Notes From the Apocalypse

JANUARY/
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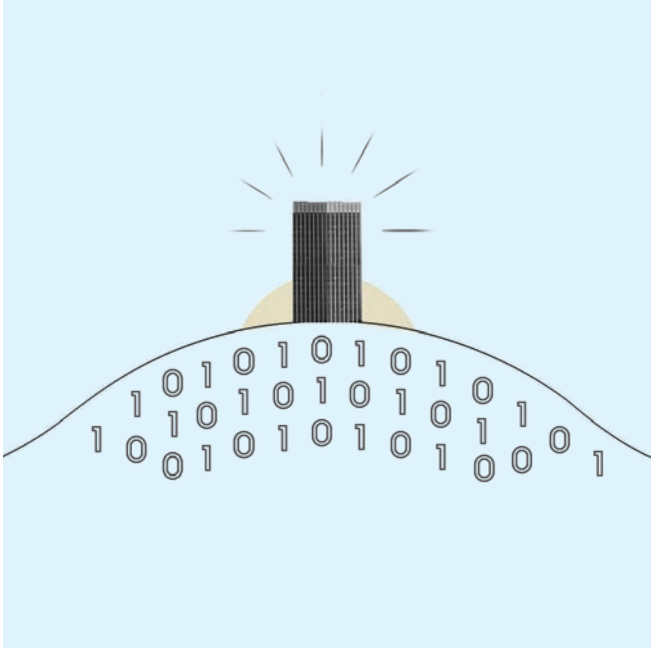
ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM McCARTEN

Someone's skill set may extend far beyond what they do on the job, yet their employer may never know. What employers do know is that there's a good chance that employees will leave. From 2017 and 2021, turnover reached nearly 50 percent.

Employers also know that people aren't likely to invest themselves in jobs they don't plan to stay in. This makes finding the right hire as crucial as it is challenging.



Data that illuminates the undiscovered talents of a company's existing workforce can save organizations millions of dollars annually. It can also create a more diverse, productive workplace.

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More slender than ever before, the Third Generation of the De Ville Prestige has been introduced with all the emblematic DNA you'd expect, but with a comprehensive upgrade across the design. This new 41 mm Co-Axial Master Chronometer model in stainless steel is presented on a blue leather strap. The domed PVD sky blue dial features an exclusive 2-in-1 finish, combining a random vertical pattern with radiant sun-brushing, while the display includes a 270° power reserve indicator and a small-seconds subdial.

Ω
OMEGA

OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE

VOL. 331–NO. 1 JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023 CONTENTS

THE PROGRESS REPORT

Looking uptown from the observation deck at One Vanderbilt, a 93-story supertall skyscraper in Midtown Manhattan

Features

On the Cover

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY PETER MENDELSUND, OLIVER MUNDAY, AND PAUL SPELLA

FROM POVERTY TO POWER

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Women in the Sagarmatha Cooperative in Banke, Nepal found their power through raising and selling goats. The lucrative business helps boost the women's incomes and their socioeconomic status.

Behind the Cover: The January/February 2023 issue collects a series of articles offering dark visions of the future under the headline "Notes From the Apocalypse." To design the cover, the art department began by experimenting with different ways of depicting destruction—fire, explosions, ominous skies—before realizing that the key lay in "destroying" the cover itself. The final image is a trompe l'oeil in which a singed cover reveals the table of contents below. This is what a magazine that has survived the apocalypse might look like.

— Oliver Munday, *Associate Creative Director*

THE

Cursive Is History

Gen Z never learned to read cursive, Drew Gilpin Faust wrote in the October 2022 issue. How will they interpret the past?

Letters

Drew Gilpin Faust's article on students' inability to read cursive reminded me of a similar lack of knowledge that I encountered years ago, when I was teaching at the University of Colorado. I had assigned my students timed presentations. There were no clocks in our classrooms (supposedly too distracting), so I brought in a portable analog clock. To my surprise, none of my students could read it—they only told time on their cellphones.

Naomi Rachel
Boulder, Colo.

As a professional calligrapher, an advocate for the continued practice of cursive, and a lover of handwriting, I share the wistfulness Drew Gilpin Faust expresses over the decline of cursive. And while I admit that in a practical sense, writing is a technology, I must add that it's an art form too, a thing of beauty regardless of skill level or perfection of form. It's a wondrous visual reminder of individuality and adds an element of artistry and humanness to everyday life.

Recently, I was scribing gift notes at a retailer in New York City and a teenage boy watched over my shoulder curiously as I used an oblique dip pen and inkwell. I was shocked when he asked what language I was writing in: I realized that to kids who haven't learned script, I may as well be writing in cuneiform. Perhaps there's a future for me in antiquities translation.

Rita Polidori O'Brien
Staten Island, N.Y.

Like Drew Gilpin Faust, I too will grieve the loss of the art of cursive writing. I was a third-grade teacher, and one of the goals of that grade was to transition the students from printing to cursive. The lessons started in September, and by January all schoolwork was to be in cursive.

By spring, a wee little miracle always occurred. Despite the rote instruction each child received, every student organically stylized their own penmanship. Some wrote in concise, blocky letters; others were more florid and ornate. By May, an unsigned test or report was easily recognizable by the student's penmanship and returned to the owner, like a note passed secretly between friends.

The loss of cursive will be a loss of individuality that today's students won't even know they've suffered—but I will.

Rebecca Lee
Rocky River, Ohio

When I was in grammar school in the 1950s, we were taught cursive in the third grade, after having learned the ABCs in caps and lowercase during the

two years before. Bad penmanship was admonished, and corrected. We practiced.

Today I work as a lawyer, and I always have two lines for signatures—the signed name and the printed name below. This is because 100 percent of the time the former is illegible.

Recently I had to examine old land transfers in the New York City deeds records. The books, dating from the 1940s, had handwritten records of titles, names, and land-lot numbers. I was struck by the sureness of the clerks' script, the clarity of their handwriting—it was quite beautiful. Line after line of exactitude and symmetry. And this just to record the ordinary.

Stephen M. Zelman
New York, N.Y.

DREW GILPIN FAUST REPLIES:

I am grateful for the surprising outpouring of responses to my article—in letters to the magazine, on social media, and in my own email box—because they underscored my sense that cursive's decline marks a meaningful generational divide and cultural transition. The messages could provide material for an article of their own—touching stories of early pedagogical encounters sent by students and teachers alike, tales of the joy of mastery and artistry involved in learning cursive, and comments from dissenters ready to bid farewell to cursive with no regrets. One of my favorites of those came from a father who noted that, after all, his son hasn't learned to churn butter. But the many moving tributes to cursive leave me convinced that it is far from dead, and not going quietly.

Let Puerto Rico Be Free

The only just future for the archipelago is not statehood, but full independence from the United States, Jaquira Díaz argued in the November 2022 issue.

As a Puerto Rican who has lived on the island my entire life and as a state representative who favors statehood, I found Jaquira Díaz's article on our political situation deeply misleading. Its title suggests that Puerto Rico wants to be free but has not yet been allowed to be. Even worse, it argues that independence represents the "only just future" for us. The problem with these claims, and the cherry-picked historical summary to support them, is simple: In the last major plebiscite on the island, the political option with the most support was statehood and some form of free association with the U.S. Independence may well be a legitimate option preferred by the author and others, but how can the "only just" alternative consistently be the one least supported by the people? Statehood and independence supporters can agree that the decolonization of Puerto Rico is a moral imperative for the United States, but from beginning to end, that process must be centered on respect for and adherence to the democratic will of the Puerto Rican people.

José Bernardo Márquez
Toa Baja, Puerto Rico

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

FROM THE ARCHIVES

In "Can a Building Be Too Tall?" (p. 36), Bianca Bosker explores the engineering feats that have propelled skyscrapers to new heights. High-rises began dotting the New York skyline in the late 1800s, she writes—but not to universal acclaim.

In *The Atlantic*'s October 1902 issue, the author Burton J. Hendrick railed against the "latest manifestation" of skyscraper design, writing that it "consists of a succession of prosaic stories … its monotony unrelieved by the slightest ornamentation." He was also concerned that the structures blocked sunlight, lowering the value of neighboring properties. Hendrick concluded, with some relief, that "the mania for mere bigness is subsiding." He predicted that the large-office-building "craze" would ease up.

But the desire to build ever taller hasn't gone away, and neither have concerns about sunlight. The luxury residential "supertalls" that loom over Central Park today prompted the creation of a "Sunshine Task Force" to look into the effects of the shadows they cast, which can reach half a mile.

Are their shadows really more troublesome than those cast by shorter, wider buildings? Maybe not, Bosker writes: The shadows of these new buildings "are long, yes, but also skinny, which means they pass quickly."

— Will Gordon,
Associate Editor

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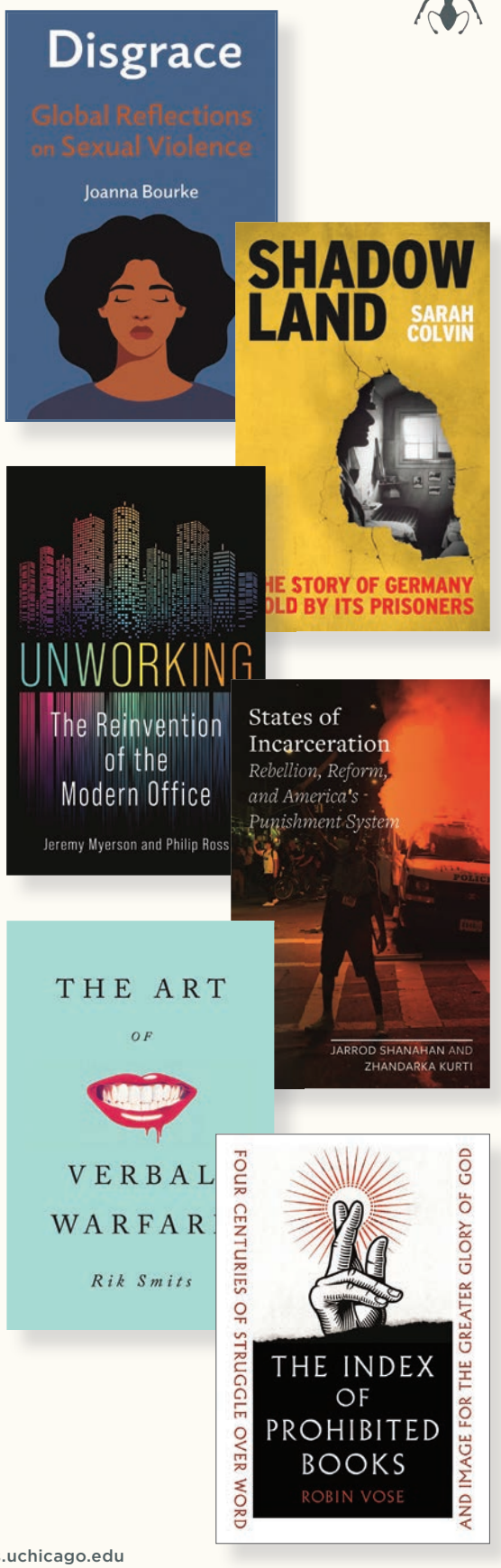

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE LOOMING REVOLT OVER HOMELESSNESS

Liberals know how to solve the problem. Why don't they?

BY JERUSALEM DEMSAS

When someone becomes homeless, the instinct is to ask what tragedy befell them. What bad choices did they make with drugs or alcohol? What prevented them from getting a higher-paying job? Why did they have more children than they could afford? Why didn't they make rent? Identifying personal failures or specific tragedies helps those of us who have homes feel less precarious—if homelessness is about personal failure, it's easier to dismiss as something that couldn't happen to us, and harsh treatment is easier to rationalize toward those who experience it.

But when you zoom out, determining individualized explanations for America's homelessness crisis gets murky. Sure,

individual choices play a role, but why are there so many more homeless people in California than Texas? Why are rates of homelessness so much higher in New York than West Virginia? To explain the interplay between structural and individual causes of homelessness, some who study this issue use the analogy of children playing musical chairs. As the game begins, the first kid to become chairless has a sprained ankle. The next few kids are too anxious to play the game effectively. The next few are smaller than the big kids. At the end, a fast, large, confident child sits grinning in the last available seat.

You can say that disability or lack of physical strength caused the individual kids to end up chairless. But in this scenario, chairlessness itself is an inevitability: The only reason anyone is without a chair is because there aren't enough of them.

Now let's apply the analogy to homelessness. Yes, examining who specifically becomes homeless can tell important stories of individual vulnerability created by disability or poverty, domestic violence or divorce. Yet when we have a dire shortage of affordable housing, it's all but guaranteed that a certain number of people will become homeless. In musical chairs, enforced scarcity is self-evident. In real life, housing scarcity is more difficult to observe—but it's the underlying cause of homelessness.

In their book, *Homelessness Is a Housing Problem*, the University of Washington professor Gregg Colburn and the data scientist Clayton Page Aldern demonstrate that "the homelessness crisis in coastal cities cannot be explained by disproportionate levels of drug use, mental illness, or poverty." Rather, the most relevant factors in the homelessness crisis are rent prices and vacancy rates.

Colburn and Aldern note that some urban areas with very *high* rates of poverty (Detroit, Miami-Dade County, Philadelphia) have among the *lowest* homelessness rates in the country, and some places with relatively *low* poverty rates (Santa Clara County, San Francisco, Boston) have relatively *high* rates of homelessness. The same pattern holds for unemployment rates: "Homelessness is abundant," the authors write, "only in areas with robust labor markets and low rates of unemployment—booming coastal cities."

WHEN WE HAVE A DIRE SHORTAGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING, IT'S ALL BUT GUARANTEED THAT A CERTAIN NUMBER OF PEOPLE WILL BECOME HOMELESS.

Why is this so? Because these "superstar cities," as economists call them, draw an abundance of knowledge workers. These highly paid workers require various services, which in turn create demand for an array of additional workers, including taxi drivers, lawyers and paralegals, doctors and nurses, and day-care staffers. These workers fuel an economic-growth machine—and they all need homes to live in. In a well-functioning market, rising demand for something just means that suppliers will make more of it. But housing markets have been broken by a policy agenda that seeks to reap the gains of a thriving regional economy while failing to build the infrastructure—housing—necessary to support the people who make that economy go. The results of these policies are rising housing prices and rents, and skyrocketing homelessness.

It's not surprising that people wrongly believe the fundamental causes of the homelessness crisis are mental-health problems and drug addiction. Our most memorable encounters with homeless people tend to be with those for whom mental-health issues or drug abuse are evident; you may not notice the family crashing in a motel, but you will remember someone experiencing a mental-health crisis on the subway.

I want to be precise here. It is true that many people who become homeless are mentally ill. It is also true that becoming homeless exposes people to a range of traumatic experiences, which can create new problems that housing alone may not be able to solve. But the claim that drug abuse and mental illness are the fundamental *causes* of homelessness falls apart upon investigation. If mental-health issues or drug abuse were major drivers of homelessness, then places with higher rates of these problems would see higher rates of homelessness. They don't. Utah, Alabama, Colorado, Kentucky, West Virginia, Vermont, Delaware, and Wisconsin have some of the highest rates of mental illness in the country, but relatively modest homelessness levels. What prevents at-risk people in these states from falling into homelessness at high rates is simple: They have more affordable-housing options.

With similar reasoning, we can reject the idea that climate explains varying rates of homelessness. If warm weather attracted homeless people in large numbers, Seattle; Portland, Oregon; New York City; and Boston would not have such high rates of homelessness and cities in southern states like Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi such low ones. (There is a connection between *unsheltered* homelessness and temperature, but it's not clear which way the causal arrow goes: The East Coast and the Midwest have a lot more shelter capacity than the West Coast, which keeps homeless people more out of view.)

America has had populations of mentally ill, drug-addicted, poor, and unemployed people for the whole of its history, and Los Angeles has always been warmer than Duluth—and yet the homelessness crisis we see in American cities today dates only to the 1980s. What changed that caused homelessness to explode then? Again, it's simple: lack of housing. The places people needed to move for good jobs stopped building the housing necessary to accommodate economic growth.

HOMELESSNESS IS BEST understood as a "flow" problem, not a "stock" problem. Not that many Americans are *chronically* homeless—the problem, rather, is the millions of people who are precariously situated on the cliff of financial stability, people for whom a divorce, a lost job, a fight with a roommate, or a

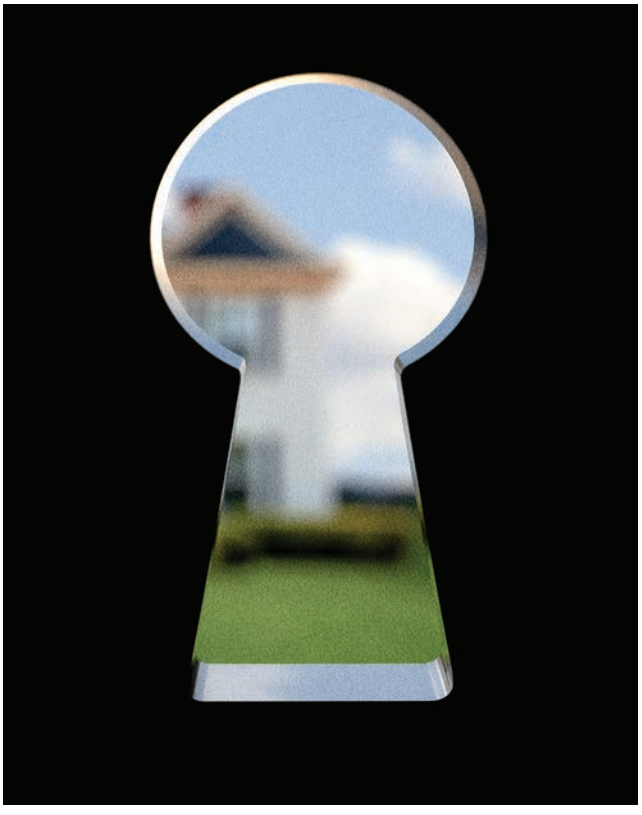
medical event can result in homelessness. According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, roughly 207 people get rehoused daily across the county—but 227 get pushed into homelessness. The crisis is driven by a constant flow of people losing their housing.

The homelessness crisis is most acute in places with very low vacancy rates, and where even "low income" housing is still very expensive. A study led by an economist at Zillow shows that when a growing number of people are forced to spend 30 percent or more of their income on rent, homelessness spikes.

Academics who study homelessness know this. So do policy wonks and advocacy groups. So do many elected officials. And polling shows that the general public recognizes that housing affordability plays a role in homelessness. Yet politicians and policy makers have generally failed to address the root cause of the crisis.

Few Republican-dominated states have had to deal with severe homelessness crises, mainly because superstar cities are concentrated in Democratic states. Some blame profligate welfare programs for blue-city homelessness, claiming that people are moving from other states to take advantage of coastal largesse. But the available evidence points in the opposite direction—in 2022, just 17 percent of homeless people reported that they'd lived in San Francisco for less than one year, according to city officials. Gregg Colburn and Clayton Aldern found essentially no relationship between places with more generous welfare programs and rates of homelessness. And abundant other research indicates that social-welfare programs *reduce* homelessness. Consider, too, that some people move to superstar cities in search of gainful employment and then find themselves unable to keep up with the cost of living—not a phenomenon that can be blamed on welfare policies.

But liberalism *is* largely to blame for the homelessness crisis: A contradiction at the core of liberal ideology has precluded Democratic politicians, who run most of the cities where homelessness is most acute, from addressing the issue. Liberals have stated preferences that housing should be affordable, particularly for marginalized groups that have historically been shunted to the peripheries of the housing market. But local politicians seeking to protect the interests of incumbent homeowners spawned a web of regulations, laws, and norms that has made blocking the development of new housing pitifully simple.



This contradiction drives the ever more visible crisis. As the historian Jacob Anbinder has explained, in the '70s and '80s conservationists, architectural preservationists, homeowner groups, and left-wing organizations formed a loose coalition in opposition to development. Throughout this period, Anbinder writes, "the implementation of height limits, density restrictions, design review boards, mandatory community input, and other veto points in the development process" made it much harder to build housing. This coalition—whose central purpose is opposition to neighborhood change and the protection of home values—now dominates politics in high-growth areas across the country, and has made it easy for even small groups of objectors to prevent housing from being built. The result? The U.S. is now millions of homes short of what its population needs.

Los Angeles perfectly demonstrates the competing impulses within the left. In 2016, voters approved a $1.2 billion bond measure to subsidize the development of housing for homeless and at-risk residents over a span of 10 years. But during the first five years, roughly 10 percent of the housing units the program was meant to create were actually produced. In addition to financing problems, the biggest roadblock was small groups of objectors who didn't want affordable housing in their communities.

Los Angeles isn't alone. The Bay Area is notorious in this regard. In the spring of 2020, the billionaire venture capitalist Marc Andreessen published an essay, "It's Time to Build," that excoriated policy makers' deference to "the old, the entrenched." Yet it turned out that Andreessen and his wife had vigorously opposed the building of a small number of multifamily units in the wealthy Bay Area town of Atherton, where they live.

The small-*c* conservative belief that people who already live in a community should have veto power over changes to it has wormed its way into liberal ideology. This pervasive localism is the key to understanding why officials who seem genuinely shaken by the homelessness crisis too rarely take serious action to address it.

THE WORST HARMS of the homelessness crisis fall on the people who find themselves without housing. But it's not their suffering that

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLE DEL PLATO

risks becoming a major political problem for liberal politicians in blue areas: If you trawl through Facebook comments, Nextdoor posts, and tweets, or just talk with people who live in cities with large unsheltered populations, you see that homelessness tends to be viewed as a problem of disorder, of public safety, of quality of life. And voters are losing patience with their Democratic elected officials over it.

In a 2021 poll conducted in Los Angeles County, 94 percent of respondents said homelessness was a serious or very serious problem. (To put that near unanimity into perspective, just 75 percent said the same about traffic congestion—in Los Angeles!) When asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how unsafe "having homeless individuals in your neighborhood makes you feel," 37 percent of people responded with a rating of 8 or higher, and another 19 percent gave a rating of 6 or 7. In Seattle, 71 percent of respondents to a recent poll said they wouldn't feel safe visiting downtown Seattle at night, and 91 percent said that downtown won't recover until homelessness and public safety are addressed. There are *a lot* of polls like this.

As the situation has deteriorated, particularly in areas where homelessness overruns public parks or public transit, policy makers' failure to respond to the crisis has transformed what could have been an opportunity for reducing homelessness into yet another cycle of support for criminalizing it. In Austin, Texas, 57 percent of voters backed reinstating criminal penalties for homeless encampments; in the District of Columbia, 75 percent of respondents to a *Washington Post* poll said they supported shutting down "homeless tent encampments" even without firm assurances that those displaced would have somewhere to go. Poll data from Portland, Seattle, and Los Angeles, among other places, reveal similarly punitive sentiments.

This voter exasperation spells trouble for politicians who take reducing homelessness seriously. Voters will tolerate disorder for only so long before they become amenable to reactionary candidates and measures, even in very progressive areas. In places with large unsheltered populations, numerous candidates have materialized to run against mainstream Democrats on platforms of solving the homelessness crisis and restoring public order.

By and large, the candidates challenging the failed Democratic governance of high-homelessness regions are not proposing policies that would substantially increase the production of affordable housing or provide rental assistance to those at the bottom end of the market. Instead, these candidates—both Republicans and law-and-order-focused Democrats—are concentrating on draconian treatment of people experiencing homelessness. Even in Oakland, California, a famously progressive city, one of the 2022 candidates for mayor premised his campaign entirely on eradicating homeless encampments and returning order to the streets—and managed to finish third in a large field.

During the 2022 Los Angeles mayoral race, neither the traditional Democratic candidate, Karen Bass, who won, nor her opponent, Rick Caruso, were willing to challenge the antidemocratic processes that have allowed small groups of people to block desperately needed housing. Caruso campaigned in part on empowering homeowners and honoring "their preferences more fully," as Ezra Klein put it in *The New York Times*—which, if I can translate, means allowing residents to block new housing more easily. (After her victory, Bass nodded at the need to house more people in wealthier neighborhoods—a tepid commitment that reveals NIMBYism's continuing hold on liberal politicians.)

> VOTERS WILL TOLERATE DISORDER FOR ONLY SO LONG BEFORE THEY BECOME AMENABLE TO REACTIONARY CANDIDATES AND MEASURES, EVEN IN VERY PROGRESSIVE AREAS.

"WE'VE BEEN DIGGING ourselves into this situation for 40 years, and it's likely going to take us 40 years to get out," Eric Tars, the legal director at the National Homelessness Law Center, told me.

Building the amount of affordable housing necessary to stanch the daily flow of new people becoming homeless is not the project of a single election cycle, or even several. What can be done in the meantime is a hard question, and one that will require investment in temporary housing. Better models for homeless shelters arose out of necessity during the pandemic. Using hotel space as shelter allowed the unhoused to have their own rooms; this meant families could usually stay together (many shelters are gender-segregated, ban pets, and lack privacy). Houston's success in combatting homelessness—down 62 percent since 2011—suggests that a focus on moving people into permanent supportive housing provides a road map to success. (Houston is less encumbered by the sorts of regulations that make building housing so difficult elsewhere.)

The political dangers to Democrats in those cities where the homelessness crisis is metastasizing into public disorder are clear. But Democratic inaction risks sparking a broader political revolt—especially as housing prices leave even many middle- and upper-middle-class renters outside the hallowed gates of homeownership. We should harbor no illusions that such a revolt will lead to humane policy change.

Simply making homelessness less visible has come to be what constitutes "success." New York City consistently has the nation's highest homelessness rate, but it's not as much of an Election Day issue as it is on the West Coast. That's because its displaced population is largely hidden in shelters. Yet since 2012, the number of households in shelters has grown by more than 30 percent—despite the city spending roughly $3 billion a year (as of 2021) trying to combat the problem. This is what policy failure looks like. At some point, someone's going to have to own it. *A*

Jerusalem Demsas is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

SECRETS OF ANCIENT EGYPT – NEW DISCOVERIES

AN EVENING WITH DR. ZAHI HAWASS

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I WENT TO TAIWAN TO SAY GOODBYE

To my grandmother, and perhaps to the country whose resilience she shares

BY KATHERINE HU

It wasn't a great time to visit Taiwan. Nancy Pelosi's layover in Taipei in early August had heightened tensions with China, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine had people asking whether Taiwan faced a similar threat.

My father and I scrolled through news—of aggressive Chinese military drills and endless U.S. delegations—and debated whether it was safe to go. But when weighed against a hypothetical, the reality of my grandmother's cancer won out. She was refusing chemotherapy. We left in September; better to be early than late.

Upon landing, I found the Taiwan of my childhood summers largely unchanged. I felt silly for expecting otherwise. Almost everything was as I remembered—my grandmother's 13th-floor apartment near Taipei's bustling Shilin Night Market; the department store where my father's family had run a small leather-goods shop; that one stall with *gua bao*, fluffy white buns stuffed with tender pork belly, and the owner who gets bossier each time I see her. The only hint of tumult was a copy of the *Taipei Times* in the snack aisle of a convenience store with the headline "China Unlikely to Invade Taiwan Soon."

The media had described the atmosphere as "defiant" but, to me, it just felt normal. At More Fine, an optical shop in the central district of Gongguan where my parents and I always get our glasses, my father asked the owner why everyone seemed so calm. "It's numbness," he called from the back of the shop. "What else is there to do?"

As I headed over to my grandmother's apartment, I mulled over the shop owner's words. I felt similarly numb, frustrated by all the unfeeling analysis of the country where my extended family lives, where my parents grew up—and where my grandmother is dying of cancer. Pundits picked over Taiwan's history and prospects, often with no personal stake in the matter. To watch a place so familiar to me be reduced to foreign-affairs talking points was disorienting: "the most dangerous place on Earth"; "a progressive, thriving democracy"; "safe until at least 2027." I was angry that we had to think about this at all, that the burdens of living and dying were not enough.

WITH MY GRANDMOTHER, though, the present was all that mattered. I sat by her side, rubbing her back as I listened to her life story, which I was determined to record before I left. I placed my phone on my knee as I yelled questions into her ear. Her hearing is poor, but her memory is surprisingly clear.

She remembers, for instance, the two other Taiwanese women who were in love with my grandfather. They had all worked in the homes of U.S. soldiers based in Tianmu during the 1950s. The prettiest of her competitors, she told me, had rosy skin and brilliant dancing skills.

But my grandfather, a cook, pursued my grandmother, a shy housekeeper. "I was the most pitiful, but I was diligent and good," she said. She noted his neatly made bed and the books on his desk; he was a man who wanted to rebuild, who was hardworking and well mannered. He began sending her braised pigs' feet from a local stall, later bringing her scallops and other delicacies that she had never tried before. "They were delicious!" she said with a mischievous chuckle.

But she had also read the loneliness in his shoulders. Before they married, he told her about his wife and two young children lost to him on the mainland. They were one of many families separated in the chaos of the Communist takeover in 1949, when he became stranded

in Taiwan. The Nationalists swiftly enacted a no-contact policy with China that would last for decades, its bans on travel and mail communication cleaving families in two. My grandmother—a *benshengren* born in Taiwan marrying a *waishengren* from China—accepted it all, including the photo of his other family that he kept in his wallet. "When I was little and I didn't understand," my mother once told me, "I'd sneak my photo into his wallet too."

He proved a dedicated husband and father to their five children. As soon as he finished work, he headed back to their small apartment, which she scrubbed clean and decorated with flowers. "Our home was the prettiest, the cleanest," she boasted. "While the kids did their homework, he would sit with them, sharpening their pencils by hand." They rarely fought. She credits him with giving her a happy life—one that she, as an adopted child treated poorly by her family, could not have imagined for herself. "I was the most blessed," she kept repeating to me. "Life with your grandfather was blessed."

One thing that my grandmother didn't bring up—but that my mother had told me about years earlier—was the trip my grandfather made to see his first wife and daughter in 1985. (His son had died by then.) The women had traveled from northeastern China to Hong Kong, where my grandfather's brother lived; my grandfather met them there.

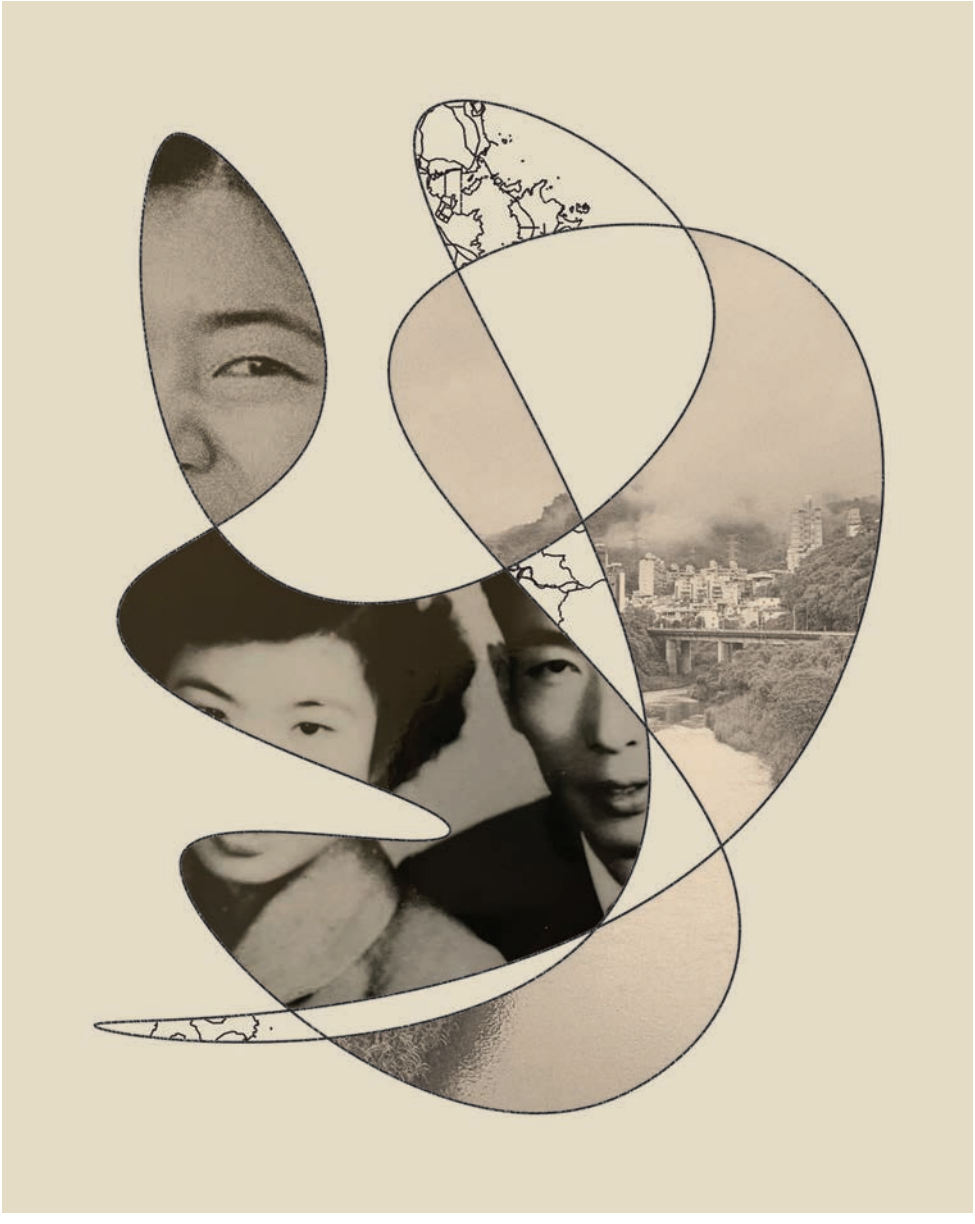
My grandmother packed sweaters and mangoes and money that they couldn't spare into my grandfather's suitcase for his week-long trip. He'd had a stroke, and was unable to walk without a cane. "It was an impossible trip," my mother said. "But he made it happen."

A week after returning to Taiwan, my grandfather died. When I asked my grandmother how his visit to Hong Kong had made her feel, she told me that he had gone to see his brother. When I asked again, she changed the subject.

I flew home on my grandmother's 87th birthday. Before I left, she patted me on the arm and told me not to worry. "Your uncle and aunts will take care of me, as will all of your cousins," she said. I thanked her, and told her to *bao zhong*, take care.

But I do worry—about how the cancer will bloom, about whether normal life in Taiwan will continue. I think of how my grandmother has to rock her weight between the dining chairs to reach the kitchen, how she wouldn't be able to escape if war broke out. And I wish, perhaps uselessly, for a world that would care about Taiwan even if it weren't a beacon of democracy in Asia or an essential producer of semiconductors or a pawn in a great-power play. A world that could peer into the warm glow of my grandmother's apartment—my aunts laughing as my nephews scramble over the couches and pull funny faces, all of us finally together. I wish that could be enough. *A*

Katherine Hu is an assistant editor at The Atlantic.



COURTESY OF THE CHI FAMILY; YUN CHANG; KATHERINE HU; DATAWRAPPER

ILLUSTRATION BY JOAN WONG

SEEING EARTH FROM SPACE WILL CHANGE YOU

The question is how.

BY MARINA KOREN

When he first returned from space, William Shatner was overcome with emotion. The actor, then 90 years old, stood in the dusty grass of the West Texas desert, where the spacecraft had landed. It was October 2021. Nearby, Jeff Bezos, the billionaire who had invited Shatner to ride on a Blue Origin rocket, whooped and popped a bottle of champagne, but Shatner hardly seemed to notice. With tears falling down his cheeks, he described what he had witnessed, his tone hushed. "What you have given me is the most profound experience I can imagine," Shatner told Bezos. "It's extraordinary. Extraordinary. I hope I never recover from this." The man who had played Captain Kirk was so moved by the journey that his post-touchdown remarks ran longer than the three minutes he'd actually spent in space.

Shatner appeared to be basking in a phenomenon that many professional astronauts have described: the overview effect. These travelers saw Earth as a gleaming planet suspended in inky darkness, an oasis of life in the silent void, and it filled them with awe. "No one could be briefed well enough to be completely prepared for the astonishing view that I got," Alan Shepard, the first American in space, wrote in 1962, after he'd made the same trip that Shatner later took.

Beholding the silky clouds below, the continents and the seas, many astronauts have seen their home planet—and humankind's relationship to it—in a profoundly new light. "It becomes so small and so fragile, and such a precious little spot in that universe that you can block out with your thumb," Russell "Rusty" Schweickart, who spent 10 days orbiting Earth on the Apollo 9 mission, said in a 1974 speech.

Michael Collins, the Apollo 11 astronaut who flew around the moon, believed that if world leaders could experience the overview effect, intractable political differences might be resolved. "That all-important border would be invisible, that noisy argument suddenly silenced," Collins wrote in his memoir, *Carrying the Fire*.

Gene Cernan, one of just a dozen people to have walked on the lunar surface, desperately wanted the rest of humanity to see what he had seen. "If only everyone could relate to the beauty and the purposefulness of it," he said in 1985. "It wouldn't bring a utopia to this planet for people to understand it all, but it might make a difference."

More than three decades later, spaceflight is not yet available to everyone, not even close. Unlike in Cernan's era, however, when such trips were made exclusively by professional astronauts, today a seat on a spacecraft is available in a growing tourism industry, at least for those who can afford the astronomical fare. Blue Origin has carried 31 people to the edge of space and back since the summer of 2021. Elon Musk's SpaceX has launched seven space tourists all the way into orbit; three of them spent more than two weeks living on the International Space Station. The next group of SpaceX tourists will exit their capsule and go on a little spacewalk.

> "IT BECOMES SO SMALL AND SO FRAGILE, AND SUCH A PRECIOUS LITTLE SPOT IN THAT UNIVERSE THAT YOU CAN BLOCK OUT WITH YOUR THUMB."

As commercial space travel becomes less expensive and more common, we can test Cernan's proposition that if enough people experience the overview effect, life back on Earth could be meaningfully improved. But we might also find that a more varied group of travelers describes the experience in different terms than the astronauts who went before them. What will a new generation of voyagers see when they regard their home from space?

FRANK WHITE COINED the term *overview effect* in the early '80s while he was flying over Earth—not in space, though high up enough to have a nice view, on a cross-country flight. White was affiliated with the Space Studies Institute, a nonprofit founded by the Princeton physicist Gerard K. O'Neill, who believed that people would

The NASA astronaut Bruce McCandless II floats above Earth, February 1984.

NASA / CORBIS / GETTY

one day live inside space stations that replicated the conditions of Earth. (A young Bezos attended O'Neill's lectures as a student; he founded Blue Origin to turn the theory into reality.) As White flew west from the East Coast, over plains, mountains, and deserts, an idea occurred to him: People living in space would *always* have this view. As he later wrote, "They will be able to see how everything is related, that what appears to be 'the world' to people on Earth is merely a small planet in space."

Seeking evidence for his theory, White started interviewing astronauts as proxies for those future space dwellers. By the early '80s, dozens of astronauts had traveled into space. Many had described their experiences in interviews and memoirs, but no one had sat them down and asked probing questions about the meaning of what they'd witnessed.

Not everyone had been changed by what they saw, White learned. But among those who were, White found common themes, which he described in *The Overview Effect*, first published in 1987. The astronauts' sense of national belonging faded away, replaced by one of

connection with their fellow human beings. They also felt a new bond with their home planet, the only known source of life in an otherwise forbidding universe. The Earth, with its wispy atmosphere, looked delicate, in need of care.

This version of the overview effect has taken hold in the public imagination, reinforced over the years by books and documentaries about the American space program. In this telling, the effect can seem like a special gesture bestowed by the cosmos upon anyone brave enough to venture beyond Earth.

But as Jordan Bimm, a historian of space exploration at the University of Chicago, has written, the overview effect is as much a cultural phenomenon as a celestial one. It is a human narrative, its themes shaped by a variety of earthly circumstances. The overview effect arose when the NASA astronaut corps was rigorously homogeneous: white males with engineering degrees and military experience. These men were a product of their training and their time. Spaceflight was a dangerous new frontier that required mental as well as physical fortitude—the right stuff.

The imperative to always demonstrate the right stuff shaped the language that astronauts used to describe their experiences in space. As Patricia Santy, a longtime psychiatrist at NASA's Johnson Space Center, in Houston, wrote in 1994, "Expression of emotions such as sadness or fear is considered a weakness." If the sight of Earth marooned in darkness inspired such feelings in the heart of an astronaut, he was unlikely to admit it, lest he jeopardize his shot at another mission.

To capture their experience of the sublime, many astronauts spoke in explicitly religious terms. Cernan, for example, said, "You only see the boundaries of nature from there, boundaries God created." This reflects their uniformly Christian backgrounds, though also the Cold War backdrop of America's early space missions. "There's this sense of us versus them ... We're not the godless Communists," Deana Weibel, a cultural anthropologist at Grand Valley State University, in Michigan, told me. "We're the ones that have God on our side." Early Soviet cosmonauts remarked on the beauty of Earth from space, but they didn't attribute it to a higher power.

The specter of nuclear war also hung over the early space missions. At a time when two superpowers were engaged in globe-spanning brinkmanship, regarding a borderless world was particularly startling. For some, the sight inspired hope; Schweickart found himself wishing he could take a person from "each side" and demand of them: "Look at it from this perspective! Look at that! What's important?"

Others, however, saw not the promise of peace but intimations of destruction. Weibel, who conducts anonymous interviews of astronauts for her research, said that one told her he took one look out the window of the space shuttle and "became absolutely convinced we would kill ourselves off between 500 and 1,000 years from now." He never said so publicly.

Walter Schirra peers into space during the Apollo 7 mission, October 1968.

COURTESY OF NASA

THE SPACEX CAPSULE that transports professional astronauts to the International Space Station is sleek and futuristic. Before its first tourist mission, the company added a big, bubble-shaped glass window. The cupola offers tourists sweeping, unobstructed views of the cosmos, including the

planet they've left behind. It turns the overview effect into an amenity.

What have the early tourists thought? Many have returned with testimonials resembling the traditional accounts. It's "very emotional, and it changes you," Sharon Hagle, a philanthropist who flew with Blue Origin, told me. "You see the curvature [of the Earth], and you see the cloud formation, and the reality of how tiny the world is."

Others have offered new lines of thought. Sian Proctor, a geoscientist and an artist who spent several days orbiting Earth in 2021, told me that although she expected to feel the oft-described sense of connectedness with the planet, what captivated her the most was Earth's sheer luminosity. "To be up there and being bathed in Earth light while floating in space, there's nothing better," she said. Proctor is only the fourth Black American woman to go to space. She painted Earth while in orbit, depicting the planet's natural wonders as flowing from the mind of a creator figure she called AfroGaia.

Hayley Arceneaux, a physician assistant who flew with Proctor, saw the planet in the context of her profession, and the challenge of distributing care across human-drawn borders. "It felt unifying, but it also made me think of healthcare disparities in a different way. How can someone born on that side of the globe have a completely different prognosis from someone born over here?" she wrote in a recent memoir. "I could see the nations all at once, and it felt more unfair than ever, the ugliness that existed within all of that beauty."

Some tourists have described the experience in tones that fall well short of the lofty anecdotes of old. Wally Funk is a longtime aviator who flew alongside Bezos in the summer of 2021. "I thought I was going to see the world," she said afterward, "but we weren't quite high enough."

Jared Isaacman, a billionaire who chartered a SpaceX trip into orbit for himself and three others, has said he preferred looking at the moon rising out of the darkness. Our home, he said, "looked like what you thought it would look like—it's that big glowing blue ball of Earth." What had been spectacularly new for Alan Shepard has now become familiar, expected. As space tourism grows, an Instagram snap of the glowing blue ball might become as banal as a selfie by the infinity pool.

As for Shatner, though he hit some familiar notes when he first touched down, he has also described his experience in terms far darker than any astronaut ever has, at least in public. In a recently published memoir, he wrote that he felt "a crushing, overwhelming sadness" when looking down on Earth.

I called Shatner to ask him how his understanding of the experience has evolved. "It took me a couple of hours sitting by myself to understand that what I was feeling was grief, and the grief was for the Earth," he told me. He had expected to delight in the wonder of the view; instead, it reminded him of all the ways that Earth is under threat, primarily from climate change. That grief, he said, is still with him. "I could tear up just talking to you about it."

There are days when he can muster more optimism, he told me, but he'd just read an article about the volume of plastic particles in the environment. "You've caught me in a moment of nonhope."

"IT TOOK ME A COUPLE OF HOURS SITTING BY MYSELF TO UNDERSTAND THAT WHAT I WAS FEELING WAS GRIEF, AND THE GRIEF WAS FOR THE EARTH," SHATNER TOLD ME.

AS POWERFUL AS it can be, the overview effect fades. Eventually, gravity and worldly responsibilities restore their hold.

"Life gets in the way," Doug Hurley, a retired NASA astronaut, told me. "Just like most Americans, we gotta work, we gotta earn money, we gotta take care of our families." Hurley's wife, Karen Nyberg, is also an astronaut. I asked her whether the couple have had deep conversations about how the view of Earth changed them. She said they probably did, but couldn't recall a specific conversation.

Katya Echazarreta, who flew on Blue Origin in 2022, told me she feels a responsibility to share her experience of the overview effect, even as its immediacy wanes. "I come from a very underrepresented background," Echazarreta, the first Mexican American in space, said. "The hardest part has actually been answering the same question thousands and thousands of times while keeping that excitement."

Chris Cassidy, a retired NASA astronaut who flew on the shuttles, witnessed flames billowing out from the Amazon rain forest. He told me the sight made the threat of climate change more urgent to him, and in turn made him "a better occupant of Earth." But the view didn't "fundamentally change" him. "It didn't make me a better dad or a better friend or a better husband," he said.

Michael Collins once said that "the best crew for the Apollo mission would be a philosopher, a priest, and a poet. Unfortunately, they would kill themselves trying to fly the spacecraft." Today, such a trio could easily make the voyage to space, if someone was willing to foot the bill. But each of them might come back with different ideas of what it had meant to enjoy a view of Earth once reserved for the gods. Awe, despair, a shrug.

Spaceflight scrambles the senses, whether you're a professional or a tourist. Human beings evolved to live on Earth, not dangle over it; in a sense, people who go to space witness something they weren't meant to see. The only universal aspect of the experience may be its ineffability. In 1962, Walter Schirra radioed from Earth orbit down to John Glenn, who had himself circuited the planet earlier that year: "It's kind of hard to describe all this, isn't it, John?" *A*

Marina Koren is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

THE EUREKA THEORY OF HISTORY IS WRONG

Illustrations by Derek Brahney

THE REAL REASON AMERICAN PROGRESS HAS STALLED

By
DEREK THOMPSON

The Scourge of All Humankind

If you were, for whatever macabre reason, seeking the most catastrophic moment in the history of humankind, you might well settle on this: About 10,000 years ago, as people first began to domesticate animals and farm the land in Mesopotamia, India, and northern Africa, a peculiar virus leaped across the species barrier. Little is known about its early years. But the virus spread and, whether sooner or later, became virulent. It ransacked internal organs before traveling through the blood to the skin, where it erupted in pus-filled lesions. Many of those who survived it were left marked, disfigured, even blind.

As civilizations bloomed across the planet, the virus stalked them like a curse. Some speculate that it swept through ancient Egypt, where its scars appear to mar the mummified body of Pharaoh Ramses V. By the fourth century A.D., it had gained a foothold in China. Christian soldiers spread it through Europe during the 11th- and 12th-century Crusades. In the early 1500s, Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors conveyed it west across the Atlantic, where it ravaged native communities and contributed to the downfall of the Aztec, Mayan, and Inca empires.

By the end of the 1500s, the disease caused by the virus had become one of the most feared in the world. About a third of those who contracted it were dead within weeks. The Chinese called it *tianhua*, or "heaven's flowers." Throughout Europe, it was known as *variola*, meaning "spotted." In England, where doctors used the term *pox* to describe pestilent bumps on the skin, syphilis had already claimed the name "the great pox." And so this disease took on a diminutive moniker that belied the scale of its wretchedness: *smallpox*.

Over time, different communities experimented with different cures. Many noticed that survivors earned lifetime immunity from the disease. This discovery was passed down through the generations in Africa and Asia, where local cultures developed a practice that became known as inoculation—from the Latin *inoculare*, meaning "to graft." In most cases, people would stick a sharp instrument into a smallpox-infected pustule to collect just a little material from the disease. Then they would stick the same blade, wet with infection, into the skin of a healthy individual. Inoculation often worked—pustules would form at the injection site, and a low-grade version of the disease would typically follow. But the intervention was terribly flawed; it killed about one in every 50 patients.

Not until the early 1700s did a chance encounter in the Ottoman empire bring the process to Britain, and bend the axis of history. In 1717, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, an English aristocrat living in Constantinople with her husband, a diplomat, heard about inoculation from her acquaintances in the Ottoman court. Circassian women, from the Caucasus Mountains and in great demand for the Turkish sultan's harem, were inoculated as children in parts of their bodies where scars would not easily be seen. Lady Montagu asked the embassy surgeon to perform the procedure on her son—and upon her return to London a few years later, on her young daughter.

Word spread from court physicians to members of the College of Physicians to doctors across the continent. Within a few years, inoculation had become widespread in Europe. But many people still died of smallpox after being deliberately infected, and in some cases inoculation transmitted other diseases, like syphilis or tuberculosis.

One boy who went through the ordeal of inoculation was Edward Jenner, the son of a vicar in Gloucestershire, England. He trained as a physician in the late 1700s, and carried out these rough smallpox inoculations regularly. But Jenner also sought a better cure. He was taken by a theory that a disease among cows could provide cross-immunity to smallpox.

In the spring of 1796, Jenner was approached by a dairymaid, Sarah Nelmes, who complained of a rash on her hand. She told Jenner that one of her cows, named Blossom, had recently suffered from cowpox. Jenner suspected that her blister might give him the opportunity to test whether cowpox was humanity's long-awaited cure.

May 14, 1796, was a golden day in the history of science but a terrifying one for a certain 8-year-old boy. Jenner drew a blade, slick with ooze from a cowpox blister, across the arm of James Phipps, the brave and healthy son of his gardener.

After a week, young James developed a headache, lost his appetite, and came down with chills. When the boy had recovered, Jenner returned with a new blade—this one coated with the microbial matter of the smallpox virus. He cut the boy with the infected lancet. Nothing happened. The boy had been immunized from smallpox without encountering the disease.

Jenner would go down in history as the person who invented and administered a medical cure for one of the deadliest viruses in world history. Then he invented something else: a new word, from the Latin for "cow," that would be carried down through the centuries alongside his scientific breakthrough. He called his wondrous invention a vaccine.

The Eureka Myth

Let's pause the story here. Jenner's eureka moment is world-famous: cherished by scientists, rhapsodized by historians, and even captured in oil paintings that hang in European museums.

For many, progress is essentially a timeline of the breakthroughs made by extraordinary individuals like Jenner. Our mythology of science and technology treats the moment of discovery or invention as a sacred scene. In school, students memorize the dates of major inventions, along with the names of the people who made them—Edison, light bulb, 1879; Wright brothers, airplane, 1903. The great discoverers—Franklin, Bell, Curie, Tesla—get best-selling biographies, and millions of people know their name.

This is the eureka theory of history. And for years, it is the story I've read and told. Inventors and their creations are the stars of my favorite books about scientific history, including *The Discoverers*, by Daniel Boorstin, and *They Made America*,

by Harold Evans. I've written long features for this magazine holding up invention as the great lost art of American technology and the fulcrum of human progress.

But in the past few years, I've come to think that this approach to history is wrong. Inventions do matter greatly to progress, of course. But too often, when we isolate these famous eureka moments, we leave out the most important chapters of the story—the ones that follow the initial lightning bolt of discovery. Consider the actual scale of Edward Jenner's accomplishment the day he pricked James Phipps in 1796. Exactly one person had been vaccinated in a world of roughly 1 billion people, leaving 99.9999999 percent of the human population unaffected. When a good idea is born, or when the first prototype of an invention is created, we should celebrate its potential to change the world. But progress is as much about implementation as it is about invention. The way individuals and institutions take an idea from one to 1 billion is the story of how the world really changes.

And it doesn't always change, even after a truly brilliant discovery. The 10,000-year story of human civilization is mostly the story of things not getting better: diseases not being cured, freedoms not being extended, truths not being transmitted, technology not delivering on its promises. Progress is our escape from the status quo of suffering, our ejection seat from history—it is the less common story of how our inventions and institutions reduce disease, poverty, pain, and violence while expanding freedom, happiness, and empowerment.

It's a story that has almost ground to a halt in the United States.

In theory, the values of progress form the core of American national identity. The American dream is meant to represent that exception to the rule of history: *Here*, we say, *things really do get better*. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, they did. Almost every generation of Americans was more productive, wealthier, and longer-lived than the one before it. In the past few decades, however, progress has faltered—and faith in it has curdled. Technological progress has stagnated, especially in the nonvirtual world. So have real incomes. Life expectancy has been falling in recent years.

What went wrong? There are many answers, but one is that we have become too enthralled by the eureka myth and, more to the point, too inattentive to all the things that must follow a eureka moment. The U.S. has more Nobel Prizes for science than the U.K., Germany, France, Japan, Canada, and Austria combined. But if there were a Nobel Prize for the deployment and widespread adoption of technology—even technology that we invented, even technology that's not so new anymore—our legacy wouldn't be so sterling. Americans invented the first nuclear

reactor, the solar cell, and the microchip, but today, we're well behind a variety of European and Asian countries in deploying and improving these technologies. We were home to some of the world's first subway systems, but our average cost per mile for tunnel projects today is the highest in the world. The U.S. did more than any other nation to advance the production of the mRNA vaccines against COVID-19, but also leads the developed world in vaccine refusal.

At its worst, the eureka theory distorts American views of how best to push society forward, and slows material advance in the process. To appreciate the deeper story of progress—and to see how it bears on America's own problems in the 21st century—let's return to 1796 and recall how history's first vaccine went global.

One to 1 Billion

After Edward Jenner verified that James Phipps was indeed protected against smallpox, he wrote a brief paper to announce his discovery. The Royal Society of London refused to publish it. His own self-published booklet, *An Inquiry Into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae*, was initially ignored by the medical community. (Jenner was both a physician and a zoologist, and his studies of cuckoo-bird behavior may have stoked suspicions that he was at best a dilettante, and perhaps something of a cuckoo himself.)

Jenner needed surrogates in the English medical field to give his wild experiments gravitas. He found one such defender in Henry Cline, an open-minded London surgeon who acquired some inoculating substance from Jenner and began conducting trials to confirm Jenner's findings, establishing the practice as safe and reliable. The vaccine was so immediately and obviously successful that it proved self-recommending. By 1800, vaccinations had spread rapidly through Europe, in large part because so many elites supported them. The kings of Denmark, Spain, and Prussia personally promoted the vaccine. The pope called it "a precious discovery" that ought to restore the public's faith in God.

Still, doctors faced a prodigious challenge: how to deliver the stuff around the world in an era without cold storage, airplanes, or cars. They settled on distribution methods that were, by any reasonable estimation, extremely strange and a little ingenious. In the early 1800s, Spain recruited 22 orphaned boys to bring the vaccine to the Americas on their body. Two boys were vaccinated immediately before their ship's departure. When pustules appeared on their arms, doctors scraped material from them to jab two more children on board. Doctors continued this daisy-chain routine until the ship reached modern-day Venezuela, where they began using the most recent pox eruption to vaccinate people in the Americas. Without any advanced storage technology, they had managed to transport history's first vaccine more than 4,000 miles, in perfect condition. Arm-to-arm, the vaccine traveled to Mexico, Macau, and Manila. Within 10 years of Jenner's paper, the vaccine had gone global.

The smallpox vaccine faced popular resistance wherever it went. (In Britain, one cartoonist depicted the vaccinated as sprouting miniature cows out of their bodies.) But America's most powerful people, including priests and presidents, typically extolled the virtues of the vaccine, having personally witnessed its benefits, which helped overcome the anti-science skepticism. Gradually, the vaccine pushed smallpox out of Europe and the U.S.

Even so, in the 1950s—some 150 years after Jenner's discovery—1.7 billion people, or roughly 60 percent of the world's population, still lived in countries where the virus was endemic. The major powers would often talk about finishing the job of smallpox eradication, but major technical and organizational obstacles stood in the way. Vaccination efforts still lacked funding. Outbreaks were still too difficult to track.

Then along came several heroes who belong in the pantheon of science history alongside Edward Jenner. The first is D. A. Henderson, the director of the World Health Organization's global vaccination effort. Henderson was just 38 years old when he arrived in Geneva to lead a program to vaccinate more than 1 billion people in 50 countries within 10 years. He was put in charge of a small staff and a modest budget within the labyrinth of a global bureaucracy.

Reaching 1 billion people with limited resources required a brilliant strategy for surveilling and containing the disease. Henderson's team invented the technique of "ring vaccination." Rather than inoculate every person in every country, his disease detectives would look for an outbreak and vaccinate all the contacts of the affected people and anyone else in the area. And so, each outbreak was encircled by people who were immune to the smallpox virus and wouldn't let it pass through them.

Above all, Henderson needed an extraordinary supply of vaccine at a cheap price with a low-cost way to administer doses to people around the world. He benefited from a timely invention that proved essential to the story of smallpox eradication. In 1965, an American microbiologist named Benjamin Rubin created a bifurcated needle, which held a tiny droplet of vaccine between two prongs, like a miniature olive fork. It allowed 100 vaccinations from a single vial (four times the previous amount) and brought down the cost of vaccination to about 10 cents a patient.

Henderson and his small army of eradicators eventually squeezed smallpox out of Africa, South Asia, and Brazil. Since October 26, 1977, no naturally occurring smallpox cases have been recorded. In 1980, the WHO announced that smallpox, which had killed about 300 million people in the 20th century alone, had finally been eradicated.

Invention Without Implementation

The end of smallpox offers a usefully complete story, in which humanity triumphed unequivocally over a natural adversary. It's a saga that offers lessons about progress—each of which pertains to America today.

The most fundamental is that implementation, not mere invention, determines the pace of progress—a lesson the U.S. has failed to heed for the past several generations. Edward Jenner's original

vaccine could not have gone far without major assistance from early evangelists, such as Henry Cline; distribution strategies to preserve the vaccine across the Atlantic; and a sustained push from global bureaucracies more than a century after Jenner's death.

Almost every story of progress is at least a little like this, because even the most majestic breakthroughs are typically incomplete, expensive, and unreliable. "Most major inventions initially don't work very well," the economic historian Joel Mokyr told me. "They have to be tweaked, the way the steam engine was tinkered with by many engineers over decades. They have to be embodied by infrastructure, the way nuclear fission can't produce much energy until it's inside a nuclear reactor. And they have to be built at scale, to bring down the price and make a big difference to people."

For many decades, the American government has focused overwhelmingly on discovery rather than deployment. After World War II, Vannevar Bush, the architect of our thrillingly successful wartime tech policy, published an influential report, "Science: The Endless Frontier," in which he counseled the federal government to grow its investment in basic research. And it did. Since the middle of the 20th century, America's inflation-adjusted spending on science and technology, through the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, has increased by a factor of 40.

But the government hasn't matched that investment in the realm of implementation. This, too, was by design. Bush believed, with some reason, that politicians should not handpick nascent technologies to transform into new national industries. Better to advance the basic science and technology and let private companies—whose ears were closer to the ground—choose what to develop, and how.

You could say that we live in the world that Bush built. "The federal government, through NIH and NSF, pours billions into basic science and defense technology," Daniel P. Gross, an economist at Duke University, told me. "But for civilian technology, there has been a view that Washington should fund the research and then get out of the way."

As a result, many inventions languish in the so-called valley of death, where neither the government nor private ventures (risk-averse and possessed by relatively short time horizons) invest enough in the stages between discovery and commercialization. Take solar energy. In 1954, three American researchers at Bell Labs, the R&D wing of AT&T, built the first modern solar-cell prototype. By 1980, America was spending more on solar-energy research than any other country in the world. According to the Bush playbook, the U.S. was doing everything right. But we lost the technological edge on solar anyway, as Japan, Germany, and China used industrial policy to spur production—for example, by encouraging home builders to put solar panels on roofs. These tactics helped build the market and drove down the cost of solar power by several orders of magnitude—and by 90 percent in just the past 10 years.

The U.S. remains the world's R&D factory, but when it comes to building, we are plainly going backwards. We've lost out on industrial opportunities by running Bush's playbook so strictly. But there are other problems, too. Since the early 2000s, the U.S. has closed more nuclear-power plants than we've opened. Our ability to decarbonize the grid is held back by environmental regulations that ironically constrict the construction of solar- and wind-energy farms. It's been roughly 50 years since Asia and Europe built their first high-speed rail systems, but the U.S. is almost comically incapable of pulling train construction into the 21st century. (A 2008 plan to build a high-speed rail line in California has seen estimated costs more than triple and deployment delayed by a decade, and it's still uncertain if it can be completed as planned.)

THE U.S. REMAINS THE WORLD'S R&D FACTORY, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO BUILDING, WE ARE PLAINLY GOING BACKWARDS.

"New ideas are getting harder to use," the futurist and economist Eli Dourado told me. If the U.S. wanted to unleash geothermal power, we could simplify geothermal permitting. If we wanted to build the next generation of advanced nuclear reactors, we could deregulate advanced nuclear reactors. These measures would not require inventing anything new. But they would stimulate progress by making it easier to bring our best ideas into the light.

The United States once believed in partnerships among the government, private industry, and the people to advance material progress. The Lincoln administration helped build the railroads. The New Deal helped electrify rural America. Dwight Eisenhower signed the Price-Anderson Act, which guaranteed government funds and limited liability for nuclear-energy firms in case of serious accidents, facilitating the construction of nuclear-power plants. John F. Kennedy's space ambitions made NASA a major consumer of early microchips, which helped reduce their price by a factor of 30 in a matter of years, accelerating the software revolution.

"And then, around 1980, we basically stopped building," Jesse Jenkins, who researches energy policy at Princeton, told me. In the past 40 years, he said, the U.S. has applied several different brakes to our capacity to build what's already been invented. Under Ronald Reagan, the legacy of successful public-private partnerships was ignored in favor of the simplistic diagnosis that the government was to blame for every major problem. In the '70s, liberals encouraged the government to pass new environmental regulations to halt pollution and prevent builders from running roughshod over low-income neighborhoods. And then middle-class Americans used these new rules to slow down the construction of new housing, clean-energy projects—just about everything. These reactions were partly understandable; for example, air and water pollution in the '70s were deadly crises. But "when you combine these big shifts, you basically stop building anything," Jenkins said.

To understand how we could do better, it's useful to compare the story of the first global vaccine to the story of the latest one.

Warp Speed

In April 2020, as COVID was circumnavigating the globe and demolishing normalcy everywhere, *The New York Times* published an article titled "How Long Will a Vaccine Really Take?" Although Trump-administration officials aimed to unveil a COVID vaccine within 18 months—that is, by the fall of 2021—the journalist Stuart Thompson reminded readers that the shortest time in history for developing a new vaccine was four years. "The grim truth," he wrote, "is that a vaccine probably won't arrive any time soon." But then it did. The first mRNA vaccines were administered before the end of 2020.

The COVID vaccines underline a second lesson from the smallpox story. Some technology myths make it seem like progress is exclusively the work of geniuses, untouched by the grubby hands of politicians and bureaucrats. But a rogue cadre of inventors didn't eradicate smallpox. States did. Agencies did. Progress is often political, because the policy decisions of states and international organizations frequently build the bridges between discovery and deployment.

The story of the mRNA vaccines can be traced back to the '90s, when the Hungarian-born scientist Katalin Karikó began her research on the pharmaceutical potential of mRNA, a small but mighty molecule that tells our cells what proteins to make. Her work, along with that of her fellow University of Pennsylvania researcher Drew Weissman, gradually raised our mastery of mRNA to the point where it could be deployed for a vaccine. In early 2020, within 48 hours of receiving the genetic sequencing of the coronavirus, Moderna had prepared its COVID-vaccine recipe, and BioNTech, a German firm that later partnered with Pfizer, had designed its own vaccine candidate.

These technological breakthroughs, building on decades of basic research, were themselves miracles. But alone, they weren't enough. The U.S. also needed a policy miracle—a feat of bureaucratic ingenuity that would make, distribute, and administer novel vaccines with record-breaking efficiency. We got just that with Operation Warp Speed, which belongs with the Apollo program and the Manhattan Project as one of the most important technology programs in the history of modern federal policy. It likely saved hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives.

From the beginning, Warp Speed's job seemed nearly impossible. To create the fastest vaccine program ever, officials had to essentially map out the entire journey of a new therapy—from research and clinical trials to regulatory approval and distribution—and turn this obstacle course into something like a glide path. They invested in both traditional and mRNA vaccine approaches, paid up front for clinical trials, and placed billions of dollars in advance orders to urge pharmaceutical companies to move as fast as possible. When Moderna needed more manufacturing facilities, Warp Speed provided funding for additional factory space. When the government identified a shortage of the special material that mRNA vaccines require for ultracold transport, Warp Speed granted $347 million to SiO2 and Corning, two manufacturers of glass vials. And because standard vaccine approval from the FDA can take years, the program's leaders allowed vaccine makers to proceed with emergency use authorizations to speed up the review process.

"The single most important thing that Operation Warp Speed did was to provide a whole-of-government urgency" to the goal of rapid deployment, Caleb Watney, a co-founder of the Institute for Progress, told me. "Getting everything right meant you needed to make a million correct decisions in the right order." If the government had bet only on traditional vaccine technology, we would have had no mRNA therapies. If the government hadn't done extensive supply-chain mapping in the summer of 2020, the initial vaccine rollout might have taken months rather than weeks. And if the government hadn't bought out vaccines from the pharmaceutical companies, they wouldn't have been free to consumers. But because Operation Warp Speed did all of this, the vaccines were expeditiously approved, manufactured, and distributed at no cost to the public.

Warp Speed was a special case, essentially a wartime policy applied to a health crisis. Few people would recommend such an aggressive approach for developing ordinary consumer technology. And the government is certainly capable of making bad choices as to exactly what technology to develop, and how. But while too much government action on this front can waste money, too little can waste time and even lives, stymieing possible breakthroughs. Warp Speed showed that smart government action can accelerate discovery and deployment. Just as significant, it showed that the kinds of bets the government can place, such as FDA reforms, don't necessarily involve spending any money at all.

Here's a thought experiment: Let's imagine what an Operation Warp Speed for cancer prevention would look like. It might include not only a larger cancer-research budget, but also a search for regulatory bottlenecks whose elimination would speed up the approval of preventative drugs that have already been developed. According to Heidi Williams, the director of science policy at the Institute for Progress, from the time the War on Cancer was announced, in 1971, until 2015, only six drugs were approved to

prevent any cancer. This reflects an enormous gap in clinical trials: From 1973 to 2011, nearly 30,000 trials were run for drugs that treated recurrent or metastatic cancer, compared with fewer than 600 for cancer prevention. How could this be?

You could start by blaming the U.S. system of patents and clinical trials, Williams told me. If a company discovers a drug that, when used by younger adults, prevents colon cancer in middle age, it could still take decades to gather long-term data from clinical trials. At that point, the patent on the original discovery might have expired. Reforming trials for preventative drugs and for early-stage disease therapies "might be the single highest-value thing we could do for biomedical research in the U.S.," Williams said. The FDA already approves heart-disease treatments, such as beta-blockers, by looking at patients' cholesterol levels rather than waiting for full mortality results. The agency could similarly establish short-term proxies for approving drugs that prevent cancers, Williams said. Or we could change the law so that the patent clock on cancer-prevention treatments didn't start ticking until after the pharmaceutical company first starts selling the drug. As with Warp Speed, these policies could accelerate the development of life-saving medication without spending a taxpayer dime on research. The key is adopting a more aggressive problem-solving approach, with the ends in mind.

One regrettable feature of history is that it sometimes takes a catastrophe to fast-forward progress. The U.S. directly advanced airplane technology during World War I; radar, penicillin manufacturing, and nuclear technology during World War II; the internet and GPS during the Cold War; and mRNA technology during the pandemic. A crisis is a focusing mechanism. But it is up to us to decide what counts as a crisis. The U.S. could announce a Warp Speed for heart disease tomorrow, on the theory that the leading cause of death in America is a national crisis. We could announce a full emergency review of federal and local permitting rules for clean-energy construction, with the rationale that climate change is a crisis. Just as it did in the '60s with smallpox, the U.S. could decide that a major disease in developing countries, such as malaria, deserves a concerted

global coalition. Even in times without world wars and pandemics, crises abound. Turning them into national priorities is, and has always been, a political determination.

A Question of Culture

Operation Warp Speed was ingenious, admirable, and wildly successful. But despite all that, it was not enough.

Having overcome the hurdles of scientific breakthrough, technological invention, and rapid distribution, the mRNA vaccines faced a final obstacle: cultural acceptance. And the skepticism of tens of millions of American adults proved too much for the vaccines to overcome. This is the third lesson of the smallpox story—culture is the true last-mile problem of progress. It doesn't matter what you discover or invent if people are unwilling to accept it.

In 2021, the U.S. took an early global lead in vaccine distribution, thanks to the accelerated development of vaccines under President Donald Trump and their timely delivery under President Joe Biden. By April, we had distributed more shots per capita than almost any other country in the world. But by September, according to one estimate, the U.S. had fallen to 36th in national vaccination rates, behind Mongolia and Ecuador. The problem wasn't supply, but demand. Tens of millions of American adults simply refused a free and effective vaccine in the middle of a pandemic.

Michael Bang Petersen, a Danish researcher who led a survey of attitudes in Western democracies about COVID-19, told me that America's history of vaccine skepticism—and of conspiracy theories surrounding vaccines—of course predates the coronavirus pandemic. And although American vaccine resistance has several sources, including the cost of some vaccines and our legacy of medical racism, Petersen told me that one of the most important factors today is "the level of polarization between Democratic and Republican elites." Vaccine rejection remains higher among Republican adults than any other measured demographic, including age, education level, gender, and ethnicity.

In the 19th century, state and church leaders across Europe and the Americas typically praised the smallpox vaccine in unison. But in the 21st century, a dwindling number of subjects enjoy such universal elite endorsement. Despite the historical assumption that moments of tragedy bring a country together, the pandemic efficiently sorted Americans into opposing camps—for and against lockdowns, for and against vaccines. Nearly 90 percent of Americans told the Pew Research Center that the pandemic has made the country more divided.

Americans are deeply polarized; that much is obvious. Less obvious, and more important for our purposes, is how polarization might complicate material progress today. One big problem the country faces is that as coastal, educated elites have come to largely identify as Democrats, Republicans have come to feel ignored or condescended to by the institutions populated by the former group. As if recoiling from the rise of a liberal scientific and managerial class, the GOP has become almost proudly anti-expertise, anti-science, and anti-establishment. Cranks and conspiracy theorists have gained prominence in the party. It is hard to imagine scientific institutions flourishing within right-wing governments averse to both science and institutions. But this is only part of the problem, culturally speaking.

The other part is that some Democrats—many of whom call themselves progressives—have in meaningful ways become anti-progress, at least where material improvement is concerned. Progress depends on a society's ability to build what it knows. But very often, it's progressives who stand against building what we've already invented, including relatively ancient technology like nuclear power or even apartment buildings. Cities and states run by Democrats have erected so many barriers to construction that blue metro areas are now where the housing crisis is worst. The five states with the highest rates of homelessness are New York, Hawaii, California, Oregon, and Washington; all are run by Democrats. Meanwhile, it is often left-leaning environmentalist groups that use onerous rules to delay the construction of wind and solar farms that would reduce our dependency on oil and gas. The left owns all the backpack pins denouncing the oil industry, but Texas produces more renewable energy than deep-blue California, and Oklahoma and Iowa produce more renewable energy than New York.

One possible explanation is that progressives have become too focused on what are essentially negative prescriptions for improving the world, including an emphasis on preservation and sacrifice ("reduce, reuse, recycle") over growth ("build, build, build"). At the extreme, this ascetic style leads to calls for permanent declines in modern living standards, a philosophy known as "degrowtherism." The aim is noble: to save our descendants from climate change by flying less, traveling less, buying less, and using less. But it is a profound departure from progressivism's history, which is one of optimism about the ability of society to improve lives on a big scale through bold action. It's self-defeating to tell voters: "My opponent wants to raise your living standards, but I promise I won't let that happen." It's far better—and, arguably, more realistic—to tell voters that building more renewable power is a win-win that will make energy cheaper and more abundant.

When you add the anti-science bias of the Republican Party to the anti-build skepticism of liberal urbanites and the environmentalist left, the U.S. seems to have accidentally assembled a kind of bipartisan coalition against some of the most important drivers of human progress. To correct this, we need more than improvements in our laws and rules; we need a new culture of progress.

The Trust Gap

A famous theme in American history is adaptability, and justifiably so. When something isn't working, we've typically been game to try something new. In the summer of 2022, Biden signed a series of laws, including the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, that included hundreds of billions of

dollars for building microchips, solar panels, electric cars, and infrastructure, green and otherwise. In an address touting this approach, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen branded it "modern supply-side economics." Contrasted with the Reagan-era phrase, which referred to cutting taxes to stimulate the economy, her speech focused more on direct investments in American manufacturing and improving America's ability to build what it invents. In October, Brian Deese, a senior adviser to Biden, announced the administration's plans to deliver a modern industrial strategy that would help "spur mature technologies to deploy more quickly [and] pull emerging innovations to market faster."

No one can say for sure how well Biden's specific plans will work—and a decade from now, critics will undoubtedly find particular initiatives that failed or wasted money. Still, we might be moving from the eureka theory of progress to an abundance theory of progress, which focuses on making our best ideas affordable and available to everyone. Overall, this new direction of federal policy seems promising.

Still, it doesn't solve the problem of cultural unreadiness for progress, a problem that afflicts the left and right differently, but that ultimately comes down to trust. Every form of institutional trust is in free fall. Fewer than half of Republicans say they have faith in higher education, big businesses, tech firms, media, the entertainment industry, and unions. Among Democrats, too, confidence in government has declined. Why is social trust so important to progress? In a country where people don't trust the government to be honest, or businesses to be ethical, or members of the opposite party to respect the rule of law, it is hard to build anything quickly and effectively—or, for that matter, anything that lasts.

One of the most important differences between invention and implementation is that the former typically takes place in private while the latter is necessarily public. The first practical silicon-solar-cell technology was developed in a corporate lab in New Jersey. Building a solar farm to generate electricity requires the sustained approval of officials and local residents—in other words, it requires people to genuinely believe that they will benefit, at least collectively, from changes to their lived environment.

I want to tell you that there is a simple agenda for restoring trust in America, but I don't think I can do that. When discussing barriers to the construction of nuclear-power plants or the pace of drug development, one can play the part of a bottleneck detective—identifying obstacles to progress and working to overcome them through clever policy tweaks. But Americans' growing mistrust of institutions and one another is rooted in the deepest hollows of society: in geographical sorting that physically separates liberals and conservatives; in our ability to find ideological "news" that flatters our sensibilities but inhibits compromise.

OPERATION WARP SPEED WAS INGENIOUS AND ADMIRABLE. BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOU DISCOVER OR INVENT IF PEOPLE ARE UNWILLING TO ACCEPT IT.

In 2022, the medical journal *The Lancet* published an analysis of which variables best predicted the rates of COVID infection across 177 countries. Outside wealth, one of the most powerful variables was trust in government among the public. "Trust is a shared resource that enables networks of people to do collectively what individual actors cannot," the authors of the *Lancet* paper wrote. When I first read their definition, I stared at it for a while, feeling the shock of recognition. I thought of how much that could serve as a definition of progress as well: a network of people doing collectively what individual actors cannot. The stories of global progress tend to be the rare examples where science, technology, politics, and culture align. When we see the full ensemble drama of progress, we realize just how many different people, skills, and roles are necessary.

The last needle to be applied against smallpox, before its eradication almost half a century ago, carried a dose of vaccine smaller than a child's pupil. Four hundred years fit inside that droplet. The devotion of D. A. Henderson's disease-eradicating team was in it. So were the contributions of Benjamin Rubin and the Spanish boys, as well as the advocacy of Henry Cline and the discovery by Edward Jenner, and before him the evangelism of Lady Montagu, and the influence of Circassian traders from the Caucasus Mountains, who first brought the practice of inoculation to the Ottoman court. An assembly line of discovery, invention, deployment, and trust wound its way through centuries and landed at the tip of a needle. Perhaps there is our final lesson, the one most worth carrying forward. It takes one hero to make a great story, but progress is the story of us all. *A*

Derek Thompson is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

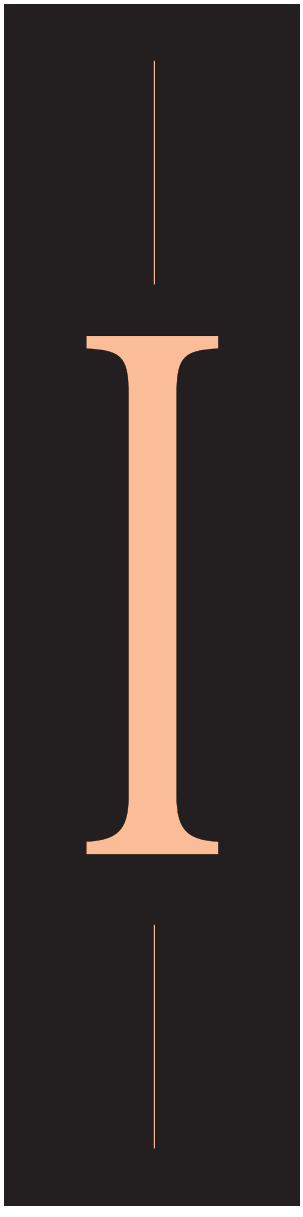
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFREY MILSTEIN

CAN A BUILDING BE TOO TALL?

THE RISE AND RISE AND RISE OF THE SUPERTALL SKYSCRAPER

BY BIANCA BOSKER

432 Park Avenue has been nicknamed the "Awful Waffle" in a nod to its grid-like facade.



It was a sunny day in New York City when I realized that my sky was being stolen.

The first sign of trouble was the crane. Its thin finger appeared over the old brick building outside my window, scratching at the sliver of sky I could just make out above the rooftops. *My* sky. In a city where you can sprain your neck searching for sky, I relished this shard of blue, so tiny that I could cover it with my thumb.

I consoled myself about the crane with the flimsy logic I once used after discovering a bedbug: *It'll go away!*

It didn't.

When the metal skeleton of a skyscraper materialized beneath the crane, I told myself that the new building would top out soon. It couldn't *possibly* get much taller.

But the skeleton kept stretching. It rose above the brick building, then over the windows of neighboring apartments, walling off precious blue behind it. It was so tall, so thin, I began to doubt that the cross-hatching of metal beams could actually *be* a building.

We're living through the birth of a new species of skyscraper that not even architects and engineers saw coming. After 9/11, experts concluded that skyscrapers were finished. Tall buildings that were in the works got scaled down or canceled on the assumption that soaring towers were too risky to be built or occupied. "There were all sorts of symposiums and public statements that we're never going to build tall again," one former architect told *The Guardian* in 2021. "All we've done in the 20 years since is build even taller."

There are skyscrapers, and then there are supertalls, often defined as buildings more than 300 meters in height, but better known as the cloud-puncturing sci-fi towers that look like digital renderings, even when you're staring at them from the sidewalk. First supertalls were impossible, then a rarity. Now they're all over the place. In 2019 alone, developers added more supertalls than had existed prior to the year 2000; there are now a couple hundred worldwide, including Dubai's 163-story Burj Khalifa (a hypodermic needle aimed at space), Tianjin's 97-floor CTF Finance Centre (reminiscent of a drill bit boring the clouds), and, encroaching on my sky, Manhattan's 84-floor Steinway Tower (a luxury condominium resembling the love child of a dustbuster and a Mach3 razor).

Some supertalls have an even more futuristic designation: *superslim*. These buildings are alternately described as "needle towers" or "toothpick skyscrapers" (though not every superslim is a supertall). Early superslims shot up in Hong Kong in the 1970s, though lately they've become synonymous with New York City; four supertall superslims loom over the southern end of Central Park in a stretch of Midtown dubbed "Billionaires' Row." Building engineers, like judgy modeling agents, have varying definitions of *superslim*, but they usually agree that such buildings must have a height-to-width ratio of at least 10 to 1. To put that in perspective, the Empire State Building (one of the world's first supertalls, completed in 1931) is about three times taller than it is wide—"pudgy," as one engineer described it to me. Steinway Tower is 24 times taller than it is wide—nearly as slim as a No. 2 pencil, and the skinniest supertall in the world. (The developer's official name for the building is 111 West 57th Street.) These superslim buildings—and supertalls generally—have relied on engineering breakthroughs to combat the perilous physics that go with height. A 2021 article in the journal *Civil Engineering and Architecture* declared: "There is no doubt that super-tall, slender buildings are the most technologically advanced constructions in the world."

Like many cutting-edge innovations, supertalls can behave unpredictably. In strong winds, occupants have reported water sloshing in toilet bowls, chandeliers swaying, and panes of glass fluttering. The architect Adrian Smith, who has designed numerous supertalls, contends that you're in supertall territory not just when you hit 300 meters, but when you build so high that you get into "potentially unknown issues." And, he acknowledges, there are "still mistakes being made."

Supertalls aren't necessarily good neighbors. Their shadows can reach half a mile, and they can magnify the winds at street level, churning the air into high-speed gusts as far as three blocks away. Many New Yorkers consider the city's proliferating supertalls at best an eyesore—"Awful Waffle" is one nickname for 432 Park Avenue, a luxury condominium that looks like a strip of graph paper stuck on the Manhattan skyline. At worst, they're considered nonsensical constructions that exacerbate the city's affordable-housing crisis, contribute to climate change, and stand as totems to inequality. An earlier generation of supertalls mostly housed offices, but today many of New York's supertalls are designed to serve as homes for the superrich—"the modern-day castle, if you will," says Stephen DeSimone, a structural engineer who's worked on supertalls in the city. "You're living amongst the sky, like the rest of the world isn't good enough."

Supertalls have made even fans of tall buildings wonder whether we've built too high, for too few—and finally gone too far. Staring up at them from the dark, blustery sidewalk, it's hard not to wonder: *Is there anything to love?*

HIGH-RISES HAVE BECOME so ubiquitous, it's easy to forget what a triumph it is to build even a humdrum office tower. For millennia, our ancestors inched slowly but steadily toward the clouds. Archaeologists have called the Tower of Jericho, completed about 10,000 years ago, the "super-skyscraper of its day." It reached a grand total of 28 feet. Around 2,600 B.C., the Great Pyramid of Giza broke records when it hit 480 feet—less than half the height of the Eiffel Tower—and humans took nearly 4,000 years to go higher. (The spire of an English cathedral eventually surpassed the Great Pyramid in 1311, but only by about three floors.)

From the Tower of Jericho through the Industrial Revolution, there was basically one way to go high: stone. Traditionally, masonry walls supported a building's weight and structure, which curtailed their height. Going taller required thicker walls, which, beyond a certain point, risked monopolizing floor space and squeezing tenants into sunless cavities. The New York World Building, briefly the city's tallest in 1890, had some walls wider than a garbage truck.

Steel skeletons sent us higher, to mixed reviews. As skyscrapers began appearing on the New York skyline at the turn of the century—back when *skyscraper* meant any building with more than a dozen floors—observers warned that these buildings were a "menace to public health and safety" that would surely collapse. After a building spree in the '70s, the urban historian Dolores Hayden criticized skyscrapers as "phallic monuments" that had been forced on cities by unchecked capitalists and stood as emblems of "architectural rape."

And yet for as long as we've been finding new ways to build taller, we've usually felt uneasy about doing so. The biblical story of the Tower of Babel is an early example of our altitude-lust going hand in hand with regret over our hubris: After that supertall scraped the heavens, God supposedly punished humans by taking away our shared language and scattering us around the globe.

Some cities tried to restrict skyscrapers after watching them transform New York's skyline in the early 20th century, and lots of places still have laws meant to limit buildings' height. Bali restricts buildings to the approximate height of a lanky palm tree, and Washington, D.C., imposes a height maximum based on street width. Even China, after a two-decade supertall spree, recently imposed a height limit of sorts, outlawing the construction of buildings over 500 meters—slightly taller than the Steinway Tower outside my window.

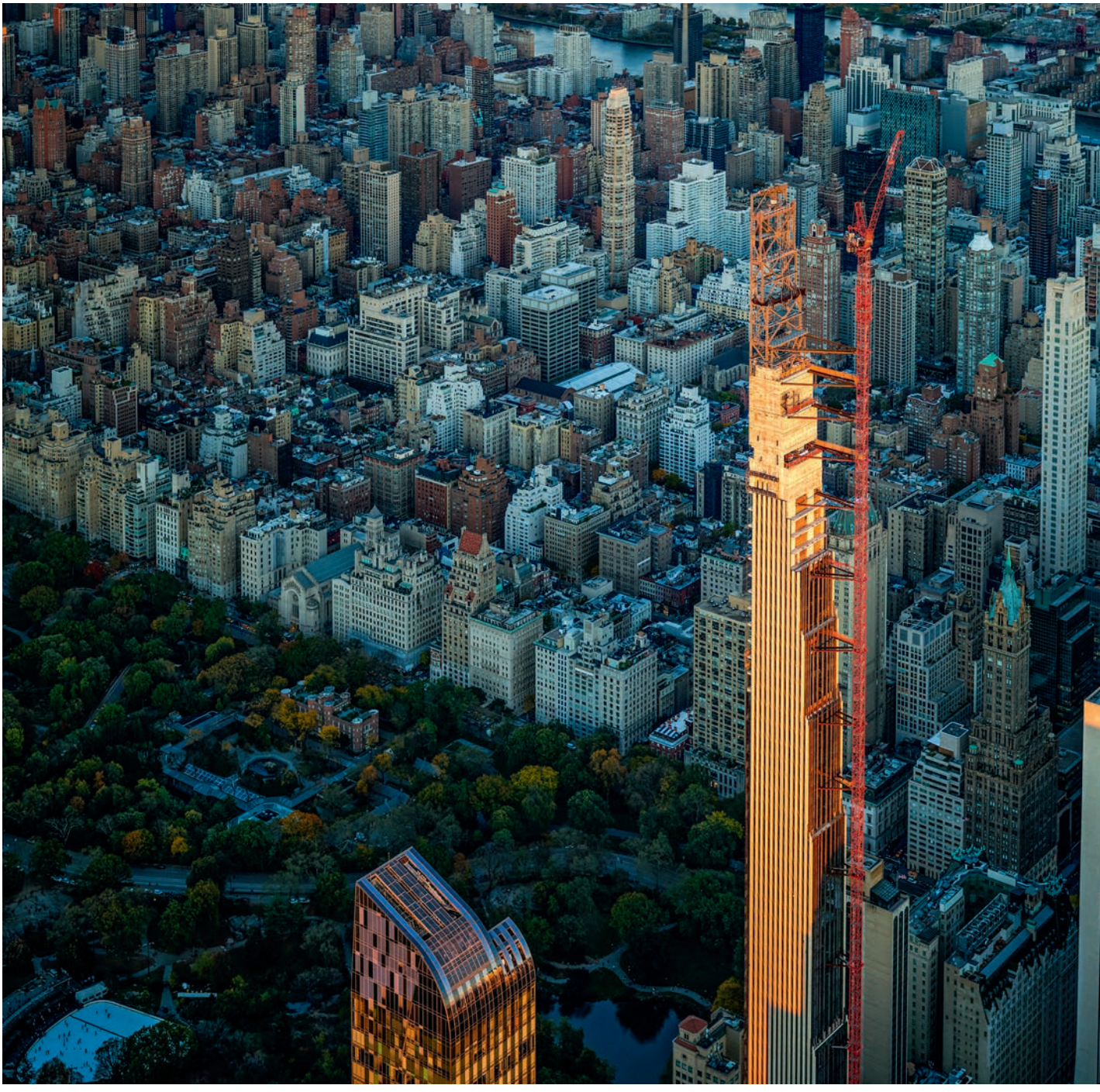
But humans keep hungering to go higher. "Boy, it is innate in us," says Bill Baker, a structural engineer at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill who played a key role in designing the Burj Khalifa. During the latter half of the 20th century, the record for the world's tallest building crept up approximately 16 stories; in the past 20 years, it's shot up nearly 90 floors. We've never witnessed buildings rise so much, so quickly. From high-rises, we've stretched to supertalls and even megatalls (double the height of a supertall), and engineers are already discussing "ultratalls" that would take us higher still. Over the past few decades, new combinations of materials like microsilica and fly ash (a residue that results from burning coal) have made concrete steroidally strong—"10 times as strong as the stuff down on the sidewalk" in some cases, Baker told me—and steel has gotten sturdier too, all of which has helped spur the supertall boom. Advances in elevator technology—such as ultra-strong, lightweight cables and algorithms that efficiently consolidate passengers—have also helped buildings stretch. But engineering advances aren't the main reason supertalls keep growing. "It's a message of power," the developer Don Peebles, who in 2021 proposed a 1,600-foot tower in Midtown Manhattan, told me. "It's not trying to blend in. It's trying to stand out."

The symbolism attached to height is no doubt part of what makes tall buildings so divisive. A century ago, many New York churchgoers felt a moral duty not to let offices rise over their houses of worship, whose spires had dominated the city's skyline for decades. In 1923, rallying around a cry to "restore the cross to the skyline!," a Methodist congregation unveiled plans for a skyscraper church that would be the tallest building in history, topped with a glowing, revolving, five-story cross. But the building never reached its full grandeur, topping out at a little more than three stories as new, taller office towers continued to overtake the skyline.

The evolution of our nation's tallest structures can arguably be divided into three broad phases. First the tallest buildings were built in honor of deities, then commerce, and now: billionaires.

IF LIFE in the clouds sounds tempting, allow me to direct your attention to the price tag. When 432 Park Avenue first went on the market, in 2012, it offered a basement storage closet smaller than a parking spot for $198,000—more than the median price of a home in Des Moines, Iowa. At $169 million, its top-floor penthouse was for a time, in 2021, the most expensive listing in Manhattan. (As of this writing, the penthouse is still on the market. Its most recent broker declined to share its current price, which is not listed.)

Who pays to live in the sky? It's not easy to find out. According to public records, lots of the units in Midtown's residential supertalls were purchased by anonymous limited-liability companies, many of them with names implying a bored exhaustion



Steinway Tower, at 111 West 57th Street in Manhattan, under construction in 2019

JEFFREY MILSTEIN

with shuffling money around. Apartment 40A at 432 Park belongs to an entity called 432Park40A LLC. Other LLCs read like AOL screen names: Ashmonster, Cupcake Lily, Bigappleview, Euclidean Taco Distance. Rarely do you come across an actual person's name—one perk of buying via LLC is the privacy—though some digging reveals buyers who are connected to sports, tech, finance, real estate. One buyer served time for running an illegal gambling ring. Before they sold their place, Jennifer Lopez and Alex Rodriguez had an apartment at 432 Park. Many units have owners but not dwellers: This fall, four properties for sale at 432 Park advertised that they'd never been occupied.

That includes the penthouse. "Never before lived in," beams Ryan Serhant, a former star of *Million Dollar Listing New York* and one of the brokers who has represented the apartment, in a home tour he posted on YouTube in 2021. "A true one of one. A world marvel."

"I don't really see us as selling real estate," Serhant told me. "I sell a transfer of enthusiasm and excitement and brand."

Could I come see this world marvel?

Absolutely not, Serhant's PR consultant informed me on his behalf. The penthouse's owner—reportedly a billionaire Saudi real-estate developer—hadn't okayed visits to the apartment from journalists. Moreover, Serhant wouldn't even *discuss* 432 Park, I was told.

This didn't seem unrelated to a lawsuit that 432 Park's condo board has filed against the building's developer. The plaintiffs claim that the building is riddled with more than 1,500 defects that have led to leaks, cracks, electrical explosions, and elevator shutdowns that trapped people for hours—as well as "horrible and obtrusive noise and vibrations," including clicks, creaks, and a trash chute that thunders "like a bomb." Also—pull out your tiny violins—breakfast in the private restaurant is no longer free. (The developer denied these allegations in court filings, saying they were "vastly exaggerated," and maintaining that 432 Park is, "without a doubt, safe." Lawyers for the developer acknowledged that, when the building had first opened, its "sophisticated symphony of systems needed to be fine-tuned," and said the board had denied the access needed to do necessary work.)

Supertalls have generated a litany of complaints that make them sound like evil X-Men in their ability to wreak havoc on a city. The allegations against them include unleashing hazardous ice (a man reportedly suffered a "major injury" when ice slid off Central Park Tower), heating cities (the United Nations blames tall buildings generally for contributing to potentially dangerous urban temperatures), monopolizing the sky (critics claim that supertall developers have exploited zoning loopholes, unfairly stretching their towers by cramming in extra floors under the guise that they house mechanical elements), and obliterating the sun (a "Sunshine Task Force" has investigated the shadows that supertalls cast on Central Park). Sun beaming off skyscrapers' glass facades has apparently resulted in so-called death rays strong enough to melt a van's dashboard and singe a pool-goer's hair.

The Jeddah Tower is a one-kilometer-tall building planned for Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and would be the world's tallest structure. Fortunately, its architects added a large canopy to the base of the supertall's curved glass facade. One of the goals: to keep it from frying pedestrians like ants under a magnifying glass.

ON A TUESDAY MORNING in the fall of 2021, Volodymyr Tyrol took the elevator to the top floor of 432 Park Avenue, climbed the stairs to the roof, and, while practically eye-level with the Empire State's spire, went right over the side of his favorite building in the city. Tyrol, who's scrutinized practically every square foot of 432 Park's exterior, was a window washer for five years (he now works in management for the same company). He is 27 years old, enjoys photography, and is scared of heights.

Tyrol moved to New York in 2017 from Lviv, Ukraine, where he lived in a second-floor apartment from which he refused to look down. After arriving in the United States, he got a job cleaning windows. His boss considered his fear of heights an asset. "He said, 'We prefer to hire people who are afraid of heights,'" Tyrol recalled. "It means you're going to be more careful and more safe."

Tyrol started low, but then began dangling off many of New York's supertalls. 432 Park is the first Tyrol ever cleaned, and he's since returned too many times to count. To get to work there, he'd leave his apartment in Sheepshead Bay, commute below the earth via subway, then propel himself 1,400 feet into the air, where, finally, "I feel like I wake up," Tyrol told me. "When I see that view, I feel like power comes to me, like the whole power from the city comes to me." At 432 Park, Tyrol could wash about 100 windows a day; the whole building took about two weeks.

Tyrol does not consider 432 Park an "Awful Waffle." He views supertalls as inspiring testaments to human ingenuity—proof that "whatever you imagine, it's possible to do." A few years back, Tyrol was dispatched to a supertall to remove the plastic film over the windows that had protected them during construction. In that moment, he felt like he was a part of history, he told me. "I'm unwrapping a gift for New York City."

It's a gift many New Yorkers wish they could return—but then, some of supertalls' alleged crimes may be overstated. The superslims along Central Park cast shadows that are long, yes, but also skinny,

which means they pass quickly; one shadow consultant told *The New York Times* that shorter and wider buildings, such as the 20-story Plaza Hotel, are more disruptive because they shade parts of Central Park for the whole day. Wide buildings can whip up the wind at street level, too. Some urban-planning experts have also pushed back on the idea that New York's supertalls are exacerbating the city's housing crunch (one economist calls them a distraction from the key issue of zoning) or hollowing out the urban core with empty pieds-à-terre (one urban historian contends that cramming billionaires into supertalls is preferable to the situation in London, where absentee owners park cash in empty rowhouses that are spread out horizontally). Though they *are* energy-inefficient resource hogs, supertalls could in theory help foster high-density urban living, which might cut down on emissions from commuting and increase housing stock where land is at a premium. (Developers are trying to build a supertall in Lower Manhattan that would include some affordable-housing units, though the plan has met opposition from the community.)

Many of the charges leveled against supertalls today are reminiscent of those brought against the Empire State Building when it first opened: It was too empty. It would cause too much congestion. It represented the triumph of greed. And yet in Central Park, tourists are already posing for photos in front of Midtown's supertalls. "In 2050, when these slender towers are eligible for landmark protection," writes the urban historian and Skyscraper Museum director Carol Willis, "I have no doubt that some—such as 432 Park Avenue and 111 W 57 Street—will be designated as superior examples of the iconic forms characteristic of New York of the 2010s."

PERHAPS BECAUSE WINDOW WASHERS aren't allowed out on the scaffold when wind speeds exceed 25 miles an hour, Tyrol said he's never felt 432 Park move. Yet supertalls not only ascend; they also sway, flutter, vibrate, bend, and lean. Often a lot. Chicago's Willis Tower—which is more than 50 feet taller than 432 Park—can move up to three feet in strong winds. If you were to look down at the spire of a tall building during a windstorm, you'd see that it careens left, right, and around, like an inebriated giraffe.

All of that motion can cause people to feel a little drunk themselves. Occupants of tall buildings have, in high winds, reported nausea, distractibility, difficulty working, and fatigue, though researchers report that skyscrapers "rarely, if ever, induce vomiting." As winds howl, buildings can moan like creaky container ships, or clatter like subway cars. "No Realtor would ever give a potential tenant a handbook that explains how these buildings behave, because they wouldn't buy them, probably," says Peter Weismantle, the director of supertall-building technology for Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture, which designed Central Park Tower.

OCCUPANTS OF TALL BUILDINGS HAVE, IN HIGH WINDS, REPORTED NAUSEA, DISTRACTIBILITY, DIFFICULTY WORKING, AND FATIGUE.

And yet some motion is safe and normal, and often goes unnoticed. In fact, evolving approaches to handling high winds are a big reason contemporary supertalls have gotten to be so numerous, and so thin.

Tall buildings get celebrated as gravity-defying, but it's their defiance of the wind that should inspire awe. Imagine a strong wind blowing south over Central Park. The wind hits the supertall and pushes it backwards into a lean, then causes the structure to sway as the gust picks up and dies down. Wind can get stronger at higher altitudes and intensify as it whips off neighboring high-rises, so what registers as a gentle breeze on the fifth floor may give way to howling on the 45th. Wind barreling around the supertall creates turbulent eddies on the building's exterior that cause the structure to wag from side to side. These are the accelerations that tenants are most likely to perceive, and slender supertalls are even more susceptible to them.

Developers know they cannot control the wind. What they can do—and this is an industry term—is confuse it. For this, they recruit a wind-whisperer like Derek Kelly. Kelly, an engineer with the consulting firm RWDI, is a garrulous Canadian who, when I asked about superslims, told me the company has worked on "almost every building you see out your window."

Take 432 Park. Once the developer had an early design for the new tower, Kelly began by making the proposed supertall—a solid, skinny, square column—super small. Kelly and his colleagues 3-D-printed a knee-high model of the building, and stuck it into a miniature Midtown Manhattan, complete with dozens of neighboring high-rises that can affect the windscape at 432 Park's site. They put the model buildings on a turntable inside a wind tunnel, then subjected them to smoke and powerful fans. RWDI adjusted the wind tunnel's settings to mimic Manhattan's gusts and rotated the tiny neighborhood in 10-degree increments to get a baseline

measurement of how the proposed supertall would sway, absorb winds careening off other structures, and shift the wind around it—all of which remains too complex to accurately predict with algorithms, Kelly said.

Even a 10-story building will move, and most of us can handle our homes wiggling about five milli-gs (a measure of acceleration) in any direction. Early tests on 432 Park's prototype revealed poor aerodynamic performance. Rafael Viñoly, 432 Park's architect, said in a 2014 lecture at the Skyscraper Museum that tests on one version of the building revealed the supertall would dance 30 milli-gs—just shy of the threshold found to "cause some occupants to lose balance," according to research published in the *International Journal of High-Rise Buildings*. "If you're standing here, your cup of tea moves," Viñoly said at the lecture, rocking his lectern back and forth to demonstrate. He called the experience of 30 milli-gs "absolutely frightening."

When problems like these arise, Kelly brings the developer and the design team to RWDI's wind tunnel for a "shaping workshop." Architects and engineers tweak the shape of their supertall, 3-D-print new versions, then put each one in the wind tunnel to see how much it moves. "For some of these buildings in New York," Kelly said, "we've done 12, 16 versions in an afternoon."

The decorative flourishes on a supertall that seem ornamental can be key to diffusing the suction-filled whirlpools that sway a building as wind whips around its sides. You could notch the corners, like on Taipei 101, which resembles a towering stack of gifts. You could twist the building, like the Twizzler-esque Shanghai Tower. You could taper it to look like the tip of a paintbrush, like the Lakhta Center, or cut out sections to let wind blow through it, like the Shanghai World Financial Center, which is nicknamed "The Bottle Opener." 432 Park's designers decided to make it more porous: Every 12 stories, there are two "blow through" floors with cutouts for windows, but no glass.

But can you comfortably host a dinner party on a blustery evening? To try to experience for themselves how hospitable 432 Park would be, Viñoly and his colleagues traveled to the Marine Institute in Newfoundland to be jostled around inside its simulator—a 20-ton steel ship's bridge mounted on hydraulic pistons and surrounded by screens. Typically, ships' crews use the simulator to practice for encounters with icebergs and roiling seas, but for the past 15 years, the institute has hosted supertall designers who want to double-check their work before they build. On these occasions, the institute covers up the nautical instruments, projects a city skyline on the screens, lugs in a forest-green sofa, puts water-filled glasses on a wooden kitchen table, and hangs a glass chandelier. Once the supertall's team of designers settles in, the room starts rocking and rolling to mimic what tenants will feel on a windy day, during a strong gale, or during a once-a-century hurricane. At 432 Park, the blow-through floors alone wouldn't settle the building, so the developers ultimately installed two tuned mass dampers—a pair of 600-ton counterweights between the 86th and 89th floors that can move 11 feet, to offset the supertall's sway.

That's the goal, anyway. New cars and planes go through rigorous testing before hitting the assembly line, but each supertall is essentially a prototype. "We're going into production on one-offs every single time with the hopes that we get it right," the structural engineer Stephen DeSimone told me. If you could crawl out over the side of 432 Park and look down at the facade during a windstorm, "you'd have not one but two heart attacks. Because the thing *does* move," Viñoly said in his 2014 lecture. "Don't tell the tenants that."

THERE IS A CRUEL IRONY in getting lost trying to enter one of the most inescapable buildings on the skyline—a building so impossible to ignore that there's an Instagram account, 432parkseesyou, dedicated to cataloging how it follows you around the tristate area. Gazing up at 432 Park from down on 57th Street, I could see Tyrol suspended along its facade and a Mac on someone's desk, but, for the 15 minutes I spent sprinting around in confusion, I couldn't find my way to the front door.

I eventually discovered the entrance tucked just beyond a white marble driveway lined with pink flowers waiting to be planted and sparkling SUVs waiting for passengers. Four building employees in suits idled around the lobby, which felt like the world's most glamorous airport lounge. It had never occurred to me that air could smell expensive, but the oxygen I inhaled felt high-caliber: perfect humidity, ideal temperature, with a freshness reminiscent of clean laundry.

My host was Noel Berk, a real-estate agent who deals in palatial beaux arts townhouses, supertall pieds-à-terre, and "super, super luxury buildings." She was the exclusive broker for three different apartments for sale at 432 Park at the time, including "#79," which her listing describes as a "masterpiece." The asking price is $135 million.

Berk vets potential buyers before allowing them into her properties. "Anyone that can afford *this* is an easy Google search," Berk's partner Doug Graham said of #79. If they're not, Berk will ask for proof that they can pay for the apartment. She was once fooled by someone who rolled up in a limo impersonating a famous musician, and the rise of crypto billionaires has complicated due diligence. Ryan Serhant, the real-estate broker, said he's had to rely on Reddit research and Coinbase statements.

The elevator let us off on the 12th floor, and I trailed Berk as she guided me toward 432 Park's restaurant—"restaurants, *plural*," she emphasized. Like cruise ships or nursing homes, New York's luxury buildings have waged an amenities arms race, trying to lure buyers with perks such as a pool with an underwater soundtrack curated by Carnegie Hall (which, as of this second, you can find only at One57, a luxury residential supertall across the street from the concert venue).

432 Park's amenities include a library stocked with thick art books, a screening room with velvet armchairs, a mahogany-paneled conference room where two people at laptops glanced up at us in surprise, and the concierge I'd passed sitting at a low gray desk in the lobby. "He's there almost every day if you need a private plane, if you need plane tickets, if you need theater tickets," Berk explained, launching into her sales patter. (432 Park's website says that he could also help with personal shopping, art restoration, automobile shipping, and "celebrity

guest appearances.") There's a gym, a sauna, a steam room, wine cellars. And you can't forget security, Berk reminded me. "Especially after the election"—in 2016—"there were a lot of demonstrations all over the city, and you don't want people coming into the building that are angry and demonstrating."

At the end of the hall on the 12th floor, a maître d' stood guard over both restaurants, *plural*, and solemnly informed us that we couldn't visit the more formal dining room, because a resident, *singular*, was eating there. Through a closed glass door, I glimpsed a crystal chandelier the size of a small waterfall and a tiny gray-haired man, alone in an expanse of white tablecloths save for a server dressed in a navy blazer. We ducked into the more casual restaurant, which opened onto a terrace for alfresco dining. The maître d', who'd followed us in, watched us warily. I wondered aloud why private restaurants were a draw in a city with such fabulous food. "The *truly* super-wealthy want privacy," Berk said. "They don't want to share a pool or a restaurant."

The maître d' glanced anxiously between us and a group of five who had entered from the terrace and were heading toward us across the restaurant. He jumped back to let them pass—though we were approximately a mile from getting in their way—and, sweeping his arm backwards like he was beckoning a dog to heel, gestured that we should do the same. Finally, when the group was only a few strides away, he hissed, "Sorry—if you can make a little *room* for them," and practically threw himself between us and the residents.

Every time we stepped on or off an elevator, someone was leaving or waiting to get on. We passed two women in their 60s with teased halos of hair, a 30-something guy in sweats, a brunette in tan Chanel flats. The only thing they seemed to have in common was a glowing aura of health, but Berk set me straight: The people who buy into supertalls, while diverse in age and citizenship, generally share a passion for art, collecting multiple residences, and paying for homes in cash. "And I'll tell you another thing," she said: "A lot of people that are buying in these buildings buy for their children who are in college, and the college student lives in the apartment."

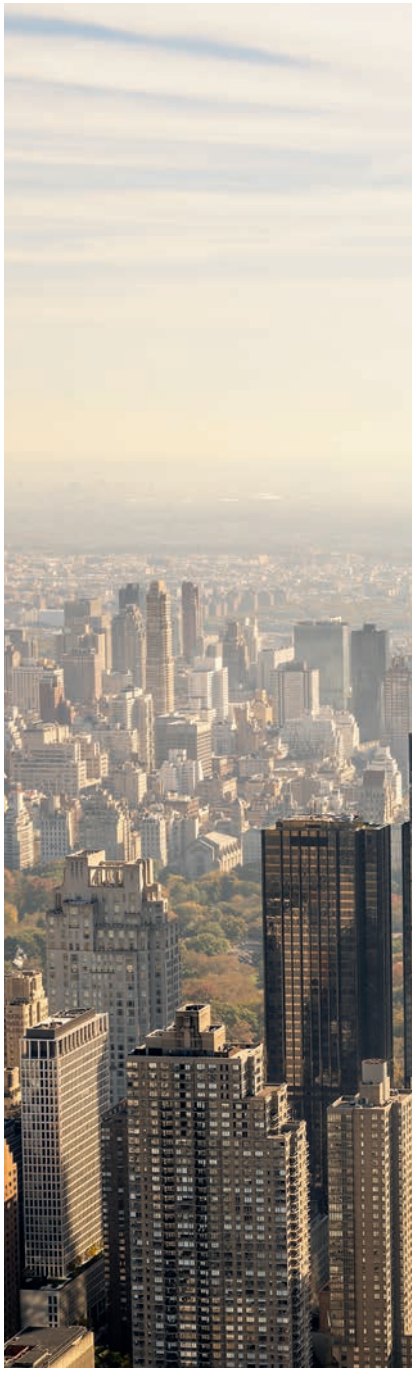
I STEPPED INTO #79, swapped my boots for beige slippers as Berk instructed, and gawked.

Apartment #79 is supposedly on the 79th floor, though supertalls embrace vanity sizing and, technically, we were 62 stories above the sidewalk. Still, I'd never been in an apartment that was so high up, or that so fully hewed to a single vision. The sellers had bought the place as a pied-à-terre and handed it over to the artist (and, more recently, architect) Hiroshi Sugimoto. He'd designed the minimalist furniture, picked the *shikkui* plaster applied by artisans flown in from Japan, and even signed his creation just inside its private elevator landing, as though it were one of his black-and-white photographs hanging in the bedrooms.

"You will notice that it's totally quiet. And *still*," Berk stressed as I entered a traditional Japanese tearoom lined with tatami mats. "And they say the tall buildings are going to move. You don't feel that at all!" I didn't. But wind speeds that afternoon were a listless five miles an hour.

I'll confess that I probably dragged out the visit longer than I needed to. The place was so peaceful. The hand-carved floorboards in the primary bedroom massaged my feet, and the thousand-year-old Yakusugi wood in the "salon" enveloped me in its cedar perfume. "There is absolutely nothing that jars your mind in this apartment," Berk said. "You take a person that has a high-high-high-pressured job and they're crazed all day—they come here and there's a calmness that settles their whole body."

In each room, we paused to contemplate the skyline. The Metropolitan Museum of Art looked like a Ritz cracker from this angle, while Manhattan's most eye-catching skyscrapers—the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, One Vanderbilt—were lined up like shots on a bar. Berk inventoried each vista—"That's Staten Island and that's Brooklyn … Then you see all the bridges"—as though the city's landmarks were amenities included with the apartment. You get a wine fridge, a sushi bar, and Long Island City.



432 Park was once Manhattan's tallest residential building, but I spotted two towers out the window that had since surpassed it. I felt a surprising rush of pride that New York, home of the world's first supertalls, was still pushing itself to reach higher, and I tried to picture where future supertalls might sprout. There's basically nothing stopping us from erecting a mile-high building, experts insist, except maybe money. Sure, at certain heights you start to wonder about oxygen or altitude sickness. But technically? It can be done, they assured me. "All you really need—you need a bunch of money and a big ego," Peter Weismantle says.

As my time in #79 stretched toward a third hour, I realized it was the longest I'd ever gone without hearing honks or sirens in

Supertalls loom over a stretch of Midtown Manhattan dubbed "Billionaires' Row."

JEFFREY MILSTEIN

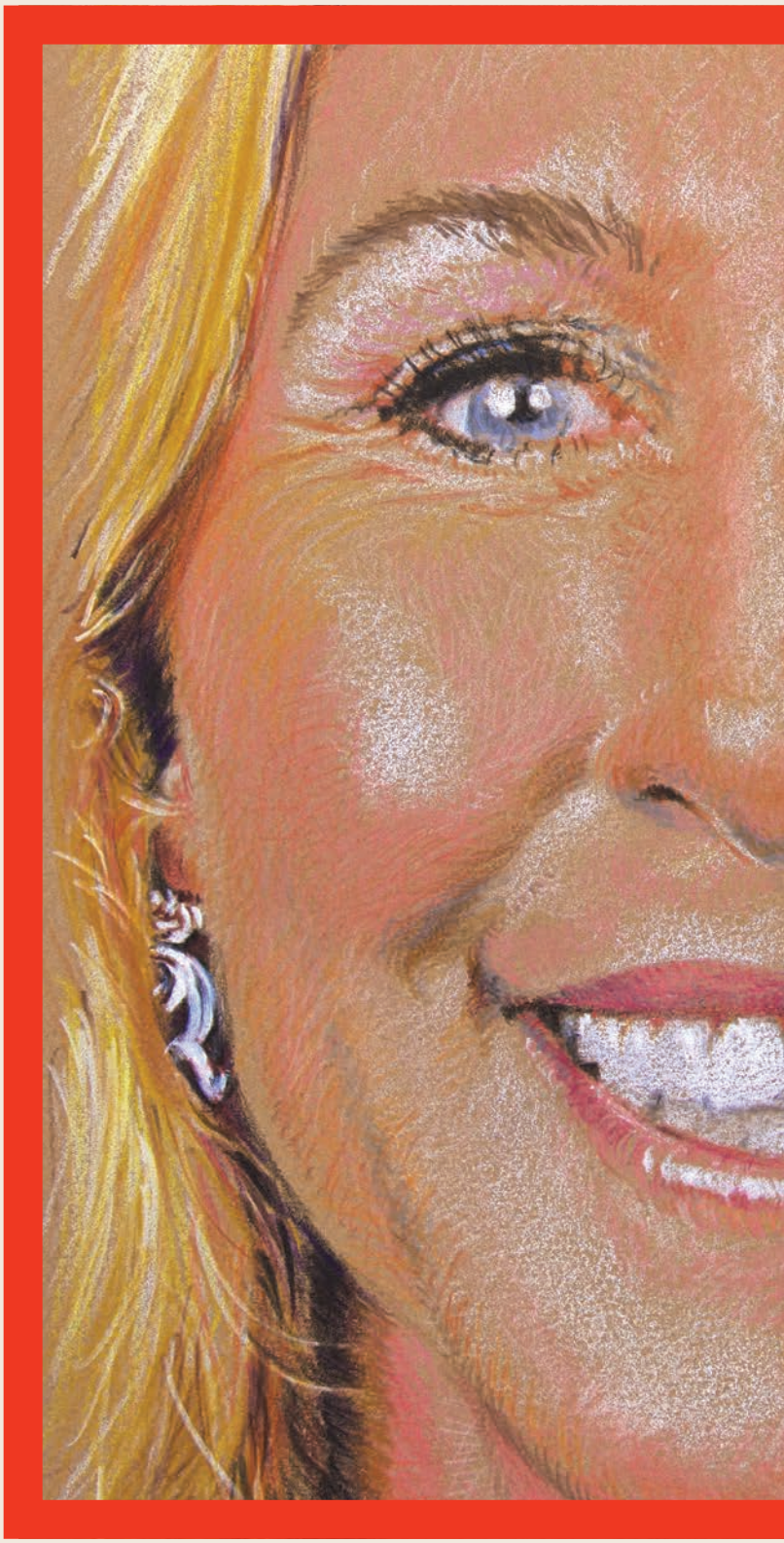
the city. In the living room, I felt momentarily disoriented. *What city is this again?* I felt like I could be anywhere.

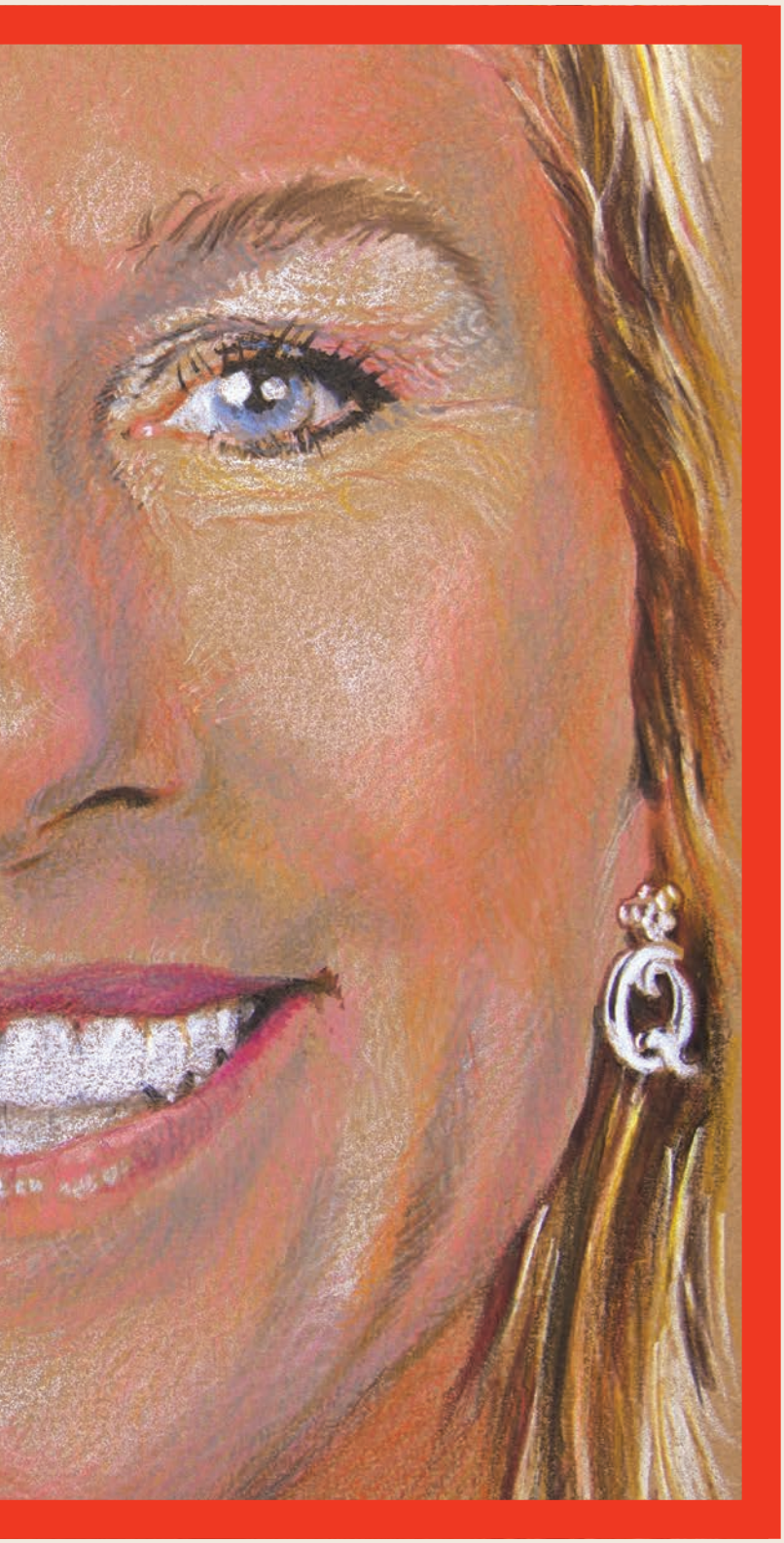
"You don't have to leave the building for anything," Berk told me. "These buildings, you could live in for the rest of your life and be taken care of."

Except eventually I did want to leave. When I finally descended back to the sidewalk, I went home in a daze, as though I'd just returned from a trip out of town. I spent that evening underground, in a basement bar with a stranger's elbow in my food, then took the long route back to the subway, immersing myself in the chaos of the street. *A*

Bianca Bosker is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.

WHY IS SHE LIKE THIS?





ON THE GROUND IN MARJORIE TAYLOR GREENE'S ALTERNATE UNIVERSE

By Elaina Plott Calabro

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIC YAHNKER

I.

She was very late. A man named Barry was compelled to lead the room in a rendition of Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." to stall for time. But when she did arrive, the tardiness was forgiven and the Cobb County Republican Party's November breakfast was made new. She wasn't greeted. She was beheld, like a religious apparition. Emotions verged on rapture. Later, as she spoke, one man jumped to his feet with such force that his chair fell over. Not far away, two women clung to each other and shrieked. I was knocked to my seat when a tablemate's corrugated-plastic FLOOD THE POLLS sign collided inadvertently with my head. Upon looking up, I came eye-level with a pistol tucked into the khaki waistband of an elderly man in front of me. "She is just so great," I heard someone say. "I mean, she really is *just amazing*."

Marjorie Taylor Greene arrived in Congress in January 2021, blond and crass and indelibly identified with conspiracy theories involving Jewish space lasers and Democratic pedophiles. She had barely settled into office before being stripped of her committee assignments; she has been called a "cancer" on the Republican Party by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell; and she now has a loud voice in the GOP's most consequential decisions on Capitol Hill because her party's leaders know, and she knows they know, that she has become far too popular with their voters to risk upsetting her.

Nobody saw her coming. Not even *Greene* saw Greene coming.

II.

She was a product, her family loved to say, of the "Great American Dream." There was a three-story home at the end of a shaded driveway in the small town of Cumming, Georgia, north of Atlanta; there was a finished basement in which Marge—and that is what she was called, Marge—and her friends would gather in faded nylon one-pieces after a swim in Lake Lanier.

Her father was Robert David Taylor, a Michigan transplant for whom a three-story home had never been guaranteed but who had believed acutely in its possibility. Bob Taylor was the son of a steel-mill worker; he had served in Vietnam; he had hung siding to pay for classes at Eastern Michigan University. He had married the beautiful Carrie Fidelle Bacon—"Delle," to most people, but he called her Carrie—from Milledgeville, Georgia, and rather than continue with college, he had become a contractor and built a successful company called Taylor Construction. For Marjorie Taylor, the first of Bob and Delle's two children, the result was a world steeped in a distinctly suburban kind of certainty: packed lunches and marble kitchen countertops, semiannual trips to the beach, and the conviction that everything happens for a reason.

She came of age in Cumming, the seat of Forsyth County. With her turtleneck sweaters and highlighted mall bangs, Marge Taylor might have been any other teenage girl in America. At South Forsyth High School, class of 1992, she was a member of the Spanish club and a manager of the soccer team. She may not have been voted Most Spirited, but she dressed to theme during homecoming week; she may not have had the Best Sense of Humor, but by graduation she had amassed her share of inside jokes with friends. "Shh … IT'S THE PEOPLE OUTSIDE!" her senior quote reads in the high-school yearbook. "Run the cops are here! I'm gone!!" She was "nice to everyone," "upbeat," with "tons of confidence," recalls Leslie Hamburger, a friend of hers and her brother David's. "I have nothing but good memories." The good-but-not-great student was hardly, in other words, an overachieving scold already plotting her ascent to Washington. It's difficult to imagine an 18-year-old Ted Cruz bothering with something called the Hot Tuna Club.

Forsyth County was a calm, quiet, ordered place. But it had a history. In September 1912, an 18-year-old white girl was found bloodied and barely breathing in the woods lining the Chattahoochee River; she died two weeks later. Within 24 hours of her discovery, four Black men had been arrested and charged with assault. A white mob dragged one of the suspects from his cell and hanged him from a telephone pole. Two others were tried and executed. White residents then decided to undertake nothing short of a racial cleansing. On horseback, armed with rifles and dynamite, they drove out virtually all of the county's Black population—more than 1,000 people. So successful were their efforts that the county would experience the modern civil-rights era vicariously at best. There were no WHITES ONLY signs to fuss over in Cumming, because there were no Black people to keep separate.

In January 1987, a white resident organized a "Walk for Brotherhood" to commemorate what had happened 75 years earlier. The project was complicated by the immediate wave of death threats he received. Arriving from Atlanta, the civil-rights leader Hosea Williams called Forsyth the most racist county in the South. Oprah Winfrey came down to cover the event. But most people in Forsyth ignored the whole affair; broach it in conversation, and you were considered a pot-stirrer. George Pirkle, the county's resident historian, was reminded of this as recently as 2011, when he readied for publication *The Heritage Book of Forsyth County*. He told the mayor of Cumming about his plans to include the region's Black history in the volume, and got an incredulous response: "Well, why in the world would you want to do that?" As Martha McConnell, the local historical society's co-president then and now, told me, the subtext was clear: "Don't be starting things."

In the end, the *Heritage Book* did not go starting things. Look through it today and you will see the neatly arranged census data that cuts off at 1910. To include 1920, of course, would have revealed that the Black population was suddenly gone. To go beyond 1920 would have revealed that the Black population never came back.

All of which is to say that Marge Taylor's worldview was shaped in a community artificially devoid of sociocultural conflict, a history scrubbed of tension. That's the basic attitude here toward the past, Pirkle told me: "If you don't talk about it, it goes away."

Decades later, as they considered her scorched-earth rise to power—the conspiracy theories and racist appeals and talk of violence against Democratic leaders—some of her teachers would find themselves wondering how they'd failed to notice the young Marge

OPENING PAGES' SOURCE: HOUSE CREATIVE SERVICES

Taylor. How was it that they had no memory of her holding forth in civics class, or waging a boisterous campaign for student office? How could it possibly be that in fact they had no memory of her at all?

III.

She did as she was supposed to do, graduating from South Forsyth High and then packing up and moving an hour and a half away, to Athens, for four years at the University of Georgia. She would flit all but anonymously through the campus of 20,000 undergraduates. For Marge Taylor, UGA was about becoming the first in her family to graduate from college—setting herself up to run Taylor Construction. Almost certainly it was also about meeting a nice man. Perry Clarke Greene was a nice man. Three years her senior, he was tall and earnest and came from Riverdale. He, too, was in the university's Terry College of Business. They exchanged vows the summer before her senior year, in 1995.

Among the things I do not know about Marjorie Taylor Greene—she would not speak with me for this story—is what her wedding was like. A newspaper account, if it exists, has yet to turn up. I do not know whether she stood before an altar laden with white gladioli, as her grandmother once had, or whether the reception was a small affair at her parents' home in Cumming or something bigger somewhere else. I also do not know whether, on that day, she was happy: whether the quiet and respectable life that now unfurled before the new Mrs. Perry Greene felt like enough.

The young couple moved into a three-bed, three-bath colonial with symmetrical shrubbery in the north-Atlanta suburb of Roswell. Perry Greene became an accountant at Ernst & Young, and Marjorie Greene became pregnant. In January 1998, she smiled alongside the other mothers with tired eyes and loose clothing as they learned to exercise and massage their newborns in the North Fulton Regional Hospital's "Mother Lore" class.

It wasn't long before Perry started working for his father-in-law as general manager of the family business. After facilitating the sale of Taylor Construction, in 1999, he moved on to Taylor Commercial, a former division of the company, which specialized in siding for apartment complexes and subsidized-housing projects. Soon after, Bob Taylor named his son-in-law president of the company.

Marjorie, meanwhile, tended to their one, two, and finally three children. There were lake days with Mimi and Papa, three-week Christmas vacations in the sun, and annual drives to visit Perry's extended family in Oxford, Mississippi. A lot of time was spent traveling to fast-pitch softball tournaments—Taylor, the middle child, was barely a teenager when she started getting noticed. ("Can't believe she is being recruited in 8th grade," Greene would write on her personal blog after a weekend at one university.)

As for Taylor Commercial, it was eventually bought by Marge and Perry. Financial-disclosure documents filed in 2020, when Greene first ran for office, reveal a company whose value ranged from $5 million to $25 million. There is a photograph that Greene cherishes: of her as a child smiling alongside her father at a construction site. Bob did not want his daughter to see her inheritance as a given; Greene has said that her father once fired her from a job she held at the company as a teenager. But now the girl in the photograph was chief financial officer of Taylor Commercial; her college sweetheart was its president; her family was by that point living in a tract mansion in Milton, which borders Alpharetta. Who could say, of course, how regularly she made use of the indoor pool, or marveled at the built-in aquarium on the terrace level—two features of this "smart-home luxury estate," in the words of a recent listing. But she could at least enjoy the fact of them.

Another thing I do not know about Marjorie Taylor Greene: I do not know precisely how long it was before the shape of her life—the quiet, the respectability, the cadence of carpooling and root touch-ups—began to assume the dull cast of malaise. Perhaps it was during one of the many softball tournaments, another weekend spent crushed against the corner of an elevator at the Hilton Garden Inn by grass-stained girls and monogrammed

ERIC YAHNKER. SOURCE IMAGE: SOUTH FORSYTH HIGH.

bat bags. Perhaps her Age of Anxiety arrived instead on a quiet Tuesday in the office of her multimillion-dollar company, when it occurred to her that running this multimillion-dollar company just might not be her purpose after all.

What I do know, after dozens of conversations with Greene's classmates and teachers, friends and associates, is that by the time she reached her late 30s, something in her had started to break.

IV.

Later, on the campaign trail, Greene would anchor much of her story in the fact that she was a longtime business owner: a woman who'd always more than held her own in the male-dominated world of construction. In beautifully shot television ads, voters saw a woman whose days were a relentless sprint between building sites—hard hats, reflector vests, jeans—and light-filled conference rooms, where she wore dresses with tasteful necklines and examined important blueprints.

That is not a fully accurate picture. People at Taylor Commercial seem to have liked Greene personally, but she spent only a few years on the job and did not put her stamp on the company. Call her on a weekday afternoon, and there was a good chance she'd answer from the gym. She had "nothing to do with" Taylor Commercial, one person familiar with the company's operations told me. "It was entirely Perry." A 2021 article in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* noted that the Taylor Commercial website during those years scarcely hinted at Greene's existence. The only flicker of acknowledgment came in the last line of Perry Greene's bio, a reference to the wife and three children with whom he shared a home.

By 2011, the *Journal-Constitution* reported, Greene was no longer listed as the chief financial officer, or any other kind of officer. A year earlier, the company had been hit with state and county tax liens. Greene would one day joke about her lack of business acumen. But it doesn't seem to have been terribly funny in the moment. Greene simply didn't love the work. She had grown up with this business; she had gone to school for this business. And yet the girl in the photograph, as it turned out, had little interest in running this business.

Some people close to Greene would describe the ensuing dynamic—her own connection to the business weakening while her husband's grew stronger—as a source of tension for the couple. Marjorie Taylor Greene's path to Congress could perhaps be said to have begun here: when, in the aftermath of her tenure as CFO, she appeared determined to strike out in search of something to call her own.

In 2011, the same year she stepped away from her job, Greene decided to commit herself to Jesus Christ. Or recommit herself, perhaps. Last spring, Greene revealed, apparently for the first time publicly, that she was a "cradle Catholic," born and raised in the Church. This disclosure was occasioned after Greene told Church Militant, a right-wing Catholic website, that efforts by bishops to aid undocumented immigrants reflected "Satan controlling the church." In response, Bill Donohue of the conservative Catholic League demanded that Greene apologize. Greene felt moved thereafter to share the details of her own personal relationship with Catholicism, explaining that she had stopped attending Mass when she became a mother: when she'd "realized," she said in a statement, "that I could not trust the Church leadership to protect my children from pedophiles, and that they harbored monsters even in their own ranks."

Greene eventually decided to join North Point Community Church, one of the largest nondenominational Christian congregations in the country. And so during a service one Sunday, as applause and encouragement echoed across the sanctuary, Greene waited her turn to be immersed, blond hair tucked behind her ears, Chiclet-white teeth fixed in a nervous smile.

Many baptisms at North Point are accompanied by testimony, in which the congregant shares a brief word about her journey to Christ. Video of Greene's testimony is no longer on the church's website, but the journalist Michael Kruse described its key moments in an article for *Politico*. From the stage that morning, he wrote, Greene spoke about "the martyrs book," meaning, I think, the *Book of Martyrs*, John Foxe's 16th-century history and polemic on the persecution of Protestants under Queen Mary. As she'd considered the "conviction" of such men and women, "how they died for Christ," Greene said, "I realized how small my faith was if I was scared to do a video and get baptized in front of thousands of people." Before those thousands of people, she accepted Jesus as her lord and savior.

Greene's congressional biography leaves the impression of deep and meaningful engagement with North Point, but according to a person in the church leadership, her involvement tapered off after several years. This person noted, somewhat ruefully, that Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state who defied President Donald Trump, has long been involved in North Point, but "no one ever asks me about him."

V.

It was around this same time that Greene, as she later put it on a local radio show, "finally got brave enough" to step into a CrossFit gym. Greene's original gym of choice had been the Alpharetta branch of Life Time. The gym, with its LifeSpa and LifeCafe, bills itself as a "luxury athletic resort," and it's easy to see how Greene might have tired of the ambience. She is not—has never been—the kind of biweekly gym-goer who walks for 45 minutes on the treadmill while watching *Stranger Things* on an iPad. In one of the few candid shots of Greene in her 11th-grade yearbook, she is flat on her back on a weight bench, lifting two heavy-looking dumbbells. "Marge Taylor pumps some Iron," the caption reads.

In 2007, a workout partner at Life Time told Greene about CrossFit, a fitness regimen that combines Olympic weight lifting with calisthenics and interval training; it has long been popular among law enforcement and members of the military. The two women went on CrossFit.com and printed out the workout of the day, or "WOD," in CrossFit parlance. This was, in the early years of CrossFit, how most newcomers engaged with the program, printing out the WOD and heading to their regular gym.

Decades later, as they considered her scorched-earth rise to power, some of her teachers would find themselves wondering how they'd failed to notice the young Marge Taylor.

By the end of that first WOD, Greene was sold. In 2011, she started going to the CrossFit gym in Alpharetta.

What Greene found at the gym (or "box," as it is known) was community. The coaches, the members, the stragglers who popped in "just to see what this is all about"—they loved her. This is something many observers in Washington and elsewhere do not appreciate about Greene: that she can be extremely likable, so long as you are not, in her estimation, among "the swamp rat elites, spineless weak kneed Republicans, and the Radical Socialist Democrats who are the demise of this country that we all love and call home." She has a sugary voice and a personable, generous affect; she is, when she wants to be, the sort of person whom a stranger might meet briefly and recall fondly to their friends as "just the *nicest* woman." "The softer side of Marjorie Taylor Greene is what her friends, neighbors, and the people who elected her know," Jamie Parrish, a Georgia Republican and close friend of Greene's, told me. Her supporters back home can seem genuinely confused by her chilly or hostile portrayal and reception elsewhere.

At CrossFit, Greene's warmth made her a star. "CrossFit's really intimidating," she explained in one radio interview. "Most people's experience with CrossFit is … they run across ESPN, and they see these *monster* people doing *crazy* amazing things, and they're usually like, 'Ohhh, I'm never gonna do that.'" But Greene could put people at ease. When she started coaching classes herself, the reviews were stellar. "I loved working out with Marjorie Greene," Carolyn Canouse, a former client, told me by email. "She was patient with my lack of athleticism, and always encouraging and supportive to everyone in the gym. She would bring her dog to work with her sometimes (he was adorable!), as well as her children who were all down to earth and nice to be around."

Greene trained on most days and competed in a workout challenge known as the CrossFit Open; at her peak, she was ranked 47th in the U.S. in her age group. Over time, she seemed to regard CrossFit less as a grounding for the rest of her life and more as an escape from it altogether.

When Greene was running for Congress, a man named Jim Chambers, jarred by her self-presentation as a paragon of family values, wrote about her alleged extramarital affairs at the gym in a Facebook post. (*The New Yorker*'s Charles Bethea later reported on text messages from Greene apparently confirming one of the affairs.) Her first alleged relationship was with a fellow trainer. Chambers, who owned one of the CrossFit boxes at which Greene coached, recalled viewing her initially as "this married lady who was at least nominally Christian, maybe not especially, but led a very suburban life. And then, like, quickly thereafter, she confessed that her marriage was on the rocks and falling apart." According to Chambers, Greene made no secret of the affair with the trainer. She talked openly about her problems with Perry—"different lives and interests … typical stuff," as Chambers summarized it. "She struck me as an extremely bored person," he added. Later, Greene apparently had an affair with another man at CrossFit, a manager whom Chambers had recently hired from Colorado; this relationship, Chambers said, was more serious, more involved, "a real affair." (Greene's office did not respond to a list of questions about the alleged affairs and other matters.)

By March 2012, she and Perry had separated. Four months later, she filed for divorce. Two months after that, the couple reconciled.

The family appeared to resume its ordinary rhythms. By January, Perry was posting again on Tripadvisor. This was no small thing. Before the separation, he had been in the habit of reviewing, with great earnestness, establishments ranging from the local Melting Pot ("As stated this is a fondue restaurant, so it is very unique") to the Cool Cat Cafe on Maui ("My family loves their burgers so much we have 'Burger Sunday' every Sunday as our family dinner"), only to go conspicuously dark during the sadness and tumult of 2012. But come the new year he was back, sharing his thoughts about the Encore, in Las Vegas ("Great ambience. Wife and I loved it!!!"), and an Italian restaurant in Alpharetta whose wine list, he judged, was "pretty good!"

Marjorie, meanwhile, worked with a personal coach in the hope of qualifying to compete in the international CrossFit Games. For the next two years, she would busy herself with his intense weekly prescriptions, all the while chronicling her experience on a WordPress blog. "Test post," she began in April 2013. "I'm testing posting on my blog from my iPhone … See if this works."

Scattered among the posts about creatine supplements ("I love that stuff") and the iPhone footage of Greene's triple jumps, there are glimmers to suggest that her family had found its way back. "I decided that I'm going to make a little home gym in my basement," Greene wrote in May 2013. "This way, on days I'm not coaching I can train at home and be around my kids. My husband thinks it's a great idea. Hopefully, they can see Mom working

hard, and I can set a good example for them." Six months later: "Just hanging around the house this weekend with my family, and I'm really happy with that."

Much of the time, however, the blog posts suggest someone pinballing from aggressive cheerfulness ("Totally doing the happy dance!!") to the "negative thoughts" that could rush in with no warning: "I wish there was a switch to turn off those thoughts."

VI.

"Confidence is also an area that I struggle in," Greene wrote in one of her blog posts. "But I've decided to say 'why not me?'"

In 2013, she set out to become a businesswoman again. Partnering with Travis Mayer, a 22-year-old coach and one of the top CrossFit athletes in the world, Greene opened a 6,000-square-foot box called CrossFit Passion, on Roswell Street, in Alpharetta. Two years later, they relocated to a space nearly twice the size. In 2016, however, Greene sold her stake. She no longer blogged about her WODs or anything else related to CrossFit.

It's unclear what prompted so abrupt a turnaround; Greene hasn't discussed the subject publicly. "She would go through a really hard workout and then just stop in the middle of it and start crying," a person who was close to Greene during this time told me. "And that started happening more regularly toward the end. It was just too much stress." (Mayer, who went on to rename the gym United Performance, which he still owns and operates today, did not respond to requests for comment.)

The other thing that happened to Marjorie Taylor Greene in 2016 was Donald Trump. Greene's family had never been especially political. Every fourth November, minus a cycle or two, Bob and Delle Taylor made sure to stop by the library or the First Baptist Church and cast a vote. It is reasonable to assume that the Taylors leaned right. For years, the family's construction company was a major sponsor of the Atlanta libertarian Neal Boortz's eponymous talk show. Boortz, one of the most popular radio personalities in America during the late 1990s and early 2000s, told me that Bob (who died in 2021) had been a good friend for decades. Still, the family did not give money to candidates, Republican or Democrat; they did not hold fundraisers at the house on Lake Lanier. For the Taylors, the 2016 presidential election commenced with no more fanfare than any other. On Super Tuesday, Bob, Delle, and Marjorie did not vote in either party's primary. In fact, Marjorie had not voted since 2010.

Greene's political origin story was not unlike that of millions of other Trump supporters. Despite having never hinted at an interest in politics, she found herself suddenly beguiled by a feeling, a conviction that despite the distance between Trump's gold-plated world and her own, she knew exactly who he was. "He reminded me of most men I know," she has said. "Men like my dad."

In some ways, he *was* like her dad. Bob Taylor may not have been overtly partisan, but he rivaled Trump in his tendency to self-mythologize. In 2006, Greene's father had published a novel with the small publisher Savas Beatie called *Paradigm*. As best I can tell, this is Taylor's effort to demonstrate the value of a system he invented called the "Taylor Effect"—which purports to predict the stock market based on the gravitational fluctuations of Earth—in the form of a high-stakes international caper. The story follows twin scientists who discover an ancient Egyptian box in the bowels of the Biltmore estate, the contents of which, they soon realize, could "destroy many of the world's most powerful families" if ever made public.

He considered his stock-market theory to be "the Genuine Article"; in the afterword, he likened himself to da Vinci, Galileo, Edison, Marconi, and the Wright brothers. "History," he wrote, "is filled with characters who endured ridicule, imprisonment, and even death because they discovered things we know today with absolute certainty to be *true*." Suzanne Thompson, a North Carolina author hired to help Taylor write *Paradigm*, recalls that Taylor had "a bit of an exalted sense of himself." She was unaware that he was Marjorie Taylor Greene's father, and gasped with dismay when I told her. "Oh my gosh, I had no idea. Oh my God."

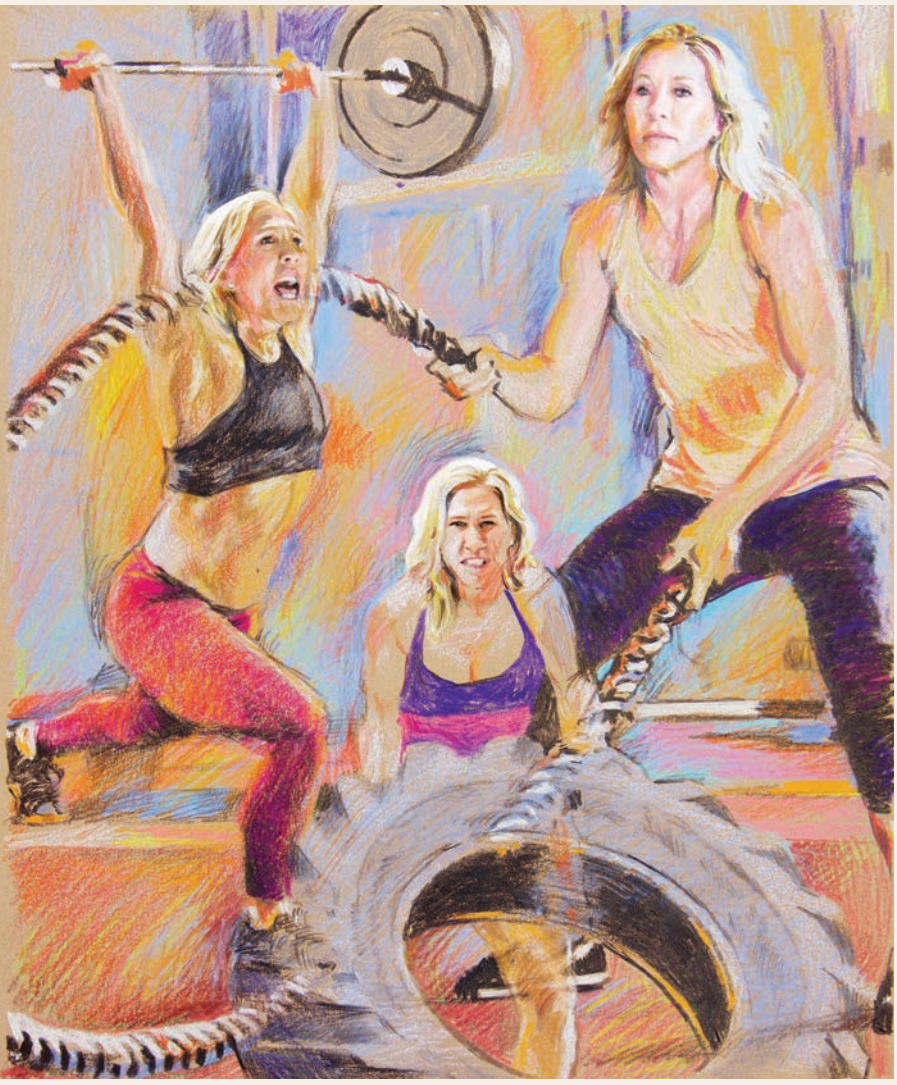
Although Greene's political awakening was sudden, she would later portray her support for Trump as the unveiling of a well-formed political identity that she'd had no choice but to keep hidden. "I've always had strong feelings about politics, but when you're a business owner, you have to really, really be careful about what you say," she told a conservative YouTube vlogger in 2019. But when she sold her gym, "something magically happened to me: I didn't have to worry about what members thought anymore."

Greene may now have felt free to speak, but it was not clear what she wanted to say. It was clear only that she wanted to say *something*. It was as though she spent the first six months of Trump's administration gathering up the scattered feelings and dim instincts that informed her attraction to his brand of politics and examining them under a microscope, twisting the knob until the edges came into focus. By July 2017, Greene was ready to start posting about politics.

She headed to American Truth Seekers, a now-defunct fringe-right website run by a New York City public-school counselor who went by the name Pat Rhiot. The contents of Greene's earliest posts have been lost to the ether, but the headlines, archived by the Wayback Machine, summarize the brand Greene set out to establish from the very beginning: "Caitlyn Jenner Considering What?" was the first headline, followed over the next few days by "Female Genital Mutilation: America's Dirty Little Secret" and "Exposed! Confidential Memo to Take Down Trump and Silence Conservatives!"

By August, when the full text of many of her blog posts become available, she was establishing her fierce devotion to gun rights and Donald Trump, and her antipathy toward conventional Republican politicians:

> MAGA means get rid of our ridiculous embarrassing massive $20 Trillion dollar DEBT you put us in!! … You see we elected Donald Trump because he is NOT one of you, a politician. He is a business man, and a VERY successful one. WE elected him because he clearly knows how to manage business and money because we all know he has made plenty of it. Oh but not you people!



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September saw her going after Hillary Clinton:

> You know how we all have that one friend or family member that shows up to the party uninvited and just causes non-stop drama? They lie and make up stories and shift blame to everyone and everything, but constantly refuse to accept reality or the fact that maybe it's their own fault. They ruin the party and make everyone miserable with all the crap they blubber out of their mouths, while they try to push their agenda on everyone and no one wants it. Yep Hillary. Can she just go away? Can she just go to jail?

Greene's posts, by the standards of the 2017 far-right blogosphere, were more or less the usual fare, nothing terribly new or uniquely provocative. But Greene, in her brief time posting, had already picked up on something remarkable: People liked that she was ordinary. In the present landscape of conservative politics, ordinariness was a branding opportunity. Ordinariness ensured that even her most banal reflections would sparkle. Ordinariness allowed Greene to offer conservatives what the Alex Joneses couldn't: affirmation that your neighborhood "full-time mom" and "female business owner" and "patriot" was fed up too. In the fall of 2017, Greene created a new Facebook page exclusively for the dissemination of her political thoughts.

The Republican base was in the market for a Marjorie Taylor Greene—a suburban woman who not only didn't recoil from Trump but was full-throated MAGA. All over the internet, it seemed, were women who claimed to be conservative and yet could do nothing but choke on their pearls and complain about Trump's tweets. But now here was regular Marge, who would put America first. Sweet southern Marge, who loved "family, fitness, travel, shooting, fun, and adventure," and who, as would soon be clear, wanted very much to save the children.

VII.

Perhaps, decades from now, what will stand out most is how easily the dominoes fell.

Imagine it like this: #SaveTheChildren, right there at the top of the feed. You click on the hashtag—because who, given the choice, would not want to save the children?—and then, suddenly, you are looking with new eyes at the chevron Wayfair rug beneath your feet. It had been 40 percent off during the Presidents' Day sale, but now you're wondering: Had *this* one been used to transport a child, a trafficked innocent rolled up inside? And then not 10 clicks later you find yourself wondering about other things, too—other conspiracies, other dark forces. Because it *is* curious, now that you're here, now that you're wondering, that you can't recall any CCTV footage of the airplane as it hit the Pentagon on 9/11. You had gone online to check if Theresa had posted photos from the baby shower and now, 20 minutes later, you log off with an entirely new field of vision, the unseen currents of the world suddenly alive.

Perhaps, for Marjorie Taylor Greene, the rug had been houndstooth and the baby shower had been Kerrie's. But you don't need the site-by-site search history to understand the narrative of Greene's descent into QAnon, because the basics are so often the same.

QAnon followers subscribe to the sprawling conspiracy theory that the world is controlled by a network of satanic pedophiles funded by Saudi royalty, George Soros, and the Rothschild family. Though Republican officials have insisted that QAnon's influence among the party's base is overstated, former President Trump has come to embrace the movement plainly, closing out rallies with music nearly identical to the QAnon theme song, "WWG1WGA" (the initials stand for the group's rallying cry, "Where we go one, we go all"). Yet since its inception, in the fall of 2017, when "Q," an anonymous figure professing to be a high-level government official, began posting tales from the so-called deep state, no politician has become more synonymous with QAnon than Greene. To an extent, Greene had already signaled her attraction to conspiracy theories, questioning on American Truth Seekers whether the 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas was a false-flag operation to eliminate gun rights. But with Q, Greene was all in. She has gone so far as to endorse an unhinged QAnon theory called "frazzledrip," which claims that Hillary Clinton murdered a child as part of a satanic blood ritual.

Ramon Aponte, a right-wing blogger known as "The Puerto Rican Conservative," became friendly with Greene soon after she began posting about Pizzagate, the conspiracy theory that a Washington, D.C., restaurant was involved in a Democratic-run child-sex ring. "Even though the mainstream news media 'debunked' it, nobody ever conducted an investigation on it," Aponte told me. "And Marjorie Taylor Greene knew this … She was a voice for the silent majority." (After a North Carolina man's armed raid of the restaurant, in December 2016, Washington police did, in fact, investigate, and pronounced the theory "fictitious.")

Was Greene a true believer? Her early outpouring of breathless posts gives that strong impression—she comes across as a convert intoxicated by revelation. But in time, her affiliation with QAnon brought undeniable advantages. It was not until she latched on to Q and Q-adjacent theories that Greene's political profile achieved scale and velocity. The deeper she plunged, the larger her following grew. And the more confident she became.

As the months passed, she started experimenting with a new tone; she would still be regular Marge and sweet southern Marge, but she would also be Marge who told the "aggressive truth"—who wasn't afraid to be *real*. In Facebook videos posted from 2017 to 2019, Greene talked about the "Islamic invasion into our government offices." She said: "Let me explain something to you, 'Mohammed' … What *you* people want is special treatment, you want to rise above us, and that's what we're against." She talked about how it was "gangs"—"not white people"—who were responsible for holding back Black and Hispanic men. She objected to the removal of Confederate statues, saying: "But that doesn't make me a racist … If I were Black people today, and I walked by one of those statues, I would be so proud, because I'd say, 'Look how far I've come in this country.'" The most "mistreated group" in America, she went on to say, was "white males."

By the end of 2018, Marjorie Taylor Greene was awash in validation. Especially from men. She found herself suddenly fielding marriage proposals in the comments beneath her selfies. "Ok ok ok so you're totally gorgeous I got that the first time I saw u," one person wrote, "but you seal the deal with what's in your head, I love the message of truth u bring and inform all who will listen I'M SOLD!!!" Greene, as she often would upon reading such comments, clicked the "Like" button in response.

Greene began to meet up with people from her Facebook circle. In March 2019, she traveled to Washington, D.C., as the Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings on restrictive gun legislation. At one point, in a now-infamous confrontation, Greene began following David Hogg, a survivor of the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida. The shooting had left 17 dead, and Hogg had come to Washington to make the case for gun-control measures. Wearing a black blazer

ERIC YAHNKER. SOURCE IMAGE: MARJORIE TAYLOR GREENE / YOUTUBE.

and leggings, a pink Michael Kors tote slung over her shoulder, Greene accosted the 18-year-old and, with a friend capturing the encounter on video, badgered him about his support for the bill: "You don't have anything to say for yourself? You can't defend your stance? How did you get over 30 appointments with senators? How'd you do that? How did you get major press coverage on this issue?" Hogg walked on in silence as Greene continued: "You know if school zones were protected with security guards with guns, there would be no mass shootings at schools. Do you know that? The best way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun."

Greene would later trace her decision to run for office to the frustration she'd felt during that trip: No one had paid her any attention. That would have to change. As she posted on a website called The Whiskey Patriots just after the Hogg incident, and just before she launched her bid for Congress: "Let the war begin …"

VIII.

She ran and she won, of course, in Georgia's Fourteenth District, in a largely rural outpost in the northwest corner of the state. Voters did not seem to care that Greene, who had judged the solidly conservative area to be friendlier to her chances than her home district in suburban Atlanta, had never actually lived there.

Shortly after she was sworn into office, in January 2021, her harassment of Hogg, as well as old social-media posts in which she endorsed the claim that the Parkland shooting was a false-flag operation, surfaced into public view. In her maiden speech on the floor of the House of Representatives, she set out to blunt the criticism she was receiving. Much of the speech was a disavowal of her own past statements. She conceded, for example, that 9/11 had actually happened, and that not all QAnon posts were accurate. "I was allowed to believe things that weren't true," she protested.

As for David Hogg, she recounted an episode at her own high school when, she said, the "entire school" had been taken hostage by a gunman—an episode that she continues to invoke as a touchstone to explain everything that is wrong about security in schools and how she has a right to browbeat a school-shooting survivor like Hogg. But if her account failed to engender much sympathy, it was because it only nominally resembled reality.

On a September morning in 1990, during Greene's junior year, a history teacher named Johnny Tallant was holding his class at South Forsyth High School when an armed sophomore entered the classroom next door, fired a rifle overhead, and marched the students there into Tallant's classroom; for the next few hours, the sophomore held some 40 of his classmates, and Tallant, at gunpoint. The hostages later said they were initially terrified; the student threatened to kill them if his demands for candy, soda, and a school bus were not met. Eventually their nerves quieted. Many of the students knew their captor at least somewhat, and they weren't altogether surprised when he put down his gun and began sharing with them "everything that was going on in his head," as one hostage recalled. "He said he wanted to get away from things and make a point," recalled another, adding that the student had repeatedly promised not to hurt them. "He said his parents were mean, that he was tired of how they treated him, and that he had no friends and just wanted to get away." Gradually, as police delivered the snacks he'd asked for, the sophomore let most of the hostages go, including all the girls but one, who knew the student well and stayed behind to keep talking to him. Five hours in, when the remaining hostages moved to grab his gun, he did not resist; when the police burst in moments later, he did not fight back.

Tallant recalls that Greene reached out to him sometime before she launched her bid for Congress, in the spring of 2019. He had no idea who she was, or why she was calling him at home. He listened that day as the unfamiliar woman explained that she wanted to speak with him about the events of 1990—that she'd been a student at South Forsyth when everything happened. Still, Tallant struggled to place her. Greene had not been in his classroom. Everyone else at the school, including Greene, had been quickly evacuated and bused away. Tallant was taken aback by Greene's intensity, her apparently sudden need, decades later, to discover flaws in the school's handling of things: "She was asking me some crazy questions about—she was saying we should have had guns ourselves, you know … She sounded like kind of a nut."

Was Greene a true believer? Her early outpouring of breathless posts gives that strong impression. But in time, her affiliation with QAnon brought undeniable advantages.

"I'm not going to mince words with you all," Greene declared at a Michigan rally this fall. "Democrats want Republicans dead, and they've already started the killings."

Tallant would not give her what she wanted. "I told her right off, we didn't need guns," he said. It wasn't a political statement; for Tallant, it was just reality—the only conclusion you could draw if you took care to examine the particulars of the crisis, of the teenage boy at the center of it. The sophomore was known by classmates and teachers to struggle with seizures and other symptoms of epilepsy. As one of the hostages later put it: "I wasn't scared of him. I was scared of what the police would do when he stepped into the hall, and I was afraid of what the police were planning to do as he walked from the room to the bus."

But never mind. Greene hung up with Tallant and eventually proceeded with her preferred version of the story in her speech on the House floor: "You see, school shootings are absolutely real," Greene said, her navy face mask emblazoned with the words FREE SPEECH in red letters. "I understand how terrible it is because when I was 16 years old, in 11th grade, my school was a gun-free school zone, and one of my schoolmates brought guns to school and took our entire school hostage."

"I know the fear that David Hogg had that day," she pronounced. "I know the fear that these kids have."

Did it even matter that Greene had not been taken hostage, or that the episode had been handled wisely and without bloodshed, or that the teacher in the classroom had told her she was wrong about her memories and her conclusions? By now, it may have occurred to Greene that performance was enough. That politics might in fact be that easy—as long as you were angry, or at least good at acting like it, most people wouldn't bother to look beneath the hood.

IX.

In late September 2022, Perry Greene filed for divorce from Marjorie Taylor Greene on the grounds that the marriage was "irretrievably broken." His timing—so close to the midterm election—did not go unnoticed in Georgia political circles. Six weeks later, on November 8, Marjorie easily won reelection to her second term in the House of Representatives.

Given her popularity among a segment of the Republican base, she is certain to play a major role in the GOP leadership, whether that role comes with a specific title and assignment or not. She wields power much like Donald Trump, doing or saying the unthinkable because she knows that most of her colleagues wouldn't dare jeopardize their own future to stop her.

What Marjorie Taylor Greene has accomplished is this: She has harnessed the paranoia inherent in conspiratorial thinking and reassured a significant swath of voters that it is okay—no, righteous—to indulge their suspicions about the left, the Republican establishment, the media. "I'm not going to mince words with you all," she declared at a Michigan rally this fall. "Democrats want Republicans dead, and they've already started the killings." Greene did not create this sensibility, but she channels it better than any of her colleagues.

In her speech at the Cobb County GOP breakfast, Greene bemoaned "the major media organizations" for creating a caricature of her "that's not real" without ever, she said, giving her the chance to speak for herself. Afterward, I introduced myself, noted what she had just said, and asked if she was willing to sit down for an interview. "Oh," she said, "you're the one that's going around trying to talk to [all my friends]. This is the first time you've actually tried to talk to me." I explained that I had tried but had been repeatedly turned away by her staff. "Yeah, because I'm not interested," she snapped. "You're a Democrat activist." Some of her supporters looked on, nodding with vigor.

Whether Greene actually believes the things she says is by now almost beside the point. She has no choice but to be the person her followers think she is, because her power is contingent on theirs. The mechanics of actual leadership—diplomacy, compromise, patience—not only don't interest her but represent everything her followers disdain. To soften, or engage in better faith, is to admit defeat.

I think often of Greene's blog post from July 26, 2014, and the question she posed to herself during her crisis of confidence. "Why not me?" she had written tentatively, trying it on for size. I think of it whenever I see Greene onstage, on YouTube, on the House floor, making performance art of rage and so clearly at ease with what she is. Were the question not in writing, I'm not sure I'd believe there was a time in her life when she'd been afraid to ask. *A*

Elaina Plott Calabro is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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The End of Us

Is the reign of human beings on Earth nearing its end?

A disparate group of thinkers says yes—and that we should welcome our demise.

By Adam Kirsch

THE POET, 2021 (OIL ON CANVAS, 47 X 36 INCHES)

"Man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."

With this declaration in *The Order of Things* (1966), the French philosopher Michel Foucault heralded a new way of thinking that would transform the humanities and social sciences. Foucault's central idea was that the ways we understand ourselves as human beings aren't timeless or natural, no matter how much we take them for granted. Rather, the modern concept of "man" was invented in the 18th century, with the emergence of new modes of thinking about biology, society, and language, and eventually it will be replaced in turn.

As Foucault writes in the book's famous last sentence, one day "man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea." The image is eerie, but he claimed to find it "a source of profound relief," because it implies that human ideas and institutions aren't fixed. They can be endlessly reconfigured, maybe even for the better. This was the liberating promise of postmodernism: The face in the sand is swept away, but someone will always come along to draw a new picture in a different style.

But the image of humanity can be redrawn only if there are human beings to do it. Even the most radical 20th-century thinkers stop short at the prospect of the actual extinction of *Homo sapiens*, which would mean the end of all our projects, values, and meanings. Humanity may be destined to disappear someday, but almost everyone would agree that the day should be postponed as long as possible, just as most individuals generally try to delay the inevitable end of their own life.

In recent years, however, a disparate group of thinkers has begun to challenge this core assumption. From Silicon Valley boardrooms to rural communes to academic philosophy departments, a seemingly inconceivable idea is being seriously discussed: that the end of humanity's reign on Earth is imminent, and that we should welcome it. The revolt against humanity is still new enough to appear outlandish, but it has already spread beyond the fringes of the intellectual world, and in the coming years and decades it has the potential to transform politics and society in profound ways.

This view finds support among very different kinds of people: engineers and philosophers, political activists and would-be hermits, novelists and paleontologists. Not only do they not see themselves as a single movement, but in many cases they want nothing to do with one another. Indeed, the turn against human primacy is being driven by two ways of thinking that appear to be opposites.

The first is Anthropocene anti-humanism, inspired by revulsion at humanity's destruction of the natural environment. The notion that we are out of tune with nature isn't new; it has been a staple of social critique since the Industrial Revolution. More than half a century ago, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, an exposé on the dangers of DDT, helped inspire modern environmentalism with its warning about following "the impetuous and heedless pace of man rather than the deliberate pace of nature." But environmentalism is a meliorist movement, aimed at ensuring the long-term well-being of humanity, along with other forms of life. Carson didn't challenge the right of humans to use pesticides; she simply argued that "the methods employed must be such that they do not destroy us along with the insects."

In the 21st century, Anthropocene anti-humanism offers a much more radical response to a much deeper ecological crisis. It says that our self-destruction is now inevitable, and that we should welcome it as a sentence we have justly passed on ourselves. Some anti-humanist thinkers look forward to the extinction of our species, while others predict that even if some people survive the coming environmental apocalypse, civilization as a whole is doomed. Like all truly radical movements, Anthropocene anti-humanism begins not with a political program but with a philosophical idea. It is a rejection of humanity's traditional role as Earth's protagonist, the most important being in creation.

Transhumanism, by contrast, glorifies some of the very things that anti-humanism decries—scientific and technological progress, the supremacy of reason. But it believes that the only way forward for humanity is to create new forms of intelligent life that will no longer be *Homo sapiens*. Some transhumanists believe that genetic engineering and nanotechnology will allow us to alter our brains and bodies so profoundly that we will escape human limitations such as mortality and confinement to a physical body. Others await, with hope or trepidation, the invention of artificial intelligence infinitely superior to our own. These beings will demote humanity to the rank we assign to animals—unless they decide that their goals are better served by wiping us out completely.

The anti-humanist future and the transhumanist future are opposites in most ways, except the most fundamental: They are worlds from which we have disappeared, and rightfully so. In thinking about these visions of a humanless world, it is difficult to evaluate the likelihood of them coming true. Some predictions and exhortations are so extreme that it is tempting not to take them seriously, if only as a defense mechanism.

But the revolt against humanity is a real and significant phenomenon, even if it is "just" an idea and its predictions of a future without us never come true. After all, unfulfilled prophecies have been responsible for some of the most important movements in history, from Christianity to Communism. The revolt against humanity isn't yet a movement on that scale, and might never be,

but it belongs in the same category. It is a spiritual development of the first order, a new way of making sense of the nature and purpose of human existence.

IN THE 2006 FILM *Children of Men*, the director, Alfonso Cuarón, takes only a few moments to establish a world without a future. The movie opens in 2027 in a London café, where a TV news report announces that the youngest person on Earth has been killed in Buenos Aires; he was 18 years old. In 2009, human beings mysteriously lost the ability to bear children, and the film depicts a society breaking down in the face of impending extinction. Moments after the news report, the café is blown up by a terrorist bomb.

The extinction scenario in the film, loosely based on a novel by the English mystery writer P. D. James, remains in the realm of science fiction—for now. But in October 2019, London actually did erupt in civil disorder when activists associated with the group Extinction Rebellion, or XR, blocked commuter trains at rush hour. At one Underground station, a protester was dragged from the roof of a train and beaten by a mob. In the following months, XR members staged smaller disruptions at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, on New York's Wall Street, and at the South Australian State Parliament.

The group is nonviolent in principle, but it embraces aggressive tactics such as mock "die-ins" and mass arrests to shock the public into recognizing that the end of the human species isn't just the stuff of movie nightmares. It is an imminent threat arising from anthropogenic climate change, which could render large parts of the globe uninhabitable. Roger Hallam, one of the founders of XR, uses terms such as *extinction* and *genocide* to describe the catastrophe he foresees, language that is far from unusual in today's environmental discourse. The journalist David Wallace-Wells rendered the same verdict in *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019), marshaling evidence for the argument that climate change "is not just the biggest threat human life on the planet has ever faced but a threat of an entirely different category and scale."

Since the late 1940s, humanity has lived with the knowledge that it has the power to annihilate itself at any moment through nuclear war. Indeed, the climate anxiety of our own time can be seen as a return of apocalyptic fears that went briefly into abeyance after the end of the Cold War.

Destruction by despoliation is more radically unsettling. It means that humanity is endangered not only by our acknowledged vices, such as hatred and violence, but also by pursuing aims that we ordinarily consider good and natural: prosperity, comfort, increase of our kind. The Bible gives the negative commandment "Thou shalt not kill" as well as the positive commandment "Be fruitful and multiply," and traditionally they have gone together. But if being fruitful and multiplying starts to be seen as itself a form of killing, because it deprives future generations and other species of irreplaceable resources, then the flourishing of humanity can no longer be seen as simply good. Instead, it becomes part of a zero-sum competition that pits the gratification of human desires against the well-being of all of nature—not just animals and plants, but soil, stones, and water.

The anti-humanist future and the transhumanist future are opposites in most ways. But both are worlds from which human beings have disappeared, and rightfully so.

If that's the case, then humanity can no longer be considered a part of creation or nature, as science and religion teach in their different ways. Instead, it must be seen as an antinatural force that has usurped and abolished nature, substituting its own will for the processes that once appeared to be the immutable basis of life on Earth. This understanding of humanity's place outside and against the natural order is summed up in the term *Anthropocene*, which in the past decade has become one of the most important concepts in the humanities and social sciences.

The legal scholar Jedediah Purdy offers a good definition of this paradigm shift in his book *After Nature* (2015):

The Anthropocene finds its most extreme expression in our acknowledgment that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate. Because we shape everything, from the upper atmosphere to the deep seas, there is no more nature that stands apart from human beings.

We find our fingerprints even in places that might seem utterly inaccessible to human beings—in the accumulation of plastic on the ocean floor and the thinning of the ozone layer six miles above our heads. Humanity's domination of the planet is so extensive that evolution itself must be redefined. The survival of the fittest, the basic mechanism of natural selection, now means the survival of what is most useful to human beings.

In the Anthropocene, nature becomes a reflection of humanity for the first time. The effect is catastrophic, not only in practical terms, but spiritually. Nature has long filled for secular humanity one of the roles once played by God, as a source of radical otherness that can humble us and lift us out of ourselves. One of the first observers to understand the significance of this change was the writer and activist Bill McKibben. In *The End of Nature* (1989), a landmark work of environmentalist thought, McKibben warned of the melting glaciers and superstorms that are now our everyday reality. But the real subject of the book was our traditional understanding of nature as a "world entirely independent of us which was here before we arrived and which encircled and supported our human society." This idea, McKibben wrote, was about to go extinct, "just like an animal or a plant"—or like Foucault's "man," erased by the tides.

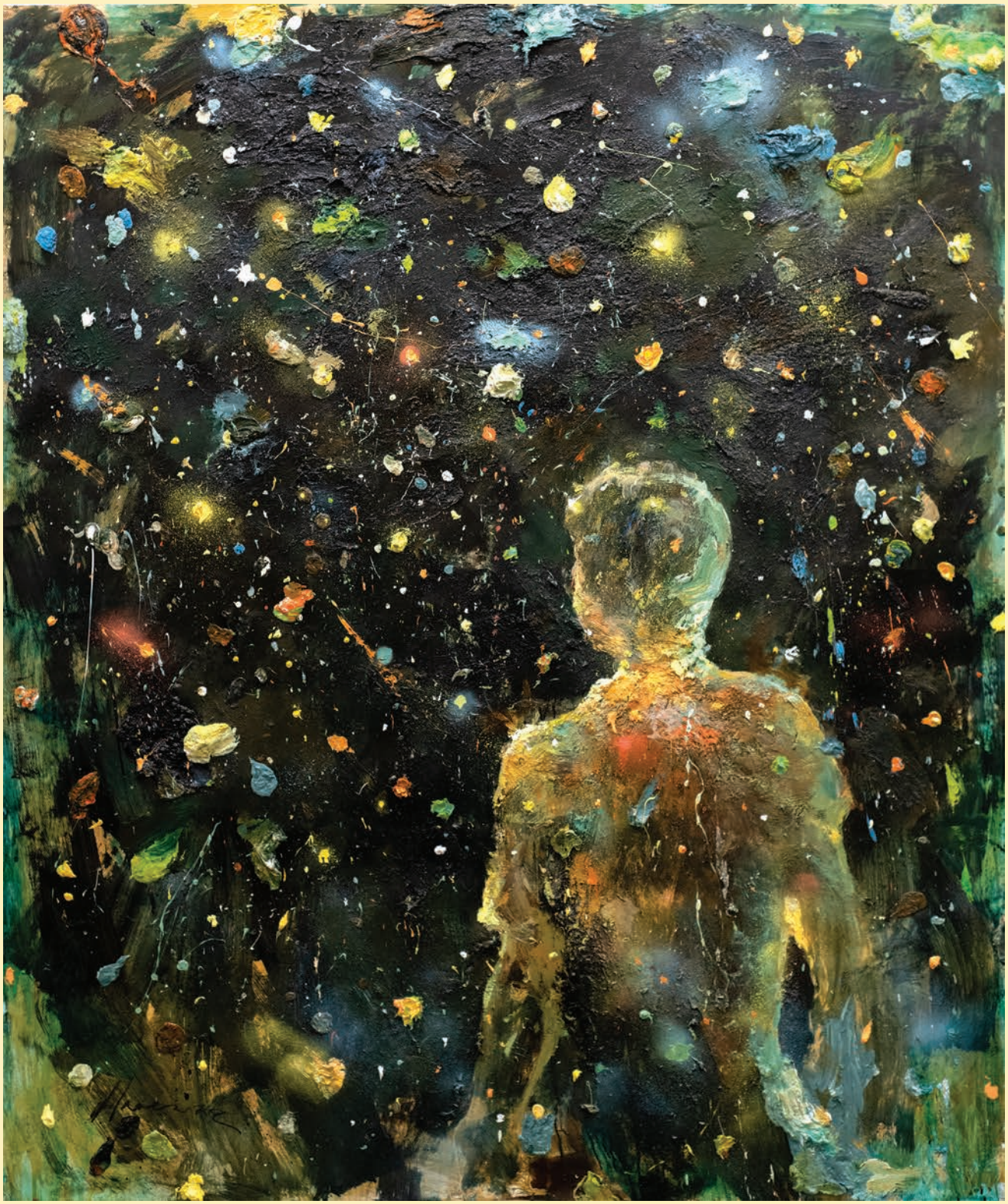
If the choice that confronts us is between a world without nature and a world without humanity, today's most radical anti-humanist thinkers don't hesitate to choose the latter. In his 2006 book, *Better Never to Have Been*, the celebrated "antinatalist" philosopher David Benatar argues that the disappearance of humanity would not deprive the universe of anything unique or valuable: "The concern that humans will not exist at some future time is either a symptom of the human arrogance … or is some misplaced sentimentalism."

The celebrated "antinatalist" philosopher David Benatar argues that the disappearance of humanity would not deprive the universe of anything unique or valuable.

Humanists, even secular ones, assume that only humans can create meaning and value in the universe. Without us, we tend to believe, all kinds of things might continue to happen on Earth, but they would be pointless—a show without an audience. For anti-humanists, however, this is just another example of the metaphysical egoism that leads us to overwhelm and destroy the planet. "What is so special about a world that contains moral agents and rational deliberators?" Benatar asks. "That humans value a world that contains beings such as themselves says more about their inappropriate sense of self-importance than it does about the world." Rather, we should take comfort in the certainty that humans will eventually disappear: "Things will someday be the way they should be—there will be no people."

LIKE ANTI-HUMANISTS, transhumanists contemplate the prospect of humanity's disappearance with serenity. What worries them is the possibility that it will happen too soon, before we have managed to invent our successors. As far as we know, humanity is the only intelligent species in the universe; if we go extinct, it may be game over for the mind. It's notable that although transhumanists are enthusiastic about space exploration, they are generally skeptical about the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence, or at least about the chances of our ever encountering it. If minds do exist elsewhere in the universe, the destiny of humanity would be of less cosmic significance.

Humanity's sole stewardship of reason is what makes transhumanists interested in "existential risk," the danger that we will destroy ourselves before securing the future of the mind. In a 2002 paper, "Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards," the philosopher Nick Bostrom classifies such risks into four types, from "Bangs," in which we are completely wiped out by climate change, nuclear war, disease,



HOME, 2022 (MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER, 70 X 59 INCHES)

or asteroid impacts, to "Whimpers," in which humanity survives but achieves "only a minuscule degree of what could have been achieved"—for instance, because we use up our planet's resources too rapidly.

As for what humanity might achieve if all goes right, the philosopher Toby Ord writes in his 2020 book *The Precipice* that the possibilities are nearly infinite: "If we can venture out and animate the countless worlds above with life and love and thought, then … we could bring our cosmos to its full scale; make it worthy of our awe." Animating the cosmos may sound mystical or metaphorical, but for transhumanists it has a concrete meaning, captured in the term *cosmic endowment*. Just as a university can be seen as a device for transforming a monetary endowment into knowledge, so humanity's function is to transform the cosmic endowment—all the matter and energy in the accessible universe—into "computronium," a semi-whimsical term for any programmable, information-bearing substance.

The Israeli thinker Yuval Noah Harari refers to this idea as "Dataism," describing it as a new religion whose "supreme value" is "data flow." "This cosmic data-processing system would be like God," he has written. "It will be everywhere and will control everything, and humans are destined to merge into it." Harari is highly skeptical of Dataism, and his summary of it may sound satirical or exaggerated. In fact, it's a quite accurate account of the ideas of the popular transhumanist author Ray Kurzweil. In his book *The Singularity Is Near* (2005), Kurzweil describes himself as a "patternist"—that is, "someone who views patterns of information as the fundamental reality." Examples of information patterns include DNA, semiconductor chips, and the letters on this page, all of which configure molecules so that they become meaningful instead of random. By turning matter into information, we redeem it from entropy and nullity. Ultimately, "even the 'dumb' matter and mechanisms of the universe will be transformed into exquisitely sublime forms of intelligence," Kurzweil prophesies.

In his 2014 book, *Superintelligence*, Nick Bostrom performs some back-of-the-envelope calculations and finds that a computer using the entire cosmic endowment as computronium could perform at least 10^{85} operations a second. (For comparison, as of 2020 the most powerful supercomputer, Japan's Fugaku, could perform on the order of 10^{17} operations a second.) This mathematical gloss is meant to make the project of animating the universe seem rational and measurable, but it hardly conceals the essentially religious nature of the idea. Kurzweil calls it "the ultimate destiny of the universe," a phrase not ordinarily employed by people who profess to be scientific materialists. It resembles the ancient Hindu belief that the Atman, the individual soul, is identical to the Brahman, the world-spirit.

Ultimately, the source of all the limitations that transhumanism chafes against is embodiment itself. But transhumanists believe that we will take the first steps toward escaping our physical form sooner than most people realize. In fact, although engineering challenges remain, we have already made the key conceptual breakthroughs. By building computers out of silicon transistors, we came to understand that the brain itself is a computer made of organic tissue. Just as computers can perform all kinds of calculations and emulations by aggregating bits, so the brain generates all of our mental experiences by aggregating neurons.

Transhumanists believe that we will take the first steps toward escaping our physical form sooner than most people realize.

If we are also able to build a brain scanner that can capture the state of every synapse at a given moment—the pattern of information that neuroscientists call the connectome, a term analogous with *genome*—then we can upload that pattern into a brain-emulating computer. The result will be, for all intents and purposes, a human mind. An uploaded mind won't dwell in the same environment as we do, but that's not necessarily a disadvantage. On the contrary, because a virtual environment is

much more malleable than a physical one, an uploaded mind could have experiences and adventures we can only dream of, like living in a movie or a video game.

For transhumanists, mind-uploading fits perfectly into a "patternist" future. If the mind is a pattern of information, it doesn't matter whether that pattern is instantiated in carbon-based neurons or silicon-based transistors; it is still authentically you. The Dutch neuroscientist Randal Koene refers to such patterns as Substrate-Independent Minds, or SIMs, and sees them as the key to immortality. "Your identity, your memories can then be embodied physically in many ways. They can also be backed up and operate robustly on fault-tolerant hardware with redundancy schemes," he writes in the 2013 essay "Uploading to Substrate-Independent Minds."

The transhumanist holy grail is artificial general intelligence—a computer mind that can learn about any subject, rather than being confined to a narrow domain, such as chess. Even if such an AI started out in a rudimentary form, it would be able to apply itself to the problem of AI design and improve itself to think faster and deeper. Then the improved version would improve itself, and so on, exponentially. As long as it had access to more and more computing power, an artificial general intelligence could theoretically improve itself without limit, until it became more capable than all human beings put together.

This is the prospect that transhumanists refer to, with awe and anxiety, as "the singularity." Bostrom thinks it's quite reasonable to worry "that the world could be radically transformed and humanity deposed from its position as apex cogitator over the course of an hour or two," before the AI's creators realize what has happened. The most radical challenge of AI, however, is that it forces us to ask why humanity's goals deserve to prevail. An AI takeover would certainly be bad for the human beings who are alive when it occurs, but perhaps a world dominated by nonhuman minds would be morally preferable in the end, with less cruelty and waste. Or maybe our preferences are entirely irrelevant. We might be in the position of God after he created humanity with free will, thus forfeiting the right to intervene when his creation makes mistakes.

The central difference between anti-humanists and transhumanists has to do with their ideas about meaning. Anti-humanists believe that the universe doesn't need to include consciousness for its existence to be meaningful, while transhumanists believe the universe would be meaningless without minds to experience and understand it. But there is no requirement that those minds be human ones. In fact, AI minds might be more appreciative than we are of the wonder of creation. They might know nothing of the violence and hatred that often makes humanity loathsome to human beings themselves. Our greatest spiritual achievements might seem as crude and indecipherable to them as a coyote's howl is to us.

NEITHER THE SUN nor death can be looked at with a steady eye, La Rochefoucauld said. The disappearance of the human race belongs in the same category. We can acknowledge that it's bound to happen someday, but the possibility that the day might be tomorrow, or 10 years from now, is hard to contemplate.

Calls for the disappearance of humanity are hard to understand other than rhetorically. It's natural to assume that transhumanism is just a dramatic way of drawing attention to the promise of new technology, while Anthropocene anti-humanism is really environmentalism in a hurry. Such skepticism is nourished by the way these schools of thought rely on unverifiable predictions.

But the accuracy of a prophecy is one thing; its significance is another. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his followers that the world is going to end in their lifetime: "Verily I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." This proved not to be true—at least not in any straightforward sense—but the promise still changed the world.

The apocalyptic predictions of today's transhumanist and anti-humanist thinkers are of a very different nature, but they too may be highly significant even if they don't come to pass. Profound civilizational changes begin with a revolution in how people think about themselves and their destiny. The revolt against humanity has the potential to be such a beginning, with unpredictable consequences for politics, economics, technology, and culture.

The revolt against humanity has a great future ahead of it because it appeals to people who are at once committed to science and reason yet yearn for the clarity and purpose of an absolute moral imperative. It says that we can move the planet, maybe even the universe, in the direction of the good, on one condition—that we forfeit our own existence as a species.

In this way, the question of why humanity exists is given a convincing yet wholly immanent answer. Following the logic of sacrifice, we give our life meaning by giving it up.

Anthropocene anti-humanism and transhumanism share this premise, despite their contrasting visions of the post-human future. The former longs for a return to the natural equilibrium that existed on Earth before humans came along to disrupt it with our technological rapacity. The latter dreams of pushing forward, using technology to achieve a complete abolition of nature and its limitations. One sees reason as the serpent that got humanity expelled from Eden, while the other sees it as the only road back to Eden.

But both call for drastic forms of human self-limitation—whether that means the destruction of civilization, the renunciation of child-bearing, or the replacement of human beings by machines. These sacrifices are ways of expressing high ethical ambitions that find no scope in our ordinary, hedonistic lives: compassion for suffering nature, hope for cosmic dominion, love of knowledge. This essential similarity between anti-humanists and transhumanists means that they may often find themselves on the same side in the political and social struggles to come. *A*

Adam Kirsch is a poet, a critic, and an editor. He is the author of The Revolt Against Humanity, *from which this article was adapted.*

Culture & Critics

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELE CASTELLANO

The Prophecy of *The Waste Land*

One hundred years after the publication of T. S. Eliot's masterwork, its vision has never been more terrifying.

By James Parker

Why is April the cruellest month? Why did the chicken cross the road? Why do people watch golf on television?

The first question I can answer.

April is the cruellest month because we are stuck. We've stopped dead and we're going rotten. We are living in the demesne of the crippled king, the Fisher King, where everything sickens and nothing adds up, where the imagination is in shreds, where dark fantasies enthrall us, where men and women are estranged from themselves and one another, and where the cyclical itch of springtime—the spasm in the earth; the sizzling bud; even the gentle, germinal rain—only reminds us how very, very far we are from being reborn.

We will not be delivered from this, or not anytime soon. That's why April is cruel. That's why April is ironic. That's why muddy old, sprouty old April, bustling around in her hedgerows, brings us down.

Reading The Waste Land *is like watching Evel Knievel. How many buses can the crazy biker fly over? How deep an abyss can the poet traverse?*

IMAGINE, IF YOU WILL, a poem that incorporates the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the blowing up of the Kerch Bridge, Grindr, ketamine, *The Purge*, Lana Del Rey, the next three COVID variants, and the feeling you get when you can't remember your Hulu password. Imagine that this poem—which also mysteriously contains all of recorded literature—is written in a form so splintered, so jumpy, but so eerily holistic that it resembles either a new branch of particle physics or a new religion: a new account, at any rate, of the relationships that underpin reality.

Now imagine this poem making news, going viral, becoming *the* poem—hailed over here, reviled over there—such that everybody is obliged to react to it, and every poem yet unwritten is already, inevitably, altered by it. And now imagine that the author of this poem—the poet himself—is a haunted-looking commuter whom you half-recognize from the subway platform.

You're getting close to *The Waste Land*.

WHEN TED HUGHES met T. S. Eliot in the 1960s, he was deeply struck by the older man's physical presence: the strength of his hands ("thick, long, massive fingers") and the slowness and deliberateness with which he ate. When Eliot spoke, Hughes remembered later, "I had the impression of a slicing, advancing, undeflectible force of terrific mass."

This—long-chewing Eliot, consolidated Eliot, powerfully and ponderously integrated Eliot, extending his personality over the young poet—was not the Eliot who wrote *The Waste Land*. No indeed. *That* Eliot, 33-year-old poet/critic, acclaimed but still struggling, was in pieces. He was in quietly raving and silently groaning fragments. He had to be. Hypercivilized as he was, and dressed with bleak propriety for his day job at Lloyds Bank, Eliot on the brink of *The Waste Land* was nonetheless a shaman, a real one, and to manifest the dire spiritual condition of the tribe, he had to undergo—in his buttoned-up way—the regulation shamanic dismembering.

SO THE ELIOT OF 1921, as he prepared to deliver himself of "a long poem that I have had on my mind for a long time," was picked and pecked at by demons. In the foreground, a miserable marriage, a life-sucking job, and the strain—for an American introvert—of participation in London's highly charged literary scene. In the background, apprehensions of profound disorder, with accompanying nervous symptoms. And finally, a visit from his mother. Charlotte Eliot, 77 years old, resident of Greater Boston, popped over to see her son in London, stayed for 10 weeks, and left him prostrate with neurosis. "I really feel very shaky," Eliot wrote to his friend Richard Aldington, "and seem to have gone down rapidly since my family left." Some brain kink, some malady of consciousness, was sinking him repeatedly into obscure states of horror. His feelings, he said, were "impossible to describe."

The bank, presented with his difficulties—imagine *that* proto-HR meeting, *that* one-act play—gave Eliot three months' sick leave. He departed London in October—first for a month-long rest cure in the English seaside town of Margate, and then for Lausanne, in Switzerland, where by the waters

of Lac Léman he placed himself under the care of Dr. Roger Vittoz.

Returning to London via Paris in January, he gave (as he later wrote) "the manuscript of a sprawling chaotic poem called *The Waste Land*" to his fellow reality-shifter and most ardent advocate: the flame-haired American nutter-prodigy Ezra Pound.

GREAT EDITORS, like great record producers, know where to make the cut.

It's a secondary creative act, doubling the primary one: to breathe upon the formless waters, to infuse the Kháos, the sprawling manuscript, with the Logos. Teo Macero—New York City, 1969—having recorded hours upon hours, spools upon spools, of Miles Davis jamming sulfurously and sorcerously with a crew of possessed sidemen, takes out his razor and makes *Bitches Brew*. Ezra Pound—Paris, 1922—licks the nib of his pencil and slashes entire sequences, entire movements, from Eliot's new poem.

Pound was a maker and a shatterer, prancing around London with his isms—his Imagism and his Vorticism and his anti-Georgianism. His ear for poetry was almost feral. Eliot trusted him completely. So across the manuscript Pound went prowling: He jabbed and bracketed and sliced, and his marginalia popped like fireworks. "Too loose" … "Too tum-pum" … "B-ll-s" … "Make up yr. mind" … Once in a while he approved: "O.K." or (more Poundian) "Echt," German for "real."

By the time he was done, *The Waste Land* had been cut by half.

SO WHAT IS IT, *The Waste Land*? It's a poem of 434 lines, in five sections.

More than half of it is quotes or near quotes from or allusions to other pieces of writing. All sorts of writing, highbrow and lowbrow. If you've ever been around somebody whose psyche is collapsing, you know that this is what sometimes happens: They start spewing quotes. They start spewing references, innuendos, broken-off bits, debris. Then they start connecting the debris.

Whether this has always been the case, or whether *The Waste Land* prophesied and inaugurated an especially modern type of crack-up … That's an interesting question.

MYTH NO. 1: It's difficult.

I first read *The Waste Land* when I was 11, precocious little short-trousered bastard that I was, and no doubt I was a better reader of it then—which is to say a purer and sharper reader—than I am now. I didn't find it difficult, because I had no expectation of understanding it. The question *What does it mean?* did not occur to me.

If The Waste Land *has a narrator, it is this weird druidic voice: creeping, visionary, sardonic, anti-romantic, almost malign.*

Myth No. 2: It's depressing.

Au contraire, it's totally bloody exhilarating. It's like watching Evel Knievel. How many buses can the crazy biker fly over? How deep an abyss can the poet traverse? Across how large a synaptic loop can the vital spark jump? "Complimenti, you bitch," Pound wrote to Eliot after reading the revised poem. "I am wracked by the seven jealousies." Envy: the purest compliment one writer can pay another.

WE BEGIN, the poem begins, under the earth. Like bulbs or corpses. "Winter kept us warm."

And then—I could say *abruptly*, but part of the spooky genius of *The Waste Land* is that none of its dozens of sudden tonal or thematic zigzags, its jump cuts and non sequiturs, feels abrupt—we are in middle Europe somewhere, in the mountains, drinking coffee and tobogganing with some aristocrats. Fresh air, the slopes. But the voice changes again: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" If *The Waste Land* has a narrator, it is this voice, this weird druidic voice: creeping, recurring, visionary, sardonic, anti-romantic, almost malign. "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." Which is the opposite, if you think about it, of seeing the world in a grain of sand.

Another voice, a lover disabled, made impotent—finished off, nearly—by an apparition of love: "Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed." Then we meet Madame Sosostris and her "wicked pack of cards," her tarot. And with her cheesy clairvoyance, her fortune-telling powers, she glimpses it: the universal disaster. "I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring." Here we all are, us, in a herd, on the wheel. The poetry rises, apostrophizes, becomes super-famous: "Unreal City …"

That's the first section, or some of it: "The Burial of the Dead."

A WOMAN seated before a mirror brushes her hair with stagy, fiery gestures. The scene is massively ornate and over-sensory, a smothering of jewels and carvings and reflections and glittering facets and beauty potions and "sevenbranched candelabra." On the wall, above the "antique mantel," is a picture of Philomela, after her rape by King Tereus, becoming a nightingale. Someone enters, a kind of cringing half person—"footsteps shuffled on the stair"—and the woman speaks.

Pound was not *The Waste Land*'s only editor. Eliot also ran early drafts past his wife, Vivienne—a risky move, given that the poem's second section, "A Game of Chess," drew upon and dramatized certain awful scenes from their marriage. And given also that Vivienne—vivid, quivering Vivienne—was,

outwardly at least, even more unstable than Eliot. She cheated on him with Bertrand Russell; she blew her top; she lay in bed and screamed. An anxious woman speaks in this section, frenziedly interrogating her husband: "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?" Not exactly a loving portrait.

Nevertheless. On the manuscript, next to the line "My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad," Vivienne—who would end her days in a mental hospital in North London, long separated from Eliot—wrote "WONDERFUL." What a trouper.

"ALL THINGS, O priests, are on fire … The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire." So speaks the Buddha in his "Fire Sermon," the *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*.

But the third section of *The Waste Land*, "The Fire Sermon," is all sludge. This part of the poem is oozing and biological and not fiery in the slightest. In fact, it makes one long for fire. Or for a flamethrower. There are violated human bodies; there are sluggish bodies of water. The River Thames. Lac Léman, where Eliot had lately submitted himself to the healing hands of Dr. Vittoz. (Healing hands: I mean that literally. With a gentle and expert touch, he would palpate the heads of his patients.) And then the canal.

"A rat crept softly through the vegetation / Dragging its slimy belly on the bank / While I was fishing in the dull canal / On a winter evening round behind the gashouse …"

Time to meet the Fisher King. Who is he?

Well, he's a number of things, in a number of stories. But in one of those stories, in the Arthurian myth that wrinkles its way through *The Waste Land*, he's a man who sits and seeps and sadly fishes while his kingdom crumbles around him. He has a mysterious thigh wound, or groin wound, that won't heal. The holy grail, in this story, is that which, at the end of the quest, heals the king's seeping wound. And/or binds up his injured psyche. And/or restores the land to fertility.

This, this scene by the canal, is as Eliotic as it gets: a deep under-image of the Fisher King, deep psychic history, flickering and fizzing behind the right-now reality of the London fishermen. And they're still out there, those London fishermen; you can see them any night of the week, sitting shapelessly on their bait buckets, dipping their lines into the greeny-black seam of Regent's Canal. On the far bank, a huge disused gasholder rears its frame bonily into the city sky. This is the London of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, the London of *The Waste Land*, the London of now. It's all still there.

WOUNDED GROINS. Drooping night anglers. Nervous wives. Are you picking up a slight atmosphere of sexual difficulty?

Enter Tiresias, "old man with wrinkled female breasts." Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek mythology who interrupted the lovemaking of two large serpents, two writhing, sexy serpents, and as a penalty was changed into a woman for seven years. So on the sex war, Tiresias has the answers for us—or some of them. "He knew both sides of love," as a 1916 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* puts it.

For the next 42 lines of "The Fire Sermon," Tiresias will be our guide. With Tiresias, who knows both sides of love, we will lurk, we will peep, we will snicker as a young woman ("the typist") invites a young man ("a small house agent's clerk") into her bedsit and bad sex ensues. Terrible sex. A scene of muffled or dissociated coercion. The meter goes jaunty-iambic, smutty-iambic, with an ABAB rhyme scheme, as if to emphasize the mechanical, *tum-pum* nature of the thing. "She turns and looks a moment in the glass, / Hardly aware of her departed lover; / Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.'"

Eliotic irony: Peering down upon this woman from a great height, itemizing snootily her "food in tins," the laundry drying on her windowsill, the narrowness of her existence, the narrator (who is Eliot, who is Tiresias) also sees her sexual predicament with a special rarefied/horrified clarity. With a livid, frozen empathy. With the pity that she, allowing one half-formed thought to pass, cannot permit herself.

POUND'S CUT to the fourth section, "Death by Water," was the big one: 83 lines of wandering, wild-weathered sea narrative, in fluent blank verse, part *The Tempest*, part *The Perfect Storm*. "And no one dared / To look into anothers face, or speak / In the horror of the illimitable scream / Of a whole world about us." Pound pencil-poked and worried at these lines, a jab here and a slice there, and finally cut the lot. Gone.

What was left, at the tail end of all this storm action, was a brief, perfect Elizabethan-style lyric. Ten lines. "Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead …" Glimmeringly discrete, with its own deep-sea music. Phlebas is a drowned sailor. The sea dissolves his body, picks "his bones in whispers." Reversion to the elemental. All very final, all very peaceful. "He passed the stages of his age and youth …" He's like the Knight, slain and rotting, in Ted Hughes's *Cave Birds*: "His submission is flawless. / Blueflies lift off his beauty."

This is what the Poundian cut could do for you: By removing the extraneous, however high-quality, it put a tremor of white light, a space echo, around what remained. Too bad he wasn't available 20 years

later, when Eliot was writing his *Four Quartets*. His priestly, intermittently waffling *Four Quartets*. Post-Pound it would have been *Two Quartets*. (You can't tell me that a line like "I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant— / Among other things—or one way of putting the same thing" would have made it past the Pound pencil. *Make up yr. mind.*)

Unfortunately, by that point Pound's brain had been eaten by anti-Semitism and crank economics, and he was making radio broadcasts for the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini.

IS THERE anti-Semitism in *The Waste Land*? No. But there might have been. It bubbles up nastily elsewhere in Eliot's poetry, and it snickers around the edges of his criticism. Things written in his 30s and 40s would have to be answered for in his 70s. ("I did make the statement which you quote, but I have ever since regretted making it in that form, for it was not intended to be anti-Semitic.")

But *The Waste Land* is free of it. By a happy accident. Or by the intervention of the Muses. The poem is superior to the poet. The poem sees more clearly.

"AFTER THE TORCHLIGHT red on sweaty faces …" Darkness. Brute arousal. A lynching; a burning; a seizure; a mob. Charlottesville. We—as in: humanity—are never getting away from this line.

The last section of *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said," is ringing with aftermath, with a note that peals and resounds and hunts for an echo in all the hardest and rockiest places. Crucifixion has happened. Murder has happened. God is dead. The pottery shards are telling it. Stones are tolling like bells. The note gathers power and becomes a shock wave, destroying cities. "Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air" like high-altitude explosives. "Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria."

Here comes Jesus, into this blown landscape. Or here he half-comes. Equivocally shows up, the hooded Christ of the hangover. "Who is the third who walks always beside you? / When I count, there are only you and I together / But when I look ahead up the white road / There is always another one walking beside you."

Eliot is doing his time trick, mapping an anecdote from Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1914–17 Antarctic expedition onto the 24th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Shackleton and his two men, wading desperately across the snowfields of South Georgia island, silently sensed or fancied that they were accompanied by an enigmatic other. "I know that during that long and racking march," Shackleton wrote in his 1920 memoir, *South*, "it seemed to me often that we were four, not three."

The disciples in Luke, heads low after the Crucifixion, trudging along, fall into conversation with an inquisitive stranger on the road to Emmaus. The stranger is the risen Jesus. They do not recognize him.

We can imagine them thinking, *Who's* this *guy?*

THE LAST 39 LINES of *The Waste Land* are an apocalypse.

Static hums in the dryness, little monsters twitch ("bats with baby faces"), and then—the storm. Civilization goes, the mind goes, and the God of the Upanishads speaks in syllables of thunder, the whole scene strobed by lightning bolts and the shock editing of life flashing before your eyes. "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" wonders the poet/Fisher King, with pathetic coherence, as London disintegrates behind him and his brain swarms with quotes and quotes and quotes, "the poem's great and final collapse"—as Matthew Hollis puts it in his brilliant new book, *The Waste Land: A Biography of a Poem*—"of cascading imagery and fleeting phrases, like a cine-reel of a disappearing Europe."

"Shantih shantih shantih," it ends. Sanskrit for "peace."

Drone of the void. Of the mind suddenly emptied.

The poem's discontinuities no longer startle us. Rather, they feel like home.

OKAY. SO WHERE ARE WE NOW, 100 years later, with *The Waste Land*? The sludge is rising; the flames are rising; the demagogues are getting louder and the brownshirts are cracking their knuckles.

The poem's discontinuities no longer startle us. Rather, they feel like home. All the sections, all the voices, all the tones—they hang together like … like … like "Bohemian Rhapsody." Like an episode of *Rick and Morty*. Like a conspiracy theory.

Our inner condition, meanwhile, has not altered. We're all trailing our lines in the dark water. We've all sustained the secret wound. You've got your holy grail, and I've got mine. And whether we can ever find them in this lifetime, our respective grails—get our hands on them and apply them to our suffering—I don't know.

The Waste Land was written by a very disturbed man, a fastidious man possessed by visions of squalor, a man unable to distinguish the fall of civilization from the fall of his own psyche. It was written in the after-roar of one war, with another boiling up on the horizon. It was marginal testimony—imagine its fate without the encouragement of Pound—that became instantly central.

Why? Because it couldn't be denied. Because it was brain-thunder. Because it was magic, and it ripped the shaman apart. Because it itemizes our illnesses like no poem before or since, offering nothing, nothing at all, but the stark elation of seeing the thing as it is. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

"The Anabasis of Godspeed" is excerpted from a forthcoming book-length poem, School of Instructions. *A memorial to the experience of West Indian soldiers serving in British regiments during World War I, the poem is also the narrative of Godspeed, a young boy living in rural Jamaica in the 1990s.*

The Anabasis of Godspeed

By Ishion Hutchinson

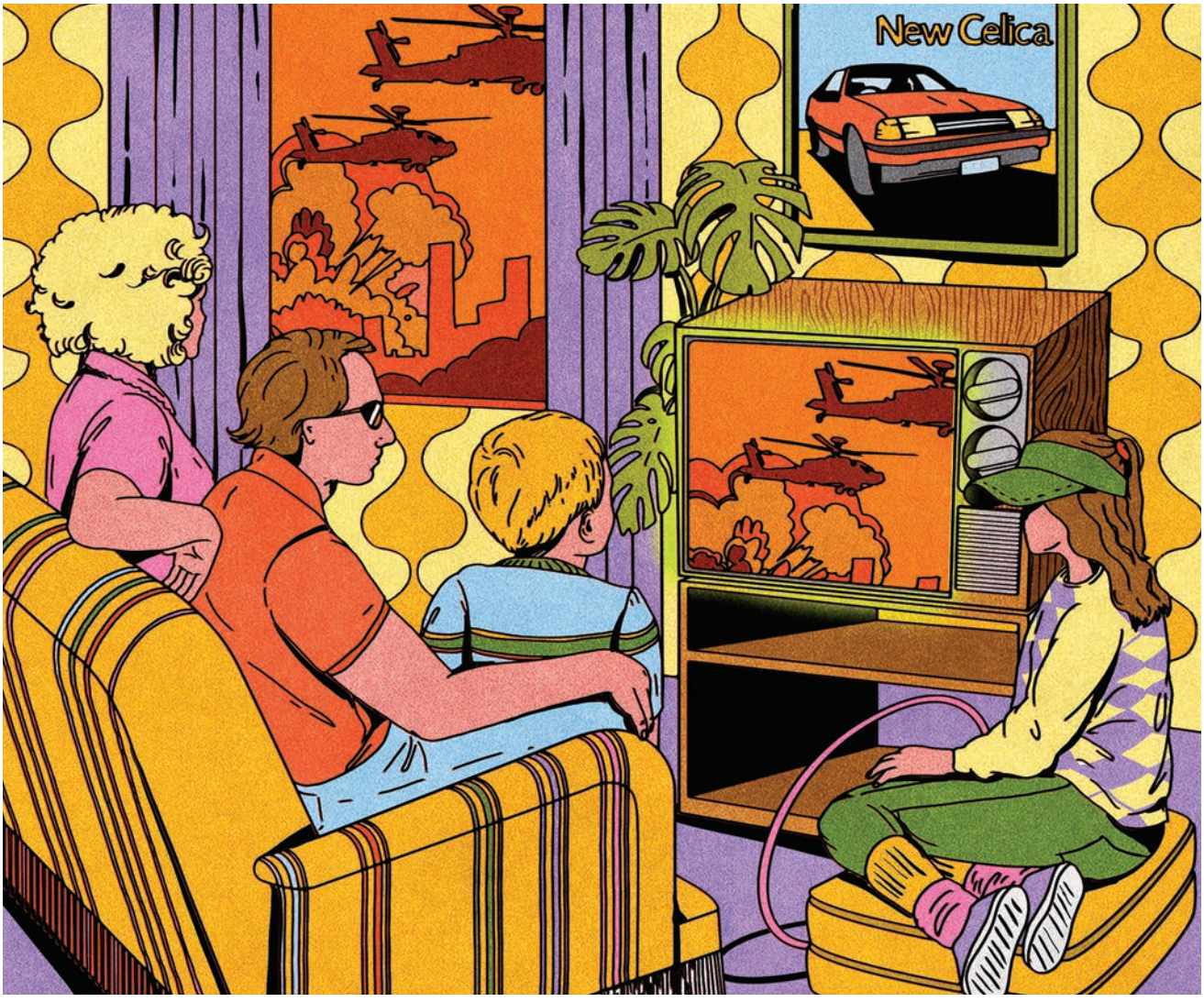
Bivouacking the night at PELUSIUM. Some nights from his hole at BARRACKS LANE
as the sugar factory purred to sleep and the canes curled their tails like fields of kittens
Godspeed polished the moon to see better Rosalie's face and proceeded to ROMANI
in the morning. Moved to MAGDHABA by rail. And 2 platoons formed escort
to prisoners of war passing through the immemorial shade of the staffroom after
the successful action at RAFA.

Then men proceeded to TAHPANHES where weeping was ceaseless.

Proceeded through the reeds and hawks of UPPER EGYPT to the tamarisks and hornets of
LOWER EGYPT and from there to JERUSALEM where No. 9265 Pte. J. Floras
"A" boy died from dysentery. In the Quaker chapel alone Godspeed looked at
the white angels and the luxe hair Christ painted above the baptismal pool. He thought
of the nub of magnet like a single black eye still whirling on the stalled fan.

The battalion halted the following night at SUFAIR-ES-SHARKIYEH. A pillar of fire some saw
when the stars went out. Godspeed trembled to the riddim like the curtains of MIDIAN
trembling to the wind.

Ishion Hutchinson was born in Port Antonio, Jamaica.



BOOKS

White Noise Used to Be Satire

What was once mildly absurd is now funny because it's true.

By Jordan Kisner

On the afternoon of the 2016 election, I took a cab directly from my polling place in South Brooklyn to JFK, where I boarded a full flight to San Francisco. In the evening, when the plane took off, the consensus seemed to be that by the time we landed, the country would have elected its first female president. I wasn't sure, so when the miniature television that had been allotted to me came alive as we climbed to 10,000 feet, I turned it to the news.

As the sunset outpaced the plane and the dark rose outside our windows, I saw that everyone else had their television turned to the news, too. Pennsylvania and Ohio, Iowa and Nebraska, passed silently beneath us as the returns came in.

The flight from JFK to SFO is about six and a half hours, depending on the wind, so between the hours of 7 p.m. and midnight eastern on November 8, 2016, 180 televisions shone their bluish light on 180 faces arranged in rows of three,

ILLUSTRATION BY MARÍA JESÚS CONTRERAS

facing forward. No one spoke. Strapped in shoulder to shoulder in a metal tube hurtling 35,000 feet over the breadth of America, everyone watched the country's electorate reveal itself on our own screens. By the time we landed, the decision had been made.

I mentioned this the next day to my mother when we spoke on the phone: the silent, dark plane; all the people quietly watching, hour after hour.

"That's just like *White Noise*," she said.

This is something my mother has been saying to me for about 15 years. *White Noise* is one of her seminal texts. She read it for a class after going back to graduate school to study literature when I was in my late teens, got excited about the book, and later taught it to her own students. "This is just like *White Noise*!" she would say, listening to the radio or sitting at the dinner table. She still does this a few times a year, but for a while she was finding *White Noise* echoes at least once a week.

I seem to be the only college-educated person left in America who hasn't read Don DeLillo. Sometimes my mother will read something I've written and say, a little balefully, "You should *really* be reading *White Noise*," suggesting that this gap in my education, specifically, is egregious and foolish. She's probably right. Any writer with an interest in probing "American magic and dread"—to borrow a phrase from the novel—is probably in conversation with DeLillo, whether or not she knows it.

I have no good reason for how or why I evaded this book for so long. It never showed up on a high-school or college reading list, for one thing, but more pertinently I have an embarrassing and completely unproductive resistance to reading what people tell me I *should* read. I have still never cracked *The Little Prince*, or *On the Road*, or *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I know. The only person this is hurting is myself. And yet I avoided *White Noise* with special stubbornness. I had the vague sense that the book was a reflection on how alienating modern American life can be—a theme you hardly need to seek out in fiction. People kept referring to it as a masterpiece of postmodernism, which—after years of being assigned so many other books of that genre—didn't light my fire. Really, I had no idea what it was about. When I asked my mother, she was cryptic. "You'll just have to read it." That's just like my mother.

"That's just like White Noise*," she said. This is something my mother has been saying to me for about 15 years.*

SOMETIMES MY PARTNER and I look up at each other while we're doing chores or reading, or maybe when we articulate some minor thought at the same time, and smile and say, "Love." It's shorthand. We mean: *This is what love is, how strange and funny and good.*

Most of the time, my brain chimes a silent little chime after "Love." *It's what makes a Subaru a Subaru.*

This is just like *White Noise*. In fact, it's a clear echo of a scene in *White Noise*. Jack Gladney, our protagonist—a professor at the College-on-the-Hill, a midsize liberal-arts college in Blacksmith, a midsize town somewhere in the midsection of the U.S.—is watching his daughter sleep and feeling the immanent swell, the "desperate piety," that parents sometimes feel. The girl turns in her sleep and mutters something, propelling him to lean forward to catch her "language not quite of this world."

> I struggled to understand. I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning. I watched her face, waited. Ten minutes passed. She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica* … She was only repeating some TV voice.

Nevertheless, Jack thrills at his 9-year-old's incantation of brand names, which, he notes, is "part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence."

Prodded by an editor at this publication, I finally read *White Noise*, a fact that vindicated and exasperated my mother in equal measure. The novel has been adapted by Noah Baumbach into a feature film starring Adam Driver and Greta Gerwig, despite a reputation for being unadaptable because of its density of detail and its fractured, occasionally absurdist plot. For the first time, nearly 40 years after the novel's publication, Americans will consider *White Noise* on-screen, which is either the best or worst—but definitely the most ironic—medium for it.

The television is always on in the house that Jack shares with his wife, Babette, a "fairly ample" woman with a blondish mop, and four of their children from various prior marriages. Fragments of programming intrude into every aspect of daily life. ("Now we will put the little feelers on the butterfly," says the voice on the television, or "And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio.") Every Friday, the family sits and watches together, sometimes a sitcom, sometimes a documentary—though far and away the biggest hits are the disasters, human and natural: car accidents, earthquakes, villages swallowed by a lava flow. "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping," Jack notes. Vaguely disconcerted by this family-bonding exercise, he mentions it to a colleague, the chair of the "department of American environments," who assures him that their behavior is totally normal. It's practically a neurological imperative, he insists: "We're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information."

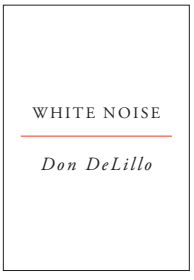
The way that technology—and particularly the television screen—seeps into our consciousness is a primary subject in *White Noise*. "You have to open yourself to the data," a visiting lecturer in American environments named Murray Jay Siskind tells Jack.

> Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. "*Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.*" The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas.

No part of the American mind remains untouched by branding. Nothing is sacred, and so eventually the branding itself comes to acquire an air of the sacrosanct. The grocery store becomes a temple. Reality is determined by the language and images that represent it on television, rather than the other way around.

Jack is renowned as the founder of an academic field, Hitler studies, though by his own admission he is not so much brilliant or pioneering as canny. He saw a niche and exploited it. Hitler studies is less concerned with history, politics, and the Second World War than with the dictator's success at corralling and manipulating group fascination, his genius for turning himself into a figurehead. Jack is interested in the surface details of Hitler, his theatrics, his optics. He, too, adopts a uniform, never removing his sunglasses or his academic robes when on campus. He teaches "Advanced Nazism" and carries around a copy of *Mein Kampf*. He barely speaks any German, but this hasn't really been a problem. Though he can't read *Mein Kampf* in its original language, he likes the way German sounds, the way it seems to carry "an authority" that he can't put his finger on. "Look at it this way," he explains to his stepdaughter, Denise. "Some people carry a gun. Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It's in this area that my obsessions dwell."

I was caught off guard by this: Although the book takes American alienation, decadence, and moral decay as its subject, it's profoundly funny. Baumbach has preserved the humor in his adaptation, along with the foreboding backdrop. The rhythm of his dialogue—everyone talking over and past one another in rapid-fire torrents of impressive but usually counterfactual or irrational language—is so perfectly chaotic, nearly slapstick, that the audience at the press screening of *White Noise* the morning of its premiere at the New York Film Festival erupted in laughter. Baumbach's Jack is equally hilarious and pathetic thanks to Driver's exquisite deadpan, his commitment to the bit (though he's too young to play Jack by about a decade, and Gerwig is too young for her role as well).



The production design is funny in its own way: The grocery store gleams, almost menacingly gorgeous. Everything is very '80s—the jogging suits, the Hula-Hoops; Gerwig's wig is a kind of joke all by itself. This hyper-saturated, highly stylized theatrical approach accents the story's humor and presages the moments when the film's mood and color palette switch to something more like noir. In the dark, Jack has nightmares; we learn that placid Babette is secretly tortured by the fear of death even when life seems like the suburban middle-class dream, a "condition" for which she takes mysterious pills. Every register contains a deft, satisfying touch of the hysterical.

I wonder if laughing at *White Noise* feels different than it used to. The novel skewers Americans' dependence on technology and screens, a phenomenon that is incalculably more intense than it was in 1985. The protagonist may have seemed like a more absurdist construction back then: the paunchy white American male of middling intelligence who idolizes dictators and never turns off the television—who studies and exploits the shortcut to power found in putting on a good show, regardless of whether you have any idea what you're talking about. Jack is funny because he's a relatively harmless fool—a product of his circumstances rather than their author; an American patsy. Terrified to die, he idolizes Hitler because Hitler seems "larger than death." Jack has no meaningful power, really, so he's a tragicomic figure. Or he was.

I texted my mom to ask whether she found *White Noise* funny when she first read it, during the early years of the Iraq War. "Not very," she replied.

CRITICS HAVE BEEN CALLING DeLillo's work prophetic nearly his whole career. When the novelist Jayne Anne Phillips reviewed *White Noise* in 1985 in *The New York Times*, she noted that the plotline was "timely and frightening." The reason Phillips gave was that the middle section of the novel revolves around an "airborne toxic event." (This is what the authorities on the radio agree to call it, having tried and discarded "feathery plume" and "black billowing cloud.") Something lethal has been released into the air. Without warning, Jack and his family are living through a public-health disaster. A month before the book appeared, an industrial accident in India had killed thousands of people; it seemed DeLillo had almost foretold the disaster.

Obviously, this plotline remains eerily prescient. Like our own recent airborne toxic event, the poison in *White Noise* is ambient, diffuse, unpredictable. It upends everyone's lives, even those who think themselves economically immune to "disasters." (Disasters happen elsewhere, Jack is sure. "Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street

WILSON WEBB / NETFLIX

Adam Driver portrays the novel's protagonist, Jack Gladney, as both hilarious and pathetic.

in one of those TV floods?") The symptoms it supposedly causes change by the hour—the authorities can't really get a handle on it, and mass hypochondria shifts every time there's an update. Jack reassures Babette that something is doubtless available to deal with such a thing, probably a squad of "custom-made organisms" ready to eat the toxic cloud. Babette feels awe—"There is just no end of surprise"—but also fear at this prospect. "Every advance is worse than the one before because it makes me more scared," she says.

"Scared of what?"

"The sky, the earth, I don't know."

Jack agrees. "The greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear."

Even aside from the airborne toxic event, calamity is ambient. Children are evacuated from school with no clear reason given, only the suspicion that the environment is somehow dangerous. Children participate in emergency evacuation drills where they lie in the street, playing victim. Lev Grossman, writing about the book for *Time* in 2010, suggested that it was "pitched at a level of absurdity slightly above that of real life," a statement that more than a decade later no longer feels quite true.

We are always running from a disaster we ourselves have caused, it would seem. We are always alienated. Americans are perpetually spiritually blotted by consumerism and afraid to die. Fitbits. #Sponcon. "Likes." "Alternative facts." Infinite scroll. Amazon same-day delivery. When my grandmother was dying, I watched on my cellphone as a priest performed her last rites; I was sitting on the floor of an empty apartment 2,000 miles away. Not knowing what else to do, I took screenshots of her face, impassive. When the call ended, I didn't see her again, except now my phone occasionally delivers me the screenshots in the middle of the day as "Memories."

I put out a call before I began reading *White Noise*, blank slate that I was, for general impressions, and the majority of people who wrote back said that they had read the book in college. Some liked it, a few objected to the characterization of Babette—who, through Jack's eyes, is more of an instrument than an interiority—but most remembered it favorably, if vaguely. I started to understand why this book appears so often in classrooms, why teachers choose to teach it. It's a masterpiece of postmodernism, sure. But what *White Noise* does well—and what literature teachers are often in the position of training students to do—is render visible (or audible, if we want to follow DeLillo's metaphor) aspects of social and political life that have been normalized into near invisibility.

One's culture is largely composed of what can no longer be explicitly sensed—we often fail to notice what's endemic in our social world, believing it to be the given state of things. Intrusions of the uncanny signal that culture is changing faster than our ability to absorb the results into our conception of what's normal.

We live in an uncanny time—though there has been no moment in my life, at least, that has not seemed to be an uneasy, unnatural moment in American life. *White Noise* was originally published against the backdrop of the Cold War; nuclear anxieties; the reelection of Ronald Reagan, an entertainment personality, to the office of the president. It turned 10 as the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. began to wane, as personal computers began appearing in American homes, nudged into daily life by the advent of the internet. It turned 20 as the War on Terror was truly getting under way. It is turning 38 as it becomes a movie that will be available for streaming, via Netflix, into tens of millions of American homes through televisions, tablets, and phones that also track how many minutes of the night you dream.

Things still seem to be just like *White Noise* because of DeLillo's gift for observing the world as if he had just been dropped into it. Instead of simply opening some gum, Babette pulls "the little cellophane ribbon on a bonus pack of sixteen individually wrapped units of chewing gum." This gaze is evident in his many subsequent novels, most recently *The Silence* in 2020, a pandemic-related novel that he happened to finish just before COVID-19 made itself known. He credits this vantage to having been raised by Italian immigrants in the Bronx, and to having "roots elsewhere. We are looking in from the outside."

In a recent interview with DeLillo in *The New York Times Magazine*, David Marchese cited the cultural theorist Raymond Williams, who posited that every era has "a structure of feeling, which is basically the way that people experience the times in which they live." DeLillo had not read Williams, but Marchese's reference still felt correct. In *White Noise*, DeLillo nailed a structure of feeling that shapes our present consciousness. Writing shortly after September 11 for *Harper's Magazine*, DeLillo articulated it this way: "We don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce, the systems and networks that change the way we live and think."

What the novel does well is render visible aspects of social and political life that have been normalized into near invisibility.

WHEN I CALLED my mother to tell her I'd finally read the book and wanted to talk about it, we agreed to do a sort of book club on Zoom. She logged on from home, but I couldn't see the room behind her: She had programmed a branded image from an organization she works for as her "background." When she tried to show me her copy of *White Noise* (a repurchase; she lost her original, dog-eared copy crammed with notes many years ago, and still resents this now-decade-old replacement), it flashed visible and invisible, interfering with the Zoom setting.

"Turn off your weird background," I said. "I can't see anything."

She smiled and cocked an eyebrow. "Are you sure? How about this one?" The beach I grew up playing on appeared behind her. "How about this one?" She was in the mountains. "How about this one?" The desert. "This one?"

She was excited to have looked over the book again for the first time in a few years. "I can't believe how funny it is! I took it so seriously when I first read it." Then again, she'd always been receptive to skepticism about technology and mass media. "Remember I didn't let you and your brother watch TV?"

"I remember. The book really was funny. He's a Hitler professor who can't even speak German?"

"Hilarious."

We chatted for an hour or so. She pointed to the echoes between Jack and Donald Trump. I wanted to know what reading it for the first time had felt like. She called me a few weeks later, after I'd been texting her about *White Noise* again. "I've been thinking more about that question you asked me, about whether I found the book funny when I read it the first time," she said.

"Tell me," I said.

"I think when the book first came out, and even when I first read it, we weren't so used to seeing the posture of dry, overweening wit, or of irony, as comedy." It was always clear that the book was humorous, she suggested, but the gesture of laughing out loud at jokes told about the sinking ship as it goes down is more recent. We are primed to laugh at black humor now, she said, and black humor becomes funnier, somehow, the blacker—or bleaker—things get. She mentioned rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

It so happened that when she called, I was reading a new book by the choreographer Annie-B Parson, *The Choreography of Everyday Life*. She observes, "I think it was Kundera who wrote that the definition of irony is one eye crying and the other eye watching that tear fall." This ability to hold our tears at a distance—whether they're tears of laughter or not—is something Americans have gotten very good at.

My mother will like the movie, I think. Especially the credits, which involve an elaborate dance sequence, zany and extravagant, set to the sounds of the first new LCD Soundsystem track in years. Baumbach loves credits at the end of movies. He likes to watch them all the way through, and he wants his audiences to as well. The dancing is his way of helping us over the finish line: He knows that Americans love a vacuous but well-executed spectacle. *A*

Jordan Kisner, a contributing writer at The Atlantic*, is the author of* Thin Places: Essays From In Between.

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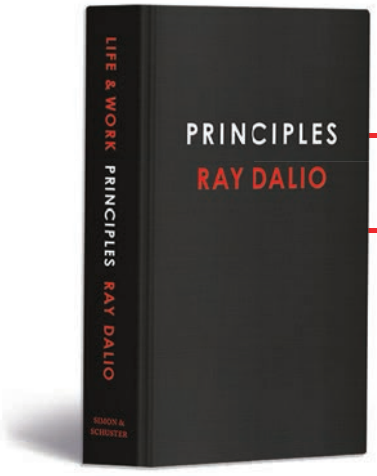

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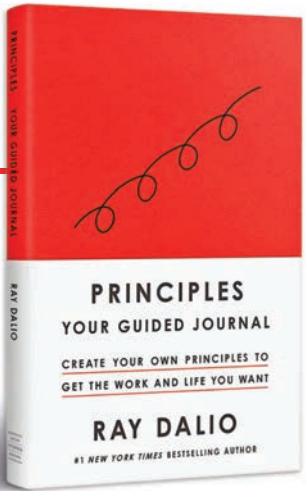

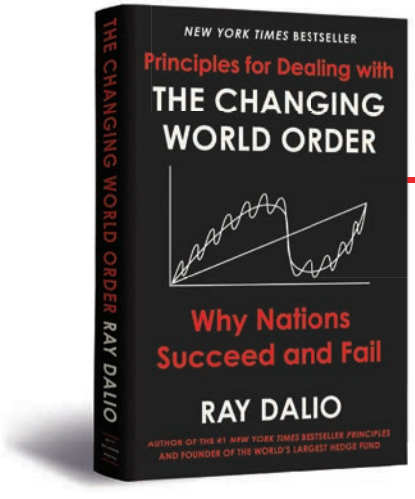

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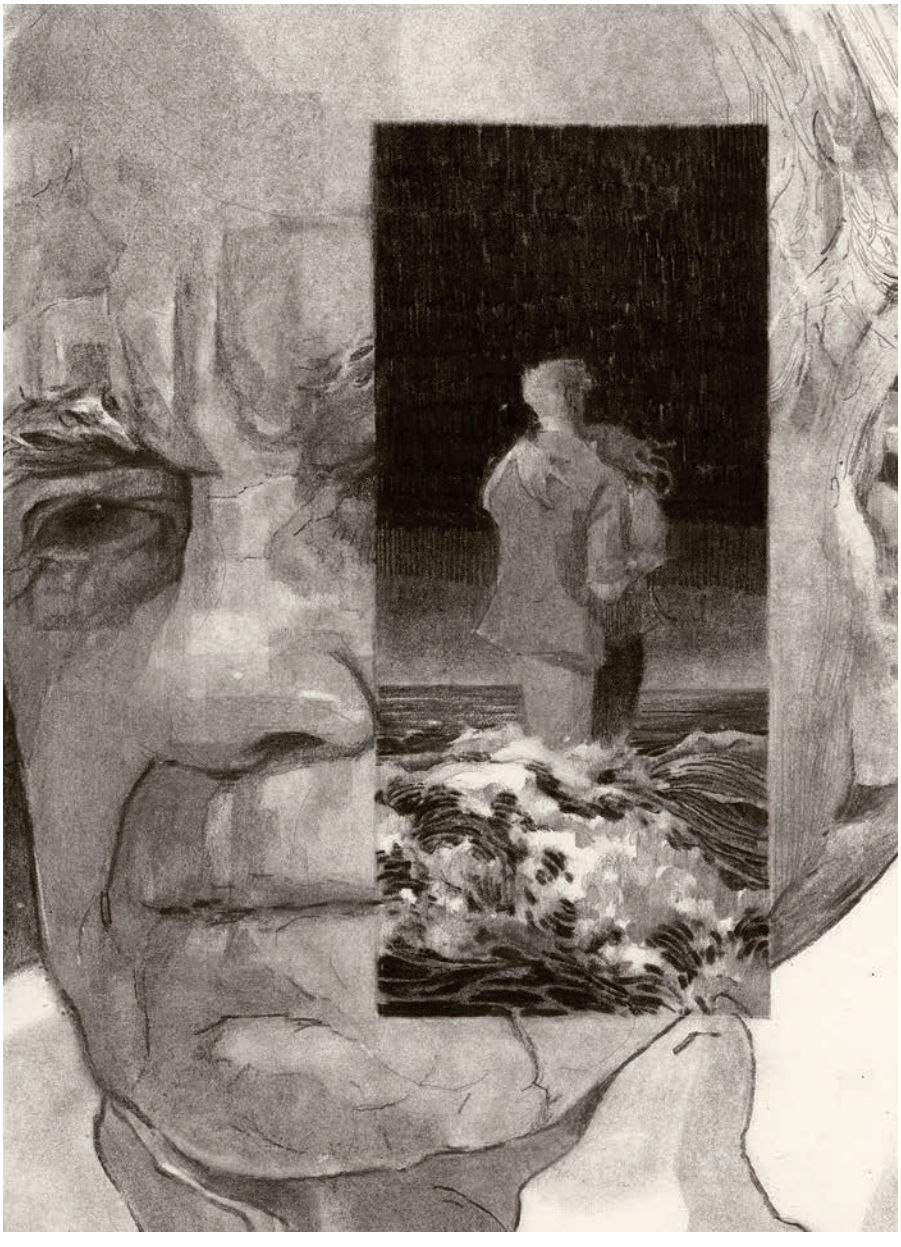
BOOKS

Cormac McCarthy Has Never Been Better

His two new novels are the pinnacle of a controversial career.

By Graeme Wood



The Passenger and *Stella Maris*, Cormac McCarthy's new novels, are his first in many years in which no horses are harmed and no humans scalped, shot, eaten, or brained with farm equipment. But you would be wrong to assume that the world depicted in these paired works of fiction, published a month and a half apart, is a cheerier place. "There are mornings when I wake and see a grayness to the world I think was not in evidence before," *The Passenger*'s most jovial character, John Sheddan, says to one of several other characters who are suicidally depressed. "The horrors of the past lose their edge, and in the doing they blind us to a world careening toward a darkness beyond the bitterest speculation."

McCarthy throws the reader an anchor of this sort every few pages, the kind of burdensome existential pronouncement that might weigh a lesser book down and make one long for the good old-fashioned Western equicide of McCarthy's earlier work. At least when a horse dies, it doesn't spend a week beforehand in the French Quarter musing about existence. For that matter, neither do most of McCarthy's previous human victims, who were too busy getting hacked or shot to death to see the darkness coming and philosophize about their condition. To twist a line from the poet Vachel Lindsay: They were lucky not because they died, but because they died so dreamlessly.

McCarthy's fervent admirers are bound to come to these novels with impossible expectations. The late critic Harold Bloom, who spoke for superfans of the writer everywhere, wrote that "no other living American novelist … has given us a book as strong and memorable as *Blood Meridian*," McCarthy's relentlessly bloody 1985 Western. That verdict came down back when Bloom favorites Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, and Don DeLillo still dominated the literary scene. McCarthy haters, equally passionate, find his writing mannered, his characters tediously

SOURCE IMAGE: KAROL JALOCHOWSKI / SANTA FE INSTITUTE / MILLER OMEGA PROGRAM

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES LEE CHIAHAN

masculine, and his plots—well, not really plots at all so much as excuses to find ever-fancier ways to rhapsodize about murder and carnage and the sublime landscape of the frontera.

The weirdness of McCarthy's style is hard to overstate. He abjures quotation marks and most commas and apostrophes, so even his text looks denuded and desertlike, with the remaining punctuation sprouting intermittently, like creosote bushes. (I once compared an uncorrected proof of *Blood Meridian* with the finished book. I found that he'd struck just a couple of commas from the final text. That amused me: *Looks good*, McCarthy must have decided. *But still too much punctuation.*) His language is archaic. Characters speak untranslated Spanish and, in *The Passenger*, a bit of German. The omniscient narrator makes no concession to readers unfamiliar with 19th-century saddlery, obscure geological terminology, and desert botany.

The narration therefore registers as omniscient in both a literary and theological sense—a voice of a merciless God, speaking in tones and language meant for his own purposes and not for ours. He presides over the incessantly violent *Blood Meridian* and the only intermittently violent Border Trilogy of the 1990s (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain*), and he delivers truths and edicts without any concern for whether members of his creation can understand them, though they are certainly bound by them. The language borrows heavily from the King James Bible, even when describing a bunch of unshowered dudes in *Blood Meridian*:

> Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat … wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all.

Here is McCarthy's God: a deranged psycho who not only tolerates his world's atrocities but conceives of them in these strange and inhuman terms.

McCarthy's God is a deranged psycho who not only tolerates his world's atrocities but conceives of them in strange and inhuman terms.

For some critics, a little of this goes way too far. "To record with the same somber majesty every aspect of a cowboy's life, from a knifefight to his lunchtime burrito, is to create what can only be described as kitsch," B. R. Myers wrote in *The Atlantic* 21 years ago. He quoted a particularly wacky excerpt from *All the Pretty Horses* and remarked, "It is a rare passage that can make you look up, wherever you may be, and wonder if you are being subjected to a diabolically thorough *Candid Camera* prank." *Blood Meridian* smacked the skepticism right out of me the first time I read it, but I have read it and most of McCarthy's other novels again since, this time with skepticism reinforced. Was I in the presence of divine wrath, or being punked? I concluded that any novel whose diction conjures questions of theodicy as well as the ghost of Allen Funt has something going for it.

THE NOVELS McCarthy published in 2022, at the age of 89, permanently resolve the question of whether McCarthy is a great novelist, or Louis L'Amour with a thesaurus. The booming, omnipotent narrative voice, which first appeared in McCarthy's Western novels of the 1980s and had already begun to fade in *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006), has ebbed almost entirely in these books—perhaps like the voice of Yahweh himself, as he transitioned from interventionist to absentee in the Old Testament. What remain are human voices, which is to say characters, contending with one another and with their own fears and regrets, as they face the prospect of the godless void that awaits them. The result is heavy but pleasurable, and together the books are the richest and strongest work of McCarthy's career.

The plots are surreal, and the characters speak often of their dreams. The principal doomed dreamers in these novels are siblings whose formal education exceeds that of all previous McCarthy characters combined: Bobby Western and his younger sister, Alicia. Their father worked on the Manhattan Project, and for his Promethean sins the next generation was punished. Alicia and Bobby shared a vague, incestuous erotic bond and (even more deviant) the curse of genius.

Bobby, the protagonist of *The Passenger*, studied physics at Caltech but forsook science to race cars in Europe; after an ugly accident, he took up work as a salvage diver based in New Orleans. This novel, released first, is set in the early '80s, some 10 years after Alicia killed herself. *Stella Maris* does not stand on its own and is best understood as an appendix to *The Passenger*. It belongs completely to Alicia and consists of a transcription of clinical interviews with a Dr. Cohen at a Wisconsin mental hospital shortly before her suicide. A math prodigy who studied at the University of Chicago and in France, Alicia left graduate training while struggling with anorexia and florid schizophrenic hallucinations. She is a key figure in *The Passenger*, too: Nine italicized sequences interspersed throughout Bobby's story recount her conversations with a hairless, deformed taunter called the Thalidomide Kid, or just the Kid. The Kid acts as a ringmaster and spokesperson for a company of other hallucinatory figures. If this roster of dramatis personae is hurting your brain, then the effect is probably intended, because not one of the characters is psychologically well.

The plot of *The Passenger* is mercifully simple—and meandering, as McCarthy's critics have complained of his books in general. Bobby is tormented by grief for having failed to save Alicia. His office dispatches him to search for survivors of a small passenger plane that crashed in shallow water. He finds corpses and signs of tampering. Someone got to the plane first. When he's back on land, men "dressed like Mormon missionaries" track him down, interrogate him, and suggest that one of the plane's passengers is unaccounted for. Their persecution intensifies, and Bobby (a quintessential McCarthy figure: laconic, cunning, prone to calamitous big decisions and canny small ones) spends the rest of the novel fleeing.

Bobby's friends—chief among them the libertine fraudster Sheddan and a trans woman named Debbie, a stripper—are no less Felliniesque than the cast that appears in his dead sister's hallucinations. Most of the novel is dialogue—if the thunderous omniscient narrator is listening, he's not interested—and by turns tender, ironic, bitter, and searching. Debbie, like many characters in the novel, is literate and philosophical, and funny. She describes her heartbreak as she realized late one night that she was alone in the world. "I was lying there and I thought: If there is no higher power then I'm it. And that just scared the shit out of me. There is no God and I am she." They are lowlifes and drunkards, but the sorts of lowlifes and drunkards who keep you lurking by them at the bar, even though you know they'll rob you or break your heart. What will they say next? A line pilfered from Shakespeare or Unamuno? A revelation about the hereafter—or about yourself?

The Shakespeare is no coincidence—and of course Shakespeare, too, was weak on plot; as William Hazlitt and later Bloom affirmed, the characters are what matter. McCarthy's Sheddan is an elongated Falstaff, skinny where Falstaff is fat, despite dining out constantly in the French Quarter on credit cards stolen from tourists. But like Falstaff, he is witty, and capable of uttering only the deepest verities whenever he is not telling outright lies. Bobby regularly shares in his stolen food and drink, and their dialogue—mostly Sheddan's side of it—provides the sharpest statement of Bobby's bind.

"A life without grief is no life at all," Sheddan tells him. "But regret is a prison. Some part of you which you deeply value lies forever impaled at a crossroads you can no longer find and never forget." The characters constantly tell each other about their dreams. Every barstool is an analyst's couch, and every conversation an interpretation of the night's omens. Sheddan's response to the void, which he sees with a clarity equal to Bobby's and Alicia's, is to live riotously. "You would give up your dreams in order to escape your nightmares," he tells Bobby, "and I would not. I think it's a bad bargain."

THE PASSENGER

Cormac McCarthy

KNOPF

STELLA MARIS

Cormac McCarthy

KNOPF

Alicia has no such wise interlocutors. *Stella Maris* is really an extended monologue, her shrink's contribution little more than comically minimal prompts. ("I should say that I only agreed to chat," she reminds him at the outset. "Not to any kind of therapy.") Critics who have doubted McCarthy's ability to write a female character must acknowledge that she is as idiosyncratically fucked-up as any of the protagonists in his previous oeuvre. If Sheddan is Falstaff, Alicia is Hamlet: voluble, funny, self-absorbed, and obsessed with the point, or pointlessness, of her continued survival. She is also completely nuts and, like Hamlet (whom she and Sheddan both quote, impishly and repeatedly), orders of magnitude too smart ever to be cured of what ails her. Bobby has a touch of Hamlet too, or possibly Ophelia—though his voyages into the watery depths are all round-trip.

Together they know too much, in almost every sense of that charged phrase. They know love, of a type one would be better off not knowing. Bobby has seen too much underwater. He and Alicia, cursed with a panoptic knowledge of science, literature, and philosophy, have reached a level of awareness indistinguishable from despair. The pursuit of Bobby by the mysterious Mormonlike men suggests that he has stumbled on forbidden facts (about criminals? extraterrestrials?). Alicia, too, seems to have arrived at certain bedrock truths about philosophy and math, and checked out of reality upon discovering how little even she, a woman of immeasurable intelligence, can understand. (Her trajectory mimics that of her mentor, Alexander Grothendieck, a real-life mathematician who gave up math, nearly starved himself to death, and became obsessed with the nature of dreams.) Her tone when speaking of the subject that once enthralled her is mournful. "When the last light in the last eye fades to black and takes all speculation with it forever," she says, "I think it could even be that these truths will glow for just a moment in the final light. Before the dark and the cold claim everything."

Long stretches of both novels involve discussions of neutrons, gluons, proof theory, and other arcana from modern physics and philosophy. One of the few points of agreement among physicists is that the world is stranger than humans tend to think, especially at extremes of size and time: What you see with your own eyes is definitely not what you get. *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* treat that spooky observation and its implications with the reverence they deserve. No actual math intrudes, and the discussions of technical subjects is Stoppardesque—accurate and playful and accessible, and nevertheless daunting to readers unacquainted with surnames like Glashow, Grothendieck, and Dirac. (No first names are included, not

that they would help anyone who needed them.) McCarthy's books have always been intimidating, even alienating. Now it's the characters, not the narrator, who do the alienating.

Alicia's death is foretold on the first page of the first novel. Bobby's is left ambiguous, and little is spoiled by my noting that time and space are pretzeled, that the nature of reality itself is suspect, and that he sometimes wishes that the car crash he suffered in Europe, just around the time when his sister was about to kill herself, had killed him rather than put him in a coma. "I'm not dead," Bobby tells Sheddan, who replies, "We wont quibble."

THESE NOVELS are enduring puzzles. Several readings have left the nature of their reality still enigmatic to me. Any novels as suffused with dreams, hallucination, and speculation as the two of them are will invite doubt as to what is really happening. "Do you believe in an afterlife?" the psychiatrist asks Alicia. "I dont believe in this one," she responds. Bobby and Alicia both have visions that call into question the nature of existence, and they are both fluent in the disorienting logic of the quantum-mechanical world. Having plumbed reality's depths, they are not sure whether to come back to the surface to join those who live in the world of the normal, like Sheddan and his gang. By my second reading I started to feel like I had remained down there on the seafloor with them, in a state of meditative loneliness that no other book in recent memory has inspired.

Sheddan seems to have tasted that loneliness, and found existential solace in literature, even of the most savage sort. "Any number of these books were penned in lieu of burning down the world—which was their author's true desire," he says at one point, having just noted Bobby's father's role in building apocalyptic munitions. I wonder whether Sheddan is accusing his own creator here, and his tendency toward violence. McCarthy's early southern-gothic period, comprising the four novels he published from 1965 to 1979, were Faulknerian, and at times darkly comic. Then came an even darker Melvillean middle, set in the Southwest and Mexico—nightmarish in *Blood Meridian* and romantic in *All the Pretty Horses* (1992)—and a desolate late period, with *No Country* and *The Road*.

Put another way, the early novels took place on a human scale, and *Blood Meridian* was about contests among humanoid creatures so violent and warlike that they might be gods and demons, a Western Götterdämmerung. The protagonist of the Border Trilogy was like a human on an expedition through this inhuman landscape. And the late novels featured humans forsaken by the gods and pitted against one another, or in the case of *No Country*, contending with demons and losing. McCarthy's latest, and probably last, novels represent a return to human concerns, but ones—love, death, guilt, illusion—experienced and scrutinized on the highest existential plane.

Having plumbed reality's depths, McCarthy's characters are not sure whether to come back to the surface to join those who live in the world of the normal.

I'm sure I wasn't alone in wondering, on hearing the news of two forthcoming McCarthy books, whether they would be noticeably geriatric in their energy, with that spectral quality familiar from other late literary creations. (There are many counterexamples, of course: the silvery vitality of Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*, the comic bitterness of Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*.) Such valedictory works are rarely among an author's best. But as a pair, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* are an achievement greater than *Blood Meridian*, his best earlier work, or *The Road*, his best recent one. In the new novels, McCarthy again sets bravery and ingenuity loose amid inhumanity. In *Blood Meridian*, the young protagonist confronts a ruthless demigod and tells him off. In *No Country*, Llewelyn Moss beholds the inevitability of his own destruction and that of everyone he cares about, and shoots back at the demon who pursues him. The Border Trilogy is about a boy who leaves home and discovers, with equal parts courage and ignorance, a world harsher to his heart and body than he had known.

Now we see characters whose vision of the world is hideous from the start. And the grappling with this vision is more direct and more profound. The McCarthy of previous novels did not appear to have much of an answer to the question that his imagination invited, a question that goes back to the ancient Greeks: What does a mortal do when all that matters is in the hands of the gods, or, in their absence, no one's? An almost-nonagenarian will of course think more acutely than a younger writer about fading from existence.

Just as Alicia imagines a final flickering glow of mathematical truth, Sheddan proposes to be a final holdout of humanism. He says he knows that Bobby has, like Sheddan, a heart whose loneliness is salved by literature. "But the real question is are we few the last of a lineage?" Wondering about the end of the age of literate culture, he tells his old friend, "The legacy of the word is a fragile thing for all its power, but I know where you stand, Squire. I know that there are words spoken by men ages dead that will never leave your heart." These novels feel like McCarthy's effort to produce such words, and to react to the dying of the light with Sheddan's vigor rather than Bobby's and Alicia's despair. The results are not weakly flickering. They are incandescent with life. *A*

Graeme Wood is a staff writer at The Atlantic *and the author of* The Way of the Strangers: Encounters With the Islamic State.

BOOKS

The Reinvention of the Catholic Church

Scandals have taken a toll, and faith is flagging in Europe and the U.S. But Catholicism isn't on the wane—it's changing in influential ways.

By Paul Elie

In May 2021, a time when public gatherings in England were strictly limited because of the coronavirus pandemic, the British tabloids were caught off guard by a stealth celebrity wedding in London. Westminster Cathedral—the "mother church" of Roman Catholics in England and Wales—was abruptly closed on a Saturday afternoon. Soon the groom and bride arrived: Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Carrie Symonds, a Catholic and a former Conservative Party press officer with whom he had fathered a child the previous year. A priest duly presided

VATICAN POOL / GETTY

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY CHANTAL JAHCHAN

over the marriage, despite the fact that the Catholic Church opposes divorce and sex outside marriage, and that Johnson had been married twice before and had taken up with Symonds before securing a divorce. It was an inadvertently vivid display of the Church's efforts to accommodate its teachings to worldly circumstances.

That same month, Church-state relations in the United States took a fresh turn when the Supreme Court decided to hear a case from Mississippi that challenged the legal right to abortion recognized in *Roe v. Wade*. The Court's decision reflected the power of its conservative majority, whose six members include five traditionalist Catholics. And it augured an eventual victory in a 50-year campaign against legal abortion, a movement anchored from the start in the Church teaching that life begins at conception—an absolute position on an issue that ordinary Catholics, like most other Americans, disagree about. The victory came this past June, when the Court struck down the constitutional right to abortion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.

Together, these episodes point up an incongruous recent development: the Catholic Church's assertive presence in public life even as Catholic faith and practice recede in families, schools, and neighborhoods in America and across Europe. As John T. McGreevy observes in *Catholicism: A Global History From the French Revolution to Pope Francis*, signs that the Church has lost vitality are abundant. Europe has seen parish closures, shrinking numbers of priests, dwindling attendance at weekly Mass, and steady departures from the faith. In the U.S., more than a third of people raised Catholic "no longer identify as such." The clerical sexual-abuse scandals have ravaged the Church's credibility, cost it billions of dollars, and put some of its leaders under criminal investigation.

At the same time, a rich variety of evidence suggests that Catholicism isn't on the wane; it's just changing. In recent decades, the pope—first John Paul II, then Benedict, and now Francis—has become a ubiquitous global figure, made so through jet travel, mass media, and a cult of personality. The view of "human dignity" framed in the 1930s by the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain—and enshrined in a United Nations declaration in 1948—has become a benchmark for international law and human-rights efforts. Africa, once seen as "pagan" missionary territory, is now home to a sixth of the world's Catholics—230 million people—and "high birth rates and high rates of adult conversion," McGreevy writes, "mean that African influence within the global church will continue to grow." In the U.S., the recent arch-Catholic remaking of the high court is likely to shape public policy for decades.

Over time, hostility to modern ideas became the default position of an institution that cleaved to an image of itself as unchanging.

McGreevy, a practicing Catholic and the provost of the University of Notre Dame, is well placed to offer perspective on the Church as an institution at once teetering and thriving. He's also a historian of Catholicism and has made its interactions with civil society a theme, one he approaches with an evenhandedness rare in the field. After *Parish Boundaries* (1996)—an account of race relations in various urban dioceses in the U.S. over five decades—he considered the country as a whole in *Catholicism and American Freedom* (2003). In *American Jesuits and the World* (2016), he extended his reach to Latin America.

Now taking the Church's global presence as his subject, McGreevy has written a lucid narrative of two and a half centuries of history, structured rather like a Ken Burns–Lynn Novick documentary. The chapters proceed in chronological sequence, organized around themes: the suppression of Catholicism in the 1700s, followed by its revival over the next hundred years; the Church's dealings with empire, democracy, and nationalism in the early 20th century; the post–Vatican II turmoil over birth control, priestly celibacy, and the "dechristianization" of Europe; and finally Pope Francis's application of Catholic teachings to such global problems as rising economic inequality and climate change. It's a book designed to provide a "savvy baseline," McGreevy writes, as Catholicism is "reinvented" in the years to come.

THE STANDARD narrative of the Church over the past two centuries depicts an institution dead set against the modern world abruptly swerving to embrace it. That narrative is simplistic, and McGreevy complicates it. His working idea is that Catholicism began its encounter with the modern world well before Pope John XXIII, in opening the Second Vatican Council in 1962, asked the bishops assembled in Rome "to ignore 'prophets of doom' who saw in 'modern times nothing but prevarication and ruin.'" In McGreevy's telling, the shifting began in 1789. The French Revolution produced a government hostile to Catholicism and sparked the revolutions of 1848 that in turn shaped the modern nation-state. Ever since, the Church has been engaged in a struggle to address social, moral, and political developments while maintaining a consistent religious identity.

The first third of the book explores how the Church, in the decades after 1789, dogmatically opposed modernity, while making practical accommodations to the changing societies in which its members lived. Pope Pius VII signed a concordat with Napoleon (whose troops controlled Rome) and traveled to Paris for his coronation as emperor in

1804. Yet newly cut off from state power and dismayed by the Enlightenment's stress on individualism, Catholic leaders in France, especially, responded to an urbanizing industrial age by erecting what McGreevy calls a "milieu" of schools, seminaries, hospitals, and orphanages as a rigidly ordered parallel world set against unruly civil society. Those "Reform Catholics" (McGreevy's term) who did strive to fit their local churches into the new order of nation-states met with resistance from the "ultramontanists," who regarded the pope as a pan-European absolute monarch and the Church as a bulwark against surging democracy.

The conflict came to a head at the First Vatican Council, in 1869. McGreevy cites a French observer's account of the gathering's anti-worldly spirit: "The church, through its supreme pastor, says to the lay world, to lay society, and to lay authorities: It is apart from you that I want to exist, to take action, to make decisions, and to develop, affirm, and understand myself." The ultramontanists prevailed, and the Catholicism then exported to the Americas through mass emigration was leery of democracy—and of citizens' efforts to expand the right to vote to women and to allow moral issues to be decided by majority rule (or vulgar haggling in the statehouse).

Over time, hostility to modern ideas became the default position of an institution that cleaved to an image of itself as premodern and unchanging. Again and again, the Church's certainty about what it was against clouded its sense of what it should support, as it adapted to circumstances in ways that seem glaringly inconsistent today. Although the Church criticized the slave trade in Africa, Catholic leaders were slow to support the abolition of slavery in the United States—"so opposed were they to the individualist (at times anti-Catholic) rhetoric they associated with liberal Protestant or secular abolitionists," McGreevy writes. They fiercely denounced anti-Catholic quotas and discrimination in the United Kingdom, where Anglicanism was the state religion; meanwhile, they ensured that the new republics in Latin America recognized Catholicism as the "national religion," and often condoned exclusionary practices against Jews and Protestants. Strangely, the Church lined up against both industrial capitalism and working-class socialism—with many Catholics believing that both were controlled by Jews.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 prompted the Church to recognize democracy as a form of government more favorable to belief than atheistic communism was. But the Church's rejection of Bolshevism led it—in enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend style—to back unjust regimes: Mussolini's Fascists in Italy, Franco's Falangists in Spain (where the Loyalists were violently anti-Catholic), and the Nazi Party of Adolf Hitler, whom the Vatican praised for his anti-Bolshevism before adopting its notorious neutrality during World War II. "In majority Catholic states such as Brazil, Portugal, and Austria," McGreevy observes, politicians and Church leaders together articulated "a distinct Catholic authoritarian vision," made up of "a fierce anti-communism, an underlying drumbeat of anti-Semitism, and skepticism about democratic politics."

After the war, the Church boosted Christian Democratic parties in Italy, France, and Germany; endorsed an independence movement led by the Catholic Léopold Senghor in Senegal; backed the Catholic Ngô Đình Diệm's postindependence regime in South Vietnam; and propped up antidemocratic oligarchies in Latin America—all as fire walls against communism. It kept up its opposition to postwar stirrings of inclusion—of Catholics in public schools, women in the workplace, sex in the movies.

Yet great ferment was under way in Catholic intellectual life, as theologians at still-robust seminaries in Europe merged Church traditions with continental philosophy. New approaches to liturgy (shifting from Latin to vernacular languages), biblical interpretation (undertaking fresh scrutiny of the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic sources), and interreligious dialogue (challenging the idea that Catholics were duty-bound to oppose other faiths) thrived. In response, John XXIII called the world's Catholic bishops to Rome for reflection on the state of the Church in an ecumenical council—Vatican II—and appointed vanguard theologians to advise them.

As the council progressed from 1962 to 1965, the image of Catholicism as a bulwark against modernity was replaced by a vision of a "pilgrim Church" providing humble service to a world in which war, migration, the spread of state-sponsored atheism, and rapid changes in technology had left people desperately in need of a religious perspective. It was time, in McGreevy's words, "for Catholics and the church to take on the world's problems as their own," living their faith (as Pope John had proposed) "in such a way as to attract others less by doctrine than 'by good example.'"

Soon "the world rushed in": the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the birth-control pill, the cresting of the movement for Black civil rights. Pope John's successor, Pope Paul VI, met with Martin Luther King Jr.—over the objections of Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York, who was suspicious of Communist leanings among civil-rights activists. Catholics marched for peace, priests ran for office, and black-clad nuns adopted plain dress and went to graduate school.

CATHOLICISM: A GLOBAL HISTORY FROM THE FRENCH REVOLUTION TO POPE FRANCIS

John T. McGreevy

NORTON

THE VATICAN'S opposition to modernity had given Catholics a common adversary to unite against, and had suppressed the Church's internal disagreements. Vatican II brought these out into the open. Since then, an institution long defined by what it was against has had to ask itself: What is the Church *for*—what vision of life does it strive to fulfill?

The challenge of offering answers has fallen, at least publicly and rhetorically, to the popes, who have used the papacy to promote distinct programs for engagement with the world. John Paul II affirmed that the Church stands for "a culture of life" against a "culture of death"—taking an approach to human flourishing grounded in a fixed view of gender roles, marriage, and procreation. Benedict XVI saw the Church as the source of objective truth, opposing a "dictatorship of relativism." Francis proposes that the Church foster "a culture of encounter," in which people of faith thrive through face-to-face dealings with others of different backgrounds and outlooks, forging a solidarity stronger than nation, class, or ideology.

Vatican II invited Catholics to do openly what they'd tried to do surreptitiously all through the modern age—adapt the Church's practices to local circumstances where possible—and those papal programs (unfamiliar to most Catholics) have been meant to guide the bishops as they seek to influence civil society in their home countries. Unsurprisingly, consistency has not been the rule since 1965 any more than it was after 1789. Sometimes the tensions involve geopolitics: John Paul championed a people's movement against oppressive state power in Poland while opposing people's movements against oppressive state power in Central America. Sometimes they arise from a split between doctrine and practice: Although women now run the offices in many U.S. parishes, the sacramental theology barring women from the priesthood still prevails in Rome. And sometimes a shift in tactics is at work, as when hard-right American Catholics switched from decrying the "activist Court" that ruled in *Roe v. Wade* to helping form an "activist Court" rooted in traditionalist Catholic principles.

All along, the Church hasn't been able to shake a habit of opposition to the nation-state when it is seen as running amok. In the U.S., that habit has paradoxically enabled the Church to maintain a robust public profile even as it loses its hold on ordinary believers. Catholic progressives were never so ardent, or so prominent, as when they came together in the 1970s to oppose U.S.-funded authoritarianism in Central and South America. Catholic traditionalists gained cohesion from their unwavering opposition to abortion, a cause that gathered momentum after *Roe*, aided by the unstinting support of American bishops, who joined fundraising dinners and blessed rallies such as the annual March for Life in Washington. Even as parish life in neighborhoods atrophied and Catholic schools closed, each movement drew headlines, styling itself as a faithful Catholic remnant valiantly standing up to worldly powers. For progressives, the struggle to thwart an anti-communist "Reagan doctrine"—a policy aligned with the Vatican's—proved exhausting. For traditionalists, by contrast, the striking down of *Roe* is evidence that a clear message can win out against what they see as ever looser social mores.

On abortion, the bishops haven't managed to convince their own people: Polls indicate that Catholics' views are as varied as those of Americans as a whole.

The Court's decision in *Dobbs* can be seen as a very public victory, too, in the Church's long and conflict-ridden relations with the state. It's a victory for the bishops in particular. Only a few years ago, the scandal of clerical sexual abuse—which they and their predecessors had evaded and covered up for decades—seemed to leave them stripped of moral authority. Now they have helped bring about a pronounced legal change on a vexed moral issue.

If it's a victory, however, it's a strange one. On abortion, the bishops haven't managed to convince their own people: Polls indicate that Catholics' views are as varied as those of Americans as a whole. As men vowed to celibacy, the bishops can't lead by example on this issue, and for the most part, they haven't tried coercion—by, say, withholding Communion from pro-abortion-rights Catholics, though that may be changing. Rather, they've opted to collaborate with a legal movement that is agnostic on many moral issues (capital punishment, for one, and those involving wealth and poverty), in the interest of elevating a cadre of "originalist" jurists whose rulings have made the anti-abortion position the basis for laws that restrict the rights of Americans broadly.

Strange as the victory is, though, it fits a pattern of Catholic dealings with modernity that will seem familiar from the Church's history since 1789. The institution has set itself against one aspect of the modern state (an entrenched legal precedent, in this case) by accommodating a different one (the judicial branch, whose structure of appointed potentates resembles the Church hierarchy). The bishops have exercised the power they enjoy as leaders of a large religious community while scanting the views on pregnancy and family of millions of the faithful in that community. Once again, it's hard to tell what the Catholic Church is for, but everybody knows what it is against. *A*

Paul Elie is a senior fellow at Georgetown University and the author, most recently, of Reinventing Bach.

BOOKS

Why Read Literary Biography?

What Shirley Hazzard's life can, and can't, tell us about her fiction

By Lauren Groff

What strange beasts literary biographies are, how mixed their reasons for existing. The desire to read one must come from admiration for the writer's work, but a literary biographer's central concern isn't a writer's work; it's the writer's life. And, though the gods of capitalism may grumble at my saying this, an artist's work and life are radically separate things. The art comes alive only when it meets another mind, like desert seeds that wait patiently until a freak rainfall wakes them, flowering, from sleep. A life, however, is made of baser stuff, such as breakdowns in grocery-store checkouts, simmering humiliations too banal to record, deeply questionable habits of hygiene. Any smart reader understands that no biography could possibly reveal its subject's true life, which is to say the humming, prismatic, spiky interior one that gives rise to the writer's works. We readers are only voyeurs, at a remove from a unique imagination, trying to peep in. The best that literary biographies can do is build a good simulacrum: a scrupulously explicated version of events that happened, a valiant attempt at a filled-in outline.

Still, a window into a famous person's birth-to-death story may offer enormous and sometimes prurient satisfactions. We can embed ourselves in the subject's network of famous friends and feel glamorous enough to sit at their lunch table; we can visit the scandals of the time, get the inside scoop on all the spicy erotic entanglements. Some biographies reveal a writer's disturbed political views (Ezra Pound), or history of mental illness (John Clare), or sexual

CRAIG SILLITOE / FAIRFAX MEDIA / GETTY

identities previously hidden. In his biography of Lytton Strachey, published in the late 1960s, Michael Holroyd outed Strachey to readers as homosexual, decisively shifting the genre's focus from public to private concerns, it has been said. Some biographies earnestly explore how writers could have been so brilliant on the page but so defeated by life that they took their own (Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, David Foster Wallace). Such portrayals can end up burning nearly as bright in our collective memory as the art does, because the sensational makes for a good story.

This somewhat vulgar mode of curiosity—it does scratch the universal human itch for gossip—is usually intermingled with (though rarely totally disguised by) higher-brow interests. A literary biography can retouch in vivid colors certain important literary people whose outlines have faded over time (William Blake). It can be an attempt to come closer to the historical context of the work, exposing influences that shaped it and showing how a writer sent ripples through their cultural, social, and political era and beyond (James Baldwin).

As I read Brigitta Olubas's *Shirley Hazzard: A Writing Life*, I found myself wondering if biographers may experience a version of the reader's hunger for this sense of larger historical intimacy. Perhaps one of their imperatives is to make those ripples spread as far as possible beyond the writer's pages, to elevate their subject's cultural standing. At any rate, given that no Titans of Literature exist, or so it seems, without a biography faithfully parsing their life, perhaps the presence of a biography is itself a declaration that a writer yet to be called Great should join the club. Olubas's book is the first to chronicle the life of the Australian American writer who died at 85, in 2016, and its meticulously researched, intricately detailed, and calmly paced 467 pages implicitly try to make the case that Hazzard is due more serious recognition than she has so far been given.

I was curious about Hazzard's life because I have read all of her work—four novels, three short-story collections (the last an omnibus, published posthumously, that includes previously uncollected stories), three nonfiction books (among them, two critiques of the United Nations), and an essay collection. During many long, insomniac Florida nights, I've also read most of the interviews with her that one can find with a Wi-Fi connection. I am a Hazzard completist primarily because the third of her four novels, *The Transit of Venus* (1980), is a razor-sharp masterpiece. As I wrote in the introduction to the Penguin Classics 2021 reissue, I think it is one of the great novels of the 20th century, against all odds: It is the most unsentimental book ever to be devoted to transcendent love. I've reread it every year for the past two decades, drawn to Hazzard's exquisite prose and her attentiveness to the workings, both intimate and structural, of power.

The Transit of Venus *is the most unsentimental book ever to be devoted to transcendent love.*

OLUBAS'S BOOK confirms what I had already gathered about Hazzard's life: that it featured little in the way of sensational adventure (unless you count youthful love affairs), but a great deal in the way of beauty, travel, books, and privilege. She was born in 1931 in Australia, to middle-class parents of humble origins—a selfish and self-made father and a stunningly beautiful horror show of a mother, the kind of person who would send her daughters casual threats of suicide when she felt lonely or unloved. A bookish girl, Hazzard never finished high school, because at 16, she was uprooted when her father became the Australian trade commissioner for Hong Kong and commercial counselor for Canton. Compared with Sydney, which had seemed to her a stultifying and cultureless backwater, Hong Kong felt vibrant and exotic and full of life.

She promptly took a job in a British-intelligence unit, where at last she met "people who had had what used to be called a classical education, and who displayed this knowledge in the most marvellous, natural way," she said in an interview later in her life. There her love of poetry bloomed, and she became someone who had poems perfectly memorized for any occasion, often flinging them like fistfuls of confetti into dinner-party conversations. (In the late 1960s, in a café on Capri, Graham Greene was reciting the end of a Browning poem for a friend but got stuck on the last line. Hazzard, who was passing by, tossed it to him, and a long and fractious friendship began, one that she later wrote about in a memoir called *Greene on Capri*.)

By the time the Hazzard family returned to the antipodes, the brief Hong Kong posting over, 17-year-old Shirley had fallen deeply in love with a dashing White Russian named Alexis Vedeniapine, her superior at the office and 15 years her senior. She was miserable apart from him, and their engagement ultimately failed. When her father was posted to New York in 1951, she was glad of the chance to reset her life. She found a secretarial job at the United Nations and began another intense love affair. In 1956, when she was 25 and had been recently abandoned by her married lover, her smattering of Italian led to a temporary position at a UN emergency mission in Naples. During that year she discovered the great passion for Italy that never faded, and she quietly embarked on her life as a writer who, Olubas emphasizes, often drew on her own experience.

Back in New York, working at the UN, Hazzard was also writing, and for the next few years she saved her pennies for summer trips to Tuscany, where she lived in a private house that served as an unofficial artists' residency. She started submitting her stories for publication, and after several rejections from *The New Yorker*, William Maxwell accepted one in the summer of 1960, shortly before she turned 30;

he later recalled the astonishment of his colleagues, "because it was the work of a finished literary artist about whom they knew nothing whatever." A flurry of acceptances followed.

Hazzard began to make literary friends, most notably the novelist Muriel Spark, whom she'd met when Spark was in town for the launch of the U.S. edition of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The two became close, and it was through Spark that Hazzard met the great love and anchor of her life, the esteemed and wealthy writer Francis Steegmuller, who wrote novels that sank quickly, but also brilliant translations and literary biographies of writers such as Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant that remain afloat today. At the time the two met, she was barely 32 and he, at nearly 57, was grieving the death of his first wife. He was somewhat nastily up front that he didn't want a long-term relationship with Hazzard, but soon enough they were married.

HERE I ADMIT to finding a startling split in her life, at least as Olubas has presented it. Shirley Hazzard before Francis Steegmuller is delightfully, emotionally chaotic; self-driven; economical out of necessity; and ardently in love with literature and beauty and love for the sake of love. Shirley Hazzard after Francis Steegmuller becomes a personage, aware of her elevated station in the world and her ability to flit to Europe and back multiple times a year; she is a caretaker of her husband's genius and his extensive art collection, as well as of her own literary reputation. A circumspection has crept into the portrait, something obsessively neat, as though her life—or at least the written traces of it she left behind—is now as painstakingly composed as her work itself.

Maybe a new stiffness comes into the narrative because the early years of life with Steegmuller were her most productive as a writer, and she began to carry with her a sense of her status as a public persona. Perhaps, I began to suspect as I read on, she became hyperaware of what sorts of things might be of biographical interest, living as she did with a literary biographer and helping him with his work. The studious accumulation of famous friends—Maxwell, Lillian Hellman, James Merrill, Bruce Chatwin, Jonathan Galassi, and on and on—starts to seem like a collection of pinned butterflies, cultivated not only out of personal interest and love, but also, perhaps, to supply literary cachet that an eventual biographer would welcome. As one friend observed of her, Hazzard was "a fabulous name dropper."

Or maybe I'm being unfair, and the arc of Hazzard's life, along with Olubas's straightforward chronological approach, account for this feeling of constraint. The pace at which she published novels slowed, even as the awards piled up; *The Evening of the Holiday* came out in 1966 and *The Bay of Noon* (a National Book Award finalist) in 1970. A decade passed before *The Transit of Venus* appeared (and won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction), and *The Great Fire*, a National Book Award winner, arrived in 2003, after a 23-year gap. Though her later life was peripatetic and rich with friends and beautiful places, it did not contain much eventful drama to mark the passing of the years.

SHIRLEY HAZZARD: A WRITING LIFE

Brigitta Olubas

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

WHEN I TURN to literary biography, it is because I am seduced by the genre's promise to offer clarification, a promise that is most compelling when the subject is a writer of poetry, or of other especially elliptical or mysterious work. We read a life of Emily Dickinson in the hope that precise details of her days as an introvert in Amherst will build a solid bridge between her gorgeous abstractions and our own slippery interpretations. Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* is grand and old-fashioned in its scope and its focus on big ideas—about fate, time, goodness; it is narratively daring in its shifting patterns, its startling prose, its unexpected humor, its ambiguous end, all of which surprise again and again. But this book is not, I think, best served by looking to the life of its author for help in unraveling its full significance. As much as Hazzard loved poetry, her novel is not elliptical like poetry; the meaning is already subtly layered into its pages. More broadly, seeking clarification in biography is perhaps a paradoxical approach to understanding art. Instead of allowing a work's enigmas to expand outward into the larger world, to reverberate in strange ways, the effect is to fix its meaning to the confines of a particular existence.

This is the deflation I couldn't help feeling when I emerged from Olubas's account, though it is as scrupulous and well written as any subject could hope a literary biography to be. The person behind the fiction stands revealed as so much smaller than the fiction itself, less interesting, less important, less distinctive. The spectacle-seeker in me was sad to learn no big secrets and discover no great mysteries; the more serious reader in me was disappointed too. I was no more convinced than I had been before reading the book that Hazzard had wielded notable sway in her cultural moment. She has, though, left other writers who, like me, adore *The Transit of Venus* feeling awed and inspired in an intensely intimate way. Which is, in the end, how literary influence thrives. We have Hazzard's books. We don't need to know how much her life figured in her writing to respond to the vitality beating just below the surface of her art. *A*

Lauren Groff is the author, most recently, of Matrix.

Bridgett Floyd
President,
The George Floyd
Memorial Foundation

BRIDGETT TURNED PAIN INTO PURPOSE

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd Jr. changed the world and Bridgett Floyd's life forever. While the world protested, donated, and wrote letters in response, George's sister, Bridgett was left with an unspeakable pain. But then she and other Floyd family members turned that pain into a higher purpose. Today, she makes sure love and George's legacy live on through the George Floyd Memorial Foundation and its mission to fight for racial justice.

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ad COUNCIL

Join Bridgett's cause and fight for racial justice for the Black community now at **LoveHasNoLabels.com**

The Myth of the Frontier Won't Die

By Noah Hawley

In our popular culture and in our politics, we're returning to the Old West. The strong survive and the weak surrender, and differences are resolved at the end of a gun.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MATT HUYNH

The problem is not that there is evil in the world. The problem is that there is good. Because otherwise, who would care?

— V. M. Varga

There have been four (soon to be five) seasons of the TV show *Fargo*, adapted from the Oscar-winning film written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. I am the show's creator, writer, and primary director. When I pitched my adaptation of the film to executives at FX, I said, "It's the story of the people we long to be—decent, loyal, kind—versus the people we fear the most: cynical and violent." I imagined it as a true-crime story that isn't true, about reluctant heroes rising to face an evil tide.

This vision of Americans is, of course, a myth.

It is summer 2022, and I am on a road trip with my family from Austin, Texas, to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. States to be visited include New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. As we cross each state line, my wife asks, "Do I have all my rights here?" The week before our departure, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, making what was a fundamental right contingent on which state a woman happens to be in. So Kyle wants to know, as we enter each state, whether she is a full citizen in this place, or a handmaid. It's handmaid in two out of five, I tell her. And in one of them, our 15-year-old daughter could be forced to have a baby if she were raped.

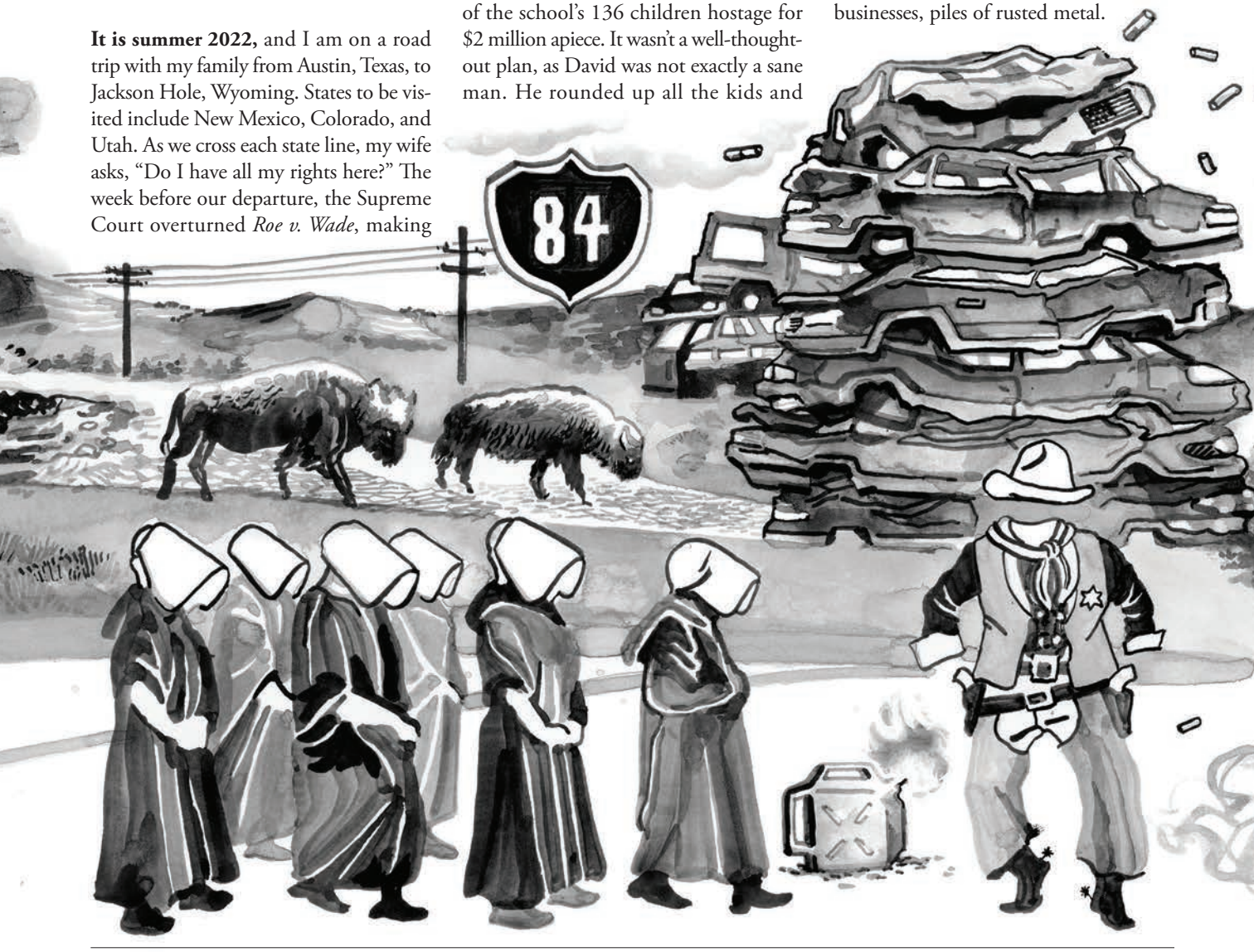
On May 16, 1986, David and Doris Young entered an elementary school in Cokeville, Wyoming. They carried semiautomatic weapons and a homemade gasoline bomb. David had spent the previous few years working on a philosophical treatise he called "Zero Equals Infinity." This is how it is with a certain type of American male. They start with Nietzsche. They end with carnage.

David had devised a plan to hold each of the school's 136 children hostage for $2 million apiece. It wasn't a well-thought-out plan, as David was not exactly a sane man. He rounded up all the kids and handed the bomb's detonator to his wife, then excused himself and went to the bathroom. Moments later, he heard the explosion. His wife had ignited the device accidentally, bursting into flames. Horrified, the children fled the building.

David found his wife writhing in agony on the classroom floor. He shot her in the head, then turned the gun on himself.

So much for the big ideas of small men.

We stopped for gas in Cokeville on our way north. Rising through the West, we experienced what a philosopher might call reality. The physical world: sagebrush and junkyards, dry streambeds and buttes. The sulfur baths of Pagosa Springs, the road-running groundhogs of eastern Utah. Fewer Donald Trump signs than I'd expected, but more poverty. Abandoned homes and businesses, piles of rusted metal.



We saw that each state is in fact multiple states; southeastern New Mexico looks nothing like northwestern New Mexico.

As we drove, we streamed music and listened to podcasts. Texts, emails, and news alerts pinged my phone. In the back seat, my daughter Snapchatted with her friends. It is said that one cannot be in two places at once, but there we were, our bodies moving in tandem through physical America as our minds journeyed alone through a virtual land, one born in a computer lab decades ago: Internet America. This virtual nation is arguably more real to most Americans than all the stop signs, livestock, and boarded-up storefronts.

Internet America is the place where our myths become dogma.

Let me ask you something. When you see a cardboard cutout of Donald Trump's head on Rambo's body, do you think, *Why Rambo?*

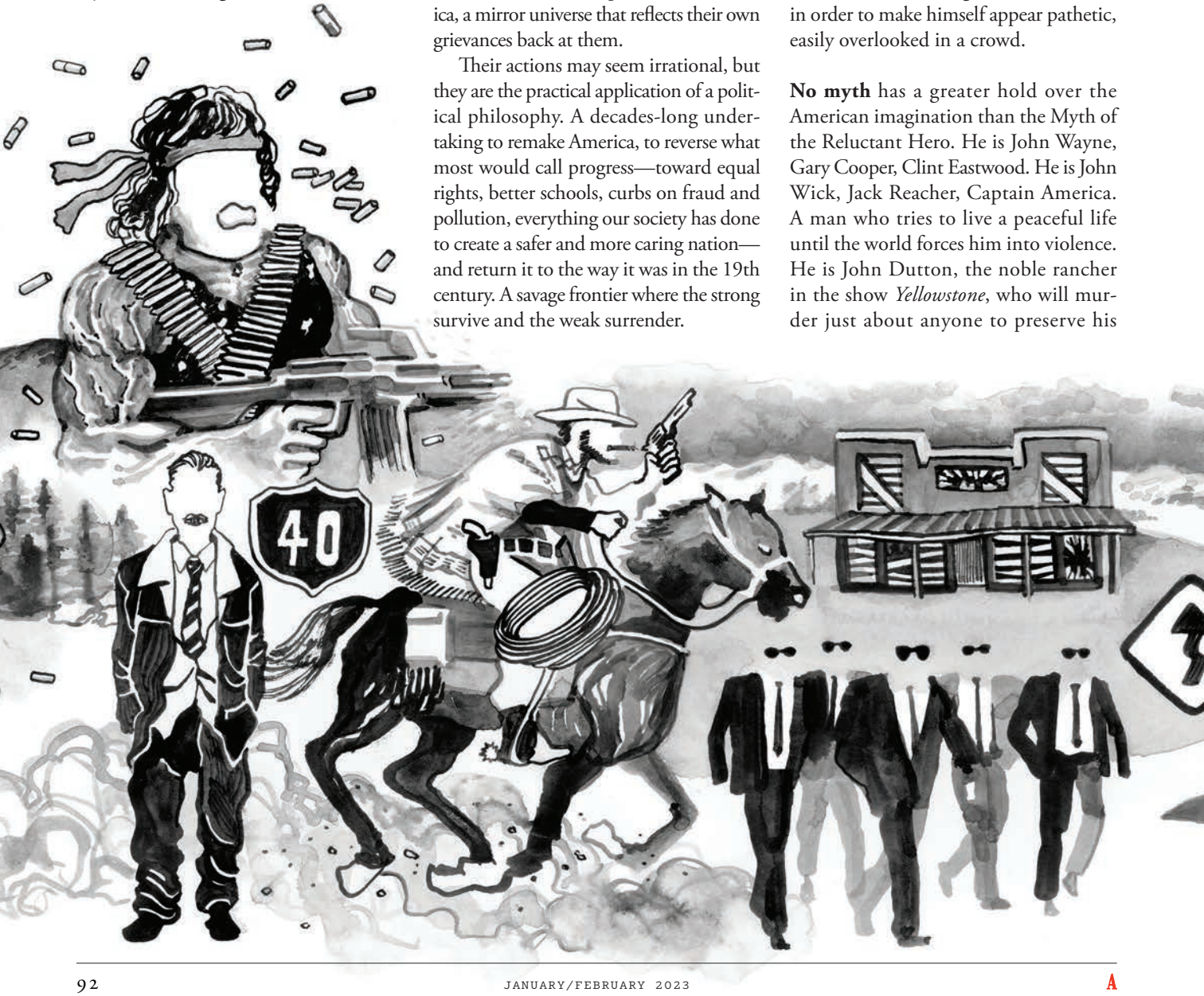
I tell you the story of David and Doris Young not because it is remarkable—maybe it used to be, in the 1980s and '90s, but not anymore. I tell it to you because this figure, the violent outsider driven by extremist views and hate-filled philosophies, is everywhere now. Incel spree-killers and race-war propagators. Young white men radicalized and weaponized. They are the children of the Unabomber, each with his own self-aggrandizing manifesto. They live not in Albany, Pittsburgh, or Spokane, but in the closed information loop of Internet America, a mirror universe that reflects their own grievances back at them.

Their actions may seem irrational, but they are the practical application of a political philosophy. A decades-long undertaking to remake America, to reverse what most would call progress—toward equal rights, better schools, curbs on fraud and pollution, everything our society has done to create a safer and more caring nation—and return it to the way it was in the 19th century. A savage frontier where the strong survive and the weak surrender.

In a hotel lobby in Big Spring, Texas, my daughter and son watch the police arrest a young man for strangling his girlfriend. She is carried out on a stretcher. It has been 36 hours since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned.

I think about the power of myth often. Though the series poses as "a true story," each season of *Fargo* is designed as a modern myth, a tall tale of midwestern crime. On-screen, myths are created not just through story action, but through everything from lens choice to costume. Picture the black suits and skinny ties of *Reservoir Dogs*. Or the Willy Loman raincoat worn by the criminal mastermind V. M. Varga, the antagonist of *Fargo*'s third season, a sad disguise he has chosen in order to make himself appear pathetic, easily overlooked in a crowd.

No myth has a greater hold over the American imagination than the Myth of the Reluctant Hero. He is John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Clint Eastwood. He is John Wick, Jack Reacher, Captain America. A man who tries to live a peaceful life until the world forces him into violence. He is John Dutton, the noble rancher in the show *Yellowstone*, who will murder just about anyone to preserve his



way of life, to protect his family and his land. The violence is not his choice, you understand. It is thrust upon him by the demon-tongued forces of progress, modernity, and greed. But he is prepared. And in the end, he is capable of far greater brutality than his enemy.

This is why Trump's face is on Rambo's body. Who was Rambo if not a reluctant hero trying to live a life of peace? But the system—small-town cops with their rules and laws—wouldn't leave him alone. So he did what he had to do, which was destroy the system that oppressed him.

This is how a man must be, the myth tells us: interested in peace, but built for war.

As we enter Colorado, Kyle and I discover an inverse correlation between vehicles that display the American flag and vehicles that follow the rules of the road. As if the performance of patriotism frees one from responsibility, not just to the law, but to other people. Cruise control set, we wince as decorative patriots speed past us, tailgating slower vehicles and veering wildly from lane to lane.

It makes me think of a line from Sebastian Junger, who wrote, "The idea that we can enjoy the benefits of society while owing nothing in return is literally infantile. Only children owe nothing."

High noon is coming, we're told. Only in this way can the story be resolved: The good guy with a gun kills the bad guy with a gun.

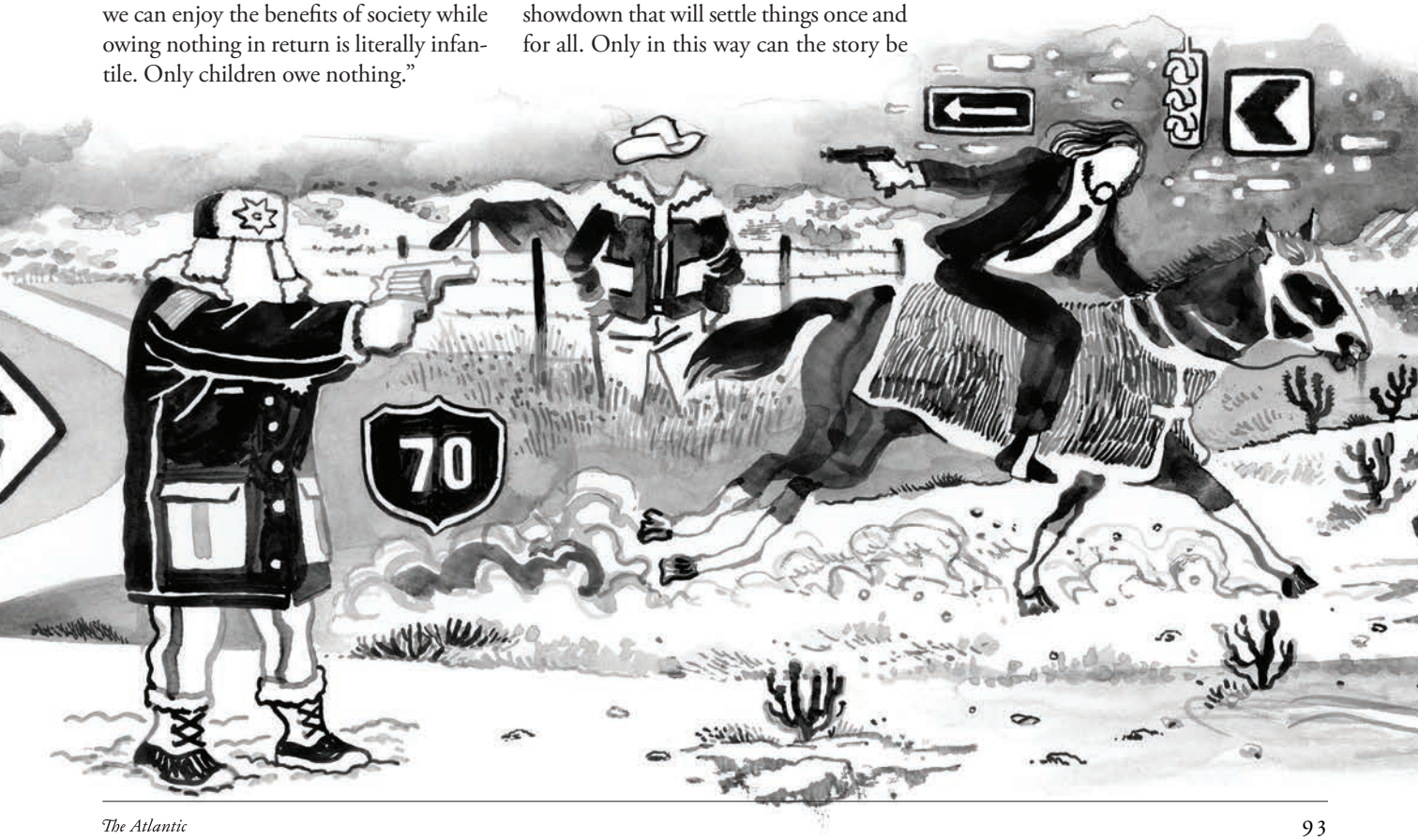
The clearest visual representation of the struggle between good and evil is the white hat and the black hat.

Symbols from the heyday of the Hollywood Western, the white hat and the black hat create a gravity well that storytellers struggle to escape even now. Specifically, the expectation that every story must have a hero and a villain, and that at the end the hero must face the villain in a gunfight (literal or metaphorical) that results in death. High noon is coming, we're told, a final showdown that will settle things once and for all. Only in this way can the story be resolved: The good guy with a gun kills the bad guy with a gun.

This is not how real life works. Nor is it how the film *Fargo* works. When Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) is arrested at the end, Chief Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) is not there. Lundegaard has fled the state, is out of her jurisdiction. The viewer is thus robbed of that crucial showdown—of the hero vanquishing the villain—a choice that felt unsatisfying to some. What you saw instead was actual justice, a system at work, delivering consequences efficiently yet impersonally.

The reluctant hero is noble. He is capable of collaboration, but happier on his own. He is every cop told to drop the case who refuses to quit.

I have created these characters myself. In the first three seasons of *Fargo*, each of my tenacious if agreeable deputies finds him- or herself at odds with the police force writ large. Molly Solverson; her father, Lou; and Gloria Burgle—each must go it alone (or with the help of a partner) to solve the case and bring the forces of darkness to justice.



It is a seductive premise, the idea of the individual versus the state. Writers as different as Franz Kafka and Tom Clancy have made a career of it. But this year on *Fargo* I feel compelled to champion the system of justice, not the exploits of a single person—to spotlight the collective efforts of a team of hardworking public servants putting in the hours, solving the cases, bringing the wicked to account. In the real world this is how the peace is kept, how rules and laws are written and enforced.

Here's an exchange from the next season of *Fargo*:

Gator: "I swear to God, him versus me, man to man, and I'd wipe the floor with him."

Roy: "What, like high noon? That only happens in the movies, son. In real life they slit your throat while you're waiting for the light to change."

The moral of the Myth of the Reluctant Hero is always the same: If you want real justice, you have to get it yourself.

There is a name for this form of justice. It is called frontier justice. And it's an idea worth exploring, because we are all of us being dragged back to the frontier, whether we like it or not.

The belief that America has become a hell on Earth—"a cesspool of crime," in Trump's words—is rampant on the new frontier.

But first it's worth noting who had rights and who didn't in frontier times. We can do it quickly, because the list is short.

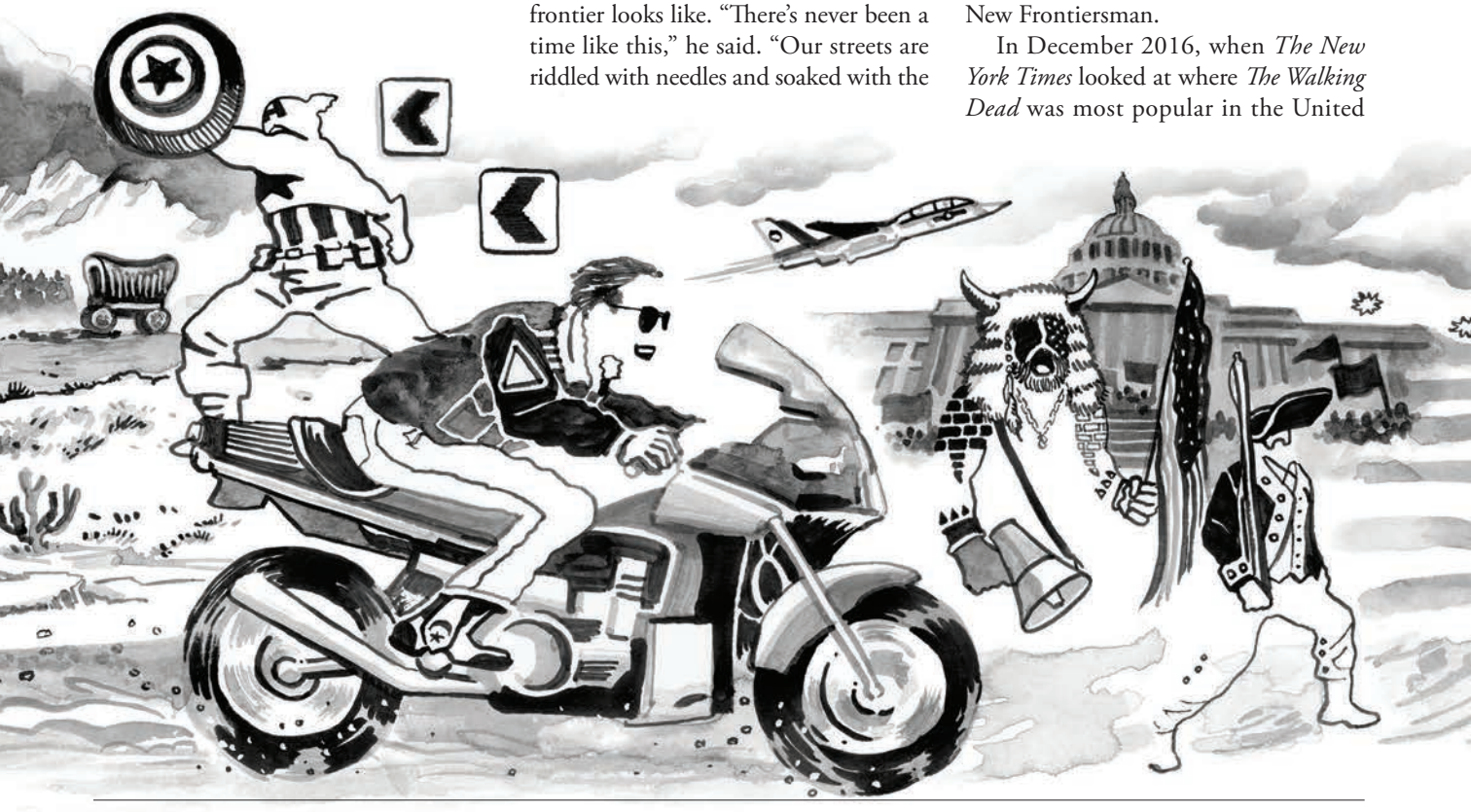
White men had rights. That is all.

In July, Trump gave a speech addressing the America First Policy Institute, in which he described in great detail what the new frontier looks like. "There's never been a time like this," he said. "Our streets are riddled with needles and soaked with the blood of innocent victims. Many of our once-great cities, from New York to Chicago to L.A., where the middle class used to flock to live the American dream, are now war zones, literal war zones. Every day there are stabbings, rapes, murders, and violent assaults of every kind imaginable. Bloody turf wars rage without mercy."

The belief that America has become a hell on Earth—"a cesspool of crime," in Trump's words—is rampant on the new frontier. The people who believe it, the New Frontiersmen, used to live on the fringes of American life, but not anymore. They are citizens of Internet America who do their own research, who believe that something vital has been not just lost but stolen. In their minds, the 2020 election was only the latest in an ever more audacious scheme to disenfranchise and disrespect the hardest-working Americans.

Have you ever noticed that in stories of the zombie apocalypse, such as *The Walking Dead*, the real enemy is always other people? This is not an accident. It is a worldview rooted in the belief that, were the rules of civility to fall away, your neighbor would just as soon kill you as lend a hand. This is a core belief of the New Frontiersman.

In December 2016, when *The New York Times* looked at where *The Walking Dead* was most popular in the United



States, it found its fan base concentrated in rural areas and states like Kentucky and Texas, which had voted for Trump. It makes a certain amount of sense. If you're convinced that the world is intrinsically uncivilized, you will gravitate to stories that agree with you: wish-fulfillment fantasies where neighbor can kill neighbor.

If this is how you see the world, then the laws of civilization—laws that would force you to surrender your arms and join the rest of the sheep—must feel like madness. You might even begin to suspect that the sheep telling you not to fear the wolf is in fact a wolf himself.

The New Frontiersman believes that only a good guy with a gun can stop a bad guy with a gun. In his mind, he is that good guy.

Another name for frontier justice is vigilante justice. The words have a long, ugly history in America, evoking images of the lynch mob. But they are modern words too. Hollywood is full of stories of vigilante justice. Batman is a vigilante; so is the latest Joker. Vigilante stories offer a romanticized vision of violent men who live in darkness, fighting to protect the rest of us from the evils of the world. They do the dirty work the rest of us are too scared or too weak to do. This is another myth.

In 2021, we were introduced to the oxymoronic idea of vigilante law. In Texas, S.B. 8 was approved by the legislature and signed into law by the governor. The law deputizes citizens to sue anyone who helps a woman get an abortion. It has been allowed to continue unchallenged by the Supreme Court, which seemed to suggest there was nothing our 246-year-old democracy could do to combat the will of the mob.

There is no named enemy in *Top Gun: Maverick*, the summer blockbuster playing at every American multiplex we pass on our drive. No Arab state or resurgent Cold War foe. Instead, the enemy is the rules themselves and the bureaucrats who enforce them. Navy brass with their flight floors and ceilings, their by-the-book mentality. Only a maverick can save us, the film tells us, not just from foreign threats, but from the system itself.

Top Gun's motto is "Don't think. Just do." Instincts, not reason, are a real man's strengths. Thinking loses the battle. The things a man knows cannot be improved by innovation or progress.

Here myth and reality separate, because in the real world, "Don't think. Just do" is not a governing philosophy. Do what for whom? What if different groups want different things?

But to ask such questions is pointless in the face of a worldview that dismisses the very idea of questions. "Don't think. Just do" harkens back to an older American motto: "Shoot first. Ask questions later."

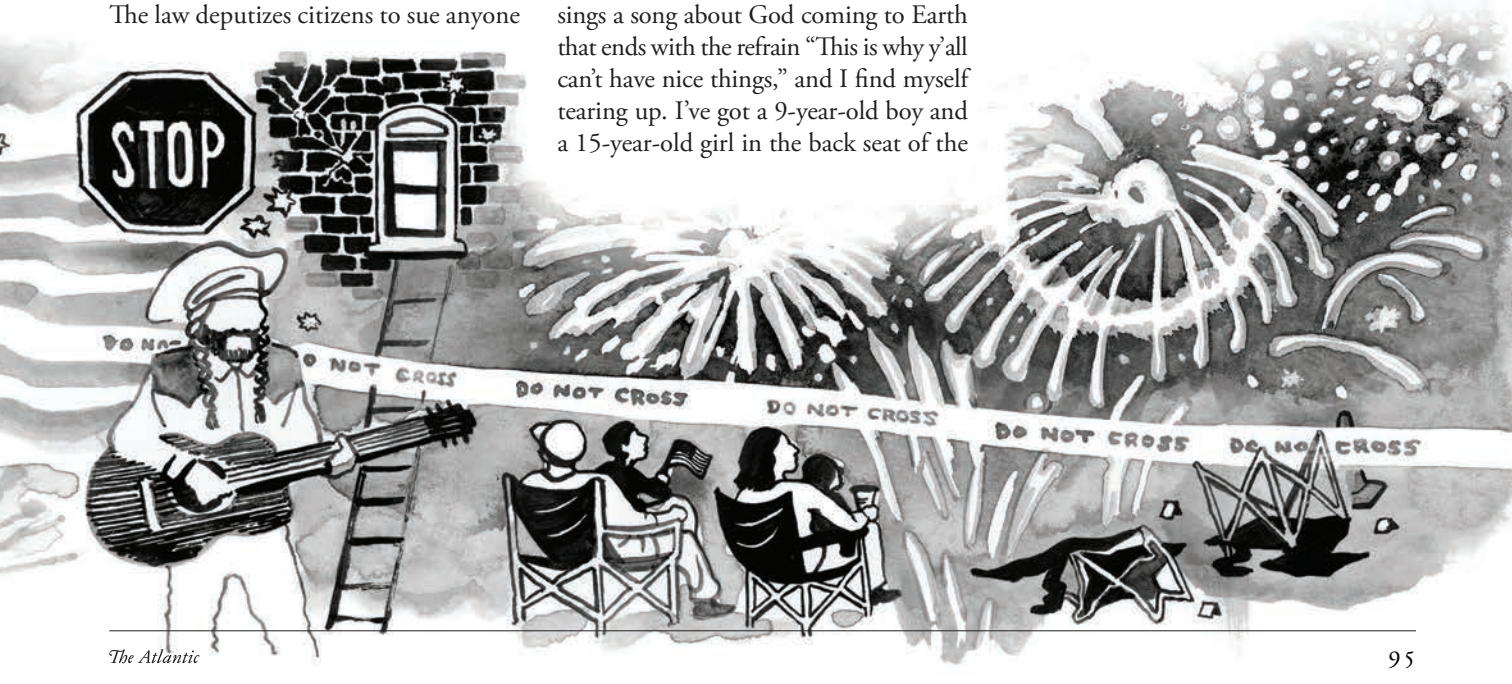
On the road trip, we listen to Lyle Lovett. We listen to Willie Nelson. Hayes Carll sings a song about God coming to Earth that ends with the refrain "This is why y'all can't have nice things," and I find myself tearing up. I've got a 9-year-old boy and a 15-year-old girl in the back seat of the car, and I don't know how to prepare them for a world in which half of the citizens of their country already appear to be living in the zombie apocalypse, armed to the teeth and fighting for survival. The zombies they're aiming at are the other half of the country, still very much alive and struggling to understand.

Myths endure because they're simple. The real world rarely offers up important choices that are binary: black hat or white hat. I think of *Fargo* as many moving pieces on a collision course. Which pieces will collide and when is never clear. Randomness, coincidence, synchronicity—all are available to me as I attempt to capture something resembling the complexity of life.

Here's another way I describe *Fargo*: a tragedy with a happy ending. Tragedy in *Fargo* is always based on an inability to communicate, sometimes even with ourselves. People are like this. We avoid difficult subjects.

As in life, everyone in the stories I tell has their own perspective, their own experience. The more selfish they are—the less able they are to accept that other people's needs matter too—the worse they act. *I'm the victim here*, they shout, as they impose their will on others.

What was the QAnon Shaman if not a creature of the frontier? How many versions of him did we see on January 6,



dressed in colonial or Revolutionary War garb? It's no accident that the cosplay insurrection drew from early American iconography. It was a throwback to the era when white men battled their way through what they saw as an uncivilized nation. When the only way to fight the savagery of their enemies was savagely, without mercy.

A tragedy based on an inability to communicate is also a good way to describe the current American predicament. You have two sides that both feel aggrieved. Each believes that their own pain is real and that the other's is a fantasy.

One side believes the last election was stolen. The other believes the right to vote itself is being taken away.

One side believes that the answer is reform, better government, a truly equitable system of justice. The other believes that government itself is the problem. Both sides are yelling and neither is listening, like a man in a fun-house mirror convinced that his reflection is a stranger.

When communication stops, violence follows. Your opponent becomes your enemy, a black hat to your white, and we all know what happens after that.

The show *1883*, created by Taylor Sheridan, who also created *Yellowstone*, explores the frontier mindset with great sympathy. To quote its young heroine, "The world doesn't care if you die. It won't listen to your screams. If you bleed on the ground, the ground will drink it. It doesn't care that you're cut."

It's better not to try to make sense of this world, we're told, after we watch a settler shoot a woman who has been scalped by Natives. The man is hysterical, quite rightly out of his mind with grief and shame at what he has done, but Sam Elliott's character tells him: "You made a decision. You did what you thought was decent. Was it decent? Who knows. What the hell is decent out here? What's the gauge? You're the gauge. You made a decision. Now stand by it! Right or wrong, you fucking stand by it."

This is frontier morality. The world is inherently indecent. No government law can tell us what is right and what is wrong. It is up to each of us to decide.

If you play it out—one step ahead, two—you realize that the inevitable end point of this new frontier mentality is crime. Because if you privilege what's "right" over what's legal—and appoint yourself as the arbiter of right and wrong—then you will inevitably end up in conflict with the rule of law.

The left, of course, has its own myths. The Myth of Stronger Together, the Myth of a Rising Tide Lifts All Boats.

In this way, the frontier becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those who believe in it must create its conditions or become criminals in the civilized world.

The left, of course, has its own myths. The Myth of Stronger Together, the Myth of a Rising Tide Lifts All Boats. We like stories of collective action, stories about unlikely bands of misfits who realize that their differences are what make them strong. Think of the unsung Black women in *Hidden Figures*, overcoming personal prejudice and institutional racism to help make spaceflight possible. Even our Westerns are pluralistic—think of *The Magnificent Seven* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

Stranger Things is a liberal fantasy, all those plucky kids banding together, never leaving a friend behind.

Squid Game is a right-wing fever dream, as if I even have to say it.

Game of Thrones was a Stronger Together Myth posing as a Frontier Justice Myth. For all its rape fantasies, it was at heart a meditation on human nature, a cautionary fable about morality and power. Good was rarely rewarded, but only collective action could save the world.

If you map where *Game of Thrones* was popular in America, incidentally, it aligns primarily with blue states. It was the anti–*Walking Dead*.

On the Fourth of July, we gather in a park in downtown Jackson to hear music and watch the fireworks. Earlier in the day, a 21-year-old man shot dozens of people from a rooftop in Highland Park, Illinois, killing seven.

Later, Kyle and I compare notes: how we both noticed the same open window in a nearby building. How we both had a plan for where we would go with the kids if a gunman—no, let's call him what he is: a terrorist—opened fire on the crowd.

Later still, I learn that a toddler was found alive in Highland Park, lying under the dead bodies of his parents. Is this really the price our children must pay for our inability to come to terms with one another, to communicate?

The next day, when I tell my son the story of the shooting, he asks what we're going to do about it—we the surviving Americans.

We're going to buy more guns, I tell him. *A*

Noah Hawley is the creator of the FX series Fargo *and the author of the novel* Anthem.

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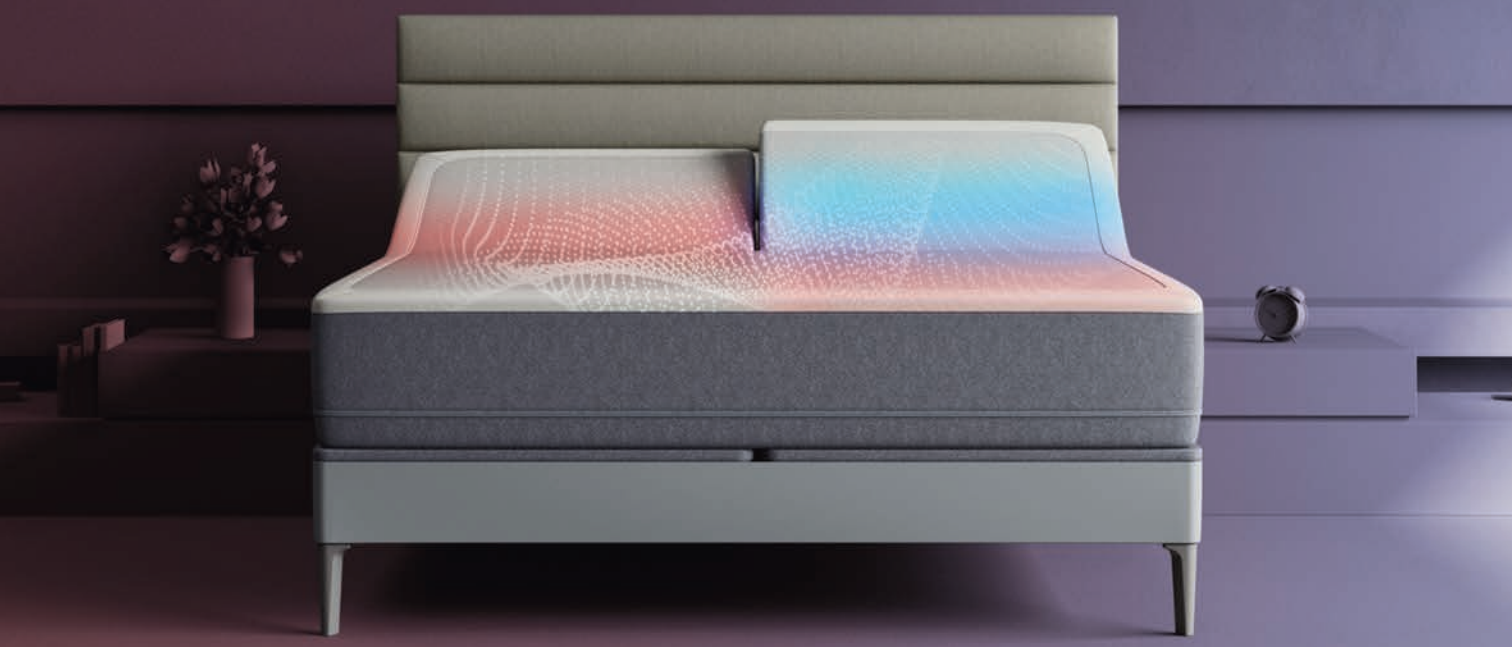

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I've had three since breakfast, and it's not even 11 a.m.

I've peaked (watching, from my kitchen window, a cat stare into a puddle), I've troughed (the impossibility of cosmic triumph), and I've bobbed in momentary equilibrium. And here you come again, my mood swing. Under the paving stones, the beach. Under the shining moment, the banana peel. Up, down, ding, dong, round and round and round … I think you might be wearing me out. But I won't reject you. No, I won't repudiate you. I'm alive in America in the 2020s, and even-temperedness—emotional homeostasis—is neither attainable nor appropriate.

Besides, it's always been this way for you and me. Ever since I saw *Chariots of Fire*. "You, Aubrey, are my most complete man," says Harold Abrahams, the driven, chippy Olympic sprinter, to his friend Aubrey Montague. Harold is on the massage table, heavy with melancholic self-knowledge, getting a rubdown before his big race. "You're brave," he tells Aubrey, in a sad, horizontal voice. "Compassionate. Kind. A content man. That's your secret. Contentment! I'm 24 and I've never known it."

Great scene. Thus was the binary implanted in my young mind, in 1981. You could be a Harold in this world, grasping and yearning and prickling and perpetually mood-swinging—and with a shot at a gold medal—or you could be an Aubrey. And I knew which one I was.

But to be a Harold all the time, all over your surface area? What's it for, mood swingers? Why did nature do this to us? I'll tell you why. Because she has her moods too. Light shifts across the face of that puddle-philosophical cat, the puddle changes color, and if I'm a failure today I might be a titan tomorrow—or in 10 minutes. We are faithful, we who swing, to the humors of reality. That shaft of brightness, that spike of delight, will reliably fade. And at the base of the great gloom-cloud, joy's little booster rockets are firing up already.

So swing, mood, swing. Twang us madly between the high note and the low. Because if we're extravagant in our reactions, we are frugal in our stimuli. It really doesn't take much to set us off. A wet leaf, a guitar solo, a glad look … We are the lightweights; we are the cheap dates.

Hard to live with? Well, yes, possibly. I mean, sure. But if you're not enjoying me right now, can I ask for your patience? I'm like a London bus. There'll be another me along in a minute. *A*

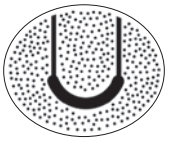
James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

ODE

— *to* —

MOOD SWINGS

By James Parker



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