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A DISPATCH FROM THE NEAR FUTURE

George Packer

THE MOONWATCH IN WHITE

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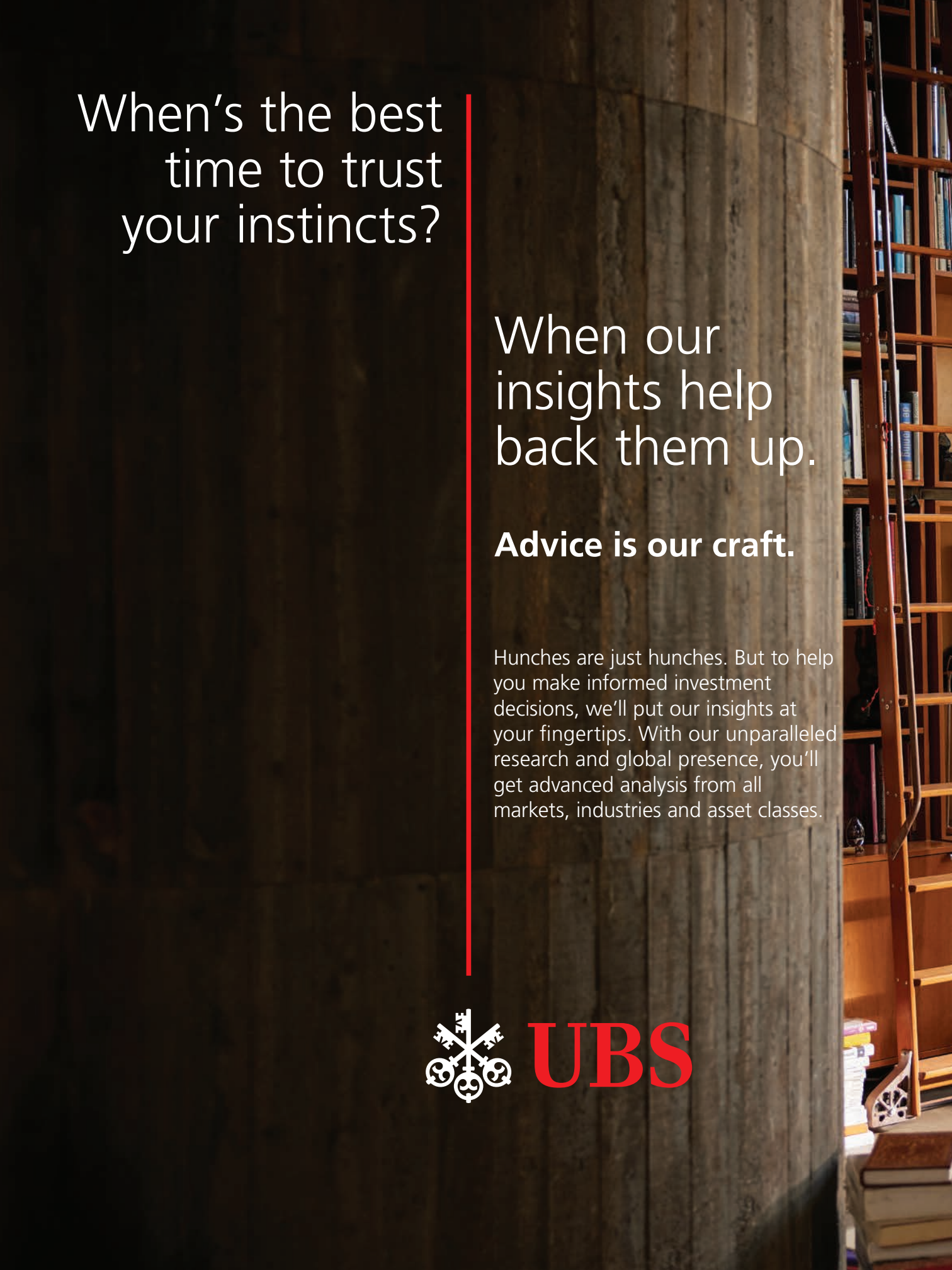
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JEREMY HARBECK / NASA ICEBRIDGE

An iceberg from the Thwaites Glacier

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On the Cover

DESIGN BY
PETER MENDELSUND

2024 Mercedes-Maybach EQS 680 SUV shown in Cirrus Silver and Nautical Blue paint. **For more information, call 1-800-FOR-MERCEDES, or visit MBUSA.com.**

IN WILDNESS IS THE PRESERVATION OF THE WORLD

Loyal readers of this magazine know that we are preoccupied with matters of climate change, and that we worry about the future of our home planet. I appreciate (I really do) Elon Musk's notion that humans, as a species, ought to pursue an extraplanetary solution to our environmental crisis, but I believe in exploration for exploration's sake, not as a pathway to a time share on Mars.

So we at *The Atlantic* are focused intensely on, among other things, the relationship between humans and the natural world they currently inhabit. We have a long history of interest here. The great conservationist John Muir more or less invented the national-parks system in *The Atlantic*. John Burroughs defended Charles Darwin in our pages. Rachel Carson wrote her earliest essays, about the sea, for us. And, of course, *The Atlantic* published much of Thoreau's finest and most enduring writing.

In our lead essay this month, our senior editor Vann R. Newkirk II argues that America owes a debt to other nations for its role in accelerating climate change, and that paying this debt may be the best way for the world to save itself. "For at least the immediate future, wealthy Americans will be protected from the worst of the climate crisis," he writes. "This comfort is seductive, but ultimately illusory."

Climate change is one reason I asked our staff writer George Packer, the author of the National Book Award–winning *The Unwinding*, to identify a place that could somehow stand in for America's fundamental quandaries, hypocrisies, and powers of self-correction and improvement. Against his better judgment (he doesn't like the heat very much), Packer found himself returning again and again to Phoenix, where, he became convinced, the future is being determined—not merely our political future, but our relationship with the natural world, on which our survival depends.

Thoreau's grave, Concord, Massachusetts

Packer's cover story possesses the grand sweep, capacious reporting, and powerful insight our readers expect from him.

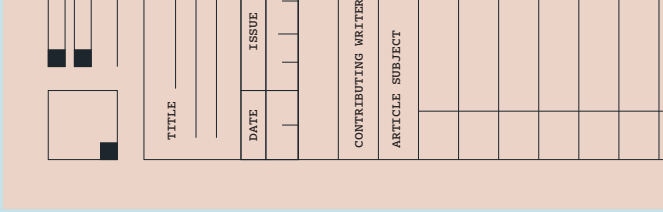
Although he appreciates Phoenix and understands it in a complicated and not-unhopeful way, I think Packer would have preferred the assignment we handed our science writer Ross Andersen, who visited Greenland to investigate the technological means through which it may be possible to save otherwise-doomed glaciers. His article, "The Glacier Rescue Project," is fascinating, and especially important in a moment when too many people believe that catastrophic sea-level rise is inevitable.

The Atlantic has large ambitions and a peripatetic staff, so when we heard that Australia's koalas were suffering from both climate change and chlamydia, we quickly dispatched Katherine J. Wu, a staff writer (and a microbiologist), to Adelaide and beyond to bring back a report. I believe this marks the first time that marsupial chlamydia has been covered in *The Atlantic*. Wu's story is a revelation, illustrating the difficulty that even wealthy nations have in protecting their most prized species during a period of climate instability.

Me, I went to Walden Pond. I visit occasionally, walking the path that starts behind Ralph Waldo Emerson's house and ends up near the pond's big parking lot and little beach. Thoreau would be surprised by Walden Pond today: more visitors, much more noise. The noise could get worse soon. A proposed plan to radically expand a nearby airport for private jets has conservationists and preservationists worried that an appreciation of the sanctity and history of Concord is not unanimously shared. One doesn't have to live like Thoreau to understand that wealth comes in many forms—in the wildness of the world, for instance—and that returning the planet to some sort of equilibrium is a universal interest.

— Jeffrey Goldberg

JEFFREY GOLDBERG



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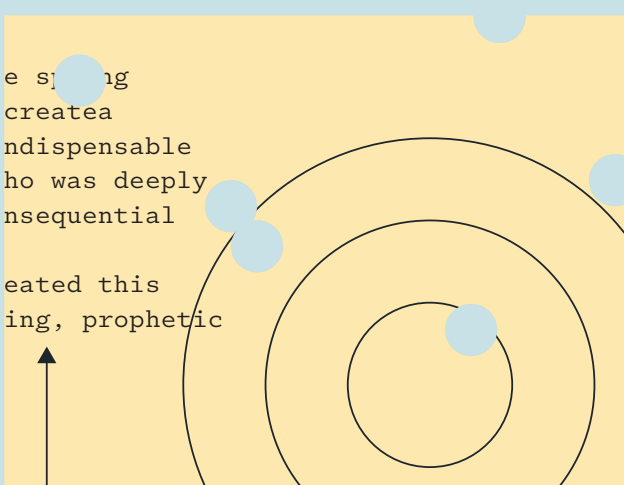

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Behind the Cover: In this issue's cover story, "The Valley" (p. 52), George Packer reports from Phoenix and the surrounding Salt River Valley. Packer argues that the Valley's problems—climate change, conspiracism, hyper-partisanship—are America's, and that its fate may presage the nation's. The cover evokes a landscape that is getting hotter and drier, and a future that is blurry. This is a place where American optimism and ingenuity are being put to the test.

— Peter Mendelsund, *Creative Director*

THE

A Meatball at Sea

For the May 2024 issue, Gary Shteyngart spent seven nights aboard the biggest cruise ship that has ever sailed.

Letters

I've never written a letter to the editor before, but rare are the times I've read an article more hilarious, brilliant, and incisive than Gary Shteyngart's on his escapades at sea. I was moved, entertained, and wowed by his keen observations. But mostly I'm grateful to him for reinforcing a promise I made to myself: I will never, ever go on a cruise.

Jennifer Ripley
Menlo Park, Calif.

I laughed out loud several times while reading Gary Shteyngart's account of his experience on the inaugural voyage of the Icon of the Seas. As someone passionate about cruising, I recognized the truth in much of what Shteyngart wrote. I'm also a travel agent, and the thought of sailing on the Icon fills me with dread. So many people! I tell my clients that cruising is for everyone, but not all cruise lines are for everyone.

There are a few aspects of cruising that I think the author missed, though. My son is a full-time wheelchair user and an avid cruiser. It's hard to imagine how he would see the world if not on a cruise ship. On today's modern, accessible vessels, the indignities that he and other people with disabilities might suffer every day at home are largely absent.

We love cruising because of the staff. The pride and care that crew members take in providing excellent service is evident. We love to ask about their family at home, and we tip them generously. We hope that Shteyngart did the same.

Kathleen Moylan
Worcester, Mass.

Once upon a time, I was a travel writer. As someone who still revels in the wonder of travel 15 years after leaving the field, I found Gary Shteyngart's article about the Icon of the Seas disappointing. Travel writing as an artistic form has been in jeopardy for years, and I fear that articles like Shteyngart's demonstrate why.

Travel writing doesn't have to follow well-worn formats or cast its subjects in a favorable light. But it should create a sense of place. No travel writer worth their salt would ever wallow in misery and disdain, as Shteyngart does here. A travel writer shouldn't judge those around them or put themselves at the center of the story; the job of a travel writer is to look at an experience and see its value. When I worked as a travel writer, if I ever found myself in an experience I disliked, I tried to understand why others around me enjoyed it and then worked to reconcile those two perspectives.

We travel writers are a specific brood. We have internalized that our work is not about us. We know we are guests in the places we visit. There is a degree of respect that a travel writer must have if they hope to see a place clearly. Those have to be table stakes.

Kim Palacios
San Ramon, Calif.

It is disconcerting that, only four months after *The Atlantic* devoted an entire issue to the dangers of a second Donald Trump presidency, the magazine published a story that seems designed to confirm the central argument of Trump's political movement: that blue-state elites despise ordinary

Americans and see no value in their way of life. Like Trump's speeches, Gary Shteyngart's humor is littered with name-calling and childish insults; the "reprobates" and "bent psychos" who spend their money on cruises are mocked for their weight, their clothes, their hobbies, their tattoos. Despite the fact that some of these "psychos" are, as Shteyngart notes, veterans who have served their country, he concludes that his fellow cruisers have no "interior life" and are thus unworthy of attention from a member of the "creative class" like himself. If Trump is reelected in November, part of the blame will lie with those, like Shteyngart, who seem to have retreated so far into their progressive bubbles that they have become the mirror image of the MAGA faithful.

Andrew Miller
New Orleans, La.

Gary Shteyngart's colorful essay from the world's largest cruise ship makes snobbery an art form. What did he expect? Cruise-ship builders take chunks of Las Vegas, Branson, and Disney and put them on a platform that moves through the water. Never have I entertained the idea of taking a trip on one, but thousands of Americans do it regularly, most of them solidly middle-class in wealth and taste. Most Americans would prefer to watch the Mets play the Marlins than the Met play Mozart.

During my cruising years—on the Navy's big gray ships, in the 1960s—officers and crews were a mix of Americans from everywhere and every social strata. One chief petty officer was an outspoken socialist; one of my commanding officers was a paranoid member of the John Birch Society. The crews of the ships I served on joined the middle class upon discharge, and some of them probably cruise and talk football and eat bad food and vote for Donald Trump. What a shame that Shteyngart couldn't connect with them. He might have learned something. I did.

Earl Higgins
River Ridge, La.

GARY SHTEYNGART REPLIES:

What fascinated me most about my fellow cruisers—many of whom were from blue states and were not MAGA diehards—was their lack of curiosity. They were more than happy to eat food that reminded me of a Yalta cafeteria in my Soviet youth. They laughed themselves silly when a comedian made fun of "shithole countries" (although the African woman and her husband next to me walked out). To Andrew Miller's point, I think it is precisely this kind of passivity and incuriosity that lets a nation forgo its long tradition of democracy and, through either malice or inaction, allow a tyrant to take charge. To Earl Higgins's comment, I tried to connect desperately, almost pathologically, with my fellow cruisers. Sadly, there was not one outspoken socialist or paranoid member of the John Birch Society to be found. Indeed, it was the blinkered blandness of my fellow cruisers that drove me to despair. In the end, I began to respect the alcoholics and degenerate gamblers I met. They, at least, had a story to tell.

A Study in Senate Cowardice

Republicans like Rob Portman could have ended Donald Trump's political career, Jeffrey Goldberg wrote in The Atlantic*'s May 2024 issue. They chose not to.*

Good journalism should make its audience angry. And Jeffrey Goldberg's detailing of the rank hypocrisy of the Republican senators who talked tough but folded like cheap suits when it came time to vote to convict Donald Trump for his role in the January 6 insurrection should incite anger in every reader who cares about this country.

Particularly fitting is Goldberg's word choice about their behavior—*pathetic*, *greasy*. I hope history remembers and repeats the names of those senators who could have stopped a threat to democracy and decency but instead caved to Trump.

Steve Schild
Winona, Minn.

Jeffrey Goldberg's article holding certain Republican senators to account makes a valid point. However, it is easy to picture the current GOP leadership retaliating with baseless impeachment proceedings against their opposition, setting a destructive precedent that could undermine and diminish the United States. Goldberg calls that argument "pathetic," but probably some of those senators who voted nay believed Trumpism would eventually pass; they followed the rule of law and looked ahead hopefully to a future generation of quality leaders for whom the nation would matter more than any individual.

Michael E. Zuller
Great Neck, N.Y.

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

Corrections: "Democracy Is Losing the Propaganda War" (June) misstated the subtitle of Anne Applebaum's latest book. The full title is *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*. "The Great Serengeti Land Grab" (May) misstated the distance between Sharjah Safari park and the Pololeti Game Reserve. The Sharjah Safari park is 2,000 miles northeast of the Pololeti Game Reserve, not 5,000 miles north. "Clash of the Patriarchs" (May) mischaracterized Roman Emperor Constantine's policy toward Christianity. Although Constantine favored Christianity over other tolerated religions in the empire, he did not impose it on his subjects.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE VANUATU PLAN

How a small island nation devised what may be the best idea for arresting climate change

BY VANN R. NEWKIRK II

Before Kyoto and Paris, there was Chantilly. In early 1991, diplomats, scientists, and policy makers from around the world arrived at a hotel conference center near Virginia's Dulles International Airport, which is famously far from everything. The delegates had been tasked with creating the first international framework for confronting climate change. An ill omen shrouded the proceedings: Virginia was in the grip of a then-record heat wave, with highs of 70 degrees in early February.

The convention unfolded over the course of five sessions and 15 months. For the most part, the attendees weren't debating whether human industry caused

global warming. Rather, their mission was to figure out what to do about it, given the preponderance of the evidence that existed even two generations ago. European delegates wanted to establish binding limits on the emissions that each country could produce, which the American representatives immediately shot down. (At the time, the United States was far and away the largest carbon emitter of any country in the world.) There was almost no international accord at all, until the Japanese delegates promoted a weak proposal with no binding emissions targets, which the U.S. accepted.

The big players had made their statement: They would not oblige themselves to prevent climate change. But a faction of smaller countries had come determined to try to make its mark, too. The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a group representing dozens of, well, small island states, led by the tiny Pacific nation of Vanuatu, consistently pushed for more ambitious policy. These nations also devised a novel framework, one through which those most affected by climate change would receive funding and support from the countries that had done the most to change the climate. That framework never made it into the final agreement. But history's dissents can be road maps for the future.

Thirty-three years later, both emissions and global temperatures have increased faster than expected. Crises that were objects of conjecture in 1991 are upon us: We are witnessing extreme weather events, acidification of the oceans, aggressive sea-level rise, megadroughts, megafires, and an inexorable onslaught of heat. These issues tend to be much more destructive for AOSIS nations and other developing countries than for the U.S. and other major economies.

Climate policy, in America and abroad, has also genuinely transformed since 1991. The United States still rejects binding emissions targets, but emissions have been falling since 2005, owing to steady progress in emissions rules, renewable energy, and, recently, wide adoption of electric and hybrid vehicles. Following decades of pressure from AOSIS and from other countries, at the United Nations' 27th Conference of the Parties (COP27) on climate change, in 2022, the U.S. even voted to create a fund through which wealthy nations can help support countries defined as "vulnerable" to climate change.

WEALTHY COUNTRIES SEEM EAGER TO EASE THEIR CONSCIENCE, NOT TO MAKE REAL COMMITMENTS TO THE COUNTRIES MOST EXPOSED TO CLIMATE DISASTER.

American support of that program, however, has thus far been nominal at best. Across the world, many otherwise bold sustainability programs merely nod at the necessity of providing direct, debt-free aid to endangered states. (Most climate funding takes the form of loans that increase the debt burdens on already distressed economies.) Wealthy countries seem eager to ease their conscience, not to make real commitments to the countries most exposed to climate disaster.

As the global effort against the climate crisis still struggles with scale and pace, world leaders should rethink their ordering of priorities. The AOSIS proposal represented a radical new way of looking at climate change, one that emphasized accountability. American policy makers have been hostile to this idea, which has inspired a broader movement known as climate reparations, and it remains controversial elsewhere. But climate reparations aren't just the fairest way to compensate small nations like Vanuatu. They may also be the only way we save ourselves.

THE VANUATU DOCUMENT is remarkable in its prescience. Years before the majority of Americans even believed that climate change affected them, the AOSIS delegates wrote that "the very existence of low-lying coastal and small vulnerable island countries is placed at risk by the consequences of climate change."

Back then, the coral reefs around the Seychelles had not yet been destroyed. Hurricane Maria had not yet plunged Puerto Rico into a year of darkness. Salt water was not yet regularly flooding Bangladesh's mustard fields. But there were warnings. Caribbean fishermen had reported drastic climate-related changes to fisheries as early as 1987. In 1989, Hurricane Hugo rampaged through the Caribbean and the U.S., flattening towns and displacing thousands of people on its way to becoming, at the time, the single costliest hurricane in history—a preview of today's stronger, more volatile storms. Audre Lorde, who'd retired to St. Croix, wrote of her experience with Hugo: "The earth is telling us something about our conduct of living, as well as about our abuse of this covenant we live upon."

The Vanuatu document is still one of the best commonsense approaches to the politics of climate. To AOSIS, the carbon emissions causing climate change were nothing more than pollution, no different from coal ash or smog. And the document identified industrial nations, with America in the vanguard, as the polluters. This may seem like a straightforward statement of fact. Too often, however, the source of the problem is obscured in the climate debate.

In recent years, it's become fashionable to talk of the Anthropocene, a proposed epoch of geologic time, like the Middle Jurassic, in which *anthropos*, or man, is the main force shaping the natural world. There is no question that people have had a massive effect on the Earth's ecosystems and its changing climate. But to focus on the role of humanity is to overlook the fact that some humans bear far more responsibility than others.

Over the recorded history of industrial emissions, 20 corporations, such as Chevron and ExxonMobil, as well as state-owned energy companies in places like China and Saudi Arabia have been responsible for more than half of all cumulative carbon emissions, a share that has actually risen to more than 60 percent since 2016. From 1990 to 2020, the cumulative emissions of the United States and the European Union member states, which together

account for about a tenth of the global population, were higher than the combined emissions of India, Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Iran, and South Korea, which account for about 30 percent of the global population. (Even within the nations that emit the most carbon, the burden is not shared equally—according to a 2020 study, the wealthiest 10 percent of American households account for 40 percent of the country's carbon output.) Leaders in the oil and gas industry have understood climate change as human-driven since at least 1982, when Exxon's own researchers helped link carbon emissions and rising temperatures, meaning they knowingly made decisions that led to this crisis. (Exxon has denied that its models—which proved remarkably accurate—represented foreknowledge of climate change.) It would be more precise to call our present epoch the Exxonocene.

Recognizing this reality, the AOSIS proposal called for industrialized countries to implement green energy and technology in developing countries, and to create a "loss and damage" fund to compensate countries for future costs stemming from climate change, including permanent climate-related losses of land, habitats, and population, as well as damages that could be remediated.

The loss-and-damage plan was modest, in its way: Its demands were purely forward-looking. It did not address the historical carbon pollution that was already heating up the world in 1991, or the devastation already absorbed by island states from sea-level rise, deforestation, disrupted fisheries, and heat.

In the years since the AOSIS proposal, other thinkers took up the Vanuatu framework and proposed more ambitious programs of recompense. In 2009, the legal scholar Maxine Burkett, who is now a White House climate adviser, made one of the first comprehensive calls for industrial states to compensate the "climate vulnerable." For Burkett, climate vulnerability arises both from exposure to hazards such as hurricanes and sea-level rise, and from a lack of resources and resiliency to deal with those threats.

Because of the geography of colonialism, these two kinds of vulnerability often intersect. In Haiti, for example, French colonizers imported African slaves to clear-cut ancient forests, and then ruthlessly exploited the colony's natural and human resources for generations. After the descendants of those slaves rose to power in the late 18th century during the Haitian Revolution, France imposed hefty indemnities on the new nation for the war, and centuries of isolation and intervention by the United States further eroded social and economic structures. Given its location, Haiti would always have been affected by hurricanes and sea-level rise. But the United States' and France's emissions have supercharged those threats, and their exploitation of Haiti has left it less capable of defending itself.

For Burkett, addressing climate change in these places requires not just loss-and-damage–style funds, but also compensation and assistance

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM MAIDA

for climate disruption that has already been inflicted—true reparations. Such efforts could take different forms, with different levels of ambition. The UN could create a vehicle through which wealthy countries pledge a percentage of their GDP to developing countries. Or an individual country might heavily tax—or even nationalize—its private oil and gas industry and pledge some or all of the proceeds to its own climate-disadvantaged citizens and to neighboring countries for climate-adaptation projects. Beyond direct monetary payments, some commentators argue for no-cost installations of sustainable-energy technology and infrastructure. Writing in *New York* magazine in 2021, David Wallace-Wells advocated for reparations in the form of a massive investment by industrial countries in carbon-capture technology—essentially paying to reverse the historic emissions that have so devastated other nations.

But compensation is only part of reparations' importance. Burkett argues that the very act of acknowledging a debt is key to the process as well, for the sake of both the polluter and the polluted. This acknowledgment makes clear that the global community is interested in the survival of the most imperiled states. Moral leadership by America would also put pressure on China and India, the two rising carbon powers, to acknowledge their own roles in this crisis. In the game of global opinion, at least, no country wants to look like the climate-change villain.

Perhaps the most important component of any kind of reparations is a commitment by the offender to stop offending. Embracing reparations would incentivize wealthy nations to set aggressive emissions targets and meet them. A true reparations program thus wouldn't be an ancillary charity attached to other solutions, but the overarching climate policy itself.

THIS SPRING, weeks of torrential downpours inundated Rio Grande do Sul, a prosperous state in southern Brazil. The resulting floods were some of the worst in the country's modern history, leaving nearly the entire state submerged. After surveying the damage, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva appeared distraught. He issued a remarkable statement. "This was the third record flood in the same region of the country in less than a year," he told *The Washington Post*. "We and the world need to prepare every day with more plans and resources to deal with extreme climate occurrences." He also said that wealthy nations owed a "historic debt" to those affected by climate change.

Brazil is itself a major emitter of carbon, but it has also been a leader in pushing for a serious commitment to the loss-and-damage fund that was finally established at COP27. The United States had long been the biggest opponent to any such program, but it was outflanked by China and a group of developing countries—including Brazil—and ultimately voted for the fund.

That, however, vote came with conditions. The U.S. later pushed to establish the fund for its first four years within the World Bank, where it holds a lone veto, and also made contributions voluntary, instead of binding. My colleague Zoë Schlanger reported in 2023 that Sue Biniaz, the deputy special envoy for climate at the State Department, said she "violently opposes" arguments that developed countries have a legal obligation under the UN framework to pay into the fund. So far, the U.S. has mostly shirked responsibility, pledging only $17.5 million to the fund. (Germany, by contrast, has promised $100 million.)

If this is the commitment the U.S. is willing to make to loss and damage, it's difficult to imagine the country adopting a true reparations program, which would require legislation that would not pass in our currently polarized Congress, and would also be immediately reversed by any future Republican president. Yet if American policy makers somehow come back around to making actual policy, they'll find that, far from being an extreme notion, reparations are an eminently practical one. Climate change is already prompting the movement of millions of people across borders, which in turn has led to the rise of autocratic leaders who pledge to keep those displaced peoples out. As climate change continues, the most vulnerable nations will fall first, but their collapse will not be contained. Sooner or later, the walled American garden will also wither in the heat.

> AS AMERICANS, WE HAVE A CHOICE: TO CONTINUE ON OUR CURRENT PATH, OR TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR ACTIONS.

An American embrace of climate reparations would create mutual obligations between disconnected hemispheres of the world, and break the climate-policy gridlock among wealthy countries. And despite the enormous cost of paying for past and future damage, those costs would be far lower than the price of failure. A recent study in *Nature* estimated that wealthy countries owe poorer countries a climate debt of almost $200 trillion. In 2020 and 2021, G20 countries alone allocated upwards of $14 trillion in stimulus spending to counteract the economic effects of COVID. A similar commitment to climate reparations by 2050 would address our climate debts, save millions of lives in the developing world, and give many countries a chance to adapt.

As Americans, we have a choice: to continue on our current path, or to take responsibility for our actions. For at least the immediate future, wealthy Americans will be protected from the worst of the climate crisis. This comfort is seductive, but ultimately illusory. To survive, we will have to, as the philosopher Olúfémi Táíwò says, begin to think "as ancestors." It has proved difficult throughout history to convince Americans to engage in this kind of long-term thinking, but there have been exceptions. The Civil War gave way to an overhaul of the Constitution for posterity. The Great Depression helped birth our modern social safety net. The space race gave us the moon. Now we can choose to give our children the Earth. *A*

Vann R. Newkirk II is a senior editor at The Atlantic.

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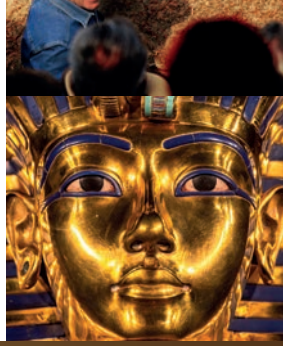

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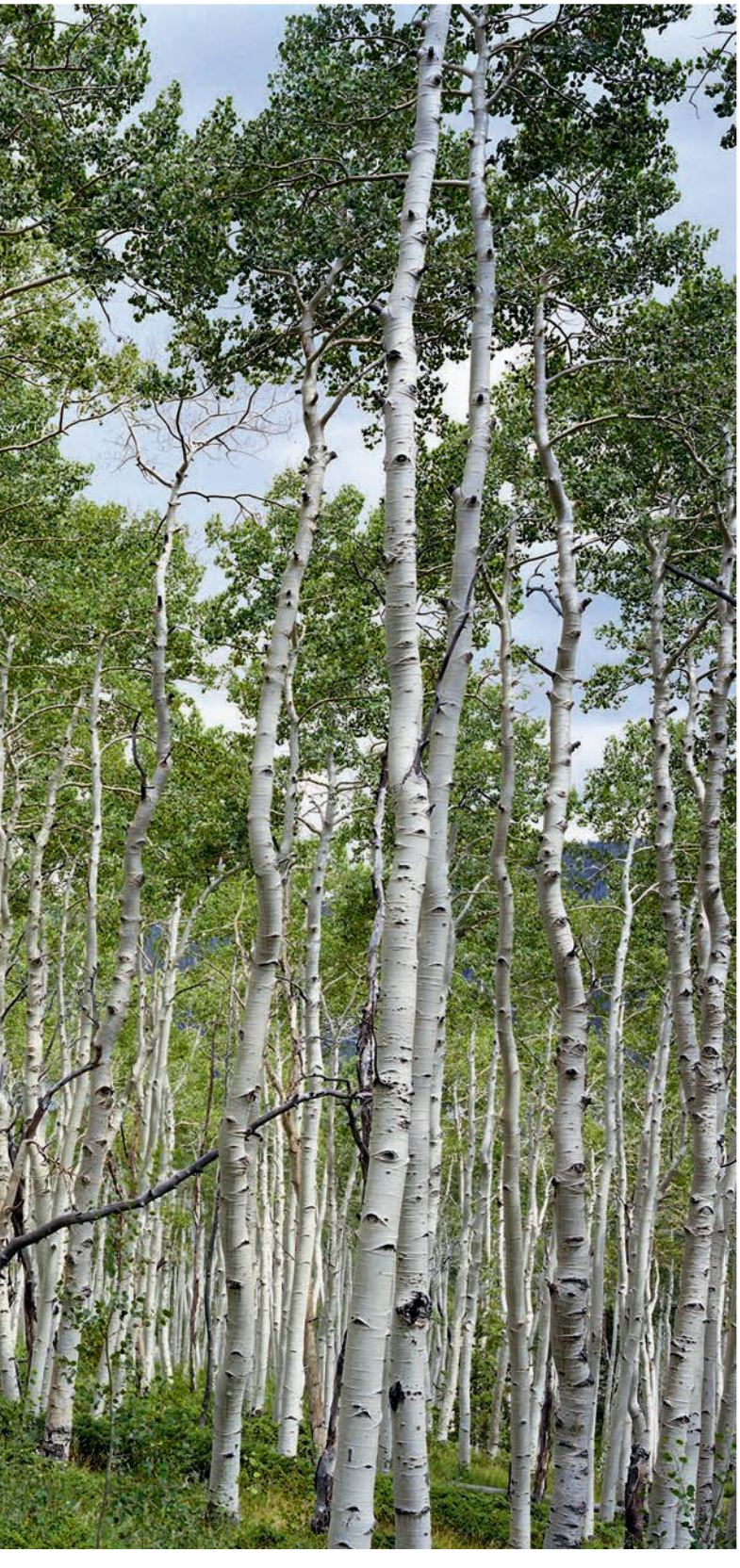


COURTESY OF STEIDL PUBLISHERS / YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

Interconnected
Photograph by Mitch Epstein

When I was a boy, I loved climbing the old oak trees in New Orleans City Park. I would hang from their branches and fling my legs into the air with unfettered delight. I would scoot my way up the trees' twisting limbs until I was a dozen feet off the ground and could see the park with new eyes. These were the same trees my mother climbed as a young girl, and the same ones my own children climb when we travel back to my hometown to visit. Live oaks can live for centuries, and the memories made among them can span generations.

For his most recent project, *Old Growth*, the photographer Mitch Epstein traveled around the United States to document some of the country's most ancient trees: big-leaf maples, eastern white pines, sequoias, redwoods, birches. Definitions vary, but Epstein considers old-growth forests to be areas that have been untouched by humans and allowed to regenerate on their own terms. Much of this land in North America has been destroyed in the centuries since European settlers arrived on the continent; Epstein wants his photographs to call attention to what remains, in order to protect it.

One site Epstein visited on his journey was Utah's Fishlake National Forest, where he spent time with Pando: a collection of 47,000 aspen trunks connected to the same root system. Covering 106 acres and weighing about 13.2 million pounds, Pando is one of the largest living organisms on the planet. Epstein has written that it "creates an illusion of infinity."

The trees in *Old Growth* have been around for at least hundreds of years, some for more than 3,000. According to a recent federal report, the biggest threat that American old-growth trees face is destruction by wildfires, which are exacerbated by climate change. Indeed, a warming planet poses risks to trees of all ages and in all settings. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina killed 2,000 trees in City Park. Future storms, made more intense by climate change, could soon make such destruction seem quaint. It might feel like the time has passed for us to change course, but Epstein insists that's not the case. "How did we get here?" he asked me, "and how do we find a way to realign our relationship to the resources that we have been graced by here on Earth?"

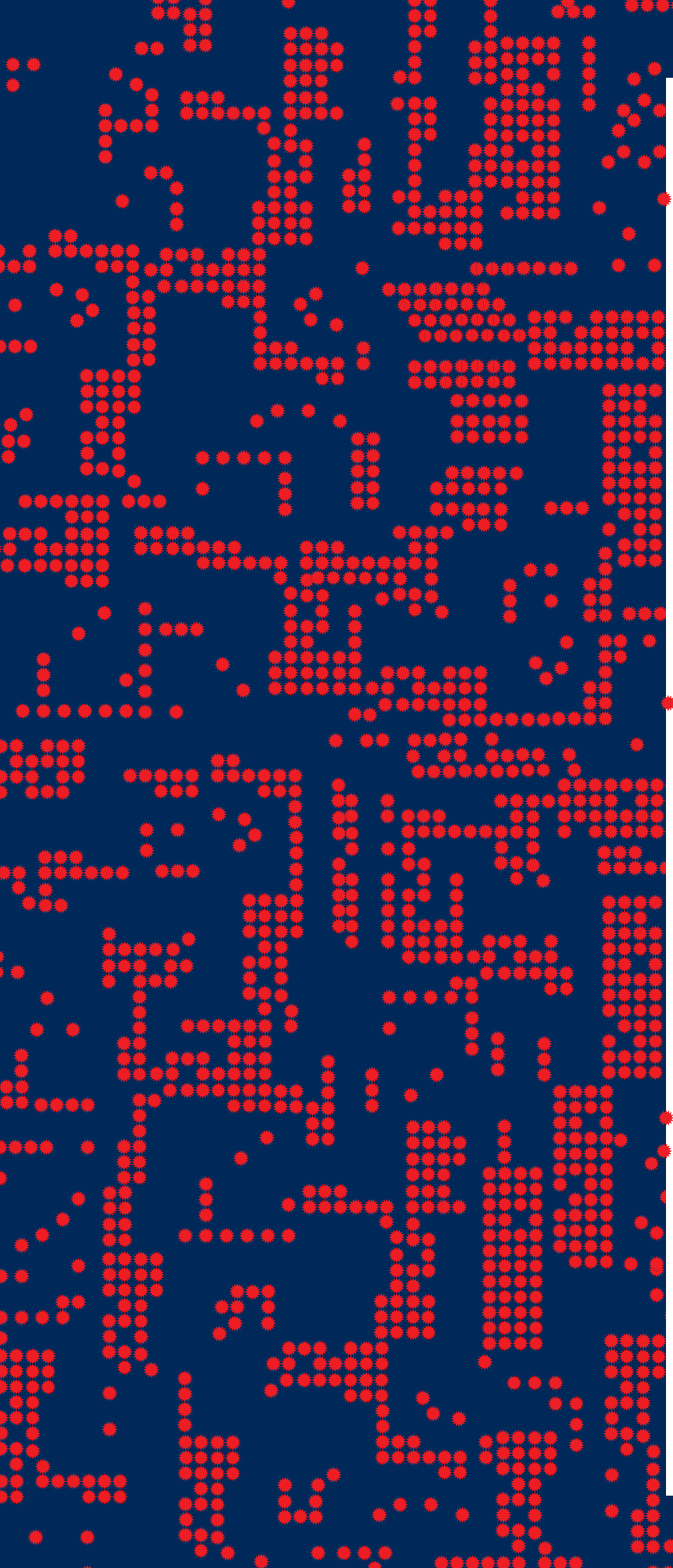
— Clint Smith

Aspen (Pando), Utah III 2023

THE FIRST THREE MONTHS

What I saw inside the government's response to COVID-19

BY ANTHONY FAUCI



On New Year's Day 2020, I was zipping up my fleece to head outside when the phone in the kitchen rang. I picked it up to find a reporter on the line. "Dr. Fauci," he said, "there's something strange going on in Central China. I'm hearing that a bunch of people have some kind of pneumonia. I'm wondering, have you heard anything?" I thought he was probably referring to influenza, or maybe a return of SARS, which in 2002 and 2003 had infected about 8,000 people and killed more than 750. SARS had been bad, particularly in Hong Kong, but it could have been much, much worse.

A reporter calling me at home on a holiday about a possible disease outbreak was concerning, but not that unusual. The press sometimes had better, or at least faster, ground-level sources than I did as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and reporters were often the first to pick up on a new disease or situation. I told the reporter that I hadn't heard anything, but that we would monitor the situation.

Monitoring, however, was not easy. For one thing, we had a hard time finding out what was really going on in China because doctors and scientists there appeared to be afraid to speak openly, for fear of retribution by the Chinese government.

In the first few days of 2020, the word coming out of Wuhan—a city of more than 11 million—suggested that the virus did not spread easily from human to human. Bob Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was already in contact with George Gao, his counterpart in China. During an early-January phone call, Bob reported that Gao had assured him that the situation was under control. A subsequent phone call was very different. Gao was clearly upset, Bob said, and told him that it was bad—much, much worse than people imagined.

"We don't know what's going on with this virus coming out of China right now," I told the group assembled in a conference room at the National Institutes of Health. This was January 3, just 48 hours after the reporter had called me at home. The scientists sitting around the table, led by Vaccine Research Center Director John Mascola, knew what I was going to say next: "We are going to need a vaccine for whatever this new virus turns out to be."

Among those present was Barney Graham, a gentle giant of a man at 6 feet 5 inches tall, and one of the world's foremost vaccinologists. For years, Barney had been leading a group of scientists trying to develop the optimal immunogens for vaccines injected into the body. (An immunogen refers to the crucial part of any vaccine that generates the immune response.) They had been working with

Moderna on a vaccine platform called mRNA, the result of groundbreaking research conducted over many years by Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman, who would win the Nobel Prize in 2023. "Get me the viral genomic sequence," Barney said, "and we'll get working on a vaccine in days."

At this point, an FDA-approved vaccine had never before been made using mRNA technology, and although a lot of skepticism remained, my colleagues and I were very optimistic about it. Compared with other vaccines, the mRNA process is faster and more precise. The team needed the coronavirus's genomic sequence so that it could pick out the part that codes for the spike protein (the immunogen) and, together with Moderna, use it to make the correct mRNA.

Only a week later, on January 10, I received an excited phone call from Barney: Scientists had just uploaded the SARS-CoV-2 sequence to a public database. Barney then immediately contacted a company that produces artificial strings of genetic code. He placed an order for the nucleotide sequence, and this lifesaving product was delivered in a small test tube packaged in a FedEx envelope. The modest charge was put on a credit card.

But soon after, Barney made a sobering point: A full-blown vaccine effort, including clinical trials, was going to cost a lot of money, far beyond what was in the Vaccine Research Center's budget. I told him not to worry. "If this thing really explodes, I promise you, I will get us more money. You just go and make your vaccine."

Hundreds of construction workers erect a prefabricated hospital in Wuhan, January 28, 2020.

ABOUT AN HOUR into a meeting in the White House Situation Room on January 29, concerning how to evacuate U.S. citizens from Wuhan, President Donald Trump walked in. The first thing he did, to my great surprise, was look right at me.

"Anthony," he said, "you are really a famous guy. My good friend Lou Dobbs told me that you are one of the smartest, knowledgeable, and outstanding persons he knows." I gulped. Thus began my first extended conversation with the 45th president of the United States. A big, imposing man, Trump had a New York swagger that I instantly recognized—a self-confident, backslapping charisma that reminded me of my own days in New York. For the next 20 minutes, as we discussed the new virus, the president directed many of his questions my way. I had met Trump only once before. In September 2019, I had been part of a group invited to the Oval Office for the signing of an executive order to manufacture and distribute flu vaccines. Prior to that, I had sometimes wondered what it would be like to interact with him. He had shocked me on day one of his presidency with his disregard of facts, such as the size of

Anthony Fauci briefs President Donald Trump in the White House Situation Room, January 29.

GETTY; JOYCE N. BOGHOSIAN / WHITE HOUSE

the crowd at his inauguration. His apocalyptic inaugural address also had taken me aback, as had his aggressive disrespect for the press. But at that brief signing ceremony, I had found him far more personable than I'd expected. Of course, I had no idea in January 2020 what the months and years ahead would be like.

I had confronted other terrible outbreaks over the course of my career—HIV in the 1980s, SARS in 2002 and 2003, Ebola in 2014, Zika in 2015—but none of them prepared me for the environment I would find myself in during the coronavirus pandemic. The nation was and is extremely polarized, with a large portion of Americans reflexively distrustful of expertise. On social media, anyone can pretend to be an expert, and malicious information is easily amplified. Soon I would come to learn just how dangerous these conditions can be.

A code red went off in my mind during the week of January 23, when I saw photos in a newspaper showing that the Chinese government was quickly erecting a 1,000-bed prefabricated hospital. At that point, the virus had reportedly killed just 25 people and infected about 800, according to data the Chinese had released. *Time out*, I thought. *Why would you need that many hospital beds when fewer than 1,000 people are infected?* That was the moment I suspected we could be facing an unprecedented challenge, and my anxiety took a sharp turn upward.

By the very end of January, we were hearing that the cases in China were increasing by about 25 percent a day. Reportedly, more than 9,000 people were infected, and 213 people were dead. The number of infections in a single month had surpassed the 2002–03 SARS outbreak. The United States had discovered its first known case of this novel coronavirus on January 20; a 35-year-old man had returned home to Washington State from Wuhan with a severe cough and a fever. The CDC had already begun screening passengers at several U.S. airports, taking their temperature and asking them about symptoms such as a sore throat and a cough. We began to wonder: Should we recommend closing the United States to travelers from China? On January 31, seated in front of the Resolute desk, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, the CDC's Bob Redfield, and I explained the details of a proposed travel ban to the president. He posed several questions specifically to me about whether I was fully on board with the ban. "It is an imperfect process with some downsides, Mr. President, but I believe it's the best choice we have right now," I told him. Later that day, the Trump administration announced that travel restrictions would go into effect.

The White House communications team began arranging for me to appear on news shows. The entire world was transfixed by this rapidly evolving outbreak,

I HAD CONFRONTED TERRIBLE OUTBREAKS, BUT NONE OF THEM PREPARED ME FOR THE ENVIRONMENT I WOULD FIND MYSELF IN DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC.

and I became the public face of the country's battle with the disease. This was useful, in that I could both try to calm the country's anxieties and provide factual information. But it also led to the gross misperception, which grew exponentially over time, that I was in charge of most or even all of the federal government's response to the coronavirus. This would eventually make me the target of many people's frustration and anger.

On February 11, the World Health Organization officially designated the disease caused by the novel coronavirus as COVID-19, which was now spreading relentlessly around the world. And in the midst of this, the CDC, the country's premier public-health agency, was stumbling badly.

The agency traditionally had a go-it-alone attitude, excluding input from outside sources. Its personnel were talented and deeply committed professionals. I respected them, and many were friends. But the CDC's approach, which is based on tracking symptoms, was poorly suited to dealing with a swiftly spreading disease in which, it would later turn out, more than a substantial portion of the transmissions come from people who are asymptomatic. The CDC was slow to recognize and act on that.

Another vulnerability was the way the CDC was set up to collect data. Rather than obtaining data firsthand, the agency depended on public-health departments around the country—but those departments did not consistently provide complete, up-to-date data. Some provided information reflecting what had occurred weeks earlier, not the day before. As the disease kept spreading, what was actually happening was always far worse than what the CDC's data were telling us at the time. Public-health officials had to constantly play catch-up.

The CDC had an outstanding track record for quickly creating tests for diseases like Zika. With COVID, however, instead of immediately partnering with the diagnostic industry, it started from scratch with a test that turned out to be defective. The agency then failed to fix the defect, and wasted even more time in developing adequate testing. February was a lost month as a result.

Although the CDC struggled, there was no mistaking the message delivered on February 25 by its

DURING TASK-FORCE MEETINGS, PENCE OFTEN SAID SOME VERSION OF "THERE ARE A LOT OF SMART PEOPLE AROUND HERE, BUT WE ALL KNOW THAT THE SMARTEST PERSON IN THE BUILDING IS UPSTAIRS."

director of immunization and respiratory diseases, Nancy Messonnier. She told reporters that a pandemic in the United States was no longer a matter of if but when, and that we should prepare to close schools and work remotely. "Disruption to everyday life may be severe," she announced. Nancy did the right thing: She told Americans the truth. But not surprisingly, her statement caused a firestorm. The media erupted, and the stock market plummeted nearly 1,000 points. Trump was furious.

The next day, he announced that Vice President Mike Pence would take over for Alex Azar as the head of the White House coronavirus task force. I met Pence the day he ran his first task-force meeting. He was soft-spoken and always solicited the medical opinions of the physicians on the task force. He listened carefully to our answers, often asking astute follow-up questions and never pretending to understand something if he did not. But I also picked up on little things that indicated how differently this administration operated from previous ones. Vice presidents are always publicly loyal to the president; that is part of the job. But Pence sometimes overdid it. During task-force meetings, he often said some version of "There are a lot of smart people around here, but we all know that the smartest person in the building is upstairs."

Others joined Pence in heaping praise on Trump. When the task force held teleconferences with governors, most of the Republicans started by saying, "Tell the president what a great job he is doing." But a couple of days after Nancy's bombshell announcement, when I got a surprise phone call from Trump at 10:35 p.m., I did not flatter him. What I did do during our 20-minute conversation was lay out the facts. I encouraged him not to underplay the seriousness of the situation. "That almost always comes back to bite you, Mr. President," I said. "If you are totally honest about what is happening with COVID, the country will respect you for it." He was courteous to me, and as we hung up, I felt satisfied that he had heard what I'd said.

I was worried about community spread, and I was particularly focused on Seattle. A longtime colleague called me from the city on March 3 and told me that 380 people with flu-like symptoms had been screened in four emergency rooms. Four had tested positive for COVID, a roughly 1 percent infection rate—that may not sound like much, but it was a clear signal that the virus was spreading among those unaware that they had been exposed. That meant the 1 percent was only a tiny fraction of what was actually already happening. When I brought this information to the task-force meeting, neither Pence nor Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin seemed to fully appreciate the seriousness of what I was telling them. While I was warning them of the impending disaster, the president was declaring outright to the press that the situation was under control. Without deliberately contradicting him, I kept repeating that things would get worse, and indeed they did.

Then, in one Oval Office meeting, I mentioned to Trump that we were in the early stages of developing a COVID vaccine. This got his attention, and he quickly arranged a trip to the NIH. During his visit, Barney Graham told the president that within a couple of weeks, a Phase 1 trial would likely begin. The president asked, "Why can't we just use the flu vaccine for this virus?" It was not the first or the last time that he seemed to conflate COVID with influenza.

PEOPLE ASSOCIATE SCIENCE with immutable absolutes, when in fact science is a process that continually uncovers new information. As new information is uncovered, the process of science allows for self-correction. The biological and health sciences are different from the physical sciences and mathematics. With mathematics, two plus two equals four today, and two plus two will equal four 1,000 years from now. Not so with the biological sciences, where what we know evolves and uncertainty is common.

On March 8, I appeared on a *60 Minutes* broadcast in a segment about COVID. At one point, I told the interviewer, "Right now in the United States, people should not be walking around with masks." I was expressing not just a personal opinion, but the consensus at the time—a view shared by the surgeon general and the CDC.

The supply of masks was already low. One fear was that there would be a stampede, and we would create an even greater shortage of masks needed by the health-care workers taking care of very ill COVID patients. Although there was accumulating evidence that the virus was spread by aerosol, this was not widely accepted, certainly not by the WHO. When additional information became available—including that the virus was readily spread by infected people who had no symptoms—we advised the public to wear masks. But this was how I became the public-health official

Vice President Mike Pence addresses reporters in the White House briefing room, March 3.

Fauci while Trump speaks at the March 20 coronavirus briefing

THE WASHINGTON POST / GETTY; ERIN SCHAFF / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

who, very early in the pandemic, instructed people not to wear a mask. Later, my words would be twisted by extreme elements in an attempt to show that I and other scientists had misled the public, that we could not be trusted, and that we were flip-floppers.

What I came to realize is that our country is more profoundly divided than I'd ever understood. I remember a time when people expected diverse political opinions. You didn't have to agree, but you respected one another enough to listen. Now the partisanship is so intense that people refuse to even try. They ignore facts in favor of tribal politics. That's how you wind up with dangerous conspiracy theories. The controversy over masks illustrates a fundamental misperception of how science works. In reality, our understanding of COVID continually evolved, and our medical advice had to change to reflect this.

March 2020 was when COVID became frighteningly real to Americans. This was also around the time I started waking up with a jolt at 4 a.m. to stare at the ceiling with worry. I believe Trump thought that COVID would be temporary: *A little time goes by, the outbreak is over, everyone goes back to work, and the election cycle can begin.* He could not have imagined that the pandemic would go on for such a long time. I think this explains why he repeatedly asked me and others whether COVID resembled the flu. He desperately wanted the pandemic to disappear, just as flu does at the end of the flu season. Tragically, COVID was not the flu, and it did not vanish. Just the opposite. And so, with the ghastly reality setting in, Trump began to grab for an elixir that would cure this disease. Along came hydroxychloroquine.

Trump began hearing from the Fox News star Laura Ingraham and others who were promoting the drug as a COVID treatment. People have long taken hydroxychloroquine to prevent or treat malaria. It is also used to treat inflammatory and autoimmune diseases such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Soon Trump began touting it to millions of worried Americans at our now-daily press briefings. But there were no clinical studies proving that this antimalarial drug would alleviate COVID. And it might even hurt people. The president seemed unable to grasp that anecdotes of how hydroxychloroquine might have helped some people with COVID did not translate into solid medical advice. This is when I realized that eventually, I would have to refute him publicly. This was not the White House I had known, and I'd been advising presidents since the Reagan administration. The differences were going to dramatically affect the way I could do my job. "Hydroxychloroquine doesn't work," I told reporters. After that, they would inevitably ask me if I agreed with something Trump had said, such as the idea that COVID would disappear

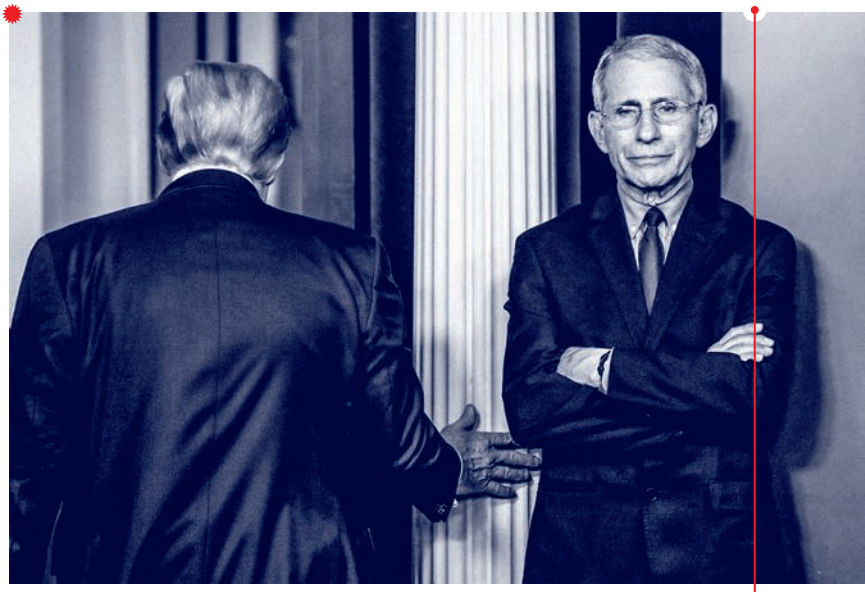
"like a miracle." I would then have to respond with the truth: "Well, that's not going to happen."

I took no pleasure in contradicting the president of the United States. I have always had a great deal of respect for the Office of the President, and to publicly disagree with the president was unnerving at best and painful at worst. But it needed to be done. I take very seriously a statement in the first chapter of *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine*, of which I have been an editor for 40 years: "The patient is no mere collection of symptoms, signs, disordered functions, damaged organs, and disturbed emotions. [The patient] is human, fearful, and hopeful, seeking relief, help, and reassurance." This compels me to always be honest; to be unafraid of saying that I do not know something; to never overpromise; to be comforting, yet realistic. Admitting uncertainty is not fashionable in politics these days, but it is essential in my work. That's the beauty of science. You make a factual observation. If the facts change, the scientific process self-corrects. You gather new information and data that sometimes require you to change your opinion. This is how we better care for people over time. But too few people understand the self-corrective nature of science. In our daily press conferences, I tried to act as if the American public were my patient, and the principles that guided me through my medical career applied.

There is a widely circulated photo of me from a White House press briefing on March 20, in which I put my hand to my forehead in response to a comment the president had made. That day, Trump was especially flippant. He was standing with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, making one provocative statement after another. Then he said, "Secretary of State Pompeo is extremely busy, so if you have any questions for him right now could you do that because … I'd like him to go back to the State Department or, as they call it, the 'Deep State' Department." I had a moment of despair mixed with amusement. I put my hand to my forehead to hide my expression. This is when things began to get difficult for my family and me.

In late March, officials monitoring the dark web started to see a considerable amount of hostility and threats directed toward me. The problem was that a hard-core group saw me as a nay-saying bureaucrat who was deliberately, even maliciously, undermining Trump. They loved and supported the president and regarded me as the enemy. To them, my hand-to-forehead moment validated what they already believed about me.

As a result, I was assigned a security detail. For years, AIDS had made me a target, but that was largely before social media. Back then, I used to get one or two insulting letters a month, mostly homophobic rants, sent to my office at the NIH. Now my family and I were barraged by emails, texts, and phone calls. I was outraged that my wife, Christine, and our daughters were harassed with foul language and sexually explicit messages, and threatened with violence and even death. I was angry and wanted to lash out. But these direct expressions of hatred did not distract or frighten me. I did not have time for fear. I had a job to do.



Trump departs a daily coronavirus briefing, March 26.

JONATHAN ERNST / REUTERS / REDUX

My training as a physician in a busy New York City hospital had taught me to push through crises and fatigue, to not feel sorry for myself. During the pandemic, Christine also insisted that I balance the demands of work with taking care of myself. ("You are going to bed at a decent hour, you are going to eat regular meals, and you are going to carry a water bottle," she said in a way that left no room for argument.) Her advice helped me get through everything that followed.

But in the ensuing years, I also came to realize that addressing the root cause of our country's division is beyond my capabilities as a scientist, physician, and public servant. That doesn't mean I've given up hope that the country can be healed. I believe scientific education is more crucial now than it has ever been in American history. Children should learn what the scientific process is, how it works, and that it self-corrects. Most of all, I believe we need to reclaim civility. To do so, we need to understand that we're all more alike than we are different—that we share common goals for ourselves and for our communities. We need to learn to talk to one another again. And we need to figure that out before the next pandemic hits. *A*

Anthony Fauci is a physician, an immunologist, and an infectious-disease expert. He was the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases from 1984 to 2022. This article has been adapted from his book On Call: A Doctor's Journey in Public Service.


1 in 10 women
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THE GLACIER RESCUE PROJECT

Can the mighty Thwaites be stopped from tumbling into the sea? *By Ross Andersen*

THE EDGE OF GREENLAND'S ICE SHEET

looked like a big lick of sludgy white frosting spilling over a rise of billion-year-old brown rock. Inside the Twin Otter's cabin, there were five of us: two pilots, a scientist, an engineer, and me. Farther north, we would have needed another seat for a rifle-armed guard. Here, we were told to just look around for polar-bear tracks on our descent. We had taken off from Greenland's west coast and soon passed over the ice sheet's lip. Viewed from directly above, the first 10 miles of ice looked wrinkled, like elephant skin. Its folds and creases appeared to be lit blue from within.

We landed 80 miles into the interior with a swervy skid. Our engineer, a burly Frenchman named Nicolas Bayou, jerked the door open, and an unearthly cold ripped through the cabin. The ice was smoother here. The May sunlight radiated off it like a pure-white aurora. We knew that there were no large crevasses near the landing site. This was a NASA mission. We had orbital reconnaissance. Still, our safety officer had warned us that we could "pop down" into a hidden crack in the ice if we ventured too far from the plane. Bayou appointed himself our Neil Armstrong. He unfolded the ladder, stepped gingerly down its rungs, and set foot on the surface.

Over the next hour and a half, we drilled 15 feet into the mile-thick ice. We fed a long pole topped by a solar-powered GPS receiver into the hole and stood it straight up. In the ensuing days, we were scheduled to set up four identical sites in a long line, the last one near Greenland's center. Each will help calibrate a $1.5 billion satellite, known as NISAR, that NASA has been building with the Indian Space Research Organisation. After the satellite launches from the Bay of Bengal, its radar will peer down at Earth's glaciers—even at night, even in stormy weather. Every 12 days, it will generate an exquisitely detailed image of almost the entirety of the cryosphere—all the planet's ice.

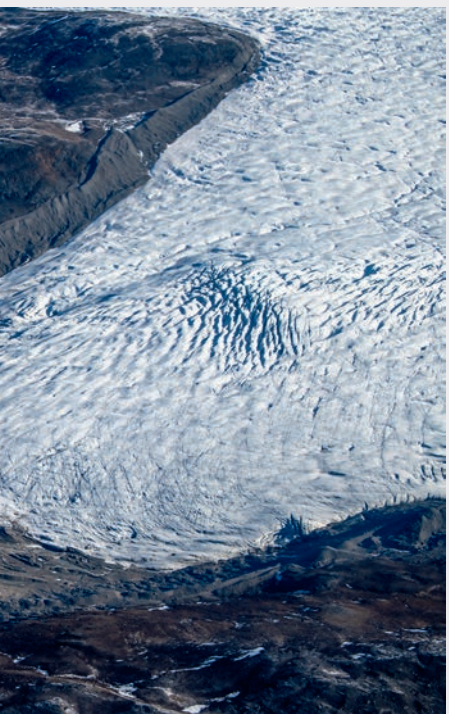
NISAR's unblinking surveillance is crucial because not even the largest, most immobile-seeming edifices of ice stay in one place. They *move*, and as the planet warms, their movements are accelerating, and so is their disintegration. Glaciologists have spent decades telling people that ice sheets are hemorrhaging icebergs and meltwater into the ocean at rates without precedent since the advent of scientific records on the subject—and that this is a serious problem, especially for the 40 percent of us who live in low-lying regions near a coastline. The glaciologists have often felt ignored. In recent years, they have begun to bicker, largely behind closed doors, about whether to push a more interventionist approach. Some now think that we should try to control the flow of the planet's most vulnerable glaciers. They say that with the right technology, we might be able to freeze them in place, stopping their slide into the seas.

PREVIOUS PAGES AND THIS PAGE: NICOLAS BAYOU

The glaciologist Ian Joughin, who leads NISAR's cryosphere team, invited me to go on the Greenland trip. In March, I visited him at the Polar Science Center at the University of Washington to talk through the mission. It was a rare clear day in Seattle. We could see Mount Rainier, the most glaciated peak in the contiguous United States, floating like a white ghost above the horizon. Joughin explained that nearly all of the Earth's ice is locked up in the two big sheets near its poles. If by some feat of telekinesis I could have airlifted the glaciers off Rainier's flanks and mashed them together with every other mountain glacier in the world, the resulting agglomeration would account for less than 1 percent of Earth's cryosphere. Greenland's ice sheet accounts for about 13 percent; Antarctica's accounts for the rest.

Ice may have arrived on Earth only a few hundred million years after the planet formed. At the time, Saturn and Jupiter hadn't yet settled into their orbits. They were still moving around, jostling icy comets, sending some of them toward the inner solar system. Some scientists believe that thousands of these cosmic snowballs smashed into the Earth. The ice they carried would have vaporized on impact, but later rained down onto the crust, raising the sea levels. At some point, the seas' polar regions started to freeze, and from these tiny beginnings, the planet's ice grew. About 2.4 billion years ago, a riot of bacteria began exhaling oxygen en masse, transforming the atmosphere's methane into molecules that don't trap much heat. Ice spread outward from the poles, advancing over land and sea without prejudice, possibly all the way to the equator. From space, the Earth would have looked like it was slowly enclosing itself in blue-veined white marble. Since then, ice has retreated and advanced, over and over, largely in accordance with the buildup and dissipation of greenhouse gases in the air.

The history of our current cryosphere began 180 million years ago, when Antarctica—then covered in thick forests filled with ferns and dinosaurs—broke off from the supercontinent Gondwana and started drifting south. Only about 20 million years ago, after it had stabilized at the South Pole and put an ocean between itself and the rest of the hemisphere's climate, did snow begin stacking up into an ice sheet on its eastern half. The first stub of what would become the West Antarctic Ice Sheet appeared around the same time, but it took longer to grow, and it was more unstable. To glaciologists' alarm, it is still unstable, and growing more so, today.



Previous pages: *The edge of the Thwaites Glacier, 2023.* Left: *The Greenland Ice Sheet, 2024.*

Greenland's ice sheet formed much later than Antarctica's. When I stepped down onto its flat, white expanse and saw that it extended all the way to the horizon, in every direction, it seemed like a permanent fixture of the planet. But it first appeared about 2.6 million years ago, and, like the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, it is fickle. In 2016, the geologist Jason Briner analyzed a rock core that had been hauled up from underneath two miles of ice at the very center of Greenland. He was surprised to find an isotope that forms only when bare rock is struck by the intense radiation that flows through the Milky Way. Scientists had long known that Greenland's ice sheet was sensitive to climate; its southern half and outer edges had crumbled and melted into the sea during the warm periods between Ice Age glaciations. Briner's analysis suggested that at some point in the past million years, the sheet had vanished entirely, exposing the underlying bedrock to the electromagnetic violence of the cosmos.

Briner's work is just one small part of an urgent effort to figure out how quickly the Earth's ice will disintegrate as the planet warms. Mountain glaciers are already shrinking fast. The ice slabs wedged into the valleys between the Alps, Andes, and Himalayas may burn off entirely before the century's end. Greenland's ice sheet is also in imminent danger. It still covers almost all of the island, apart from the coasts, but its outlet glaciers have been sloughing off icebergs at an increasing rate. And from my porthole window in the Twin Otter, I could see slushy aquamarine streams rushing across the ice sheet's surface, even though it wasn't yet summer. These two sources together make Greenland the largest current contributor to global sea-level rise, but perhaps not for long. Antarctica is awakening from its deep freeze. Within decades, its dissolution could overtake Greenland's.

Antarctica's ice sheet won't *melt* away, at least not from the top; air temperatures in the continent's interior are colder than 40 degrees below zero for much of the year. But melting isn't the only risk to ice sheets. Because Antarctica is so enormous, the quickening of its iceberg discharge alone would be enough to surpass Greenland's entire output. East Antarctica may be safe for now. Much of its ice sheet rests on a high plateau. But the story is different in West Antarctica, and especially on Thwaites, the glacier that may well determine its future.

Thwaites covers an area as large as the island of Britain. Its bed has relatively few large obstacles, perfect for a glacier that wants to flow fast. A considerable portion of it sits well below sea level. During the last Ice Age, Thwaites grew monstrously thick, and dug a trough beneath itself as it pushed out along the continental shelf. Today, near its terminus, it rests on bumps and ridges on the seafloor, to which ice attaches, creating resistance and helping to hold the otherwise smooth-flowing glacier back. Glaciologists have long worried that the deep currents of warm water surrounding Antarctica could sneak into the trough underneath it. After

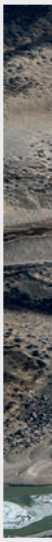
Thwaites began shedding ice at an alarming rate, they sent an autonomous submersible to investigate. To their dismay, they saw warm water flowing beneath the glacier, thinning its underside. If that continues, the icy structures that affix Thwaites to the undersea ridges may melt away. The glacier could become a runaway. A big inland portion of it could pour into the sea across a period of decades. The models that most glaciologists use suggest that this could occur sometime in the next several centuries. But the models don't yet have a long track record. The field's experts can imagine tail scenarios in which it happens much sooner, perhaps within the lifetime of people reading this today.

The loss of Thwaites would be catastrophic. If it goes, it would likely lead to the loss of much of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet. That would raise sea levels by up to 10 feet. Even five feet of sea-level rise would erase hundreds of islands from the Earth's surface, along with the unique cultures and ecologies that have taken root on them. Hundreds of millions of people who live along coasts could be forced to find new homes, with unpredictable geopolitical ripple effects. Rich countries would normally have the capacity—if not the willingness—to help poor ones. But their resources may be strained if the urban grids of New York City, Miami, London, Amsterdam, Tokyo, and Shanghai are underwater.

While reporting this story, I talked with more than 20 scientists who study the cryosphere. Many of them burned with impatience. They are no longer content with the traditional scientific role of neutral observation. "I'm not going to be satisfied simply documenting the demise of these environments that I care about," Brent Minchew, a glaciologist at MIT, told me. Minchew is teaming up with like-minded scientists who want to do something about it. They are designing grand technological interventions that could slow down the cryosphere's disintegration. Most of the scientists are on the younger side, but the central idea they are working on isn't. It was dreamed up by a member of the older guard, a 57-year-old glaciologist at UC Santa Cruz named Slawek Tulaczyk.

Before leaving for Greenland, I visited Tulaczyk in Santa Cruz. We met at the university arboretum and walked uphill through the forested campus, pausing only to let two coyotes leave the trail. When we reached the hilltop, we gazed out over the Pacific. Tulaczyk began to explain how its waves had shaped the landscape. Hundreds of thousands of years ago, after an extreme Ice Age glaciation receded, the sea rose by nearly 400 feet, and cut a deep new shoreline into the coast. Erosion had since rounded down one of its cliffs into the hill we had just climbed. I asked Tulaczyk if he thought the sea would creep up here again. He told me that he is not a doomer by nature—he once believed that diplomacy and reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change would prevent glaciers from avalanching off West Antarctica. But a few years ago, he lost his faith.

It's not hard to see why. The global appetite for fossil fuels remains ravenous. As of January, China was planning or actively building more *new* coal plants than all the plants currently operating in the United States. Each one may burn for more than 40 years. Yes, solar panels are flying off assembly lines worldwide, but grids can't yet store all the daylight that they absorb. Electric cars are still relatively rare, and container ships run on oil. The planet has already warmed by more than 1 degree Celsius since the Industrial Revolution. Each extra degree will destabilize ice sheets further, making them more likely to tumble, rather than slowly flow, into the sea. Tulaczyk doesn't think that the creaky machinery of global governance is moving quickly enough to stop them. He's formulating a backup plan.



Tulaczyk first became interested in glaciers as a boy running wild through the countryside of his native Poland. He wondered about the deep history of its forests and fields. He learned that during the Pleistocene, ice sheets had steamrolled down from the North Pole and flattened much of the country. When they retreated, they left lakes behind. ("Picture Wisconsin," Tulaczyk told me.) After immigrating to the United States, he did his doctoral work in glaciology at the California Institute of Technology under Barclay Kamb, a legendary figure from a more freewheeling age of polar exploration. During the 1990s, Kamb took Tulaczyk on long summer expeditions to tented camps in the remote Antarctic interior. They drilled holes into ice sheets with pressurized hot water. Sometimes they reached more than half a mile down, all the way to the continent. Tulaczyk studied the underlying sediment. He found rock and gravel, but also silts and muds that suggested a liquid layer.

Glaciologists were beginning to understand that underneath the miles-thick Antarctic ice lurks a dark water world as mysterious as the sea that sloshes beneath the frozen surface of Jupiter's moon Europa. The friction of a glacier's slide toward the sea combines with heat radiating up from the Earth's mantle to melt a tiny bit of its underside. Subglacial watersheds channel the meltwater into hidden streams and rivers. Some pool into lakes that eventually discharge as the ice above them moves, and watersheds shift. Satellite-laser scans have recently revealed more than 400 areas across Antarctica that pulsate faintly in time lapse, like subwoofers, as the lakes deep beneath them fill and drain. Some are as large as Lakes Eerie or Ontario. In 2013, Tulaczyk helped lower the first cameras and sampling tubes into one. He found microbes that survive on their own kind of fossil fuel: organics from the continent's warmer times. Antarctica is often described as Earth's largest desert, but it may also be its most extensive living wetland.

Tulaczyk has long been intrigued by the way that this sprawling wetland lubricates the ice above it, speeding up its journey toward the ocean. At a conference in the late '90s, he learned about a mysterious subglacial event that occurred 200 years ago, underneath the Kamb Ice Stream, a glacier on the opposite side of West Antarctica from Thwaites. Until the mid-19th century,

Top: *A GPS antenna and associated equipment on the Whillans Ice Stream in Antarctica in 2015, placed to help scientists better understand how fast the ice is moving.*
Bottom: *Meltwater from the Greenland Ice Sheet running along a valley, 2024.*

SLAWEK TULACZYK; NICOLAS BAYOU

the glacier was flowing into the Ross Sea at an estimated 2,300 feet a year. But then, in the geologically abrupt space of only a few decades, this great river of ice all but halted. In the two centuries since, it has moved less than 35 feet a year. According to the leading theory, the layer of water underneath it thinned, perhaps by draining into the underside of another glacier. Having lost its lubrication, the glacier slowed down and sank toward the bedrock below. At its base, a cooling feedback loop took hold. Eventually, enough of it froze to its bed to keep it in place.

The story of the glacier that had suddenly halted stayed with Tulaczyk. Around 2010, he began to wonder whether water could be drained from underneath a large glacier like Thwaites to achieve the same effect. He imagined drilling down to its subglacial lakes to pump the water out of them. He imagined it gushing from the pumps' outlets and freezing into tiny crystals before it even splashed onto the Antarctic surface, "like a snow gun." The remaining water underneath the ice would likely flow toward the empty lakes, drying out portions of the glacier's underside. With luck, a cooling feedback loop would be triggered. Thwaites would freeze in place. Catastrophic sea-level rise would be avoided. Humanity would have time to get its act together.

The morning after my visit, Tulaczyk wrote to say that his research group preferred to describe his plan as an "ice preservation" scheme, rather than anything that smacks of geoengineering. Manipulating the flow of nation-size glaciers certainly qualifies as geo-engineering. But Tulaczyk is right to distinguish it from more dramatic, and truly global, interventions; instead of wrapping the Earth in a layer of aerosols to dim the sun, he merely wants to intervene at the glacier. His is only one of the preservation schemes that glaciologists are considering. Another team of scientists has suggested that mind-bogglingly large swaths of insulating fabric could be draped on top of vulnerable glaciers to keep them cold. Still another team has proposed that a curtain—made of plastic or some other material—be stretched across the 75-mile-wide zone where Thwaites meets the sea, to divert the warm water that is flowing underneath it.

In December, many of the world's most prominent glaciologists gathered for two days at Stanford University to discuss ice preservation, following a smaller such meeting in the fall. For Tulaczyk, it was a thrill just to organize a meeting like this. More than a decade ago, he'd pitched similar workshops to the National Science Foundation and NASA, and was told "nope," he said. At the time, many scientists worried that any talk of engineering ice sheets would distract from the necessary work of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. Tulaczyk's mentors had warned him that pursuing the matter further might damage his career.

Before the December meeting, I'd reached out to Ted Scambos, one of the lead investigators for the International Thwaites Glacier Collaboration, a $50 million study of the endangered glacier by more than 100 scientists around the world. Scambos told me that many of the scientists who were attending were still skeptical that any of the ideas would work. Some had declined to attend altogether. Twila Moon, a glaciologist at the University of Colorado at Boulder, told me that she sent in a video statement protesting the very premise of the meeting and calling it a distraction.

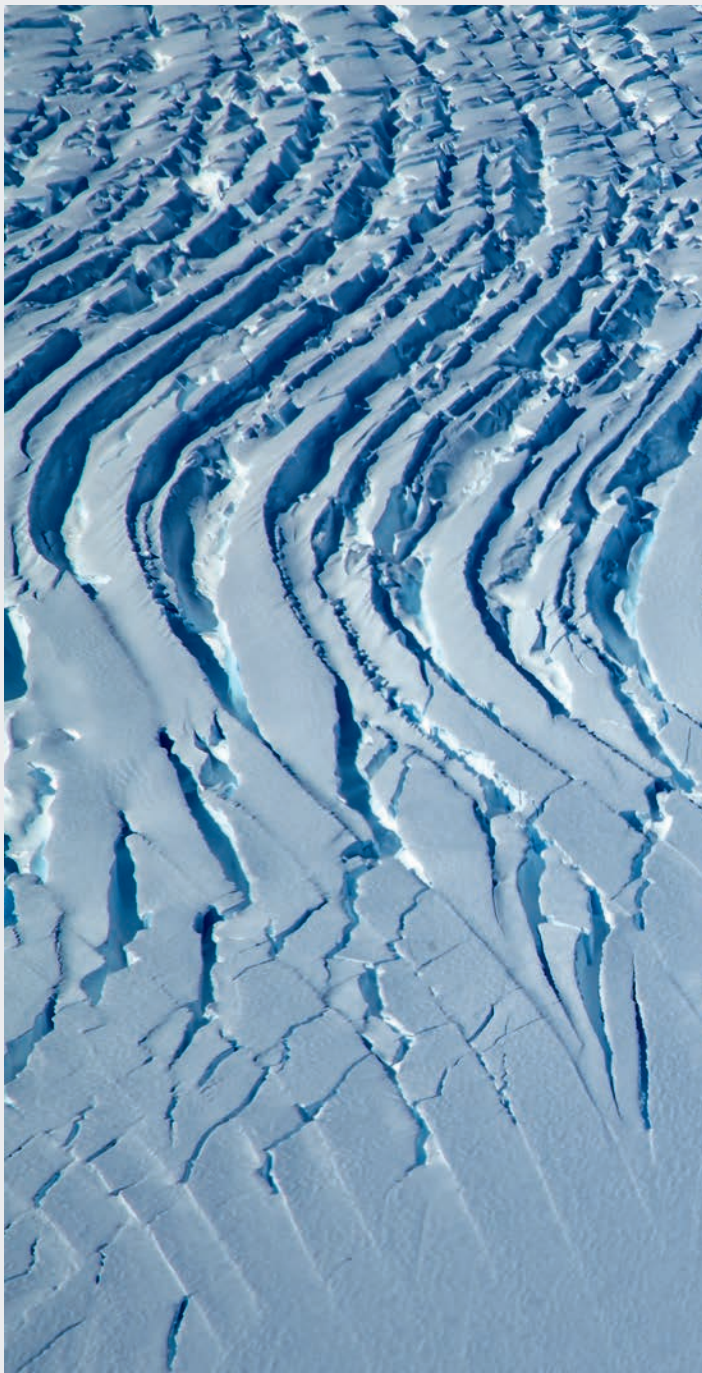
When I caught up with Scambos after the meeting, he said that he came away from it thinking that two things had shifted in the small world of glaciology. First, more scientists were now open to experimenting with ice preservation. Some had been convinced that there was no avoiding geo-engineering; it was going to happen, either at the glaciers themselves or at hundreds of other places around the planet, where seawalls and additional megastructures would need to be built if glaciers were lost.

The second shift Scambos noticed was that Tulaczyk's idea—freezing a glacier into place—now had more momentum. The fabric-covering idea hasn't gained much traction outside of groups working to preserve small glaciers in the Alps. And the curtain had come in for criticism at the meeting, in part because the sea edge of Thwaites is one of the most remote and forbidding environments on Earth. It was the last stretch of Antarctica's coast to be mapped, its final terra incognita. Installing anything of serious scale there, underwater, would be extraordinarily challenging and fantastically expensive. Even if the curtain could be successfully installed, it would risk unintended consequences; it could entangle marine mammals and divert warm water to other ice shelves. Some of the assembled scientists found it easier to imagine hot-water drilling in Antarctica because they had actual experience doing it, whereas none of them had ever installed a sea curtain. It also helped that philanthropists, including a former executive at Google X, had expressed interest in funding field tests.

"The beauty of this idea is that you can start small," Tulaczyk told me. "You can pick a puny glacier somewhere that doesn't matter to global sea level." This summer, Martin Truffer, a glaciologist at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, will travel to the Juneau Icefield in Alaska to look for a small slab of ice that could be used in a pilot test. If it stops moving, Tulaczyk told me he wants to try to secure permission from Greenland's Inuit political leaders to drain a larger glacier; he has his eye on one at the country's northeastern edge, which discharges five gigatons of ice into the Arctic Ocean every year. Only if that worked would he move on to pilots in Antarctica.

Even if these pilot experiments are successful, and hailed as such by the entire field, halting the mighty flow of Thwaites would still be a daunting challenge. To trigger a cooling feedback loop underneath its ice, a checkerboard array of separate drilling sites would be required. Estimates for how many range wildly, from a few dozen to thousands. In the annals of polar science, there is no precedent for a mission of this scope, as Tulaczyk well knows. In 2018, after five years of planning, it took a camp of 50 people in a much more accessible region of West Antarctica a whole field season to drill one borehole down to a subglacial lake. If you were operating 100 such sites, some economies of scale would kick in, but only to a point. A Thwaites field team could number 5,000 people—that's roughly the peak population of Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project, except in this case, they'd be deployed across one of the world's most remote glaciers.

Very few polar explorers have been to Thwaites. Tulaczyk himself has never made it to the glacier, despite 12 expeditions to



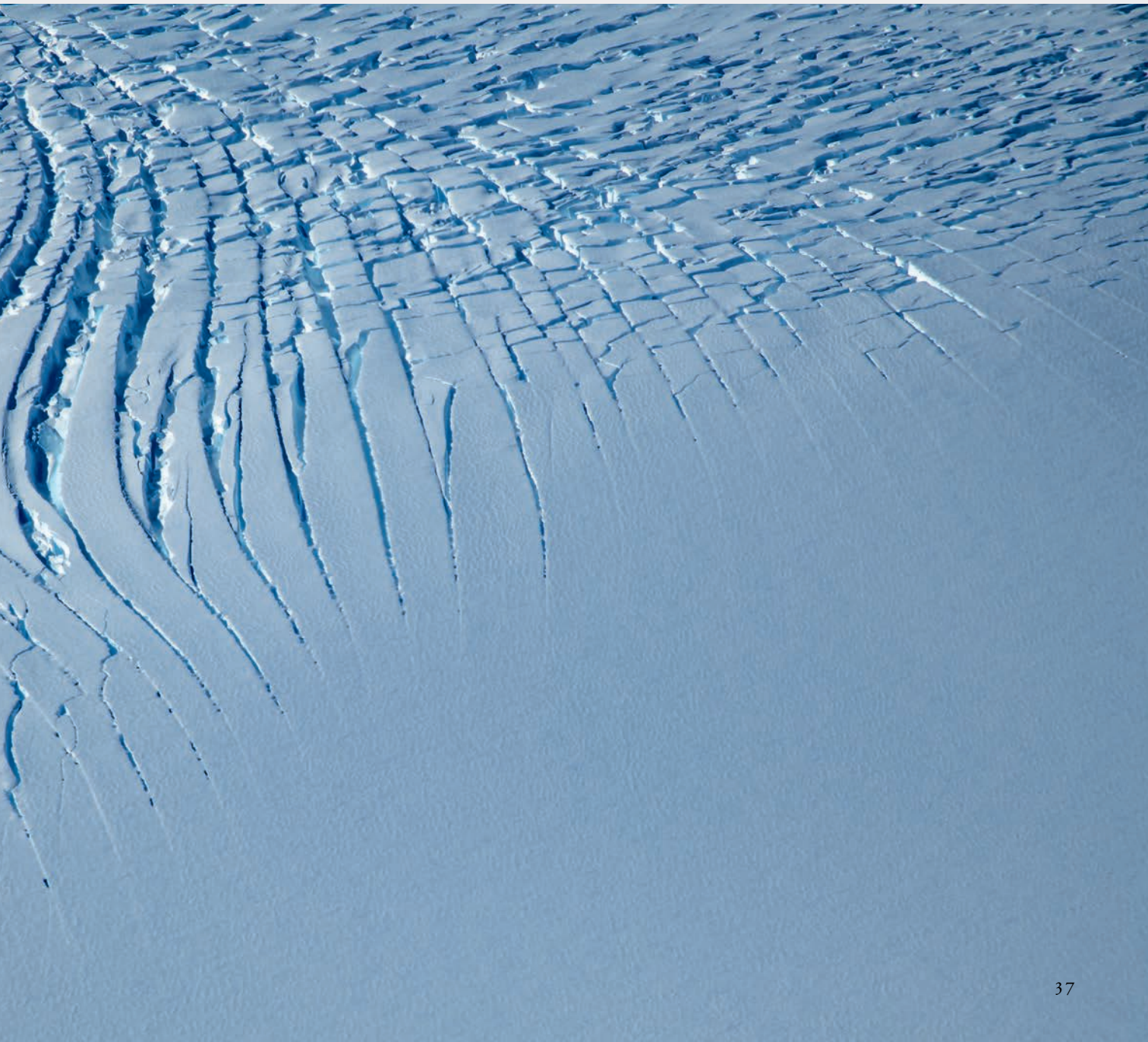
Crevasses in the Thwaites Glacier, 2023

Antarctica. When I asked those who have been there about the prospect of sending a scientific mission of this size, they seemed dazed by the question. But Tulaczyk, who is not just a scientist but an engineer, has given it serious thought. I heard him out, and then, to try to imagine how the project might work, I talked with Rob Grant, who led logistics for the British Antarctic Survey's most recent mission to Thwaites; Zoe Courville, who has helped keep dozens of traverses on Antarctica safe for American science missions; and Tanner Kuhl, an engineer with the U.S. Ice Drilling Program.

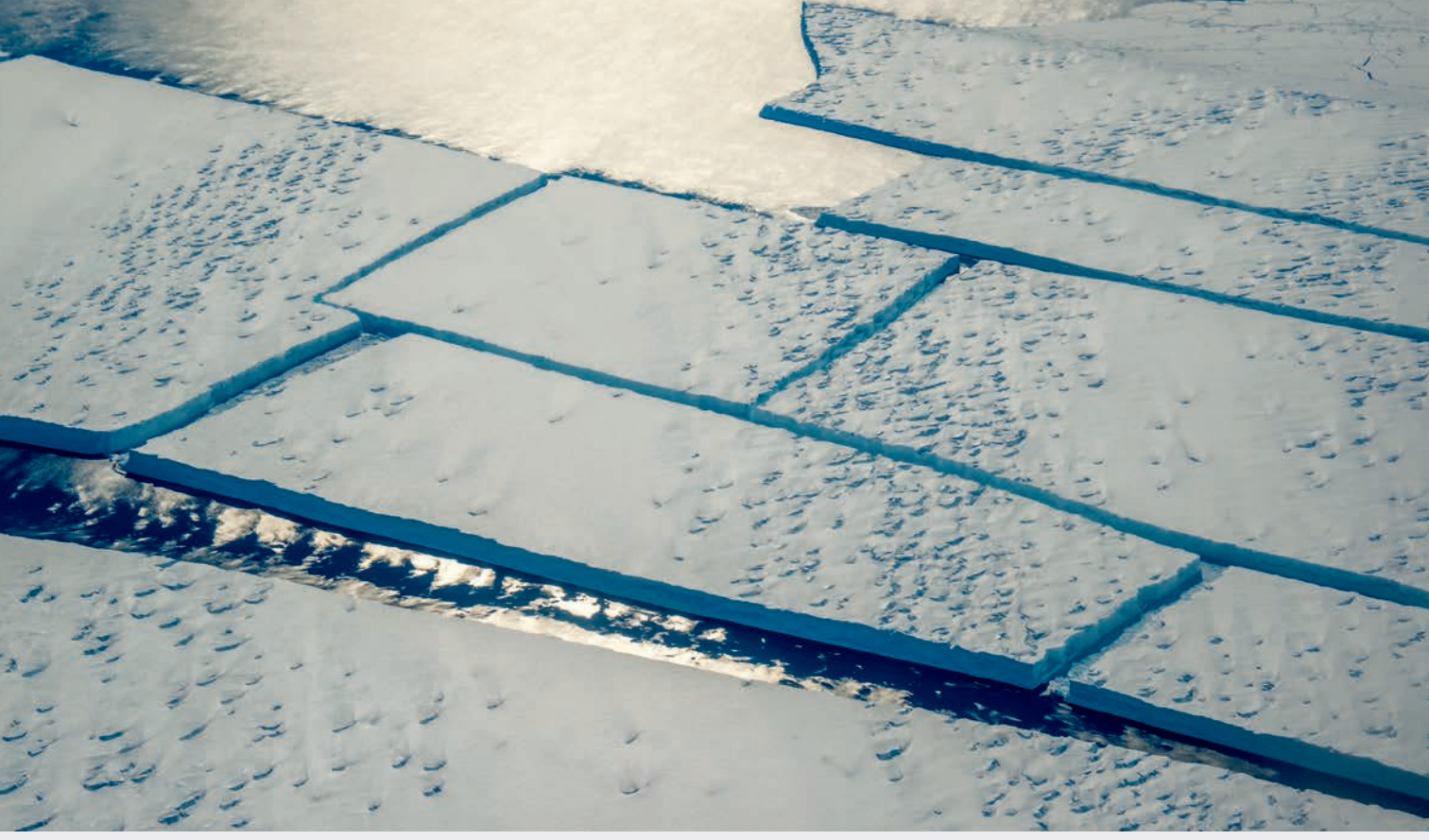
The mission's cargo alone would fill thousands of shipping containers. They would all need to be loaded onto a very large boat that would sail from Punta Arenas, Chile, and cross the Southern Ocean, a latitudinal band where no land exists to stop sea winds from whipping furiously around the planet. In 1774, Captain Cook made his way across these stormy seas and approached Thwaites directly from the north, but he never saw it: He turned back while still more than 100 miles away after encountering a dense field of icebergs "whose lofty summits reached the Clowds."

The planet's two most active glaciers—Thwaites and Pine Island—terminate in the very same bay. They are constantly ejecting building-size blocks of ice into its waters. In this bay, calm breezes can become gale-force winds in just minutes. Ice fog can white out the surroundings. On average, human civilization sends only one vessel of brave souls a year into the waters near Thwaites, and in some years no one goes.

Even if docking alongside Thwaites were a simple matter, unloading people and cargo onto an ice shelf that can tower more than 100 feet above the water would be impossible. Nor can heavy



NICOLAS BAYOU



planes land a bit farther in on the glacier, because its ice stretches and wrinkles during its final seaward sprint, riddling it with crevasses. Grant told me that it took his British team years to find an ice shelf that their ships could sidle up to. The good news: It's just 12 feet high, and it leads to a relatively stable route inland. The bad news: It's in the Ronne Inlet, 750 miles away.

The Antarctic field season is only a few months long. A cargo ship with a crane would need to trail an icebreaker into the Ronne Inlet and dock next to the ice shelf sometime in October. Mega-tractors would tow humongous bladders of fuel, wood crates packed with scientific instruments, and the rest of the cargo to a staging ground 150 miles into the interior. From there, a tractor convoy would set out across West Antarctica on a high ice plateau that runs alongside the continent's tallest mountain range. At the front of the convoy, ground-penetrating-radar specialists would scan the path ahead for crevasses. When the snow atop a crevasse was too thin to support a tractor's weight, they would adjust course, or blow up the crevasse with dynamite—sending a column of smoke and snow 80 feet into the sky—then fill it in using bulldozers.

After weeks on the ice, including whole days lost to extreme weather, the convoy would arrive at a second staging ground on the western edge of Thwaites, and then it would divide into a hundred smaller versions of itself, each taking its own path to a different drilling site on the glacier. During that first season, no one would even unpack a drill, much less a pump. They'd simply build each camp's basic infrastructure, and a large berm to make sure that the winter snowfall didn't bury it all.

Hot-water drills that can reach deep into ice have existed for decades. But there are only about 50 of them in the world, some weighing tens of thousands of pounds, made bespoke for missions in Greenland and Antarctica. The Thwaites mission would likely need more than double that number. On-site, bulldozers would heap snow into their heated holding tanks, and everyone would wait around while it melted. When at last hot water started jetting down from the drill's showerhead, steam would billow off the ice. A small dent would appear. It would deepen into a white-walled borehole at a rate of one meter every minute, assuming everything went smoothly.

But it rarely does. Truffer, who is known for his experience with ice drilling, told me that there are always stops and starts. Broken parts are especially maddening, because there are no polar hardware stores at which to buy replacements. Even with no hiccups, the boreholes could take days to drill, especially where Thwaites thickens to more than a half mile. If one of those deeper holes were wide enough to admit an Olympic diver, and she dove straight down to the subglacial lake below, more than 10 seconds would pass before she splashed into its water.

All the drilling and pumping and tractors and camps would require a small city's worth of energy. There might be no way to supply it cleanly. Solar panels could support some summertime operations, but not drilling and pumping. The camp that drilled a borehole for scientific research in 2018 required thousands of gallons of diesel fuel. To power 100 such sites would, in a terrible irony, likely require a great and sustained conflagration of fossil fuels.

NICOLAS BAYOU

Ice from the tongue of the Thwaites Glacier floating in the Amundsen Sea, 2018

If the operation ever happens, Tulaczyk won't run it. He said that he has had extraordinary experiences during his multimonth trips to Antarctica, but he has also felt the cold sting of its isolation. He once described Antarctica to me as a preview of the inhospitable universe that exists beyond the vibrant bounty of Earth. He has missed 12 Christmases with his kids doing fieldwork there, and many of his wife's birthdays. "There are a lot of divorced glaciologists," he said. "I don't want to join them." He is nearing retirement anyway. He may not even live to see his plan come to fruition, and he told me he is okay with that. He has inspired younger scientists. Some of them have begun to develop more elegant iterations of his idea. This is the natural way of things.

Minchew, the MIT glaciologist, is one of those scientists. He has adopted the drilling part of Tulaczyk's plan, but instead of pumping water out, he wants to pump warmth out, by lowering tubelike heat siphons into the boreholes. Tens of thousands of these siphons are already wedged alongside crude-oil pipelines in the Arctic. They pull up the subsurface heat that the pipelines emanate, so that it doesn't melt the permafrost and make the ground go askew. If a heat siphon could reach the bottom of Thwaites, it might be able to freeze a region of the glacier's base, creating a sticky spot. But the siphons used in the permafrost are only a few meters long; it may be difficult to lengthen them by orders of magnitude. There is good reason to try: Siphons don't need diesel fuel. They're powered by temperature differences alone. Minchew told me that if enough of them were lodged into Thwaites, like pins in a pincushion, they might be able to keep the whole thing in place. And they'd do it gently. They wouldn't make a sound. They wouldn't so much as glow.

Greenland's Sermeq Kujalleq glacier is the Thwaites of the Arctic—the Northern Hemisphere's fastest-crumbling edge. Every year, it dumps 11 cubic miles of ice into a fjord near the small town of Ilulissat. Before leaving Greenland, I flew north to see it. I landed after 8 p.m., and really should have called it a day. But I was feeling hardy from the musk-ox sausages that I'd eaten before takeoff, and I knew that the Arctic sun wouldn't set for hours. I dropped my bags at my hotel, slipped on my parka, and hiked toward the fjord.

Several glaciologists who have worked in both Antarctica and Greenland told me that the Ilulissat fjord is the most spectacular icescape in the world. During the Pleistocene, its glacier bulldozed boulders and other debris into the fjord's mouth, creating an underwater ridge. As a consequence, the gigantic icebergs that calve off the glacier can't just slip directly into the Atlantic. They bounce around the fjord together for months on end. After they melt down a bit and find just the right angle of escape, the icebergs embark on great journeys. Locals take a grim satisfaction in the strong possibility that one of them rammed the Titanic's hull. Some have likely drifted to latitudes as far south as Portugal.

I walked along Ilulissat's streets of brightly colored houses to its outskirts, where small shacks are surrounded by sled dogs chafing at their chains. Most of Greenland's residents are Inuit; their ancestors brought these dogs here from Alaska 1,000 years ago and used them to travel long distances across the Greenland Ice Sheet. They retain more than a trace of Arctic wolf in their physique and spirit. After climbing into the hills that separate the town from the fjord, I could still hear them howling into the cold wind.

It took me an hour to reach the fjord's most iceberg-dense section. I had to hopscotch across a tundra of slate-colored rock and vivid maroon lichen, while attempting to avoid snowdrifts. I got stuck, thigh-deep, in one. By the time I dug myself out, it was nearing 11 p.m. and the sky was finally darkening. I began to regret setting out so late on my own, until I passed over a rise and saw the fjord in its full glory.

Dozens of icebergs were spread across the water like floats massing before a parade. I couldn't help but project familiar shapes onto them—one resembled a giant polar bear kneeling in the water, searching for seals. All I could hear were small streams running off the tundra and the melancholy calls of gulls flying across the fjord. Occasionally, a distant iceberg would crack, and the sound would ricochet toward me, greatly reduced, like muffled gunfire.

I sat down on a patch of golden grass in front of the largest iceberg. It was a landscape unto itself, with a little mountain range on one side and a river running through its middle. Along its edges were sheer 100-foot cliffs, chalk-white like the coast of Dover. It was beautiful, and also disquieting. The whole thing was the size of a Manhattan block. And yet, compared with the ice sheet that had ejected it into the water, it was only a snowflake.

Twila Moon, the University of Colorado glaciologist, had recommended this hike to me in mid-March. I had called to ask about the video statement that she had sent to the Stanford meeting in December. Her position hadn't softened in the intervening months. Human beings have directed the flow of rivers, with mixed success, for thousands of years, but Moon thinks that a river of ice is a force beyond our reckoning. She worries that grant makers and scientific talent will be seduced—and that precious resources will be diverted from emissions reduction to chase a techno-fantasy. Even small-scale tests of Tulaczyk's idea are a waste of time, she told me, because as a practical matter, the technology could never be deployed at scale on Antarctica.

Icebergs in Pine Island Bay, into which Thwaites feeds, 2016

NICOLAS BAYOU

The first time I called Martin Truffer, the glaciologist at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks with a penchant for ice drilling, he had seemed to agree. But then I saw him on my way up to Greenland, where he planned to land a small helicopter on the glacier that feeds the Ilulissat fjord. The U.S. Air Force had flown us part of the way in a C-130, but the plane broke down in Newfoundland, and we were stranded for several days. One night, we discussed Tulaczyk's idea, and he acknowledged that the impoverished state of scientific research may have conditioned him to think too small.

Many polar science projects are held together by duct tape and the grit of people like Truffer, who spend long months in the field away from their families. But ice preservation on Antarctica wouldn't be an ordinary science project. If a consortium of governments became convinced that Thwaites could be saved, and that trillions of dollars of flooding damage could be avoided, they might treat the project more like a military mobilization or mass vaccine deployment. By those standards, the many billions of dollars you might need—especially if the glacier had to be drilled and pumped continually, across many years—really isn't that much money. Truffer remains skeptical of Tulaczyk's project, but he said it would be much more imaginable if it were backed by those kinds of resources.

That's really conceivable only in an asteroid-headed-for-Earth scenario where glaciologists are in total agreement that the loss of Thwaites is imminent. Funding, in that case, would be the easy part. Getting permission from Russia, China, and dozens of other parties to the Antarctic Treaty would likely be harder. Building an international consensus, manufacturing the equipment, and setting it up on Antarctica could take decades. Testing will certainly take decades.

In the meantime, the world's ice will continue to dissolve. Even if we were to halt emissions immediately and entirely, we could still lose major glaciers at both poles within a century. We can see them fragmenting now, in real time. On my last night in Ilulissat, I went back to the fjord on a small icebreaker. As we moved through the pewter water, the thin sea ice beneath us fractured into every imaginable polygon. From the hills above, the icebergs had all seemed still and sculptural. Up close, it was easier to see that they were in flux. Meltwater glittered along their edges, and they were all drifting ever so subtly. One by one, they would soon head out to sea. If we want to keep our ice sheets and shores where they are, Tulaczyk's idea may help. Maybe it will work all by itself, or in combination with other ice-control schemes. Or maybe all of these ideas are destined to fail. Either way, we should find out. *A*

Ross Andersen is a staff writer at The Atlantic.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By Katherine J. Wu

Too Cute to Fail

Koalas are threatened by climate change, cars, and chlamydia. Can Australia find a way to protect its most beloved animal?

Photographs by James Bugg

Ten-month-old Emerson fixed his big brown eyes on me and yawned. Still groggy from a nap, the koala rubbed his face, then stuck out an expectant paw. The nurse escorting me through his enclosure smiled. "He's looking for his milk," she said.

Four months earlier, when Emerson was admitted to Northern Rivers Koala Hospital, in New South Wales, Australia, he was so small that volunteers had to feed him with a syringe, dribbling formula into his mouth, his furry body swaddled in a towel. Now healthy and about five pounds, he was one of the most effortlessly anthropomorphized animals I had ever come across. With his big nose and round-bodied floofiness, his shuffling movements, his droopy eyelids and eagerness to cuddle, he seemed like nature's ultimate cross between a teddy bear, a bumbling grandpa, and a sleepy toddler.

"The first thing I tell my volunteers when they come here to start is: 'You will not be cuddling these koalas,'" Jen Ridolfi, the volunteer coordinator for Friends of the Koala, the nonprofit that runs Northern Rivers, told me. But sometimes even the most stoic get attached. Many koalas spend months here; volunteers call them "dear," "sweetie," and "love." I watched one volunteer lean down to coo at a male named Gigachad. "I just want to kiss his nose," she said, before quickly assuring me that she wouldn't. Even FOK's veterinary staff will occasionally pat the backs of koalas during routine checkups or slip a hand into the paw of an animal under anesthesia.

Ridolfi is vigilant about volunteers for a reason. Of the roughly 350 koalas admitted annually to Northern Rivers, only about a third survive. Chief among the threats they face is chlamydia—yes, *that* chlamydia—a bacterial infection that in koalas, as in humans, spreads primarily via sex, and can cause blindness, infertility, and other severe, sometimes fatal complications. Car collisions and dog attacks are not far behind. Koalas are also vulnerable to cancers, fungal infections, herpes, parasites, kidney problems, mange, and a retrovirus that might leave them immunocompromised.

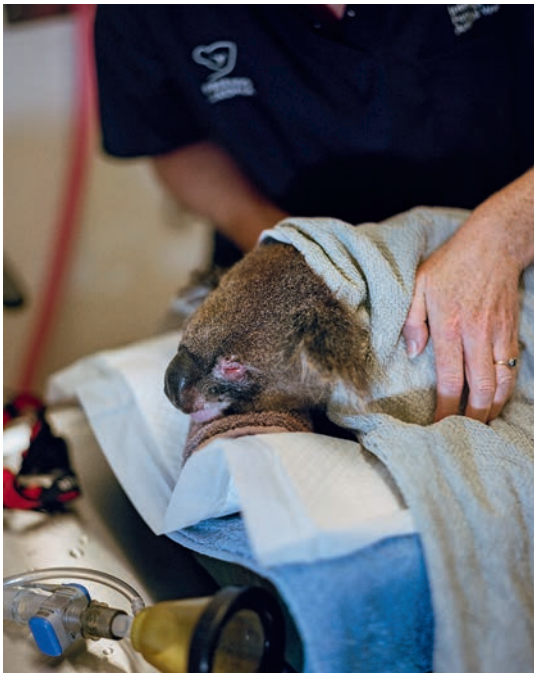
These acute perils are compounded by more chronic ones: habitat destruction; genetic fragility; and climate change, which fuels heat waves, droughts, and wildfires that scorch the trees that koalas live in and eat from. "The biology of the species has been hammered by humans," Edward Narayan, a biologist at the University of Queensland, told me. Some koala populations have, in recent decades, fallen by 80 percent. In 2022, Australia's federal government declared the animals endangered in Queensland, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory, essentially the eastern third of the country.

Koalas are far from Australia's most endangered animal—they're not even its most endangered marsupial. (Pity the Gilbert's potoroo, a rat-kangaroo the size of a guinea pig, and the very rare and very whiskered northern hairy-nosed wombat.) But if there's any creature that people are motivated to save, it's the koala. Since 2019, the Australian government has dedicated the equivalent of about 50 million U.S. dollars to conserving the species, far more than it has allocated to animals in greater peril. Koalas are a national icon and, like many other charismatic megafauna, a boon for tourism. Plus people just seem to connect with them in a way they do with few other animals.

But the places where koalas prefer to live—lush, coastal regions—are also the places that human beings find most hospitable. Which means that even an animal this beloved may test the limits of what people are willing to sacrifice to save another species.

MARIA MATTHES can spot koalas in trees even while driving 50 miles an hour down roads riddled with potholes. "Did you see them?" she asked me. "There were at least five koalas, just down that stretch." (I had seen zero.) Matthes, an ecologist who works

Opening pages: *Emerson is one of roughly 350 koalas admitted annually to Northern Rivers Koala Hospital, in New South Wales, Australia.* This page: *A koala is treated for a chlamydia infection at the hospital.*



JAMES BUGG FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Maria Matthes, an ecologist who works with Friends of the Koala, estimates that she has buried about 30 koalas on her own property in two decades.

JAMES BUGG FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

with Friends of the Koala, grew up naming the koalas that loafed around in her backyard. Now she spends her time surveying wild koalas. When she spots a sick one, she sets out to trap it.

The day we met, Matthes was attempting, for the third time, to snare Dumpling, a koala that had been lurking for weeks on the property of her friends Jo Walton and Peter Boucher. Dumpling was clearly not well. She looked frail. The fur on her rump was wet and stained reddish brown—an indication that she suffered from an inflammatory condition called cystitis. Matthes had seen these signs before: Dumpling had chlamydia, and she'd had it for a while. In all likelihood, Matthes said, the bacterial pathogen had spread to her reproductive tract, lining it with cysts that can be as big as oranges. At this stage of the disease, Dumpling was likely dehydrated and in serious pain, struggling to move or even eat.

Sexually transmitted infections have never been just a human problem: Dolphins have genital herpes; pigs exchange brucellosis; rabbits, notoriously promiscuous, get syphilis. For the most part, STIs are not hastening the decline of entire species. But for koalas, chlamydia is a scourge. They lack immunity to the pathogen, which some researchers suspect was introduced to koalas by imported livestock in the 18th century. Retroviral infections, too, may be speeding the spread of the deadly disease.

At FOK, the majority of koalas admitted with chlamydia must be euthanized shortly after they arrive. Among those that receive treatment, fewer than half survive: The drugs that kill the pathogen can also destroy koalas' fragile gut microbes.

The threat of chlamydia is also growing as the disease seeps into just about every corner of the species' northern range. In 2008, scientists tracking one population around the town of Gunnedah, New South Wales, which calls itself the "koala capital of the world," found chlamydia in less than 10 percent of the koalas they tested. Now the disease is thought to be present in nearly every koala there; within just a few years, researchers expect Gunnedah's population to entirely disappear.

Peter Timms, a microbiologist at the University of the Sunshine Coast, and his colleagues have been developing a chlamydia vaccine that's now being administered to small numbers of koalas in Queensland and New South Wales on a trial basis. It can't prevent infection, but it does seem to curb the disease's severity. Vaccinating a fifth of one koala population, Timms said, appears to have improved survival by at least 60 percent.

The vaccine is still in limited supply, though. Northern Rivers Koala Hospital receives just 100 doses a year; when I visited in March, the facility had only 10 left for the next four months. Jodie Wakeman, a veterinarian at FOK, saves the shots for young, healthy animals, which likely have many reproductive years ahead. I watched Wakeman administer doses 91 and 92 to two male joeys—Droplet, who was recovering after falling from a tree, and Kelso, who came in with a mild-enough case of chlamydia that it left no lingering damage, and was now disease-free. In late April, Emerson received one too.

But vaccines can't help animals that have already been infected for months or years—which ended up being the case for Dumpling, who finally crawled down into her trap about a day and a half after Matthes set it. An exam at Northern Rivers confirmed what Matthes had guessed: a bladder burning with cystitis, and a reproductive tract so full of cysts that it was no

longer functional. A veterinarian euthanized Dumpling and later handed the body back over to Matthes, at her request.

Dumpling's death shook Jo Walton, who had named the koala and taken dozens of photos of her. Matthes, Boucher, and Walton buried Dumpling, arms crossed over her little chest, in Boucher and Walton's garden, murmuring their regrets about not finding her earlier.

On her own property, Matthes estimates that she has buried about 30 koalas over the past two decades, a practice she started after finding one too many dead koalas on the roads near her home. Sending them to the landfill "doesn't feel right," she said, "especially when they are a koala I know." She is particularly tender with the ones that were killed by dogs or cars. "I am sorry humans are so careless," she tells them, before lowering their bodies into the dirt.

MILLIONS OF KOALAS are thought to have lived in Australia before Europeans colonized the continent in earnest. Starting in the 19th century, though, eager to meet demand for koala pelts from clothing makers abroad, settlers hunted so many of the marsupials that they were eventually driven to near extinction, particularly in the south. By the 1930s, the koala-fur trade had been halted, but already, koalas were running up against another human desire: land. Today the country's koalas number only in the hundreds of thousands, by most estimates; some argue that the real count is even lower. And as Australia's human population continues to grow, protecting the animals exclusively by setting aside new, people-free habitats for them becomes more difficult. "It's naive to think that that's ever going to happen," Deborah Tabart, the chair of the Australian Koala Foundation, told me.

About 30 years ago, Tabart and her colleagues were mapping prime koala habitat, and they could see how little was left. Particularly in the northern part of the species' range, the animals were being squeezed between new highways and housing developments to the east and agricultural fields to the west. But one choice area in New South Wales overlapped with a nearly 900-acre tract of land owned by a developer Tabart knew, and she successfully talked him into creating the country's first koala-friendly subdivision, called Koala Beach. Homes would be built only on land that had already been cleared—about a quarter of the area, room for 500 houses—and residents would have to abide by a variety of rules meant to foster coexistence with koalas and some two dozen other rare or endangered species. The plan, Tabart said, was to "squeeze the humans in, and let the animals have the bush." She hoped it could be a model that other developers would follow.

People have made their priorities clear: They do love koalas. They also love cars and dogs.

Before I visited Koala Beach, I imagined an overgrown, semitropical utopia that would illustrate the extreme measures required for us to live alongside these fragile marsupials. When I arrived, though, I was struck by how much the neighborhood looked like a typical suburb. The speed limits were lower here, yes, and block letters painted prominently on Koala Beach's roads warned NO CATS NO DOGS, but there were still plenty of cars. The koala-friendly measures were subtle: On the sidewalk outside many of the houses, I saw a species of gum tree that koalas are known to eat, and several streets terminated in a miles-long tangle of uninterrupted forest. (Each household in Koala Beach is required to pay the equivalent of about 140 U.S. dollars a year to help maintain the wild land.) I spotted several koala-themed mailboxes, but never, to my disappointment, any actual koalas. They were around, though: Irene Timmins, who moved to Koala Beach nine years ago, told me that residents reported sightings "quite frequently now," at least by endangered-animal standards. "Maybe once every couple of weeks."

In the 1990s, when just a few dozen nature-loving residents lived in the development, Koala Beachers were generally happy to forgo cats and dogs as pets, and to build fences with at least a foot of clearance off the ground, so a koala could pass through. Now essentially all of the 500 homes in the estate are occupied—some by buyers who were more attracted to the new houses and coastal location than to Koala Beach's commitment to biodiversity. It's become common, Timmins said, to see cars speeding down the streets, and about half the fences have been built or retrofitted to sit flush against the ground. At least a few people have snuck pet dogs into the estate, Timmins said, one of which she thinks may be owned by some of her neighbors. They deny it, she said. "But I've got the picture."

Koala Beach never took off as a model for sustainable development; according to Tabart, it is still Australia's only designated koala-friendly subdivision. How much it has actually helped its namesake animal is also unclear. No one I spoke with was able to tell me, for instance, how many koalas live there—let alone whether their numbers have increased since the koala-friendly regulations went into effect. "I have lost faith in Koala Beach," Tabart said. The development itself

A wild koala in the Northern Rivers region

JAMES BUGG FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

will probably still be around in another 30 years. "Whether the koalas are there," she said, "I don't think so."

Government conservation plans have set aside swaths of protected koala habitat, but many of the experts I spoke with said that the land isn't nearly enough. Koala Beach was meant to be the compromise—a tacit acknowledgment that humans wouldn't cede all of the untouched forest necessary for koalas to live apart from us. But humans made their priorities clear: People do love koalas. They also love cars and dogs.

IN OTHER PARTS of Australia, koalas face a threat that's almost unimaginable in Koala Beach: overpopulation. French Island, about a 15-minute ferry ride from Stony Point, in the southern Australian state of Victoria, is home to about 140 humans and, by residents' best estimates, at least 35 times as many koalas. Veronica Shannon, who has lived on French for the past three years, sees dozens most weeks, several of them in the grove of trees a few hundred feet from her front door. In late February, she sent me a photo of a hulking male perched on her deck that a few days earlier had startled her awake when he rapped his claws on her bedroom window.

French is one of the country's most koala-rich tracts. The animals were introduced to the island in the 1890s by locals, in an attempt to halt population declines during the still-rampant fur trade. Safe from foxes and other mainland predators, the island's koalas became so numerous that conservationists eventually began using them to repopulate other areas in the country's south. Down there, koalas haven't had to contend with the same sweep of urbanization that has reshaped the continent's east coast; they seem to be less troubled by both chlamydia and retrovirus. Overall, the region's koala population is large and stable enough that, were koala declines to be averaged across the entire country, any official listings for endangerment would probably disappear.

Some locals on French, including Shannon, delight in the koalas that traipse across their property and slosh through the surf near the ferry dock. Southern koalas look different from northern ones: They're browner, fluffier, and weigh about twice as much. And unlike the wary animals to the north, French's koalas don't seem to mind humans. A co-owner of the island's Eco Inn, Phil Bock, showed me an adult male koala that was dozing at eye level in a stumpy tree, barely fidgeting even when Bock cooed at him from inches away.

Other residents, though, see the koalas as a nuisance. During the animals' mating season, in the spring and summer, many evenings ring with males' piglike grunts and growls, followed by females' wailing shrieks. And it's nearly impossible to sate the appetites of thousands of animals that can each grind through more than a pound of eucalyptus leaves a day. Noel Thompson, a local farmer whose family has been on French Island for 130 years, drove me to a small grove of trees he had planted on his ranch and counted off the half a dozen or so that, thanks to the "bears," no longer had leaves, and never would again: "Dead, dead, dead, dead,

JAMES BUGG FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Left: *Some people in southern Australia see the local koalas as a nuisance.* Right: *A mailbox in the Koala Beach housing estate, in New South Wales.*

dead, dead." Thompson's cousin Lois Airs told me she had dedicated years to planting and caring for French's trees, many of which koalas then stripped bare. She likes koalas, she said, but French long ago surpassed its threshold for too many.

That sentiment is also common in Cape Otway, Victoria, a forested triangle of coastline where a small cohort of French Island koalas was reintroduced in the 1980s—and quickly boomed, gnawing its way through the region's manna gum trees. The streets here were once shaded by a magnificent canopy, thick enough that it was difficult to see through. Now entire stretches of road are lined with dead trees, their trunks twisted and dry, their bark a ghostly white. Where birds and frogs and rodents once chirped and croaked and chittered, the forest is silent, save for the sounds of passing cars. Visitors regularly ask what fire or disease killed the trees.

Researchers can't say for certain why the koalas so stubbornly stuck to Cape Otway's trees. But by 2013, scientists were documenting parts of the area with koala densities 20 times higher than what's been observed in healthy populations elsewhere; people began to snap photos of a dozen koalas crammed into a single tree. Maybe the animals preferred the local leaves, or couldn't stomach other ones; maybe they had no options for a better habitat. They might have even inherited some behavioral quirk from generations of inbreeding. Whatever the reasons, even as the branches grew barren, the koalas refused to vacate.

Desley Whisson, who studies koala overabundance at Deakin University, in Victoria, recalls that emaciated koalas ended up crawling around at the base of trees, gnawing on bark and chewing on grass just to try to fill their bellies. Eventually, the state dispatched a team of veterinarians to euthanize dying koalas—some 1,400, according to the official tally. Other animals simply starved. Frank Fotinas, who co-owns a local campground called Bimbi Park, told me that the whole region "stunk of death for months and months."

To control overly abundant populations, officials have moved koalas to new homes, given them contraceptive implants, and, as needed, euthanized sick animals. But both in Cape Otway and on French Island, locals think current efforts are failing to keep the numbers in check. Airs would add a more efficient option—a regular cull. "Thank you," Thompson said. "Absolutely."

Still, Airs and Thompson are acutely aware that any mention of culling koalas tends to spark backlash. Government officials cull wallabies and kangaroos as a matter of course. But koalas are still treated as more sacred, and killing a healthy one hasn't been legal in Australia for nearly a century.

Southern koalas have been cast as inferior, less attractive versions of their counterparts to the north.

IN AN OPTIMISTIC FUTURE, southern koalas could repopulate the species' northern range, just as French Island koalas helped repopulate the south—a possibility that some researchers are already planning for. But shifting koalas around isn't as simple as it sounds. Even translocating koalas *within* a forest can be harmful to an animal, because their gut bacteria are so sensitive to dietary changes; cross-country migrations may simply not be possible. And scientists remain unsure why Australia's northern and southern koalas are so different. If genetics is part of the reason southern koalas have fewer problems with chlamydia, for instance, then those animals might be able to help their northern relatives. But the disparities could also be explained by quirks of the environment, different strains of the bacterium or the immunocompromising retrovirus, or chance. Mingling north and south might speed chlamydia's spread, or even import southern diseases north, accelerating the timeline on which the entire species vanishes.

The idea of southern koalas repopulating the continent assumes, too, that those koala populations are healthy and stable. But "the story that koalas are 'not endangered' down south … is absolute rubbish," Flavia Santamaria, a koala researcher at Central Queensland University, told me. The entire region has only a handful of truly ultradense populations. Most other koala communities in southern Australia remain in decline.

Across the country, climate change is only further challenging koala survival. Pilliga, a vast stretch of forest in New South Wales, was once a haven for thousands of koalas, enough that researchers considered it a kind of emergency reservoir. Now, thanks to a rash of fires and droughts, the koalas appear to be all but gone, probably for good. Farther south and west, extreme temperature spikes are taking their toll: During a brutal heat wave in March, I visited the Adelaide Koala & Wildlife Centre on a day when most of the koalas brought in were admitted with suspected heat stress. Locals have found the animals discombobulated and languishing at the base of trees, sometimes so desperate for water that they'll crawl into backyards to sip whatever liquid they can from pools and dog bowls.

As northern populations continue their rapid decline, the south will account for even more of the world's remaining koalas. But some people seem to think less of southern koalas: They've often been cast as inferior, less attractive versions of their counterparts to the north. Several experts

have also dismissed the koala population in the south as being too inbred to serve as an insurance policy for the entire continent. Some southern koalas, for instance, have wonky jaws or testicular abnormalities. Perhaps attitudes will shift as the years wear on; southern koalas, after all, could someday be the last ones the world has left.

There will never be a single correct way to save koalas—not when the species' problems are so diverse and humans cannot agree on what the animals most need, or even whether they *are* in need. Some people in the south treat koalas not as a species under threat of eventual extinction but as easily expendable "tree lice" or "tree pigs." Earlier this year, a farmer in southwest Victoria was fined after he hired contractors to bulldoze his blue-gum plantation, injuring and killing dozens of koalas; recently, loggers allegedly cleared land on South Australia's Kangaroo Island with koalas still in the trees. "I've seen people hit them with cars and not stop to check if they're okay," Kita Ashman, an ecologist at World Wide Fund for Nature in Australia, told me.

Emotions can cloud decisions in the other direction, too. Jen Ridolfi, the volunteer coordinator, and Jodie Wakeman, the veterinarian, said that at FOK, some rescuers still break down in tears every time they bring a sick or injured koala in. On occasion, people will even get combative with Wakeman, insisting that they know what's best for "my baby." I asked Wakeman if her job sometimes feels like that of a pediatrician, managing the emotions of parents. She laughed sadly. "Yes," she said. "Sometimes it does."

While in Adelaide, I watched the Koala & Wildlife Centre's veterinary staff examine one very sick koala, a 12-year-old female named Amethyst, while she was under anesthesia. An abdominal scan revealed crystals in her kidneys—a telltale sign of severe renal disease; the vet treating her also suspected that she had chlamydia in her urogenital tract. After a few moments of silence, a member of the staff shuffled me toward the koala enclosures, where the next patients were being kept. Perhaps the team didn't want me to watch them decide to euthanize Amethyst, or see the black body bag into which they'd load her corpse. But I learned of her fate soon enough: In the koala dormitory, I saw a volunteer slip in, walk to the whiteboard on the front of Amethyst's cage, and erase her name. *A*

Katherine J. Wu is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

JAMES BUGG FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

A koala can grind through more than a pound of leaves a day; in Cape Otway, trees have been stripped bare and died as a result of the marsupials' appetites.

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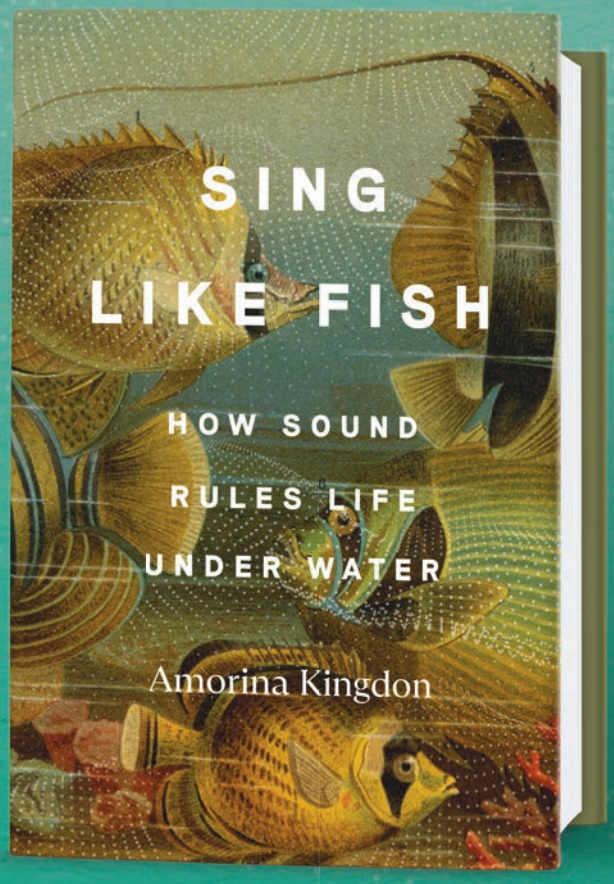

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THE VALLEY

By George Packer

Searching for the future in the most American city

Photographs by Ashley Gilbertson

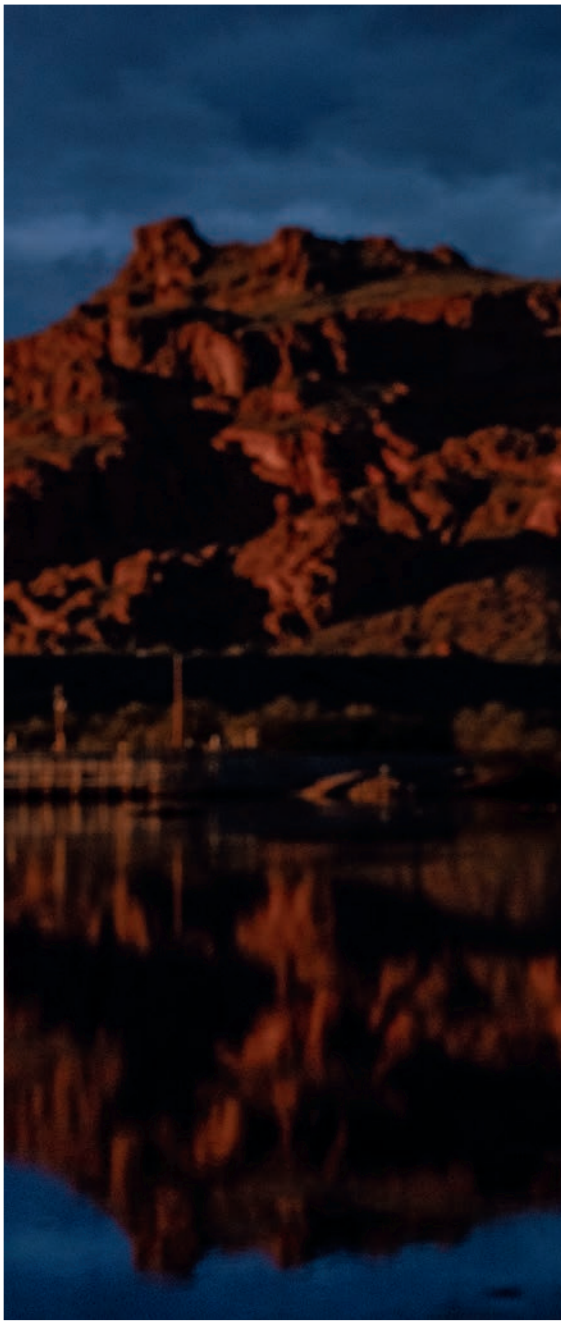
No one knows why the Hohokam Indians vanished. They had carved hundreds of miles of canals in the Sonoran Desert with stone tools and channeled the waters of the Salt and Gila Rivers to irrigate their crops for a thousand years until, in the middle of the 15th century, because of social conflict or climate change—drought, floods—their technology became obsolete, their civilization collapsed, and the Hohokam scattered. Four hundred years later, when white settlers reached the territory of southern Arizona, they found the ruins of abandoned canals, cleared them out with shovels, and built crude weirs of trees and rocks across the Salt River to push water back into the desert. Aware of a lost civilization in the Valley, they named the new settlement Phoenix.

It grew around water. In 1911, Theodore Roosevelt stood on the steps of the Tempe Normal School, which, half a century later, would become Arizona State University, and declared that the soaring dam just completed in the Superstition Mountains upstream, established during his presidency and named after him, would provide enough water to allow 100,000 people to live in the Valley. There are now 5 million.

The Valley is one of the fastest-growing regions in America, where a developer decided to put a city of the future on a piece of virgin desert miles from anything. At night, from the air, the Phoenix metroplex looks like a glittering alien craft that has landed where the Earth is flat and wide enough to host it. The street grids and subdivisions spreading across retired farmland end only when they're stopped by the borders of a tribal reservation or the dark folds of mountains, some of them surrounded on all sides by sprawl.

Phoenix makes you keenly aware of human artifice—its ingenuity and its fragility. The American lust for new things and new ideas, good and bad ones, is most palpable here in the West, but the dynamo that generates all the microchip factories and battery plants and downtown high-rises and master-planned suburbs runs so high that it suggests its own oblivion. New Yorkers and Chicagoans don't wonder how long their cities will go on existing, but in Phoenix in August, when the heat has broken 110 degrees for a month straight, the desert golf courses and urban freeways give this civilization an air of impermanence, like a mirage composed of sheer hubris, and a surprising number of inhabitants begin to brood on its disappearance.

Growth keeps coming at a furious pace, despite decades of drought, and despite political extremism that makes every election a crisis threatening violence. Democracy is also a fragile artifice. It depends less on tradition and law than on the shifting contents of individual skulls—belief, virtue, restraint. Its durability under natural and human stress is being put to an intense test in the Valley. And because a vision of vanishing now haunts the whole country, Phoenix is a guide to our future.



ASHLEY GILBERTSON FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Rusty Bowers, the former Republican speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives, was besieged by MAGA supporters enraged by his refusal to endorse a pro-Trump slate of electors in the 2020 election. Photographed at the Granite Reef Diversion Dam, in Mesa, Arizona, February 7, 2024.

1. The Conscience of Rusty Bowers

Among the white settlers who rebuilt the Hohokam canals were the Mormon ancestors of Rusty Bowers. In the 1890s, they settled in the town of Mesa, east of Phoenix and a few miles downstream from where the Verde River joins the Salt. In 1929, when Bowers's mother was a little girl, she was taken to hear the Church president, believed to be a prophet. For the rest of her life, she would recall one thing he told the assembly: "I foresee the day when there will be lines of people leaving this valley because there is no water."

The Valley's several thousand square miles stretch from Mesa in the east to Buckeye in the west. Bowers lives on a hill at Mesa's edge, about as far east as you can go before the Valley ends, in a pueblo-style house where he and his wife raised seven children. He is lean, with pale-blue eyes and a bald sunspotted head whose pinkish creases and scars in the copper light of a desert sunset give him the look of a figure carved from the sandstone around

him. So his voice comes as a surprise—playful cadences edged with a husky sadness. He trained to be a painter, but instead he became one of the most powerful men in Arizona, a 17-year state legislator who rose to speaker of the House in 2019. The East Valley is conservative and so is Bowers, though he calls himself a "pinto"—a spotted horse—meaning capable of variations. When far-right House members demanded a 30 percent across-the-board budget cut, he made a deal with Democrats to cut far less, and found the experience one of the most liberating of his life. He believes that environmentalists worship Creation instead of its Creator, but he drives a Prius as well as a pickup.

In the late 2010s, the Arizona Republican Party began to worry Bowers with its growing radicalism: State meetings became vicious free-for-alls; extremists unseated mainstream conservatives. Still, he remained a member in good standing—appearing at events with Donald Trump during the president's reelection campaign, handing out Trump flyers door-to-door—until the morning of Sunday, November 22, 2020.

Bowers and his wife had just arrived home from church when the Prius's Bluetooth screen flashed WHITE HOUSE. Rudy Giuliani was calling, and soon afterward the freshly defeated president came on the line. As Bowers later recalled, there was the usual verbal backslapping, Trump telling him what a great guy he was and Bowers thanking Trump for helping with his own reelection. Then Giuliani got to the point. The election in Arizona had been riddled with fraud: piles of military ballots stolen and illegally cast, hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens and dead people voting, gross irregularities at the counting centers. Bowers had been fielding these stories from Republican colleagues and constituents and found nothing credible in them.

"Do you have proof of that?" Bowers asked.

"Yeah," Giuliani replied.

"Do you have names?"

"Oh yeah."

"I need proof, names, how they voted, and I need it on my desk."

"Rudy," Trump broke in, "give the man what he wants."

Bowers sensed some further purpose to the call. "To what end? What's the ask here?"

"Rudy, what's the ask?" Trump echoed, as if he didn't know.

America's ex-mayor needed Bowers to convene a committee to investigate the evidence of fraud. Then, according to an "arcane" state law that had been brought to Giuliani's attention by someone high up in Arizona Republican circles, the legislature could replace the state's Biden electors with a pro-Trump slate.

The car was idling on the dirt driveway by a four-armed saguaro cactus. "That's a new one," Bowers said. "I've never heard that one before. You need to tell me more about that."

Giuliani admitted that he personally wasn't an expert on Arizona law, but he'd been told about a legal theory, which turned out to have come from a paper written by a 63-year-old state representative and avid Trump partisan named Mark Finchem, who was studying for a late-in-life master's degree at the University of Arizona.

"We're asking you to consider this," Trump told Bowers.

Top: *A homeless man seeks shade in downtown Phoenix.* Bottom: *Doing drugs on North First Street.*

"Mr. President …"

Bowers prayed a lot, about things large and small. But prayer doesn't deliver instant answers. So that left conscience, which everyone is blessed with but some do their best to kill. An immense number of Trump-era Republican officeholders had killed theirs in moments like this one. Bowers, who considered the Constitution divinely inspired, felt his conscience rising up into his throat: *Don't do it. You've got to tell him you won't do it.*

"I swore an oath to the Constitution," Bowers said.

"Well, you know," Giuliani said, "we're all Republicans, and we need to be working together."

"Mr. President," Bowers said, "I campaigned for you. I voted for you. The policies you put in did a lot of good. But I will do nothing illegal for you."

"We're asking you to consider this," Trump again told Bowers.

At the end of November, Trump's legal team flew to Phoenix and met with Republican legislators. Bowers asked Giuliani for proof of voter fraud. "We don't have the evidence," Giuliani said, "but we have a lot of theories." The evidence never materialized, so the state party pushed the theories, colleagues in the legislature attacked Bowers on Twitter, and a crowd swarmed the capitol in December to denounce him. One of the most vocal protesters was a young Phoenix man a month away from world fame as the QAnon Shaman.

On December 4, Bowers wrote in his diary:

> It is painful to have friends who have been such a help to me turn on me with such rancor. I may, in the eyes of men, not hold correct opinions or act according to their vision or convictions, but I do not take this current situation in a light manner, a fearful manner, or a vengeful manner. I do not want to be a winner by cheating … How else will I ever approach Him in the wilderness of life, knowing that I ask this guidance only to show myself a coward in defending the course He led me to take?

Caravans of trucks climbed the road to Bowers's house with pro-Trump flags and video panels and loudspeakers blasting to his neighbors that he was corrupt, a traitor, a pervert, a pedophile. His daughter Kacey, who had struggled with alcoholism, was now dying, and the mob outside the house upset her. At one point, Bowers went out to face them and encountered a man in a Three Percenter T-shirt, with a semiautomatic pistol on his hip, screaming abuse. Bowers walked up close enough to grab the gun if the Three Percenter drew. "I see you brought your little pop gun," he said. "You gonna shoot me? Yell all you want—don't touch that gun." He knew that it would take only one would-be patriot under the influence of hateful rhetoric to kill him. He would later tell the January 6 congressional committee: "The country is at a very delicate part where this veneer of civilization is thinner than my fingers pressed together."

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Emails poured in. On December 7, someone calling themselves hunnygun wrote:

> FUCK YOU, YOUR RINO COCKSUCKING PIECE OF SHIT. STOP BEING SUCH A PUSSY AND GET BACK IN THERE. DECERTIFY THIS ELECTION OR, NOT ONLY WILL YOU NOT HAVE A FUTURE IN ARIZONA, I WILL PERSONALLY SEE TO IT THAT NO MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY SEES A PEACEFUL DAY EVER AGAIN.

Three days before Christmas, Bowers was sitting on his patio when Trump called again—this time without his attorney, and with a strange message that might have been an attempt at self-exculpation. "I remember what you told me the last time we spoke," Trump said. Bowers took this as a reference to his refusal to do anything illegal, which he repeated. "I get it," Trump said. "I don't want you to." He thanked Bowers for his support during the campaign. "I hope your family has a merry Christmas."

Kacey Bowers died at age 42 on January 28, 2021. COVID rules kept the family from her hospital bedside until her final hours. Bowers, a lay priest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, gave his daughter a blessing, and at the very end, the family sang a hymn by John Henry Newman:

> Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom,
> Lead thou me on!
> The night is dark, and I am far from home,
> Lead thou me on!

The gloom thickened. Bowers's enemies launched an effort to recall him, with foot soldiers provided by the Trump youth organization Turning Point USA, which is headquartered in Phoenix. The recall failed, but it was an ill omen. That summer, a wildfire in the mountains destroyed the Bowers ranch, taking his library, his papers, and many of his paintings. In 2022, after Bowers testified before the January 6 committee in Washington, D.C., the state party censured him and another stream of abuse came to his doorstep. Term-limited in the House, he ran for a Senate seat just to let the party know that it couldn't bully him out. He was demolished by a conspiracist with Trump's backing. Bowers's political career was over.

"What do you do?" Bowers said. "You stand up. That's all you can do. You have to get back up. When we lost the place and saw the house was still burning and now there's nothing there, gone, and to have 23-plus years of a fun place with the family to be gone—it's hard. Is it the hardest? No. Not even close. I keep on my phone (I won't play it for you) my last phone call from my daughter—how scared she was, a port came out of her neck, they were transporting her, she was bleeding all over, and she says: 'Dad, please, help me, please!' Compared to a phone call from the president, compared to your house burning down? So what? What do you do, Dad? Those are hard things. But they come at us all. They're coming at us as a country … What do we do? You get up."

Bowers went back to painting. He took a job with a Canadian water company called EPCOR. Water had obsessed him all his life—he did not want the prophet's vision to come to pass on his watch. One bright day last October, we stood on the Granite Reef Diversion Dam a few miles from his house, where the two main water systems that nourish the Valley meet at the foot of Red Mountain, sacred to the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indians, whose reservation stood just across the dry bed of the river. Below the dam's headgate three-foot carp thrashed in the turbulent water of the South Canal, and wild horses waded in the shallows upstream.

"What's the politics of water here?" I asked.

Bowers laughed, incredulous. "Oh my gosh, that question. It's everywhere. You've heard the dictum."

I had heard the dictum from everyone in the Valley who thought about the subject. "Whiskey's for drinking—"

"Water's for fighting," Bowers finished, and then he amended it: "Water's for killing."

2. The Heat Zone

Summer in the Valley for most of its inhabitants is like winter in Minnesota—or winter in Minnesota 20 years ago. People stay inside as much as possible and move only if absolutely necessary among the artificial sanctuaries of home, car, and work. Young professionals in the arts district emerge after dark to walk their dogs. When the sun is high, all human presence practically disappears from the streets, and you notice how few trees there are in Phoenix.

Frank Lloyd Wright disliked air-conditioning. During a visit to Taliesin West, the home and studio he built from desert stone in the 1930s on a hillside north of Phoenix, I read in his book *The Natural House*:

> To me air conditioning is a dangerous circumstance. The extreme changes in temperature that tear down a building also tear down the human body … If you carry these contrasts too far too often, when you are cooled the heat becomes more unendurable; it becomes hotter and hotter outside as you get cooler and cooler inside.

The observation gets at the unnaturalness of the Valley, because its civilization is unthinkable without air-conditioning. But the massive amount of energy required to keep millions of people alive in traffic jams is simultaneously burning them up, because air-conditioning accounts for 4 percent of the world's greenhouse-gas emissions, twice that of all aviation.

One morning last August, goaded by Wright and tired of air-conditioned driving, I decided to walk the mile from my hotel to an interview at the Maricopa County Recorder's Office. Construction workers were sweating and hydrating on the site of a new high-rise. A few thin figures slouched on benches by the Valley Metro tracks. At a bus shelter, a woman lay on the sidewalk in some profound oblivion. After four blocks my skin was prickling and I thought about turning back for my rental car, but I couldn't face suffocating at the wheel while I waited for the air to cool. By the time I reached the Recorder's Office, I was having trouble thinking, as if I'd moved significantly closer to the sun.

Even touching the pavement is dangerous. A woman waiting in line outside a food pantry showed me a large patch of pink skin on her calf—the scar of a second-degree burn from a fall she'd taken during high heat.

Last summer—when the temperature reached at least 110 degrees on 55 days (above 110, people said, it all feels the same), and the midsummer monsoon rains never came, and Phoenix found itself an object of global horror—heat officially helped kill 644 people in Maricopa County. They were the elderly, the sick, the mentally ill, the isolated, the homeless, the addicted (methamphetamines cause dehydration and fentanyl impairs thought), and those too poor to own or fix or pay for air-conditioning, without which a dwelling can become unlivable within an hour. Even touching the pavement is dangerous. A woman named Annette Vasquez, waiting in line outside the NourishPHX food pantry, lifted her pant leg to show me a large patch of pink skin on her calf—the scar of a second-degree burn from a fall she'd taken during a heart attack in high heat after seven years on the streets.

It was 115 on the day I met Dr. Aneesh Narang at the emergency department of Banner–University Medical Center. He had already lost four or five patients to heatstroke over the summer and just treated one who was brought in with a body temperature of 106 degrees, struggling to breathe and unable to sweat. "Patients coming in at 108, 109 degrees—they've been in the heat for hours, they're pretty much dead," Narang said. "We try to cool them down as fast as we can." The method is to strip off their clothes and immerse them in ice and tap water inside a disposable cadaver bag to get their temperature down to 100 degrees within 15 or 20 minutes. But even those who survive heatstroke risk organ failure and years of neurological problems.

Recently, a hyperthermic man had arrived at Narang's emergency department lucid enough to speak. He had become homeless not long before and was having a hard time surviving in the heat—shelters weren't open during the day, and he didn't know how to find the city's designated cooling centers. "I can't keep up with this," he told the doctor. "I can't get enough water. I'm tired."

Saving a homeless patient only to send him back out into the heat did not feel like a victory to Narang. "It's a Band-Aid on a leaking dam," he said. "We haven't solved a deep-rooted issue here. We're sending them back to an environment that got them here—that's the sad part. The only change that helps that situation is ending homelessness. It's a problem in a city that'll get hotter and hotter every year. I'm not sure what it'll look like in 2050."

The mayor of Phoenix, Kate Gallego, has a degree in environmental science and has worked on water policy in the region. "We are trying to very much focus on becoming a more sustainable community," she told me in her office at city hall. Her efforts include the appointment of one of the country's first heat czars; zoning and tax policies to encourage housing built up rather than out (downtown Phoenix is a forest of cranes); a multibillion-dollar investment in wastewater recycling; solar-powered shipping containers used as cooling centers and temporary housing on city lots; and a shade campaign of trees, canopies, and public art on heavily walked streets.

But the homeless population of metro Phoenix has nearly doubled in the past six years amid a housing shortage, soaring rents, and NIMBYism; *multifamily affordable housing* remain dirty words in most Valley neighborhoods. Nor is there much a mayor can do about the rising heat. A scientific study published in May 2023 projected that a blackout during a five-day heat wave would kill nearly 1 percent of Phoenix's population—about 13,000 people—and send 800,000 to emergency rooms.

Near the airport, on the treeless streets south of Jefferson and north of Grant, there was a no-man's-land around the lonely tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad, with scrap metal and lumber yards, stacks of pallets, a food pantry, abandoned wheelchairs, tombstones scattered across a dirt cemetery, and the tents and tarps and belongings and trash of the homeless. I began to think of this area, in the dead center of the Valley, as the heat zone. It felt hotter than anywhere else, not just because of the pavement and lack of shade, but because this was where people who couldn't escape the furnace came. Most were Latino or Black, many were past middle age, and they came to be near a gated 13-acre compound that offered meals, medical and dental care, information about housing, a postal address, and 900 beds for single adults.

The Bartlett Dam, on the Verde River, is part of the Salt River Project, which manages water allocation in the Valley.

Last summer, the homeless encampment outside the compound stretched for several desolate blocks—the kind of improvised shantytown I've seen in Manila and Lagos but not in the United States, and not when the temperature was 111 degrees. One day in August, with every bed inside the compound taken, 563 people in varying states of consciousness were living outside. I couldn't understand what kept them from dying.

Mary Gilbert Todd, in her early 60s, from Charleston, South Carolina, had a cot inside Respiro, a large pavilion where men slept on one side, women on the other. Before that she'd spent four years on the streets of Phoenix. Her face was sunburned, her upper teeth were missing, and she used a walker, but her eyes gleamed bright blue with energy.

"If you put a wet shirt on and wet your hair, it's gonna be cool," she told me cheerfully, poking with a fork at a cup of ramen. "In the daytime, you don't wanna walk. It's better, when you're homeless, to find a nice, shady tree and build yourself a black tent that you can sleep in where there's some breeze. The black, it may absorb more heat on the outside, but it's going to provide more shade. Here you got the dry heat. You want to have an opening so wind can go through—something that the police aren't going to notice too much. Because if you're in a regular tent, they're gonna come bust you, and if you're sitting out in the open, they're gonna come mess with you." She said that she'd been busted for "urban camping" 600 times.

My guide around the compound was Amy Schwabenlender, who directs it with the wry, low-key indignation of a woman working every day in the trenches of a crisis that the country appears readier to complain about than solve. "It's America—we don't have to have homelessness," she said. "We allow homelessness to happen. We—the big *we*." The neighbors—a casket maker, an electric-parts supplier, the owners of a few decaying houses—blamed Schwabenlender for bringing the problem to their streets, as if she were the root cause of homelessness. In the face of a lawsuit, the city was clearing the encampment.

Schwabenlender had come to the Valley to get away from depressing Wisconsin winters. After her first night in a motel in Tempe, she went out to her car and found the window heat-glued to the door by its rubber seal. "What did I just do to myself?" she wondered. Now she lives in North Phoenix in a house with a yard and a pool, but she has seen enough misery to be a growth dissident.

"I don't know why people want to live here," she said, smiling faintly, her pallor set off by thick black hair. "We can't have enough housing infrastructure for everyone who wants to live here. So why are we celebrating and encouraging more business? Why are we giving large corporations tax breaks to move here? How can we encourage people to come here when we don't have enough housing for the people who *are* here, and we don't have enough water? It doesn't add up to me."

While we were talking, a woman with a gray crew cut who was missing her left leg below the thigh rolled up to Schwabenlender in a wheelchair. She had just been released after a long prison term and had heard something that made her think she'd get a housing voucher by the end of the month.

Schwabenlender gave an experienced sigh. "There's a waitlist of 4,000," she told the woman.

On my way out of Respiro, I chatted with a staff member named Tanish Bates. I mentioned the woman I'd seen lying on the sidewalk by the bus shelter in the heat of the day—she had

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seemed beyond anyone's reach. "Why didn't you talk to her?" Bates asked. "For me, it's a natural instinct—I'm going to try. You ask them, 'What's going on? What do you need? Do you need water? Should I call the fire department?' Nothing beats failure but a try." She gave me an encouraging pat. "Next time, ask yourself what you would want."

Utterly shamed, I walked out into the heat zone. By the compound's gate, a security guard stood gazing at the sky. A few lonely raindrops had begun to fall. "I been praying for rain," she said. "I am so tired of looking at the sun." People were lining up to spend an hour or two in a city cooling bus parked at the curb. Farther down Madison Street, the tents ended and street signs announced: THIS AREA IS CLOSED TO CAMPING TO ABATE A PUBLIC NUISANCE.

Every time I returned to Phoenix, I found fewer tents around the compound. The city was clearing the encampment block by block. In December, only a few stragglers remained outside the gate—the hardest cases, fading out on fentanyl or alert enough to get into fights. "They keep coming back," said a skinny, shirtless young man named Brandon Bisson. "They're like wild animals. They'll keep coming back to where the food and resources are." Homeless for a year, he was watering a pair of healthy red bougainvillea vines in front of a rotting house where he'd been given a room with his dog in exchange for labor. Bisson wanted a job working with animals.

"There's no news story anymore," Schwabenlender said as she greeted me in her office. The city had opened a campground where 15th Avenue met the railroad tracks, with shipping containers and tents behind screened fencing, and 41 people were now staying there. Others had been placed in hotels. But it was hard to keep tabs on where they ended up, and some people were still out on the street, in parks, in cars, under highway overpasses. "How do we keep the sense of urgency?" Schwabenlender murmured in her quizzical way, almost as if she were speaking to herself. "We didn't end homelessness." The housing waitlist for Maricopa County stood at 7,503. The heat was over for now.

Farmland north of Phoenix irrigated by water from Salt River Project dams

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3. Democracy and Water

Civilization in the Valley depends on solving the problem of water, but because this has to be done collectively, solving the problem of water depends on solving the problem of democracy. My visits left me with reasons to believe that human ingenuity is equal to the first task: dams, canals, wastewater recycling, underground storage, desalination, artificial intelligence. But I found at least as many reasons to doubt that we are equal to the second.

It's easy to believe that the Valley could double its population when you're flying in a helicopter over the dams of the Salt River Project, the public utility whose lakes hold more than 2 million acre-feet—650 trillion gallons—of water; and when Mayor Gallego is describing Phoenix's multibillion-dollar plan to recycle huge quantities of wastewater; and when Stephen Roe Lewis, the leader of the Gila River Indian Community, is walking through a recharged wetland that not long ago had been barren desert, pointing out the indigenous willows and cattails whose fibers are woven into traditional bracelets like the one around his wrist.

But when you see that nothing is left of the mighty Colorado River as it approaches the Mexican border but dirt and scrub; and when you drive by a road sign south of the Valley that says EARTH FISSURES POSSIBLE because the water table is dropping four feet a year; and when sprinklers are watering someone's lawn in Scottsdale in the rain—then the prophet's vision feels a little closer.

American sprawl across the land of the disappeared Hohokam looks flimsy and flat and monotonous amid the desert's sublime Cretaceous humps. But sprawl is also the sight of ordinary people reaching for freedom in 2,000 square feet on a quarter acre. Growth is an orthodox faith in the Valley, as if the only alternative is slow death.

Once, I was driving through the desert of far-northern Phoenix with Dave Roberts, the retired head of water policy for the Salt River Project. The highway passed a concrete fortress rising in the distance, a giant construction site with a dozen cranes grasping the sky. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company's three plants would employ 6,000 people; they would also consume billions of gallons of Phoenix's water every year. Roberts filled in the empty space around the site: "All this desert land will be apartments, homes, golf courses, and who knows what—Costcos. There's going to be malls out here. Gobs of people." As long as people in places like Louisiana and Mississippi wanted to seek a better life in the Valley, who was he to tell them to stay away? A better life was the whole point of growth.

I asked Roberts, an intensely practical man, if he ever experienced apocalyptic visions of a dried-up Valley vanishing.

"We have three things that the Hohokam didn't," he said—pumping, storage (behind dams and underground), and recycling. When I mentioned this to Rusty Bowers, I couldn't remember the third thing, and he interjected: "Prayer." I offered that the Hohokam had probably been praying for water too. "I bet they were," Bowers said. "And the Lord says, 'Okay. I could go *Bing!* But that's not how I work. Go out there and work, and we'll figure this thing out together.'"

This famously libertarian place has a history of collective action on water. Thanks to the bipartisan efforts of the 20th century—the federal dams built in the early 1900s; the 330-mile canal that brought Colorado River water to the Valley in the late 20th century; a 1980 law regulating development in Arizona's metro regions so they'd conserve groundwater, which cannot be replaced—Phoenix has a lot of water. But two things have happened in this century: a once-in-a-millennium drought set in, and the political will to act collectively dried up. "The legislature has

The Taiwan Semiconductor construction site in northern Phoenix. Its three plants will employ 6,000 people—and consume billions of gallons of the city's water every year.

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become more and more partisan," Kathleen Ferris, an architect of the 1980 law, told me. "And there's a whole lot of denial."

At some point, the civilization here stopped figuring this thing out together. The 1980 groundwater law, which required builders in regulated metro areas like the Valley to ensure a 100-year supply, left groundwater unregulated in small developments and across rural Arizona. In the mid-1990s, the legislature cut loopholes into the 100-year requirement. The God-given right to pursue happiness and wealth pushed housing farther out into the desert, beyond the reach of the Valley's municipal water systems, onto groundwater. In the unregulated rural hinterland, megafarms of out-of-state and foreign agribusinesses began to pump enormous quantities of groundwater. The water table around the state was sinking, and the Colorado River was drying up.

Ferris imagined a grim future. Without new regulation, she said, "we will have land subsidence, roads cracking, destroying infrastructure, and in some cases people's taps going dry." The crisis wouldn't hit the water-rich Phoenix metroplex first. "It's going to be on the fringes, and all the people who allowed themselves to grow there are going to be really unhappy when they find out there's no water."

MOST PEOPLE in the Valley come from somewhere else, and John Hornewer came from Chicago. One summer in the early 1990s, when he was about 25, he went for a hike in the Hellsgate Wilderness, 75 miles northeast of Phoenix, and got lost. He ran out of water and couldn't find a stream. When he grew too weak to carry his backpack, he abandoned it. His eyes began to throb; every muscle hurt; even breathing hurt. He sank to his knees, his face hit the ground, and as the flies buzzed around he thought: *Just stop my heart*. He was saved by campers, who found him and drove him the 20 miles he'd wandered from his car.

Almost dying from dehydration changed Hornewer's life. "I take water very seriously," he told me. "I'm passionate about water."

In the late '90s, Hornewer and his wife bought two and a half acres several miles up a dirt road in Rio Verde Foothills, a small community on the northeastern edge of the Valley. To the southwest, the city of Scottsdale ends and unincorporated Maricopa County starts where the golf courses give way to mesquite and the paved roads turn to dirt. Over the years, the desert around the Hornewers was filled in by people who wanted space and quiet and couldn't afford Scottsdale.

Seeing a need, Hornewer started a business hauling potable water, filling his 6,000-gallon trucks with metered water at a Scottsdale standpipe and selling it to people in Rio Verde with dry wells or none at all. What kept Rio Verde cheaper than Scottsdale was the lack of an assured water supply. Wildcat builders, exploiting a gap in the 1980 law, didn't tell buyers there wasn't one, or the buyers didn't ask. Meanwhile, the water table under Rio Verde was dropping. One of Hornewer's neighbors hit water at 450 feet; another neighbor 150 feet away spent $60,000 on a 1,000-foot well that came up dry.

Hornewer wears his gray hair shoulder-length and has the face of a man trying to keep his inherent good nature from reaching its limit. In the past few years, he began to warn his Rio Verde customers that Scottsdale's water would not always be there for them, because it came to Scottsdale by canal from the diminishing Colorado River. "We got rain a couple of weeks ago—everything's good!" his customers would say, not wanting to admit that climate change was causing a drought. He urged the community to form a water district—a local government entity that would allow Rio Verde to bring in water from a basin west of the Valley. The idea was killed by a county supervisor who had done legal work for a giant Saudi farm that grew alfalfa on leased state land, and who pushed for EPCOR, the private Canadian utility, to service Rio Verde. The county kept issuing building permits, and the wildcatters kept putting up houses where there was no water. When the mayor of Scottsdale announced that, as of January 1, 2023, his city would stop selling its water to Rio Verde, Hornewer wasn't surprised.

Suddenly, he had to drive five hours round trip to fill his trucks in Apache Junction, 50 miles away. The price of hauled water went from four cents a gallon to 11—the most expensive water anywhere in the country. Rio Verde fell into an uproar. The haves with wet wells were pitted against the have-nots with hauled water. Residents tried to sell and get out; town meetings became shouting matches with physical threats; Nextdoor turned septic. As soon as water was scarce, disinformation flowed.

In the middle of it all, Hornewer tried to explain to his customers why his prices had basically tripled. Some of them accused him of trying to get their wells capped and enrich his business. He became so discouraged that he thought of getting out of hauling water.

"I don't have to argue with people anymore about whether we're in a drought—they got that figured out," he told me. "It would be nice if people could think ahead that they're going to get hit on the head with a brick before it hits you on the head. After what I saw, I think the wars have just begun, to be honest with you. You'd think water would be unifying, but it's not. Whiskey is for drinking; water is for fighting."

One of Hornewer's customers is a retiree from Buffalo named Rosemary Carroll, who moved to Rio Verde in 2020 to rescue donkeys. The animals arrived abused and broken at the small ranch where she lived by herself, and she calmed them by reading to them, getting them used to the sound of her voice, then nursed them back to health until she could find them a good home. Unfairly maligned as dumb beasts of burden, donkeys are thoughtful, affectionate animals—Carroll called them "equine dogs."

After Scottsdale cut off Rio Verde on the first day of 2023, she repaired her defunct well, but she and her two dozen donkeys still relied on Hornewer's hauled water. To keep her use down in the brutal heat, she took one quick shower a week, bought more clothes at Goodwill rather than wash clothes she owned, left barrels under her scuppers to catch any rainwater, and put double-lock valves, timers, and alarms on her hoses. Seeing water dripping out of a hose into the dirt filled her with despair. In the mornings, she rode around the ranch with a pail of water in a wagon pulled by a donkey and refilled the dishes she'd left out for rabbits and quail. Carroll tried to avoid the ugly politics of Rio Verde's water. She just wanted to keep her donkeys alive, though an aged one died from heat.

And all summer long, she heard the sound of hammering. "The people keep coming, the buildings keep coming, and

there's no long-term solution," Carroll told me, taking a break in the shade of her toolshed.

Sometimes on very hot days when she was shoveling donkey manure, Carroll gazed out over her ranch and her neighbors' rooftops toward the soft brown hills and imagined some future civilization coming upon this place, finding the remains of stucco walls, puzzling over the metal fragments of solar panels, wondering what happened to the people who once lived here.

"IF WE THOUGHT Rio Verde was a big problem," Kathleen Ferris said, "imagine if you have a city of 100,000 homes."

An hour's drive west from Phoenix on I-10, past truck stops and the massive skeletons of future warehouses, you reach Buckeye. In 2000, 6,500 people lived in what was then a farm town with one gas station. Now it's 114,000, and by 2040 it's expected to reach 300,000. The city's much-publicized goal, for which I never heard a convincing rationale, is to pass 1 million residents

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and become "the next Phoenix." To accommodate them all, Buckeye has annexed its way to 642 square miles—more land than the original Phoenix.

In the office of Mayor Eric Orsborn, propped up in a corner, is a gold-plated shovel with TERAVALIS on the handle. Teravalis, billed as the "City of the Future," is the Howard Hughes Corporation's planned community of 100,000 houses. Its several hundred thousand residents would put Buckeye well on its way to 1 million.

The Horse Mesa Dam, part of the Salt River Project

I set out to find Teravalis. I drove from the town center north of the interstate on Sun Valley Parkway, with the White Tank Mountains to the right and raw desert all around. I was still in Buckeye—this was recently annexed land—but there was nothing here except road signs with no roads, a few tumbledown dwellings belonging to ranch hands, and one lonely steer. Mile after mile went by, until I began to think I'd made a mistake. Then, on the left side of the highway, I spotted a small billboard planted in a field of graded dirt beside a clump of saguaros and mesquite that seemed to have been installed for aesthetic purposes. This was Teravalis.

Some subdivisions in the Valley are so well designed and built—there's one in Buckeye called Verrado—they seem to have grown up naturally over time like a small town; others roll on in an endless sea of red-tile sameness that can bring on nausea. But when I saw the acres of empty desert that would become the City of the Future, I didn't know whether to be inspired by the developer's imagination or appalled by his madness, like Fitzcarraldo hauling a ship over the Andes, or Howard Hughes himself beset by some demented vision that the open spaces of the New World arouse in willful men bent on conquest. And Teravalis has almost no water.

In her first State of the State address last year as Arizona's governor after narrowly defeating Kari Lake, Katie Hobbs revealed that her predecessor, Doug Ducey, had buried a study showing that parts of the Valley, including Buckeye, had fallen short of the required 100-year supply of groundwater. Because of growth, all the supply had been allocated; there was none left to spare. In June 2023, Hobbs announced a moratorium on new subdivisions that depended on groundwater.

The national media declared that Phoenix had run dry, that the Valley's fantastic growth was over. This wasn't true but, as Ferris warned, the edge communities that had grown on the cheap by pumping groundwater would need to find other sources. Only 5,000 of Teravalis's planned units had received certificates of assured water supply. The moratorium halted the other 95,000, and it wasn't obvious where Teravalis and Buckeye would find new water. Sarah Porter, who directs a water think tank at Arizona State, once gave a talk to a West Valley community group that included Buckeye's Mayor Orsborn. She calculated how much water it would take for his city to be the next Phoenix: nearly 100 billion gallons every year. Her audience did not seem to take in what she was saying.

Orsborn, who also owns a construction company, is an irrepressible booster of the next Phoenix. He described to me the plans for finding more water to keep Buckeye growing. Farmland in the brackish south of town could be retired for housing. Water from a basin west of the Valley could be piped to much of Buckeye, and to Teravalis. Buckeye could negotiate for recycled wastewater and other sources from Phoenix. (The two cities have been haggling over water in and out of court for almost a century, with Phoenix in the superior position; another water dictum says, "Better upstream

If, like almost everything else in American politics, water turns deeply partisan and ideological, contaminated by conspiracy theories and poisoned with memes, then preserving this drought-stricken civilization will get a lot harder, like trying to solve a Rubik's Cube while fending off a swarm of wasps that you might be hallucinating.

with a shovel than downstream with a lawyer.") And there was the radical idea of bringing desalinated water up from the Gulf of California through Mexico. All of it would cost a lot of money.

"What we've tried to do is say, 'Don't panic,'" the mayor told me. "We have water, and we have a plan for more water."

At certain moments in the Valley, and this was one, ingenuity took the sound and shape of an elaborate defense against the truth.

When Kari Lake ran for governor in 2022, everyone knew her position on transgenderism and no one knew her position on water, because she barely had one. The subject didn't turn out voters or decide elections; it was too boring and complicated to excite extremists. Water was more parochial than partisan. It could pit an older city with earlier rights against the growing needs of a newer one, or a corporate megafarm against a nearby homesteader, or Native Americans downstream against Mormon farmers upstream. Stephen Roe Lewis, the leader of the Gila River Indian Community, described years of court battles and federal legislation that finally restored his tribe's water rights, which were stolen 150 years ago. The community, desperately poor in other ways, had grown rich enough in water that nearby cities and developments were lining up to buy it.

As long as these fights took place in the old, relatively sane world of corrupt politicians, rapacious corporations, overpaid lawyers, and shortsighted homeowners, solutions would usually be possible. But if, like almost everything else in American politics, water turned deeply partisan and ideological, contaminated by conspiracy theories and poisoned with memes, then preserving this drought-stricken civilization would get a lot harder, like trying to solve a Rubik's Cube while fending off a swarm of wasps that you might be hallucinating.

4. Sunshine Patriots

They descended the escalators of the Phoenix Convention Center under giant signs—SAVE AMERICA, BIG GOV SUCKS, PARTY LIKE IT'S 1776—past tables explaining the 9/11 conspiracy and the Catholic Church conspiracy and the rigged-election conspiracy; tables advertising conservative colleges, America's Leading Non-Woke Job Board, an anti-abortion ultrasound charity called PreBorn!, a $3,000 vibration plate for back pain, and the One and Only Patriot Owned Infrared Roasted Coffee Company, into the main hall, where music was throbbing, revving up the house for the start of the largest multiday right-wing jamboree in American history.

In the undersea-blue light, I found an empty chair next to a pair of friendly college boys with neat blond haircuts. John was studying in North Carolina for a future in corporate law; Josh was at Auburn, in Alabama, about to join the Marines. "We came all the way here to take back the country," John said. From what or whom? He eagerly ticked off the answers: from the New York lady crook who was suing Donald Trump; from the inside-job cops who lured the J6 patriots into the Capitol; from the two-tier justice system, the corrupt Biden family, illegal immigrants, the deep state.

The students weren't repelled by the media badge hanging from my neck—it seemed to impress them. But within 90 seconds, the knowledge that these youths and I inhabited unbridgeable realms of truth plunged me into a surprising sadness. One level below, boredom waited—the deepest mood of American politics, disabling, nihilistic, more destructive than rage, the final response to an impasse that resists every effort of reason.

I turned to the stage. Flames and smoke and roving searchlights were announcing the master of ceremonies.

"Welcome to AmericaFest, everybody. It's great to be here in Phoenix, Arizona, it's just great."

Charlie Kirk—lanky in a patriotic blue suit and red tie, stiff-haired, square-faced, hooded-eyed—is the 30-year-old founder of Turning Point USA, the lucrative right-wing youth organization.

In 2018, it moved its headquarters to the Valley, where Kirk lives in a $4.8 million estate on the grounds of a gated country club whose price of entry starts at $500,000. In December, 14,000 young people from all 50 states as well as 14 other countries converged on Phoenix for Turning Point's annual convention, where Kirk welcomed them to a celebration of America. Then his mouth tightened and he got to the point.

"We're living through a top-down revolution, everybody. We're living through a revolution that's different than most others. It is a cultural revolution, similar to Mao's China. But this revolution is when the powerful, the rich, the wealthy decide to use their power and their wealth to go after *you*. Instead of building hospitals and improving our country, they are spending their money to destroy the greatest country ever to exist in the history of the world."

Kirk started Turning Point in 2012, when he was 18 years old, and through tireless organizing and demagogy he built an 1,800-chapter, 600,000-student operation that brings in $80 million a year, much of it in funding from ultrarich conservatives.

"The psychology is that of civilizational suicide. The country has never lived through the wealthiest hating the country. What makes this movement different is that you are here as a grassroots response to the top-down revolution happening in this country."

When the young leader of the grassroots counterrevolution visited college campuses to recruit for Turning Point and record himself baiting progressive students, Kirk sometimes wore a T-shirt that said THE GOVERNMENT IS LYING TO YOU, like Mario Savio and Jerry Rubin 60 years ago, demonstrating the eternal and bipartisan appeal for the young of paranoid grievance. His business model was generational outrage. He stoked anger the way Big Ag pumped groundwater.

"This is a bottom-up resistance, and it terrifies the ruling class." Kirk was waving a finger at the students in the hall. "Will the people, who are the sovereign in this country, do everything they possibly can with this incredible blessing given to us by God to fight back and win against the elites that want to ruin it?" Elites invite 12,000 people to cross a wide-open border every day; they castrate children in the name of medicine; they try to put the opposition leader in jail for 700 years. "They hate the United States Constitution. They hate the Declaration."

The energy rose with each grievance and insult. Kirk's targets included Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky ("that go-go dancer"); LinkedIn's co-founder, Reid Hoffman; Laurene Powell Jobs, the majority owner of this magazine; Senator Mitt Romney; satanists; "weak beta males" on campus; and even the Turning Pointers who had come to the convention from Mexico and Honduras ("I'm told these people are here legally"). Kirk is an accomplished speaker, and his words slide out fluidly on the grease of glib hostility and grinning mockery. But standing inside the swirl of cross-and-flag hatreds whipped up by speeches and posts and viral videos is a 6-foot-4 son of the Chicago suburbs with a smile that exposes his upper gums and the smooth face of a go-getter who made it big and married a beauty queen—as if the hatred might just be an artifice, digitally simulated.

"Elon Musk liberating Twitter will go down as one of the greatest free-speech victories in the history of Western civilization," Kirk said. "We can say that 'January 6 is probably an inside job; it's more of a fed-surrection than anything else.' And that '99 percent of people on January 6 did nothing wrong.' That we can go on Twitter and say, 'George Floyd wasn't a hero, and Derek Chauvin was targeted in a Soviet-style trial that was anti-American and un-American.' One of the reasons why the powerful are getting nervous is because we can finally speak again online."

The other good news was that American high-school boys were more conservative than they'd been in 50 years—Turning Point's mass production of memes had given a sense of purpose to a generation of males known for loneliness and suicidality. Kirk is obsessed with their testosterone levels and their emasculation by elites who "want a guy with a lisp zipping around on a Lime scooter with a fanny pack, carrying his birth control, supporting his wife's career while he works as a supportive stay-at-home house husband. He has a playlist that is exclusively Taylor Swift. And their idea of strength is this beta male's girlfriend opening a pickle jar just for him."

Kirk erected an index finger.

"At Turning Point USA, we resoundingly reject this. We believe strong, alpha, godly, high-T, high-achieving, confident, well-armed, and disruptive men are the hope, not the problem, in America."

The picture of the American experiment grew grimmer when Kirk was followed onstage by Roseanne Barr. She was dressed all in beige, with a baseball cap and a heavy skirt pleated like the folds of a motel-room curtain, chewing something in her hollowed cheeks.

She could not make sense of her laptop and shut it. "What do you want to talk about?"

Without a speech, Barr sank into a pool of self-pity for her canceled career, which reminded her of a quote by Patrick Henry, except the words were on her laptop and all she could remember was "the summer soldier," until her son, in the front row, handed her a phone with the quote and told her that it was by Thomas Paine.

"I'm just all in for President Trump, I just want to say that. I'm just all in … 'cause I know if I ain't all in, they're going to put my ass in a Gulag," Barr said. "If we don't stop these horrible, Communist—do you hear me? I'm asking you to hear me!" She began screaming: "STALINISTS—COMMUNISTS—WITH A HUGE HELPING OF NAZI FASCISTS THROWN IN, PLUS WANTIN' A CALIPHATE TO REPLACE EVERY CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY ON EARTH NOW OCCUPIED. DO YOU KNOW THAT? I JUST WANT THE TRUTH! WE DESERVE TO HEAR THE TRUTH, THAT'S WHAT WE WANT, WE WANT THE TRUTH, WE DON'T CARE WHICH PARTY IS WRONG, WE KNOW THEY'RE BOTH NOTHIN' BUT CRAP, THEY'RE BOTH ON THE TAKE, THEY'RE BOTH STEALIN' US BLIND. WE JUST WANT THE TRUTH ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT WE FOUGHT AND DIED AND SUFFERED TO PROTECT!"

The college boys exchanged a look and laughed. The hall grew confused and its focus began to drift, so Barr screamed louder. This was the pattern during the four days of AmericaFest, with Glenn Beck, Senator Ted Cruz, Vivek Ramaswamy, Kari Lake, Tucker Carlson, and every other far-right celebrity except Donald Trump himself: A speaker would sense boredom threatening the hall and administer a jolt of danger and defilement and the

enemy within. The atmosphere recalled the politics of resentment going back decades, to the John Birch Society, Phyllis Schlafly, and Barry Goldwater. The difference at AmericaFest was that this politics has placed an entire party in thrall to a leader who was once the country's president and may be again.

I wanted to get out of the hall, and I went looking for someone to talk with among the tables and booths. A colorful flag announced THE LIONS OF LIBERTY, and beside it sat two men who, with their round shiny heads and red 19th-century beards and immense girth, were clearly brothers: Luke and Nick Cilano, who told me they were co-pastors of a church in central Arizona. I did not yet know that the Lions of Liberty were linked to the Oath Keepers and had helped organize an operation that sent armed observers with phone cameras to monitor county drop boxes during the 2022 midterm election. But I didn't want to talk with the Lions of Liberty about voter fraud, or border security, or trans kids, because I already knew what they would say. I wanted to talk about water.

No one at AmericaFest ever mentioned water. Discussing it would be either bad for Turning Point (possibly leading to a solution) or bad for water policy (making it another front in the culture wars). But the Cilano brothers, who live on five acres in a rural county where the aquifer is dropping, had a lot to say about it.

"The issue is, our elected officials are not protecting us from these huge corporations that are coming in that want to suck the groundwater dry," Nick said. "That's what the actual issue is."

"The narrative is, we don't have enough water," Luke, who had the longer beard by three or four inches, added. "That's false. The correct narrative is, we have enough water, but our elected officials are letting corporations come in and waste the water that we have."

This wasn't totally at odds with what experts such as Sarah Porter and Kathleen Ferris had told me. The Cilano brothers said they'd be willing to have the state come in and regulate rural groundwater, as long as the rules applied to everyone—farmers, corporations, developers, homeowners—and required solar panels and wind turbines to offset the energy used in pumping.

"This is a humanity issue," Luke said. "This should not be a party-line issue. This should be the same on both sides. The only way that this becomes a red-blue issue is if either the red side or the blue side is legislating in their pocket more than the other." And unfortunately, he added, on the issue of water, those legislators were mostly Republicans.

As soon as a view of common ground with the Lions of Liberty opened up, it closed again when the discussion turned to election security. After withdrawing from Operation Drop Box in response to a lawsuit by a prodemocracy group, Nick had softened his opposition to mail-in voting, but he wanted mail ballots taken away from the U.S. Postal Service in 2024 and their delivery privatized. He couldn't get over the sense that 2020 and 2022 must have been rigged—the numbers were just too perfect.

Before depression could set in, I left the convention center and walked out into the cooling streets of a Phoenix night.

THE ARIZONA REPUBLICAN PARTY is more radical than any other state's. The chief qualification for viability is an embarrassingly discredited belief in rigged elections. In December 2020, Charlie Kirk's No. 2, Tyler Bowyer, and another figure linked to Turning Point signed on to be fake Trump electors, and on January 6, several Arizona legislators marched on the U.S. Capitol. In the spring of 2021, the state Senate hired a pro-Trump Florida firm called Cyber Ninjas to "audit" Maricopa County's presidential ballots with a slipshod hand recount intended to show massive fraud. (Despite Republicans' best efforts, the Ninjas increased Joe Biden's margin of victory by 360 votes.) After helping to push Rusty Bowers out of politics, Bowyer and others orchestrated a MAGA party takeover, out-organizing and intimidating the establishment and enlisting an army of precinct-committee members to support the most extreme Republican candidates.

In 2022, the party nominated three strident election deniers for governor, attorney general, and secretary of state. After all three lost, Kari Lake repeatedly accused election officials of cheating her out of the governorship, driving Stephen Richer, the Maricopa County recorder, to sue her successfully for defamation. This past January, just before the party's annual meeting, Lake released a secret recording she'd made of the party chair appearing to offer her a bribe to keep her from running for the U.S. Senate. When she hinted at more damaging revelations to come, the chair, Jeff DeWit, quit, admitting, "I have decided not to take the risk." His successor was chosen at a raucous meeting where Lake was booed. Everyone involved—Lake, DeWit, the contenders to replace him, the chair he'd replaced—was a Trump loyalist, ideologically pure. The party bloodletting was the kind of purge that occurs in authoritarian regimes where people have nothing to fight over but power.

In April Arizona's attorney general indicted 11 fake Trump electors from 2020, including two state senators, several leaders of the state Republican Party, and Tyler Bowyer of Turning Point, as well as Giuliani and six other Trump advisers. The current session of the legislature is awash in Republican bills to change election procedures; one would simply put the result of the state's presidential vote in the hands of the majority party. I asked Analise Ortiz, a Democratic state representative, if she trusted the legislature's Republican leaders to respect the will of the voters in November. She thought about it for 10 seconds. "I can't give you a clear answer on that, and that worries me."

Richer, the top election official in Maricopa County, is an expert on the extremism of his fellow Arizona Republicans. After taking office in 2021, he received numerous death threats—some to his face, several leading to criminal charges—and he stopped attending most party functions. Richer is up for reelection this year, and Turning Point—which is trying to raise more than $100 million to mobilize the MAGA vote in Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin—is coming after him.

Election denial is now "a cottage industry, so there are people who have a pecuniary interest in making sure this never really dies out," Richer told me drily. "Some of these organizations, I'm not even sure it's necessarily in their interest to be winning. You look at something like a Turning Point USA—I'm not sure if they want to win. They certainly have been very good at not winning. When you are defined by your grievances, as so much of the party is now and as so much of this new populist-right movement is, then it's easier to be mad when you've lost."

The Arizona Republican Party is more radical than any other state's. The chief qualification for viability is an embarrassingly discredited belief in rigged elections. In April, the state's attorney general indicted 11 fake Trump electors from 2020, including two state senators.

Richer listed several reasons MAGA is 100 proof in Arizona while its potency is weaker in states such as Georgia. One reason is the presence of Turning Point's headquarters in Phoenix. Another is the border. "The border does weird things to people," he said. "It contributes to the radicalization of individuals, because it impresses upon you the sense that your community is being stolen and changed." A University of Chicago study showed that January 6 insurrectionists came disproportionately from areas undergoing rapid change in racial demographics. And, Richer reminded me, Phoenix "contributed the mascot."

JACOB CHANSLEY, the QAnon Shaman, sat waiting at a table outside a Chipotle in a northwest-Phoenix shopping mall. He was wearing a black T-shirt, workout shorts, and a ski hat roughly embroidered with an American flag. Perhaps it was the banal setting, but even with his goat's beard and tattoos from biceps to fingernails, he was unrecognizable as the horned and furred invader of the Capitol. For a second, he disappeared into that chasm between the on-screen performance and the ordinary reality of American life.

The Shaman was running as a Libertarian in Arizona's red Eighth Congressional District for an open seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. "Can you imagine the kind of statement it would send to the uniparty in D.C. to send me back as a congressman?" Chansley wouldn't be able to vote for himself—he was still on probation after serving more than two years in a federal prison. It was hard to tell to what extent his campaign actually existed. He was accepting no money from anyone, and when I asked how many signatures he'd collected for a petition to get on the ballot, he answered earnestly, "Over a dozen." (He would ultimately fail to submit any at all.) That was how Chansley talked: with no irony about circumstances that others might find absurd. There was an insistent strain in his voice, as if he had spent his life trying to convince others of something urgent that he alone knew, with a stilted diction—"politics and the government and the legislation therein has been used to forward, shall we say, a less than spiritual agenda"—that seemed familiar to me.

Why was he running for Congress? Unsurprisingly, because politicians of the uniparty were all in the pocket of special interests and international banks and did not represent the American people. His platform consisted of making lobbying a crime, instituting term limits for congresspeople and their staff, and prosecuting members engaged in insider trading. Meanwhile, Chansley was supporting himself by selling merch on his website, ForbiddenTruthAcademy.com, and doing shamanic consultations.

Why had he gone to the Capitol in regalia on January 6? He had a spiritual answer and a political answer. The Earth's electromagnetic field produces ley lines, he explained, which crisscross one another at sacred sites of civilizational importance, such as temples, pyramids, and the buildings on the National Mall. "If there's going to be a million people assembling on the ley lines in Washington, D.C., it's my shamanic duty, I believe, to be there and to ensure that the highest possible frequencies of love and peace and harmony are plugged into the ley lines." That was the spiritual answer.

The political answer consisted of a long string of government abuses and cover-ups going back to the Tuskegee experiment, and continuing through the Warren Commission, Waco, Oklahoma City, 9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan, Hillary Clinton's emails, COVID and the lockdowns, Hunter Biden's laptop, and finally the stolen 2020 election. "All of these things were like a culmination for me," he said, "'cause I have done my research, and I looked into the history. I know my history." Chansley's only regret about January 6 was not anticipating violence. "I would have created an environment that was one of prayer and peace and calm and patience before anything else took place." That day, he was at the front of the mob that stormed the Capitol and broke into the Senate chamber, where he left a note on Vice President Mike Pence's desk that said, "It's only a matter of time, justice is coming."

As for the conspiracy theory about a global child-sex-trafficking ring involving high-level Democrats: "Q was a successful psychological operation that disseminated the truth about corruption in our government."

One leader had the Shaman's complete respect—Donald Trump, who sneered at globalists and their tyrannical organizations, and who, Chansley said with that strain of confident

knowing in his voice, declassified three vital patents: "a zero-point-energy engine, infinite free clean energy; a room-temperature superconductor that allows a zero-point-energy engine to function without overheating; and what's called a TR3B—it's a triangular-shaped antigravity or inertia-propulsion craft. And when you combine all these things together, you get a whole new socioeconomic-geopolitical system."

When the Shaman got up to leave, I noticed that he walked slew-footed, sneakers turned outward, which surprised me because he was extremely fit, and I suddenly thought of a boy in my high school who made up for awkward unpopularity by using complex terms to explain forbidden truths that he alone knew and everyone else was too blind to see. Chansley was a teenage type. It took a national breakdown for him to become the world-famous symbol of an insurrection, spend two years in prison, and run for Congress.

5. The Aspirationalist

"Can the American experiment succeed? It's not 'can'—it has to. That doesn't mean it will."

Michael Crow, the president of Arizona State University, wore two watches and spoke quickly and unemotionally under arched eyebrows without smiling much. He was physically unimposing at 68, dressed in a gray blazer and blue shirt—so it was the steady stream of his words and confidence in his ideas that suggested why several people described him to me as the most powerful person in Arizona.

"I am definitely not a declinist. I'm an aspirationalist. That's why we call this the 'new American university.'"

If you talk with Crow for 40 minutes, you'll probably hear the word *innovative* half a dozen times. For example, the "new American university"—he left Columbia University in 2002 to build it in wide-open Phoenix—is "highly entrepreneurial, highly adaptive, high-speed, technologically innovative." Around the Valley, Arizona State has four campuses and seven "innovation zones," with 145,000 students, almost half online; 25,000 Starbucks employees attend a free program to earn a degree that most of them started somewhere else but never finished. The college has seven STEM majors for every one in the humanities, graduating thousands of engineers every year for the Valley's new tech economy. It's the first university to form a partnership with OpenAI, spreading the free use of chatbots into every corner of instruction, including English. Last year, the law school invited applicants to use AI to help write their essays.

Under Crow, Arizona State has become the kind of school where faculty members are encouraged to spin off their own companies. In 2015, a young materials-science professor named Cody Friesen founded one called Source, which manufactures hydropanels that use sunlight to pull pure drinking water from the air's moisture, with potential benefits for the world's 2.2 billion people who lack ready access to safe water, including those on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. "If we could do for water what solar did for electricity, you could then think about water not as a resource underground or on the surface, but as a resource you can find anywhere," Friesen told me at the company's headquarters in the Scottsdale innovation zone.

"Can the American experiment succeed? It's not 'can'—it has to. That doesn't mean it will."

But the snake of technology swallows its own tail. Companies such as Intel that have made the Valley one of the largest job-producing regions in the country are developing technologies that will eventually put countless people, including engineers, out of work. Artificial intelligence can make water systems more efficient, but the data centers that power it, such as the new one Microsoft is building west of Phoenix in Goodyear, have to be cooled with enormous quantities of water. Arizona State's sheer volume and speed of growth can make the "new American university" seem like the Amazon of higher education. Innovation alone is not enough to save the American experiment.

For Crow, new technology in higher education serves an older end. On his desk, he keeps a copy of the 1950 course catalog for UCLA. Back then, top public universities like UCLA had an egalitarian mission, admitting any California student with a B average or better. Today they compete to resemble elite private schools—instead of growing with the population, they've become more selective. Exclusivity increases their perceived value as well as their actual cost, and it worsens the heart-straining scramble of parents and children for a foothold in the higher strata of a grossly unequal society. "We've built an elitist model," Crow said, "a model built on exclusion as the measurement of success, and it's very, very destructive."

This model creates the false idea that certain credentials are the only proof of a young person's worth, when plenty of capable students can't get into the top schools or don't bother trying. "I'm saying, if you keep doing this—everyone has to be either Michigan or Berkeley, or Harvard or Stanford, or you're worthless—that's gonna wreck us. That's gonna wreck the country," Crow said, like a *Mad Max* film whose warring gangs are divided by political party and college degree. "I can't get some of my friends to see that we, the academy, are fueling it—our sanctimony, our

know-it-all-ism, our 'we're smarter than you, we're better than you, we're gonna help you.'"

The windows of his office in Tempe look out across the street at a block of granite inscribed with the words of a charter he wrote: "ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed." Arizona State admits almost every applicant with at least a B average, which is why it's so large; what allows the university to educate them all is technology. Elite universities "don't scale," Crow said. "They're valuable, but not central to the United States' success. Central to the United States' success is broader access to educational outcomes."

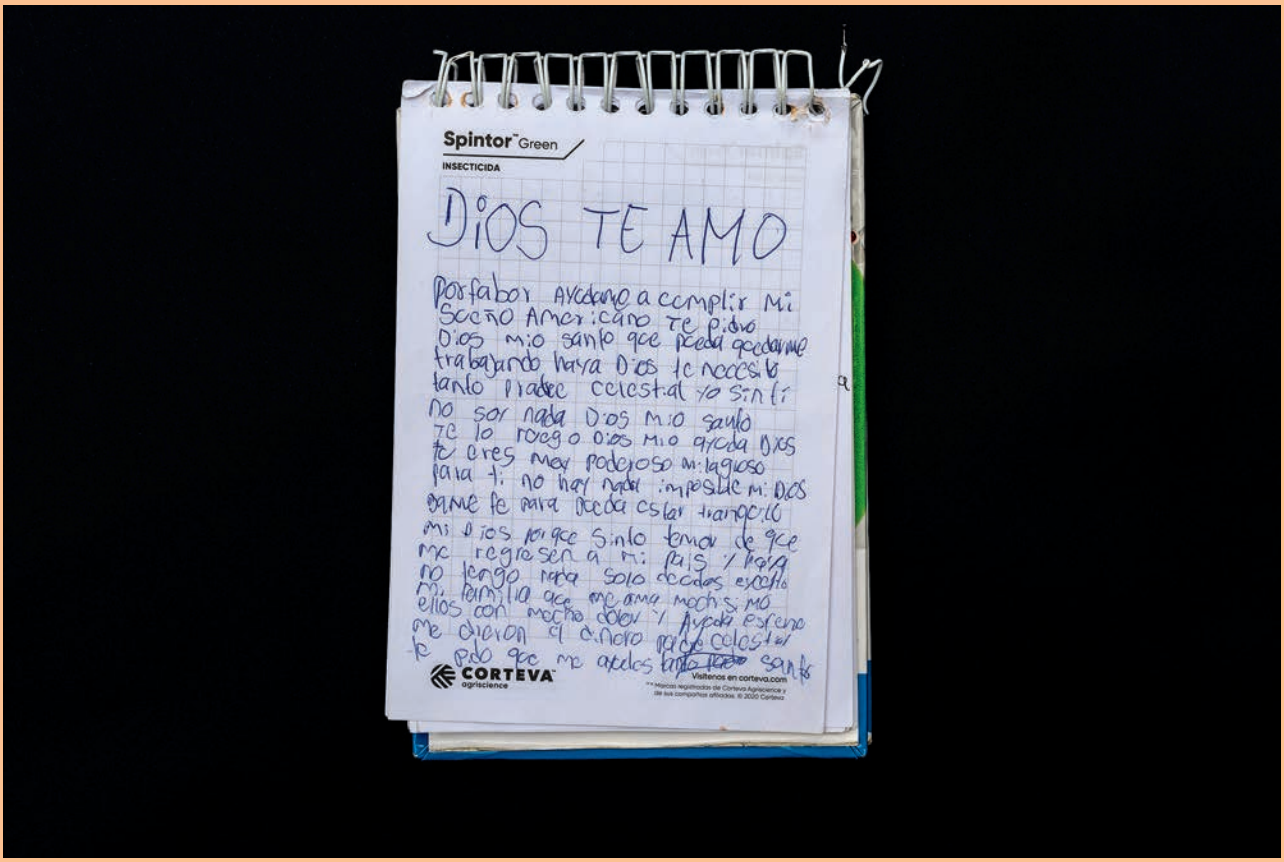
The same windows have a view of the old clay-colored Tempe Normal School, on whose steps Theodore Roosevelt once foresaw 100,000 people living here. Today the two most important institutions in the Valley are the Salt River Project and Arizona State. Both are public enterprises, peculiarly western in their openness to the future. The first makes it possible for large numbers of people to live here. The second is trying to make it possible for them to live together in a democracy.

In 2016, the Republican majority in the Arizona legislature insisted on giving the university $3 million to start a School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership. SCETL absorbed two earlier "freedom schools" dedicated to libertarian economics and funded in part by the Charles Koch Foundation. The new school is one innovation at Arizona State that looks backwards—to the founding principles and documents of the republic, and the classical philosophers who influenced them. Republican legislators believed they were buying a conservative counterweight to progressive campus ideology. Faculty members resisted this partisan intrusion on academic independence, and one left Arizona State in protest. But Crow was happy to take the state's money, and he hired a political-science professor from the Air Force Academy named Paul Carrese to lead the school. Carrese described himself to me as "an intellectual conservative, not a movement conservative," meaning "America is a good thing—and now let's argue about it."

I approached SCETL with some wariness. Koch-funded libertarian economics don't inspire my trust, and I wondered if this successor program was a high-minded vehicle for right-wing

Jacob Chansley, the QAnon Shaman, at a Chipotle in Phoenix, February 9, 2024. After serving time in federal prison for his actions at the Capitol on January 6, he ran for office in Arizona's Eighth Congressional District.

ASHLEY GILBERTSON FOR *THE ATLANTIC*



ASHLEY GILBERTSON FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

indoctrination on campus, which is just as anti-intellectual as the social-justice orthodoxy that prevails at elite colleges. Yet civic education and civic virtue are essential things for an embattled democracy, and generally missing in ours. So is studying the classics of American history and thought in a setting that doesn't reduce them to instruments of present-day politics.

As we entered the campus building that houses SCETL, a student stopped Carrese to tell him that she'd received a summer internship with a climate-change-skeptical organization in Washington. On the hallway walls I saw what you would be unlikely to see in most academic departments: American flags. But Carrese, who stepped down recently, hired a faculty of diverse backgrounds and took care to invite speakers of opposing views. In a class on great debates in American political history, students of many ethnicities, several nationalities, and no obvious ideologies parsed the shifting views of Frederick Douglass on whether the Constitution supported slavery.

Crow has defended SCETL from attempts by legislators on the right to control it and on the left to end it. Republican legislatures in half a dozen other states are bringing the model to their flagship universities, but Carrese worries that those universities will fail to insulate the programs from politics and end up with partisan academic ghettos. SCETL's goal, he said, is to train students for democratic citizenship and leadership—to make disagreement possible without hatred.

"The most committed students, left and right, are activists, and the center disappears," Carrese said. This was another purpose of SCETL: to check the relentless push toward extremes. "If students don't see conservative ideas in classes, they will go off toward Charlie Kirk and buy the line that 'the enemy is so lopsided, we must be in their face and own the libs.'"

Turning Point has a large presence at Arizona State. Last October, two Turning Point employees went on campus to get in the face of a queer writing instructor as he left class in a skirt, pursuing and filming him, and hectoring him with questions about pedophilia, until the encounter ended with the instructor on the ground bleeding from the face and the Maricopa County attorney filing assault and harassment charges against the two Turning Point employees. "Cowards," Crow said in a statement. He had previously defended Kirk's right to speak on campus, but this incident had nothing to do with free speech.

Leading an experiment in mass higher education for working- and middle-class students allows Crow to spend much less time than his Ivy League counterparts on speaker controversies, congressional investigations, and Middle East wars. The hothouse atmosphere of America's elite colleges, the obsessive desire and scorn they evoke, feels remote from the Valley. During campus protests in the spring, Arizona State suspended 20 students—0.0137 percent of its total enrollment.

Items left behind by migrants near the wall at the Mexican border

6. The Things They Carried

Two hours before sunrise, Fernando Quiroz stood in the bed of his mud-caked truck in a corner of Arizona. Eighty people gathered around him in the circle of illumination from a light tower while stray dogs hunted for scraps. It was February and very cold, and the people—men with backpacks, women carrying babies, a few older children—wore hooded sweatshirts and coats and blankets. Other than two men from India, they all came from Latin America, and Quiroz was telling them in Spanish that Border Patrol would arrive in the next few hours.

"You will be asked why you are applying for asylum," he said. "It could be violence, torture, communism."

They had been waiting here all night, after traveling for days or weeks and walking the last miles across the flat expanse of scrubland in the darkness off to the west. This was the dried-up Colorado River, and here and there on the far side, the lights of Mexico glimmered. The night before, the people had crossed the border somewhere in the middle of the riverbed, and now they were standing at the foot of the border wall. They were in America, but the wall still blocked the way, concealing fields of winter lettuce and broccoli, making sharp turns at Gate 6W and Gate 7W and the canal that carried Mexico's allocated Colorado River water from upstream. Quiroz's truck was parked at a corner of the wall. Its rust-colored steel slats rose 30 feet overhead.

Seen from a distance, rolling endlessly up and down every contour of the desert, the wall seemed thin and temporary, like a wildly ambitious art installation. But up close and at night it was an immense and ominous thing, dwarfing the people huddled around the truck.

"Put on your best clothes," Quiroz told them. "Wear whatever clothes you want to keep, because they'll take away the rest." They should make their phone calls now, because they wouldn't be able to once Border Patrol arrived. They would be given a gallon-size ziplock bag and allowed into America with only what would fit inside: documents, phones, bank cards. For all the other possessions that they'd chosen out of everything they owned to carry with them from all over the world to the wall—extra clothes, rugs, religious objects, family pictures—Border Patrol would give them a baggage-check tag marked DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY. They would have 30 days to come back and claim their belongings, but hardly anyone ever did—they would be long gone to Ohio or Florida or New York.

At the moment, most of them had no idea where they were. "This is Arizona," Quiroz said.

As he handed out bottled water and snacks from the back of his truck, a Cuban woman asked, "Can I take my makeup?"

"No, they'd throw it out."

A woman from Peru, who said she was fleeing child-kidnappers, asked about extra diapers.

"No, Border Patrol will give you that in Yuma."

Asylum seekers gather by the U.S.-Mexico border wall in San Luis, Arizona.

I watched the migrants prepare to abandon what they had brought. No one spoke much, and they kept their voices low. A man gave Quiroz his second pair of shoes in case someone else needed them. A teenage girl named Alejandra, who had traveled alone from Guatemala, held a teddy bear she'd bought at a Mexican gas station with five pesos from a truck driver who'd given her a ride. She would leave the teddy bear behind and keep her hyperthyroid medicine. Beneath the wall, a group of men warmed themselves by the fire of a burning pink backpack. In the firelight, their faces were tired and watchful, like the faces of soldiers in a frontline bivouac. A small dumpster began to fill up.

For several years, Quiroz had been waking up every night of the week and driving in darkness from his home in Yuma to supply the three relief stations he had set up at the wall and advise new arrivals, before going to his volunteer job as a high-school wrestling coach. He had the short, wiry stature and energy of a bantamweight, with a military haircut and midlife orthodontia installed cheap across the border. He was the 13th child of Mexican farmworkers, the first to go to college, and when he looked into the eyes of the migrants he saw his mother picking lettuce outside his schoolroom window and asked himself, "If not me, then who?"

He was volunteering at the deadliest border in the world. A few miles north, the wall ended near the boundary of the Cocopah reservation, giving way to what's known as the "Normandy wall"—a long chain of steel X's that looked like anti-craft obstacles on Omaha Beach. Two winters ago, checking his relief station there, Quiroz found an old man frozen to death. Last summer, a woman carrying a small child crossed the canal on a footbridge and turned left at the wall instead of going right toward Gates 6W and 7W. She walked a few hundred yards and then sat down by the wall and died in the heat. (The child survived.) Afterward, Quiroz put up a sign pointing to the right.

Over time, he began to find heaps of discarded objects in the dirt—clothing, sleeping bags, toiletries, a stroller. Border Patrol didn't have a policy of confiscating migrants' possessions—if anything, this violated official policy—but the practice was widespread, varying from post to post and day to day depending on the volume of influx and the mood of agents. So mounds of what looked like trash piled up at the wall, and right-wing media portrayed the sight as the filth and disorder that migrants were bringing into the country. Through a collaboration with Border Patrol and Yuma County, Quiroz set up dumpsters, toilets, and shade tents at his relief stations. He was also spending his own money, sometimes $200 a day, and his house filled up with migrants' lost property—hundreds of abandoned Bibles and rosaries, and backpacks that he emptied, cleaned, and donated to migrant shelters.

East of Yuma, near a remote border crossing called Lukeville, I met a man with a plastic bag and a trash-picker walking alone on a dirt track along the wall. He was a retired public historian named Paul Ferrell, and he was collecting what migrants had left behind: brand-new backpacks, prescription medicine, silk saris, Muslim prayer rugs, a braided leather waistband from West Africa, money in 13 currencies, identity cards from dozens of countries. Ferrell intended to throw away or sell some items, and donate others to

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the University of Arizona—as if here, a few miles from the reservation of the Tohono O'odham Nation, believed to be descendants of the vanished Hohokam, he'd stumbled on the relics of another civilization, a recent one spanning the entire world, but already abandoned: a notebook from Delhi filled with a young person's fantasy story, handwritten in English, called "Murder in Paradise"; pages of notes in Punjabi detailing the writer's persecution; a notebook with a Spanish prayer titled "God I Love You":

> Please help me fulfill my American dream I ask you my saint God that I can stay working there God I need you so much heavenly father without you I am nothing … I feel fear that they will return me to my country there I don't have anything but debts except my family loves me so much they with so much pain help effort gave me money heavenly father I ask you to help me heavenly father.

Like the things you would try to save from a fire, migrants' possessions are almost by definition precious. Having already left nearly everything behind, at the wall some lose their contacts' information, some their evidence for asylum, some their money, and some their identity. Quiroz was trying to bring these indignities to the attention of officials in Washington, but the border seems designed more for posturing than for solutions.

His daily efforts didn't win him universal admiration. A couple of years ago, self-described patriots drove along the wall and trashed his water stations, threw away bananas and oranges, and harassed him and other volunteers. After that, he kept his coolers padlocked to the wall, and on the morning in early February of this year when a gun-carrying convoy that called itself God's Army rolled through Yuma, he stayed home, not wanting a confrontation. The migrant numbers had grown so high that public opinion was moving against them. "It's going to be what wins the election: Where do you stand on the border?" Quiroz said. "Politicians will throw everything out of our faith and humanity to get leverage. It's sad—I see it in my friends, good people, the children of immigrants. It breaks my heart. My wife kicks me under the table: *Don't say anything*."

Even the most sympathetic humanitarian knew that some asylum seekers were gaming the system. One morning, at a Spanish-speaking church in Mesa that receives migrants from the border every Thursday, I watched 24 single men emerge from a Border Patrol bus holding ziplock bags; one of them, a 20-year-old from India, told me that he had left his father's car-parts yard and traveled nine months to start his own business in Indiana.

I went to the border believing that any country has to control whom it admits; that 2.5 million apprehensions in a single year are a crisis; that an overwhelmed asylum system intended for the persecuted is being exploited by the desperate; that the migrant influx shows this country's enduring appeal while undermining it by inflaming extremism and convincing less advantaged Americans that the government and the elites don't care about them.

A few hours at the wall didn't change these beliefs. But the immeasurable distance between the noise in Washington and the predawn hush around Quiroz's truck reminded me, not for the first time in Arizona, that our battles royal take our attention from the things that matter most—a human face, a lost notebook.

In a place like Maryvale, you realize how righteously stupid the culture wars make both sides. There's no reason to think that great books and moral education have anything to do with MAGA.

The sun's yellow rays in the east were beginning to pierce the slats when Gate 6W slid open and a Border Patrol van appeared. The agent had the migrants line up, women and children first, and, one by one, he photographed them and their passports. A light rain fell, and the arch of a rainbow rose over the invisible border in the riverbed. People began removing their shoelaces as Border Patrol required and Quiroz had instructed, presumably to prevent suicide attempts. They would leave their belongings at the wall and then be taken to the Yuma Sector, where they would be held for a day or two, or longer, some to be sent on to an immigration detention center, some to be deported, while others—the ones who convinced an official in a hurried interview that they might face danger if forced to return home—would be put on a bus to Phoenix, clutching their ziplock bag.

But Phoenix was almost never their ultimate destination. Phoenix was an overnight church shelter, a shower and a meal, a set of used clothes, a call to someone somewhere in the country for an onward ticket—then the Greyhound station or Sky Harbor Airport, the longest journey's second-to-last stop for an Indian traveling from Gujarat to Fresno, an Ecuadorean from Quito to Orlando, a Guinean from Conakry to the Bronx. The drama at the border kept Arizona's political temperature near boiling, but otherwise it left little impression on the rest of the state. The latest immigrants to the Valley are engineers coming from California and Seattle. Those who arrived speaking other languages have already been here long enough to have changed the place forever.

7. American Dreams

My traveling companion to the border was a young man named Ernie Flores. He had spent his childhood on both sides, waking in darkness at his mother's house in San Luis, Mexico, and crossing over every day to attend school in Yuma. He had been a troublemaker, always tired and angry, but he grew up with a kind of mystical optimism. "I remind myself constantly: If I'm suffering, I like to be present," he said, "because that's my life."

Tall and husky, with a fade haircut and a reserved face under heavy black brows, Flores was canvassing for Working America, an organization that connected nonunion households to the labor movement. As the sun set, he went door-to-door in the city's poorer neighborhoods like his own in South Phoenix, informing residents about the power company's price gouging; asking their views on health care, jobs, education, and corporate accountability; and collecting their email addresses on his tablet. He would stand back from the doorway and speak quietly, neither presenting nor inviting a threat. It was slow, unglamorous work on issues that mattered to everyone and resisted hot takes, and Flores was good at it. He relished these brief encounters, windows into other people's lives, hearing them out even when he knew they wouldn't give him their email.

On his own time, he ran a small business helping migrants start their own, so that they would contribute to the American economy rather than burden it. At the wall, he advised a tailor from Ecuador. Gate 6W of the Yuma Sector reminded Flores of Ellis Island. He wanted the border where he'd spent his childhood to be a highway someday, with off-ramps into both countries, integrating their economies. Right now the border seemed to exist so that political parties could exploit it. There were all kinds of people, he said, and everyone had to be represented, including Trump supporters. Education and information would gradually lead voters like the ones he met at front doors to make better demands of their leaders. "Everything has a cycle, I guess," he said. "This division that we have because of Trump will fade away as it usually does."

His long, calm, generous view was rare in this Year of American Panic. It escaped the gravity of polarization. In a way, it made Ernie Flores someone Charlie Kirk should fear.

PHOENIX IS ONLY slightly more white than Latino, and carne asada joints and the sound of Spanish are so ubiquitous that it feels less like a divided city than a bicultural one. "Ethnic politics are not as strong here as in the East," Joaquin Rios, a leader of Arizona's teachers' union, told me. Michael Crow, the Arizona State president, went a step further and called Phoenix "a post-ethnic city." He added: "It didn't grow up around ethnic communities that then helped to define its trajectories, with a series of political bargains along the way. It was wide open."

But for much of the 20th century, the city restricted its Latino and Black populations to the area below the Salt River, and South Phoenix remains mostly working-class. When newer waves of immigrants from Mexico began coming in the 1980s, many settled in a neighborhood of modest single-family houses in West Phoenix called Maryvale, a postwar master-planned community—Arizona's first—that white families were abandoning for gated swimming pools in North Phoenix and Scottsdale.

To call Phoenix wide open—a place where people from anywhere can arrive knowing no one and make their way up and leave a mark—is truer than to say it of Baltimore or Cleveland or Dallas. But the fault lines around a lousy school district are just as stark here as everywhere else in America, and white professionals' children are just as unlikely to be trapped inside one. Our tolerance of inequality is bottomless, but sunshine and sprawl have a way of hiding it. You can drive the entire length of the Valley, from Queen Creek to Buckeye, and start to feel that it all looks the same. Only if you notice the concentration of vape and smoke shops, tire stores, panhandlers at freeway entrances, and pickups in the dirt yards of beige stucco houses do you realize you're passing through Maryvale.

The Cortez family—Fabian, Erika, and their four daughters—lives in a tiny two-room apartment just outside Maryvale, with less space than a master bathroom in one of the $6 million Paradise Valley houses whose sales are reported in *The Arizona Republic*. The girls—Abigail, Areli, Anna, and Arizbeth, ranging from 18 to 10—sleep in the back room, and their parents sleep in the front, where there's a sofa, a small kitchen, a washer-dryer, and a partly inaccessible table pushed into a corner.

Erika—a former athlete, tall, with a round face and large glasses—first came to the U.S. on a visa from Mexico in 2004, to see her mother and give birth to Abigail. Then they went back to Juárez, where Fabian was working in a warehouse and Erika attended college. But a few months later, when Erika tried to reenter the U.S. to have Abigail vaccinated, an immigration officer at the border in El Paso demanded: "Why is she a citizen and you're not? If I see you again, I'll take away your visa." Afraid of being separated from her mother forever, a day later Erika was in Phoenix with the baby. That was the end of her education. After a month, Fabian joined them and found work as a maintenance man. They began to raise an American family: the children as citizens, the parents, in Erika's word, "illegal."

Mixed-status families are common in Maryvale. Analise Ortiz, who represents the area in the state legislature, told me, "It's not so much the everyday flow of traffic over the border that impacts my district—people come to Phoenix and then they leave. It's immigration policy on the federal level." The country's failure year after year to address the dilemma of its millions of undocumented residents shapes every aspect of the Cortez family's life. When Fabian spent weekends doing landscape work for a man who then refused to pay what he owed him—saying, "I'll call immigration; get off my property"—he had no recourse. In 2006, he fell from the second floor of a job site onto a concrete slab and fractured his back. Fabian spent a year in bed recovering while Erika sold tamales from their kitchen to make ends meet. He still feels pain today, but the company paid him no compensation.

In 2010, a punitive state law known as S.B. 1070—nicknamed the "Show Me Your Papers" law, and enforced by the rabidly anti-immigrant sheriff of Maricopa County at the time, Joe

Erika and Fabian Cortez and their four daughters live in a two-room apartment near Maryvale. The girls attend a charter school with a classical curriculum.

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Arpaio—instituted a reign of terror for people in the Valley with dark skin. Every day, the Cortezes risked a police check that might break up the family, and Erika was afraid to go outside. Once, two policemen stopped Fabian when he was driving a friend's car—one cop wanted to take him in, but the other, seeing two child seats in the back, let Fabian go and impounded the car. (S.B. 1070 significantly reduced the number of undocumented immigrants in Arizona; it also galvanized Latinos to vote Democratic and helped turn the state purple.)

Several years ago, Erika became diabetic, and she's been plagued ever since by serious illnesses and chronic fatigue. But with Fabian's minimum-wage pay and no health insurance, she's limited to a discount clinic where the wait time is long and the treatment is inadequate. In 2020, amid the depths of the pandemic, the owner of the four-bedroom house they were renting near the interstate broke the lease, saying that he was going to sell, and gave the family a month to leave. They had no choice but to put most of their furniture in storage and squeeze into the two cramped rooms. The girls made their mother weep by saying, "Don't be sad. We're together, we have a ceiling, we have food. If we're together, we're happy—that's all that matters."

Arizona ranks 48th among states in spending per student, ahead of only Utah and Idaho, in spite of poll after poll showing wide support for public education. A universal-voucher law is sending nearly $1 billion annually in tax money to the state's private schools. With little regulation, Phoenix is the Wild West of education—the capital of for-profit, scandal-plagued colleges and charter schools, many of them a mirage, a few of them a lifeline for desperate parents.

The Cortez girls attended Maryvale public schools, where Erika and Fabian always volunteered. The girls were studious and introverted; the classrooms were often chaotic. When Areli was in fifth grade, her teacher warned Erika that the local middle school would be a rough place for her, as it had been for Abigail. The teacher recommended a Maryvale charter school that was part of a network in the Valley called Great Hearts. Its curriculum was classical—essentially a great-books program, with even geometry taught using *Euclid's Elements*—and its mission was education through "truth, beauty, and goodness." Erika didn't know any of this when she toured the school, but she was impressed by the atmosphere of discipline and respect. Children were learning in a safe place—that was enough for her and Fabian. Areli got in off the waitlist, Abigail was admitted into the school's first ninth-grade class, their younger sisters entered the elementary school, and the girls began their education in Latin, Shakespeare, van Gogh, and Bach.

The family's life revolved around school. Erika woke before dawn and drove Fabian to his job at 5:30 a.m., then returned home to take the girls to Great Hearts. She was the classic Team Mom and spent hours every afternoon driving her kids and others to basketball games and track meets. Unlike Maryvale's Great

Hearts, which is overwhelmingly Latino and poor, most schools in the network are largely white and middle-class, and the Cortez girls weren't always made to feel welcome at away games. But Erika loved that her daughters were studying books she'd only heard of and learning to think more deeply for themselves. The family never gathered at home before eight at night, when Erika was often exhausted; the girls—straight-A students—did homework and read past midnight. Their mother lived with the fear that she wouldn't see them all grown. She wanted "to give them wonderful memories. I don't want to waste time."

I spent a morning at Great Hearts in Maryvale, where hallways displayed replicas of paintings by da Vinci, Brueghel, and Renoir. A 12th-grade class in "Humane Letters" was studying *The Aeneid*, and on the whiteboard the teacher had written, "To whom or what is duty owed? Can fate and free will coexist?" Students were laboring to understand the text, but Aeneas's decision to abandon Dido for his destiny in Rome sparked a passionate discussion. "What if Aeneas, like, asked Dido to come with him?" one boy asked.

If you accept the assumption that children won't learn unless they see their own circumstances and identities reflected in what they're taught, then the pedagogy at Great Hearts must seem perverse, if not immoral. I asked Rachel Mercado, the upper-school headmaster, why her curriculum didn't include the more "relevant" reading now standard at most schools in poorer districts. "Why do my students have to read that?" she demanded. "Why is that list for them and not this list? That's not fair to them. I get very worked up about this." Her eyes were filling. "They deserve to read good things and have these conversations. They're exposed to all that"—the problems of race and gender that animate many contemporary teen novels. "Why is that the only thing they get to read? You saw them reading *The Aeneid*. These books are about problems that humans relate to, not just minority groups."

Like SCETL at Arizona State, classical education at Great Hearts runs the risk of getting caught in the constantly grinding gears of the culture wars. The network was co-founded by a Republican political operative, and sponsors of its annual symposium include the Heritage Foundation and Hillsdale College. Great Hearts' leaders worry that some people associate classical education with the right. "But teachers don't think about it," Mercado said. "This whole political thing is pushed by people who don't think about what to do in the classroom."

Great Hearts has made it difficult for students to change their gender identity in school. For some progressives, this is evil, and, what's more, the Cortez girls only appear to be thriving in an inequitable education that marginalizes them. For some conservatives—Charlie Kirk, for example, and Kari Lake, now running for the U.S. Senate—the girls' parents are criminals who should be sent back to Mexico, destroying everything they've sacrificed to build, and depriving America of everything they would contribute.

In a place like Maryvale, you realize how righteously stupid the culture wars make both sides. There's no reason to think that great books and moral education have anything to do with MAGA. There's no reason reading Virgil should require banning children from changing names. There's no reason to view Western civilization as simply virtuous or vicious, only as the one that most shaped our democracy. There's no reason to dumb down humanistic education and expect our society to become more just. If we ever do something about the true impediments to the Cortez family's dreams—if Fabian could earn enough from his backbreaking work for the six of them to live in four rooms instead of two; if insurance could cover treatment for Erika's illnesses so she doesn't have to delay seeing a doctor until her life is threatened; if the local public schools could give their daughters a safe and decent education; if America could allow the family to stop being afraid and live in the sunlight—then by all means let's go back to fighting over name changes and reading lists.

8. Campaigners

Ruben Gallego was hopping up and down in the middle of the street in a tie-dyed campaign T-shirt and shorts and a pair of cheap blue sunglasses. The Phoenix Pride Parade was about to start, and everyone was there, every class and color and age: Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, NASCAR, McKinsey, the Salt River Project, Gilbert Fire & Rescue, Arizona Men of Leather. Gallego, the U.S. representative from Arizona's Third District (and the ex-husband of the mayor of Phoenix), is running for the U.S. Senate against Kari Lake.

Gallego grew up in a small apartment outside Chicago with his mother, a Colombian immigrant, and his three sisters after their Mexican father abandoned the family. Ruben slept on the floor, worked in construction and meatpacking, got into Harvard, was suspended for poor grades before graduating in 2004, and enlisted with the Marine reserves. In 2005, he was sent to Iraq and fought for six months in the hardest-hit Marine battalion of the war. His deployment still haunts him. He looks more like a labor organizer than a congressman—short and bearded, with the face and body of a middle-aged father who works all the time but could have taken care of himself on January 6 if an insurrectionist had gotten too close.

The Third District includes South Phoenix and Maryvale, and Gallego was campaigning as a son of the working class on behalf of people struggling to afford rent or buy groceries. The Third District borders the Ninth, whose median income is not much higher, and whose congressman, Paul Gosar, inhabits the more paranoid precincts of the Republican Party. The district line might as well be a frontier dividing two countries, but some of

Top: *Bernadette Greene Placentia, a long-haul truck driver, ran for Arizona's Eighth Congressional District as an anti-establishment Democrat.*
Bottom: *Firefighters respond to a fire that tore through a hair salon and a pawn shop in South Phoenix in February.*

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the difference dissolves in the glare of sunlight hitting the metal roof of a Dollar General. Three-quarters of Gallego's constituents are the urban Latino and Black working class. I asked him if his message could win over Gosar's rural white working class.

"You can win some of them—you're not going to win them all," he said. "They hate pharmaceutical companies as much as I do. They hate these mega-monopolies that are driving up the cost of everything as much as I do. They worry about foreign companies sucking up the water as much as I do."

In 2020, Gallego received national attention when he tweeted his rejection of the term *Latinx*. He criticizes his own Democratic Party for elitism. "We should not be afraid to say, 'You know what—we messed up,'" he told me. "'We lost our focus on working-class issues, and we need to fight to get it back.'" I asked Gallego about the recent turn of Latino and Black Americans toward the Republican Party. He was more concerned that sheer cynicism would keep them from voting at all.

The parade started up Third Street, and Gallego went off looking for every hand he could shake. In the first 10 minutes, he counted 86.

It struck me that a parade for the child tax credit would never draw such a large, diverse, and joyous crowd, or any crowd at all. Even with a resurgence of union activism, "We are wage workers" doesn't excite like "LGBTQ together." When the Arizona Supreme Court voted in April that a Civil War–era ban on almost every abortion should remain state law, the dominant theme of Gallego's campaign became that familiar Democratic cause, not the struggles of the working class.

Americans today are mobilized by culture and identity, not material conditions—by belonging to a tribe, whether at a Pride march or a biker rally. Political and media elites stoke the culture wars for their own benefit, while government policies repeatedly fail to improve conditions for struggling Americans. As a result, even major legislation goes unnoticed. Joe Biden's infrastructure, microchip, and climate bills are sending billions of dollars to the Valley, but I hardly ever heard them mentioned. "Right now they are not a factor in my district," Analise Ortiz, the state representative, told me. When she went door-to-door, the bills hardly ever came up. "Honestly, it's rare that Biden even comes up."

The professional class has lost so much trust among low-income voters that a Democratic candidate has to be able to say: "I don't despise you. I talk like you, I shop like you—I'm one of you." This was the approach of Bernadette Greene Placentia.

SHE STARTED WORKING as a long-haul trucker in 1997, became the owner of a small trucking company, and at age 50 still drove one of the three rigs. She grew up in rural Nebraska and Wyoming, the daughter of a union railroader who was a conservative Democrat and National Rifle Association lifer—a type that now barely exists. She's married to the son of a Mexican American labor leader who worked with Cesar Chavez, and together they raised an adopted daughter from China. She's a pro-union, pro–death penalty, pro-choice gun owner—"New Deal instead of Green New Deal." She struggles with medical bills and rig payments, and she was running for Congress as a Democrat in Arizona's Eighth Congressional District, which encompasses the heavily Republican suburbs northwest of Phoenix.

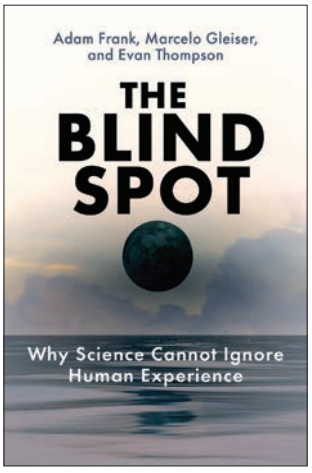
> Bernadette Greene Placentia was trying to do for the Democrats what Sarah Palin had done for the Republicans.

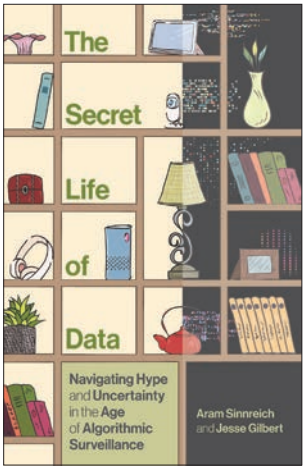
The open seat in the Eighth was more likely to go to the Republican speaker of the Arizona House, Ben Toma; or to Blake Masters, the Peter Thiel disciple who lost his run for U.S. Senate in 2022; or to Anthony Kern, a state senator and indicted fake Trump elector who joined the mob outside the Capitol on January 6; or to Trump's personal choice, Abe Hamadeh, another election denier who was still suing after losing the attorney-general race in 2022. But I wanted to talk with Greene Placentia, because she confounded the fixed ideas that paralyze our minds with panic and boredom and deepen our national cognitive decline.

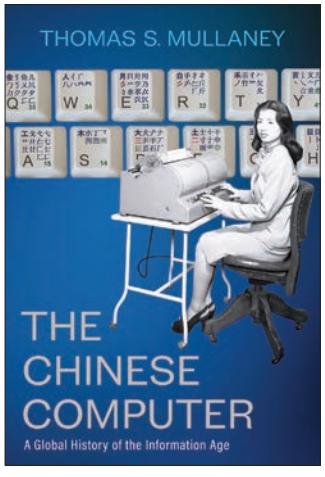
We met at a Denny's next to the interstate in Goodyear. She was wearing an open-shoulder cable-knit turtleneck sweater with crossed American and Ukrainian flag pins. Her long hair was pulled back tight, and her eyes and mouth were also tight, maybe from driving 3.5 million miles around the country. As soon as I sat down, she said, "The Democratic Party purports to be the party of the working class. Bullshit."

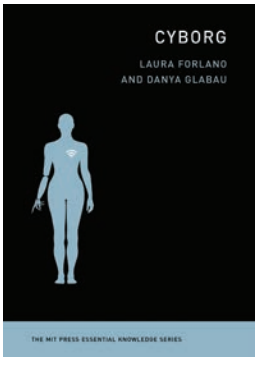
When she knocked on doors in her district and introduced herself, the residents couldn't believe she was a Democrat. "We need to get rid of the political elites; we need to get rid of the multimillionaires," she would tell them. "We need representative democracy. That means people like you and me." And they would say, "Yeah, you're not like the other Democrats."

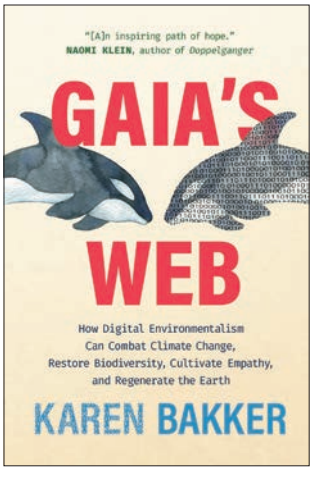
The image is a caricature, and unfair. The Republican Party is dominated by very rich men, including its leader. But populist resentments in America have usually been aroused more by cultural superiority than by great wealth. In 2016, Greene Placentia knew that Trump would win, because she worked every day with the targets of his appeal. "As rich as that fucker is, he stood up

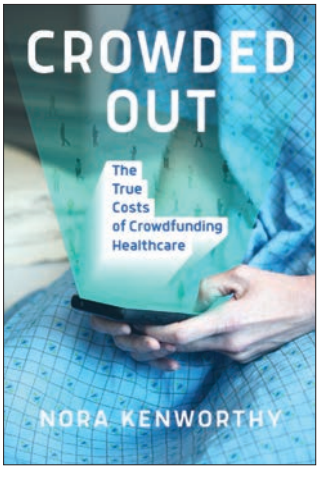


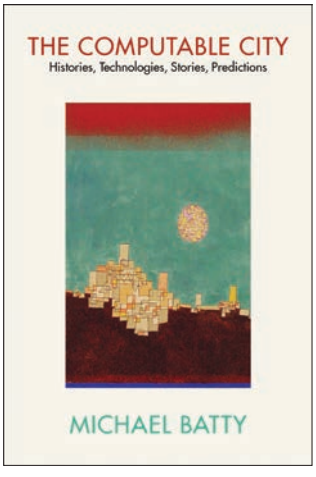












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When politics itself becomes a group identity, dividing us into mutually unintelligible blocs with incompatible realities, then the stakes of every election are existential, and it becomes hard to live together in the same country without killing one another.

there and said, 'You know what? It's not your fault; it's their fault. They don't care about you—I care about you. I will fight for you. They're busy fighting to get guys in dresses.' Crude, but that's what he said. And when your life has fallen apart, when you're not making shit, and somebody stands there and says, 'I will help you. I believe in you,' you're gonna go there. We gotta belong to a pack. If that pack isn't paying attention to us, you're gonna go to another pack." The pack, she said, is Trump's, not the Republican Party's, and its bond is so strong that a road-rage encounter between two members will end in apologies and bro hugs.

For nearly a decade, journalists and academics have been trying to understand Trump's hold on white Americans who don't have a college degree. Racism, xenophobia, economic despair, moral collapse, entertainment value? Greene Placentia explained it this way: The white working class is sinking, while minority groups, with the support of Democrats, are rising—not as high, but getting closer. "When you're falling and the party that built its back on you isn't there, and you look over and they're busy with everybody else and the environment and all this shit, and your life is falling apart, and all you see is them rising, it breeds resentment."

She wasn't justifying this attitude, and she despised Trump ("a con man"), but she was describing why she was running for Congress. "The reason they don't listen to us—it isn't because of the message we're saying; it's because of the messenger. They don't trust any establishment Democrats. You're gonna have to start getting people in there that they believe in and trust, and it has to be people that's more like them and less like the Gavin Newsoms and the Gretchen Whitmers that grew up in the political world. Otherwise, every presidential election is gonna be on the margins."

Stashed under her car's dashboard was a pack of Pall Malls along with a "Black Lives Matter / Women's Rights Are Human Rights / No Human Is Illegal …" leaflet. In a sense, Greene Placentia was trying to do for the Democrats what Sarah Palin had done for the Republicans. She was trying to make working-class into a political identity that could attract voters who seemed to belong to the other party or neither.

"The problem is, both the establishment Republicans and the establishment Democrats are gonna fight like hell against that person," she said, "'cause that kind of person isn't for a party; it's for the people."

The Arizona Democratic Party ignored Greene Placentia. In the end, like the Shaman, she didn't gather enough signatures to get on the ballot.

JEFF ZINK drove around South Phoenix wearing a black Stetson, stitched boots, and a LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT belt buckle, with a pistol holstered on his right hip—as if to say, *That's right, I'm a Second Amendment guy from Texas*, which is what he is. Zink was campaigning for Gallego's seat in the Third Congressional District on a Republican brand of identity politics—an effort at least as quixotic as Greene Placentia's in the Eighth, because South Phoenix, where Zink lives, is solidly Democratic and Latino. Like her, he didn't have much money and was spending down his retirement funds on the campaign. He was betting that his surname and party wouldn't matter as much as the area's crime and poverty and the empty warehouses that should have been turned into manufacturing plants with good jobs by the past three congressmen with Hispanic surnames—that his neighbors were fed up enough to vote for a white MAGA guy named Zink.

Zink believed that his background as an NFL trainer and ordained Christian minister showed that he couldn't be the racist some called him because of January 6. That day, he and his 32-year-old son, Ryan, had crossed police barriers and joined the crowd on the Capitol steps, though they hadn't entered the building itself. Zink wasn't charged, but Ryan—who had posted video on social media of himself cheering the mob as it stormed the doors—was found guilty on three counts and faces up to 22 years in federal prison. Zink complained to me that a rigged court in Washington had convicted his son for exercising his First Amendment rights. He also believed that the 2020 presidential and 2022 state elections in Arizona had been fraudulent, and he'd participated in "recounts" of both. Even his own congressional-race loss to Gallego in 2022, by a 77–23 margin, had left him suspicious. Nothing was on the level, evil was in control—but a heavenly God was watching, and soon America would be governed biblically by its true Christians of every color.

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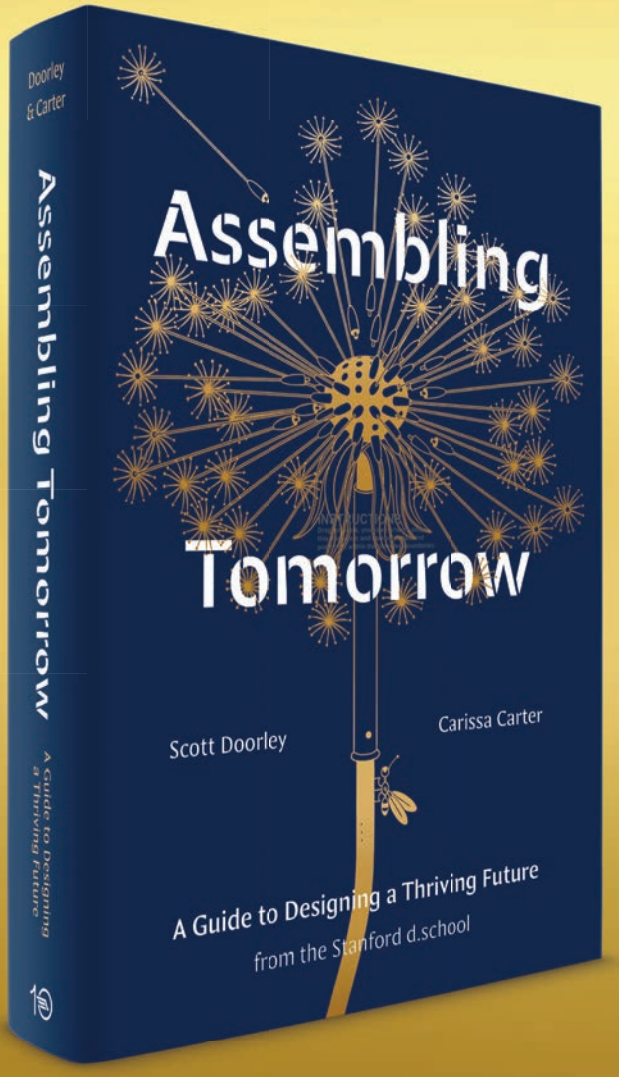

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Zink drove along Baseline Road, the main east-west drag through South Phoenix. He wanted to show me crime and decay, and it didn't take long to find it. A fire truck with lights flashing was parked outside a Taco Bell in a shopping center. "I guarantee you we have a fentanyl overdose," Zink said—but the man lying on the floor inside had only passed out drunk. The next stop was a tire shop in the same mall. Zink had already heard from the store manager that drug dealers and homeless people from a nearby encampment had broken in dozens of times.

The manager, Jose Mendoza—lean, with a shaved head and a fringe of beard along his jawline, wearing his store uniform, jacket, and cap—seemed harassed. The local police force was understaffed, and he had to catch criminals himself and haul them down to the precinct. After a break-in at his house while his wife and kids were there, he had moved out to Buckeye. On the long commutes, he listened to news podcasts. Standing by the store counter, he had a lot to say to Zink.

"My biggest thing, the reason I don't like Trump, is because he politically divided the nation," Mendoza said. "If he wins, I am leaving, I'm going back south, I'm selling everything I have and getting out of here. I am 100 percent serious, brother, because I'm not going to be put inside a camp like he threatened to do already. I'm not going to stand for any of my people being put inside of a camp." Mendoza was furious that Trump had pardoned Joe Arpaio, who had treated Latinos like criminals for two decades.

"Right," Zink said. "These are the things where that division that has happened and—"

"I don't see Biden coming in here and getting the sheriffs to start profiling people," Mendoza said.

"Right, right."

The candidate kept trying to agree with Mendoza, and Mendoza kept showing that they disagreed. He ended the conversation in a mood of generalized disgust. "You know what? Get rid of both of 'em. Put somebody else," he said. "Put Kennedy, shit, put somebody's Labrador—I'll vote for a Labrador before I'll vote for any of those two guys."

Zink had neglected to tell Mendoza that he and his gun had just been at the border in Yuma with the anti-migrant God's Army convoy. Or that the friend who'd first urged him to move to the Valley was one of Arpaio's close aides. But back in his truck, Zink said, "My father told me this: 'Until you've walked a mile in somebody's shoes, you don't know where they're coming from.' It's going to take me a long time to listen to Jose, with all of the things that's gone on."

A warmer reception awaited him from Dania Lopez. She owned a little shop that sold health shakes in the South Plaza mall, where her husband's low-rider club gathered on weekends. She had been raised Democratic, but around 2020 she began to ask herself whether she agreed with what she'd watched all her life on Univision. She and her husband, an auto mechanic,

A homeless man named Roberto Delaney Francis Jesus Herrera in the no-man's-land around the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad

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opposed abortion, worried about undocumented immigrants bringing fentanyl across the border, and distrusted the notion of climate change ("It's been hot here every year"). Their Christian values aligned more with the Republican Party, so they began listening to right-wing podcasts. But the decisive moment came on Election Day in 2020, when a voting machine twice rejected her husband's ballot for Trump. The paper size seemed too large to fit.

"If that happened to me, how many more people that happened to?" Lopez asked me in the back of her shop. "It really raised those red flags." This procedural mistake was enough to make her believe that the 2020 election was rigged. Now there was a ZINK FOR CONGRESS sign in her store window. "I think that God has opened my eyes to be able to see something that I couldn't see before." A lot of her friends were making the same change.

Lopez and her husband are part of a political migration among working-class Latino and Black voters, especially men. The trend might get Trump elected again this year. Biden's margin of support among Black voters has dropped by as much as 28 percent since 2020, and among Latino voters by as much as 32 percent, to nearly even with Trump's. Attendance at the Turning Point USA convention was overwhelmingly white, but outside the center I met a Black woman from Goodyear, in a red AMERICA FIRST jacket, named Christy Kelly. She was collecting signatures to get her name on the ballot for a seat on the state utility commission, in order to block renewable energy from causing rolling blackouts and soaring prices, she said. She called herself a "walkaway"—a defector from a family of longtime Democrats, and for the same reason as Dania Lopez: She was a conservative.

I asked if she didn't regard Trump as a bigot. "Absolutely not," Kelly said cheerfully. "Trump has been one of the No. 1 names quoted in rap music going back to the '80s, maybe the '90s. Black people have loved Trump. Mike Tyson loved him." Republicans just had to learn to speak with more sensitivity so they didn't get automatically labeled racist.

Kelly and Lopez defied the rules of identity politics. They could not be counted on to vote according to their race or ethnicity, just as Greene Placentia could not be counted on to vote according to her class. Whether or not we agreed, talking with these women made me somewhat hopeful. Identity is a pernicious form of political division, because its appeal is based on traits we don't choose and can't change. It's inherently irrational, and therefore likely to lead to violence. Identity politicians—and Trump is one—don't win elections with arguments about ideas, or by presenting a vision of a world more attractive than their opponent's. They win by appealing to the solidarity of group identity, which has to be mobilized by whipping up fear and hatred of other groups.

Unlike identities, ideas are open to persuasion, and persuasion depends on understanding and reaching other people. But when partisanship itself becomes a group identity, a tribal affiliation with markers as clear as Jeff Zink's handgun, dividing us into mutually unintelligible blocs with incompatible realities, then the stakes of every election are existential, and it becomes hard to live together in the same country without killing one another.

9. The Good Trump Voter

Bernadette Greene Placentia's account of Trump voters wasn't completely satisfying. Resentment of elites is a powerful motive in democratic politics, and so is the feeling—apparently universal among long-haul truckers—that the economy was better under Trump. But that disregards the moral and psychological cesspool himself: a bully, a liar, a bigot, a sexual assaulter, a cheat; crude, cruel, disloyal, vengeful, dictatorial, and so selfish that he tried to shatter American democracy rather than accept defeat. His supporters have to ignore all of this, explain it away, or revel in displays of character that few of them would tolerate for a minute in their own children. Now they are trying to put him back in power. Beyond the reach of reason and even empathy, nearly half of my fellow citizens are unfathomable, including a few I personally like. The mystery of the good Trump voter troubled me.

Most people are better face-to-face than when performing online or in an anonymous crowd. At the Turning Point convention, where four days of rage and hatred spewed from the stage, everyone I spoke with, my media badge in full view, was friendly (other than 30 seconds of scorn from Charlie Kirk himself when I tried to interview him). Did this matter? I didn't want to live in a country where politics polluted every cranny of life, where communication across battle lines was impossible. It was important to preserve some civic ties for the day after the apocalypse, yet the enormity of the threat made it hard to see any basis for them.

A man was attending the convention with the pass of a friend who had recently lost his wife during the coronavirus pandemic. The friend had been invited to speak about the staggering losses of the pandemic and the reasons for them, but some days were still bad, and he had skipped the day's session. His name was Kurtis Bay. I wanted to meet him.

Bay lived in a gated subdivision in Mesa at the eastern edge of the Valley, three miles from Rusty Bowers. Bay's house, like all the ones around it, was beige, stucco-walled, and tile-roofed, with a small desert yard. A Toyota Tacoma was parked in the driveway and an American flag hung from a pole on the garage wall. The rooms inside were covered in pictures of a middle-aged blond woman with a warm smile and, occasionally beside her, a man with the silvering goatee and easy, sun-reddened face of someone enjoying his late 50s with his wife.

This was the man who greeted me in a half-zip windbreaker. But all the pleasure was gone from his blue eyes, and his voice easily broke, and the house felt empty with just him and his dog, Apollo, and an occasional visit from the housekeeper or the pool guy. His sons and grandsons couldn't bear to come over since Tammy's death, so Bay had to get in his truck to see them.

He had come up in Washington State from next to nothing, deserted by his father, raised by his mother on food stamps in Section 8 housing, leaving home at 15 and boxing semi-pro. Though he never forgot the humiliations of poverty and the help of the state, his belief in personal responsibility—not rugged

individualism—led him, in the binary choice, to vote Republican. Kurtis and Tammy married when they were in their early 20s and raised two boys in the Valley, while he ran a business selling fire and burglar alarms and started a nonprofit basketball program for disadvantaged youth that was later taken over by the Phoenix Suns. A generation or two ago, the Bay family might have been an ad for white bread, but one of the sons was gay and the other was married to a Black woman, and the two grandsons were growing up, Bay said, in a society where "they will never be white enough or Black enough."

These themes kept recurring with people I met in the Valley: mixed-race families, dislike of political extremes, distrust of power, the lingering damage of COVID.

The coronavirus took Tammy's mother in the early months of the pandemic. Kurtis and Tammy had moved back to Washington to be near her, but after her death they returned to the Valley, where their married son had just moved his family so that the boys could attend school in person. Kurtis and Tammy didn't get vaccinated, not because they were anti-vax but because they'd already had COVID. "We are not anti-anything," he said, "except anti-evil, anti-mean, anti-crime, anti-hate."

The year 2021 was golden for them: projects on the new house in Mesa, their sons and grandsons nearby, Kurtis retired and golfing, Tammy starting a business restoring furniture. "We got back to running around chasing each other naked, living our best life in the home of our dreams," he said. "We'd witnessed the worst and seen the best. We were together 39 years."

Tammy came down with something after a large Christmas party at their son's house. By early January 2022, she was so exhausted that she asked Kurtis to drive her to the nearest hospital. A COVID test came back negative, while chest X-rays showed pneumonia. Still, the doctors brought Tammy up to the COVID unit, where the staff were all wearing hazmat suits and next of kin were allowed to stay only an hour. The disorientation and helplessness of a complex emergency at a big hospital set in, nurses who didn't know the patient's name coming and going and a doctor with the obscure title "hospitalist" in charge, needing immediate answers for alarming decisions and insisting on treating a virus that Kurtis was adamant Tammy didn't have. When he refused to leave her side, a nurse called security and he was physically escorted out, but not before he wrote on the room's whiteboard: "No remdesivir, no high-flow oxygen, no sedation, no other procedures without my approval. Kurtis Bay."

To the hospital, Bay was a combative husband who was resisting treatment for his extremely sick wife. To Bay, the hospital was slowly killing his beloved and recently healthy wife with antiviral drugs and two spells on a ventilator. The ordeal lasted 15 days, until Tammy died of sepsis on January 20, 2022.

Bay told me the story with fresh sorrow and lingering disbelief rather than rancor. "I have a lot of pain, but I'm not going to be that person that's going to run around with a sandwich board and stand in front of the courthouse and scream, 'You murdered my wife!'" He believed that federal agencies and insurance companies created incentives for hospitals to diagnose COVID and then follow rigid protocols. The tragedy fed his skepticism toward what he called the "managerial class"—the power elite in government bureaucracy, business, finance, and the media. The managerial class was necessary—the country couldn't function without it—but it accumulated power by sowing conflict and chaos. Like the hospital's doctors, members of the class weren't individually vicious. "Yes, they are corrupt, but they're more like AI," Bay said. "It's morphing all by itself. It's incestuous—it breeds and breeds and breeds." As for politicians, "I don't think either political party gives a shit about the people"—a dictum I heard as often as the one about whiskey and water.

Bay saw Trump as the only president who tried to disrupt the managerial class and empower ordinary citizens. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. would do it too, but voting for him would be throwing his vote away. If Trump loses this year, the managerial class will acquire more power and get into more wars, make the border more porous, hurt the economy by installing DEI algorithms in more corporations. "I'll vote for Trump," Bay said, "but that's, like, the last thing I think about in terms of how I'm going to impact my neighbor, my friend, my society." Everyone wanted clean air, clean water, opportunity for all to make money and raise a family. If the extremes would stop demonizing each other and fighting over trivia, then the country could come together and solve its immense problems—poverty, homelessness …

I listened, half-agreeing about the managerial class, still wondering how a man who dearly loved his multiracial family and cared about young people on the margins and called his late wife "the face of God on this Earth" could embrace Trump. So I asked. Bay replied that good people had done bad things on January 6 but not at Trump's bidding, and he might have gone himself if the timing had been different; that he didn't look to the president for moral guidance in raising children or running a business; that he'd easily take "grab her by the whatever" from a president who would end the border problem and stop funding wars. All of this left the question unanswered, and maybe it was unanswerable, and I found myself looking away from his watery eyes to the smiling woman in the large framed picture behind his left shoulder.

"There are no good days," Bay said.

10. Dry Wells

In the spring of 2023, Governor Hobbs convened an advisory council to find solutions to the two parts of the water problem: how to allow urban areas to keep growing without using more groundwater, and how to prevent rural basins from running out of water altogether. The council began to meet in Room 3175 at the Arizona Department of Water Resources, two blocks north of the homeless compound in the heat zone, and a dozen blocks west of the convention center's noise and smoke machines. Around a long horseshoe table sat every interested party: farmers, builders, tribal leaders, politicians, environmentalists, experts, and the state's top water officials. The Salt River Project was there; so were Kathleen Ferris and Sarah Porter;

Stephen Roe Lewis, the leader of the Gila River Indian Community. After years of litigation, the community now controls large amounts of water.

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so was Stephen Roe Lewis, the leader of the Gila River Indian Community, who had secured federal funding to install experimental solar panels over the tribe's canals to conserve water and power. At one end of the table, frown lines extending from the corners of her mouth, sat Gail Griffin, the diminutive and stubborn 80-year-old Republican chair of the House committee on natural resources. Rusty Bowers, working as a lobbyist for the water company EPCOR, listened from the back of the room.

They studied documents and took turns asking questions, challenging proposals, seeking consensus on the Rubik's Cube of water. They had until the end of the year. Maybe it was the heat, but I began to think of Room 3175 as one of the places where the fate of our civilization would be decided. These people had to listen to one another, but that didn't guarantee any agreement. Developers remained unhappy with the governor's halt to building on groundwater in the Valley's edge towns, like Buckeye. In October, two women quit the council, complaining that farm interests were going unheard. They were replaced by a farmer named Ed Curry, who grew chili peppers down in Cochise County.

Cochise interested me. It is one of the most conservative counties in Arizona. Last November, two county supervisors were indicted for refusing to validate votes without a hand count and delaying certification of the 2022 midterms, which elected Hobbs governor over Kari Lake. Cochise was also the county most threatened by the depletion of groundwater. Its Willcox Basin had lost more than 1 trillion gallons since 1990, at least three times the amount of water restored by rain or snowmelt, and the water table was now below the reach of the average well. Cochise was where you saw a road sign that said EARTH FISSURES POSSIBLE.

The convergence of these two extremes—MAGA politics and disappearing water—made for unusual alignments in rural Arizona. As the Lions of Liberty told me at Turning Point's convention, water didn't divide strictly red and blue—the issue was more local. Rural groundwater in Arizona was left unregulated by the 1980 law, and around the state, some conservative county supervisors whose constituents' wells had gone dry were urging the legislature to impose rules. In some places, the crisis pitted homesteaders against large agribusinesses, or a retiree against a neighboring farmer, with Republicans on both sides. I sometimes thought the problem could be solved as long as Turning Point never hears about it.

Cochise County is a three-hour drive southeast from Phoenix. Its flat expanse of land ends at distant ranges made of rock formations in fantastic shapes. The Willcox Basin has a sparse population and little in the way of jobs other than farming. In the past few years, retirees and young pioneers looking to live

"We can't get nothin' done, because we got the far right over here scared of the far left. It's all this new sexual revolution of the transgender stuff. Country people deal with cows, bulls—we know better than all this crap. God didn't make us goofy."

off the grid have begun moving to Cochise. So have agricultural businesses—wineries, large pecan and pistachio growers from California, and Riverview, a giant Minnesota cattle operation with some 100,000 heifers, known locally as the Dairy. The Willcox Basin has no reservoirs or canals; almost all of the available water lies hundreds of feet below the dry ground. The Dairy drilled more than 100 wells, some 2,500 feet deep, to suck out groundwater and irrigate 40,000 acres of corn and wheat, heavy water-use crops, to raise the heifers before shipping them back north for milking. Cochise County simply provided the water, for free. Ferris predicted how the story would end: "The water will dry up and Riverview will leave town and take their cows and go. And all the people that love it down there because it's so gorgeous are going to run out of water."

Last July, a retired construction worker from Seattle named Traci Page, who had 40 acres near the Dairy, turned on her tap to wash the dishes and got a lukewarm brown stream. Her well had gone dry. In a panic, she called the Dairy and was offered a 3,000-gallon tank so she could replace her well with expensive hauled water. "Thanks," she said, "but will you please deepen my well? You're out here drilling these holes." Page's state representative was Gail Griffin, from the governor's advisory council—a devout believer in property rights and an adamant opponent of regulation. Griffin never replied to her appeals. Page ended up selling her tractor to cover part of the $16,000 it cost to have her well deepened.

"During this dry-up, I feel like I'm sprinting up a gravel hill and it's giving way under my feet. I can't get ahead," Page told me. "And this economy, and the corruption on both sides, and the corrupt corporations coming in here—can we just catch a break? Can you stop a minute so we can breathe?"

The sinking aquifer and relentless pumping by agribusiness led some locals to put an initiative on the ballot in 2022 that would have required the state to regulate groundwater in the Willcox Basin much as it did in the Phoenix area. The initiative set neighbor against neighbor, just like the water cutoff in Rio Verde, with rumors and falsehoods flying on Facebook and the Farm Bureau advertising heavily against it. A retired feed-store owner named Lloyd Glenn, whose well had dropped sharply, supported the initiative and found himself on the opposite side of most people he knew. "I guess I'm not a good Republican anymore," he told me.

"That's the thing—they've gone a bit radical," his wife, Lisa, a retired schoolteacher, said. "It's lent itself to the disbelief. We can't get the same information and facts." She added, "And Gail Griffin has not let anything come forward in 10 years. She shuts down legislation and is thick as thieves with the Farm Bureau. If the water goes, there will be no more life here."

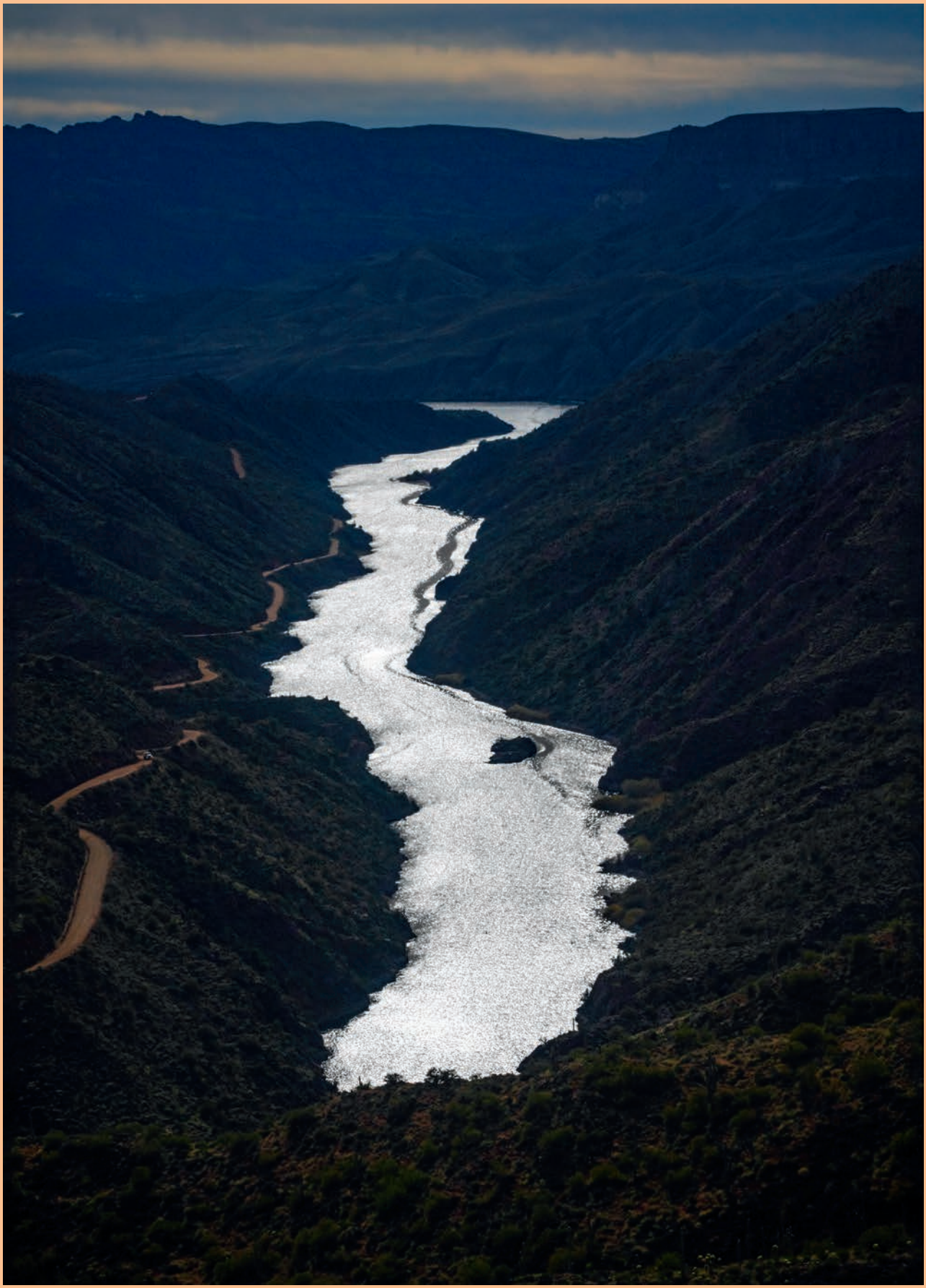
The initiative was overwhelmingly defeated. I talked with several farmers who argued that it was appropriate for an urbanizing area like the Valley but not for the hinterlands. One of them was Ed Curry.

His 2,000-acre farm has sat alongside Highway 191 for 43 years. Curry was 67, white-haired and nearly deaf in one ear, a religious conservative and an agricultural innovator. His farm produced 90 percent of the world's green-chili seed and experimented with new genetic strains all the time, including one that had signs of success in arresting Alzheimer's. To save water, Curry used drip irrigation and planted 300 acres of rosemary. He wanted to hand the farm down to his kids and grandkids, and that meant finding ways to use less water.

Curry was always hugging people and saying he loved them, and one person he loved was Gail Griffin. They had a special relationship that went back 30 years, to an incident at a community musical program in a local public school, where Curry told a story about Sir Isaac Newton that seemed to insist on the existence of a Creator. When the local "witchcraft group" called the American Civil Liberties Union on him, he told me, Griffin contacted a lawyer from the Christian Coalition in Washington and rescued him, and ever since then Curry had put up Griffin signs at election time. But he hated the labeling and demonizing by the right and the left. In Sunday school, he taught the kids that "the ills of society are because we've forgotten we belong to each other."

When the governor's water advisers asked Curry to join the council in November, he took the chance, and went up

A branch of the Salt River just south of the Theodore Roosevelt Dam, northeast of Phoenix



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to Phoenix to meet with the people in Room 3175 and try to work something out. As a farmer who practiced sustainability, who understood property rights but also obligations to your neighbors, he believed that he could reach both sides, including his old friend Griffin. "Guys, we can't get nothin' done, because we got the far right over here scared of the far left," Curry told the governor's people. "It's all this new sexual revolution of the transgender stuff. Country people deal with cows, bulls—we know better than all this crap. God didn't make us goofy. So you've got the far right taking this stand against the far left because they see 'em as way out there. And yet the far left says the far right are a bunch of bigots. None of that affects this water deal—none of it! Doesn't matter."

ON MY WAY BACK to Phoenix from Curry's farm, I stopped in the town of Willcox to see Peggy Judd, one of the county supervisors indicted for election interference. By then it was dark, and the front door opened into the small living room of a very small house decorated for Christmas. Judd sat on the sofa, a heavyset woman with flat hair and a tired smile. Her husband, Kit, who had bone cancer, lay under a blanket in a recliner, wearing a Trump cap and taking Vicodin. He was a mechanic and had once installed Curry's irrigation engines.

I sat beside Peggy on the sofa and we talked about water. She had opposed the initiative, but she had come to realize the urgency of acting to save the county's groundwater. Griffin, with whom she'd once been close, for a time stopped talking to her. "Representative Griffin wants water to be free. We can't fix that. She is a private-property-rights, real-estate-broker person, and her brain cannot be fixed."

In Arizona, I hoped for surprises that would break down the hardened lines of politics, and here was one. Gail Griffin, a traditional conservative, remained an immovable champion of the farm lobby, but Peggy, a MAGA diehard, wanted action on water because her neighbors' wells were going dry. In this one case, partisanship mattered less than facts. Disinformation and conspiratorial thinking had no answer for a dry well.

We talked for an hour, and the whole time, the threat of prison hung in the room unmentioned. Suddenly Peggy brought up politics. She had loved being a county supervisor, passing budgets, solving local problems—until COVID. "It wasn't political 'til then," she said, when mask mandates and vaccines set people against one another.

"COVID flipped us upside down," Kit said in a faint, throaty voice. "People don't know how to act anymore."

Peggy had driven with her daughter and grandkids to Washington for January 6, to let the president know how much they loved him and would miss him. It was a beautiful day of patriotic songs and prayer, but they got cold and headed for the Metro before things turned ugly. Then came the midterm election of 2022, when she ignored the Cochise County attorney's opinion and refused to validate the votes without a hand count. She told me that she just wanted to help her constituents get over their suspicion of the voting machines: "I'm surprised I'm being indicted, because I was election-denier lite."

"You may not be able to change the world," says Rusty Bowers, who lost his daughter to illness, his ranch to a wildfire, and his career to Republican extremists. "You may not be able to change a forest fire. But you can act. You can choose: *I will act now.*"

She didn't consider that she was part of a wider effort, going back to that beautiful, patriotic day in Washington, to abuse the public trust and take away her fellow citizens' votes. In three days she would be arraigned in Phoenix.

Peggy had received a lot of ugly messages. She played a voicemail that she'd saved on her phone. "You're a fat, ignorant cunt. You're a disgrace and embarrassment to this country," said a man's voice. "At least you're old as fuck and just look unhealthy as hell and hopefully nature wipes you off this planet soon. From a true American patriot. Worthless, ignorant scum of the planet … All because of you fucking scumbags on the right just don't understand that you're too psychologically weak and damaged to realize that you are acting against this country … Again, from a true American patriot, you fucking fat cunt."

Peggy wiped away tears. A week ago, she said, she had woken up at four in the morning and couldn't face another day as county chair, because of the comments that came her way at public meetings. Then she made some fudge and ate it off the spoon and felt better. She texted a woman out east who worked for Mike Lindell, the right-wing pillow salesman, who was going to help pay Peggy's legal bills. "I'm miserable," she told the woman. "Things are not

going to be okay. I don't even know if I can go to work today." But she made herself drive down to the county seat.

When she returned home that evening, a sheriff's sergeant was waiting at her house. Someone had reported comments Peggy made while waiting to be fingerprinted at the county jail. A suicide-prevention lady gave Peggy a little pamphlet that she now took with her everywhere. She had learned a lesson: If you feel like you're going to kill yourself, tell someone.

"I pray, I pray that Trump comes back," Kit moaned from the recliner. "There'll be nothing left of this country if we have to go through another bout of the Democrats." He had just two months to live.

"There, see, you want to know why we're divided?" Peggy said to me. "Because people that believe that believe *that*. And people that believe the opposite believe *that*. It's all in their heart."

I had the sense that she would have talked until midnight. But it was getting late, and I didn't want to feel any sorrier for her than I already did, so I drove back to Phoenix with a plate of Peggy's Christmas cookies.

11. Epilogue

"I'm going to do something weird," Rusty Bowers said. Seated at the wheel of his truck in his dirt driveway, he uttered a short prayer for our safety. Then we drove out of the Valley east into the Sierra Ancha mountains.

The fire that took his ranch and studio had burned over the escarpment and left behind the charred stumps of oak trees. The air tankers' slurry spray had just missed his house, and most of the nearby forest was gone. But a stand of ponderosa pines had survived, and the hillsides were already coming back green with manzanita shrubs and mountain mahogany. Up here, the Salt River was a narrow stream flowing through a red canyon. From the remains of the ranch, we climbed the switchbacks of a muddy road to almost 8,000 feet. On Aztec Peak, we could see across to the Superstition range and over a ridge down into Roosevelt Lake, cloud-covered, holding the water of the Salt River Project. The Valley that it fed was hidden from view.

It was just before Christmas, the start of the desert winter. A few weeks earlier, the governor's water council had released its recommendations: Where rural groundwater was disappearing, the state should regulate its use, while giving each local basin a say in the rules' design. Ed Curry, the chili farmer, considered this a reasonable approach, but he was unable to move Gail Griffin, who blocked the council's bill in her House committee and instead proposed a different bill that largely left the status quo in place. The logic of partisanship gave Griffin full Republican support, but Curry warned that she was losing touch with her constituents, including some farmers. "We're two friends in desperate disagreement about water," he told me. In February, 200 people—including Traci Page, whose well had gone dry—crowded a community meeting near Curry's farm. Many of those who spoke described themselves as conservatives, but they denounced the Dairy's irresponsible pumping, the state's inaction, and Griffin herself, who was in the room and appeared shaken by their anger. Groundwater continued to disappear much faster than it could be restored, but something was changing in people's minds, the wellsprings of democracy.

Peggy Judd's voicemail had reminded me of the abuse directed at Bowers from the other extreme. As he drove, I asked what he thought of her. "Zealously desirous to follow the cause, but not willfully desirous," he said, distinguishing between true believers like Judd and power-hungry manipulators, like Charlie Kirk, "cloaked in Christian virtue and 'We're going to save America.' And that is a very dangerous thing." He went on, "You will push her into the cell and then use her as a pawn for fundraising." Bowers believed that Satan seared consciences with hate like a hot iron until people became incapable of feeling goodness. He also believed that faith led to action, and action led to change—"even if it's just in your character. You may not be able to change the world. You may not be able to change a forest fire. But you can act. You can choose: *I will act now*."

Bowers wanted to show me a ranch that he was fantasizing about buying. We drove on a forested mountain road that ran along a stream and came to a metal barrier. On the other side, in an opening of pine trees, was a small meadow of yellow grass, an apple orchard, and a red cabin with a rusted roof and a windmill. In the sunlight, it looked like the setting of a fairy tale, beautiful and abandoned.

"Hellooo!" Bowers called three times, but no one answered.

He had an idea for what to do with the ranch if he bought it. He would build a camp for kids in the Valley—kids of all backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, but especially ones with hard lives. They would leave their phones behind and come up here in the mountains with proper chaperoning—no cussing or spitting—and learn how to make a bivouac, cook for themselves, and sit around the campfire and talk. The talking would be the main point. They would discuss water and land use, the environment, "all the things that could afflict us today." It would be a kind of training in civil discourse.

"Point being, division has to be bridged in order to keep us together as a country," Bowers said. "One at a time. That's why you get a little camp. Can I save all the starfish after a storm? No. But I can save this little starfish."

We got in the truck and started the drive back down to the Valley. It was late afternoon. We'd been alone in the mountains all day, and I'd forgotten about the 5 million people just west of us. It had been a relief to be away from them all—the strip malls, the air-conditioned traffic, the swimming-pool subdivisions, the half-built factories, the pavement people in the heat zone, COVID and January 6, the believers and grifters, the endless fights in empty language over elections and migrants and schools and everything else. But now I realized that I was ready to go back. That was our civilization down in the Valley, the only one we had. Better for it to be there than gone. *A*

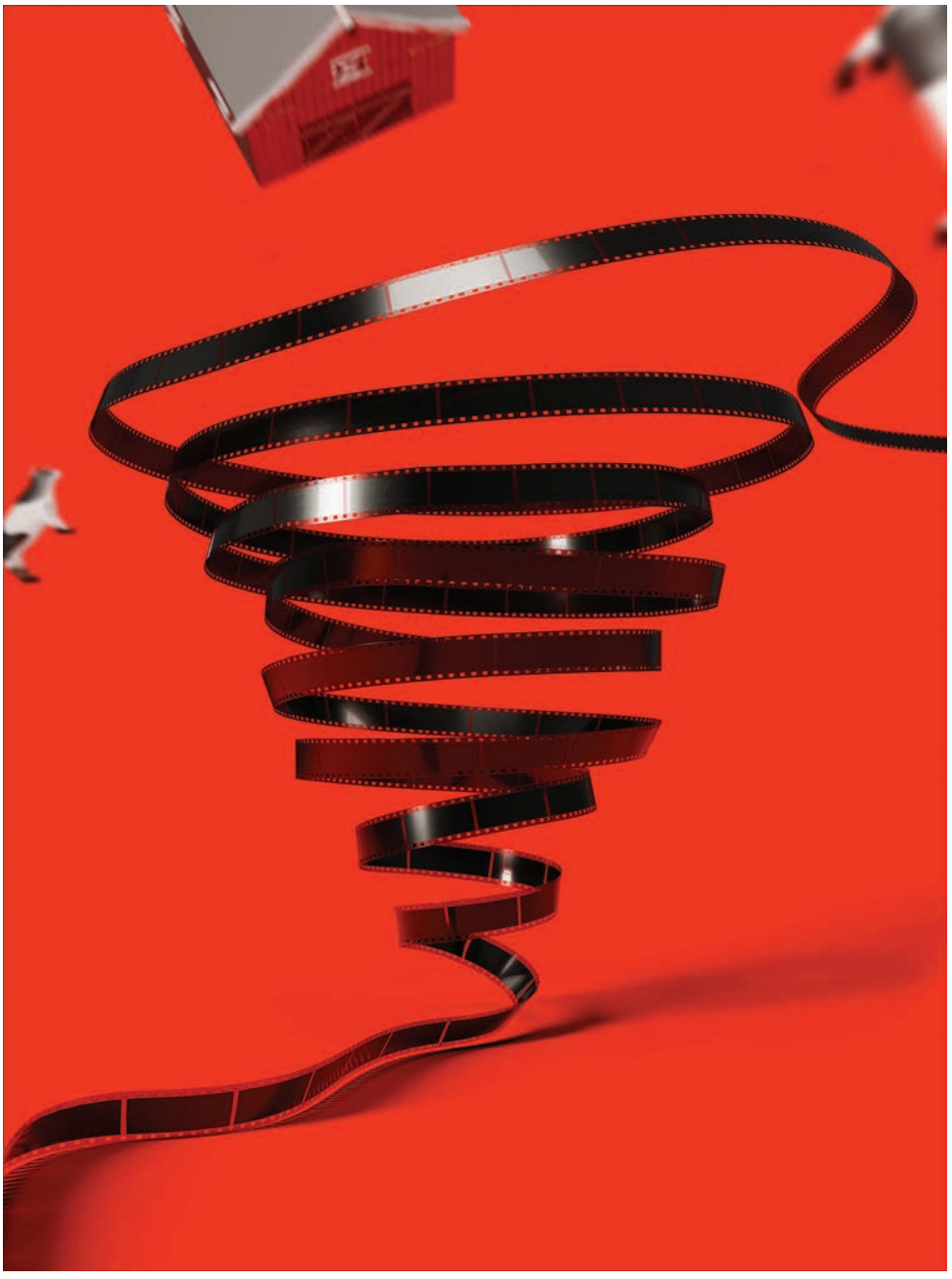
George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

OMNIVORE

Tornado Watch

How Lee Isaac Chung reimagined Twister, *one of the biggest climate-disaster thrillers of all time*

By Shirley Li



Lee Isaac Chung was a junior in high school in 1996 when he and his father walked into a theater in Fayetteville, Arkansas, to watch a movie about tornadoes. Chung was skeptical of the premise. *How could you make a whole movie about this?* he wondered. *If a tornado comes, you just run and hide.*

Throughout his childhood, when tornado season

ILLUSTRATION BY RICARDO REY

descended upon rural Arkansas, Chung would head outside to gaze at approaching storms. He found the buildup irresistible—the darkening skies, the shifting temperatures, the way the air itself seemed to change. "I would stay out there until it started raining," he told me recently. "The adults are grabbing all the stuff, and I'm just standing out there, like …" He demonstrated: neck craned upward, eyes open wide, arms outstretched as if ready to catch the clouds.

Generally, though, a tornado warning meant boredom more than thrills. The first time his family heeded one, they piled into his father's pickup truck at two in the morning, ready to leap out and duck into a ditch if a twister got too close. Waiting inside the truck, Chung fell asleep. The funnel never arrived. Hours later, he woke up and asked his sister if the whole experience had been a dream.

But that day in 1996, the movie *Twister* mesmerized him. He watched a vortex tear apart a drive-in theater and a cow get lifted into the air, mooing mournfully as it soared. More than anything, Chung was compelled by the movie's storm-chaser heroes. Like his boyhood self, they were awestruck by the uncontrollable forces before them. Unlike his family, they rushed toward the danger.

Twister captivated America, too. It was the second-highest-grossing movie of the year (behind *Independence Day*) and helped launch a series of climate-centric movies—*The Perfect Storm*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *2012*—that swallowed fishing boats, leveled cities, and demolished landmarks.

Directed by Jan de Bont, who'd previously made the thriller *Speed*, *Twister* arrived in the golden days of CGI: Dinosaurs had been resurrected in *Jurassic Park* (1993), and one year after *Twister*, a massive ocean liner would splinter into the sea in *Titanic*. De Bont made the most of the rapidly improving digital tools, while also relying on the analog special effects of his earlier career. "When things fell from the sky, there were real things falling from a helicopter," de Bont told an interviewer last summer. "If you film a car escaping a tornado in a hailstorm, it was real ice that came at us. It's a movie that cannot be remade." Perhaps not, but nearly three decades after *Twister*'s release, the film is getting an update called *Twisters*—and Lee Isaac Chung is directing it.

Chung is an unlikely choice for the job. His previous movies have mostly been quiet character studies. In his debut feature, 2007's *Munyurangabo*, two friends travel across Rwanda years after the genocide there. Without depicting the violence in their families' past, Chung traces how unspoken pain frays their friendship. Despite stellar reviews—Roger Ebert called *Munyurangabo* a "masterpiece"—what followed was a decade of making micro-budget indie movies. Then, in 2018, Chung accepted a job teaching filmmaking, believing that his time behind the camera was coming to an end. But first he wrote one more screenplay, in which he set out to tackle "the thing that matters to me the most": the story of how his parents, South Korean immigrants, built a home in a place they struggled to fully understand.

Minari (2020) is based on Chung's childhood in the 1980s, when his father settled their family in Arkansas to start a farm. The movie, which ends in a devastating fire that nearly destroys the livelihood the family has worked so hard to build, is a delicate portrait of the sometimes bitter realities of chasing the American dream. It was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, and Chung was nominated for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay.

Chung recognizes how bizarre it must seem that his follow-up project is *Twisters*. He remembers seeing online commenters wondering what he could possibly get from taking on such popcorn fare, aside from a sizable paycheck. But his decision to make *Twisters* is a surprise, he told me, only to people who haven't seen his work. "You know," he said, smiling, "*Minari* is like a disaster movie, but on a smaller scale."

Chung was compelled by Twister*'s storm-chaser heroes. Like his boyhood self, they were awestruck by the uncontrollable forces before them.*

IN THE ORIGINAL *Twister*, Jo Harding (played by Helen Hunt) is a professor who reunites with her estranged meteorologist husband, Bill (Bill Paxton), to test out his prototype for a new tornado-data-gathering device on a uniquely powerful cyclone. Part of the movie's appeal is the infectious camaraderie of its ragtag crew of storm chasers (including two played by Philip Seymour Hoffman and Alan Ruck). But *Twister* is a thriller, not a character study—backstory and dialogue are mostly in service to the action.

To get the job directing *Twisters*, Chung had to pitch his vision for the film to its producers, including one of his childhood heroes: Steven Spielberg. Chung explained that he imagined the movie as something more than a frenetic natural-disaster story. To him, the original *Twister* was a comedy of remarriage between Hunt's and Paxton's characters; he wanted *Twisters* to draw its own tension (and occasional levity) from the shifting interpersonal dynamics at its center.

The new movie centers on Kate (Daisy Edgar-Jones), a meteorologist traumatized by a past brush with a particularly vicious tornado. When she returns to Oklahoma to help a former classmate, Javi (Anthony Ramos), on a mission to plant data-tracking radar devices near tornadoes, she struggles to overcome her fear of the storms that are now her life's work. Little by little, her bond with Javi and her evolving friendship with Javi's rival storm chaser, Tyler (Glen Powell), help her rediscover her purpose.

Lee Isaac Chung in May 2024

"The twisters are there to challenge the characters, drawing out their fears and testing their courage," Spielberg told me in an email. "Isaac and I talked about the power of these storms as background for the characters to explore their relationships."

Of course, the movie only works if it also delivers the pulse-quickening action of the original, a style of directing that Chung had to learn. To prepare, he studied how action-film directors he admired—including de Bont and *Top Gun*'s Tony Scott—used long lenses and shaky camerawork to heighten the "pure energy and intensity" of their set pieces.

Chung understood, too, that a movie about tornadoes would land differently in 2024 than in 1996. Although *Twisters* is far from a climate-change polemic, Chung, who majored in ecology and evolutionary biology at Yale, sought to base his film in an atmosphere of heightened anxiety about extreme weather. Kate's mother (Maura Tierney), a hard-bitten farmer, is convinced that there are more tornado outbreaks than ever before. Chung incorporated actual climate science as well, foregrounding new technologies that have emerged alongside the global rise in extreme-weather events. Javi's mission to create three-dimensional maps of tornado structures using radar data, for instance, is based on a real initiative to improve weather-forecasting models.

One morning in April, I visited Chung at his office in Los Angeles, where he was editing the movie. In the hallway hung a poster displaying the Enhanced Fujita scale, which measures a tornado's intensity from EF0 to EF5—EF5 being, as any *Twister* fan knows, the kind that rips telephone poles from the ground and sends tractors hurtling through the air. With the film's release date approaching, the staff had added a magnet reading WE ARE HERE to the chart as a way to track their collective stress level. When Chung and I walked by the poster, he slid the magnet a smidge closer to EF0. It was a tranquil day.

The making of *Twisters* was less serene. Though the funnels themselves would be inserted digitally, Chung pushed to film in Oklahoma so he could shoot overcast skies during tornado season. But this meant that actual tornadoes caused frequent delays, forcing cast and crew to halt production and hunker down until a storm passed.

And then, two months into the shoot, Chung faced a personal tragedy: His father died suddenly. He was devastated; he'd chosen to make *Twisters* in part because his father had loved the original. The Hollywood strikes started soon after his father's death, giving Chung time to mourn. When he returned to set, he found it helpful to carve out moments to pray—for his family, and for perspective on the daily challenges of filmmaking. He'd grown up religious, attending church regularly, and he took solace in prayer. "It crystallized for me on *Twisters* that I had to rely on faith a lot more," Chung said. "I do feel like I surrender to something much bigger than me."

The more tumultuous things became on set, the more Chung found he had to let go. As Steven Yeun, who played the patriarch in *Minari*, told me, Chung "is someone who has control and is willing to relinquish control at the same time."

IN SOME WAYS, Chung's movie is a classic thriller in the *Twister* mold. It's undeniably fun, with harrowing, windswept action scenes. Chung channeled de Bont in mixing computer animation and practical effects—including pelting actors with real ice—to re-create the visceral feel of the original. But he was also at pains to make his own movie. He told me he had to dissuade his crew from inserting distracting

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHILIP CHEUNG FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Steven Yeun (*left*) in *Minari*, 2020

Above: Bill Paxton and Helen Hunt in *Twister*, 1996. *Below:* Daisy Edgar-Jones, Anthony Ramos, and Glen Powell in *Twisters*, 2024.

JOSH ETHAN JOHNSON / COURTESY OF A24; EVERETT COLLECTION; MELINDA SUE GORDON / UNIVERSAL PICTURES / WARNER BROS. PICTURES & AMBLIN ENTERTAINMENT

callbacks to the old film. "Everybody has been trying to sneak a cow into this movie, and I've been systematically removing them," he said with a laugh. He kept just one blink-and-you'll-miss-it shot of flying livestock for hard-core fans to find.

The final film feels distinctly Chung's. *Twisters* dramatizes the turbulence of his characters' relationships, and their individual arcs of self-discovery, as much as the building storms. Daisy Edgar-Jones recalled how much thought Chung put into Kate's trajectory—his determination, "amongst all of the kind of fun and the thrill, to also find that really human story of a person who's grieving and who's dealing with PTSD and heartbreak." On-screen, she conveys an unusual vulnerability and depth for a thriller heroine.

Chung also gives the movie a vivid sense of place. He pushed to stage scenes on a farm and at a rodeo, spaces he remembered from his youth. After leaving Arkansas, Chung had discovered how often people misunderstand rural America; he wanted to depict the toughness and resilience he'd seen during his childhood, "to get this right for back home." In one scene, Glen Powell told me, Chung asked him to say the word *home* as if his character, a researcher and YouTuber who frequently drives straight into the middle of storms to livestream the chaos, was surprised by how much the idea meant to him. "It became the seed I built a lot of my character off of," Powell said. The movie, he added, "is really about pride in this place, pride that you stay in a place in which danger can fall from the sky at any point."

Before a screening at the end of April, Chung asked the sound team to incorporate more seasonal bug noises—crickets, grasshoppers—into a sequence of Kate driving home to her mother's farm. As the new mix played, Chung felt transported to his childhood as well as to the moment when he'd filmed the scene last summer. It had been his father's birthday, he told me, and they'd spoken on the phone. Watching the scene again, he was hit by a wave of emotion. "I just lost it while I was watching the movie, and I kind of felt like, *Well, I needed that*," he said. "I needed to realize how personal this thing is to me."

Around the postproduction offices, Chung has sketched several doodles of the film's characters, peeking out cheerfully from the corners of whiteboards. On the wall in one office, his 10-year-old daughter added her own stick figure: Chung admiring a tornado, a grin stretching across his face. In her rendering of her father, his arms are outstretched, as if he's about to catch the twister himself. *A*

Shirley Li is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

BOOKS

Kafka's Not Supposed to Make Sense

"The incomprehensible," he explained, "is incomprehensible."

By Judith Shulevitz

The rabbis of the Talmud taught in parables, fanciful tales meant to illustrate moral principles. *To what may a parable be compared?* one of them once asked, that being the form of most rabbinical questions. *To a cheap candle used by a king to find a gold coin. With just one modest anecdote, you may fathom the Torah!*

Jesus taught in parables too—which is not surprising, given that he was also a rabbi of sorts. *Why do you speak to the people in parables?* his disciples ask him in Matthew 13:10–17, after he has just preached one to large crowds. *Because they don't understand them*, he responds, offering one of the most mystifying explanations in the Gospels: *Seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear*. But you disciples, Jesus says, addressing his loyal followers, rank among the initiated and know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, so you do understand

ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIELA PESQUEIRA

my parables, and can learn from them: *To he who has, more will be given, but from he who has not, more will be taken.*

Franz Kafka wasn't a rabbi, exactly, but he is the high priest of 20th-century literature, and he also wrote in parables. In a brief one called "On Parables," he asks, in effect, what they're good for. Why do sages feel obliged to illustrate their principles with tales, requiring their listeners to, as he puts it, "go over" to another world? Kafka answers: The sages don't mean that we should go to "some actual place," but rather to "some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the least." In short, even the sage can't articulate the meaning of his own parables, and so they're useless to us. "All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible."

The rabbis say that parables teach Torah. Jesus says that only the seeker for truth can understand parables. Kafka says no one can. It's a strange claim for a storyteller to make. To what may Kafka's pessimism be compared? To his parable "An Imperial Message." A dying emperor entrusts a messenger with a message meant for you and you alone. The man is strong; he clears a path easily through the gathered throng. But the crowds and the courtyards multiply: "He is still pressing through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he prevail; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would have been gained: he would have to fight his way down the steps; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would be gained." And so it goes for thousands of years. And you? You "sit at your window and dream" of the message that never comes.

The rabbis say that parables teach Torah. Jesus says that only the seeker for truth can understand parables. Kafka says no one can.

KAFKA DIED a century ago this year at the age of 40, and since then a mighty industry has arisen to deliver all of the messages that Kafka said would never be delivered. Interpretation requires context, and so the enigmatic missives that he sent from his alternate universe are always being claimed by one tradition or other. Many German writers, including Thomas Mann, greatly admired Kafka's prose; Kurt Tucholsky, Weimar Germany's leading political commentator and cultural critic, called it "the best classical German of our time." This was a high honor for a Czech writer, and the German Literature Archive fought to acquire a trove of his manuscripts on the grounds that he was a great German writer. Kafka's first English-language translators, Edwin and Willa Muir, theologized him as a Christian pilgrim in search of salvation. John Updike praised him for escaping narrow sectarianism: "Kafka, however unmistakable the ethnic source of his 'liveliness' and alienation, avoided Jewish parochialism." Nonsense, Cynthia Ozick retorted: "Nothing could be more wrong-headed than this parched Protestant misapprehension of Mitteleuropa's tormented Jewish psyche."

On the whole, Ozick is right. Kafka couldn't have avoided his Jewish parochialism had he wanted to, which he didn't. The bourgeois Jewish Prague he was born into aspired to assimilation but couldn't pull it off, defeated by a rising roar of Czech anti-Semitism. His parents never quashed the traces of their shtetl childhood. Kafka himself had no formal Jewish education, but in his 20s, he developed a passion for Jewish culture. He embraced Yiddish theater, moved in a circle of Zionist intellectuals, steeped himself in Jewish classical texts—Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah—and Hasidic folklore. By the end of his life, he had a decent command of Hebrew.

But Ozick is also wrong. Kafka is universalist in his particularism. His themes—alienation, shame, exile, tradition and the lack thereof, revelation and the lack thereof, the crushing power of the law—are both very Jewish and post-theological, the leitmotifs of our time. Kafka's stories are Jewish the way the Old Testament is Jewish. That is, it's also Christian, and it speaks even more generally to the human condition, and to a great deal besides that. Both Kafka and the Bible are inexhaustible sources of meaning because they overflow any box we build around them. They exist on a plane of Western consciousness so formative of ours today that they seem to come from everywhere and nowhere.

As it happens, Kafka writes in a biblical manner. The Hebrew Bible's authors exerted a subtractive force on him. His protagonists are not flat, exactly, but not round, either. Like Joseph, Moses, the patriarchs and matriarchs, they don't engage in introspection, which is not to say that they lack interiority, just that we don't hear about it. And Kafka starves his prose until it is as stark as scripture. He uses a limited vocabulary, abstains from metaphor, and stints on the random details that create what the literary theorist Roland Barthes called the "reality effect."

Kafka's friend Max Brod once regaled him with the overwrought language of a supernatural tale he was reading, and he replied with a line of poetry that expressed his idea of beauty: "The smell of wet stones in a hallway." (That's from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "The Conversation About Poems," 1903.) Over the years, Kafka's settings became ever more generic and abstract—figurative deserts, as it were. So when Kafka homes in on some striking particular, such as the fleas on the doorkeeper's collar in the story "Before the Law," the absence of other details makes that one radiant with meaning.

A curious feature of Kafka's prose is that, pared down though its lexicon may be, it resists translation. There's a good reason for that. Dictionaries supply more definitions for basic words than for those of greater complexity because simpler ones are the roots of vast family trees of words; plain language signifies promiscuously. How, as a translator, do you convey a multitude of implications as well as a narrow contextual meaning at the same time?

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera gave a famously dyspeptic answer to that question: The translator should translate humbly. In a 1993 essay, he berates those who try to liven up Kafka's deceptively dull, repetitive prose to conform to conventions of literary excellence. "Every author of some value *transgresses* against 'good style' and in that transgression lies the originality (and hence the raison d'être) of his art," Kundera writes. Translators don't want to sound colorless, so they're willfully colorful; Kundera disdainfully calls this "synonymizing."

MARK HARMAN, who has translated Kafka's *Amerika: The Missing Person*, *The Castle*, and now a new collection of selected stories, does not synonymize. The most consequential simplification in the volume is a small fix. He changes the title of the novella we know as *The Metamorphosis* to *The Transformation*, a literal translation of the German title *Die Verwandlung*. *Transformation* is one of the story's important repetitions. Kafka uses it again in the very first sentence: "One morning when Gregor Samsa awoke in his bed from restless dreams he found himself transformed into a monstrous insect."

Putting *transformation* back into the title opens up new dimensions in the story—new, that is, to English-language readers. *Metamorphosis* doesn't just mean change; it means a change in form or structure. It carries an echo of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose characters undergo bodily transmutations into things, animals, and plants. By getting rid of the morphological implication, Harman reveals less concrete transformations. Before Gregor Samsa woke up as a beetle-like creature, he supported his family, which must now become self-sufficient because he can no longer work. His sweet, sheltered sister gets a job at a shop and gains the confidence to adopt a forceful tone with her parents. His father, a defeated man since his business failed, goes to work as a factotum in a bank, wearing a blue uniform with gold buttons. The uniform instills in him a quasi-military pride. The stronger the family gets, the more it neglects the monstrous Gregor; his sister grows actively hostile toward him. As Gregor's situation declines, the family's improves. There is not one transformation, but many.

SELECTED STORIES

Franz Kafka, translated by Mark Harman

BELKNAP PRESS

The unspecificity of *transformation* also retains a crucial mystery: What exactly does Gregor turn into? Kafka insisted that the question go unanswered. Fearing that an illustrator might propose to draw Gregor, Kafka wrote to his publisher, "Not that, please not that! … The insect itself cannot be depicted. It cannot even be shown from a distance." If the title no longer tells us that Gregor has taken a new shape, we can't be sure that he really has, as opposed to, say, that he is suffering a hallucinatory dysmorphia or the misfortune of having been thrust into some other, abhorrent, hybrid reality. Perhaps we all have an insect nature. We're talking about an animal fable here.

Another challenge for a translator is *Ungeziefer*, the unrepresentable creature that Gregor turns into. How to convey the correct shade of meaning, and set up a later ironic reversal? *Ungeziefer* means "vermin." That's an insult, not an entomological term. It refers to any living thing deemed loathsome—bugs, yes, but also mice (which terrified Kafka) and people. Some German Bibles use *Ungeziefer* for the creatures that swarm Pharaoh's palace during the fourth plague. Hitler used it for Jews. (Kafka was mercifully dead by then.) Various translators have used *vermin*—"a monstrous vermin," "some sort of monstrous vermin"—but somehow the phrase is always awkward. The difficulty, in English, is that *vermin* is primarily a collective noun; you can't really say that Gregor woke up as "a vermin."

Harman offers "insect," because Kafka called Gregor that in his letter to his publisher. *Insect* is vague but not vague enough; it leaves out the element of revulsion and makes the new Gregor too identifiable. The poet and translator Michael Hofmann settled on "cockroach"—a mistake. Vladimir Nabokov, who knew his arthropods, demonstrated conclusively that Gregor could not have been a cockroach: "A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small." There is no perfect solution.

The ironic reversal that *vermin* makes possible hinges on repetitions of *Zischen*, "hiss." It first appears on the day of Gregor's transformation. His father, enraged that the *Ungeziefer* has come out of his room, drives him back into it with a walking stick and the loud hisses, *Zischlaute*, of a wild man or beast, *ein Wilder*—the *wild* in *Wilder* suggesting something feral, excluded from human society. The horrible, insistent hissing—variations on *Zischen* occur twice more in the scene—terrifies Gregor. Weeks later, in acute pain from an apple lodged in his back after his father threw it at him, Gregor grows furious at his family, which is squabbling violently, and hisses loudly at them. (They ignore him.) That Gregor is

now hissing loudly tells us that he has been reduced to his father's level. He has become *ein Wilder* too. And that raises the most important question in the novella: Who was the *Ungeziefer* all along—Gregor or his father?

Repetitions like *hiss* and *transform* are good examples of a biblical technique written about extensively by two of Kafka's contemporaries, the great Jewish philosophers Martin Buber (Kafka's friend) and Franz Rosenzweig, who rendered the Hebrew Bible into a beautifully Hebraized German. Their theory of biblical style turned on the notion of key words that were repeated, with variation, throughout a scene or across a book; when strung together, these form the basis of a "higher meaning," as Buber put it. They must be translated very carefully, according to the philosophers, because they effectively serve as conduits from the surface of the text to a subterranean narrative, often with important spiritual undertones. Miss one, and you may miss the whole story.

Kafka's best-known parable is probably "Before the Law," which appears in *The Trial* but is sometimes also published as a stand-alone story. Harman illustrates the importance of key words—this time by negative example. Here, Harman uses the same word throughout when he should have noted a very subtle shift at the end. A doorkeeper stands before the law. A man from the country comes and asks to enter. Harman translates the request as one for "admission," but the German word, *Eintritt*, is more neutral than that. It means "entry"—literally, a stepping-into. *Eintritt* does not anticipate the need for the doorkeeper's explicit permission. But the doorkeeper says no, he cannot go in.

The man importunes the doorkeeper again and again. The years go by, and the man is on the verge of death. Just before he dies, he asks the doorkeeper one last question: "Everyone strives towards the law … How is it that during those many years no one except for me requested admission?" Harman's "admission" is now a translation of *Einlass*, and a correct one: *Einlass* does indeed convey the sense of being let in, admitted, by someone—the doorkeeper in this case. In other words, a straightforward request to enter has degenerated into an abject plea for permission. By failing to register the slight yet telling shift from *entry* to *admission*, Harman glosses over the debasement of the man's spiritual condition.

The doorkeeper then answers the man's question with one of the most memorable paradoxes in literary history: "Nobody else could be admitted here since this entrance was intended for you alone. I shall go now and close it." If the entrance was always meant to be his, does this mean that he had never needed to ask to enter in the first place, let alone beg for permission? One could dream up endless interpretations; in *The Trial*, the parable occasions a confounding display of exegetical prowess by a priest. One thing we know for sure, however, is that we will never know for sure. The messenger never arrives. The door slams. As the cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote in an essay on Kafka, "His parables are never exhausted by what is explainable; on the contrary, he took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings."

So is God evil? a friend asked Kafka. Not at all, Kafka said. He just has bad moods.

IT WOULD BE FOOLISH to claim that Kafka learned his metaphysical wordplay from Jewish texts alone. He read widely: Gustave Flaubert, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He admired the understated prose of Anton Chekhov and Heinrich von Kleist. He read literary magazines that published cutting-edge work, too. Still, his regular reading of the Bible—nightly, during some periods of his life—contributed a laconic quality to his classical prose that doesn't make him anachronistic; it makes him original. From 1912 to 1924, when other modernist writers were embracing Freud, and James Joyce was experimenting with stream of consciousness, Kafka was choosing surface over depth psychology. Or, you might say, he was keeping the same tactful distance from his characters as the biblical narrator did from his.

Jews and Christians are People of the Book, preoccupied with narrative and language—with the truths they provide access to, the conversation with God they facilitate. By the time Kafka began to reach for his tradition, however, truth and God had been swamped by radical doubt. The conversation was no longer to be had. To ask was to be denied an answer: The door is closed.

Benjamin recounts a famous anecdote told by Max Brod: Kafka said to him that people are "nihilist thoughts that came into God's head." So is God evil? Brod asked. Not at all, Kafka said. He just has bad moods. Still, is there no hope outside this world? Kafka smiled and offered up another of his paradoxes: "Plenty of hope—for God, an infinite amount of hope—only not for us." In other words, we're on our own—though at least we have Kafka to tell us that. He may have turned a literary form that once bound a people to their God into a notice of his absence, but remarking on God's absence is also a way of making him present. And we have the parables. That's not hope, exactly, but it's not nothing. *A*

Judith Shulevitz, a contributing writer at The Atlantic, *is the author of* The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time.

BOOKS

The Industry That Ate America

The long and lurid history of lobbying

By Franklin Foer

On March 18, news broke that Donald Trump intended to restore the disgraced lobbyist Paul Manafort to the ranks of his campaign advisers. In any other moral universe, this would have been an unimaginable rehabilitation. Back in 2016, as revelations about Manafort's work on behalf of pro-Kremlin politicians in Ukraine began appearing in the press, even Trump considered him a figure so toxic that he forced him to resign as chair of his campaign. Two years later, Manafort was locked up in federal prison on charges of tax evasion and money laundering, among other transgressions. His was one of the most precipitous falls in the history of Washington.

But at this stage in that history, it's not remotely shocking to learn that the revolving door continues to turn. By the end of Trump's term, Manafort had already won a presidential pardon. His unwillingness to cooperate with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation had earned him Trump's unstinting admiration: "Such respect for a brave man," he tweeted. Now it seemed that Manafort's loyalty would be rewarded with the lobbyist's most valuable tool: the perception of access, at an opportune moment.

In early May, under growing media scrutiny for international consulting work that he'd reportedly been involved in after his pardon, Manafort said that he would "stick to the sidelines," playing a less visible role in supporting Trump. (He'd recently been in Milwaukee, part of meetings about this summer's Republican National Convention programming.) But if Trump wins the election, Manafort won't need 2024 campaign work officially on his résumé to convince corporations and foreign regimes that he can bend U.S. policy on their behalf—and he and his ilk will be able to follow through on such pledges with unimpeded ease. A second Trump term would mark the culmination of the story chronicled by the brothers Luke and Brody Mullins, a pair of energetic reporters, in their absorbing new book, *The Wolves of K Street: The Secret History of How Big Money Took Over Big Government.*

As Trump dreams about governing a second time, he and his inner circle have declared their intention to purge what they

ILLUSTRATION BY PABLO DELCAN

call the "deep state": the civil service that they regard as one of the greatest obstacles to the realization of Trump's agenda. What they don't say is that the definition of the deep state—an entrenched force that wields power regardless of the administration in the White House—now fits the business of lobbying better than it does the faceless bureaucracy. This is the deep state, should Trump emerge the victor in the fall, that stands to achieve near-total domination of public power.

LOBBYING, LIKE Hollywood and Silicon Valley, is a quintessentially American industry. The sector took root along the K Street corridor of gleaming glass-and-steel buildings in downtown D.C. during the 1970s. Though accurately capturing the scale of its growth is hard, a study by George Mason University's Stephen S. Fuller Institute reported that, in 2016, the "advocacy cluster" employed more than 117,000 workers in metropolitan Washington (that's more than the population of Manchester, New Hampshire). In theory, lobbying is a constitutionally protected form of redressing grievances. Businesses have every right to argue their case in front of government officials whose policies affect their industries. In practice, lobbying has become a pernicious force in national life, courtesy of corporate America, which hugely outspends other constituencies—labor unions, consumer and environmental groups—on an enterprise now dedicated to honing ever more sophisticated methods of shaping public opinion in service of its own ends.

The forerunners of the modern lobbyist were Tommy "The Cork" Corcoran, a member of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's brain trust, and Clark Clifford, who ran President Harry Truman's poker games. Both men left jobs in government to become freelance fixers, working on behalf of corporate behemoths (the United Fruit Company, for example, and General Electric). Mystique was essential to their method. Corcoran kept his name out of the phone book and off his office door. If a company was bothered by a nettlesome bureaucrat—or wanted help overthrowing a hostile Central American government—they were the men ready to pick up the phone and make it so.

But Corcoran and Clifford were anomalous figures. In the late '60s, only about 60 registered lobbyists were working in Washington. Most businesses, during the decades of postwar prosperity, didn't see the point in hiring that sort of help. Management was at peace with labor. Corporations paid their taxes, while reaping ample profits. Then along came Ralph Nader, a young Harvard Law School graduate who ignited the modern consumer movement. By dint of his fervent advocacy, he managed to rally Congress to pass the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act in 1966, which led automakers to install headrests and shatter-resistant windshields. Nader, a scrappy upstart, single-handedly outmaneuvered the great General Motors.

In the late '60s, only about 60 registered lobbyists were working in Washington. Most businesses, during the decades of postwar prosperity, didn't see the point in hiring that sort of help.

Slow to register an emerging threat, corporate America sat complacently on the sidelines while an expansive new regulatory state emerged, posing a potential obstacle to business imperatives: The Environmental Protection Agency was established in 1970, followed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration the next year, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1972. Meanwhile, in 1971, a lawyer in Richmond, Virginia, named Lewis Powell urged a counterrevolution, writing a memo that called on the corporate world to build the infrastructure that would cultivate pro-business intellectuals and amass political power to defend the free market. Later that year, Richard Nixon named him to the Supreme Court.

A figure from outside the conservative orbit became the ground commander of the corporate cause in the capital. Tommy Boggs was the son of the legendary Hale Boggs, a Democratic congressman from Louisiana. The Great Society was, in no small measure, Hale's legislative handiwork, and Washington was in Tommy's blood. (As a boy, he ran House Speaker Sam Rayburn's private elevator in the Capitol.) He saw how he could become a successor to Corcoran and Clifford, but on a far grander scale. After a failed run for Congress in 1970, he devoted himself to expanding the lobbying firm Patton Boggs.

Boggs mobilized a grand corporate alliance (including television networks, advertising agencies, and food conglomerates) to roll back the liberal state—and then ferociously used his connections on his clients' behalf. M&M's and Milky Way (he was working for the Mars candy company) were among the beneficiaries of a major victory. Jimmy Carter's Federal Trade Commission had threatened to regulate the advertising of candy and sugar-heavy cereals directed at kids. Boggs sent the deputy editor of *The Washington Post*'s editorial page, Meg Greenfield, material about the horrors of this regulation. The newspaper then published an editorial with the memorable headline "The FTC as National Nanny." Senators thundered against the absurdity of the new vigilance. The FTC abandoned its plans.

Boggs ignited not just a revolution in American government, but a cultural transformation of Washington. Before his ascent, patricians with boarding-school pedigrees sat atop the city's social hierarchy, disdainful of pecuniary interests and the ostentatious flaunting of wealth. Boggs, very highly paid to work his wonders, rubbed his success in Washington's face. He would cruise around town in one of the firm's fleet of luxury cars with a brick-size mobile phone plastered to his face, a cigar dangling from his mouth.

THE STORY that unfolds in *The Wolves of K Street* features an ironic twist: Liberal activists figured out how to mobilize the public to care about important issues and how to inspire them to become democratically engaged. K Street fixers saw this success, then adapted the tactics to serve the interests of corporations. In the Mullinses' narrative, this evolution found its embodiment in Tony Podesta. An activist who came of age during the anti-war movement of the 1960s and a veteran of George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign, Podesta made his name running the TV producer Norman Lear's group People for the American Way, a progressive counterweight to Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. In 1987, Podesta helped rally the left to sink Robert Bork, Ronald Reagan's Supreme Court nominee.

Not long after, Podesta left the world of public-interest advocacy and began to sell his expertise—at first primarily to liberal groups, then almost exclusively to businesses. Using the techniques he learned while working with Lear, he specialized in deploying celebrity figures to influence public attitudes, counting on citizen sentiment to in turn sway politicians. To block the FDA from regulating vitamins in 1993 (his client was a group of dietary-supplement manufacturers), he cut an ad with the actor Mel Gibson that depicted a SWAT team busting him at home for possessing vitamin C. "Call the U.S. Senate and tell them that you want to take your vitamins in peace," Gibson said in a voice-over.

With stunning speed, Podesta—a bon vivant who went on to amass one of Washington's most impressive private collections of contemporary art—had gone from excelling in impassioned advocacy to becoming promiscuous in his choice of client. To fund his lifestyle, the Mullinses write, he helped Lockheed Martin win approval of the sale of F-16s to Pakistan, even though the Indian government, another client of the Podesta Group, opposed the deal. He represented the tire manufacturer Michelin and its competitor Pirelli. Over the objections of his staff, he joined forces with Paul Manafort to polish the image of Viktor Yanukovych, the corrupt pro-Kremlin politician who ruled Ukraine until a revolution ousted him in 2014.

As K Street boomed, the Mullinses show, its denizens remade American life well beyond Washington culture. They report that the firm Black, Manafort, Stone, and Kelly, also a central player in their book, aided the Australian magnate Rupert Murdoch in overcoming regulatory obstacles and extending his corrosive media empire in the United States. In the '80s, the firm became masters at deregulating industries and securing tax breaks for the powerful—$130 million for Bethlehem Steel, $58 million for Chrysler, $38 million for Johnson & Johnson—helping to usher in an age of corporate impunity and gaping inequality.

THE WOLVES OF K STREET: THE SECRET HISTORY OF HOW BIG MONEY TOOK OVER BIG GOVERNMENT

Brody Mullins and Luke Mullins

SIMON & SCHUSTER

THE WOLVES OF K STREET is full of cautionary tales about the normalization of corruption. Revolving-door practices—leaving government jobs and parlaying insider connections into lucrative lobbying work—became part of the system. Meanwhile, the culture fueled fraudulent self-aggrandizing of the sort on lurid display in the sad case of a relatively fringe figure named Evan Morris. A kid from Queens who first arrived in town as a college intern in the Clinton White House, he quickly grasped that K Street represented the city's best path to power and wealth. He scored a coveted job at Tommy Boggs's firm while in law school, arriving just as lobbyists became essential cogs in a whole new realm: the machinery of electioneering.

The McCain-Feingold Act of 2002—campaign-finance legislation intended to wean the political system off big donors—prevented corporations and individuals from writing massive checks to political parties. Unable to rely as heavily on big donors, campaigns were happy to outsource to lobbyists the arduous job of rounding up smaller contributions from the wealthy: Lobbyists became "bundlers," in fundraising parlance. As a 20-something, Morris proved to be one of the Democratic Party's most exuberant solicitors, promising donors VIP access to events that he couldn't provide, or intimating that he was asking on behalf of Boggs himself, which he wasn't. Despite his relative inexperience, he managed to schmooze with the likes of Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton.

He went on to work for Roche, a Swiss pharmaceutical giant, and hatched a kind of campaign that he described as "black ops." Amid the bird-flu outbreak of 2005, the Mullinses write, he began urging the government to stockpile the antiviral medication that Roche produced. He hired consultants to promote news stories that stoked public panic about the bird flu. He compiled studies touting the benefits of the drug, including some written by people who had at one point received money from Roche. The government bought more than $1 billion worth of the antiviral.

Morris's job was to bend perception—and he also tried to bend the way that Washington perceived him. In 2009, he was hired to head the Washington office of Genentech, a Roche subsidiary. He became relentlessly acquisitive: three Porsches, multiple Cartiers and Rolexes, humidors filled with the finest cigars. Apparently, many of Morris's extravagant purchases were bought with Genentech's money, including a condo in San Francisco and a GMC Yukon.

Such a brazen scheme didn't escape his superiors' notice. While being presented by investigators with damning evidence of his malfeasance, Morris left the room to take a bathroom break and never returned. That afternoon, he went to the Robert Trent Jones Golf Club in Gainesville, Virginia, which he had paid a

$150,000 initiation fee to join. That night, he retreated to a quiet corner of the club grounds and shot himself with a Smith & Wesson revolver. He was 38.

YET SUCH downfall narratives feel strangely dissonant. Although a handful of lobbyists may suffer a dramatic tumble from grace, the industry itself does nothing but boom. Each time a new reform surfaces, aimed at curtailing K Street's power, influence peddlers figure out how to exploit the rules for greater influence and profit. Although Trump promised to drain this swamp, the swamp flourished. From 2016 to 2018, spending on K Street increased 9 percent, rising to $3.5 billion.

Washington lobbying firms have ballooned into conglomerates, resembling the multinational corporations that hire them. K Street currently consists of data analysts, pollsters, social-media mavens, crisis managers, grassroots organizers. Lobbying firms are one-stop shops for manipulating opinion—and are experts at image management, including their own: Their employees' business cards identify them as "consultants" and "strategists," now that everyone associates lobbying with sleaze.

Lobbying has disguised itself so well that it is often barely visible even to savvy Washington insiders. The Mullinses tell the story of Jim Courtovich, the head of a boutique public-relations firm and a close collaborator of Evan Morris's. Courtovich's business plan featured splashy parties that attracted top journalists and other prominent figures with whom he hoped to trade favors. Mingling with the media, the Mullinses write, Courtovich encouraged stories that might help his clients; in one case they cite, the goal was to damage a Saudi client's rival. Starting in the fall of 2015, many such gatherings were hosted at a house his firm owned on Capitol Hill; presumably, the reporters who attended them had no idea that Saudi investors had financed the purchase of the building. In 2016, the authors note, Courtovich began working for the Saudi-government official who would later allegedly orchestrate the murder of *The Washington Post*'s Jamal Khashoggi, a colleague of the journalists he assiduously cultivated.

As lobbying has matured, it has grown ever more adept at turning government into a profit center for its clients. Even Big Tech, which once treated Washington with disdainful detachment, seems to have felt the irresistible, lobbyist-enabled pull of chunky contracts with the feds. Such possibilities were part of the pitch to Amazon, for example, to erect a second corporate headquarters in Crystal City, Virginia, enticed by the prospect of pursuing multibillion-dollar contracts with the likes of the CIA and the Pentagon. (Amazon has said that political considerations played no part in the company's decision.)

For eager beneficiaries of government largesse—not to mention for their equally wolfish facilitators—a second Trump administration would represent a bonanza, unprecedented in the history of K Street. Trump's plan to overturn a bureaucratic ethos that has prevailed since the late 19th century—according to which good government requires disinterested experts, more loyal to the principles of public stewardship than to any politician—opens the way to installing cronies who will serve as handmaidens of K Street. The civil service, however beleaguered, has acted as an imperfect bulwark against the assault of corporate interests. Its replacement would be something close to the opposite. The hacks recruited to populate government departments will be primed to fulfill the desires of campaign donors and those who pay tribute to the president; they will trade favors with lobbyists who dangle the prospect of future employment in front of them. This new coterie of bureaucrats would wreck the competence of the administrative state—and the wolves of K Street will feast on the carcass of responsible governance. *A*

Franklin Foer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Mojave Ghost
By Forrest Gander

Looking for their night roost, tiny
birds drop like stars into the darkened dead trees
around me. I thought

dreams were like water, that we
can't smell anything there. And then you visited me,
your body whole again
but the must of extinction on your breath.

Forrest Gander is the author of the forthcoming Mojave Ghost: A Novel Poem, *from which this poem was adapted. He is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.*

BOOKS

A Novel Without Characters

Rachel Cusk's lonely experiment

By Nicholas Dames

Start, as one tends to do in Rachel Cusk's writing, with a house. It is not yours, but instead a farmhouse on the island property to which you have come as a renting vacationer. It has no obvious front door, and how you enter it, or whether you are welcome to do so, isn't clear. You are, after all, only a visitor. Built out in haphazard fashion, the house seems both neglected and fussed over, and as a result slightly mad. A small door, once located, opens to reveal two rooms. The first, although generously proportioned and well lit, shocks you with its disorder, the riotous and yet deadening clutter of a hoarder. As you navigate carefully through it, the sound of women's voices leads you to a second room. It is the kitchen, where the owner's wife, a young girl, and an old woman—three generations of female labor—prepare food in a clean and functional space. When you enter, they fall silent and seem to share a secret. They consent to rather than encourage your presence, but here you will be fed. Of the first room, the owner's wife comments dryly that it is her husband's: "I'm not allowed to interfere with anything here."

This is a moment from *Parade*, Cusk's new book, and like so much in this novel of elusive vignettes, it can be seen as an allegory about both fiction and the gendered shapes of selfhood. After reading *Parade*, you might be tempted to imagine the history of the novel as a cyclical battle between accumulation and erasure, or hoarders and cleaners. For the hoarders, the ethos is to capture as much life as possible: objects, atmospheres, ideologies, social types and conventions, the habits and habitudes of selves. For the cleaners, all of that detail leaves us no space to move or breathe. The hoarder novel may preserve, but the cleaner novel liberates. And that labor of cleaning, of revealing the bare surfaces under the accumulated clutter of our lives and opening up space for creation and nourishment, is women's work. Or so Cusk's allegory invites us to feel.

Whether or not the typology of hoarder and cleaner is useful in general, it has licensed Cusk to push her style toward ever greater spareness. For the past decade, since 2014's *Outline*, Cusk has been clearing a path unlike any other in English-language fiction, one that seems to follow a rigorous internal logic about the confinements of genre and gender alike. That logic, now her signature, has been one of purgation. The trilogy that *Outline* inaugurated (followed by *Transit* and *Kudos*) scrubbed away plot to foreground pitiless observation of how we represent, justify, and unwittingly betray ourselves to others. Each of these lauded novels is a gallery of human types in which the writer-narrator, Faye, wanders; finding herself the recipient of other people's talkative unburdening, she simply notices—a noticing that, in its acuity and gift for condensed expression, is anything but simple. Cusk's follow-up, 2021's

TRISTAN FEWINGS / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY IRIS LEGENDRE

Second Place, is a psychodrama about artistic production that sacrifices realistic world making for the starkness of fable.

Now, in *Parade*, the element to be swept away is character itself. Gustave Flaubert once notoriously commented that he wanted to write "a book about nothing"; Cusk wants to write a book about no one. No more identities, no more social roles, even no more imperatives of the body—a clearing of the ground that has, as Cusk insists, particular urgency for writing by women, who have always had to confront the limits to their autonomy in their quests to think and create. The question *Parade* poses is what, after such drastic removal, is left standing.

IF THIS SOUNDS ABSTRACT, it should—Cusk's aim is abstraction itself. *Parade* sets out to go beyond the novel's habitual concretion, to undo our attachment to the stability of selfhood and its social markers. We are caught by our familiar impulses; trapped within social and familial patterns and scripts; compelled, repelled, or both by the stories of how we came to be. What if one didn't hear oneself, nauseatingly, in everything one said and did, but instead heard something alien and new? This is Cusk's negative theology of the self, a desire to imagine lives perfectly unconditioned and undetermined, no longer shaped by history, culture, or even psychological continuity—and therefore free from loss, and from loss's twin, progress. It is a radical program, and a solitary one.

To be concrete for a moment: The book comes in four titled units. Its strands are not so much nested as layered, peeling apart in one's hands like something delicate and brittle. What binds them together is the recurring appearance of an artist named "G," who is transformed in each part, sometimes taking multiple forms in the same unit. G can be male or female, alive or dead, in the foreground or the background, but G always, tellingly, gravitates toward visual forms rather than literary forms: *Parade* is in love with the promise of freedom from narrative and from causality that is offered by visual representation. We remain outside G, observing the figure from various distances, never with the intimacy of an "I" speaking to us. G is sometimes tethered to the history of art: *Parade* begins by describing G creating upside-down paintings (a clear reference to the work of Georg Baselitz, though he goes unnamed); a later G is palpably derived from Louise Bourgeois, the subject of an exhibition that figures in two different moments in the novel. Yet G tends to float free of these tethers, which threaten to specify what Cusk prefers to render abstractly.

Cusk imagines a series of scenarios for G, often as the maker of artworks viewed and discussed by others with alarm, admiration, or blasé art-world sophistication. When the shape-shifting G moves into the foreground, shards of personal life surface. As a male painter, G makes nude portraits of his wife that lurch into grotesquerie, imprisoning her while gaining him fame. As a female painter, she finds herself, as if by some kind of dark magic, encumbered with a husband and child. Another G abandons fiction for filmmaking, refusing the knowingness of language for the unselved innocence of the camera: "He wanted simply to record." Whatever changes in each avatar—G's gender; G's historical moment; whether we share G's thoughts, see G through their intimates, or merely stand in front of G's work—the differences evaporate in the dry atmosphere that prevails in *Parade*. G, whoever the figure is, wants to disencumber their art of selfhood. So we get not stories but fragmented capsule biographies, written with an uncanny, beyond-the-grave neutrality, each of them capturing a person untying themselves from the world, casting off jobs, lovers, families.

Gustave Flaubert once notoriously commented that he wanted to write "a book about nothing"; Cusk wants to write a book about no one.

People on their way out of their selves: This is what interests Cusk. From a man named Thomas who has just resigned his teaching job, putting at risk his family finances as well as his wife's occupation as a poet, we hear this: "I seem to be doing a lot of things these days that are out of character. I am perhaps coming out of character, he said, like an actor does." The tone is limpid, alienated from itself. "I don't know what I will do or what I will be. For the first time in my life I am free." Free not just from the story, but even from the sound of himself, the Thomasness of Thomas.

Parade's hollowed-out figures have the sober, disembodied grace of someone who, emerging from a purification ritual, awaits a promised epiphany. The female painter G, having left behind her daughter with a father whose sexualized photographs of the daughter once lined the rooms of their home, is herself left behind, sitting alone in the dark of her studio: This is as far as Cusk will bring her. They've departed, these people, been purged and shorn, but have not yet arrived anywhere, and they stretch out their hands in longing for the far shore and lapse into an austere, between-worlds silence. Cusk observes an even more disciplined tact than she did in *Outline*. If regret lurks in their escapes—about time wasted, people discarded, uncertainty to come—Cusk won't indulge it. She seems to be not describing her figures so much as joining them, sharing their desire, a kind of hunger for unreality, a yearning for the empty, unmappable spaces outside identity. The result is an intensified asceticism. Her sentences are as precise as always, but stingless, the edges of irony sanded down.

What Cusk has relinquished, as if in a kind of penance, is her curiosity. Even at its most austere, her previous work displayed a fascination with the experience of encountering others. That desire was not always

distinguishable from gossip, and certainly not free of judgment, but was expressed in an openness to the eccentricities of others as a source of danger, delight, and revelation. These encounters appealed to a reader's pleasure in both the teasing mystery of others and the ways they become knowable. In *Parade*, Cusk seems to find this former curiosity more than a little vulgar, too invested in what she calls here "the pathos of identity."

Nothing illustrates this new flatness better than "The Diver," *Parade*'s third section. A group of well-connected art-world people—a museum director, a biographer, a curator, an array of scholars—gathers for dinner in an unnamed German city after the first day of a major retrospective exhibition of the Louise Bourgeois–like G. The opening has been spoiled, however, by an incident: A man has committed suicide in the exhibition's galleries by jumping from an atrium walkway. (It is one of the novel's very few incidents, and it occurs discreetly offstage.) The diners collect their thoughts after their derailed day, ruminating on the connections between the suicide and the art amid which it took place, on the urge to leap out of our self-imposed restraints—out of our very embodiment.

Their conversation is detached, a bit stunned, but nonetheless expansive: These are practiced, professional talkers. The scene is also strangely colorless. In discussing the hunger to lose an identity, each speaker has already been divested of their own, and the result is a language that sounds closer to the textureless theory-Esperanto of museum wall text. The director weighs in: "Some of G's pieces, she said, also utilise this quality of suspension in achieving disembodiment, which for me at times seems the furthest one can go in representing the body itself." Someone else takes a turn: "The struggle, he said, which is sometimes a direct combat, between the search for completeness and the desire to create art therefore becomes a core part of the artist's development."

It is politely distanced, this after-suicide dinner in its barely specified upper-bourgeois setting, and all of the guests are very like-minded. The interlude generates no friction of moral evaluation and conveys no satiric view of the quietly distressed, professionally established figures who theorize about art and death. What one misses here is the constitutive irony of the *Outline* trilogy, the sense that these people might be giving themselves away to our prurient eyes and ears. One wants to ask any of *Parade*'s figures what anguish or panic or rage lies behind their desire to cease being a person—what struggle got them here.

PARADE

Rachel Cusk

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

IF ***PARADE*** feels too pallid to hold a reader's attention, that is because it tends to resist answering these questions. But abstraction's hold on Cusk isn't quite complete, not yet, and she has one answer still to give: You got here because you were mothered. The book comes alive when Cusk turns to the mother-child relationship—a core preoccupation of hers—and transforms it into an all-encompassing theory of why identity hampers and hurts, a problem now of personhood itself as much as of the constraints that motherhood places on women. Every one of *Parade*'s scenarios features mothers, fleeing and being fled. Between mother and child is the inescapable agony of reciprocal creation. The mother weaves for her child a self; the child glues the mask of maternity onto the mother's face. They cannot help wanting to run from what they've each made, despite the pain that flight exacts on the other. And so, pulling at and away from each other, mother and child learn the hardest truth: Every escape is bought at the expense of struggle and loss for both the self and someone else. Cusk is, as always, tough; she insists on the cost.

This is where *Parade* betrays some sign of turbulence beneath its detachment. The novel's concluding section begins with the funeral of a mother, of whom we hear this, narrated in the collective "we" of her children: "The coffin was shocking, and this must always be the case, whether or not one disliked being confined to the facts as much as our mother had." A knotty feeling emerges in this strand, sharp and funny—the angry rush of needs caught in the act of being denied, both the need for the mother and the need to be done with her. It is the closest *Parade* comes to an exposed nerve. We both want and loathe the specificity of our selfhood. Cusk understands the implicit, plaintive, and aggressive cry of the child: Describe me, tell me what I am, so I can later refuse it! That is the usual job of mothers, and also of novelists—to describe us and so encase us. By Cusk's lights, we should learn to do without both; freedom awaits on the other side.

It may be, though, that the anguish of the mother-child bind feels more alive than the world that comes after selfhood. The problem is not that Cusk has trouble finding a language adequate to her theory of the burdens of identity—the problem may be instead that she has found that language, and it is clean indeed, scoured so free of attachments as to become translucent. *Parade* wants to replace the usual enticements of fiction—people and the story of their destinies—with the illumination of pure possibility. As such, the novel seems designed to provoke demands that it won't satisfy. *Be vivid!* we might want to say to Cusk. Be angry; be savage; be funny; be real. *Be a person.* To which her response seems to be: *Is that what you should want?* *A*

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ESSAY

The Harlem Renaissance Was Bigger Than Harlem

How Black artists made modernism their own

By Susan Tallman

Sometimes it's the sleepers that stay with you. In "The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism," a sprawling exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it was a watercolor still life by Aaron Douglas. Born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1899, Douglas may be the most recognizable Black artist of the 1920s and '30s. His appealing blend of Art Deco and African American affirmation enlivened

Aaron Douglas, *Still Life*, n.d.

Aaron Douglas, *Let My People Go*, circa 1935–39

books, magazines, and public spaces in his heyday, and paintings such as his grand Works Progress Administration cycle, *Aspects of Negro Life*, at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now part of the Schomburg Center), have kept him visible ever since.

The watercolor, though, feels a world apart from his luminous silhouettes and vivid storylines. It houses no heroic figure pointing toward the future, no shackles being cast off. Instead we get leafy branches splaying out from a pot beneath a tattered picture hung askew on a wall. The branches might be magnolia—it's hard to tell—but art nerds can recognize the crooked picture-within-a-picture as a loose rendering of Titian's *The Entombment of Christ* (circa 1520), which has been in the Louvre for centuries. Turner copied it there in 1802, Delacroix around 1820, Cézanne in the 1860s. Douglas would have seen it when he was studying in Paris in the early 1930s.

The Titian might have attracted his attention for many reasons—its display of crushing grief and unvoiced faith, its sublimely controlled composition, or the warm brown skin that Titian gave the man lifting Christ's head and shoulders, usually identified as Nicodemus. The Titian connection is not highlighted at the Met, but in its own oblique way, Douglas's watercolor encapsulates the most important lesson this show has to offer: Art's relationship to the world is always more complicated than you think.

Organized by Denise Murrell, who, as the Met's first curator at large, oversees projects that cross geographical and chronological boundaries, this exhibition has a lot on its to-do list. It wants to remind us of Harlem's role as a cultural catalyst in the early 20th century, while showing that those creative energies extended far beyond the familiar reading list of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, beyond literature and music, beyond the prewar decades, and beyond Upper Manhattan. It wants us to understand that Black American artists were learning from European modernists, and that European modernists were aware of Black contributions to world culture.

The exhibit showcases an abundance of mostly Black, mostly American painters and sculptors, as well as pictures of Black subjects by white Europeans, documentary photographs, film clips of nightclub acts, and objects by artists of the African diaspora working in locations from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom. Like an exploding party streamer, it unfurls in multiple directions from a starting point small enough to hold in your hand—in this case, the March 1925 special issue of the social-work journal *Survey Graphic*, its cover emblazoned with "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," heralding a new cultural phenomenon.

That issue, edited by the philosopher Alain Locke, contained sociological and historical articles by Black academics along with poetry by the likes of Hughes and Jean Toomer. James Weldon Johnson, the executive secretary of the NAACP, offered an essay on the real-estate machinations that had made Harlem Black, and W. E. B. Du Bois contributed a parable highlighting the Black origins of American achievements in domains including the arts and engineering. The German-immigrant artist Winold Reiss provided eloquent portraits of celebrities such as the singer and activist Paul Robeson, along with those of various Harlem residents identified by social role in the manner of August Sander photographs—a pair of young, earnest *Public School Teachers* with Phi Beta Kappa keys dangling around their necks, a somber-faced *Woman Lawyer*, a dapper *College Lad*. All of this made manifest the galvanizing assumption that what Black Americans possessed was not a

culture that had failed to be white, but one rich with its own inheritances and inventions; its own brilliance, flaws, and challenges. And Harlem was its city on a hill.

Working as an art teacher in Kansas City, Missouri, Aaron Douglas saw *Survey Graphic* and moved to New York, where he worked with Reiss and was mentored by Du Bois. When Locke expanded the *Survey Graphic* issue to book length (his pivotal anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*), Douglas provided illustrations.

Locke and Du Bois were the intellectual stars of Black modernity, and they believed in the power of the arts to transform social perception. But where Du Bois once said, "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda," Locke was intrigued by the indirect but ineluctable workings of aesthetics. A serious collector of African art, he saw its severe stylizations and habits of restraint as a flavor of classicism, as disciplined in its way as Archaic Greek art, and hoped it might provide "a mine of fresh *motifs*" and "a lesson in simplicity and originality of expression" to Black Americans.

Locke also took note of how European artists, bored with the verisimilitude, rational space, and propriety of their own tradition, had become smitten with Africa: how Picasso claimed the faceted planes of African masks as the starting point of cubism; how German expressionists enlisted the emphatic angularity of African carvings in their pursuit of emotional presence. They might be woefully (or willfully) ignorant of African objects' original contexts and meanings, but, as Locke recognized, an important bridge had been crossed. Something definitively Black was inspiring the foremost white artists in the world.

No artist fulfilled the twin mandates of clear messaging and savvy, African-influenced modernism more successfully than Douglas. The style he developed took tips from the easy-to-read action of ancient-Egyptian profiles, the staccato geometries of African art, and the flat pictorial space of abstraction, and he put that style to work in narrative pictures designed to inspire hope, pride, and a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself. Du Bois might have called it propaganda, but under the name "history painting," this kind of thing had constituted the most prestigious domain of pre-20th-century art. Think of Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), and John Martin's cast-of-thousands blockbusters like *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822).

Let My People Go (circa 1935–39) is one of several majestic Douglas paintings included at the Met. Its design began as a tightly composed black-and-white illustration for James Weldon Johnson's 1927 book, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (in addition to running the NAACP, Johnson was a poet). Even within the more expansive space of the color painting, *Let My People Go* has a lot going on: Lightning bolts rain down from the upper right; spears poke up from the lower left as Pharaoh's army charges in, heedless of the great wave rising like a curlicue cowlick at center stage. Slicing diagonally across all of this action, a golden beam of light comes to rest on a

Archibald Motley, *Blues*, 1929

William H. Johnson, *Jitterbugs V*, circa 1941–42

kneeling figure, arms spread in supplication. It's a John Martin biblical epic stripped of Victorian froufrou, a modernist geometric composition with a moral.

AMBITIOUS BLACK ARTISTS hardly needed Locke to point them toward Europe. "Where else but to Paris," Douglas wrote, "would the artist go who wished really to learn his craft and eventually succeed in the art of painting?" Paris had the Louvre, it had Picasso and Matisse, it had important collections of African art, and for decades, it offered Black American artists both education and liberation. William H. Johnson arrived in 1926, Palmer Hayden and Hale Woodruff in 1927, Archibald Motley in 1929. Henry Ossawa Tanner, in France since 1891, was a chevalier of the Legion of Honor. The French were not free of race-based assumptions, but their biases were more benign than those institutionalized in the United States—enough so that Motley would later say, "They treated me the same as they treated anybody else."

One of the great pleasures at the Met is watching these artists feel their way in a heady world. The setting for Motley's bright and bumptious dance scene *Blues* (1929) was a café near the Bois de Boulogne frequented by African and Caribbean immigrants, where he would sit and sketch into the night. The subject is unquestionably modern, as are Motley's smoothed-out surfaces and abruptly cropped edges, but the gorgeous entanglement of musicians and revelers—the chromatic counterpoint of festive clothing and faces that come in dark, medium, and pale—recalls far older precedents, such as Paolo Veronese's *The Wedding Feast at Cana* (1562–63), the enormous canvas at the Louvre that people back into when straining for a glimpse of the *Mona Lisa*.

Woodruff and Hayden took up the theme of the card game, closely associated with Cézanne but also a long-standing trope in European art and African American culture. In Hayden's *Nous Quatre à Paris* ("We Four in Paris," circa 1930) and Woodruff's *The Card Players* (1930), the teetering furniture and tilted space set up a pictorial instability that can be seen as a corollary of social pleasure and moral peril, or just the reality of odds always stacked against you. But whereas Woodruff's jagged styling in *The Card Players* nods to German expressionism and the African sources behind it, the caricatured profiles in Hayden's *Nous Quatre à Paris* call up racist antecedents like Currier and Ives's once-popular *Darktown* lithographs. Beautifully drawn in watercolor, it remains a stubbornly uncomfortable image some 95 years after its creation.

William H. Johnson, for his part, spent his years in Europe mostly making brushy landscapes with no obvious social messages. Paired with a woozy village scene by the French expressionist Chaim Soutine, an early Johnson townscape at the Met looks accomplished and unadventurous. But with his wife, the Danish textile artist Holcha Krake, Johnson developed an appreciation for the flat forms and dramatic concision of Scandinavian folk art—a reminder that Africa was not the only place where modernists searched for outsider inspiration—and when he returned to the States, he began working in a jangly figurative mode with no direct antecedent. The dancing couples in his *Jitterbugs* paintings and screen prints (1940–42) may look simple and cartoonish at first glance, but those pointy knees and high heels are held mid-motion through Johnson's brilliant machinery of pictorial weights and balances.

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There is more than a soupçon of *épater le bourgeois* in much of this, aimed not just at the buttoned-up white world, but also at the primness of many members of the Black professional class. Langston Hughes, writing in *The Nation* in 1926, expressed his hope that "Paul Robeson singing Water Boy … and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies" might prompt "the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty."

THE PURSUIT of that glimmer accounts for one of the Met exhibition's most remarkable aspects—its preponderance of great portraiture. There are portraits of the famous, portraits by the famous, portraits of parents and children, and portraits of strangers. Some are large and dazzlingly sophisticated: Beauford Delaney's 1941 portrait of a naked, teenage James Baldwin in a storm of ecstatic color is a harbinger of the gestural abstractions that Delaney would paint 10 years later. Some are tiny and blunt, like the self-portrait by the self-taught Horace Pippin, celebrated as "the first important Negro painter" by the art collector Albert C. Barnes because of his "unadulterated" ignorance of other art.

This abundance is remarkable because portraiture was not central to European modernism or to 20th-century art in general. Never the most prestigious of genres (too compromised as work-for-hire), the painted portrait had lost its primary raison d'être following the advent of photography in the 1830s and never really recovered. Modernists went on drawing people, but instead of providing a physiognomy to be followed, the sitter was now a toy to be played with. Picasso's drypoint of the Martinican poet and activist Aimé Césaire is representative, looking very much like a Picasso and not much at all like Césaire. (The Met's wall text refers to it as a "symbolic portrait.") The title of the wonderful Edvard Munch painting in the show originally emphasized the polygonal slab of green scarf at its center, not the identity of Abdul Karim, the man wearing it. We might well be curious about Karim—Munch apparently encountered him in a traveling circus's ethnographic display, and hired him as a driver and model—but Munch wants to lead us away from the distractions of biography and toward color, form, and paint. It was a common ploy. James McNeill Whistler, after all, titled his famous portrait of his mother *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*.

For Black artists and audiences, the situation was different. Painted portraits have always been an extravagance, their mere existence evidence of the value of the people in them. But after 500 years of Western portrait painting, Black faces remained, Alain Locke wrote, "the most untouched of all the available fields of portraiture." The American Folk Art Museum's "Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North"—which overlapped with the Met show for a month before closing in March—aimed to fill in that lacuna, with rare commissioned portraits of 19th-century Black sitters, more numerous examples of Black figures (often children) presented as fashionable accessories in portraits of white sitters, and still more dispiriting mass-market material, like a pair of *Darktown* lithographs showing grossly caricatured Black couples attempting to play tennis.

Far from merely gratifying the vanity of a sitter or the creative ego of an artist, portraiture was a correction to the canon, offering proof of how varied beauty, character, or just memorable faces can look.

Against this background, portraiture—the quintessential celebration of the individual—could serve a collective purpose. Far from merely gratifying the vanity of a sitter or the creative ego of an artist, it was a correction to the canon, offering proof of how varied beauty, character, or just memorable faces can look. The subject mattered, regardless of the style through which he or she was presented. Laura Wheeler Waring was no avant-gardist—her blend of precision and moderately flashy brushwork gives *Girl in Pink Dress* (circa 1927) the demeanor of a society portrait. The arrangement is conventional: The sitter is seen in profile, hair in a flapper bob, a spray of silk flowers tumbling over one shoulder like fireworks. But that shade of pink, which might look simpering on a blonde, acquires visual gravitas on this model. She does not smile or acknowledge the viewer. For all her youth and frothy attire, she owns the space of the canvas in no uncertain terms. The dress is frivolous; the picture is not.

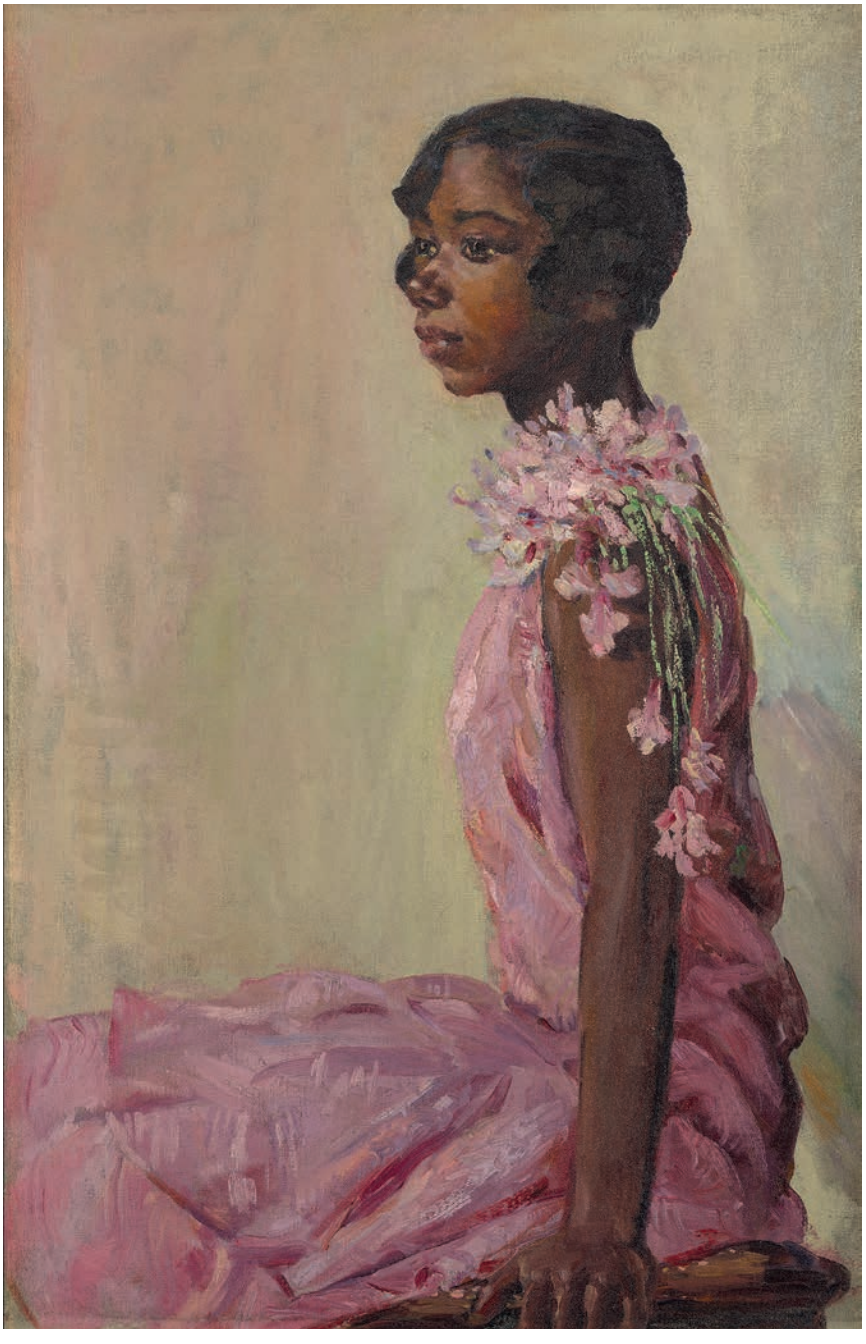
Waring, like Munch, does not give us a name to go with the face. For modern artists—whether Black or white, male or female—models, most often young women, were an attribute of the studio, there to be dressed up and arranged like a still life with a pulse. At the Met, they look out at us from frames next to titles that point to their hats and dresses, their jobs and accessories. In some cases, an identity is discoverable—Matisse's *Woman in White* (1946) was the Belgian Congolese journalist Elvire Van Hyfte; Winold Reiss's *Two Public School Teachers* are thought to have been named Lucile Spence and Melva Price—but many remain anonymous. They are decorative markers for something larger than themselves.

In contrast with Waring's *Girl in Pink Dress*, Henry Alston's *Girl in a Red Dress* (1934) is stridently modernist, reducing its subject to elemental forms. The erect pose could have been borrowed from a Medici bride, but the elongated neck and narrow head and shoulders were inspired, we are told, by reliquary busts of the Central African Fang people. For Alston, neither European modernism nor Fang tradition was a mother tongue, which helps give the picture its modern edge. He is less interested in the distinctive features of a living individual than in how those features might serve new relationships of form and color.

Other artists, notably the watercolorist Samuel Joseph Brown Jr., succeed in inducing portraiture's most magical effect—the eerie sense of a real person on the other side of the frame. His *Girl in Blue Dress* (1936) leans slightly forward, hands casually clasped, a half smile of anticipation on her lips, like someone rapt in conversation. The play of light and the puddled blues and browns are beautifully handled, but the appeal is also social: She looks like someone who would be fun to know.

BLACK PORTRAITURE also carries special clout because of the existential consequences that physical appearance can have in Black life. It was at the core of race-based slavery, and perception of color, which is a painter's stock in trade, retained its ability to dictate life's outcomes. Picasso and Matisse might be cavalier about skin tone—painting faces in white and yellow, or green and blue for that matter—but many Black artists recognized it as an optical property riddled with storylines. William H. Johnson gave each of the girls in *Three Children* (circa 1940) a different-colored hat and a different tone of face. Waring (whose self-portrait resembles my third-grade teacher, a middle-aged woman of Scandinavian extraction) addressed the complexities of color and identity in *Mother and Daughter* (circa 1927), a double portrait whose subjects exhibit the same aquiline profile but different complexions. Archibald Motley's *The Octoroon Girl* (1925) is rosy-cheeked and sloe-eyed, perched on a sofa with the frozen expression of someone expecting bad news. (Motley had a gift for capturing this kind of social discomfort.) The title, which points to the existence of one Black great-grandparent, all but dares the viewer to bring a forensic eye to her face, her hands, the curl of brown hair escaping from under her cloche.

Laura Wheeler Waring, *Girl in Pink Dress*, circa 1927



It's worth noting that for a show about Black culture in the first half of the 20th century, "Harlem Renaissance" gives little space to the continued horror of lynching, the everyday brutality of Jim Crow, and the nationwide rise of the Ku Klux Klan, which reached peak membership around the time that Locke's *Survey Graphic* was published. Only a handful of works explicitly address either violence or what Hilton Als, writing about the show in *The New Yorker*, called the "soul-crushing" realities of the 1920s for Black people. (The most wrenching of these pieces is *In Memory of Mary Turner as a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*, a 1919 sculpture by the Rodin protégé Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller.) The emphasis here is on agency and survival, not trauma.

Here, too, the portraits operate as a reservoir of weighty meaning, especially those of elderly relatives. Some sitters, like Motley's Uncle Bob, were old enough to have been born into slavery. All are endowed by the artists with as much dignity as the conventions of portraiture can muster. Uncle Bob is wearing the plain clothes of a farmer, but is seated like a gentleman, pipe in hand, with a book and a vase of flowers at his elbow. John N. Robinson's 1942 painting of his grandparents (titled, with

curious formality, *Mr. and Mrs. Barton*) is filled with the hypertrophic detail of a Holbein painting, and as in a Holbein, everything signifies: Mrs. Barton's look of sober patience; Mr. Barton's suit, tie, and wingtip shoes; the oak table and the sideboard with its pressed-glass pitcher and glasses; the framed studio photographs of what must be their great-grandchildren on the wall.

William H. Johnson's *Mom and Dad* (1944) departs from tradition in style, but not in purpose. His gray-haired mother faces us from her red rocking chair, hands folded, eyes wide with something like worry. His deceased father presides from his portrait on the wall behind her, his handlebar mustache and celluloid collar decades out of date, but lasting evidence of respectability. These people don't show a lot of laugh lines, nor the haughtiness endemic to so much society portraiture. Instead there is poise and forbearance, along with the knowledge that they weren't bought cheap.

John N. Robinson, *Mr. and Mrs. Barton*, 1942

HARLEM WAS PRONOUNCED the "Mecca of the New Negro" 99 years ago. That cultural renaissance is as far from us today as the contributors to that *Survey Graphic* issue were from the presidency of John Quincy Adams. The Met's is not the first big show to survey Black artists' achievements in that era, but it is the most ambitiously global, a quality that makes that vanished world feel more familiar than we might expect—a place where Black artists move back and forth across the Atlantic, absorbing every influence on offer, coping with questions of identity, and struggling to make ends meet. Against this, the abundance of photographs—the marching men in bowler hats, the marcelled ladies who lunch, the couple posing in raccoon coats with their shiny roadster like Tom and Daisy Buchanan—works to remind us of the temporal distance that painting and sculpture can collapse.

Attempting to define modernism is a thankless task. But a few years ago, the painter Kerry James Marshall offered this observation: "Modern is not so much an appearance or a subject matter. It is, indeed, a process of always becoming and a negotiation for attention between the contemporary artist's ego and the legacy of previous masterworks." At its best, what "Harlem Renaissance" provides is a chance to witness that becoming, to peek at those negotiations in progress, through the work of artists whose achievements have, in many cases, been insufficiently celebrated. Which brings us back to that Aaron Douglas still life.

History painting went out of vogue in the 20th century because modern art stopped believing in simple stories. Douglas's narrative paintings, beautifully designed and eye-catching though they can be, are throwbacks—spectacular, efficient, impersonal engines for delivering public-service messages. The still life is different. Sure, the sloping magnolia branches and off-kilter Titian conform to his love of diagonals on diagonals. But the things represented are not abstractions; they are objects that lived in the real world—the leaves are curled and brown in spots; the margins of the Titian are torn and stained. What is pictured isn't a lesson, but a meditation on learning, and on the many ways that meaning can make itself felt.

Douglas was a native Kansan. It is possible that Titian's Nicodemus echoed, for him, the abolitionist song "Wake Nicodemus," whose hero, a slave "of African birth," was the namesake of a Kansas town founded after the Civil War by the formerly enslaved. Or maybe Douglas just loved that painting in the Louvre. Or both. *A*

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CALEB'S INFERNO

By Caleb Madison

Warning: This crossword puzzle starts easy, but gets devilishly hard as you descend into its depths. See which circle you can reach before you abandon all hope.

ACROSS

1 Word cheered twice before "hooray"
4 Acronym for a deep-sleep cycle
7 "I'd like to thank the ___" (classic Oscars-acceptance-speech shout-out)
9 Cosmetic procedure that might impair one's sense of smell in the short term
10 Creature depicted in a garden figurine
11 Device used in "cloud chasing" (exhaling thick vape hits)
14 General George whose leadership was decisive in the Battle of the Bulge
16 Puts one's ice skates on
17 ___' acte (intermission)
18 2/1 begins it, briefly
19 Creature Cleopatra calls a "poor venomous fool"
22 Class for the RailRiders and the Jumbo Shrimp
24 Bird that's the mascot for Pomona College
25 It's unexpectedly offensive
26 Experiencing periodic discomfort, informally?
28 Marbled night-market snack
29 Refrain from jazz music
30 Cracker of some crusts
33 Verne who played Mini-Me
35 Material for a bloomery
36 Petition
37 Once called
38 Best Supporting Actress nominee for *American Gangster* (2007)
39 She famously worked to destroy Paris
40 Storage unit
43 Become rusty
44 Looking like a port?
45 Stable quality

DOWN

1 Put on the wall, as a painting
2 It's tapped to open an app
3 El ___, Texas (city on the Rio Grande)
4 Turns down
5 Music genre associated with skinny jeans and black eyeliner
6 "Oops, that one's on me"
8 Greek goddess whose daughter 23-Down was kidnapped by 39-Down and brought to the underworld
12 Letters of debt?
13 Macroecon. yardstick
14 Chain founded as Saint Louis Bread Company, casually
15 Feign power
16 Choices made by those who have eschewed their rights?
19 Secretary of state after Ed Muskie
20 Spotting
21 Co. that supplied the Union army with soap and candles during the Civil War
23 See 8-Down
26 Bartlett source
27 Stage manager of musicals, casually?
28 Designation for *Avatar: The Last Airbender*
31 2024 Emmy winner for her portrayal of Sydney Adamu
32 Treats like a piece of fabric
34 Got ready to dig in again, perhaps
35 Arabic equivalent of *-son*
39 See 8-Down
40 Crops crops, say
41 Way to go!
42 She played Esmeralda in the 1956 *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

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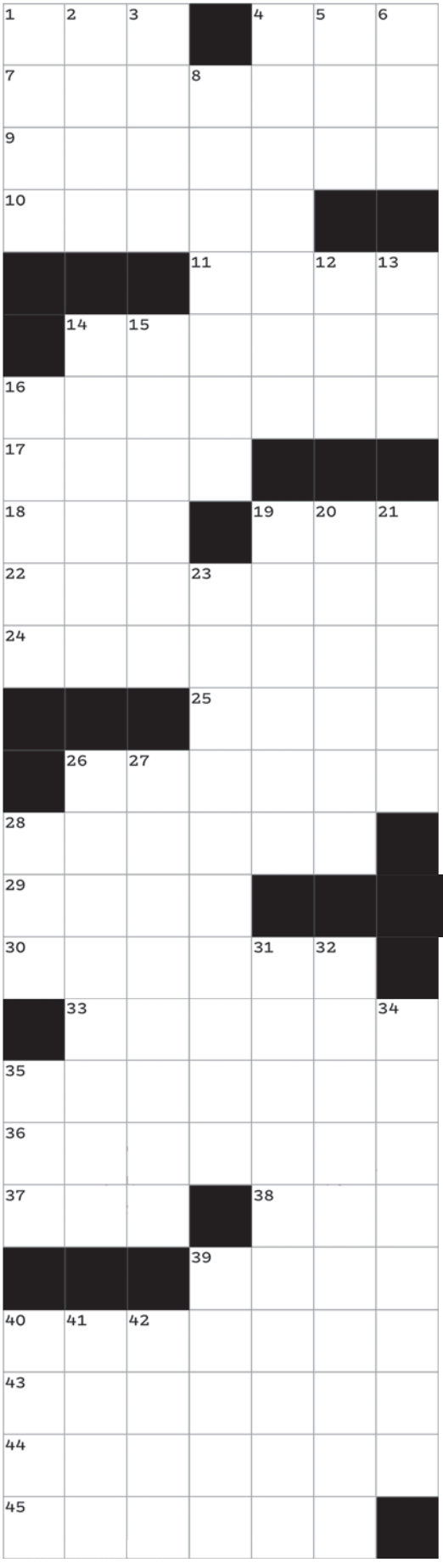

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