they suggest that outcomes involving trained nonphysicians are comparable to those



Firefighters at the Planned Parenthood office in Knoxville, Tennessee, after an arson attack on New Year's Eve

involving physicians (and in either case, the risks are very low).

Even clinical abortion providers who work directly with patients acknowledge that the future may involve them less. Asked about this, Danika Severino Wynn, the vice president of abortion access for Planned Parenthood, replied in a written statement: “Some people may choose to self-manage their abortion with pills, and this may become more common as laws increasingly restrict access to legal care. Planned Parenthood honors and respects this decision and will provide education, support, and any needed clinical care to anyone who seeks it—no matter what.”

Some patients can’t—or don’t want to—manage their own abortions. For them, and for those seeking the dilation-and-evacuation abortions that are most commonly used in the second trimester, the services provided by Planned Parenthood and independent clinics will remain necessary. But for a variety of reasons, including legal restrictions on abortion, the number of brick-and-mortar clinics has been dwindling for years.

Efforts to prepare for a post-*Roe* future have been undertaken in unexpected

places. In 2020, a hackers’ convention called HOPE included talks on coding and digital privacy along with something quite different: A speaker using the alias Maggie Mayhem showed how to build and operate a Del-Em in a workshop titled “Hackers in a Post *Roe v. Wade* World.” In her presentation, Mayhem employed a demonstration method that has been used for training clinicians and medical residents: evacuating a papaya. (According to research published in the journal *Family Medicine*, “Papayas resemble the early pregnant uterus in size, shape, and consistency, and their softness makes them somewhat more realistic models than durable plastic devices.”)

In December, when the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Dobbs*, post-*Roe* prepping intensified. Volunteers across the country handed out thousands of boxes labeled ABORTION PILLS. (Rather than actual medication, they contained cards with a link to shareabortionpill.info, a website that does what the name suggests.) The pro-pill message was amplified with posters, yard signs, stencils, a mural, a digital-billboard truck, and a plane towing a banner over Arizona. The campaign was run by Shout Your Abortion, a nonprofit that aims to destigmatize

the procedure by helping people speak publicly about their experiences.

Whatever the laws may say, history has shown that women will continue to have abortions. The spread of pills and devices like the Del-Em—discreet, inexpensive, and fast—could, if nothing else, help ensure that abortions are done safely and, because of their accessibility, on average earlier in a pregnancy than is the norm today.

Even so, pill proselytizers and Del-Em makers are not the only ones prepping. A nonprofit called Abortion Delivered is planning to deploy mobile abortion vans. The first one was being readied when I spoke with a staff member at the organization who, like Ellie, did not wish to use her name. I’ll call her Angela. The van was being bullet-proofed, Angela told me. It would then be retrofitted with an ultrasound machine and a gynecological-exam table, so a doctor with a manual vacuum-aspiration device could perform first-trimester abortions inside. Abortion Delivered, which originated in Minnesota, planned to dispatch the van—and a second one, stocked with abortion pills—to just outside the Texas border.

“They are small and inconspicuous,” Angela said. “Part of the appeal of it is that we can pass unnoticed and not draw attention.” She did worry about clinicians’ and patients’ safety along the edge of a heavily armed, anti-abortion state. Local FBI agents had been advising on security procedures, she said.

I asked Angela what Abortion Delivered would do with the vans if the Supreme Court weakened or overturned *Roe*. “Well, we’re going to need more,” she said. A cluster of nearby states—Wyoming, North and South Dakota, Nebraska—would likely also curtail abortion access. “We will just be driving up and down the borders,” she explained. “With four fleets, we think we could cover them.” She already has road experience, having delivered abortion pills throughout rural Minnesota in a rented Winnebago. “We would be in one town for 20 minutes,” Angela said, and then the Winnebago would move on. “And no one knew our route.” This may sound like the public-health version of *Mad Max* meets *Station Eleven*, but it’s easy to see how such a scene could become part of the future. Abortion providers have been traveling

from state to state for decades—they used to be called “circuit riders”—to work at understaffed abortion clinics, often in hostile territory.

If the abortion deserts of the Midwest and the South become even more arid than they already are, people will take to the road in ever-greater numbers. Clinicians got a preview of the abortion diaspora after Texas—home to one in 10 reproductive-aged American women—passed its ban. According to a study published earlier this year, clinics as far as Maryland and Washington State saw a rise in patients from Texas. The resulting backlog also created longer wait times. Pregnancies progressed. Some patients who would have otherwise been eligible for abortion pills or manual vacuum aspiration ended up requiring second-trimester surgeries instead.

Other abortion seekers found themselves stuck in Texas. Some ended up having to give birth, unless they were among the lucky few to stumble on an underground provider network. One California activist described mailing misoprostol—something she’d never done before—after getting a panicked request from Texas. “A friend of a friend reached out and said, ‘There’s a 13-year-old girl who needs access, like, right now. And I know that the timing is bad, but can you help?’” Her package, which also included a greeting card, some coffee, and Naomi Alderman’s novel *The Power*, about women taking over the world, arrived the day the ban took effect.

VI.

More of America may soon look like Texas—but in a post-*Roe* world, states where abortion remains accessible could look quite different too. The new infrastructure being put into place extends beyond the grassroots efforts of American abortion activists. California and New York—the two states with the most abortion clinics—have been preparing for an influx of patients.

“We’ll be a sanctuary,” California Governor Gavin Newsom stated in December. Planned Parenthood clinics in Orange and San Bernardino Counties are already staffing up, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Political leaders pushed for public funds to cover the costs of low-income, out-of-state women visiting for abortions. In New York, Attorney General Letitia James proposed a similar fund to make the state a “safe haven.”

Activists in Mexico, whose Supreme Court decriminalized abortion last year, have been planning to help Americans with access. Some are already getting misoprostol into the U.S., by foot and by mail. Aid Access, an Austrian nonprofit, now offers “advance provision,” allowing Americans who aren’t pregnant to order mife and miso for possible future use. The organization serves all 50 states, including those with restrictions on medication abortion. The founder of Aid Access is Rebecca Gomperts, a physician who first gained prominence for creating the organization Women on Waves, which sailed to countries where abortion was illegal, picked up patients, then administered abortion pills in international waters. Similar methods—floating clinics in the Gulf of Mexico’s federal waters; a cruise ship turned clinic anchored outside U.S. jurisdiction—are on the minds of American activists.

In late January, I visited three women from a West Coast menstrual-extraction group founded in 2017 by a sex educator I’ll call Norah, who had organized it as a response to President Donald Trump’s election on an anti-*Roe* platform. The four of us sat in a backyard bungalow, eating cheese and crackers as a fireplace crackled on a wall-mounted television. The group members talked about abortion access—which they hoped to expand by teaching menstrual extraction to activists in heavily regulated states. They had already trained visitors from Kentucky and Texas and had plans to host someone from Ohio.

After talking for almost two hours, we filed into a bedroom for a demonstration. A woman I’ll call Kira attached a Del-Em to a pink Spectra S2 breast pump. Once switched on, the machine began to purr and click at regular intervals; it sounded like a robot snoring.

Norah, who was not pregnant but menstruating, undressed from the waist down

The van was being bulletproofed. It would be retrofitted with an ultrasound machine and a gynecological-exam table.

and lay on the bed. She expertly installed a speculum in her vaginal canal, creating a direct route to her cervix. Kira began to insert the cannula. “I’m at your os,” she said, referring to the cervical opening. “Is it okay to enter?”

“Go for it,” Norah said. The group chatted to pass the time—why do faxes still exist?—until blood appeared in the aquarium tube.

After 15 minutes of extraction, a small clot, nothing unusual, clogged the cannula. Because this was just a demonstration and Norah was getting crampy, they decided to stop. Kira removed the cannula and let the tube drain into the mason jar, where the contents settled: an inch of blood. And then it was over.

I thought back to an afternoon I’d spent interviewing Carol Downer, who toured the Del-Em across America with Lorraine Rothman more than 50 years ago. On her porch in a quiet Los Angeles suburb, we talked about what might happen if the constitutional right to abortion was lost. Downer was glad pharmaceuticals had been added to the feminist toolbox, she told me, though she was concerned about the government finding a way to take them out of women’s hands and she worried about people taking pills in isolation, without a context of friendly support. Downer still kept a Del-Em in

her library, sitting on a table. She was confident the device would remain available. (“It’s a lot harder to ban mason jars,” she observed.) She reflected on the new underground that was growing, and the variety of tools it was employing: “We need all of these things,” she explained.

VII.

Efforts are expanding to provide the kind of friendly support spoken of by Downer. On a Saturday evening in early January, some 40 participants trickled into a conference room on Jitsi Meet, an encrypted, open-source Zoom alternative favored by the anti-surveillance set. We had been instructed beforehand: No real names. No audio, except for the presenters. No video. The screen filled up with blacked-out squares and aliases: Jolly Broccoli. Astronaut Witch. Blue Dinosaur. Tulip Jones. Adventurous Fern.

Zane (a pseudonym) was a volunteer with Autonomous Pelvic Care, an Appalachia-based reproductive-health organization that teaches courses for community-care providers on subjects such as self-managed abortion with pills, menstrual extraction, fertility tracking, and digital security. It had been a fraught week. Eight days earlier, on New Year’s Eve, an arsonist had burned down the Planned Parenthood office in Knoxville, Tennessee. Ever since, Zane told me, they’d been preparing to host this evening while fielding panicky messages from community members asking, “What do we do now?”

Tonight’s session featured four educators and was aimed at community providers and anyone else who might be supporting someone through a self-managed abortion. Zane started the session by talking through a protocol for mifepristone and misoprostol. One of the evening’s presenters, an herbalist and doula with Holistic Abortions, offered ways to ease the process—before, during, and after—with the goal of

improving the whole abortion experience.

Next came a volunteer from Mountain Access Brigade, which runs a secure voice and text support line for abortion seekers in eastern Tennessee and Appalachia who need logistical, emotional, and financial assistance. She shared a website called Plan C, which includes a state-by-state directory for ordering pills online.

The last presenter was from If/When/How, a reproductive-justice legal-advocacy group that had recently announced a \$2 million defense fund to cover bail, expert witnesses, and attorneys’ fees for people who get arrested after managing their own abortions. Prosecutors, she noted, have been known to repurpose obscure laws—including some from the 18th century—that were not meant to criminalize self-managed abortion.

Much of the material in this workshop and Susan Yanow’s session was new to me. But the tone felt familiar: Two years into the pandemic, we’ve all become public-health preppers. We’re more keenly attuned to threats and better stocked with the tools—hand sanitizer, antigen tests—to meet them.

No matter what happens to *Roe*, my own freedoms seemed unlikely to change much, at least for the foreseeable future; after all, I was living at the time in Los Angeles and make my permanent home in New York City. Even so, I decided to order some pills. I went online to Plan C and scrolled through the drop-down menu to California. There was a buffet of choices: Six telehealth providers, including Aid Access and start-ups called Hey Jane and Choix, offered mifepristone and misoprostol together beginning at \$150.

For preppers—people who wouldn’t need the pills immediately—the best choice appeared to be ordering them from Aid Access, the only service offering advance provision. I placed my order on Saturday night, a few hours after the Autonomous Pelvic Care session wrapped up. I didn’t have to speak with anyone directly. An online questionnaire took less than 15 minutes and ended by asking the reason for my order, with a litany of mostly depressing options: *Stigma. Cost. Having to deal with protesters. The need to keep my treatment a secret. Legal restrictions.*

I ordered the pills on Saturday night. I didn’t have to speak with anyone directly. An online questionnaire took less than 15 minutes.

Risk of abuse from my partner. The next day, my order was approved and I made an online payment of \$150.

Four days later, a U.S. Postal Service package arrived. It came from an online pharmacy called Honeybee Health, just seven miles from where I was living. Inside, a plastic sleeve patterned with festive dots held the goods: a few leaflets, a box of mifepristone, and a teal bottle with hexagonal tablets inside. I tipped them into my palm and counted eight misoprostol pills. They looked utilitarian and chalky, nothing like M&M’s.

The instructions were printed on a double-sided flyer. A cartoon showed two pills tucked inside a cheek. Another showed a woman lying on her side, barefoot, eyes closed. Her arms were wrapped around her midsection. Her knees were drawn up to her chest. The caption said, “Expect bleeding.” Looking at the drawing made me feel queasy, even a bit afraid. I wanted to draw a friend next to her.

Instead, I rewrapped the package. Then I tucked it away, wondering if the contents would look any different in June. *A*

Jessica Bruder is a Brooklyn-based journalist and the author of three books, including Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century.

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TOUR

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GUIDES

TO A

TRAGEDY



The killing of three
civil-rights workers
in Neshoba County,
Mississippi, in 1964
changed America. But
today, if you want to
know what happened
here, you need to
know who to ask.

Photographs by
Nate Palmer



My stepdad, Obbie Riley, was born in Philadelphia, Mississippi, a place known nationally more for an act of unspeakable violence than for anything else. He turned 2 during the Freedom Summer of 1964,

when nearly 1,000 volunteers from up north worked alongside local activists registering Black Mississippians to vote. A week into the project, Klansmen murdered three young civil-rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—who had come to investigate the Ku Klux Klan’s burning of Mount Zion United Methodist Church, where my stepdad grew up worshipping. The violence stuck with him. He left the state after high school to look for work, but 22 years later he returned to his hometown, with history still on his mind.

Now my stepfather is one of a handful of Black folks around town who give informal tours of Philadelphia’s civil-rights history. The pandemic put these tours on hold for a while, but even before COVID, they were irregular, and could be found only by word of mouth. Guides like Obbie don’t have websites, or even Facebook pages. Yet people from all over have managed to reach them—Obbie estimates that he’s given more than 100 tours. Their popularity is understandable in a town where official sources, such as the local museum, are still reluctant to tell the story. Even in this boom time of national memorialization of Black civil-rights history, in Philadelphia, tours like Obbie Riley’s are the only real way to connect to the dark truth of our past.

This fall, on one of my trips back home, I decided to talk with him about that past. I sat at the kitchen counter as he washed dishes. He told me he’s curious about what people—white people—think about the 1964 murders. Obbie, who also serves on the county’s board of supervisors as the only Black person and sole Democrat, has spent his life capturing memories about that time from his elders. He’s inclined to assume that the legacy of the murders doesn’t affect the white population, which makes up about 60 percent of the county, as much as it does the Black folks. But he doesn’t know for sure. No one talks about it, after all.

“I think they made themselves believe that sticking their heads in the ground is a cure,” he said. “We haven’t opened up and talked about it to heal.”

Obbie told me he started doing tours years ago. What happened here is no secret—there are books and movies about it. People who cared about civil-rights history would travel to the church in June for the annual memorial service to commemorate the three civil-rights workers, and many would ask to get better acquainted with the history. Obbie is of the opinion that if something needs to get done, especially something as important as ensuring that the legacy of your community and family doesn’t get erased, you’d better first employ yourself to do something about it. I’d lived in town for years, but I’d never taken his tour. So on a chilly November day, we hopped into his white pickup truck at dusk with his mean little mutt, Rex. We pulled out of the long gravel driveway and drove into history.

WE BEGAN IN THE WOODS about half a mile up the road from my parents’ house. Obbie showed me the 200-year-old post-oak trees that he said mark where sharecroppers like his parents lived in tenant houses, and the woodsy, overgrown area where, he told me, formerly enslaved people are buried, their markers missing or mossy and tilted. We turned down Road 747, where a white sign at the highway intersection advertises Mount Zion, just about two or so miles down this country road.

The red-brick building sits a ways back from the road, accessible by a semicircle driveway. Six decades ago, the Klan ambushed Black churchgoers here as they left a meeting.

Previous spread: *The site in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were murdered in 1964.* Opposite page: *Obbie Riley on his farm in Philadelphia, Mississippi.*





The Klan had been monitoring 24-year-old Michael Schwerner, a Jewish civil-rights worker originally from New York who was on staff at the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), one of the civil-rights groups that had come together as the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to organize Freedom Summer. Schwerner had opened the COFO field office in nearby

Meridian, and led the office with his wife, Rita. He was also leading the effort to turn Mount Zion into a Freedom School—a center to help the surrounding community combat voter-suppression tactics. Places like Mount Zion—Black churches in Black communities—were the only spaces where the activists could hope to have any safety. But on that June night, Klansmen



The Klan burned Mount Zion United Methodist Church to the ground in 1964. It was rebuilt in 1966.

came to Mount Zion after getting a tip that a meeting was happening at the church, and that Schwerner and other white civil-rights workers might be there. They weren't—but Klan members still exacted violence on the church's parishioners.

One man, Bud Cole, suffered a beating so brutal that he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. Georgia Rush and one

of her sons, John Thomas, were also beaten. Klansmen returned later that night and set fire to Mount Zion, burning it down completely. A report from the Associated Press said Mount Zion was one of four “Negro” churches scorched in Mississippi within a 10-day period.

Word about Mount Zion's destruction traveled to a Freedom Summer training Schwerner was helping conduct at Western College for Women, in Ohio (now Miami University). Schwerner knew he had to head back to Philadelphia. So did James Chaney, a Black CORE staffer and native of Meridian who'd been working with Schwerner that summer. A new volunteer named Andrew Goodman, a Jewish college student who was also from New York, asked to go too. Later, the FBI would come to believe that the Klan had burned Mount Zion to lure Schwerner back.

Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman arrived in Philadelphia on June 21, five days after the fire, to interview community members. One of the last places they stopped was Rush's home, to pay their respects. The three men knew they had to get out of Neshoba County before nightfall. An agency called the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission had been tracking civil-rights workers and had given the Neshoba County Sheriff's Office—and thus the Klan—a description of the car the men were driving.

The way my stepdad tells it is that, after leaving Rush's residence, Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner decided to drive through town to catch Highway 19 to Meridian and avoid the winding back roads. From this point, the details diverge depending on whose version of events you hear. According to FBI documents, Deputy Sheriff Cecil Ray Price, a Klansman, spotted their station wagon while he was driving in the opposite direction; he turned around and began following it. In the center of town, the men pulled over to change a tire. Price pulled up beside them. He let them fix their car before arresting them and taking them to the county jail, booking Chaney for speeding and holding Schwerner and Goodman for investigation. While they were locked up, Price called Edgar Ray Killen, a local preacher and Klansman, to alert him to the young men's capture.

Obbie made that turn onto Highway 19, close to where Price had apprehended the trio. We proceeded down the two-lane road, a stretch of which has been renamed Goodman Chaney Schwerner Memorial Highway. It's the road they drove down after Price released them from jail at about 10:30 p.m.

Less than 10 miles down the road is the marker for an area called Bethsaida, home to a suspected Klan meeting spot at the time. My stepdad floored the gas pedal. “This is where the chase began,” he told me.

Two cars of Klansmen had been following the station wagon. They were soon joined by Price. It was Price who pulled up behind the three civil-rights workers, in his patrol car. Obbie said he wonders what the trio's conversation must have been,



This page: *A sign marking the murder site.*

Opposite page: *Jewel McDonald, an unofficial tour guide, at her home.*

what they must have said to one another once they realized they were being pursued. The men pulled over and Price forced them into his patrol car; another Klansman took the wheel of the station wagon. The cars drove together to a secluded spot on Rock Cut Road.

There are different versions of what happened next. According to a confession later made by one of the Klansmen, his partners pulled Schwerner from the car and shot him first, then Goodman. A private autopsy performed later indicated that the Klansmen had beaten Chaney severely before they killed him. The man who shot Chaney complained that he hadn't gotten to kill one of the white men: "You didn't leave anything but a nigger." Then the Klansmen loaded the bodies back into the station wagon and drove away.

The disappearance of the civil-rights workers created a national uproar. As the federal government launched a massive 44-day manhunt, Rita Schwerner, Michael's widow, said that the reason the widespread search was happening at all was because two of the three men were white. Two days after they were killed, authorities found their torched station wagon in Bogue Chitto Creek. As law-enforcement and military officials searched the surrounding area for the three victims, they came across the bodies of two Black men who had gone missing earlier that year. Federal agents ultimately found the three bodies they were looking for on Old Jolly Farm, buried in an earthen dam.

IT'S PERFECTLY POSSIBLE to come to Philadelphia, Mississippi, without ever encountering this history.

A few weeks before I went on the tour with my stepfather, I visited the Philadelphia–Neshoba County Historical Museum, a white wooden house off a narrow street that dead-ends in the woods. I had heard there was nothing in the museum about Mount Zion or the three civil-rights workers, and wanted to see for myself.

The museum manages to be both in the center of town and tucked away, and has been open since the '90s. One day last fall, I finally succeeded at getting inside—the hours of operation are a mere suggestion. I rang the bell and a volunteer, an older white woman, came to greet me. She offered a tour.

For about half an hour, she walked me through the exhibits that detailed what downtown social life was like in the 1920s. An entire room on the first floor is dedicated to the country-music star and Philadelphia native Marty Stuart. Across from Stuart's room is another music-centered room, dedicated to Otis Rush and Fats Domino, whose histories have been given a wall apiece. We trekked upstairs to the veterans' memorial, in a dusty room that felt like an attic.

Our final stop was a replica cabin of the kind you see at "Mississippi's Giant Houseparty," the Neshoba County Fair. The event is an annual week of horse racing, politicking, beer chugging, and whiteness. The fair was where Ronald Reagan launched his presidential campaign with a speech about states' rights, a loud

“WHAT’S DONE IN THE DARK ALWAYS COMES TO THE LIGHT,” JEWEL MCDONALD, A TOUR GUIDE, TOLD ME.



dog whistle not far in distance or time from the Freedom Summer murders. It's the town's pride, and part of the reason Philadelphia's tagline is "Our fair city."

At the end of the tour, I asked my guide if maybe I had missed the Mount Zion exhibit. "This is supposed to be back before the '60s, you know, and all that happened in the '60s," she said. "We don't have anything on that."

We stood in silence.

A museum board member later confirmed that it doesn't have anything on Mount Zion or the murders, and that curators focus on the agricultural and industrial history of the county, not social justice or race. "We stay away from issues that would be controversial," he said.

IF YOU WANT to find out what happened here and aren't related to a tour guide, you might start at the Depot, a former train station that's now home to several municipal offices, including the tourism bureau.

At the main entrance, a volunteer told me that guided civil-rights tours weren't being offered during the pandemic and that she didn't know who normally organized them. So I visited Tim Moore's office, just down the hall. Moore, 46, runs the Community Development Partnership, which is responsible for tourism in the city and the county. Moore told me that he's often the middleman connecting visitors who call ahead with guides like Obbie. Like many white people his age, Moore didn't learn about the history of Mount Zion until he was an adult. He said he has reservations about his office taking on more responsibility when it comes to formalizing the civil-rights tours. "Yes, we're all in the same community; it's all of our story," he told me. "But I never want to infringe on that particular story, because it is sacred. It is special." He sticks to arranging tours on a case-by-case basis.

In addition to my stepdad, one of the people Moore often calls is Jewel McDonald, the daughter of Georgia Rush, the woman who was beaten in the attack on Mount Zion in 1964. McDonald turned 18 six days before the Klan burned down her church. She was supposed to be in the sanctuary that night, but she had decided to watch her niece instead. Now 75 years old, she's become another unofficial docent on the civil-rights trail here. She gave tours until the pandemic began, especially to students, and plans to start again when she can. It's not as easy for her as it once was—in 2010, McDonald lost her right leg to a bacterial infection. But she does it anyway.

"What's done in the dark always comes to the light," McDonald told me one Sunday afternoon while we sat at her kitchen table. It's a refrain she often heard from her mother.

Five months after the murders, McDonald married her husband, Cleo. They caught the Greyhound bus headed north the next day. The McDonalds first lived in Syracuse, New York, and then Cleveland, places where they had some family. Jewel thought she might never come back to Mississippi. When Cleo popped

Top: A memorial to James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner outside Mount Zion.
Bottom: The road leading to Mount Zion, at dusk.



THEY ARE THE STEWARDS OF THIS NATION'S CIVIL RIGHTS, AND I FEAR THAT OUR HISTORY MIGHT DIE WITH THEM.

into the kitchen, he told me that it was always in the plan to return. “I told you that before we got married,” Cleo said to Jewel. They came back in 1994, to move Jewel’s mom home to Mississippi after she’d fallen ill.

About a decade after the McDonalds returned, Jewel got a phone call from Jim Prince, the editor and publisher of the local newspaper, inviting her to a meeting regarding the upcoming 40th anniversary of the murders. The multiracial group of residents who attended that meeting continued to meet regularly afterward. Accountability for the crimes had been minimal. A federal trial in 1967 resulted in seven convictions, eight not-guilty verdicts, and three mistrials. But the 18 defendants had been charged with civil-rights violations, not murder. Only the state government could have brought murder charges, and Mississippi had not pursued the case. None of the defendants served more than six years in prison.

It had been an open secret that the Klansman and Baptist preacher Edgar Ray Killen had played a significant role in the murders. In 1967, he was one of the 11 men who got off scot-free; a woman on the all-white jury said she couldn’t bring herself to convict a preacher. In 2004, he was still alive, and living nearby.

For months, the group Prince helped organize, which became known as the Philadelphia Coalition, listened to stories of residents like Jewel, who told them about how her mother and brother were beaten. On May 26, 2004, the coalition made a public appeal at city hall for the state to level criminal charges. Leroy Clemons, then the president of the local NAACP chapter and also a tour guide,

read the announcement with Prince, his fellow coalition chair. The remarks didn’t directly name whom the state might charge with murder, but everyone knew they referred to Killen.

“We deplore the possibility that history will record that the state of Mississippi, and this community in particular, did not make a good-faith effort to do its duty,” Clemons said.

The coalition’s efforts paid off. In June 2005, Killen was finally prosecuted by the state of Mississippi. He was sentenced to 60 years in prison for manslaughter; he died just shy of his 93rd birthday while incarcerated at Parchman, the state penitentiary.

Jewel began giving tours around the time of the trial that put Killen away. She told me that when she was living up north, she never talked about what had happened in 1964—no one did. But she was upset to encounter a veil of silence in Philadelphia shrouding the history of “the boys,” as many in her generation call the trio. She saw a need, both for the kids in the area who weren’t learning this history in school—and whose grandparents might have still been afraid to talk, Jewel added—and for the out-of-towners who would come by the church and elsewhere asking for a tour.

But the lack of infrastructure also meant that, for years, Jewel wasn’t paid for her time, beyond voluntary donations. Only recently has she begun charging a small fee. It also means you can come to Neshoba County, or grow up in it for that matter, without ever getting a good account of what happened here.

I can understand why people don’t want to talk about this history. It’s disturbing and painful, as the truth can be. Learning this history is like taking bitter medicine, my stepdad said. “If you never cleanse yourself of this and own it,” he continued, “it’s just there.”

But despite the silence in Neshoba County, the markers of this history are all around, if you know where to look. They’re in church cemeteries and in the stories passed down—the ghosts that appear to haunt only some of us. Especially during these past two years of the pandemic, when gathering with elders has been tricky at best, I’ve been anxious about all of the memories, histories, and knowledge we stand to lose. They are the stewards of this nation’s civil rights, and I fear that our history might die with them.

Lately, a remedy for this worry has been to turn on a recorder when Obbie gets to telling a story, or when he’s with his brothers, or when my great-aunt recalls what it was like to leave Mississippi for Chicago only to come back home. I realize that my own efforts to chronicle their stories are attempts at picking up reins that they will soon cease to hold. I understand that history is not just forgotten—rather, it is destroyed by the same violence that claimed Mount Zion. As Martin Luther King Jr. said on his visit to the ruins in 1964: “I think this church was burned because it took a stand.” But the target was never just a building. *A*

Ko Bragg is an editor at Scalawag magazine, and is based in New Orleans.

THE
SHADOW

ROYALS

ACROSS
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DESCENDANTS
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BELIEVE THEY
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BY
HELEN
LEWIS

Opposite page: *Prince Leka II of Albania, photographed in February at his residence in Tirana*



ONE PECULIARITY OF EUROPEAN ARISTOCRATS

is that their names pile up, like snowdrifts. It's lunchtime in Tirana, the capital of Albania, and I am about to meet Leka Anwar Zog Reza Baudouin Msiziwe Zogu, crown prince of the Albanians.

The Albanian royal residence is easy to miss, tucked away on a quiet side street behind the national art museum. While Buckingham Palace has 775 rooms, including 188 staff bedrooms, 19 staterooms, and 78 bathrooms, the Albanian residence would be among the smaller, more understated houses in a wealthy American suburb. Its front gate opens onto a yard where the country stores its unwanted Soviet statues: Lenin, Stalin, and the Albanian Communist leader Enver Hoxha all gaze with stony fortitude at a generic Stakhanovite maiden. Lenin has no arms. Hoxha's nose is missing. The gate is guarded by an elderly manservant for whom the term *faithful retainer* might have been invented. Because I am British, his thinly disguised irritation at my presence makes me feel right at home.

And here is the prince: 39 years old, more than six feet tall, with a sandy beard, navy blazer, and soft South African accent, saying goodbye to his wife, Crown Princess Elia, and their 1-year-old daughter, Princess Geraldine. The pair are about to go to the park—without bodyguards—and Prince Leka II takes me inside, to the drawing room, where the faithful retainer brings me an espresso. Next door is a room devoted to Albanian history (“what a lovely scimitar,” I find myself exclaiming, my reserves of small talk inadequate at the sight of the family's sword collection), and beyond that is a cozy lounge with a leather sofa, its domesticity slightly compromised by the bows and arrows hanging on the wall.

Leka's cosmopolitan name tells the story of his family. Zog is for his grandfather, an Ottoman bey, or chieftain, who became prime minister of Albania in 1922 and upgraded himself to president three years later, then to king in 1928. That arrangement lasted for 11 years, before Mussolini invaded, in 1939, and made Albania part of the Italian empire. Zog fled to Greece, along with his wife, Geraldine, and two-day-old son, whose name would later be styled Leka I. The family subsequently moved to Turkey, then France, then London, then Egypt, and then back to France, where Zog died, in 1961. His widow and son moved to Spain and then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) before ending up in South Africa.

Leka II's other names pay tribute to the leaders who helped the royal household in its long exile: Anwar is for Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat; Reza is for Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last shah of Iran; Baudouin is for Boudewijn, an uncle of the

current king of Belgium. Msiziwe is a Zulu honorific, derived from the word for “helper,” a reminder that when Zog's grandson was born, in South Africa, the government symbolically designated the maternity ward as Albanian soil.

Prince Leka grew up in the last days of apartheid. He has a strong childhood memory of visiting the beach at Durban and asking why the family's Zulu driver could not join them. “It was a white beach,” he says. Then he looked across at the Black children playing in their segregated area and wondered why he couldn't play with them. “Do you ever watch Trevor Noah?” he asks me. “I resonate with his ideas, his philosophy,” he says, leaning forward in his chair. “If we don't recall our legacy and the torments of the past, it's nothing good for the future.”

Leka is a paradox—a royal prince living in a democratic republic. His position is lonely, as the only son of an only son. He has assigned himself an immense task: to act as a unifying figure in a poor country with a febrile political system still scarred by half a century of authoritarianism, in a region marked by religious violence. And the tools available to him are few: a resonant name, a gentle manner, and a handful of social-media accounts. Leka is active on Facebook and Instagram, and occasionally drops into Twitter, where his unverified account promises to share a “combination of personal and official happenings.”

Across Europe, royal families are variously seen as tourist attractions, embarrassing artifacts, spiritual leaders, and symbols of national identity. Several countries that exiled their monarchs in favor of fascism, communism, or military rule—Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and of course Albania—have now allowed their royal families back home, making uneasy pacts with history. They are royal but not royal, monarchs without thrones, caught between the past and the future. A surprising number of them have gone into politics. What do their countries want from them?

Leka lives modestly; the original royal palace was confiscated by the Communists in 1946, and the royal household today receives no funding from the state. He has no constitutionally recognized role. And he has only a minuscule chance of regaining the throne. In some ways, his story is quintessentially Millennial: In previous generations, a crown prince could look forward to a secure, permanent job, with a salary and great benefits. Instead Leka is performing royal duties for “exposure,” in hopes of being hired full-time.

Think of it as an unpaid internship in monarchy.

T

The history of Europe can be told through its royal dynasties—the Habsburgs, the Bourbons, the Romanovs, the Stuarts, the House of Hohenzollern, the House of Orange. Some kings were imported: The great powers of Europe decided that Albania needed a monarch, so in 1914 they sent over a German army captain to do the job. (He lasted six months before being forced into exile.) Some kings were elected: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's laudable attempt to widen the monarchy's applicant pool led to repeated wars. Some kings were executed: Charles I of England lost his head to an ax and Louis XVI to the guillotine.

Europe has 12 remaining monarchies, including three principalities and a grand duchy. But the continent is also lousy with dethroned or exiled royals, many of whom have returned to their ancestral homelands. King Michael of Romania was kicked out by Communists, but his daughter Margareta, custodian of the Romanian crown, is back there, and has co-founded a charitable foundation. Constantine II, a former king of Greece, flew his family to safety in Italy after a coup in 1967. He now lives a quiet life in a Greek resort town. Crown Prince Alexander of Serbia was born in a suite at Claridge's in London after his father fled Yugoslavia during the Second World War. He now lives in the royal palace in Belgrade. Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, a former king of Bulgaria, spent 50 years in exile. He served as the country's prime minister soon after he was allowed home, in 1996.

The further royals get from power, the odder the whole business seems. There are three main claimants to the French throne. One of them—Jean-Christophe Napoléon Bonaparte, who works in private equity—has a LinkedIn profile. Another, Jean d'Orléans, count of Paris, is six generations away from the last king of France, Louis-Philippe, but feels the need to keep the monarchist presence alive on the internet. “In the last 30 years, the politics of our country has completely altered our social bonds through its hedonistic individualism,” he explains on his website. “It therefore seemed important to me to accompany my commitments with appropriate communication.” (For the record, this is also why I tweet.)

The third claimant goes even further. Louis de Bourbon, duke of Anjou, has the type of spicily partisan Twitter presence more usually associated with Substack writers. The self-styled Louis XX has spoken out against gay marriage and backed the “silent majority” of France's “yellow vest” protesters. In 2020, after an activist removed the hand of a royal statue in Kentucky during racial-justice protests, he

UNDER COMMUNIST RULE, EVEN OWNING A PICTURE OF KING ZOG CARRIED A LONG PRISON SENTENCE.

tweeted: “As the heir of #LouisXVI, and attached to the defense of his memory, I do hope that the damage will be repaired and that the statue will be restored.” Americans were unimpressed. Many of the 8,000 quote-tweets ran along the same lines: “Your family has never been particularly good at reading the room have they,” said one. “You act like that's the worst body part Louis XVI ever lost in front of a crowd,” offered another.

The French public has greeted the jostling among the three pretenders mostly with indifference or contempt. But other former kingdoms have taken a softer stance toward their aristocrats. Leka's presence in Tirana is a signal that the intolerant, paranoid days of communism are over. Although his father's politics were right-wing, he is resolutely nonpartisan, and his patchwork family—Anglican mother, Catholic grandmother, Muslim grandfather, and Orthodox wife—is a model for a country trying to resist the divisions that have long plagued the Balkans. He presents himself as the answer to a question: If a country does not define itself by a religion or an ideology, does it need another focal point, a symbol of national unity? “We are lacking role models,” says Grida Duma, a member of Parliament for the center-right Democratic Party. “From Byzantine times, we have had the luck and the misluck to be in the middle of cultures—and being small, as a country in the middle of cultures, it's very hard to create identity.”

B

Before I arrived in Tirana, the royal household assigned me a fixer—Biniamin Bakalli, billed online as the family's former “head of protocol,” now a voluble middle-aged businessman with an American passport and a deep loathing of communism. Ahead of the scheduled interview with Prince Leka, Bakalli took me to an underground museum in the center of the city, made from one of the country's 170,000 abandoned bunkers, which stand as concrete-and-steel monuments to the Communist dictator Enver Hoxha's paranoia. Bakalli paid the admission fees, although he noted later that he was entitled to free entry, because the victims of communism whom the museum was set up to remember include several members of his family.

Hoxha was still in power when Leka was born, in 1982. Back then, his family's chances of returning to Albania looked remote: If they did, they were likely to be executed by the Communist government. Even owning a picture of King Zog carried a long prison sentence.

Under Communist rule, Albania proclaimed itself a republic and disavowed its former monarch. Lea Ypi, a London School of Economics professor who grew up in

Communist Albania, recalls that whenever the former ruler was mentioned in her lessons at school, it was never as King Zog, but as “Zog the tyrant.” A handsome, ruthless chain-smoker with a tiny mustache, he’d thrived in the bear pit of Albanian politics and reportedly survived more than 50 assassination attempts.

That the Communist regime branded him a tyrant is ironic, however. Hoxha—or “Uncle Enver,” as children were told to call him—executed at least 6,000 political opponents, intellectuals, and religious leaders. He killed his own brother-in-law and all but one of his interior ministers. He broke with the post-Stalin Soviet Union after deciding that Nikita Khrushchev was a softy. His only major allies were the Chinese Communists—until 1978, when he broke with them too. Long poised between the Ottoman empire and Christian Europe, Albania had been a religiously diverse country for centuries, but in 1967 it became an atheist state, because Hoxha’s government tolerated no alternative power bases.

The exhibits at the bunker museum demonstrate his mania for control—for instance, he had the beards of tourists shaved off at the border—and the totality of the surveillance state he constructed. Ypi’s family developed an elaborate code to discuss friends and family who were taken to labor camps, referring to them as going to “college” and either “graduating” (being released) or “dropping out” (being executed).

Hoxha died in 1985, leaving behind the third-poorest country in the world. His legacy of a one-party state ended six years later, when the first multiparty elections were held. The transition from communism to capitalism was fraught, as an estimated two-thirds of the population used their new economic freedom to invest in pyramid schemes—the inevitable collapse of which caused panic, riots, and mass emigration. By the late 1990s, Ypi says, “there was no state.” In addition to food shortages and electrical blackouts—nothing new—the old armories had been looted. Men and women carried weapons, “and because they had been trained under communism to use guns, they could also use them.”

Against this background, King Zog’s son secured a referendum on the return of the monarchy in 1997. The striking, 6-foot-8 Leka I, who regularly dressed in military fatigues, returned to Albania to campaign. He toured the country to make his case; Ypi remembers watching television ads extolling the virtues of kingship. “Every evening, a split screen showed images of Albania in flames alongside photos of landmarks in Oslo, Copenhagen, and Stockholm,” she writes in *Free*, her recent memoir. “Written in blue under the photos one could read: ‘Norway: Constitutional Monarchy’; ‘Denmark: Constitutional Monarchy’; ‘Sweden: Constitutional Monarchy.’” All this could be yours, the commercials promised, if you just let the heirs to Zog return home. Ypi watched these ads over the sound of Kalashnikovs being fired in the streets.

The ad campaign didn’t work. The official result was a two-thirds majority for a republic, although Leka I would maintain to his death that the vote had been rigged against him. A recount led to protests, which led to violence, which led to Leka I fleeing the country again, and being convicted in absentia of organizing an armed uprising. But the wheel kept turning, and five years later, in 2002, he was granted amnesty and invited home. Next to him as he disembarked from a plane at Tirana’s airport was his 20-year-old son.

Suddenly, Prince Leka II’s life changed. He went from being a private citizen in the global South to a half-prince in a homeland he had never really known. He had grown up surrounded by Albanians, “old mountain men” of his grandfather’s generation, who reminisced about a bygone version of the country. He always felt his destiny was there.

“I

“I can’t believe it’s 20 years since I’ve been back,” Leka tells me as we drink our coffee under a picture of his grandparents’ wedding ceremony, rescued a few years ago from a shop run by two little old ladies. I tell him that the worst part about approaching 40 is that you realize you are, indisputably, a grown-up. “We’re getting old,” he agrees. “And as you reach the age of 40, you ask yourself: *What have we achieved?*”

After the family’s return, the young Leka fashioned for himself a course in kingship. Like his father, he attended Sandhurst military academy, England’s equivalent of West Point. He studied international relations in Kosovo, and Italian in Perugia, Italy. After returning to Tirana, he worked for the Albanian government, spending three years as an adviser in the ministry of foreign affairs, then three years in the ministry of the interior and a year in the president’s office.

Still, Leka is right to wonder: What has he achieved? When his father died a decade ago, Leka inherited a crown that doesn’t exist. He has a job that very few people in history have ever held—but what exactly is it?

He does charity work through a foundation named after his grandmother Queen Geraldine. Sometimes he acts as a kind of diplomatic wingman: In 2019, he accompanied the Albanian president on a visit to Monaco. He also receives pleas for help in navigating Albania’s labyrinthine (and corrupt) bureaucracy and legal systems. “You have to understand, it’s a very difficult country,” Leka says. “And a lot of people feel that they are disenfranchised or neglected; they have issues.” The mysterious, enduring glamour of monarchy means that nonprofits, international organizations, and politicians take his calls.

And then there is his unofficial ambassadorial role, improving the international reputation of a country that was closed to outsiders for half a century. When other Europeans think of Albania at all, many imagine it as an exporter of drug dealers and criminal gangs. This casual prejudice was the reason Leka accepted an interview request out of the blue from a British writer at an American magazine. “You’re five times more likely to be robbed in London than Tirana,” he tells me. “We have 375 kilometers of pristine

Opposite page (clockwise from top left): *Skanderbeg Square in central Tirana; Leka at home; family photographs displayed at the Albanian royal residence; a statue of King Zog in Tirana*





coastline, the Ionian Sea, the Adriatic Sea ... The potential which Albania has is quite incredible.” He is right; this is a country with medieval ruins, wild mountains, and not a single McDonald’s.

One of the greatest functions of royalty is simply to be seen. That is why medieval monarchs held royal progresses, touring their lands, touching the sick, and hearing the grievances of the poor. They sent portraits of themselves to be displayed in cathedrals and countinghouses. They put their face on coins. The modern version of this is social media, and Leka has become a sort of, well, *prinfluencer*. His wife, Elia, is particularly popular on Instagram—she was a member of the Albanian answer to the Spice Girls before marrying him—and he posts photos of himself with extravagantly bearded religious leaders or in black tie at the weddings of fellow royals, and the occasional selfie at the beach with baby Geraldine.

It is fashionable to deride modern celebrities as “famous for being famous,” but this is a style pioneered by shadow monarchs. With no army or bureaucracy to enact their desires, they draw power from their symbolism.

Like other kinds of influencers, though, modern royals (and pretenders) must carefully defend their brands from controversy. They tend to promote virtues that are nebulous and expansive enough to seem above party politics. “Tolerance” is the most obvious, as a softer way of talking about pluralism. “Taking care of the planet” is the defanged version of environmentalism. “Empowering women” is another favorite, although even this is considered edgy in Albania, where Leka gets dismissive comments when he takes Geraldine out in her stroller alone—many Albanians see child-rearing as

women’s work and therefore demeaning for a father, never mind a prince. In that context, his support for women’s charities and his Instagram dad-posts are quiet political statements.

This is one way Leka is unlike his father—the “soldier,” as the son refers to him. “He was from a different era,” he tells me, choosing his words carefully. In fact, a repeated refrain I hear from many people I meet in Albania is that Leka is too nice to be a ruler. “He’s well mannered, well educated, and, politically, sorry, he’s too good,” the Albanian journalist and author Erald Kapri says. He doesn’t have the killer instinct? I ask. “In Albanian politics, you should have it.”

Leka himself deflects the question of whether he will ever be king. “As a family, we are not working for a referendum,” he says. He wants to “be part of the system,” and is pleased when he is asked to join government meetings with foreign ambassadors and emissaries from NATO and the European Union. When I ask him about the loneliness of his job—whom does he complain to?—he responds with a quick smile: “I never complain.” I press him, hoping to discover a secret WhatsApp group of dispossessed royals sending one another cry-laughing emoji under the table at boring state dinners. He will admit only to discussing his job with his wife.

This page: *Tirana, photographed in February. The city’s Socialist mayor, Erion Veliaj, calls Leka “a de facto ambassador of the new Albania.”* Opposite page: *A recently unveiled statue of Queen Geraldine (top); men playing dominoes in Tirana.*

K

Karl von Habsburg has entered the Zoom. The 61-year-old head of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine would today be the leader of the Austro-Hungarian empire, if there were an Austro-Hungarian empire left to lead. Instead, he is fiddling with his microphone and talking to me.

Karl's father, Otto, was the last crown prince, born in 1912. His given names were Franz Joseph Otto Robert Maria Anton Karl Max Heinrich Sixtus Xavier Felix Renatus Ludwig Gaetan Pius Ignatius, and his titles included king of Hungary and Bohemia, margrave of Moravia, and grand prince of Transylvania. It was the assassination of Otto's great-uncle Archduke Franz Ferdinand that triggered the First World War—and in turn the dissolution of an empire that covered parts of modern-day Austria, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Croatia, and the Czech Republic, among other nations.

Otto von Habsburg was a child when he became an ex-crown prince, and he had to find a new path. He learned seven languages, and he remained active in politics, earning a doctorate in political and social sciences and opposing the rise of the Nazis. He fled to the United States after Austria was annexed by Hitler. Otto devoted himself to "pan-Europeanism," pragmatically renouncing the throne in 1961 and spending 20 years as a member of the European Parliament instead—not as fancy as being an emperor, admittedly, but the expenses were generous and there was less chance of being assassinated. Otto helped organize the Pan-European Picnic of 1989, on the border between Austria, in the free-market west of Europe, and Hungary, part of the communist east. It was described in his *Guardian* obituary as "one of the events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet communism."

Four of Otto's children also became politicians: Karl is a former member of the European Parliament for Austria, Walburga was in the Swedish Parliament, Gabriela was the Georgian ambassador to Germany, and Georg is the Hungarian ambassador to France. "What people tend to forget is that my ancestors were for 800 years professional politicians," Karl tells me. "Yes, the circumstances have changed slightly ... but you're stuck with the bug." The "bug," in Karl's case, means a genuine and lifelong advocacy for pan-Europeanism, which is an unfashionable sentiment in an age of rising nationalism.

For Karl's birthday last year, a group of Czech monarchists made him a replica of their country's revered Crown of Saint Wenceslas. From the news reports, I sensed a slight mismatch in enthusiasm between the monarchists and their desired monarch. Was this not awkward—a reminder of what he had lost? "It is very impolite not to accept presents," he tells me, diplomatically. "So it's very nice. But then on the other side, this is not exactly a piece you would like to have standing at home on your mantelpiece." He has given the replica to the Order of St. George in Vienna, to be displayed in its offices.

What can an old family like the Habsburgs offer 21st-century Europe? "A sense of history," Karl says. "If you want to understand or do any prediction on what might theoretically be happening in



the future, you have to base it on something.” Like other shadow royals, he performs an informal diplomatic function, as a kind of ermine-clad back channel. When the funeral of King Hassan II of Morocco was being arranged in 1999, Karl tells me, “I was in a rather advanced position compared to the representative of the Austrian state, because there’s a personal relationship there also between his family and my family.”

Bearing that in mind, I ask whether he thinks the Habsburgs will ever be restored to power. “The words *never* and *always*, these are two expressions that should only be used in a religious context, and not necessarily the political context,” Karl replies. And then, with the assurance that flows from membership in a dynasty that first sat on the throne of the Holy Roman Empire in 1273, he adds, casually: “Two generations in this framework, it’s very little.”

“R

“Royalty was like dandelions,” writes the fantasy author Terry Pratchett in *Feet of Clay*, his novel about the appearance of a long-lost heir to the fictional throne of Ankh-Morpork. “No matter how many heads you chopped off, the roots were still there underground, waiting to spring up again ... Whoever had created humanity had left in a major design flaw. It was its tendency to bend at the knees.”

Removing the monarchy doesn’t remove this tendency. Look at the United States, in thrall to its own aristocratic dynasties—the Kennedys, the Bushes, arguably even the Trumps—and delighted to have a satellite branch of the House of Windsor, even though the country fought a literal war to make Prince Harry’s ancestors butt out of American politics. Monarchy speaks to a deep need in people—the need for a connection with the past, and a sense of continuity across time. Less wholesomely, it also suggests a widespread desire for fixed, unarguable hierarchies and a lingering opposition to the idea that jobs should be distributed on merit. These are strong currents in the human psyche, and they are resistant to change.

On my last day in Albania, I meet Erion Veliaj, the Socialist mayor of Tirana, at a private lounge in the airport. Young, forceful, and charismatic, he explains that his party’s roots lie in the anti-monarchist movement, “but that doesn’t blind me to accept that this was part of our history.” The city he runs is shaped by the rule of King Zog, who enlisted European architects to design wide roads and open squares, turning a rural settlement into a modern capital.

Tirana now looks like any other European city, but it is pockmarked with scars from the past. The bunkers are still there. Ten minutes’ walk from my hotel stands the House of Leaves, the former surveillance headquarters, now turned into a museum. The city’s most fashionable district, where you can drink espresso and eat sushi in the sunshine, was within my lifetime the “Blloku”—the block reserved for Hoxha and his politburo, where they sealed themselves away from a discontented populace.

For Veliaj, pragmatically accepting Leka’s unofficial role is part of a generational process to make peace with this history. That acceptance would not have been possible under Leka’s father, who associated himself with the political right. “You can throw toxins, or you can be a healer,” says Veliaj of Prince Leka II. “He’s become a de facto ambassador of the new Albania. And I really appreciate that. So, although politically we’re on different sides of the spectrum, he is someone I am proud to call a very good friend.”

No one I met in Albania believed that Leka would ever be king. In the 2021 elections, the right-wing monarchist party, the PLL, won just a single seat. When I asked about succession, Leka told me he would ask Princess Geraldine, when she turned 18, if she wanted to be his heir. “Legally, according to the Albanian royal constitution, it would go directly to the first male,” he said. But the rules can be fudged, not least because Zog’s laws were overhauled by the Italians, and then the Communists, and the constitution has no legal standing. At the time, Leka’s statement seemed like a sweet endorsement of gender equality and personal choice. It was only later that I realized *choice* is antithetical to monarchy. The whole point is that you get whomever you’re given.

Then again, maybe this kind of contradiction should be embraced. Albania is an experiment in multiethnic, multiparty democracy. A republic with an unofficial monarch, living in a plain house and taking his daughter to the park without armed guards? It sounds absurd. But while dictatorships are simple, democracy is not. And people do have a deep, almost spiritual hunger for leaders who are more than mere bureaucrats or legislators. We want *symbols*.

Before I left the royal residence, Leka showed me something. Above the double doors in the reception room was a portrait of King Zog. It had been given to his father by a family who had hidden it for half a century in their basement, despite the great personal risk. As Albania’s ruler, Zog had been a tyrant and a modernizer, a viper and a visionary, intent on obtaining and holding power at any cost. His grandson will have to find his own way to be royal—or to be ordinary instead. *A*

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Helen Lewis is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

On it.

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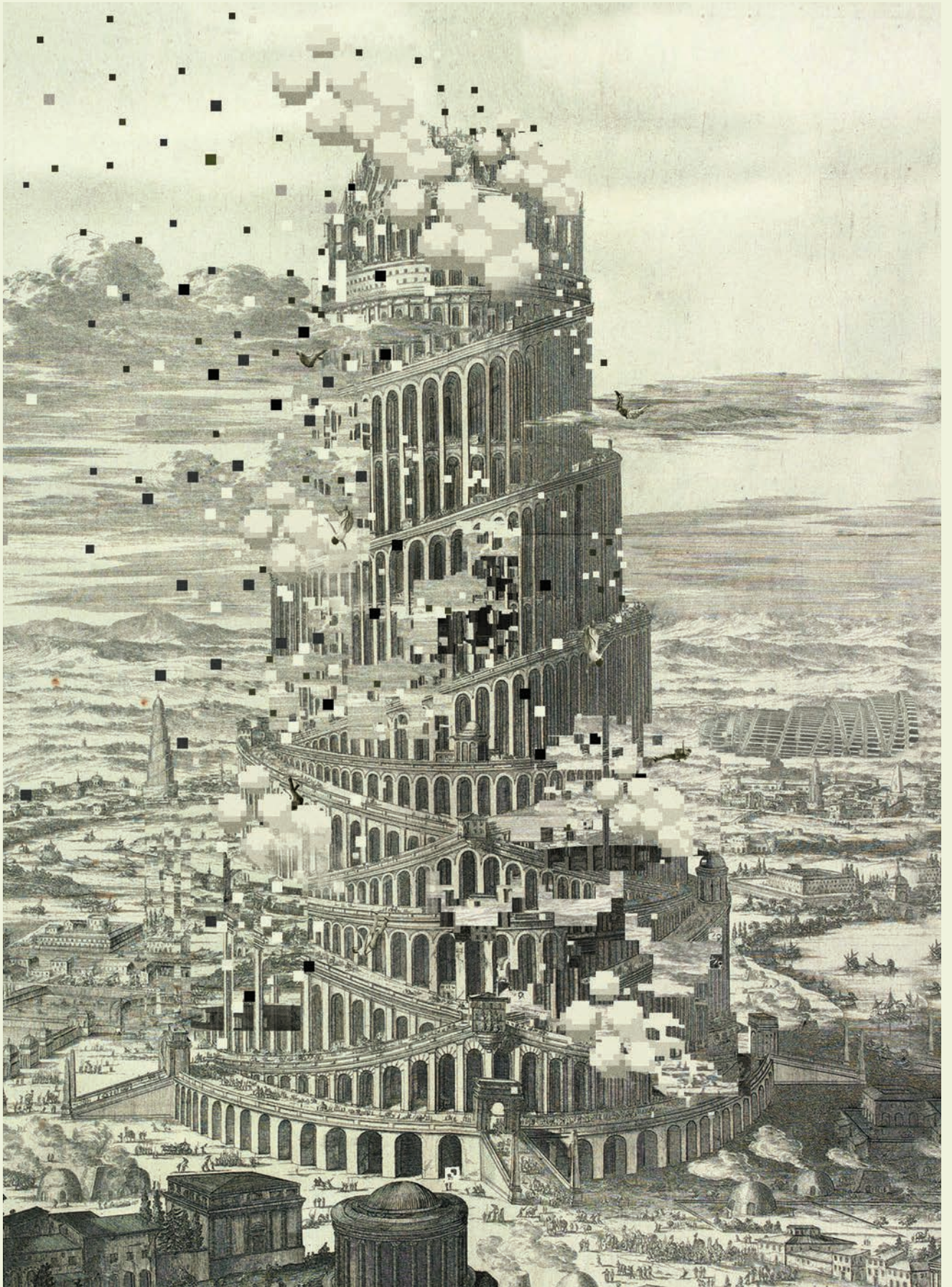
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AFTER BABEL

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HOW
SOCIAL MEDIA
DISSOLVED
THE
MORTAR *of*
SOCIETY
AND MADE
AMERICA
STUPID

■

By
JONATHAN
HAIDT

■



What would it have been like to live in Babel in the days after its destruction? In the Book of Genesis, we are told that the descendants of Noah built a great city in the land of Shinar. They built a tower “with its top in the heavens” to “make a name” for themselves. God was offended by the hubris of humanity and said:

Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.

The text does not say that God destroyed the tower, but in many popular renderings of the story he does, so let’s hold that dramatic image in our minds: people wandering amid the ruins, unable to communicate, condemned to mutual incomprehension.

The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past.

It’s been clear for quite a while now that red America and blue America are becoming like two different countries claiming the same territory, with two different versions of the Constitution, economics, and American history. But Babel is not a story about tribalism; it’s a story about the fragmentation of everything. It’s about the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community. It’s a metaphor for what is happening not only *between* red and blue, but within the left and within the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional associations, museums, and even families.

Babel is a metaphor for what some forms of social media have done to nearly all of the groups and institutions most important to the country’s future—and to us as a people. How did this happen? And what does it portend for American life?

THE RISE OF THE MODERN TOWER

There is a direction to history and it is toward cooperation at larger scales. We see this trend in biological evolution, in the series of “major transitions” through which multicellular organisms first appeared and then developed new symbiotic relationships. We see it in cultural evolution too, as Robert Wright explained in his 1999

book, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*. Wright showed that history involves a series of transitions, driven by rising population density plus new technologies (writing, roads, the printing press) that created new possibilities for mutually beneficial trade and learning. Zero-sum conflicts—such as the wars of religion that arose as the printing press spread heretical ideas across Europe—were better thought of as temporary setbacks, and sometimes even integral to progress. (Those wars of religion, he argued, made possible the transition to modern nation-states with better-informed citizens.) President Bill Clinton praised *Nonzero*’s optimistic portrayal of a more cooperative future thanks to continued technological advance.

The early internet of the 1990s, with its chat rooms, message boards, and email, exemplified the *Nonzero* thesis, as did the first wave of social-media platforms, which launched around 2003. Myspace, Friendster, and Facebook made it easy to connect with friends and strangers to talk about common interests, for free, and at a scale never before imaginable. By 2008, Facebook had emerged as the dominant platform, with more than 100 million monthly users, on its way to roughly 3 billion today. In the first decade of the new century, social media was widely believed to be a boon to democracy. What dictator could impose his will on an interconnected citizenry? What regime could build a wall to keep out the internet?

The high point of techno-democratic optimism was arguably 2011, a year that began with the Arab Spring and ended with the global Occupy movement. That is also when Google Translate became available on virtually all smartphones, so you could say that 2011 was the year that humanity rebuilt the Tower of Babel. We were closer than we had ever been to being “one people,” and we had effectively overcome the curse of division by language. For techno-democratic optimists, it seemed to be only the beginning of what humanity could do.

In February 2012, as he prepared to take Facebook public, Mark Zuckerberg reflected on those extraordinary times and set forth his plans. “Today, our society has reached another tipping point,” he wrote in a letter to investors. Facebook hoped “to rewire the way people spread and consume information.” By giving them “the power to share,” it would help them to “once again transform many of our core institutions and industries.”

In the 10 years since then, Zuckerberg did exactly what he said he would do. He did rewire the way we spread and consume information; he did transform our institutions, and he pushed us past the tipping point. It has not worked out as he expected.

THINGS FALL APART

Historically, civilizations have relied on shared blood, gods, and enemies to counteract the tendency to split apart as they grow. But what is it that holds together large and diverse secular democracies such as the United States and India, or, for that matter, modern Britain and France?

Social scientists have identified at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital



(extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories. Social media has weakened all three. To see how, we must understand how social media changed over time—and especially in the several years following 2009.

In their early incarnations, platforms such as Myspace and Facebook were relatively harmless. They allowed users to create pages on which to post photos, family updates, and links to the mostly static pages of their friends and favorite bands. In this way, early social media can be seen as just another step in the long progression of technological improvements—from the Postal Service through the telephone to email and texting—that helped people achieve the eternal goal of maintaining their social ties.

But gradually, social-media users became more comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives with strangers and corporations. As I wrote in a 2019 *Atlantic* article with Tobias Rose-Stockwell, they became more adept at putting on performances and managing their personal brand—activities that might impress others but that do not deepen friendships in the way that a private phone conversation will.

Once social-media platforms had trained users to spend more time performing and less time connecting, the stage was set for the major transformation, which began in 2009: the intensification of viral dynamics.

Before 2009, Facebook had given users a simple timeline—a never-ending stream of content generated by their friends and connections, with the newest posts at the top and the oldest ones

at the bottom. This was often overwhelming in its volume, but it was an accurate reflection of what others were posting. That began to change in 2009, when Facebook offered users a way to publicly “like” posts with the click of a button. That same year, Twitter introduced something even more powerful: the “Retweet” button, which allowed users to publicly endorse a post while also sharing it with all of their followers. Facebook soon copied that innovation with its own “Share” button, which became available to smartphone users in 2012. “Like” and “Share” buttons quickly became standard features of most other platforms.

Shortly after its “Like” button began to produce data about what best “engaged” its users, Facebook developed algorithms to bring each user the content most likely to generate a “like” or some other interaction, eventually including the “share” as well. Later research showed that posts that trigger emotions—especially anger at out-groups—are the most likely to be shared.

By 2013, social media had become a new game, with dynamics unlike those in 2008. If you were skillful or lucky, you might create a post that would “go viral” and make you “internet famous” for a few days. If you blundered, you could find yourself buried in hateful comments. Your posts rode to fame or ignominy based on the clicks of thousands of strangers, and you in turn contributed thousands of clicks to the game.

This new game encouraged dishonesty and mob dynamics: Users were guided not just by their true preferences but by their past experiences of reward and punishment, and their prediction of

how others would react to each new action. One of the engineers at Twitter who had worked on the “Retweet” button later revealed that he regretted his contribution because it had made Twitter a nastier place. As he watched Twitter mobs forming through the use of the new tool, he thought to himself, “We might have just handed a 4-year-old a loaded weapon.”

As a social psychologist who studies emotion, morality, and politics, I saw this happening too. The newly tweaked platforms were almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves. The volume of outrage was shocking.

It was just this kind of twitchy and explosive spread of anger that James Madison had tried to protect us from as he was drafting the U.S. Constitution. The Framers of the Constitution were excellent social psychologists. They knew that democracy had an Achilles’ heel because it depended on the collective judgment of the people, and democratic communities are subject to “the turbulence and weakness of unruly passions.” The key to designing a sustainable republic, therefore, was to build in mechanisms to slow things down, cool passions, require compromise, and give leaders some insulation from the mania of the moment while still holding them accountable to the people periodically, on Election Day.

The tech companies that enhanced virality from 2009 to 2012 brought us deep into Madison’s nightmare. Many authors quote his comments in “Federalist No. 10” on the innate human proclivity toward “faction,” by which he meant our tendency to divide ourselves into teams or parties that are so inflamed with “mutual animosity” that they are “much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good.”

But that essay continues on to a less quoted yet equally important insight, about democracy’s vulnerability to triviality. Madison notes that people are so prone to factionalism that “where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.”

Social media has both magnified and weaponized the frivolous. Is our democracy any healthier now that we’ve had Twitter brawls over Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s TAX THE RICH dress at the annual Met Gala, and Melania Trump’s dress at a 9/11 memorial event, which had stitching that kind of looked like a skyscraper? How about Senator Ted Cruz’s tweet criticizing Big Bird for tweeting about getting his COVID vaccine?

It’s not just the waste of time and scarce attention that matters; it’s the continual chipping-away of trust. An autocracy can deploy propaganda or use fear to motivate the behaviors it desires, but a democracy depends on widely internalized acceptance of the legitimacy of rules, norms, and institutions. Blind and irrevocable trust in any particular individual or organization is never warranted. But when citizens lose trust in elected leaders, health authorities, the courts, the police, universities, and the integrity of elections, then every decision becomes contested; every election becomes a life-and-death struggle to save the country from the other side. The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer (an international measure of citizens’ trust in government, business, media, and nongovernmental organizations) showed stable and competent autocracies (China and the United Arab Emirates)

at the top of the list, while contentious democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, and South Korea scored near the bottom (albeit above Russia).

Recent academic studies suggest that social media is indeed corrosive to trust in governments, news media, and people and institutions in general. A working paper that offers the most comprehensive review of the research, led by the social scientists Philipp Lorenz-Spreen and Lisa Oswald, concludes that “the large majority of reported associations between digital media use and trust appear to be detrimental for democracy.” The literature is complex—some studies show benefits, particularly in less developed democracies—but the review found that, on balance, social media amplifies political polarization; foments populism, especially right-wing populism; and is associated with the spread of misinformation.

When people lose trust in institutions, they lose trust in the stories told by those institutions. That’s particularly true of the institutions entrusted with the education of children. History curricula have often caused political controversy, but Facebook and Twitter make it possible for parents to become outraged every day over a new snippet from their children’s history lessons—and math lessons and literature selections, and any new pedagogical shifts anywhere in the country. The motives of teachers and administrators come into question, and overreaching laws or curricular reforms sometimes follow, dumbing down education and reducing trust in it further. One result is that young people educated in the post-Babel era are less likely to arrive at a coherent story of who we are as a people, and less likely to share any such story with those who attended different schools or who were educated in a different decade.

The former CIA analyst Martin Gurri predicted these fracturing effects in his 2014 book, *The Revolt of the Public*. Gurri’s analysis focused on the authority-subverting effects of information’s exponential growth, beginning with the internet in the 1990s. Writing nearly a decade ago, Gurri could already see the power of social media as a universal solvent, breaking down bonds and weakening institutions everywhere it reached. He noted that distributed networks “can protest and overthrow, but never govern.” He described the nihilism of the many protest movements of 2011 that organized mostly online and that, like Occupy Wall Street, demanded the destruction of existing institutions without offering an alternative vision of the future or an organization that could bring it about.

Gurri is no fan of elites or of centralized authority, but he notes a constructive feature of the pre-digital era: a single “mass audience,” all consuming the same content, as if they were all looking into the same gigantic mirror at the reflection of their own society. In a comment to *Vox* that recalls the first post-Babel diaspora, he said:

The digital revolution has shattered that mirror, and now the public inhabits those broken pieces of glass. So the public isn’t one thing; it’s highly fragmented, and it’s basically mutually hostile. It’s mostly people yelling at each other and living in bubbles of one sort or another.

Mark Zuckerberg may not have wished for any of that. But by rewiring everything in a headlong rush for growth—with a naive conception of human psychology, little understanding of the intricacy of institutions, and no concern for external costs imposed on society—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and a few other large platforms unwittingly dissolved the mortar of trust, belief in institutions, and shared stories that had held a large and diverse secular democracy together.

I think we can date the fall of the tower to the years between 2011 (Gurri's focal year of "nihilistic" protests) and 2015, a year marked by the "great awakening" on the left and the ascendancy of Donald Trump on the right. Trump did not destroy the tower; he merely exploited its fall. He was the first politician to master the new dynamics of the post-Babel era, in which outrage is the key to virality, stage performance crushes competence, Twitter can overpower all the newspapers in the country, and stories cannot be shared (or at least trusted) across more than a few adjacent fragments—so truth cannot achieve widespread adherence.

The many analysts, including me, who had argued that Trump could not win the general election were relying on pre-Babel intuitions, which said that scandals such as the *Access Hollywood* tape (in which Trump boasted about committing sexual assault) are fatal to a presidential campaign. But after Babel, nothing really means anything anymore—at least not in a way that is durable and on which people widely agree.

POLITICS AFTER BABEL

"Politics is the art of the possible," the German statesman Otto von Bismarck said in 1867. In a post-Babel democracy, not much may be possible.

Of course, the American culture war and the decline of cross-party cooperation predates social media's arrival. The mid-20th century was a time of unusually low polarization in Congress, which began reverting back to historical levels in the 1970s and '80s. The ideological distance between the two parties began increasing faster in the 1990s. Fox News and the 1994 "Republican Revolution" converted the GOP into a more combative party. For example, House Speaker Newt Gingrich discouraged new Republican members of Congress from moving their families to Washington, D.C., where they were likely to form social ties with Democrats and their families.

BABEL IS NOT A STORY ABOUT TRIBALISM. IT'S A STORY ABOUT THE FRAGMENTATION OF EVERYTHING.

So cross-party relationships were already strained before 2009. But the enhanced virality of social media thereafter made it more hazardous to be seen fraternizing with the enemy or even failing to attack the enemy with sufficient vigor. On the right, the term *RINO* (Republican in Name Only) was superseded in 2015 by the more contemptuous term *cuckservative*, popularized on Twitter by Trump supporters. On the left, social media launched callout culture in the years after 2012, with transformative effects on university life and later on politics and culture throughout the English-speaking world.

What changed in the 2010s? Let's revisit that Twitter engineer's metaphor of handing a loaded gun to a 4-year-old. A mean tweet doesn't kill anyone; it is an attempt to shame or punish someone publicly while broadcasting one's own virtue, brilliance, or tribal loyalties.

It's more a dart than a bullet, causing pain but no fatalities. Even so, from 2009 to 2012, Facebook and Twitter passed out roughly 1 billion dart guns globally. We've been shooting one another ever since.

Social media has given voice to some people who had little previously, and it has made it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their misdeeds, not just in politics but in business, the arts, academia, and elsewhere. Sexual harassers could have been called out in anonymous blog posts before Twitter, but it's hard to imagine that the #MeToo movement would have been nearly so successful without the viral enhancement that the major platforms offered. However, the warped "accountability" of social media has also brought injustice—and political dysfunction—in three ways.

First, the dart guns of social media give more power to trolls and provocateurs while silencing good citizens. Research by the political scientists Alexander Bor and Michael Bang Petersen found that a small subset of people on social-media platforms are highly concerned with gaining status and are willing to use aggression to do so. They admit that in their online discussions they often curse, make fun of their opponents, and get blocked by other users or reported for inappropriate comments. Across eight studies, Bor and Petersen found that being online did not make most people more aggressive or hostile; rather, it allowed a small number of aggressive people to attack a much larger set of victims. Even a small number of jerks were able to dominate discussion forums, Bor and Petersen found, because nonjerks are easily turned off from online discussions of politics. Additional research finds that women and Black people are harassed disproportionately, so the digital public square is less welcoming to their voices.

Second, the dart guns of social media give more power and voice to the political extremes while reducing the power and voice of the moderate majority. The "Hidden Tribes" study, by

the pro-democracy group More in Common, surveyed 8,000 Americans in 2017 and 2018 and identified seven groups that shared beliefs and behaviors. The one furthest to the right, known as the “devoted conservatives,” comprised 6 percent of the U.S. population. The group furthest to the left, the “progressive activists,” comprised 8 percent of the population. The progressive activists were by far the most prolific group on social media: 70 percent had shared political content over the previous year. The devoted conservatives followed, at 56 percent.

These two extreme groups are similar in surprising ways. They are the whitest and richest of the seven groups, which suggests that America is being torn apart by a battle between two subsets of the elite who are not representative of the broader society. What’s more, they are the two groups that show the greatest homogeneity in their moral and political attitudes. This uniformity of opinion, the study’s authors speculate, is likely a result of thought-policing on social media: “Those who express sympathy for the views of opposing groups may experience backlash from their own cohort.” In other words, political extremists don’t just shoot darts at their enemies; they spend a lot of their ammunition targeting dissenters or nuanced thinkers on their own team. In this way, social media makes a political system based on compromise grind to a halt.

Finally, by giving everyone a dart gun, social media deputizes everyone to administer justice with no due process. Platforms like Twitter devolve into the Wild West, with no accountability for vigilantes. A successful attack attracts a barrage of likes and follow-on strikes. Enhanced-virality platforms thereby facilitate massive collective punishment for small or imagined offenses, with real-world consequences, including innocent people losing their jobs and being shamed into suicide. When our public square is governed by mob dynamics unrestrained by due process, we don’t get justice and inclusion; we get a society that ignores context, proportionality, mercy, and truth.

STRUCTURAL STUPIDITY

Since the tower fell, debates of all kinds have grown more and more confused. The most pervasive obstacle to good thinking is confirmation bias, which refers to the human tendency to search only for evidence that confirms our preferred beliefs. Even before the advent of social media, search engines were supercharging



confirmation bias, making it far easier for people to find evidence for absurd beliefs and conspiracy theories, such as that the Earth is flat and that the U.S. government staged the 9/11 attacks. But social media made things much worse.

The most reliable cure for confirmation bias is interaction with people who don’t share your beliefs. They confront you with counterevidence and counterargument. John Stuart Mill said, “He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that,” and he urged us to seek out conflicting views “from persons who actually believe them.” People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you make you smarter, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain. People who try to silence or intimidate their critics make themselves stupider, almost as if they are shooting darts into their own brain.

In his book *The Constitution of Knowledge*, Jonathan Rauch describes the historical breakthrough in which Western societies developed an “epistemic operating system”—that is, a set of institutions for generating knowledge from the interactions of biased and cognitively flawed individuals. English law developed the adversarial system so that biased advocates could present both sides of a case to an impartial jury. Newspapers full of lies evolved into professional journalistic enterprises, with norms that required seeking out multiple sides of a story, followed by editorial review, followed by fact-checking. Universities evolved

from cloistered medieval institutions into research powerhouses, creating a structure in which scholars put forth evidence-backed claims with the knowledge that other scholars around the world would be motivated to gain prestige by finding contrary evidence.

Part of America's greatness in the 20th century came from having developed the most capable, vibrant, and productive network of knowledge-producing institutions in all of human history, linking together the world's best universities, private companies that turned scientific advances into life-changing consumer products, and government agencies that supported scientific research and led the collaboration that put people on the moon.

But this arrangement, Rauch notes, "is not self-maintaining; it relies on an array of sometimes delicate social settings and understandings, and those need to be understood, affirmed, and protected." So what happens when an institution is not well maintained and internal disagreement ceases, either because its people have become ideologically uniform or because they have become afraid to dissent?

This, I believe, is what happened to many of America's key institutions in the mid-to-late 2010s. They got stupider en masse because social media instilled in their members a chronic fear of getting darted. The shift was most pronounced in universities, scholarly associations, creative industries, and political organizations at every level (national, state, and local), and it was so pervasive that it established new behavioral norms backed by new policies seemingly overnight. The new omnipresence of enhanced-virality social media meant that a single word uttered by a professor, leader, or journalist, even if spoken with positive intent, could lead to a social-media firestorm, triggering an immediate dismissal or a drawn-out investigation by the institution. Participants in our key institutions began self-censoring to an unhealthy degree, holding back critiques of policies and ideas—even those presented in class by their students—that they believed to be ill-supported or wrong.

But when an institution punishes internal dissent, it shoots darts into its own brain.

The stupefying process plays out differently on the right and the left because their activist wings subscribe to different narratives with different sacred values. The "Hidden Tribes" study tells us that the "devoted conservatives" score highest on beliefs related to authoritarianism. They share a narrative in which America is

eternally under threat from enemies outside and subversives within; they see life as a battle between patriots and traitors. According to the political scientist Karen Stenner, whose work the "Hidden Tribes" study drew upon, they are psychologically different from the larger group of "traditional conservatives" (19 percent of the population), who emphasize order, decorum, and slow rather than radical change.

Only within the devoted conservatives' narratives do Donald Trump's speeches make sense, from his campaign's ominous open-

ing diatribe about Mexican "rapists" to his warning on January 6, 2021: "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

The traditional punishment for treason is death, hence the battle cry on January 6: "Hang Mike Pence." Right-wing death threats, many delivered by anonymous accounts, are proving effective in cowering traditional conservatives, for example in driving out local election officials who failed to "stop the steal." The wave of threats delivered to dissenting Republican members of Congress has similarly pushed many of the remaining moderates to quit or go silent, giving us a party ever more divorced from the conservative tradition, constitutional responsibility, and reality. We now have a Republican Party that describes a violent assault on the U.S. Capitol as "legitimate political discourse," supported—or at least not contradicted—by an array of right-wing think tanks and media organizations.

The stupidity on the right is most visible in the many conspiracy theories spreading across right-wing media and now into Congress. "Pizzagate," QAnon, the belief that vaccines contain microchips, the conviction that Donald Trump won reelection—it's hard to imagine any of these ideas or belief systems reaching the levels that they have without Facebook and Twitter.

The Democrats have also been hit hard by structural stupidity, though in a different way. In the Democratic Party, the struggle between the progressive wing and the more moderate factions is open and ongoing, and often the moderates win. The problem is that the left controls the commanding heights of the culture: universities, news organizations, Hollywood, art museums, advertising, much of Silicon Valley, and the teachers' unions and teaching colleges that shape K–12 education. And in many of those institutions, dissent *has* been stifled: When everyone was issued a dart gun in the early 2010s,

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many left-leaning institutions began shooting themselves in the brain. And unfortunately, those were the brains that inform, instruct, and entertain most of the country.

Liberals in the late 20th century shared a belief that the sociologist Christian Smith called the “liberal progress” narrative, in which America used to be horrifically unjust and repressive, but, thanks to the struggles of activists and heroes, has made (and continues to make) progress toward realizing the noble promise of its founding. This story easily supports liberal patriotism, and it was the animating narrative of Barack Obama’s presidency. It is also the view of the “traditional liberals” in the “Hidden Tribes” study (11 percent of the population), who have strong humanitarian values, are older than average, and are largely the people leading America’s cultural and intellectual institutions.

But when the newly viralized social-media platforms gave everyone a dart gun, it was younger progressive activists who did the most shooting, and they aimed a disproportionate number of their darts at these older liberal leaders. Confused and fearful, the leaders rarely challenged the activists or their nonliberal narrative in which life at every institution is an eternal battle among identity groups over a zero-sum pie, and the people on top got there by oppressing the people on the bottom. This new narrative is rigidly egalitarian—focused on equality of outcomes, not of rights or opportunities. It is unconcerned with individual rights.

The universal charge against people who disagree with this narrative is not “traitor”; it is “racist,” “transphobe,” “Karen,” or some related scarlet letter marking the perpetrator as one who hates or harms a marginalized group. The punishment that feels right for such crimes is not execution; it is public shaming and social death.

You can see the stupefaction process most clearly when a person on the left merely points to research that questions or contradicts a favored belief among progressive activists. Someone on Twitter will find a way to associate the dissenter with racism, and others will pile on. For example, in the first week of protests after the killing of George Floyd, some of which included violence, the progressive policy analyst David Shor, then employed by Civis Analytics, tweeted a link to a study showing that violent protests back in the 1960s led to electoral setbacks for the Democrats in nearby counties. Shor was clearly trying to be helpful, but in the ensuing outrage he was accused of “anti-Blackness” and was soon dismissed from his job. (Civis Analytics has denied that the tweet led to Shor’s firing.)

The Shor case became famous, but anyone on Twitter had already seen dozens of examples teaching the basic lesson: Don’t question your own side’s beliefs, policies, or actions. And when traditional liberals go silent, as so many did in the summer of 2020, the progressive activists’ more radical narrative takes over as the governing narrative of an organization. This is why so many epistemic institutions seemed to “go woke” in rapid succession that year and the next, beginning with a wave of controversies and resignations at *The New York Times* and other newspapers, and continuing on to social-justice pronouncements by groups of doctors and medical associations (one publication by the American

Medical Association and the Association of American Medical Colleges, for instance, advised medical professionals to refer to neighborhoods and communities as “oppressed” or “systematically divested” instead of “vulnerable” or “poor”), and the hurried transformation of curricula at New York City’s most expensive private schools.

Tragically, we see stupefaction playing out on both sides in the COVID wars. The right has been so committed to minimizing the risks of COVID that it has turned the disease into one that preferentially kills Republicans. The progressive left is so committed to maximizing the dangers of COVID that it often embraces an equally maximalist, one-size-fits-all strategy for vaccines, masks, and social distancing—even as they pertain to children. Such policies are not as deadly as spreading fears and lies about vaccines, but many of them have been devastating for the mental health and education of children, who desperately need to play with one another and go to school; we have little clear evidence that school closures and masks for young children reduce deaths from COVID. Most notably for the story I’m telling here, progressive parents who argued against school closures were frequently savaged on social media and met with the ubiquitous leftist accusations of racism and white supremacy. Others in blue cities learned to keep quiet.

American politics is getting ever more ridiculous and dysfunctional not because Americans are getting less intelligent. The problem is structural. Thanks to enhanced-virality social media, dissent is punished within many of our institutions, which means that bad ideas get elevated into official policy.

IT’S GOING TO GET MUCH WORSE

In a 2018 interview, Steve Bannon, the former adviser to Donald Trump, said that the way to deal with the media is “to flood the zone with shit.” He was describing the “firehose of falsehood” tactic pioneered by Russian disinformation programs to keep Americans confused, disoriented, and angry. But back then, in 2018, there was an upper limit to the amount of shit available, because all of it had to be created by a person (other than some low-quality stuff produced by bots).

Now, however, artificial intelligence is close to enabling the limitless spread of highly believable disinformation. The AI program GPT-3 is already so good that you can give it a topic and a tone and it will spit out as many essays as you like, typically with perfect grammar and a surprising level of coherence. In a year or two, when the program is upgraded to GPT-4, it will become far more capable. In a 2020 essay titled “The Supply of Disinformation Will Soon Be Infinite,” Renée DiResta, the research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory, explained that spreading falsehoods—whether through text, images, or deep-fake videos—will quickly become inconceivably easy. (She co-wrote the essay with GPT-3.)



American factions won't be the only ones using AI and social media to generate attack content; our adversaries will too. In a haunting 2018 essay titled "The Digital Maginot Line," DiResta described the state of affairs bluntly. "We are immersed in an evolving, ongoing conflict: an Information World War in which state actors, terrorists, and ideological extremists leverage the social infrastructure underpinning everyday life to sow discord and erode shared reality," she wrote. The Soviets used to have to send over agents or cultivate Americans willing to do their bidding. But social media made it cheap and easy for Russia's Internet Research Agency to invent fake events or distort real ones to stoke rage on both the left and the right, often over race. Later research showed that an intensive campaign began on Twitter in 2013 but soon spread to Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, among other platforms. One of the major goals was to polarize the American public and spread distrust—to split us apart at the exact weak point that Madison had identified.

We now know that it's not just the Russians attacking American democracy. Before the 2019 protests in Hong Kong, China had mostly focused on domestic platforms such as WeChat. But now China is discovering how much it can do with Twitter and Facebook, for so little money, in its escalating conflict with the U.S. Given China's own advances in AI, we can expect it to become more skillful over the next few years at further dividing America and further uniting China.

In the 20th century, America's shared identity as the country leading the fight to make the world safe for democracy was a strong force that helped keep the culture and the polity together. In the 21st century, America's tech companies have rewired the world and created products that now appear to be corrosive to democracy, obstacles to shared understanding, and destroyers of the modern tower.

DEMOCRACY AFTER BABEL

We can never return to the way things were in the pre-digital age. The norms, institutions, and forms of political participation that developed during the long era of mass communication are not going to work well now that technology has made everything so much faster and more multidirectional, and when bypassing professional gatekeepers is so easy. And yet American democracy is now operating outside the bounds of sustainability. If we do not make major changes soon, then our institutions, our political system, and our society may collapse during the next major war, pandemic, financial meltdown, or constitutional crisis.

What changes are needed? Redesigning democracy for the digital age is far beyond my abilities, but I can suggest three categories of reforms—three goals that must be achieved if democracy is to remain viable in the post-Babel era. We must harden democratic institutions so that they can withstand chronic anger and mistrust, reform social media so that it becomes less socially corrosive, and better prepare the next generation for democratic citizenship in this new age.

Harden Democratic Institutions

Political polarization is likely to increase for the foreseeable future. Thus, whatever else we do, we must reform key institutions so that they can continue to function even if levels of anger, misinformation, and violence increase far above those we have today.

For instance, the legislative branch was designed to require compromise, yet Congress, social media, and partisan cable news channels have co-evolved such that any legislator who reaches across the aisle may face outrage within hours from the extreme wing of her party, damaging her fundraising prospects and raising her risk of being primaried in the next election cycle.

Reforms should reduce the outsize influence of angry extremists and make legislators more responsive to the average voter in their district. One example of such a reform is to end closed party primaries, replacing them with a single, nonpartisan, open primary from which the top several candidates advance to a general election that also uses ranked-choice voting. A version of this voting system has already been implemented in Alaska, and it seems to have given Senator Lisa Murkowski more latitude to oppose former President Trump, whose favored candidate would be a threat to Murkowski in a closed Republican primary but is not in an open one.

A second way to harden democratic institutions is to reduce the power of either political party to game the system in its favor, for example by drawing its preferred electoral districts or selecting the officials who will supervise elections. These jobs should all be done in a nonpartisan way. Research on procedural justice shows that when people perceive that a process is fair, they are more likely to accept the legitimacy of a decision that goes against their interests. Just think of the damage already done to the Supreme Court's legitimacy by the Senate's Republican leadership when it blocked consideration of Merrick Garland for a seat that opened up nine months before the 2016 election, and then rushed through the appointment of Amy Coney Barrett in 2020. A widely discussed reform would end this political gamesmanship by having justices serve staggered 18-year terms so that each president makes one appointment every two years.

Reform Social Media

A democracy cannot survive if its public squares are places where people fear speaking up and where no stable consensus can be reached. Social media's empowerment of the far left, the far right, domestic trolls, and foreign agents is creating a system that looks less like democracy and more like rule by the most aggressive.

But it is within our power to reduce social media's ability to dissolve trust and foment structural stupidity. Reforms should limit the platforms' amplification of the aggressive fringes while giving more voice to what More in Common calls "the exhausted majority."

Those who oppose regulation of social media generally focus on the legitimate concern that government-mandated content restrictions will, in practice, devolve into censorship. But the main problem with social media is not that some people *post* fake or toxic stuff; it's that fake and outrage-inducing content can now *attain a level of reach and influence* that was not possible before 2009. The Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen advocates for simple changes

to the architecture of the platforms, rather than for massive and ultimately futile efforts to police all content. For example, she has suggested modifying the “Share” function on Facebook so that after any content has been shared twice, the third person in the chain must take the time to copy and paste the content into a new post. Reforms like this are not censorship; they are viewpoint-neutral and content-neutral, and they work equally well in all languages. They don’t stop anyone from saying anything; they just slow the spread of content that is, on average, less likely to be true.

Perhaps the biggest single change that would reduce the toxicity of existing platforms would be user verification as a precondition for gaining the algorithmic amplification that social media offers.

Banks and other industries have “know your customer” rules so that they can’t do business with anonymous clients laundering money from criminal enterprises. Large social-media platforms should be required to do the same. That does not mean users would have to post under their real names; they could still use a pseudonym. It just means that before a platform spreads your words to millions of people, it has an obligation to verify (perhaps through a third party or nonprofit) that you are a real human being, in a particular country, and are old enough to be using the platform. This one change would wipe out most of the hundreds of millions of bots and fake accounts that currently pollute the major platforms. It would also likely reduce the frequency of death threats, rape threats, racist nastiness, and trolling more generally. Research shows that antisocial behavior becomes more common online when people feel that their identity is unknown and untraceable.

In any case, the growing evidence that social media is damaging democracy is sufficient to warrant greater oversight by a regulatory body, such as the Federal Communications Commission or the Federal Trade Commission. One of the first orders of business should be compelling the platforms to share their data and their algorithms with academic researchers.

Prepare the Next Generation

The members of Gen Z—those born in and after 1997—bear none of the blame for the mess we are in, but they are going to inherit it, and the preliminary signs are that older generations have prevented them from learning how to handle it.

Childhood has become more tightly circumscribed in recent generations—with less opportunity for free, unstructured play;

less unsupervised time outside; more time online. Whatever else the effects of these shifts, they have likely impeded the development of abilities needed for effective self-governance for many young adults. Unsupervised free play is nature’s way of teaching young mammals the skills they’ll need as adults, which for humans include the ability to cooperate, make and enforce rules, compromise, adjudicate conflicts, and accept defeat. A brilliant 2015 essay by the economist Steven Horwitz argued that free play prepares children for the “art of association” that Alexis de Tocqueville said was the key to the vibrancy of American democracy; he also argued that its loss posed “a serious threat to liberal societies.” A generation prevented from learning these social skills, Hor-

witz warned, would habitually appeal to authorities to resolve disputes and would suffer from a “coarsening of social interaction” that would “create a world of more conflict and violence.”

And while social media has eroded the art of association throughout society, it may be leaving its deepest and most enduring marks on adolescents. A surge in rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among American teens began suddenly in the early 2010s. (The same thing happened to Canadian and British teens, at the same time.) The cause is not known, but the timing points to social media as a substantial contributor—the surge began just as the large majority of American teens became daily users of the major platforms. Correlational and experimental studies back up the connection to depression and anxiety, as do reports from young people themselves, and from Facebook’s own research, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal*.

Depression makes people less likely to want to engage with new people, ideas, and experiences. Anxiety makes new things seem more threatening. As these conditions have risen and as the lessons on nuanced social behavior

learned through free play have been delayed, tolerance for diverse viewpoints and the ability to work out disputes have diminished among many young people. For example, university communities that could tolerate a range of speakers as recently as 2010 arguably began to lose that ability in subsequent years, as Gen Z began to arrive on campus. Attempts to disinvite visiting speakers rose. Students did not just say that they disagreed with visiting speakers; some said that those lectures would be dangerous, emotionally devastating, a form of violence. Because rates of teen depression and anxiety have continued to rise into the 2020s, we should expect these views to continue in the generations to follow, and indeed to become more severe.

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public-health authorities should then encourage parents to let their kids walk to school and play in groups outside, just as more kids used to do.

HOPE AFTER BABEL

The story I have told is bleak, and there is little evidence to suggest that America will return to some semblance of normalcy and stability in the next five or 10 years. Which side is going to become conciliatory? What is the likelihood that Congress will enact major reforms that strengthen democratic institutions or detoxify social media?

Yet when we look away from our dysfunctional federal government, disconnect from social media, and talk with our neighbors directly, things seem more hopeful. Most Americans in the *More in Common* report are members of the “exhausted majority,” which is tired of the fighting and is willing to listen to the other side and compromise. Most Americans now see that social media is having a negative impact on the country, and are becoming more aware of its damaging effects on children.

Will we do anything about it?

When Tocqueville toured the United States in the 1830s, he was impressed by the American habit of forming voluntary

associations to fix local problems, rather than waiting for kings or nobles to act, as Europeans would do. That habit is still with us today. In recent years, Americans have started hundreds of groups and organizations dedicated to building trust and friendship across the political divide, including BridgeUSA, Braver Angels (on whose board I serve), and many others listed at BridgeAlliance.us. We cannot expect Congress and the tech companies to save us. We must change ourselves and our communities.

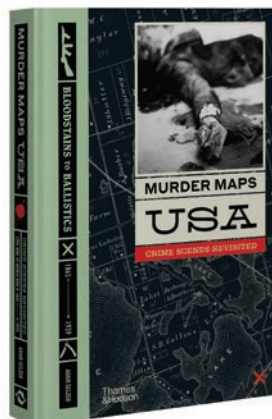
What would it be like to live in Babel in the days after its destruction? We know. It is a time of confusion and loss. But it is also a time to reflect, listen, and build. *A*

*Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist at the NYU Stern School of Business. He is the author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* and is writing *Life After Babel: Adapting to a World We Can No Longer Share*, which will be published by Penguin Press in 2023.*

The most important change we can make to reduce the damaging effects of social media on children is to delay entry until they have passed through puberty. Congress should update the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, which unwisely set the age of so-called internet adulthood (the age at which companies can collect personal information from children without parental consent) at 13 back in 1998, while making little provision for effective enforcement. The age should be raised to at least 16, and companies should be held responsible for enforcing it.

More generally, to prepare the members of the next generation for post-Babel democracy, perhaps the most important thing we can do is let them out to play. Stop starving children of the experiences they most need to become good citizens: free play in mixed-age groups of children with minimal adult supervision. Every state should follow the lead of Utah, Oklahoma, and Texas and pass a version of the Free-Range Parenting Law that helps assure parents that they will not be investigated for neglect if their 8- or 9-year-old children are spotted playing in a park. With such laws in place, schools, educators, and

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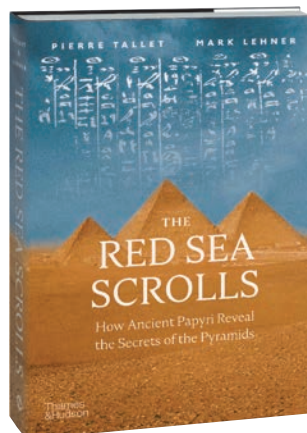


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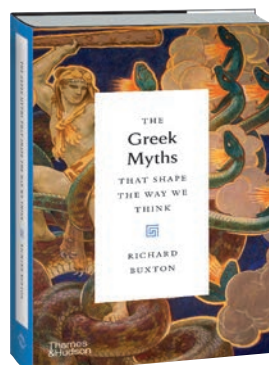


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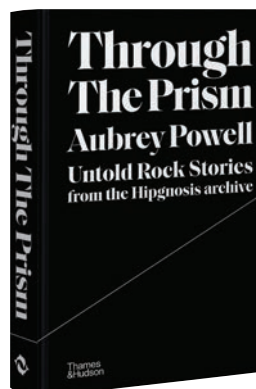


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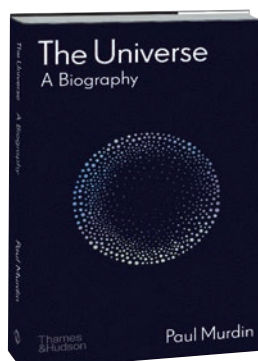


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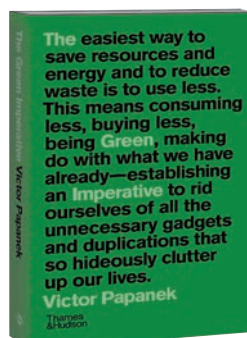


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Culture & Critics

OMNIVORE

Better Call Saul Dared to Bore Us

Do we still have time for slow TV?

By Spencer Kornhaber

People who respect the integrity of television as an art form tend to be horrified by the Netflix feature that lets viewers speed up what they're watching. Yet I recently found myself unable to resist the "1.5x" button as I caught up with one of the most acclaimed shows on TV. AMC's *Better Call Saul*, the



GREG LEWIS / AMC / SONY PICTURES TELEVISION; GETTY

Breaking Bad spin-off that debuted to record cable viewership in 2015 and will begin airing its sixth and final season this spring, can be magnificent. It can also be tedious. Frequent-depictions-of-tooth-brushing tedious. Multiseason-subplot-about-retirement-home-billing tedious. Slow-and-repetitive-commentary-on-the-human-condition tedious. I-stopped-watching-after-three-years tedious.

Mundanity and profundity—these were key to the 21st-century boom in what critics call “prestige TV,” during which the onetime “vast wasteland” (as Federal Communications Commission Chair Newton N. Minow called it in 1961) began earning regular comparisons to great cinema and literature. Depicting a chemistry teacher, Walter White, who manufactures meth to support his family after receiving a cancer diagnosis, *Breaking Bad*, which aired from 2008 to 2013, was a defining work of that renaissance. So were *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, and *Game of Thrones*, each of which injected a formula-ridden genre—the mob drama, the period piece, the fantasy epic—with realism, interiority, silence, and intimacy (as well as brooding antiheroes, most of them men). Audiences still relished crescendos of bloodshed or melodrama, but they also seemed to appreciate the reprieve from fast-paced plotting, relentless action, even reliable comedy—the familiar gambits for keeping eyes glued to the screen. Millions were tuning in to works that could be as contemplative as a Sofia Coppola movie or as fastidious as a John McPhee book. In other words, the future of TV seemed to promise that the medium would allow itself to get, from time to time, a little slow.

Or even very slow, *Better Call Saul* suggested. Two years after *Breaking Bad*’s five-season run ended, the show’s creator, Vince Gilligan, and one of its writers, Peter Gould, launched their new series with a lengthy black-and-white sequence showing a man working at a Cinnabon. That man, fans recognized, was a meeker and wearier incarnation of Saul Goodman, Walter White’s sleazy lawyer, played by the comedian Bob Odenkirk. On *Breaking Bad*, Saul had been a world-wise jester, all quips and garish suits. But *Better Call Saul*, it quickly became clear, would not play up the comedy inherent in a billboard-advertised defender of drug dealers and drunk drivers. Nor would it be a reimagined courts-and-cops procedural. It would instead focus on the years before *Breaking Bad* and on the man who grew into the Saul Goodman persona: Jimmy McGill, a screwup and small-time con artist who just wanted to have a legitimate legal career.

The fact that viewers knew how the story would turn out—eventually, the schlump becomes a monster—removed any expectation of great suspense. In its

absence, Gilligan and Gould could push their bold cinematic vision beyond the realm of what television had offered before. They had begun expressing that vision on *Breaking Bad*. Amid grinding tension and flares of violence, the series had fundamentally been a morality play that captured life’s ordinary texture in arresting ways. Skewed camera angles rendered brown-orange strip malls and tract-home cul-de-sacs as fascinating, tessellated puzzles. Careful cause-and-effect logic ruled both overarching plots and dreamy montages about cooking drugs. One of the show’s most memorable episodes spent nearly an hour following Walter White as he attempted to swat a fly.

Saul, Julia Turner proclaimed in a 2016 *Slate* rave, aimed “higher than its progenitor by lowering the stakes,” while adding “more beauty, subtlety, and moral sophistication.” The spin-off’s first two episodes did briefly enter thriller territory when Jimmy had to negotiate for his life with a crazed drug dealer he’d accidentally offended. But rather than steadily escalate the hijinks, *Saul* dwelled on legal minutiae (Jimmy manipulates documents to help his girlfriend, the buttoned-up lawyer Kim Wexler, land a regional bank as a client), a psychological cold war (between Jimmy and his snooty corporate-attorney brother, Chuck), and light skulduggery (often facilitated by Mike Ehrmantraut, a charcoal-voiced parking attendant whom *Breaking Bad* viewers knew as a scarily competent hit man). Bursts of charm, pathos, and action were sprinkled throughout like M&M’s in a bag of trail mix. But the show mostly aspired to the stillness of an Edward Hopper painting as it scanned for melancholy beauty in everyday America. Gilligan told me in a 2017 interview that he wanted to make “room for slower-paced stories,” which he saw “as an antidote to everything else.”

I found the early seasons intriguing in part because the show seemed to be commenting on the very nature of boredom. *Breaking Bad*’s final episode had featured Walter confessing that he hadn’t become a meth kingpin for money; he’d sought out danger in order to feel “alive.” In *Saul*, Jimmy strained to adhere to the straight-and-narrow—public-defender work, estate law—but couldn’t resist the rush of the occasional bribery or faked accident. Viewers oscillated between rooting for him to find happiness in drudgery and rooting for more pulse-quickenings schemes. Yet even when Jimmy broke the rules, lovingly filmed vignettes about process—the painstaking toil of document forgery, the construction of a device to disguise his voice on the phone—hammered home the inescapability of logistics and hard work.

By Season 4, the actual experience of watching the show had come to feel like a chore I no longer needed to perform. The descent into Sauldom

The show aspired to the stillness of an Edward Hopper painting as it scanned for melancholy beauty in everyday America.

was inching along, and lengthy scenes were devoted to Jimmy (his law license temporarily suspended) working at a cellphone store with no customers to serve. After multiple seasons inspired by the rhythms of regular life, Gould and Gilligan had made their position clear: Jimmy might cut corners for a head rush, but this show simply wouldn't. I did not stop appreciating that project so much as forget to keep tuning in to it. The broader television ecosystem was supplying plenty of high-minded distraction, and in a variety of more vibrant flavors.

SAUL'S DEBUT YEAR turned out to mark the moment when the so-called Golden Age of Television, with its hour-long weekly minimovies, tipped into "peak TV," as on-demand streaming services supplied a glut of content. Much of that content has been worthy of the "prestige" label, but not because it builds on *Mad Men's* and *Breaking Bad's* quietest moments by solemnly meditating on ordinary reality. Instead, the best of recent TV has often spiced up real-world settings with wild concepts (*Russian Doll*, which brought a psychedelic twist to an existential crisis), powerful topicality (*Succession*, a dramedy about the rich and pathetic), and zingy comedy (*Fleabag*, a character study of a woman who suspects, like Jimmy, that she is a loser). The aura of significance that surrounded Walter White's saga came from years of careful, unhurried attention to a supposed everyman—a paradigm that *Saul* doubled down on. Meanwhile, miniseries and varied episode lengths began to show a fresher way forward, and more diverse casting broadened and challenged the everyman conceit.

Still, in preparation for *Saul's* final season, I vowed to catch up—curious less about what had happened to the characters than about the state of my attention span. Would I recover the pleasure of patient viewing? How nostalgic or antsy would I feel about the now half-decade-old goal of making "room for slower-paced stories"? When I was confronted again with the dreary cellphone store, I felt a wave of exhaustion. I powered through it, though, and discovered that I'd bailed just when *Saul* started to recalibrate. Toward the end of the fourth season, that defining sensation of TV enjoyment—the binge impulse—finally kicked in, and I began hitting "Next Episode" out of desire rather than obligation.

At long last, *Better Call Saul* had ratcheted up the pace, the suspense, the stakes! As Season 4 ended, Jimmy adopted the name—and criminal-friendly branding—of Saul Goodman. Gun battles, life-endangering treachery, and duffel bags of cash—the pulp grist that had always been on the show's periphery—were now central. Gilligan and

Gould still indulged in their cinematic reveries (a leisurely sequence zoomed in on ants swarming an ice-cream cone, to take one example), but the series was no longer fetishizing the grind of dealing with one small crisis after another between moments of serenity—which is to say, it was no longer focused on the familiar daily feeling of being alive. It was instead imagining how it feels to consciously make the leap into another universe, one of constant danger and excitement.

Would this jolt of adrenaline have been just a cheap high had *Saul* not delayed it for so long? I'm not yet ready to forgive the show's dullest detours. But the excellence of Season 5 did benefit from years' worth of slowly accreted details coming together. Certainly, the gradual lead-up to Jimmy's fall had set the conditions for an inner storm—greed and exhilaration mingling with guilt and fear—that roiled throughout the season. After one particularly traumatic ordeal for the characters, Mike gives a spiel about life's road being determined by small, irreversible choices. The *oh shit* wince that Jimmy gives in response is all too believable: Viewers knew, deep in their cortex, that he had long failed to reckon with the larger course he'd been charting from one petty scrape to the next.

Saul's story was always fated to get wild toward the end, and indeed, the creators of the final season have "turned the volume up on all of it," Rhea Seehorn, the actor who plays Kim, recently told *The New York Times Magazine*. "Whatever direction someone was already going in, they made it more extreme." That amplification sounds tantalizing, even if it may refute some of the ideals the series once seemed to stand for. Very few of the streaming era's breakout shows have shared *Saul's* earlier, low-level languor—or they have done so only within the helpful confines of the miniseries format, or with the benefit of some sort of fantastical hook (see HBO's postapocalyptic tone poem, *Station Eleven*). Perhaps not coincidentally, nothing commands—nothing really can command—the same combination of acclaim and viewership that the Golden Age standouts did. What *Saul* does now share with its contemporaries and predecessors—what makes it, at last, a great show—is an energetic embrace of TV's promise: the room to experiment with the medium's episodic format, to play with pace and create immersive, sustained, addictive stories. Future viewers of this dazzling and frustrating series shouldn't think twice about speeding up when they feel the urge. *A*

The excellence of Season 5 benefited from years' worth of slowly accreted details coming together.

Spencer Kornhaber is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



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BOOKS

Change the Map, Change the Moral

A global view of World War II turns a battle for freedom into a battle for empire.

By Daniel Immerwahr

What was the Second World War about? According to Allied leaders, that wasn't a hard question. "This is a fight between a free world and a slave world," U.S. Vice President Henry Wallace explained. It is "between Nazidom and democracy," Winston Churchill said, with "tyranny" on one side and "liberal, peaceful" powers on the other.

Would that it were so simple. The Allies' inclusion of the Soviet Union—"a dictatorship as absolute as any dictatorship in the world," Franklin D. Roosevelt once called it—muddled the waters. But the other chief Allies weren't exactly liberal democracies, either. Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United States, and (depending on how you view Tibet and Mongolia)



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China were all empires. Together, they held, by my count, more than 600 million people—more than a quarter of the world—in colonial bondage.

This fact wasn't incidental; empire was central to the causes and course of the war. Yet the colonial dimensions of World War II aren't usually stressed. The most popular books and films present it as Churchill did, as a dramatic confrontation between liberty-loving nations and merciless tyrants. In the United States, it's remembered still as the "good war," the vanquishing of evil by the Greatest Generation.

That understanding works—sort of—when war stories focus on Adolf Hitler's invasions of sovereign states in Europe. It falters, however, when they center on the Pacific. There, the Japanese targeted colonies, seizing them under the banner of "Asia for the Asiatics." The Allies beat Japan back, but only to return Burma to the British and Indonesia to the Dutch—Asia for the Europeans.

The Pacific clash over colonies reveals a greater truth about the Second World War. Or such is the contention of Richard Overy, one of the conflict's most distinguished historians. After writing some 20 books about the war, focused mainly on Europe, Overy has widened his scope. His new book, *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931–1945*, 1,000 pages long, refuses to treat the Pacific as "an appendix," as histories often do. Rather, it sees World War II as a truly "global event."

In that light, one thing becomes clear. Whatever else the Second World War was about, it was, on both sides, a war for empire.

WHAT IMPELLED Germany, Japan, and Italy on their conquering missions? Given how reckless and ruinous their belligerence was, pathologizing it is easy. Madness clearly abounded in the high command, but three countries going insane in the same way at the same time isn't exactly a satisfying explanation. A better one, Overy suggests, lies further in the past.

The 19th century had seen a "veritable steeplechase for colonial acquisitions," as Italy's foreign ministry described it. Britain won that race, with other countries that would eventually join the Allies taking secondary prizes. The Axis powers, late out of the gate, got the leftovers. Worse, the winners locked the losers out, rebuffing Japan's attempts to join the great powers' club and stripping Germany of its meager overseas holdings after World War I. Going into the 1930s, the Allies held 15 times more colonial acreage than the Axis states did.

Japan, Germany, and Italy were rising economies without large empires. Was that a problem? Today, it wouldn't be; 21st-century countries don't require colonies to prosper. But different rules applied in the

first half of the 20th century. Then, industrial powers depended on raw materials from far-off lands. And without colonies, they had every reason to worry about ready availability. Hitler never forgot the World War I blockade that largely cut Germany off from such materials as rubber and nitrates and caused widespread hunger. The global Depression, which shrunk international trade by two-thirds from 1929 to 1932, threatened a new form of blockade.

As cross-border trade collapsed, rich countries subsisted off whatever was within their borders. The British and French could lean on their empires. But the Germans? They were a "people without space," as the title of a popular novel had it. Hence Hitler's fixation on *Lebensraum* and the parallel Italian search for *spazio vitale*—both terms translate as "living space." The Japanese complained of "ABCD encirclement," meaning that their access to such vital resources as oil and rubber was hemmed in by the Americans, British, Chinese, and Dutch.

The war, Overy argues, didn't pit peaceful nation-states against violent thugs. It's better understood as a conflict between incumbent and insurgent imperialists. The British, French, and United States preferred peace because they were satisfied with the status quo. "We have got most of the world already, or the best parts of it," observed the head of Britain's navy in 1934. "We only want to keep what we have got and prevent others from taking it away from us." The Japanese, Germans, and Italians, by contrast, sought a violent redivision of the spoils.

On the day of the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese government blamed the war on the Anglophone powers' "selfish desire for world conquest."

TAKING A GLOBAL VIEW leads to a different picture of the war. For example, when did it begin? Most English speakers would say 1939, with Germany's invasion of Poland. But by then Japan had already been at continuous war with China for two years and had violently conquered Beijing, Shanghai, and the Chinese capital of Nanjing. (China recently mandated that its textbooks use an even earlier start year for its war with Japan: 1931, when the Japanese invaded Manchuria.) Only by sidelining Asia can you claim that the Second World War ran from 1939 to 1945.

Japan started the fighting, and Japan made the war a "world" event. Until 1941, the regional conflicts on the Asian mainland and in Europe and the Mediterranean were largely disconnected. Japan fused them together on December 7/8, 1941, when it attacked the British empire in Asia. Yanking on Britain's colonies, Japan pulled the great power into the Pacific War. That's also how the United States got dragged in; for all its self-congratulation about standing up to fascism,

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the country declared war only when another country tried to take its territories.

The December 1941 attacks are the subject of considerable mystification in the United States. Here, the episode is remembered as “Pearl Harbor” and placed on December 7, 1941, which Roosevelt indelibly called “a date which will live in infamy.” But while Roosevelt’s speech focused on the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in the territory of Hawaii, that was far from the only target. As Roosevelt acknowledged in a less-noted part of the speech, the Japanese swept over the Anglophone holdings in the Pacific. They attacked within hours not only Hawaii but the U.S. possessions of Guam, the Philippines, Midway, and Wake Island and the British ones of Malaya, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

Only in Hawaii and Midway did the vagaries of the international date line place the event on December 7. Everywhere else, the infamous date was December 8. By confining the time to December 7 and the place to Pearl Harbor, Americans miss the significance of the event. It wasn’t merely an attempt to sink battleships; it was a blitzkrieg dash for British and U.S. colonies. And—this is another thing the Pearl Harbor framing misses—it succeeded. Though the Japanese never conquered Hawaii or Midway, they took all the other targets, soon adding British Burma, Australia’s territories of New Guinea and Papua, nearly all of the Dutch East Indies (today’s Indonesia), the western tip of Alaska, and a constellation of colonized Pacific islands.

In the Pacific, the war was transparently a fight for empire. In Europe, Overy argues, it wasn’t all that different. “What India was for England the spaces of the East will be for us,” Hitler once remarked. Shifting analogies, he also noted that Germans should “look upon the natives as Redskins.” If Germany couldn’t easily reach distant territories in Asia or Africa, it could carve colonial space out of Eastern Europe.

The aim of these land grabs was resources, and the Axis states plundered their conquered territories. Millions of Asians starved as Japan impounded food—the Indonesians and Vietnamese both suffered famines. Germany plundered, too, targeting Jews but not limiting its depredations to them. Its scheme to feed itself with confiscated Soviet grain, the unfathomably cruel “Hunger Plan,” was carried out with the understanding that, if successful, it might kill 30 million. “Starvation and colonization were German policy,” the historian Timothy Snyder has written, “discussed, agreed, formulated, distributed, and understood.”

But were such policies effective? Ultimately not, Overy argues. It was hard to invade a country, subjugate it, return it swiftly to full productivity, and carry off its goods—all while fighting a war. The extreme violence

that characterized life in the Axis empires can be partly explained by the occupiers’ desperate attempts to extract resources that were simply not forthcoming.

Meanwhile, the Allies still had much territory to draw on. Britain could marshal 2.7 million troops from India alone. The United States’ continental expanse—won in the 19th century via wars, purchases, and Indigenous dispossession—held nearly 60 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves. The Germans and Italians were running out of fuel in North Africa while the Americans were shipping tanks there from Detroit. U.S. supplies coursed through a global circulatory system of bases, many of them in Allied colonies, that stretched through the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.

By wresting Pacific islands away from Japan, the United States managed in 1945 to anchor its network within striking distance of Japan’s home islands, which it bombed thoroughly. And when the Japanese empire fell, the Allies rushed to reclaim their lost colonies.

ALLIED LEADERS didn’t dwell on the contradictions between fighting for freedom and fighting for colonies. In fact, they didn’t always see them. Empire had been “one vast machine for the defense of liberty,” Britain’s colonial secretary proclaimed, audaciously, at the war’s end.

Things looked different from the colonized world. Overy focuses on the imperialist rulers rather than their subjects—Britain and Japan, in other words, not Burma and the Philippines. Yet the glimpses he gives of colonial life confirm Mohandas Gandhi’s warning to Roosevelt that, in the territories, Allied boasts of protecting freedom and democracy rang “hollow.”

Gandhi’s country, India, entered the European conflict in 1939 not out of any popular desire to quash Nazism but because its British viceroy had declared war on its behalf. Many of Gandhi’s fellow nationalists quit their governmental posts in protest, but to little effect. London requisitioned troops and supplies from its colony, paid for with IOUs, to be redeemed after the war. The economic drain on India, already poor, caused a crisis.

Conditions grew dire in Bengal, an Indian province near the edge of Japan’s empire. There, colonial authorities confiscated food, evacuated villages, and destroyed tens of thousands of boats for fear that Japanese invaders might get them. Yet this also removed local sources of support and encouraged panicked hoarding; many Bengalis went hungry.

The British, of course, took hunger seriously. The government in London was “awash with nutritionists,” the historian James Vernon has written. War meant scarcity, but officials assiduously researched public needs, paying special attention to vulnerable

BLOOD
AND RUINS:
THE LAST
IMPERIAL WAR,
1931–1945

Richard Overy

VIKING

groups, and rationed food thoughtfully and fairly. Churchill was resolute: “Nothing must interfere with the supplies necessary to maintain the stamina and resolution of the people of this country.”

Yet by “this country,” Churchill meant the British Isles. There, the state’s nutritional planning was so successful that diets improved despite the shortages. In Bengal, by contrast, British officials did shockingly little to stop the deprivation they’d created from tipping into starvation. They insisted on letting the market operate freely, and they watched rice flow out of Bengal and people drop dead of hunger. Overy devotes only a paragraph to the resulting famine but registers its enormous death toll, which he places at 2.7 million to 3 million. Pressed to send aid, the war cabinet in London refused. Churchill blamed Indians for “breeding like rabbits.”

Gandhi and the leaders of his party, the Indian National Congress, vigorously protested the government’s famine-inducing policy of confiscation and, days after, threatened mass civil disobedience if India wasn’t freed. Churchill was apoplectic. “We will not let the Hottentots by popular vote throw the white people into the sea” was his view. The British arrested the National Congress leadership, including Gandhi. By the end of 1943, almost 92,000 were behind bars.

“We resist British Imperialism no less than Nazism,” Gandhi wrote to Hitler. “If there is a difference, it is in degree.” *If there is a difference.* W. E. B. Du Bois, a leading African American thinker, was also unsure he saw much of one. “There was no Nazi atrocity,” he wrote after the war, “which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race.”

Following this logic to its conclusion, the Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose escaped British house arrest in Bengal and fled to Hitler’s Germany. Bose recruited thousands of captured Indians to fight with the Wehrmacht and then, moving to the Japanese empire, helped raise an Indian expatriate army to attack British India. For Bose, this wasn’t an invasion but a liberation.

Bose’s freedom fighters met swift defeat. Yet their cause resounded. Throughout Asia, empire was collapsing. Weapons, once tightly controlled, spread widely during the fighting. And Japan, with its loud rhetoric about ending foreign rule, poured gas on the fire. The sight of whites ousted and Asians taking their place was one that colonized people couldn’t easily unsee.

The Allies vanquished the Axis powers but, as Overy notes, the battles didn’t stop. Reclaiming Allied colonies required more than dispatching rival colonizers. It also meant confronting the colonized, who were armed and loath to return to the old ways. In

just the month after Japan announced its surrender, Indonesia and Vietnam declared independence and Malaya was in revolt.

The British, Dutch, and French fought bloody rearguard actions to hold their possessions (“Shoot before you are shot at and don’t trust anyone black!” Dutch soldiers were instructed), but ultimately they lost those battles. In 1940, nearly one out of every three individuals on the planet was colonized. By 1965, barely one in 50 was.

FEW WOULD count the French war in Vietnam (or the U.S. one that immediately followed) as part of the Second World War. Yet why not? The story ends in 1945 thanks only to the focus on Europe and the democracy-versus-totalitarianism framing, which crops empire out of the picture.

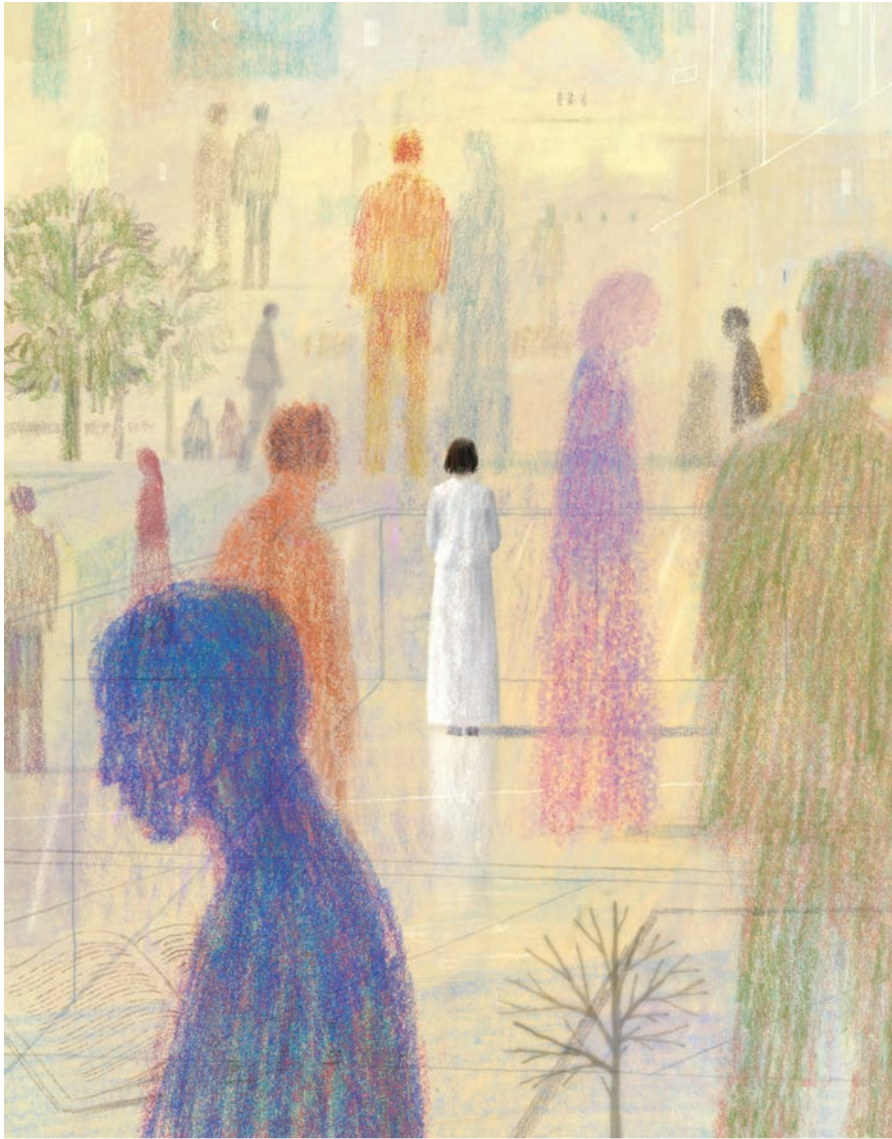
Ignoring empire also turns the Second World War into a moral triumph. That’s comforting for the winners, but perhaps too much so. Whereas Germany and Japan developed serious peace movements after 1945, the Allied powers, and particularly the United States, kept their war footing. Though the U.S. never declared war again after defeating Japan, the scholar David Vine calculates that there have been only two years since—1977 and 1979—when American forces weren’t invading or fighting in some foreign country.

The violence has flowed from Cambodia to Congo, and often with World War II as the model. First the “free world” fought the “totalitarian” foes in the Cold War, then came the “axis of evil” and “Islamofascism.” “Each succeeding conflict,” the West Point professor Elizabeth Samet writes in her recent book, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness*, “has led to the reprise and reinvention of the Good War’s mythology to justify or otherwise explain uses of American power.” Convinced of the inherent goodness of the war, U.S. leaders have sought to refight it in new guises again and again.

They might have been better off seeing the war through Gandhi’s eyes rather than Churchill’s: as a battle over territory, not an Armageddon-style showdown between good and evil. They might have then remembered it as more like the First World War, a lethal collision of self-interested rivals. That earlier war taught even its victors to be suspicious of militaristic moralizing. But by restricting their attention to Europe and taking a regional view of a global war, the Western victors in the Second World War avoided that lesson. *A*

Daniel Immerwahr teaches history at Northwestern and is the author of How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States.

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BOOKS

Sex for Art's Sake

Elif Batuman's curious experiment in fiction

By Jennifer Wilson

“One is tired of living in the country, one moves to the city; one is tired of one’s native land, one goes abroad; one is europamüde, one goes to America, and so on.” In *Either/Or* (1843), the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard calls this ceaseless quest for novelty the defining feature of an “aesthetic life,” one in which meaning is derived from pleasure-seeking (rather than from, say, the stable tedium of marriage). Those who subscribe to it are in constant pursuit of new erotic and artistic stimuli, consequences be damned: “One burns half of Rome to get an idea of the conflagration of Troy.” Fortunately, for the Harvard student Selin Karadağ—the protagonist of Elif Batuman’s *The Idiot* (her fiction debut, and a Pulitzer Prize nominee in 2018) and its sequel, *Either/Or*—embracing this quest never comes to arson. A sophomore now, in Batuman’s second novel, she can just declare a new major.

For Selin, a narrator who treats course descriptions as manifestos, this portends a drastic shift in worldview and sensibility. At the end of *The Idiot*, she resolved to stop taking classes in the psychology and philosophy of language. She had just spent the summer of 1996 teaching English in a village outside Budapest, a job she took to get closer—physically and culturally—to her crush, a Hungarian math student named Ivan who has now graduated. When the sexual tension built over the summer crescendoed into nothing more than a brotherly hug in a parking lot, Selin was left feeling adrift—and angry about all the linguistics classes she had taken the previous year. “They had let me down,” she seethed. The blunders and miscues that stalled her relationship with Ivan could not be explained away by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that she had sworn by—the idea that “the language you spoke affected how you processed reality.”

In reality, *Either/Or* informs us, Ivan was just the kind of person who preferred sex on a Thai beach to stilted

conversation by the Danube. Like some critics of *The Idiot*, he turns out to have wanted a little less talk and a little more action. *Either/Or* shares none of the chastity of its predecessor. Selin and Ivan's tentative and nerdy emails (in which they pretended to be characters from their Russian-language textbook) and their innocent swims in Walden Pond have given way to an S&M party, K-Y jelly, handcuffs, and talk of a Swedish-twin fetish. It is as if Batuman set out to respond to her detractors and (in the style of her protagonist, who always petitions the dean to take a fifth course) couldn't help overachieving in the process. But the sex is not gratuitous. Now a literature major who has just discovered Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in a bookstore, Selin—by testing out the aesthetic life—is simply doing her homework.

The novel meanders along as she experiments with sensualism. As Selin bounces from one experience (boys, books, countries, etc.) to the next, *Either/Or* never gets tied down to any one story line. Batuman is not about to concoct some equivalent to the marriage plot; an aesthetic life necessitates narratological promiscuity.

The sequel is a more explicit *künstlerroman* than its antecedent. The Selin who spent the last parts of *The Idiot* in a small Hungarian village gathering anecdotes for a novel is now in possession of a full-fledged creative philosophy. Her new taste for whirlwind sexual affairs coincides with her belief that to be a writer, she must collect experiences that she can churn into art. However, Selin, never one to leave an idea unchallenged, spends much of *Either/Or* questioning the ethical implications of seeing other people as material for fiction, especially as her setting shifts from Harvard Yard to Turkey. As the novel traverses the globe, we remain fixed within Selin's mind, a space that vibrates with the intensity of someone young enough to think that she will solve this dilemma once and for all.

BATUMAN'S FIRST BOOK, *The Possessed: Adventures With Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* (2010), was a memoiristic account of her grad-school days at Stanford. It put on full display Batuman's now-familiar gift for blending erudition with approachability, sophisticated literary exegesis with self-deprecating humor. She described her choice to study Russian literature as "an impulsive decision, not unlike jumping over a wall and ending up in a graveyard." Fans of Batuman, myself included, would be lying if we did not admit that, when reading her, we tacitly hope her hyperintelligence might be contagious. Publishers intuited as much when she initially pitched *The Possessed* as fiction. "Nobody wants to read a whole novel about depressed grad

students" was the message Batuman got, she told the magazine *Guernica* in 2017, "but with a non-fiction book, some people might read it in the hope of learning about the Russian novels they never had time to read themselves. It was supposed to be sort of a time-saving device."

Like *The Possessed*, *Either/Or* could double as a syllabus. Batuman's newest narrative is propelled by Selin's encounters with various works of art, which teach her that her dalliance with Ivan, baffling and torturous though it had been, was good material. She recognizes versions of her story not just in Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, a novel about unrequited love, but in the lyrics of the Fugees (over email, Ivan had killed her softly with his words), and she is reassured—her agonies will not be for naught. Above all, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* consolidates her allegiance to an aesthetic approach to life. As in *The Idiot*, her friend Svetlana is her foil, a woman who "wanted to be in a 'stable relationship' and to someday have children"—precisely the path that holds no allure for Selin.

Creative writing dovetails well with getting over a breakup. As Selin goes out to amass experiences, Ivan recedes into the background; where we once awaited his emails, we now await Selin's inevitable UTI. Her sex-shy and teetotaling days behind her, she embarks on a college life more ordinary, saying yes where she would have once said no. With the raw sincerity and droll insight into the rarefied world of academia that readers will remember from Batuman's previous books, Selin recounts her initial toe-dip into hedonism—which entails, among other things, losing her virginity to a Harvard guy who studies the "depolarization-induced slowing of Ca²⁺ channel deactivation in squid neurons." She surprises her friend Lakshmi by dressing "appropriately" for an S&M party. The new thrill-seeking, uninhibited Selin hears the Alanis Morissette song "Head Over Feet," particularly the line about "wanting something rational," and feels disdain. She concludes that Alanis must be singing about "some boring guy," not the kind of person who would make for a good character in a novel.

The simplicity of the experience-for-art's-sake mantra is itself a clue that the cerebral Selin will soon grow suspicious of it. For a seminar on chance she reads *Nadja* (1928), by the surrealist André Breton, a novel based on his brief, real-life affair with a young woman who was later institutionalized. The idea that, as the back cover puts it, "Nadja is not so much a person as a way she makes people behave" freaks Selin out. She's more than a little repulsed by this instrumental view of a human being. Yet doesn't she go on to adopt a similar attitude in her dealings with

Creative writing dovetails well with getting over a breakup.

the boys she encounters in her sensual makeover? As if on cue, Svetlana (who delights in passing judgment) pronounces, “That’s what can happen when you fetishize an aesthetic life. It can make you irresponsible and destructive.” But even Svetlana concedes that “people like that can invent a new style, and I can appreciate that.”

Selin is not terribly troubled by the prospect of using the young men in her life, and rightly so: After all, they seem just as eager to dispose of her as she of them. The ethics of being an autobiographical-writer-in-the-making who feeds on turmoil become murkiest for Selin when she thinks about her family, who made an appearance in *The Idiot* and return in *Either/Or*. She considers the lingering effects of her parents’ divorce, now brought into relief by an illness that accentuates her mother’s vulnerability. Selin recalls the little jokes her mother would make about which of her bad habits would end up in Selin’s novel. A fiercely loyal and empathetic daughter, Selin is unsettled by the notion that her parents’ lapses have served as a kind of creative resource for her as a writer. “The disorder you experienced in your childhood was somehow to your credit, or capitalizable upon later in life,” she thinks—“even though, or precisely because, it was a discredit to your mother.”

BATUMAN HAS SPOKEN frequently about her indebtedness to the 20th-century Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued that the novel is defined by its ability to accommodate different registers of language and dialect and to contain multiple genres (letters, essays, poems, etc.). *Either/Or* takes full advantage of that capaciousness; along with song lyrics (Tom Waits is also on the playlist), it includes letters and poetry from a street magazine sold by unhoused people in Cambridge, Harvard course-catalog offerings, live-chat messages, and a series that proves surprisingly suited to raising even wider-ranging questions about the aesthetic approach to life: the *Let’s Go* travel guides. Selin gets hired by the longtime publisher of the Harvard-student-written books even though she fails the *Let’s Go* test (enough language proficiency to pay a bribe) for her desired destination, Russia: Selin fudges the grammar when she tries to offer a fake Russian cop \$4, so she is assigned to Turkey instead.

One of the criticisms levied at *The Idiot* was that Selin seemed to lack a political consciousness. However one comes down on the debate over whether literary fiction should be held to such a standard, *Either/Or* is enriched by Batuman’s decision to raise the stakes of the novel’s central theme. Like Batuman’s, Selin’s family is from Turkey, and the guidebook she

has been tasked with updating forces her to confront what it means to have your own way of life aestheticized by others. In Ankara, she stays with her grandmother, who tends to speak in proverbs. “I was used to tuning them out,” Selin says, but now she realizes that this is precisely what *Let’s Go* readers want to hear—some local color to accentuate the foreignness. “If it had been Russia—I would have been trying to learn the proverbs,” she admits, and so “I started writing them down.” At a hostel, a German tourist overhears Selin speaking Turkish and asks her to belly dance.

Selin finds herself stuck between the wishes of Turkish hospitality workers, who want her to advertise their services in *Let’s Go*, and the demands of foreign travelers, who are expecting her to deliver vivid experiences (which always seem to involve paying as little as possible for the wares and services of locals). The Turkish characters are confused by Selin’s actions—why is she making life so hard for herself, taking two buses to a small, remote village? “The book I work for is for Americans,” she explains. “If their life is too easy, they worry that they’re missing the authentic essence of Turkish existence.” Her interlocutors remain authentically puzzled. Batuman devotes her final chapters to ferry captains and the people who work front desks at hostels and bus depots. In other words, she shines a light on what you could call the experience supply chain and the labor that goes into furnishing people with a life they might consider worth writing about.

As for what kind of life is worth reading about, some will no doubt be prompted to wonder just that after closing *Either/Or*. To paraphrase the publisher who considered Batuman’s first pitch for *The Possessed*, plenty of people might ask themselves why they should bother with a whole novel about an antic undergrad obsessed with the dilemmas of art-making. I confess I felt a tinge of the same vexation. Unsure how to think about that, I did what Selin does in *Either/Or* when she finishes *Nadja*—I read the back-jacket copy: “How does one live a life as interesting as a novel—a life worthy of becoming a novel—without becoming a crazy, abandoned woman oneself?” I decided that Batuman is warning us (and Selin, not that she’s listening) against just that sort of fervent need to identify with fictional characters, to see their demons and desires reflected in our own lives. Perhaps it should be enough to say of reading *Either/Or* that I enjoyed the experience. *A*

Jennifer Wilson is a contributing essayist for The New York Times Book Review.

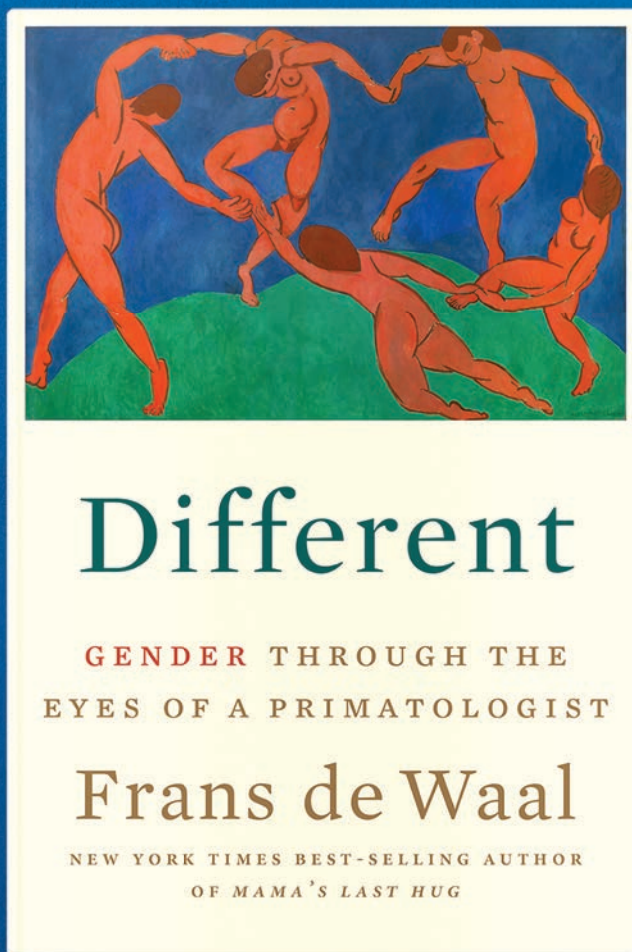
EITHER/OR

Elif Batuman

PENGUIN PRESS

**“Argues with wit and clarity against assumptions about
sex and gender that generate inequality....
Engaging, enlightening, and deeply informative.”**

—Kirkus, starred review



**“It is a brave man these days who
ventures into the minefield of gender differences.**

But Frans de Waal relies on a gift for storytelling, a sincere respect for culture, along with intimate knowledge of longtime bonobo and chimpanzee associates to deftly negotiate this treacherous terrain.

Wise and humane.”

—SARAH BLAFFER HRDY

**“A brilliant and fascinating book
that brings a scientific, compassionate and balanced
approach to some of the hottest controversies about sex and gender.”**

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Privacy Isn't Dead

But who gets to keep a secret in a hyperconnected world?

By Sarah E. Igo

America's first newspaper, *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, was also one of its short-lived. Motivated by the creed "That Memorable Occurrences of Divine Providence may not be neglected or forgotten," the inaugural issue, published in 1690, aired rumors of an affair between the French king and his daughter-in-law, along with other scandalous reports—and was promptly censored and confiscated by British authorities in Boston. But the American appetite for such salacious fare was irrepressible. By the time of the Civil War, journals such as *The Illustrated Police News* were devoted to graphic depictions of real-life criminal cases: Readers were served up vivid woodcuts of brothel raids, hangings, suicides, and child deaths—the more violent and gruesome, the better.

The invasiveness of contemporary gossip sites, social media, and search engines, it turns out, has a long pedigree. Although the technologies of dissemination have changed, the impulse to portray—and profit from—intimate material has thrived for centuries.

The lineage of the counter-impulse—legal efforts to restrain intrusions into Americans' private lives and affairs—is shorter and its legacy more elusive. Public calls for a right to privacy emerged only at the turn of the 20th century, triggered by a more aggressive press as well as technical innovations like instantaneous photography, new communication platforms like the telegraph and the telephone, and, later, novel uses of personal information by private companies and government agencies. In response, state legislatures, the Supreme Court, and eventually Congress stepped

in to patrol the boundary between the properly public and the deservedly private.

The battles were at times spirited. But many commentators now claim that the war is over, and that privacy has lost. Public and private organizations alike mine the minutiae of our lives, and citizens—enmeshed in a culture of confession and data-driven consumerism—are unable, or unwilling, to resist. Older modes of discretion have given way to an ethos of self-disclosure, an urge to be known. In this view, the sidelining of privacy as a social and cultural value—as well as a legal right—was only a matter of time.

The rise of powerful technologies (facial recognition) and businesses (Facebook) that hinge on access to our personal information understandably inspires such fatalism. Yet over the past two decades, ever-expanding surveillance has been accompanied by a wide-ranging public debate about protecting aspects of our lives from scrutiny—evidence that privacy, endangered though it may be, is not yet extinct as a cultural concern. Indeed, that debate has sparked a welter of new proposals for protecting private life, such as the “right to be forgotten” and the right to move through public spaces undetected.

In *Seek and Hide: The Tangled History of the Right to Privacy*, the legal scholar Amy Gajda links our present struggle to an underappreciated tradition in American law and thought. She argues that although the right to privacy may have been a 19th-century innovation, privacy sensibilities have since the nation's beginnings served as a durable counterweight to the hallowed principles of free speech, free expression,

and the right to know. Ranging across several centuries, her account of the determined fight to protect privacy sounds like just the sort of road map we could use right now. But legal victories won in the name of privacy have often been sorely inadequate. What's more, they have historically favored the privileged over the vulnerable. A realistic defense of privacy in the digital age isn't a lost cause, but it will require grappling with new social as well as technological challenges. It will also entail reckoning with privacy's past uses and abuses.

SEEK AND HIDE focuses on a specific kind of privacy conflict: the propriety of publicizing true but intimate or embarrassing facts about a person. That sort of shame-inducing exposure may sound almost passé in the era of Twitter and TMZ. We're by now used to personal missteps forever preserved online, innuendo circulating on the web, doxing as a weapon of rhetorical war. We take for granted the constant prying that seems to come with a life hooked up to the internet. But the history of disputes over press invasions serves as a kind of barometer, revealing the cyclical nature of privacy's fortunes. It also highlights the persistent disparities in whose privacy has mattered to lawmakers and courts.

Gajda traces the championing of privacy (and skepticism of an overly free press) back to the nation's founding. Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton—who otherwise agreed on little—both spoke to the damage that truthful-but-embarrassing disclosures could cause. To let such details loose in the world, Hamilton charged, was a “two-edged sword, by which to wound the public character and stab the private felicity of the person.” (Both men, it should be noted, were considerably less bothered when those details concerned a political rival.)

Not incidentally, these men each had a personal investment in keeping certain matters quiet: Jefferson's sexual relationship with the enslaved Sally Hemings and Hamilton's affair with a married woman, made still more scandalous by his payoffs to her husband. Courts, following the lines of status in American society, were generally happy to oblige, punishing journalistic invasions chiefly when they threatened the reputations of elite white men.

The cohort of Americans who could count on their privacy being respected grew over the course of the 19th century. The middle class, with its newly genteel sensibilities and domestic sanctuaries, was now included, although women's and children's privacy continued to matter mostly as an extension of that of male heads of household. At a time when immigrants, nonwhite people, the poor, criminals, and other “unworthies” were neither allotted much

privacy nor thought to deserve it, the well-heeled and respectable won libel suits against reporters for printing potentially damaging stories. In the mid-19th century, for example, the New Hampshire Supreme Court ruled that a local newspaper was unquestionably out of line in tarnishing the name of a “good, pious, virtuous and honest” woman by recounting that, during the course of a party she had attended, “kisses were bestowed on ripe lips and cheeks ... generally innocent of such sweet tokens.”

Long before a “right to privacy” was codified, American law thus drew a line between issues of public import that needed to see the light of day and intimate affairs that individuals had every right to cloak. Certain matters were considered especially intimate. Personal correspondence, sexual liaisons, indecorous divorce proceedings, medical diagnoses, and images of the naked body were all deemed worthy of protection. By the 1880s, the U.S. Supreme Court seemed to recognize this boundary in a search-and-seizure case, describing the “privacies of life” as an essential component of liberty and a “sacred right.”

It was in the next decade that privacy became a major public concern. This was prompted by the growing audacity of the scandal press, but also by the impact of new technologies, such as the telegraph and the telephone (and with it, the potential for wiretapping). Instantaneous photography in particular let loose a whole new species of virtual invasion in the form of “Kodak fiends,” proto-paparazzi who were now able to capture—and disseminate—individuals' images without their knowledge or consent.

In 1890, in what went on to be hailed as a landmark *Harvard Law Review* essay, Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, Boston lawyers, decried the press for transgressing the “obvious bounds of propriety and of decency” and trafficking in gossip as “a trade.” They also fretted over the novel forces allowing the “unauthorized circulation of portraits of private persons.” What they demanded in response was an actionable “right to privacy.” Their article helped give shape to a new legal claim for damages: the publication of private facts. (Ironically, Warren was heir to the paper company whose product made the printing of illustrations and photographs financially feasible for the scandal press—even as it also supplied paper to more reputable organs like *The Atlantic*.)

Although their call for a new right was inspired by modern privacy invasions, Brandeis and Warren traded in older gender- and class-bound ideas about who suffered most, both materially and psychologically, from the slings and arrows of publicity. Delicacy around embarrassing revelations was still often imagined as the privilege of elites. As their contemporary, the editor E. L. Godkin, put it, privacy was “one thing

SEEK AND HIDE:
THE TANGLED
HISTORY OF
THE RIGHT
TO PRIVACY

Amy Gajda

VIKING

to a man who has always lived in his own house, and another to a man who has always lived in a boarding-house.” Yet the ability to at least stake a claim against unwelcome public scrutiny was becoming available to a wider array of Americans.

One flash point was a 1900 suit filed by a 17-year-old named Abigail Roberson, charging that she was “made sick” by the unauthorized use of her image (shown in profile, revealing a bit of collarbone, and accompanied by the tagline “Flour of the family”) in advertisements for the Franklin Mills flour company—25,000 posters displayed in grocery stores, saloons, and other public venues. As Gajda recounts, a lower court sided with Roberson, stating that “every woman has a right to keep her face concealed from the observation of the public.” A higher court pointedly disagreed, however, that anyone had a right to move through the world free of unwanted publicity. Indeed, “others would have appreciated the compliment,” Judge Alton Parker pronounced. Popular outcry led the New York legislature to pass the nation’s first privacy statute the following year. Tellingly, Parker changed his tune just a couple of years later, when he ran for president and became desperate to escape “camera fiends” and what he described as the “sleepless surveillance of surreptitious snapshotters.” His own private life and affairs, unlike a pretty young girl’s, seemed obviously worthy of shielding.

The Roberson case pointed to the way commercial interests and evolving cultural values would recast privacy debates in the 20th century. Even as privacy rights gained a firmer footing, the notion that one could not realistically live outside the public gaze was taking hold. It was a position that scandalmongers as well as respectable papers endorsed as part of the First Amendment guarantee of press freedom. Defined relatively narrowly in Hamilton and Jefferson’s day, the people’s right to know was becoming a more expansive concept, promoted by publishers and reporters and backed by courts. The ebbing of Victorian norms of propriety, which had sought to keep unseemly matters out of public places, helped loosen rules on what was publishable, too.

The impulse to tell all was tempered—for a time—by the professionalization of journalism in the 1920s. The American Society of Newspaper Editors drafted national standards of behavior for its members, more of whom now came out of journalism schools. The dean of the University of Missouri’s journalism school, the first such program in the country, wrote in 1914 that “no one should write as a journalist what he would not say as a gentleman.” (The choice of language suggests the lasting association between privacy rights and social status.) In turn, jurists began to trust reporters to make their own calls as to what was in

the public interest to expose—to adjudicate what was newsworthy and what was not.

For a moment, the United States enjoyed a rare alignment of privacy sensibilities, journalistic practice, and the law. It didn’t last long. As the legal historian Samantha Barbas has explained, the courts’ deference to the press led, by mid-century, to a transformation in the very meaning of the term *newsworthy*. It came to refer not to what the public needed to know but to what it wanted to know. And what the public demanded was still the stuff of *The Illustrated Police News*: voyeuristic accounts of sex and violence.

The courts ratified this shift. In 1966, the Supreme Court heard *Time, Inc. v. Hill*, which concerned *Life* magazine’s misrepresentations of a family’s experience being taken hostage during an armed robbery. The Court ruled in favor of the publisher. In an echo of the Roberson case, the majority indicated that “exposure of the self to others” was simply part and parcel of life in a modern society that placed “a primary value on freedom of speech and of press.”

In subsequent decades, courts tilted further still, offering constitutional protection to parties who had exposed a private citizen’s sexual orientation against his wishes, published a rape victim’s name because it was discoverable in public documents, and televised a horrific accident scene in the name of public interest. Under American law, a private person could become a public one, his or her life stripped bare, simply by virtue of bad luck. Well before the advent of the internet age, American jurisprudence was coming around to the view that everyone was a public figure, and without the restrictions, cultural or legal, on the flow of personal information that Hamilton and Jefferson had counted on.

Well before the internet age, American courts were coming around to the view that everyone was a public figure.

THE VICISSITUDES of the right to privacy over the past two centuries suggest that we may be overdue for a reckoning akin to Brandeis and Warren’s. Even in a no-holds-barred social-media landscape, we are not without resources—whether in the form of legal precedents or changing social values.

California’s privacy regulations now permit minors to erase their past social-media posts, a version of Europe’s “right to be forgotten.” New statutes criminalize the humiliating nonconsensual sharing of explicit photos and videos known as revenge porn. Whistleblowers have begun to reveal the calculated damage to both private and public life caused by unregulated social media. Cities have banned facial-recognition technologies. Courts have ruled that Americans are entitled to some privacy in even the most public of places. Details that were never before treated as private—such as home addresses and geo-location data—have earned legal protections.

Pitched battles over claims of privacy and publicity underscore the urgency, and unsettled boundary lines, of our own historical moment. So far, these efforts have been scattershot. But they make clear that privacy is not “over.” As in the past, new privacy claims are emerging in tandem with novel violations.

History of course provides no tidy formula for the present. Gajda’s chronicle reveals an enduring tension between principles of free speech and respect for individuals’ private lives. But it also throws into sharp relief how much the context for that debate has changed in the past several decades. Highly visible privacy invasions have by no means abated: Take Jeff Bezos’s recent fight with the *National Enquirer* over its threat to print embarrassing photos of him and his girlfriend, or Hulk Hogan’s lawsuit against *Gawker* over the publishing of a sex tape featuring the former wrestler. (The success of the latter was, depending on your point of view, a victory for privacy or proof that it remains a prerogative of powerful men.) But such episodes in the tabloid press are now swamped by a much more extensive and complex ecosystem of incursions.

Our models and tools for safeguarding privacy need to catch up. We live in a world where daily, continuous—and often unfelt and unseen—intrusions are the rule, the work not just of traditional media but of tech companies, data-analytics firms, entertainment systems, financial industries, and state agencies seeking unfettered access to our information. Each of us now navigates competing claims of transparency and privacy every time we swipe a credit card, download an app, or pass through a smart home. Focusing on individual violations and litigation in the courts, a strategy that once served to protect (some) Americans’ privacy, is insufficient in the present. For a shot at privacy in the digital age—to say nothing of the coming metaverse—we will need to envision privacy as a collective social good in need of collective solutions: strong public regulation that systematically reins in the parties who trample it.

There is another lesson to be drawn from Gajda’s history. From the earliest days of the republic, privacy law has best served the most privileged in American society: those with considerable clout and resources at their disposal. To enact meaningful protections today, advocates will need to challenge the uneven allotment of privacy in the United States, taking careful account of who has and hasn’t been served by past victories. If they do, Americans may yet summon defenses of privacy responsive to the needs and desires of ordinary citizens. *A*

Sarah E. Igo is a history professor at Vanderbilt and the author of The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America.

Oral History By Elisa Gabbert

I read somewhere that people don’t mind a long wait for the elevator as long as there’s a mirror in the lobby.

I read that scientists don’t know why some girls’ ponytails bounce up and down and other girls’ swing from side to side.

I read in a blog comment “i feel that hot chicks just like going to public events to be hot” and on some level I kind of agree.

I once read that rich people have to invent new names because the good names get “stolen” by poor people.

I read that the atlas moth is born without a mouth and has one week to mate before it dies of starvation.

I read about a brain-imaging study that showed a dead fish could recognize human emotions.

I read that plants can “hear” themselves being eaten.

I read that Pisces dislike “the past coming back to haunt.”

I spend a lot of time waiting around for something wonderful to happen.

I often feel that I’m waiting for an unexpected life-changing force to come from nowhere—but how can it if I expect it?

I feel most myself—most trapped in my self—when I’m bored.

I experience boredom as a kind of luxurious misery.

I read that geologically speaking we are “marooned in time,” nothing interesting happening for eternity, as far as we’re concerned, on either side.

I asked my parents if they think I look like them and they said no.

Elisa Gabbert’s most recent book is The Unreality of Memory and Other Essays (2020). This poem appears in her forthcoming collection, Normal Distance, which will be published this fall.

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ESSAY

Winslow Homer's America

*What the
painter saw,
and why
it still speaks
to us*



By
Susan
Tallman

“I am not at all sure that I know what Americanism really is,” the art critic Elisabeth Luther Cary told readers of *The New York Times* in 1936, “but so the case stands: Americanism really is, and, in art, Winslow Homer is its great exemplar.” There was little disagreement. His very name seemed made for the job,

half muscular Greek adventure, half fretful Yankee Calvinism (his parents were inspired by the Congregational pastor Hubbard Winslow). During his lifetime, he managed—not without strategizing—to be both popular with the hoi polloi and admired by his peers. After his death in 1910, his husky seafarers and oddly concrete ocean sprays were a bridge between old-fashioned storytelling pictures and the 20th-century preference for expressive form. In 1995, when the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., assembled a magisterial retrospective, Homer was still “America’s greatest and most national painter.” He gave us our best selves: Currier and Ives without the kitsch, modernism with a human face. To John Updike, he was simply “painting’s Melville.”

This kind of flag-waving is no longer fashionable, or even comfortable, in an art world striving to be global and in a country where arguments over what counts as “real America” become nastier by the day. So it is not surprising that “Crosscurrents,” the biggest Homer show in more than a quarter century, positions the artist as part of a transnational Atlantic world, stretching from the Caribbean (where he made radiant watercolors of shark fishermen and limpid inlets) north to Quebec (leaping landlocked salmon and First Nations guides) and east to the English village of Cullercoats (heroic fishwives whipped by wind). In between lie his familiar stomping grounds: the battlefields of Virginia, the rocky coast of New England, the autumnal Adirondacks.

The map thus devised roughly follows the contours of the Gulf Stream, which is also the title of the first Homer painting purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a co-organizer of the exhibition, along with the National Gallery, in London. Indeed, *The Gulf Stream* (1899) is the centerpiece, a marker for how the curators—Stephanie L. Herdrich and Sylvia Yount in New York, Christopher Riopelle in London—envisage Homer for the 21st century. No longer an oracle of American innocence, he is recast as a poet of observed conflict: North versus South, man versus sea, nature red in tooth and claw.

Painted late in Homer’s life, *The Gulf Stream* nods back to his earlier

dory-in-distress pictures, such as *The Fog Warning* and *Lost on the Grand Banks* (both 1885). A sailor is adrift on heavy seas in a boat that has lost rudder and mast, but the setting is not the despondent gray of the North Atlantic—the sea is blue, the sailor is Black, and the home port named on the stern is Key West. Sharks slice through the foreground water, and in place of pallid halibut the deck is strewn with red-and-green sugarcane curled like snakes. In the distance, two possible resolutions to the drama heave into view: on the left, a full-rigged ship and hope of rescue; on the right, a

Homer is the master of the ambiguous outcome, which also makes him the master of the unclear moral.

waterspout and certain death. The sailor sees neither—he is looking to the side, beyond the edge of the canvas. We can’t see what he sees, and we have no way of knowing which way the wind blows.

The painting was never universally loved. It took seven years to sell, and was acquired by the Met in 1906 only under pressure from Homer’s peers at the National Academy of Design. Early viewers complained that the boat was too tubby, the drawing inelegant, the story line unpleasant. More recent observers have found the melodrama excessive, like *Sharknado* without the humor. When it was shown at the Knoedler Gallery in

1902, some female visitors, worried about the sailor’s fate, prompted the gallery to ask for clarification. Homer wrote back:

You ask me for a full description of my picture of the “Gulf Stream.” I regret very much that I have painted a picture that requires any description. The subject of this picture is comprised in *its title* . . .

I have crossed the Gulf Stream *ten* times & I should know something about it. The boat & sharks are outside matters of little consequence. *They have been blown out to sea by a hurricane.* You can tell these ladies that the unfortunate negro who now is so dazed & parboiled, will be rescued & returned to his friends and home, & ever after live happily.

This testy explanation satisfied no one, and *The Gulf Stream* has enjoyed a busy life in academic debate ever since, adduced as evidence of the artist’s thoughts on human frailty, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the death of his father, or the charm of painterly maritime disasters.

But for more than a century, *The Gulf Stream* has also been that rarest of things—an acknowledged masterpiece by a beloved artist, hanging in an eminent institution, and featuring a Black hero. It “broke the cotton-patch and back-porch tradition” of representation, Alain Locke wrote in 1935. And if white art historians spent decades tactfully ignoring the implications of skin color, among Black artists *The Gulf Stream* has been a touchstone. Derek Walcott identifies the sailor with the hero of his epic poem of diasporic Blackness, *Omeros*. Kerry James Marshall overhauled Homer’s parts to make his own *Gulf Stream* (2003), in which the water is shark-free, the sloop is yar, and four Black figures relax between the boom and a boom box. Marshall does add a Homer-worthy question mark: the glittery rope that forms the painting’s ornamental surround is broken on one side—an emblem of emancipation, perhaps, or of a doomed ship.

The Homer of *The Gulf Stream* is both more worldly and more elusive than the Homer of little red schoolhouses and sou’westers. And what the 90 or so paintings and watercolors assembled in “Crosscurrents” make clear is that the most salient

PREVIOUS SPREAD: WINSLOW HOMER (AMERICAN, 1836-1910). *THE GULF STREAM*, 1899. OIL ON CANVAS, 28 1/8 X 49 1/8 IN. (71.4 X 124.8 CM). THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, CATHARINE LORILLARD WOLFE COLLECTION, 1906 (06.1234). PHOTO COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.



Sharpshooter (1863)

quality of his art was never straightforwardness; it is his knack for using visual precision to demonstrate the limits of vision. We can see what is happening but not what *will* happen. He is the master of the ambiguous outcome, which also makes him the master of the unclear moral: Believe in the ship, and *The Gulf Stream* is a lesson in forbearance; believe in the waterspout, and it is a lesson in futility.

THE OPENING of “Crosscurrents” coincides with the publication of a new biography, *Winslow Homer: American Passage*, by William R. Cross. Both endeavors aim to refresh our understanding of an artist already familiar to most museumgoers, and both face the same hazard—a mulishly unwilling subject. Not for nothing was Homer known as the “Obtuse Bard”

in the annals of one of the artists’ clubs he belonged to. His letters could be chatty about fly-fishing, but were circumspect to the point of muteness on questions of love and art. How do you re-create the inner life of an artist who did not talk about art?

Homer’s outer life is known well enough. Born in Boston in 1836 to an old and intermittently prosperous Yankee family, he was apprenticed to a lithographer before setting out on his own as a freelance illustrator. By 1859 he was in New York City, supplying the new mass-market periodicals like *Harper’s Weekly* with frothy scenes of dancing cadets and ladies riding sidesaddle. If his anatomy was a bit Gumbyish and his faces were little more than panache to survive the ossifying translation into wood engraving. When *Harper’s* sent

him to Virginia to cover the Civil War, he found his forte in closely observing camp life, attending to “the ordinary foot soldier,” Cross notes, “not the general.”

He had ambitions. In New York he attended life-drawing classes and received basic painting instruction. He studied how-to books and prints of European paintings. He learned to set people, places, and things on geometric scaffolds, giving the most happenstance of subjects a sense of sublime order. (A beautiful 1877 watercolor of a young woman pointing out geometric figures on a blackboard feels unexpectedly personal, with his signature placed as if chalked on the slate.) Not a natural when it came to color, he relied heavily on Michel-Eugène Chevreul’s 1839 book, *The Laws of Contrast of Colour*. Like artists his age on both sides of the



Snap the Whip (1872)

Atlantic, he borrowed spatial ideas from Japanese woodblocks, and was alert to the look of photography (he redrew Mathew Brady photographs for *Harper's*, and owned cameras himself).

The wood engraving of a Union sharpshooter perched in a tree that appeared in the November 15, 1862, issue of *Harper's* bore a new credit line: "From a Painting by W. Homer, Esq." The topic was newsworthy for a magazine—equipped with telescopic sights, sharpshooters represented a novel type of warfare, capable of hitting a target hundreds of yards away from a concealed position—but it was a peculiar subject for a painting. War paintings were generally stagey battle scenes. *Sharpshooter* is more like a genre painting of a man at work; his work just happens to be killing. Years later, Homer wrote that the scene was "as near murder as anything I ever could think of in connection with the army." *Sharpshooter* is taut with anticipation—the tensile crisscross of rifle, branches, and human limbs is worthy of Franz Kline—but it is impossible to say if it shows a hero or a villain.

Prisoners From the Front (1866), a record of the Civil War acclaimed for its social allegory, made Homer's reputation as a serious artist. There was the northerner exuding "the dignity of a life animated by principle," his friend Eugene Benson wrote in the *New York Evening Post*, facing the "audacious, reckless, impudent young Virginian," the "bewildered old man, perhaps a spy, with his furtive look," and "the poor white,' stupid, stolid, helpless." Easy-to-read typologies were part of his illustrator tool kit, but here they acquired a restrained gravitas.

When the picture was exhibited at the 1867 Exposition Universelle, in Paris, Homer made his first trip to Europe. He landed in Liverpool and may, as Cross suggests, have lingered in London, taking in the bounty of Turners and the Raphael Cartoons. Or maybe not. Neither there nor in France did he leave a record of what he saw or what he thought about it.

In New York he was evidently clubbable, elected to the Century Association and the National Academy of Design—then the city's premier exhibition

venues—while still in his 20s. In the summers he headed to the country with friends: the White Mountains, the Hudson River Valley, the Adirondacks. He painted people at play (the small and wonderful croquet paintings of 1866), but more often he painted them at work out of doors. He also traveled to the former Confederacy, painting scenes of African American life.

Critics often took Homer to task for his abrupt color and rough paint, which tugged at the edges of attention, spoiling the illusion. His working-class subjects were found uncouth, his depiction of a Black family's dovecote "slovenly." And yet his pictures rewarded the eye in ways that flummoxed the most sophisticated of onlookers. Henry James, who would have preferred scenes of Capri, wrote that though Homer chose "the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization; he has resolutely treated them as if they *were* pictorial ... and, to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded ... Our only complaint with it is that it is damnably ugly!"

WINSLOW HOMER (AMERICAN, 1836-1910). *SNAP THE WHIP*, 1872. OIL ON CANVAS 12 X 20 IN. (30.5 X 50.8 CM.). THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF CHRISTIAN A. ZABRISKIE, 1950 (50.41). PHOTO COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.



A Good Pool, Saguenay River (1895)

What redeemed him was attentiveness. Even when the subject is banal, his line is unexpected, diverted from cliché by incident—the peculiar crumpling of a sail, or the irregular break of a ripple. Each object has a specific weight, as well as a sense of incipient motion; it feels as though everything is about to come apart. His famous scene of barefoot boys playing, *Snap the Whip* (1872), is unusual in showing the moment *after* the break, rather than the moment before.

These qualities erupted with fresh clarity when he turned to watercolor in 1873. The first picture he ever exhibited in New York had been a watercolor, but the medium was still disdained for its association with female amateurs (including Homer's mother, an accomplished flower painter). So he mastered oil painting, but his oils somehow always feel like work in a way the agile, brilliant watercolors do not. In watercolor, the fall of light on a child's bare back evokes an event rather than an effect.

Returning to England in 1881, Homer settled in Cullercoats, a fishing port with bad weather where artists specializing in the "peril at sea" genre gathered. Working mainly on paper, he stripped back and

decluttered his compositions, endowing his fisherfolk with caryatid majesty.

It was also in watercolor that he recorded the leaping light of the Caribbean. Once treated as a sidenote, the Caribbean watercolors constitute roughly a third of the works in "Crosscurrents."

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This emphasis is a corrective for past omissions, and builds a visual and conceptual context for *The Gulf Stream*. (Also, they are simply beautiful.)

The last third of his life was spent mostly in Prouts Neck, a slip of land on the coast of Maine where his family had acquired property. He continued to travel—willingly for fishing, less willingly for the various honors that came his way. Curiously, for all his love of wilderness, he never went farther west than Chicago. "While his compatriots were chasing Native Americans across the plains of South Dakota," Daniel Immerwahr writes in the catalog for "Crosscurrents," "Homer was painting bucolic watercolors of dogs, deer, and trout in the Adirondacks." The pictures were not always so bucolic (especially for the deer), but they made nature present, not as an awe-inspiring panorama in the manner of Frederic Edwin Church or Albert Bierstadt, but as an intimate encounter. In the extraordinary watercolor *A Good Pool, Saguenay River* (1895), a huge salmon hangs in mid-air above the choppy waters, while from a canoe below, a hairline filament loops through the air like a pen flourish, ending in the red fly that has just caught the fish's cheek. Everything is connected.



The Turtle Pound (1898)



After the Hurricane, Bahamas (1899)

It was at Prouts Neck that Homer painted the late, great meetings of sea and shore that kept his reputation alive among modernists made itchy by narrative. In these, he made literal the rhetoric in his sassy note about *The Gulf Stream*: Boats and fish and all “outside matters” have been dismissed, leaving light, and weather, and tides—motion without human motivation, time without end.

IN THE MIDST of listing all the things he detested about Homer’s art, Henry James paused to admit: “There is nevertheless something one likes about him.” For a century and a half, people have been explaining that liking in different ways. Homer’s vaunted Americanism was one. In this line, he was celebrated as an autodidact, free of inherited airs or any “hint of Europe or of Asia.” Helped along by

his reticence to wax lyrical in writing, his “down-to-earth honesty” devolved into a kind of wholesome stupidity. As the National Gallery of Art curator Nicolai Cikovsky put it in 1995, “It has not been customary to regard Homer’s intellectual and moral equipment as significant aspects of his artistic enterprise.” Earlier writers topped off their portrayals with an almost parodic masculinity: His style was “manly,” his subjects were “virile,” and even the effeminate watercolor was, in his hands, “pre-eminently a man’s art.” About this diffident and reportedly dapper man, his first biographer enthused, “Like the men of Viking blood, he rises to his best estate in the stress of the hurricane.”

This Thor-meets-L. L. Bean character bears little resemblance to the sophisticated and strategic, if enigmatic, Homer presented in the new biography and the “Crosscurrents” catalog essays. The authors emphasize virtues likely to appeal to us now: his interest in depicting Black people, working (not just ornamental) women, and environmental systems. In keeping with today’s scholarship, the catalog considers the exhibit’s artworks as vectors of social and political forces. Immerwahr examines Homer in light of America’s territorial and economic expansion, asking whether the entrancing Bahamian watercolors might be “an invitation to empire”; Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw digs into Homer’s difficulties aligning observation with received wisdom in his depictions of Black Americans; Stephanie Herdrich uses *The Gulf Stream* as a jumping-off point to explore conflict and mortality in Homer’s career; Sylvia Yount maps a mountain of Homer scholarship; and Christopher Riopelle surveys Homer’s relationship to Europe.

Cross’s book, by contrast, is a hefty, traditional “life of.” Not particularly interested in investigating systemic power and privilege, Cross draws out aspects of life that may have figured more consciously in Homer’s own mind, acknowledging without contempt, for instance, Homer’s pragmatic approach to business. Summers in the country may have offered “solace ... after the trauma of wartime,” as Herdrich writes, but they were also a way to stockpile sketches of the kind

TOP: WINSLOW HOMER (AMERICAN, 1836–1910), *THE TURTLE POUND*, 1898, WATERCOLOR OVER PENCIL, 14 15/16 X 21 3/8 IN. (38.0 X 54.2 CM), BROOKLYN MUSEUM, SUSTAINING MEMBERSHIP FUND, ALFRED T. WHITE MEMORIAL FUND, AND A. AUGUSTUS HEALY FUND (23.98). PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM.

of sunlit scenes collectors liked to buy. When paintings didn't sell, he kept fiddling with them, whether for his own enjoyment or to second-guess the market, and he was not above painting the same picture twice (there are two versions of *Snap the Whip*, one with eight children, one with nine). "I will paint for money at any time. Any subject, any size," he told a dealer in the 1890s.

Cross also gives substantial space to religion—both the theological debates over slavery that roiled New England during Homer's childhood and the later proliferation of natural theology, the belief that divine order was revealed through the natural world, which underlay many of the books, both scientific and spiritual, in Homer's library. If he can be seen as a proto-feminist and proto-environmentalist, his reasons were different from our own.

There are still huge holes, including the nature, or even existence, of Homer's love life. Was his heart broken by the artist Helena de Kay (of whom he painted a rare portrait in a Whistlerish mode)? Or by the businessman Albert Warren Kelsey (with whom he posed for a chummy photograph in Paris)? Cross alerts us to the theories, but warns that there are only "a few shreds of evidence" of any specific sexual dalliance. And while it is hard to disagree with Herdrich's observation that Homer seemed "to revel in depicting healthy, young, Black bodies glistening in warm water and sunlight," the same might be said of his attitude toward fish.

Art-historical queries run into similar dead ends. Homer was in Paris at a crucial moment in the history of Impressionism, but the all-important issue—what did he see and when did he see it?—subsides into speculation: "Surely," writes Riopelle in the "Crosscurrents" catalog, "Homer rushed to Manet's pavilion." "One cannot imagine that he would have missed it," Cross concurs. The tale chugs along on a track of "would haves" and "must haves."

"THE MOST INTERESTING part of my life," Homer wrote when refusing to assist an aspiring biographer, "is of no concern to the public." That statement is extraordinary—an overt tease (what *is* the most interesting part?) followed by a slammed door. It feels curiously familiar. That push and pull, like the alternation of clarity and opacity in his biography, also haunts his pictures.

The shyness of Homer's people has often been remarked on. They turn their back, look over their shoulder, veil their

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features with slouchy hats and falling hair. It has been suggested that he was just bad at faces, but he could paint them with grace when he wanted to. The habit is too persistent not to be purposeful, and it has a distinct effect: Instead of looking at people, we end up looking at people looking at things we cannot see. Soldiers look through rifle sights; sailors look to sea. Wading children bend over to look under the water's surface. Sometimes, as in the poignant *Waiting for Dad (Longing)* (1873), we have a clue about what they are looking for, though not what

they actually see. In *Two Guides* (1877), a gray-bearded mountain man (he could be a model for Gabby Johnson, the speaker of "authentic frontier gibberish" in *Blazing Saddles*) extends his arm and index finger to point at ... something.

It is perennially surprising, when you come across Homer paintings on a museum wall, to discover how small they are, mostly in the two-by-three-foot range. (Kerry James Marshall's *Gulf Stream* occupies 12 times the area of Homer's.) This domesticated scale, however, was "not calculated for the drawing-room," his friend Kenyon Cox wrote, but for grander, more spacious venues. Homer wanted people to "stand off," and derided the habit of leaning in as "smelling" a picture. He once asked that a painting be hung in a gallery window so it could be seen "properly from the opposite side of 5th Ave ... as it is painted at the distance of 60 feet." In Prouts Neck, he explained, "I hang my pictures on the upper balcony of the studio, and go down by the sea seventy-five feet away, and look at them." Embedded in the shadow of a wave, beneath his signature on *The Gulf Stream*, is the painted message "At 12 feet from the picture you can see it."

From that distance, Homer's famous brusqueness is smoothed out and the illusion of space deepens. He explained that the "first shark" was 15 feet long and 30 feet forward of the boat. But if you stand just two feet away, it looks like the sailor could reach out and pet it. Only from a distance does the space stretch out. Up close you might see how the trick was played, but you lose the magic.

Homer may indeed be painting's Melville, not because of the passport he held, but because he could cram so much precision and perplexity into a single breath. *A*

Susan Tallman is an art historian. Her latest book, co-written with Niels Borch Jensen, is No Plan at All, about Jensen's Danish print workshop.



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different,
always
the same.*

Which is to say, whatever the size or mood or condition of the room, whether there's hair coiled blackly in the bathtub or an orchid in a vase on the table, what greets you as you open the door, every time, is a neutral waft of possibility. A sense of your self-in-waiting. Who are you going to be in *here*? As you mingle with this careful anonymity, as you drift and lightly settle into this fancy or not-so-fancy non-place, what might happen?

Not much, probably. The old gravity asserts itself, the old you-ness; you spread out your things, you build your shrines, you start making your little traditional messes. You arrive, and then *you* arrive. Somehow the hotel room, in the mystique of its banality, maintains the invitation. Especially if you let housekeeping in. Another day. Another chance. Clean, crispy sheets. Your crap politely rearranged. Maybe this time.

Even before you get up to any real mischief, the hotel

room promotes a minor moral collapse. Your instinct here is to loll, sprawl, degenerate, create crumbs. Unseen hands have labored for your comfort—that's not good for you. The citrus-scented bodywash and the robust Wi-Fi will make you slightly vicious.

I do love the noises. The whine or wheeze of the bathroom fan; bovine thuds in the hallway; the fridge clicking on as you lie there in bed, and then that strange breathlessness in the air after it clicks off. Those muffled voices through the wall—the low, honking, incomprehensible vowels; the cellolike groans—surely they recall the experience of being in the womb? They put me, at least, in a state of baby-minded suspension. Recently, in a hotel in the San Fernando Valley, I became convinced a porn shoot was going on in the room next door. It could just as easily have been a very committed game of Trivial Pursuit.

And then it's over. Check-out comes galloping, always too fast, and now all of a sudden you have to get it together: your exploded luggage, your exploded brain. You're trapped in a time-lapse movie about yourself, packing. Did you change in here? Advance, wallow backwards, go sideways? Hustle, hustle, and don't forget to leave a nice tip. Propitiate the hotel room, because you'll be back. You'll pop in on another day, in another city, somewhere else in the eternally hanging dream-honeycomb of hotel rooms. Wide-eyed with expectation, almost innocent, you'll open another door. *A*

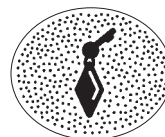
James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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HOTEL ROOMS

By James Parker





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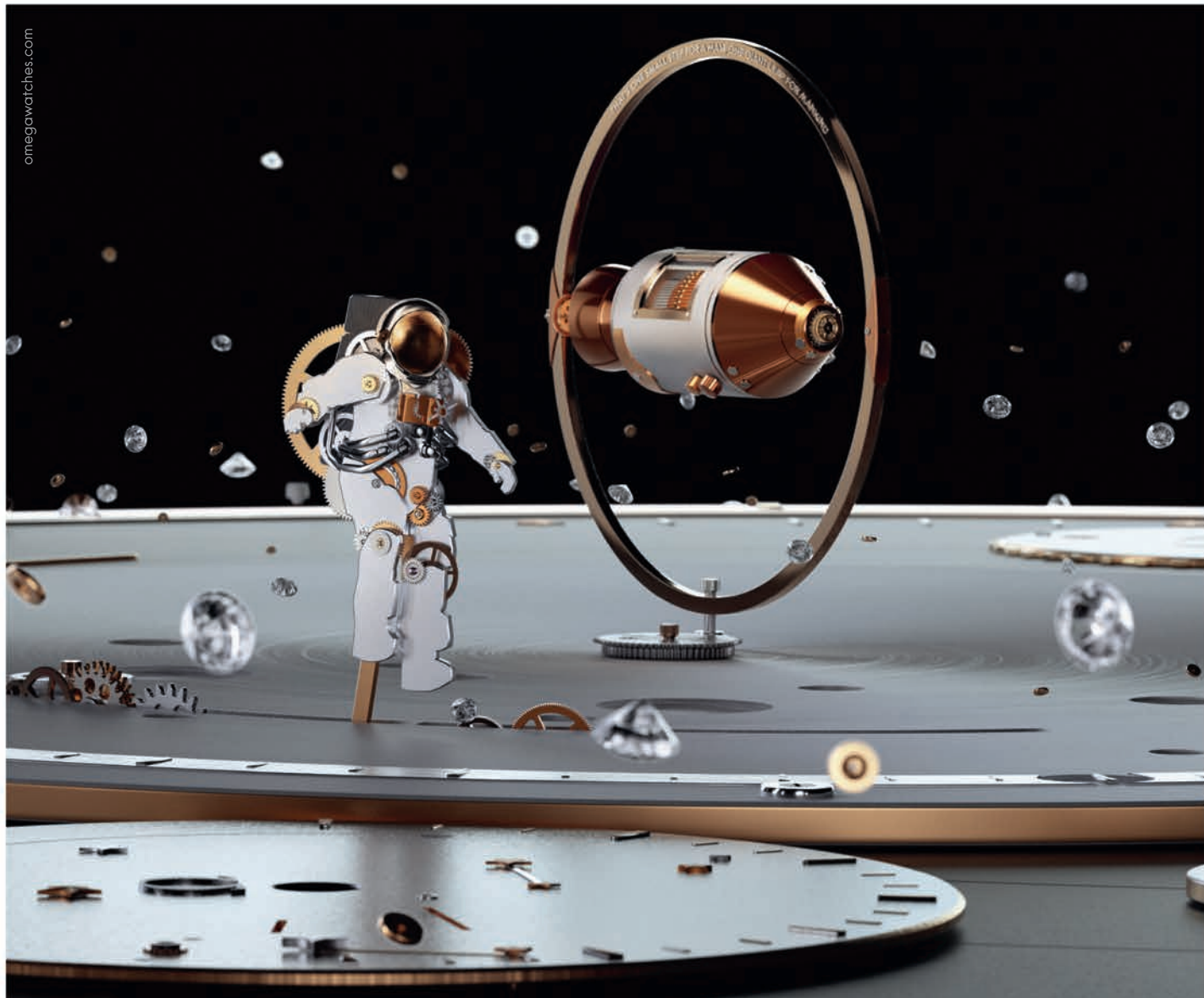
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