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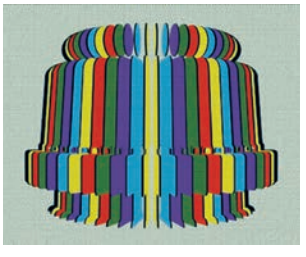
FEATURE

The AI-Powered Future of Drug Discovery

The pioneering AI model AlphaFold can predict the structure and interactions of molecules with unprecedented accuracy.

BY ALASDAIR LANE
ART BY PETRA PÉTERFFY



FEATURE

Transforming Human Labor

The challenge of the next decade is to discover how to introduce artificial intelligence into the workforce so that everyone benefits.

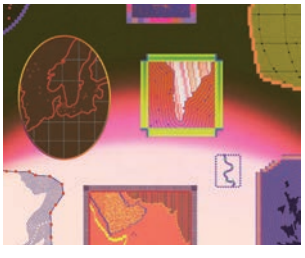
ART BY IRENE SUOSALO

FEATURE

Supercharging Human Curiosity

A new suite of artificial intelligence models empowers our desire to learn.

BY ANYA KAMENETZ
ART BY YANN KEBBI



FEATURE

Around the Globe, Governments Lean into AI

Governments around the globe are in a high-stakes race to develop cutting-edge AI systems. But how exactly are they using the technology for their own operations, and what might their progress tell us about the growth and development of AI worldwide?

BY MARK ESPOSITO
ART BY IBRAHIM RAYINTAKATH

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VOL. 335–NO. 3 MARCH 2025 CONTENTS

Features

Gary Shteyngart models his custom suit in Manhattan.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DINA LITOVSKY FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

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Culture & Critics

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On the Cover

ILLUSTRATION BY JAVIER JAÉN

Behind the Cover: In this month's cover story, "Stuck In Place" (p. 32), Yoni Appelbaum explores why Americans, once the most mobile people on the planet, have become less and less apt to move to new homes in new places over the past 50 years. The decline in geographic mobility, he argues, is the most important social change of the past half century, shaping our politics, our culture, and how we relate to one another. For our cover image, the artist Javier Jaén designed an abandoned moving truck resting on concrete blocks, symbolizing a nation that has stopped moving to seek new opportunities.

— Liz Hart, *Art Director*

THE

Teaching Lucy

In the December 2024 issue, Helen Lewis wrote about how one woman became the scapegoat for America's literacy crisis.

Letters

A heartfelt thank-you to Helen Lewis for her reporting on Lucy Calkins and the most recent phase of the "reading wars." As a career English teacher whose mother was also a career English teacher, I have had a front-row seat to the reading wars for decades. Emily Hanford's *Sold a Story* podcast was particularly frustrating to me for its oversimplification of Calkins's reading workshop and its all-too-typical sidelining of teachers' voices. Wise educators have known for a very long time that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction; effective teachers combine phonics with other strategies that help develop a student's identity as a reader. It is shocking to none of us that the solution is "both, and" and not "either/or." Lewis's article was a breath of fresh air. Calkins is by no means flawless, but her Units of Study remain some of the most comprehensive and useful language-arts curricula out there in a sea of flashy, colorful nonsense.

Trish Manwaring
San Rafael, Calif.

Helen Lewis's interesting article on Lucy Calkins sadly missed some of the substance behind the "phonics"–versus–"whole language" debate. Beginning-reading teachers immediately encounter a reality Lewis doesn't mention: Although many other languages are highly phonetic, English is not, so an approach that relies mostly on teaching the sounds of letters can leave children confused and frustrated.

In fact, some of the most common English words are nonphonetic. For example, the words *to* and *do* do not rhyme with *so* or *go*. *One* and *gone* don't rhyme either. And why are *to*, *too*, and *two* all pronounced the same? Only context and experience with real texts can help readers learn which pronunciation is appropriate.

Programs that rely mostly on phonics impose reading materials on children that tend to exclude nonphonetic words in order to make the text "decodable." That sounds great in theory, but nonphonetic words are so common in English that when you leave them out, the resulting texts are nonsensical. Many sound so stupid that they can turn kids off from reading.

This is what Calkins was trying to avoid. This inherent challenge in teaching reading in English is studiously ignored by the *Sold a Story* podcast. The nature of the English language makes a balanced approach combining phonics and normal texts the most sensible strategy for teaching reading.

Nick Estes
Albuquerque, N.M.

When I was in grad school at Columbia's Teachers College, I worked as a student teacher at P.S. 87 in Manhattan, a so-called Lucy school. I was placed in a kindergarten class and a fourth-grade class. It was apparent to me that a significant number of children were not benefiting from the curricula and needed phonics to launch them into reading. To have continued with Calkins's method of instruction alone would have been ludicrous. You have to tailor your technique to the needs of each student.

COMMONS

DISCUSSION & DEBATE

Although some students may not need phonics instruction and may even be bored by it, others need it to succeed academically. Teachers should have the independence to make decisions about which children will benefit from which type of instruction and how much instruction they will need. It will vary from student to student—and teachers and supervisors need to be trained to recognize that and make the appropriate educational decisions.

Laurie Spear
New York, N.Y.

I began my teaching career in 1976. I was a kindergarten teacher, trained well in my California district, and I've watched the conflicts over reading and writing instruction ever since. At some point in my teaching journey, I learned about Lucy Calkins. I loved what she had to say. I know two things are true: Lucy Calkins has been a great contributor to the knowledge of how to teach literacy, and many of us have asked too much of her. Teachers cannot take a blanket approach to teaching literacy. Calkins provided many good things over her long career, even if she did not provide everything, and for that I am grateful. Educators and administrators should be learners, too, who understand the complexity of teaching reading. Shame on those who left Calkins hanging out to dry.

Wendy Zacuto
Playa Vista, Calif.

I appreciated Helen Lewis's article about Lucy Calkins because it added some much-needed nuance to the conversation about reading instruction in American schools. I am a former teacher, and I attended Lucy Calkins's trainings at Columbia. But I've learned a lot since then.

Our education system suffers from several problems that have made it possible for flawed instructional methods to achieve wide reach. Many states and districts push teachers to adopt curricular programs with "fidelity"—that is, without ever questioning them. Even in schools where teachers have a little more freedom, they're rarely given the tools or time to evaluate the quality of instructional methods themselves. I remember being handed Calkins's reading curriculum in my third year of teaching, and I wondered about the research that undergirded its methods. But the curriculum books didn't provide much information. I didn't know where else to look, and even if I had known where to find the facts, I didn't have time to do research on my own, because I had just three days to set up my new classroom.

Ask any veteran educator, and they will tell you that our school systems have a knack for repeating the same mistakes. I worry that the new "science of reading" movement is being co-opted by curriculum publishers, professional-development providers, and "experts" who are seeking profits by promoting a silver bullet—just as they have with other *en vogue* methods in the past. My kids' school district just adopted a new curriculum that allegedly reflects the "science of reading," but it seems like the same type of mediocre curricula that have been peddled to big school systems for decades.

If we really want research-based instruction in our schools, we have to be humble about what we know and don't know about effective reading instruction. We have to be wary of anyone pushing quick fixes, and we need to teach teachers how to be critical consumers of research and users of curricula. Educators can't do this alone: We need more nuanced reporting like Lewis's so that all of us—educators, parents, citizens—can better understand the problems we face and how we might solve them.

Jennie Herriot-Hatfield
San Francisco, Calif.

HELEN LEWIS REPLIES:

I loved reading these responses, because the spread of opinions echoed what I heard while doing my reporting: that people with significant expertise can come to wildly divergent conclusions about the roots of America's "reading crisis." What first attracted me to this story was the idea that bad outcomes can happen without anyone involved having bad intentions. Debates over curricula make sense only in the wider context of American education—ever-changing standards, racial and class disparities, a sometimes chaotic bureaucracy, politicized decisions at the state level. Also, Nick Estes is entirely right to point out that English is very irregular. For a while, Finland's strong performance in reading was attributed partly to its strongly phonetic language. But in the past few years, that country's reading scores have fallen precipitously—and no one can really say what's changed. A good reminder that this subject demands caution and humility.

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: "The Loyalist" (October 2024) originally stated that Kash Patel did not include the events of October 30, 2020, in his book. In fact, Patel did include a brief narrative of events for that day. "Modi's Failure" (February 2025) originally stated that Narendra Modi was formerly the governor of Gujarat. In fact, Modi was chief minister.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

WHY THE COVID DENIERS WON

Lessons from the pandemic and its aftermath

BY DAVID FRUM

Five years ago, the coronavirus pandemic struck a bitterly divided society.

Americans first diverged over how dangerous the disease was: just a flu (as President Donald Trump repeatedly insisted) or something much deadlier.

Then they disputed public-health measures such as lockdowns and masking; a majority complied while a passionate minority fiercely resisted.

Finally, they split—and have remained split—over the value and safety of COVID-19 vaccines. Anti-vaccine beliefs started on the fringe, but they spread to the point where Ron DeSantis, the governor of the country's third-most-populous state, launched a campaign for president on an appeal to anti-vaccine ideology.

Five years later, one side has seemingly triumphed. The winner is not the side that initially prevailed, the side of public safety. The winner is the side that minimized the disease, then rejected public-health measures to prevent its spread, and finally refused the vaccines designed to protect against its worst effects.

Ahead of COVID's fifth anniversary, Trump, as president-elect, nominated the country's most outspoken vaccination opponent to head the Department of Health and Human Services. He chose a proponent of the debunked and discredited vaccines-cause-autism claim to lead the CDC. He named a strident critic of COVID-vaccine mandates to lead the FDA. For surgeon general, he picked a believer in hydroxychloroquine, the disproven COVID-19 remedy. His pick for director of the National Institutes of Health had advocated for letting COVID spread unchecked to encourage herd immunity. Despite having fast-tracked the development of the vaccines as president, Trump has himself trafficked in many forms of COVID-19 denial, and has expressed his own suspicions that childhood vaccination against measles and mumps is a cause of autism.

The ascendancy of the anti-vaxxers may ultimately prove fleeting. But if the forces of science and health are to stage a comeback, it's important to understand why those forces have gone into eclipse.

FROM MARCH 2020 TO February 2022, about 1 million Americans died of COVID-19. Many of those deaths occurred after vaccines became available. If every adult in the United States had received two doses of a COVID vaccine by early 2022, rather than just the 64 percent of adults who had, nearly 320,000 lives would have been saved.

Why did so many Americans resist vaccines? Perhaps the biggest reason was that the pandemic coincided with a presidential-election year, and Trump instantly recognized the crisis as a threat to his chances for reelection. He responded by denying the seriousness of the pandemic, promising that the disease would rapidly disappear on its own, and promoting quack cures.

> WE WANT TO BELIEVE THAT SOMEBODY IS IN CONTROL, EVEN IF IT'S SOMEBODY WE DON'T LIKE. AT LEAST THAT WAY, WE CAN BLAME BAD EVENTS ON BAD PEOPLE.

The COVID-19 vaccines were developed while Trump was president. They could have been advertised as a Trump achievement. But by the time they became widely available, Trump was out of office. His supporters had already made up their minds to distrust the public-health authorities that promoted the vaccines. Now they had an additional incentive: Any benefit from vaccination would redound to Trump's successor, Joe Biden. Vaccine rejection became a badge of group loyalty, one that ultimately cost many lives.

A summer 2023 study by Yale researchers of voters in Florida and Ohio found that during the early phase of the pandemic, self-identified Republicans died at only a slightly higher rate than self-identified Democrats in the same age range. But once vaccines were introduced, Republicans became much more likely to die than Democrats. In the spring of 2021, the excess-death rate among Florida and Ohio Republicans was 43 percent higher than among Florida and Ohio Democrats in the same age range. By the late winter of 2023, the 300-odd most pro-Trump counties in the country had a COVID-19 death rate more than two and a half times higher than the 300 or so most anti-Trump counties.

In 2016, Trump had boasted that he could shoot a man on Fifth Avenue and not lose any votes. In 2021 and 2022, his most fervent supporters risked death to prove their loyalty to Trump and his cause.

WHY DID POLITICAL fidelity express itself in such self-harming ways?

The onset of the pandemic was an unusually confusing and disorienting event. Some people who got COVID died. Others lived. Some suffered only mild symptoms. Others spent weeks on ventilators, or emerged with long COVID and never fully recovered. Some lost businesses built over a lifetime. Others refinanced their homes with 2 percent interest rates and banked the savings.

We live in an impersonal universe, indifferent to our hopes and wishes, subject to extreme randomness. We don't like this at all. We crave satisfying explanations. We want to believe that somebody is in control, even if it's somebody we don't like. At least that way, we can blame bad events on bad people. This is the eternal appeal of conspiracy theories. *How did this happen? Somebody must have done it—but who? And why?*

Compounding the disorientation, the coronavirus outbreak was a rapidly changing story. The scientists who researched COVID-19 knew more in April 2020 than they did in February; more in August than in April; more in 2021 than in 2020; more in 2022 than in 2021. The official advice kept changing: *Stay inside—no, go outside. Wash your hands—no, mask your face.* Some Americans appreciated and accepted that knowledge improves over time, that more will be known about a new disease in month two than in month one. But not all Americans saw the world that way. They mistrusted the idea of knowledge as a developing process. Such Americans wondered: *Were they lying before? Or are they lying now?*

In a different era, Americans might have deferred more to medical authority. The internet has upended old ideas of what should count as authority and who possesses it.

The pandemic reduced normal human interactions. Severed from one another, Americans deepened their parasocial attachment to social-media platforms, which foment alienation and rage. Hundreds of thousands of people plunged into an alternate mental universe during COVID-19 lockdowns. When their doors reopened, the mania did not

recede. Conspiracies and mistrust of the establishment—never strangers to the American mind—had been nourished, and they grew.

THE EXPERTS themselves contributed to this loss of trust.

It's now agreed that we had little to fear from going outside in dispersed groups. But that was not the state of knowledge in the spring of 2020. At the time, medical experts insisted that any kind of mass outdoor event must be sacrificed to the imperatives of the emergency. In mid-March 2020, federal public-health authorities shut down some of Florida's beaches. In California, surfers faced heavy fines for venturing into the ocean. Even the COVID-skeptical Trump White House reluctantly canceled the April 2020 Easter-egg roll.

And then the experts abruptly reversed themselves. When George Floyd was choked to death by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, hundreds of thousands of Americans left their homes to protest, defying three months of urgings to avoid large gatherings of all kinds, outdoor as well as indoor.

On May 29, the American Public Health Association issued a statement that proclaimed racism a public-health crisis while conspicuously refusing to condemn the sudden defiance of public-safety rules.

The next few weeks saw the largest mass protests in recent U.S. history. Approximately 15 million to 26 million people attended outdoor Black Lives Matter events in June 2020, according to a series of reputable polls. Few, if any, scientists or doctors scolded the attendees—and many politicians joined the protests, including future Vice President Kamala Harris. It all raised a suspicion: *Maybe the authorities were making the rules based on politics, not science.*

The politicization of health advice became even more consequential as the summer of 2020 ended. Most American public schools had closed in March. "At their peak," *Education Week* reported, "the closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. public and private schools." By September, it was already apparent that COVID-19 posed relatively little risk to children and teenagers, and that remote learning did not work. At the same time, returning to the classroom before vaccines were available could pose some risk to teachers' health—and possibly also to the health of the adults to whom the children returned after school.

How to balance these concerns given the imperfect information? Liberal states decided in favor of the teachers. In California, the majority of students did not return to in-person learning until the fall of 2021. New Jersey kept many of its public schools closed until then as well. Similar things happened in many other states: Illinois, Maryland, New York, and so on, through the states that voted Democratic in November 2020.

Florida, by contrast, reopened most schools in the fall of 2020. Texas soon followed, as did most other Republican-governed states. The COVID risk for students, it turned out, was minimal: According to a 2021 CDC study, less than 1 percent of Florida students contracted COVID-19 in school settings from August to December 2020 after their state restarted in-person learning. Over the 2020–21 school year, students in states that voted for Trump in the 2020 election got an average of almost twice as much in-person instruction as students in states that voted for Biden.

Any risks to teachers and school staff could have been mitigated by the universal vaccination of those groups. But deep into the fall of 2021, thousands of blue-state teachers and staff resisted vaccine mandates—including more than 5,000 in Chicago alone. By then, another school year had been interrupted by closures.

BY DISPARAGING public-health methods and discrediting vaccines, the COVID-19 minimizers cost hundreds of thousands of people their

lives. By keeping schools closed longer than absolutely necessary, the COVID maximizers hazarded the futures of young Americans.

Students from poor and troubled families, in particular, will continue to pay the cost of these learning losses for years to come. Even in liberal states, many private schools reopened for in-person instruction in the fall of 2020. The affluent and the connected could buy their children a continuing education unavailable to those who depended on public schools. Many lower-income students did not return to the classroom: Throughout the 2022–23 school year, poorer school districts reported much higher absenteeism rates than were seen before the pandemic.

Teens absent from school typically get into trouble in ways that are even more damaging than the loss of math or reading skills. New York City arrested 25 percent more minors for serious crimes in 2024 than in 2018. The national trend was similar, if less stark. The FBI reports that although crime in general declined in 2023 compared with 2022, crimes by minors rose by nearly 10 percent.

People who finish schooling during a recession tend to do worse even into middle age than those who finish in times of prosperity. They are less likely to marry, less likely to have children, and more likely to die early. The disparity between those who finish in lucky years and those who finish in unlucky years is greatest for people with the least formal education.

Will the harms of COVID prove equally enduring? We won't know for some time. But if past experience holds, the COVID-19 years will mark their most vulnerable victims for decades.

> IN TRUTH, THE STORY OF COVID IS A STORY OF STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE.

THE STORY OF COVID can be told as one of shocks and disturbances that wrecked two presidencies. In 2020 and 2024, incumbent administrations lost elections back-to-back, something that hadn't happened since the deep economic depression of the late 1880s and early 1890s. The pandemic caused a recession as steep as any in U.S. history. The aftermath saw the worst inflation in half a century.

In the three years from January 2020 through December 2022, Trump and Biden both signed a series of major bills to revive and rebuild the U.S. economy. Altogether, they swelled the gross public debt from about $20 billion in January 2017 to nearly $36 billion today. The weight of that debt helped drive interest rates and mortgage rates higher. The burden of the pandemic debt, like learning losses, is likely to be with us for quite a long time.

Yet even while acknowledging all that went wrong, respecting all the lives lost or ruined, reckoning with all the lasting harms of the crisis, we do a dangerous injustice if we remember the story of COVID solely as a story of American failure. In truth, the story is one of strength and resilience.

Scientists did deliver vaccines to prevent the disease and treatments to recover from it. Economic policy did avert a global depression and did rapidly restore economic growth. Government assistance kept households afloat when the world shut down—and new remote-work practices enabled new patterns of freedom and happiness after the pandemic ended.

The virus was first detected in December 2019. Its genome was sequenced within days by scientists collaborating across international borders. Clinical trials for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine began in April 2020, and the vaccine was authorized for emergency use by the FDA in December. Additional vaccines rapidly followed, and were universally available by the spring of 2021. The weekly death toll fell by more than 90 percent from January 2021 to midsummer of that year.

The U.S. economy roared back with a strength and power that stunned the world. The initial spike of inflation has subsided. Wages are again rising faster than prices. Growth in the United States in 2023 and 2024 was faster and broader than in any peer economy.

Even more startling, the U.S. recovery outpaced China's. That nation's bounceback from COVID-19 has been slow and faltering. America's economic lead over China, once thought to be narrowing, has suddenly widened; the gap between the two countries' GDPs grew from $5 trillion in 2021 to nearly $10 trillion in 2023. The U.S. share of world economic output is now slightly higher than it was in 1980, before China began any of its economic reforms. As he did in 2016, Trump inherits a strong and healthy economy, to which his own reckless policies—notably, his trade protectionism—are the only visible threat.

In public affairs, our bias is usually to pay most attention to disappointments and mistakes. In the pandemic, there were many errors: the partisan dogma of the COVID minimizers; the capitulation of states and municipalities to favored interest groups; the hypochondria and neuroticism of some COVID maximizers. Errors need to be studied and the lessons heeded if we are to do better next time. But if we fail to acknowledge America's successes—even partial and imperfect successes—we not only do an injustice to the American people. We also defeat in advance their confidence to collectively meet the crises of tomorrow.

Perhaps it's time for some national self-forgiveness here. Perhaps it's time to accept that despite all that went wrong, despite how much there was to learn about the disease and how little time there was to learn it, and despite polarized politics and an unruly national character—*despite all of that*—Americans collectively met the COVID-19 emergency about as well as could reasonably have been hoped.

The wrong people have profited from the immediate aftermath. But if we remember the pandemic accurately, the future will belong to those who rose to the crisis when their country needed them. *A*

David Frum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

CAN EUROPE STOP ELON MUSK?

He and other tech oligarchs are making it impossible to conduct free and fair elections anywhere.

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM

During an American election, a rich man can hand out $1 million checks to prospective voters. Companies and people can use secretly funded "dark money" nonprofits to donate unlimited money, anonymously, to super PACs, which can then spend it on advertising campaigns. Podcasters, partisans, or anyone, really, can tell outrageous, incendiary lies about a candidate. They can boost those falsehoods through targeted online advertising. No special courts or election rules can stop the disinformation from spreading before voters see it. The court of public opinion, which over the past decade has seen and heard everything, no longer cares. U.S. elections are now a political Las Vegas: Anything goes.

But that's not the way elections are run in other countries. In Britain, political parties are, at least during the run-up to an election, limited to spending no more than £54,010 per candidate. In Germany, as in many other European countries, the state funds political parties, proportionate to their number of elected parliamentarians, so that politicians do not have to depend on, and become corrupted by, wealthy donors. In Poland, courts fast-track election-related libel cases in the weeks before a vote in order to discourage people from lying.

Nor is this unique to Europe. Many democracies have state or public media that are obligated, at least in principle, to give equal time to all sides. Many require political donations to be transparent, with the names of donors listed in an online registry. Many have limits on political advertising. Some countries also have rules about hate speech and indict people who break them.

Countries apply these laws to create conditions for fair debate, to build trust in the system, and to inspire confidence in the winning candidates. Some democracies believe that transparency matters—that voters should know who is funding their candidates, as well as who is paying for political messages on social media or anywhere else. In some places, these rules have a loftier goal: to prevent the rise of antidemocratic extremism of the kind that has engulfed democracies—and especially European democracies—in the past.

But for how much longer can democracies pursue these goals? We live in a world in which algorithms controlled by American and Chinese

ANNA MONEYMAKER / GETTY; OXFORD SCIENCE ARCHIVE / PRINT COLLECTOR / GETTY; MIKROMAN6 / GETTY

oligarchs choose the messages and images seen by millions of people; in which money can move through secret bank accounts with the help of crypto schemes; and in which this dark money can then boost anonymous social-media accounts with the aim of shaping public opinion. In such a world, how can any election rules be enforced? If you are Albania, or even the United Kingdom, do you still get to set the parameters of your public debate? Or are you now forced to be Las Vegas too?

ALTHOUGH IT'S EASY to get distracted by the schoolyard nicknames and irresponsible pedophilia accusations that Elon Musk flings around, these are the real questions posed by his open, aggressive use of X to spread false information and promote extremist and anti-European politicians in the U.K., Germany, and elsewhere. The integrity of elections—and the possibility of debate untainted by misinformation injected from abroad—is equally challenged by TikTok, the Chinese platform, and by Mark Zuckerberg's Meta, whose subsidiaries include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Threads. TikTok says the company does not accept any paid political advertising. Meta, which announced in January that it is abandoning fact-checking on its sites in the U.S., also says it will continue to comply with European laws. But even before Zuckerberg's radical policy change, these promises were empty. Meta's vaunted content curation and moderation have never been transparent. Nobody knew, and nobody knows, what exactly Facebook's algorithm was promoting and why. Even an occasional user of these platforms encounters spammers, scammers, and opaque accounts running foreign influence operations. No guide to the algorithm, and no real choices about it, are available on Meta products, X, or TikTok.

In truth, no one knows if any platforms really comply with political-funding rules either, because nobody outside the companies can fully monitor what happens online during an intense election campaign—and after the voting has ended, it's too late. According to declassified Romanian-intelligence documents, someone allegedly spent more than $1 million on TikTok content in the 18 months before an election in support of a Romanian presidential candidate who declared that he himself had spent nothing at all. In a belated attempt to address this and other alleged discrepancies, a Romanian court canceled the first round of that election, a decision that itself damaged Romanian democracy.

Not all of this is new. Surreptitious political-party funding was a feature of the Cold War, and the Russian government has continued this practice, sometimes by offering deals to foreign businesspeople close to pro-Russian politicians. Press moguls with international political ambitions are hardly a novelty. Rupert Murdoch, an Australian who has U.S. citizenship, has long played an outsize role in U.K. politics through his media companies. John Major, the former British prime minister and Conservative Party leader, has said that in 1997, Murdoch threatened to pull his newspapers' support unless the prime minister pursued a more anti-European policy. Major refused. Murdoch has said, "I have never asked a prime minister for anything," but one of his Conservative-leaning tabloids, *The Sun*, did endorse the Labour Party in the next election. Major lost.

That incident now seems almost quaint. Even at the height of its influence, the print edition of *The Sun* sold 4 million copies a day. More to the point, it operated, and still does, within the constraints of U.K. rules and regulations, as do all broadcast and print media. Murdoch's newspapers take British libel and hate-speech laws into consideration when they run stories. His business strategy is necessarily shaped by rules limiting what a single company can own. After his journalists were accused of hacking phones and bribing police in the early 2000s, Murdoch himself had to testify before an investigative commission, and he closed down one of his tabloids for good.

MUSK'S PERSONAL X ACCOUNT HAS MORE THAN 212 MILLION FOLLOWERS, GIVING HIM ENORMOUS POWER TO SET THE NEWS AGENDA AROUND THE WORLD.

Social media not only has far greater reach—Musk's personal X account has more than 212 million followers, giving him enormous power to set the news agenda around the world—it also exists outside the legal system. Under the American law known as Section 230, passed nearly three decades ago, internet platforms are not treated as publishers in the U.S. In practice, neither Facebook nor X has the same legal responsibility for what appears on their platforms as do, say, *The Wall Street Journal* and CNN. And this, too, has consequences: Americans have created the information climate that other countries must accept, and this allows deceptive election practices to thrive. If countries don't have their own laws, and until recently most did not, Section 230 effectively requires them to treat social-media companies as if they exist outside their legal systems too.

Brazil broke with this pattern last year, when a judge demanded that Musk comply with Brazilian laws against spreading misinformation and political extremism, and forced X offline until he did. Several European countries, including the U.K., Germany, and France, have also passed laws designed to bring the platforms into compliance with their own legal systems, mandating fines for companies that violate hate-speech laws or host other illegal content. But these laws are controversial and hard to enforce. Besides, "illegal speech" is not necessarily the central problem. No laws prevented Musk from interviewing Alice Weidel, a leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, on X, thereby providing her with a huge platform, available to no other political candidate, in the month before a national election. The interview, which

included several glaringly false statements (among others, that Weidel was the "leading" candidate), was viewed 45 million times in 24 hours, a number far beyond the reach of any German public or private media.

ONLY ONE INSTITUTION on the planet is large enough and powerful enough to write and enforce laws that could make the tech companies change their policies. Partly for that reason, the European Union may soon become one of the Trump administration's most prominent targets. In theory, the EU's Digital Services Act, which took full effect last year, can be used to regulate, fine, and, in extreme circumstances, ban internet companies whose practices clash with European laws. Yet a primary intent of the act is not punitive, but rather to open up the platforms: to allow vetted researchers access to platform data, and to give citizens more transparency about what they hear and see. Freedom of speech also means the right to receive information, and at the moment social-media companies operate behind a curtain. We don't know if they are promoting or suppressing certain points of view, curbing or encouraging orchestrated political campaigns, discouraging or provoking violent riots. Above all, we don't know who is paying for misinformation to be spread online.

In the past, the EU has not hesitated to try to apply European law to tech companies. Over the past decade, for example, Google has faced three fines totaling more than $8 billion for breaking antitrust law (though one of these fines was overturned by the EU's General Court in 2024).

In November, the European Commission fined Meta more than $800 million for unfair trade practices. But for how much longer will the EU have this authority? In the fall, J. D. Vance issued an extraordinarily unsubtle threat, one that is frequently repeated in Europe. "If NATO wants us to continue supporting them and NATO wants us to continue to be a good participant in this military alliance," Vance told an interviewer, "why don't you respect American values and respect free speech?" Mark Zuckerberg, echoing Vance's misuse of the expression *free speech* to mean "freedom to conceal company practices from the public," put it even more crudely. In a conversation with Joe Rogan in January, Zuckerberg said he feels "optimistic" that President Donald Trump will intervene to stop the EU from enforcing its own antitrust laws: "I think he just wants America to win."

> A GROUP OF AMERICAN OLIGARCHS WANT TO UNDERMINE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS BECAUSE THEY DON'T WANT TO BE REGULATED.

Does America "winning" mean that European democracies, and maybe other democracies, lose? Some European politicians think it might. Robert Habeck, the German vice chancellor and a leader of that country's Green Party, believes that Musk's frenzies of political activity on X aren't the random blurts of an addled mind, but rather are "logical and systematic." In his New Year's address, Habeck said that Musk is deliberately "strengthening those who are weakening Europe," including the explicitly anti-European AfD. This, he believes, is because "a weak Europe is in the interest of those for whom regulation is an inappropriate limitation of their power."

Until recently, Russia was the most important state seeking to undermine European institutions. Vladimir Putin has long disliked the EU because it restricts Russian companies' ability to intimidate and bribe European political leaders and companies, and because the EU is larger and more powerful than Russia, whereas European countries on their own are not. Now a group of American oligarchs also want to undermine European institutions, because they don't want to be regulated—and they may have the American president on their side. Quite soon, the European Union, along with Great Britain and other democracies around the world, might find that they have to choose between their alliance with the United States and their ability to run their own elections and select their own leaders without the pressure of aggressive outside manipulation. Ironically, countries, such as Brazil, that don't have the same deep military, economic, and cultural ties to the U.S. may find it easier to maintain the sovereignty of their political systems and the transparency of their information ecosystems than Europeans.

A crunch point is imminent, when the European Commission finally concludes a year-long investigation into X. Tellingly, two people who have advised the commission on this investigation would talk with me only off the record, because the potential for reprisals against them and their organizations—whether it be online trolling and harassment or lawsuits—is too great. Still, both advisers said that the commission has the power to protect Europe's sovereignty, and to force the platforms to be more transparent. "The commission should look at the raft of laws and rules it has available and see how they can be applied," one of them told me, "always remembering that this is not about taking action against a person's voice. This is the commission saying that everyone's voice should be equal."

At least in theory, no country is obligated to become an electoral Las Vegas, as America has. Global democracies could demand greater transparency around the use of algorithms, both on social media and in the online-advertising market more broadly. They could offer consumers more control over what they see, and more information about what they don't see. They could enforce their own campaign-funding laws. These changes could make the internet more open and fair, and therefore a better, safer place for the exercise of free speech. If the chances of success seem narrow, it's not because of the lack of a viable legal framework—rather it's because, at the moment, cowardice is as viral as one of Musk's tweets. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic. *Her most recent book is* Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World.

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ALL THE KING'S CENSORS

When bureaucrats ruled over British theater

BY THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS

Several stories below the British Library's Magna Carta room, alongside a rumbling line of the London Underground, is a brightly lit labyrinth of rare and historic items. Past a series of antique rifles chained to a wall, past an intricate system of conveyor belts whisking books to the surface, the library stores an enormous collection of plays, manuscripts, and letters. Last spring, I checked my belongings at security and descended to sift through this archive—a record of correspondence between the producers and directors of British theater and a small team of censors who once worked for the Crown.

For centuries, these strict, dyspeptic, and sometimes unintentionally hilarious bureaucrats read and passed judgment on every public theatrical production in Britain, striking out references to sex, God, and politics, and forcing playwrights to, as one put it, cook their "conceptions to the taste of authority." They reported to the Lord Chamberlain's Office, which in 1737 became responsible for granting licenses to theaters and approving the texts of plays. "Examiners" made sure that no productions would offend the sovereign, blaspheme the Church, or stir audiences to political radicalism. An 1843 act expanded the department's powers, calling upon it to block any play that threatened not just the "Public Peace" but "Decorum" and "good Manners."

Hardly chosen for their artistic sensibilities or knowledge of theatrical history, the men hired by the Lord Chamberlain's Office were mostly retired military officers from the upper-middle class. From the Victorian era on, they scrutinized plays for references to racial equality and sexuality—particularly homosexuality—vulgar language, and "offensive personalities," as one guideline put it.

> "OMIT THE BUSINESS AND SPEECHES ABOUT FLYBUTTONS."

Twentieth-century English theater was, as a result of all this vigilance, "subject to more censorship than in the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I," wrote the playwright and former theater critic Nicholas de Jongh in his 2000 survey of censorship, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions*. The censors suppressed or bowdlerized countless works of genius. As I thumbed through every play I could think of from the 1820s to the 1960s (earlier manuscripts, sold as part of an examiner's private archive, can be seen in the Huntington Library in California), it became clear that the censors only got stricter—and more prudish—over time.

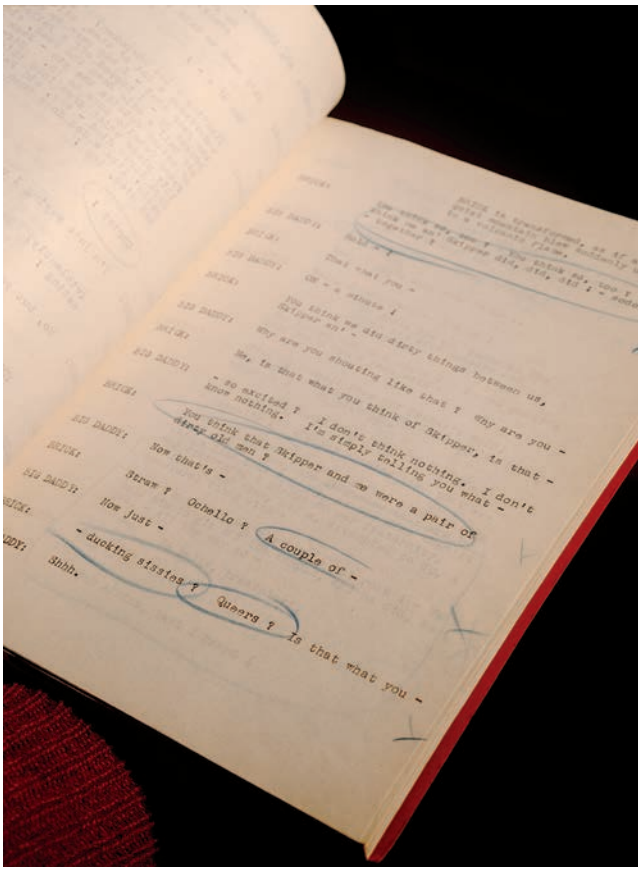
"Do not come to me with Ibsen," warned the examiner E. F. Smyth Pigott, nicely demonstrating the censors' habitual tone. He had "studied Ibsen's plays pretty carefully," and determined that the characters were, to a man, "morally deranged."

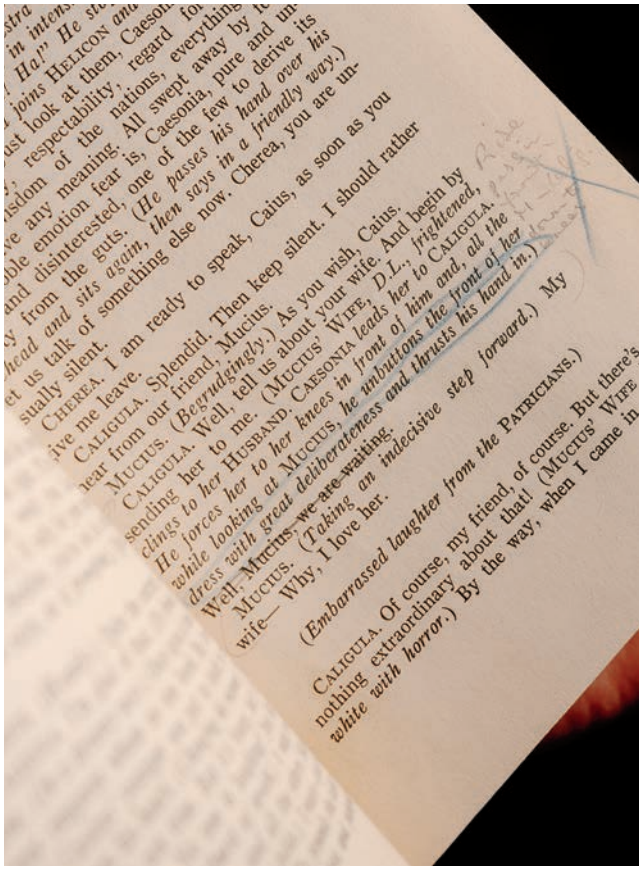
IN CARDBOARD BOXES stacked on endless rows of metal shelving, string-tie binders hold the original versions of thousands of plays. The text of each is accompanied by a typewritten "Readers' Report," most of them several pages long, summarizing the plot and cataloging the work's flaws as well as any redeeming qualities. That is followed, when available, by typed and handwritten correspondence between the censors and the applicants (usually the play's hopeful and ingratiating producers).

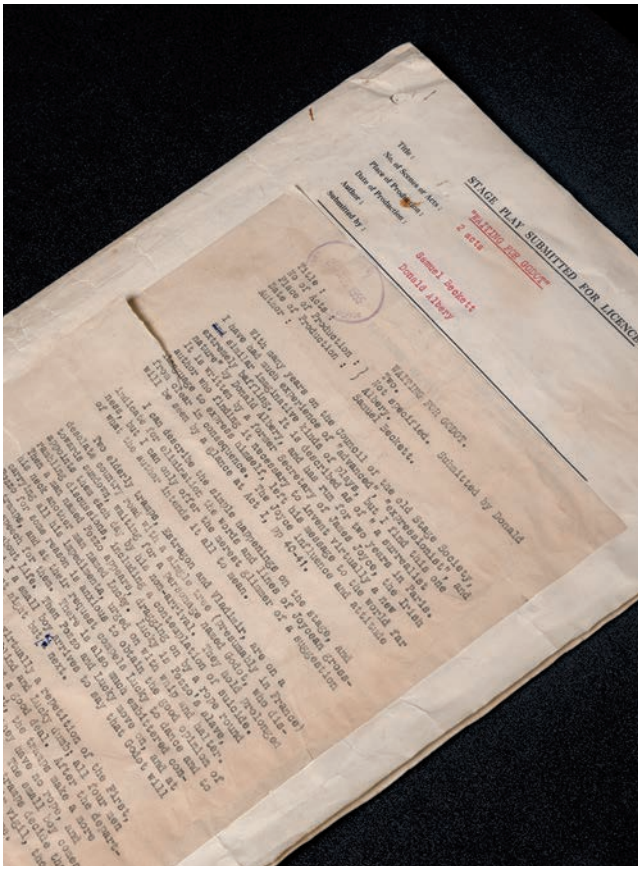
These reports can at times be as entertaining as the plays themselves. On Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, one examiner wrote: "Omit the business and speeches about flybuttons"; on Sartre's *Huis Clos*: "The play illustrates very well the difference between the French and English tastes. I don't suppose that anyone would bat an eyelid over in Paris, but here we bar Lesbians on the stage"; on Camus' *Caligula*: "This is the sort of play for which I have no liking at all"; on Tennessee Williams: "Neuroses grin through everything he writes"; and on Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*: "A good play about negroes in a Chicago slum, written with dignity, power and complete freedom from whimsy. The title is taken from a worthless piece of occasional verse about dreams deferred drying up like a raisin in the sun—or festering and exploding."

These bureaucrats were eager, as one of them wrote, to "lop off a few excrescent boughs" to save the tree. They were anti-Semitic (one successful compromise involved

Clockwise from top left: *The script of Albert Camus'* Caligula*; an examiner's notes on Tennessee Williams's* Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; an examiner's report on Samuel Beckett's* Waiting for Godot*; inside the script of* Caligula







PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS HOARE FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

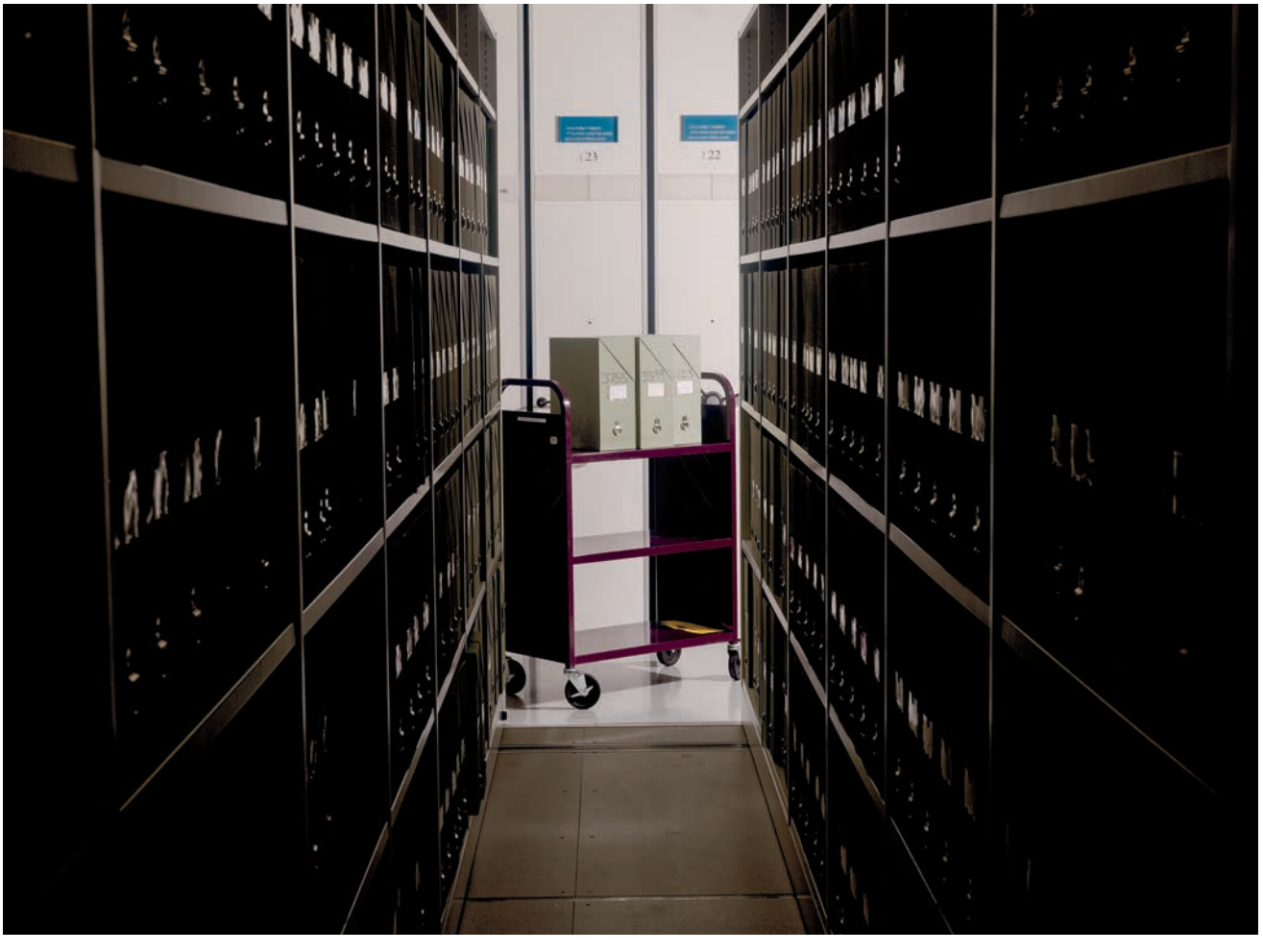
replacing a script's use of "Fuck the Pope" with "The Pope's a Jew") and virulently homophobic. In response to Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*, in 1958, one Lieutenant Colonel Vincent Troubridge noted: "There was a great fuss in New York about the references to cannibalism at the end of this play, but the Lord Chamberlain will find more objectionable the indications that the dead man was a homosexual."

But the censors could also, occasionally, aspire to the level of pointed and biting literary criticism. "This is a piece of incoherence in the manner of Samuel Beckett," the report for a 1960 production of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* begins, "though it has not that author's vein of nihilistic pessimism, and each individual sentence is comprehensible if irrelevant." One gets the impression that, like the characters from a Bolaño novel, at least some of these men were themselves failed artists and intellectuals, drawn to such authoritarian work from a place of bruised and envious ego.

Indeed, one examiner, Geoffrey Dearmer, considered among the more flexible, had written poetry during the Great War. He reported to the Lord Chamberlain alongside the tyrannical Charles Heriot, who had studied theater at university and worked on a production of *Macbeth* before moving, still as a young man, into advertising, journalism, and book publishing. He was known, de Jongh wrote, for being "gratuitously abusive." (Heriot on Edward Bond's 1965 *Saved*: "A revolting amateur play … about a bunch of brainless, ape-like yobs," including a "brainless slut of twenty-three living with her sluttish parents.") Another examiner, George Alexander Redford, was a bank manager chosen primarily because he was friends with the man he succeeded. When asked about the criteria he used in his decision making, Redford answered, "I have no critical view on plays." He was "simply bringing to bear an official point of view and keeping up a standard. … There are no principles that can be defined. I follow precedent."

The director Peter Hall, writing in *The Guardian* in 2002 about his experiences with the censors, said that the office "was largely staffed by retired naval officers with extraordinarily filthy minds. They were so alert to filth that they often found it when none was intended." Once, he called to ask why some lines had been cut from a play he was directing:

> "We all know what's going on here, Hall, don't we?" said the retired naval officer angrily. "It's up periscopes." "Up periscopes?" I queried. "Buggery, Hall, buggery!" Actually, it wasn't.



CHRIS HOARE FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Above: *Inside the archive.* Opposite page: *A cartoon from 1874 satirized the Lord Chamberlain's attempts to clean up the stage.*

AS COMIC AS these men seem now, they wielded enormous, unexamined power. The correspondence filed alongside the manuscripts reveals the extent to which the pressures of censorship warped manuscripts long before they even arrived on the censors' desks. Managers and production companies checked scripts and suggested changes in anticipation of scrutiny. In a 1967 letter, a representative of a dramatic society eager to stage *Waiting for Godot* writes, "On page 81 Estragon says 'Who farted?' The director and myself are concerned as to whether, during a public presentation, this might offend the laws of censorship. Awaiting your advice." Presumably, the answer was affirmative.

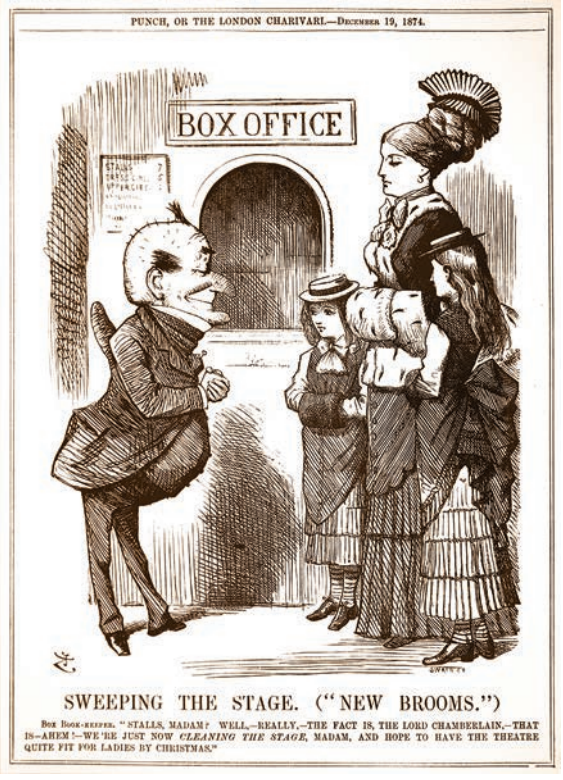
Playwrights also performed their own "pre-pre-censorship"—limiting the scope of their subject matter before and during the writing process. According to the 2004 book *The Lord Chamberlain Regrets … A History of British Theatre Censorship*, as far back as 1866, the comptroller of the LCO, Spencer Ponsonby-Fane, "explicitly commended examiners for operating this 'indirect system of censorship' because it enabled the Office to keep the number of prohibited plays to a minimum and forestall concerns about repression."

Some plays made it past the censors only as a result of human error. When I met Kate Dossett, a professor at the University of Leeds who specializes in Black-theater history, she told me that the case of the playwright Una Marson is an example of what "gets hidden in this collection." Marson's 1932 play, *At What a Price*, depicts a young Black woman from the Jamaican countryside who moves to Kingston and takes a job as a stenographer. Her white employer seduces—or, in today's understanding, sexually harasses—and impregnates her. The drama is a subtle exploration of miscegenation, one of the core taboos that the LCO often clamped down on. But the play was approved because the examiner—confused by the protagonist's class markers and education—didn't realize that she was Black.

"This play is to be produced by the League of Coloured Peoples but it seems to have no particular relation to the objects of that institution except that the scene is in Jamaica and some of the minor characters are coloured and speak a more or less diverting dialect," the report states. "The main story is presumably about English people and is an old-fashioned artless affair."

From the beginning, some prominent figures fought against the system of censorship. Henry Brooke's *Gustavus Vasa* bears the distinction of having been the first British play banned under the Licensing Act of 1737. The work, ostensibly about the Swedish liberator Gustav I, was interpreted as a thinly veiled attack on Prime Minister Robert Walpole. Responding to the ban in a satirical defense of the censors, Samuel Johnson wrote that the government should go further, and make it a "felony to teach to read without a license from the lord chamberlain." Only then would citizens be able to rest, in "ignorance and peace," and the government be safe from "the insults of the poets."

Henry James, in his day, spoke out in defense of the English playwright, who "has less dignity—thanks to the censor's arbitrary rights upon his work—than that of any other man of letters in Europe." So, too, did George Bernard Shaw. "It is a frightful thing to see the greatest thinkers, poets and authors of modern Europe, men like Ibsen," Shaw wrote, "delivered helplessly into the vulgar hands of such a noodle as this despised and incapable old official."

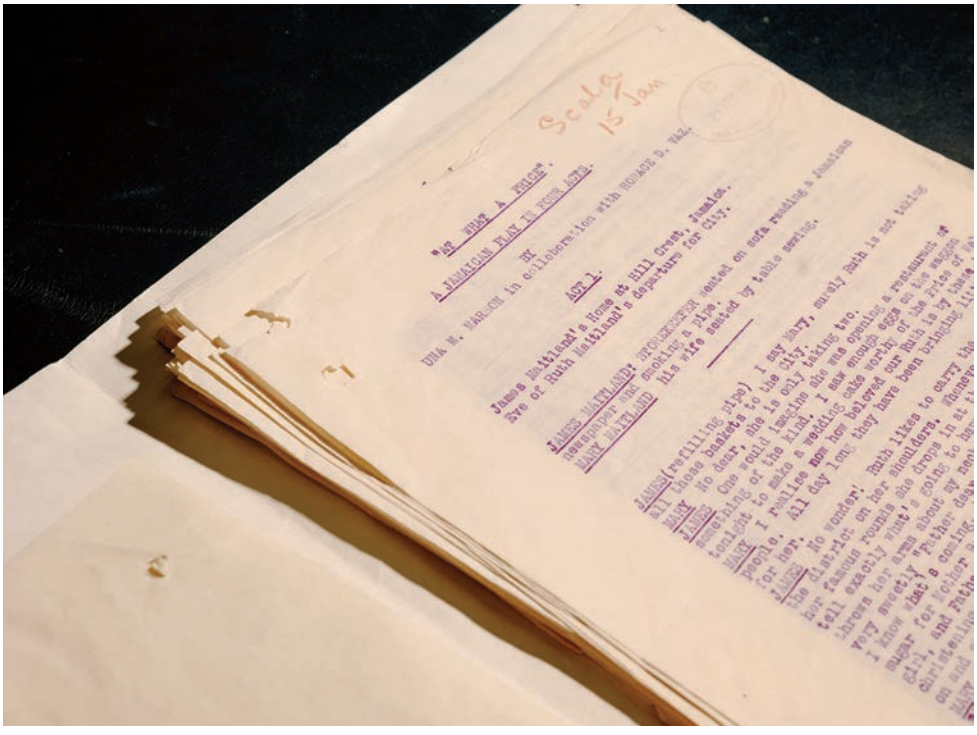


By the time the Theatres Act of 1968 abolished the censorship of plays, social attitudes were changing. The influx of workers from Jamaica and other countries in the Commonwealth in the 1950s challenged the stability of racial dynamics; sex between men was decriminalized in England and Wales in 1967; divorce became more common; and the rock-and-roll era destigmatized drugs. For years, theaters had been taking advantage of a loophole: Because the LCO's jurisdiction applied only to public performances, theaters could charge patrons a nominal membership fee, thereby transforming themselves into private subscription clubs out of the censors' reach.

It must have gotten lonely, trying to stand so long against the changing times. "I don't understand this," Heriot wrote, plaintively, about *Hair*. The American musical was banned three times for extolling "dirt, anti-establishment views, homosexuality and free love," but in the end, one gets the impression that the censors just gave up. Alexander Lock, a curator at the library, pointed me to Heriot's report on the final version of the musical. The pain of defeat in his voice is almost palpable: "A curiously half-hearted attempt to vet the script" had been made, he wrote, but many offenses were left intact.

Hair opened at the Shaftesbury Theatre in September 1968. That month, by royal assent, no new plays

UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE / GETTY



The script of Una Marson's At What a Price

required approval from the Lord Chamberlain's Office, which was left to devote its attention to the planning of royal weddings, funerals, and garden parties.

SOME MAY BE TEMPTED to dismiss the censors' legacy as limited to, as a 1967 article in *The Times* of London had it, "the trivia of indecency." But the damage was far deeper. The censors, de Jongh wrote, stunted English theater, kept it frivolous and parochial, and prevented it from dealing with "the greatest issues and anguishes of this violent century." No playwrights addressed "the fascist regimes of the 1930s, the process that led to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the ghastliness perpetrated by Hitler and Stalin, or the tyrannies experienced in China and under other totalitarian leaderships. No wonder. Their plays would have been disallowed. In the 1930s you could not win licences for plays that might offend Hitler or Mussolini or Stalin." Shakespeare never "had to put up with" censorship so "rigorous and narrow-minded," Peter Hall wrote. His "richest plays and his finest lines, packed with erotic double meanings, would have been smartly excised by the Lord Chamberlain's watchdogs."

These practices may strike us today as outlandish and anachronistic. Many of us take for granted creative license and the freedom of expression that undergirds it. But the foundation upon which these rights—as we think of them—are situated is far less immutable than we would like to imagine. As recent trends in the United States and elsewhere have shown, advances toward greater tolerance are reversible.

Indeed, many Americans on both the right and the left correctly sense this, even if they do not always understand what genuine censorship looks like. Activists on college campuses have confused the ability to occupy and disrupt physical space for the right to dissent verbally. Meanwhile, Elon Musk warns that "wokeness" will stifle free speech even as he uses the social-media site he owns to manipulate public debate.

Perusing the plays in the Lord Chamberlain's archive is, among other things, a reminder of what censorship really is: government power applied to speech to either limit or compel it. And it is also a reminder that in the long term, many such attempts backfire. They reveal, as Sir Roly Keating, who was chief executive of the library from 2012 until the beginning of this year, told me, more about the censors' own "fears, paranoias, obsessions" than they ever succeed in concealing.

There is also the sheer fact of what Keating called "this extraordinary imposition of bureaucracy." Just as the Stasi archive provides unparalleled insight into the interplay of art and politics in postwar East German society, and the Hoover-era FBI's copious files on Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, and other Black American luminaries amount to a valuable cultural repository, the Lord Chamberlain's archive can now be seen as one of the preeminent collections of Black and queer theater in the English-speaking world. It includes not just the plays that were staged, but also those that were rejected, and in some cases multiple drafts of them. These are precisely the kinds of works that, without the backing of institutions that have the resources to protect their own archive, might have been lost to history.

"Theater's an ephemeral medium," Keating told me. "Early drafts of plays change all the time; many don't get published at all." Among the many ramifications of censorship, I had not adequately considered this one: the degree to which methodical suppression can create the most meticulous collection. It is a deeply satisfying justice—even a form of revenge—that the hapless bureaucrats who endeavored so relentlessly to squelch and block independent thought have instead so painstakingly preserved it for future generations. *A*

Thomas Chatterton Williams is a staff writer at The Atlantic. *Support for this article was provided by the British Library's Eccles Institute for the Americas & Oceania Phil Davies Fellowship.*

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CAPITULATION IS CONTAGIOUS

By killing a cartoon that lampooned its owner, The Washington Post *set a dangerous precedent.*

BY ADRIENNE LaFRANCE

At the height of his powers, Jay Gould was known by many names, few of them flattering. People called him the Skunk of Wall Street, the Napoleon of Finance, and Mephistopheles himself. Gould, alongside rivals such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and John D. Rockefeller, was a captain of industry—or, as they would all come to be known, a robber baron.

These men were stupendously powerful, and ruthlessly devoted to the perpetuation of their own wealth and influence. They battled one another for control of America's railways. They hoarded gold, manipulated markets, and exploited workers. They bribed journalists to win favorable coverage and, when that didn't work, threatened the writers and editors who displeased them.

These threats carried weight. Rockefeller's Standard Oil could crush a newspaper by pulling advertising if it didn't like what it saw. Eventually Gould and Rockefeller bought or otherwise invested in newspapers, in an attempt to exert greater influence over how they were covered. Gould even bought a majority interest in Western Union, which gave him power to control the flow of vital information.

Even so, muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell took on Standard Oil. Cartoonists such as Thomas Nast and Joseph Keppler lampooned the unconstrained power of the industrialists and the corruption of Tammany Hall and its leader, William "Boss" Tweed. Tweed was fixated on the political cartoons that mocked him. "I don't care so much what the newspapers write about me—my constituents can't read," he said. "But, damn it, they can see pictures."

The brave few who stood up to the magnates of the Gilded Age came to mind in January, when Ann Telnaes, a *Washington Post* cartoonist, resigned over the paper's refusal to publish a cartoon in which she skewered today's titans of industry—Jeff Bezos, the owner of the *Post*, among them. After resigning, Telnaes posted a rough sketch of the cartoon on Substack, and *The Atlantic* is publishing it here with her permission. It shows Bezos and other tech and media giants (along with Mickey Mouse, representing his owner) kneeling and prostrating before a colossal Donald Trump. Telnaes, in explaining her departure, wrote that there have been "instances where sketches have been rejected or revisions requested, but never because of the point of view inherent in the cartoon's commentary."

Telnaes told me that she didn't see her resignation as courageous, merely necessary. "When a newspaper decides to turn its head away from holding government and powerful people accountable, it threatens a free press and, by extension, democracy," she said.

David Shipley, the newspaper's Opinions editor, has said he spiked the cartoon because he wanted to avoid "repetition" with columns that the section had published or assigned. His reasoning was unpersuasive. There have been numerous signs that Bezos, who successfully stewarded the *Post* through its "Democracy Dies in Darkness" years, has shifted his position on Trump. Once a champion of journalists who refuse to be intimidated by bullies, Bezos is now behaving in a more accommodating way. Last fall, he killed the paper's planned endorsement of Kamala Harris days before the election. The day after the election, he tweeted "big congratulations" to Trump, who has vowed to imprison Americans who say or write things he doesn't like. Bezos then traveled to Mar-a-Lago to meet with Trump and Elon Musk—and had Amazon pledge $1 million to Trump's lavishly oversubscribed inauguration fund.

The cartoon I first thought of when I read about Telnaes's resignation was Joseph Keppler's 1889 drawing "The Bosses of the Senate," in which bloated monopolists totter into the Senate chamber, each top-hatted and bearing the name of

Joseph Keppler's "The Bosses of the Senate" (1889)

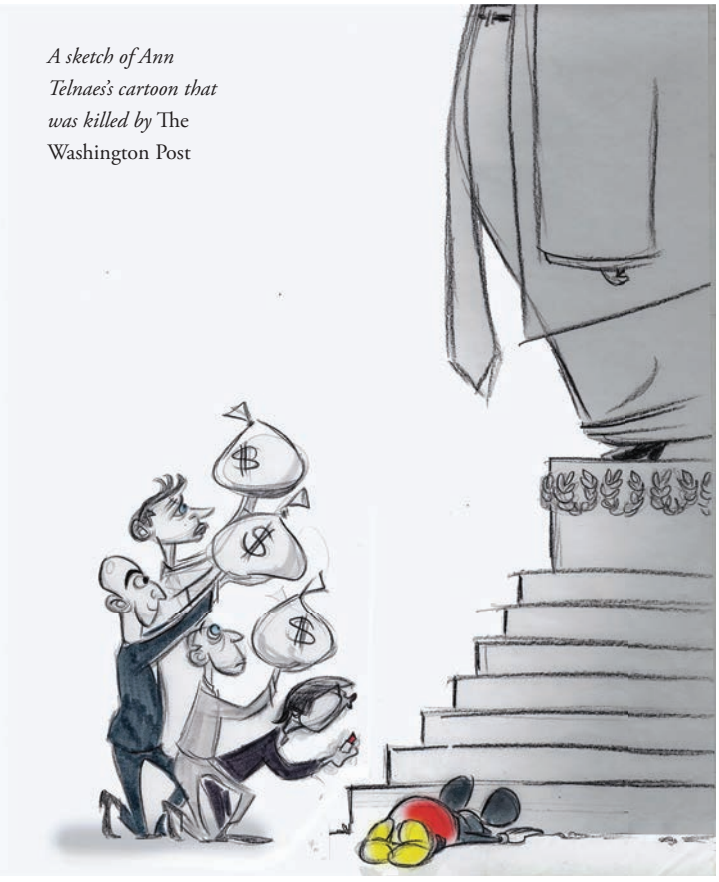
NAWROCKI / CLASSICSTOCK / GETTY

his own special interest: Standard Oil Trust, Sugar Trust, Copper Trust, Coal, and so on. The cartoon was more than an ephemeral jab. Alongside journalistic investigations into these same powerful interests, "The Bosses of the Senate" helped citizens see in the clearest possible terms how the powerful put themselves and their fortunes ahead of the public good.

In today's information-soaked world, a single political cartoon rarely makes much noise. Telnaes's did, though not for the reasons she'd hoped. The suppression of her cartoon has become a symbol of spinelessness—of a once-intrepid American newspaper now too afraid to lampoon the richest men on Earth for their obsequiousness. Sycophancy has a kind of momentum. Like any form of groupthink, it is part conformity, part self-preservation. The first person to grovel is undignified, but each subsequent act of cowardice allows the next person to acquiesce more easily.

Trump promises to punish people for disagreeing with him. Lately, he's found that such threats are sufficient to bring many of his perceived enemies in line. This was certainly the case when the leaders at Disney rolled over after Trump sued ABC for alleged defamation by George Stephanopoulos, in a case that First Amendment lawyers widely believed Disney would have won. This is one way that institutions fail: not because they are forced into submission, but because people in positions of power collapse all on their own.

Today, the three richest men in America are Bezos, Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg. These new robber barons have proclaimed their commitment to free speech. When Trump, in his second term, makes good on his promises to seek revenge against the American citizens who work as journalists, we will see whether they choose to back up that commitment. Like the robber barons who preceded them, Musk and Zuckerberg seem less interested in the public good than in their own personal enrichment. Musk, in particular, has built a platform designed to advance his political goals and discredit his opponents. But Bezos, too, has gone so far as to write a column in his own newspaper blaming its journalists for public distrust in them. Somehow, he managed to leave out any mention of Trump's years-long campaign to cast them as "enemies of the people."



A sketch of Ann Telnaes's cartoon that was killed by The Washington Post

ANN TELNAES

Plenty of Americans can still see all of this quite clearly—those who believe in truth, and who know that freedom of speech and freedom of the press are God-given rights, not granted to us by the government, or Elon Musk, or anyone else, but rights that we are born with, and that many of our fellow Americans have died for.

Sycophancy, as we see, has momentum, but so too does courage. Ida Tarbell, in her investigation of Standard Oil, documented a pattern of bribery, fraud, and monopolistic business practices. She described a culture in which "business is war" and "morals have nothing to do with its practice." But she also implored her fellow citizens: "What are we going to do about it? For it is *our* business. We, the people of the United States, and nobody else, must cure whatever is wrong in the industrial situation." There is much talk of the institutions that protect democracy, and how crucial they are to the American project. But those institutions work only because of the individuals who make them work. For every powerful person who capitulates, there are among us many more who see the world as Tarbell did, and as Telnaes does, and are willing to act on their principles. *A*

Adrienne LaFrance is the executive editor of The Atlantic.

Shipwrecked in the Amazon

Photographs by Musuk Nolte

Threaded throughout the Amazon, the world's largest rainforest, is a system of rivers. More than 1,000 tributaries collect rain and glacial runoff from a basin nearly the size of the contiguous United States. They gather into a waterway so expansive that oceangoing vessels can travel 900 miles inland from the Atlantic coast and dock at the river port of Manaus, Brazil.

At least under normal circumstances. A drought that began in 2023 deepened last year into the worst in the Amazon's recorded history. In Manaus, a sprawling city of more than 2 million, the depth of the Rio Negro, a major branch of the Amazon River, reached an all-time low of 40 feet in October, almost 25 feet lower than would be typical at that time of year. The Peruvian photographer Musuk Nolte has documented the drought's impact on Manaus's outlying communities. Many residents live in houses meant to float on the water; the drought has left them effectively shipwrecked. One river trader, who typically transported his bananas by boat, told Nolte that he was forced to carry them overland in 104-degree heat. Others saw no choice but to abandon the lives they'd always known and try their luck in the urban tumult of Manaus itself.

Through years of reporting in the Amazon, I've gotten to know the region well. Viewing Nolte's photos is like waking up in an alternate reality: a sea turned to desert. But the transformation shouldn't come as a surprise. Over the past 50 years, an area of the rainforest larger than the state of Texas has been razed to make way for farmland and cattle pasture. Scientists have long warned that this could disrupt the virtuous cycle through which trees fuel rain clouds by releasing water vapor. Nolte's photos seem to show the results.

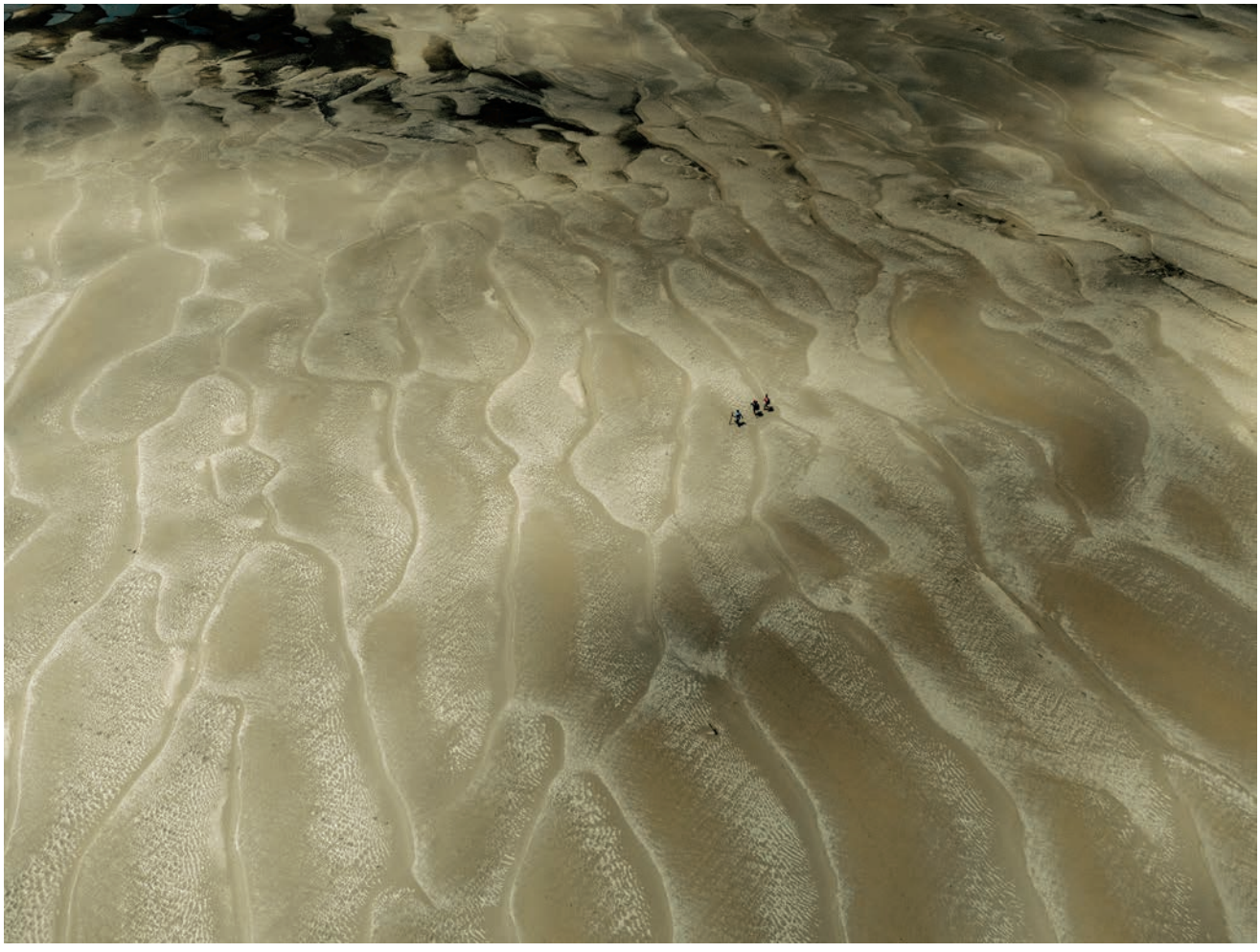
One of his images features a mostly dry riverbed, its sand mysteriously streaked. Nolte told me that the marks had been left by outboard motors riding perilously low as water levels plunged. He calls them scars, visible signs of a wounded planet.

— Alex Cuadros

An Amazon lake east of Manaus, Brazil

Above: *Two fishermen push a boat toward a stretch of still-navigable water next to Lago do Aleixo, east of Manaus.*

Left: *Falling water levels have made it difficult for Raimundo Silva Do Carmo, a river trader, to navigate the area around Puraquequara, where he works.*



Above: *Fishermen traverse a dry riverbed in Manacapuru, a city west of Manaus.*

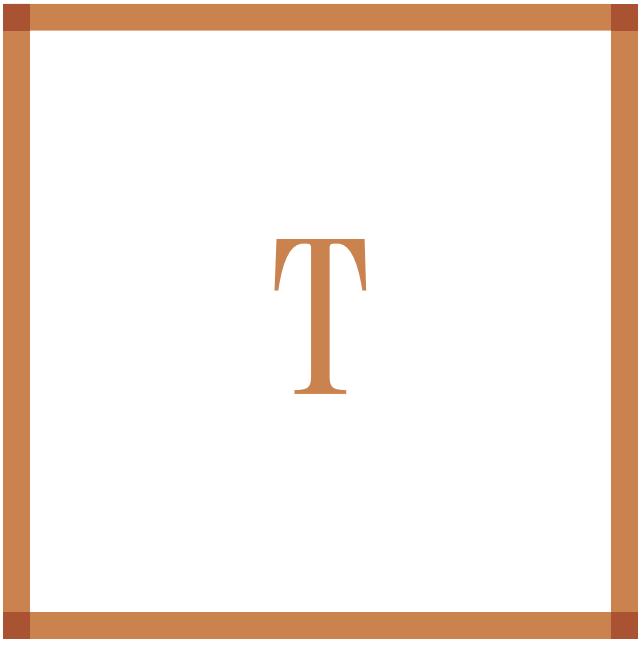
Right: *A river trader stands on the deck of his family's home, which used to float on the river.*

Illustrations by Javier Jaén

Stuck In Place

By Yoni Appelbaum

Why Americans stopped moving houses—and why that's a very big problem



The idea that people should be able to choose their own communities—instead of being stuck where they are born—is a distinctly American innovation. It is the foundation for the country's prosperity and democracy, and it just may be America's most profound contribution to the world.

No society has ever been as mobile as the United States once was. No society has even come close. In the 19th century, the heyday of American mobility, roughly a third of all Americans changed addresses each year. European visitors were astonished, and more than slightly appalled. The American "is devoured with a passion for locomotion," the French writer Michel Chevalier observed in 1835; "he cannot stay in one place." Americans moved far more often, over longer distances, and to greater advantage than did people in the lands from which they had come. They understood this as the key to their national character, the thing that made their country distinctive. "We are a migratory people and we flourish best when we make an occasional change of base," one 19th-century newspaper explained. "We have cut loose from the old styles of human vegetation, the former method, of sticking like an oyster to one spot through numberless succeeding generations," wrote another.

As the 19th century turned into the 20th, as two world wars passed, as the Baby Boom began, Americans kept on moving. And as Americans moved around, they moved up. They broke away from stultifying social hierarchies, depleted farmland, declining towns, dead-end jobs. If the first move didn't work out, they could always see a more promising destination beckoning them onward.

These ceaseless migrations shaped a new way of thinking. "When the mobility of population was always so great," the historian Carl Becker observed, "the strange face, the odd speech, the curious custom of dress, and the unaccustomed religious faith ceased to be a matter of comment or concern." And as diverse peoples learned to live alongside one another, the possibilities of pluralism opened. The term *stranger*, in other lands synonymous with *enemy*, instead, Becker wrote, became "a common form of friendly salutation." In a nation where people are forever arriving and departing, a newcomer can seem less like a threat than a welcome addition: *Howdy, stranger*.

Entrepreneurship, innovation, growth, social equality—the most appealing features of the young republic all traced back to this single, foundational fact: Americans were always looking ahead to their next beginning, always seeking to move up by moving on.

But over the past 50 years, this engine of American opportunity has stopped working. Americans have become less likely to move from one state to another, or to move within a state, or even to switch residences within a city. In the 1960s, about one out of every five Americans moved in any given year—down from one in three in the 19th century, but a frenetic rate nonetheless. In 2023, however, only one in 13 Americans moved.

The sharp decline in geographic mobility is the single most important social change of the past half century, although other shifts have attracted far more attention. In that same span, fewer Americans have started new businesses, and fewer Americans have switched jobs—from 1985 to 2014, the share of people who became entrepreneurs fell by half. More Americans are ending up worse off than their parents—in 1970, about eight out of every 10 young adults could expect to earn more than their parents; by the turn of the century, that was true of only half of young adults. Church membership is down by about a third since 1970, as is the share of Americans who socialize several times a week. Membership in any kind of group is down by half. The birth rate keeps falling. And although half of Americans used to think most people could be trusted, today only a third think the same.

These facts by now form a depressingly familiar litany. They are often regarded as disparate phenomena of mysterious origins. But each of them can be traced, at least in part, to the loss of mobility.

In 2016, Donald Trump tapped into the anger, frustration, and alienation that these changes had produced. Among white voters who had moved more than two hours from their hometown, Hillary Clinton enjoyed a solid six-point lead in the vote that year. Those living within a two-hour drive, though, backed Trump by nine points. And those who had never left their hometown supported him by a remarkable 26 points. Eight years later, he tapped that support again to recapture the White House.

Today, America is often described as suffering from a housing crisis, but that's not quite right. In many parts of the country, housing is cheap and abundant, but good jobs and good schools are scarce. Other areas are rich in opportunities but short on affordable homes. That holds true even within individual cities, neighborhood by neighborhood.

As a result, many Americans are stranded in communities with flat or declining prospects, and lack the practical ability to move across the tracks, the state, or the country—to choose where they want to live. Those who do move are typically heading not to the places where opportunities are abundant, but to those where housing is cheap. Only the affluent and well educated are exempt from this situation; the freedom to choose one's city or community has become a privilege of class.

The sclerosis that afflicts the U.S.—more and more each year, each decade—is not the result of technology gone awry or a reactionary movement or any of the other culprits that are often invoked to explain our biggest national problems. The exclusion that has left so many Americans feeling trapped and hopeless traces back, instead, to the self-serving actions of a privileged group who say that inclusion, diversity, and social equality are among their highest values.

Reviving mobility offers us the best hope of restoring the American promise. But it is largely self-described progressives who stand in the way.

I. Moving Day

The great holiday of American society at its most nomadic was Moving Day, observed by renters and landlords throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th with a giant game of musical houses. Moving Day was a festival of new hopes and new beginnings, of shattered dreams and shattered crockery—"quite as recognized a day as Christmas or the Fourth of July," as a Chicago newspaper put it in 1882. It was primarily an urban holiday, although many rural communities where leased farms predominated held their own observances. The dates differed from state to state and city to city—April 1 in Pittsburgh, October 1 in Nashville and New Orleans—but May 1 was the most popular. And nothing quite so astonished visitors from abroad as the spectacle of thousands upon thousands of people picking up and swapping homes in a single day.

For months before Moving Day, Americans prepared for the occasion. Tenants gave notice to their landlords or received word of the new rent. Then followed a frenzied period of house hunting as people, generally women, scouted for a new place to live that would, in some respect, improve upon the old. "They want more room, or they want as much room for less rent, or they want a better location, or they want some convenience not heretofore enjoyed," *The Topeka Daily Capital* summarized. These were months of general anticipation; cities and towns were alive with excitement.

Early on the day itself, people commenced moving everything they owned down to the street corners in great piles of barrels and crates and carpetbags, vacating houses and apartments before the new renters arrived. "Be out at 12 you must, for another family are on your heels, and Thermopylae was a very tame pass compared with the excitement which rises when two families meet in the same hall," a Brooklyn minister warned.

JAVIER JAÉN

The carmen, driving their wagons and drays through the narrow roads, charged extortionate rates, lashing mattresses and furnishings atop heaps of other goods and careening through the streets to complete as many runs as they could before nightfall. Treasure hunters picked through detritus in the gutters. Utility companies scrambled to register all the changes. Dusk found families that had made local moves settling into their new home, unpacking belongings, and meeting the neighbors.

In St. Louis, the publisher of a city directory estimated in 1906 that over a five-year span, only one in five local families had remained at the same address. "Many private families make it a point to move every year," *The Daily Republican* of Wilmington, Delaware, reported in 1882. Moving Day was nothing short of "a religious observance," the humorist Mortimer Thomson wrote in 1857. "The individual who does not move on the first of May is looked upon … as a heretic and a dangerous man."

Moving Day was, *The Times-Democrat* of New Orleans attested, "an essentially American institution." Europeans might move "in a sober, quiet, old-world way, once in a decade or thereabout," the paper explained, but not annually, in the "excessive energetic manner of the nomadic, roving American." European visitors made a point of witnessing the peculiar ritual and included accounts of carts flying up and down the streets in their travelogs.

For some, Moving Day meant trauma and dislocation. In tightening markets, landlords seized the opportunity to jack up rents. But in most places and for most people, Moving Day was an opportunity. The housing stock was rapidly expanding. You could spot the approach of the holiday, a Milwaukee paper explained, by the sight of new buildings being rushed to completion and old houses being renovated and restored. As wealthier renters snapped up the newest properties to come to market, less affluent renters grabbed the units they vacated in a chain of moves that left almost all tenants better off. Landlords faced the ruinous prospect of extended vacancies if they couldn't fill their units on Moving Day. Tenants used their leverage to demand repairs and upgrades to their house or apartment, or to bargain for lower rent.

The habit of annual moves was not confined to the poor or the working class. Nor was it confined to local relocations. Americans moved to new territories, thriving towns, and rapidly growing cities, driven forward by hope. "That people should move so often in this city, is generally a matter of their own volition," the journalist and social reformer Lydia Maria Child wrote of New York. "Aspirations after the infinite," she added tartly, "lead them to perpetual change, in the restless hope of finding something better and better still." It's not a bad summary of the American dream.

WHAT LUBRICATED all of this movement was not an abundance of space but rather a desperate eagerness to put space to better use. The viability of their communities, Americans believed, rested on their capacity to attract merchants and manufacturers and, above all, residents. Land use was regulated as early as the colonial era, but the rules were sparse, and written to maximize development. A fallow field or an abandoned mine could be seized; a vacant lot could draw a stiff fine. Noxious businesses, such as tanneries and distilleries, were consigned to the margins, for fear that they would deter construction in the center. The goal was growth.

The nation's push westward in the 1800s created new opportunities, and Americans moved toward them—dispossessing Native peoples of their land—but westward migration was never the whole story, or even most of it. The rate of migration *within* the East was even higher, as Americans drained away from farms and into market towns, county seats, and teeming industrial cities. There were few rules about what could be constructed on private property, and a diverse array of buildings sprang up to meet demand. A new arrival might rent a room in a private home, boardinghouse, tenement, residential hotel, or bachelors-only apartment building. Some of these structures were garish, or stuck out from their surroundings like tall weeds. Reformers were eager to manage the chaos, and cities began to adopt more extensive building codes, aimed at reducing the risk of fire and protecting the health of residents. But old buildings continually yielded to newer ones, as neighborhoods climbed higher to meet demand; the first townhouse on a block of freestanding homes might, a couple of decades later, be the last remaining townhouse sandwiched between apartment buildings.

Americans once tended to look at houses the way Americans today look at cars or iPhones—consumer goods to be enjoyed until the next model came within reach.

So long as speculators erected new buildings, so long as aging houses were turned over to the rental market or split up into flats, so long as immigrant entrepreneurs built new tenements, people could reasonably expect to find a new home each year that in some way exceeded their old. And through the 19th century and into the early decades of the 20th, the supply of homes steadily expanded.

Americans of that era tended to look at houses the way Americans today look at cars or iPhones—as useful contrivances that nevertheless lose their value quickly and are prone to rapid technological obsolescence. Every year, newly constructed and

freshly renovated homes offered wonders and marvels: water that ran out of taps, cold and then hot; indoor plumbing and flush toilets and connections to sewer lines; gas lighting, and then electric; showers and bathtubs; ranges and stoves; steam heating. Factories created new materials and cranked out hinges, doorknobs, hooks, wooden trim, and railings in a dizzying variety of styles. One decade's prohibitive luxury was the next's affordable convenience and the third's absolute necessity. A home was less a long-term investment—most people leased—than a consumer good, to be enjoyed until the next model came within reach.

The cultural implications of an always-on-the-move society were profound, and perhaps counterintuitive. As they observed the nomadic style of American life, some critics worried that the constantly shifting population would produce an atomized society, leaving people unable to develop strong ties, invest in local institutions, maintain democratic government, or build warm communities. In fact, that got the relationship between mobility and community precisely backward. Over the course of the 19th century and well into the 20th, Americans formed and participated in a remarkable array of groups, clubs, and associations. Religious life thrived. Democracy expanded. Communities flourished.

The key to vibrant communities, it turns out, is the exercise of choice. Left to their own devices, most people will stick to ingrained habits, to familiar circles of friends, to accustomed places. When people move from one community to another, though, they leave behind their old job, connections, identity, and seek out new ones. They force themselves to go meet their neighbors, or to show up at a new church on Sunday, despite the awkwardness. American individualism didn't mean that people were disconnected from one another; it meant that they constructed their own individual identity by actively choosing the communities to which they would belong.

All of this individual movement added up to a long, grand social experiment—a radical reinvention of what society could be. In the European lands that many immigrants had come from, successive generations lived in the same towns, inhabited the same houses, plied the same trades, and farmed the same land. Experience had taught them that admitting new members left a community with less to go around, so they treated outsiders with suspicion and hostility. They learned that rifts produced lasting bitterness, so they prioritized consensus and conformity. Village life placed the communal above the individual, tradition ahead of innovation, insularity before acceptance.

But when the earliest settlers crossed the Atlantic, they left behind their assumptions. They had moved once, so they should be able to move again. The Puritans soon codified into law the right to leave the Massachusetts Bay Colony, likely the first time anywhere in the world that this freedom was put into writing and defined as a fundamental right. Two centuries later, as the midwestern territories competed to attract residents, they would add a complementary freedom, the right to arrive—and to stay, without the need to secure the formal consent of the community. Together, these revolutionary rights conferred on Americans a new freedom to move, enabling the American story.

Mobility was not always uncontested, of course. Waves of immigrants faced discrimination from those who had come only slightly before, turned away from communities just because they were Irish, or Italian, or Jewish. Laws excluded the Chinese, and vigilantes hounded them from their homes. Women seldom enjoyed the full privilege of mobility, constrained by social strictures, legal barriers, and physical dangers. And even after the end of slavery, Black Americans had to fight at every turn to move around, and toward opportunity, in the face of segregation and racist violence. But by the end of the 19th century, mobility was a deeply ingrained habit throughout the United States.

That habit has now been lost, and the toll is enormous. By one estimate, the decline in mobility is costing the American economy nearly $2 trillion each year in lost productivity. The personal costs may be even greater, albeit sometimes harder to recognize. Residential relocation is like physical exercise in this way: Whether you're sitting on a couch or ensconced in a home, you're unlikely to identify inertia as the underlying source of your problems. It's only when you get up that the benefits of moving around become clear. People who have recently changed residences report experiencing more supportive relationships and feeling more optimism, greater sense of purpose, and increased self-respect. Those who want to move and cannot, by contrast, become more cynical and less satisfied with their lives. And Americans are shifting from that first category to the second: Since 1970, the likelihood that someone who expects to move in the next few years will successfully follow through on that ambition has fallen by almost half.

Americans of previous generations would be shocked by our stagnation. The inclination to keep moving was long the defining feature of the American character. And yet today, we're stuck. What went wrong?

II. Who Killed American Mobility?

Blame Jane Jacobs. American mobility has been slowly strangled by generations of reformers, seeking to reassert control over their neighborhoods and their neighbors. And Jacobs, the much-celebrated urbanist who died in 2006, played a pivotal role.

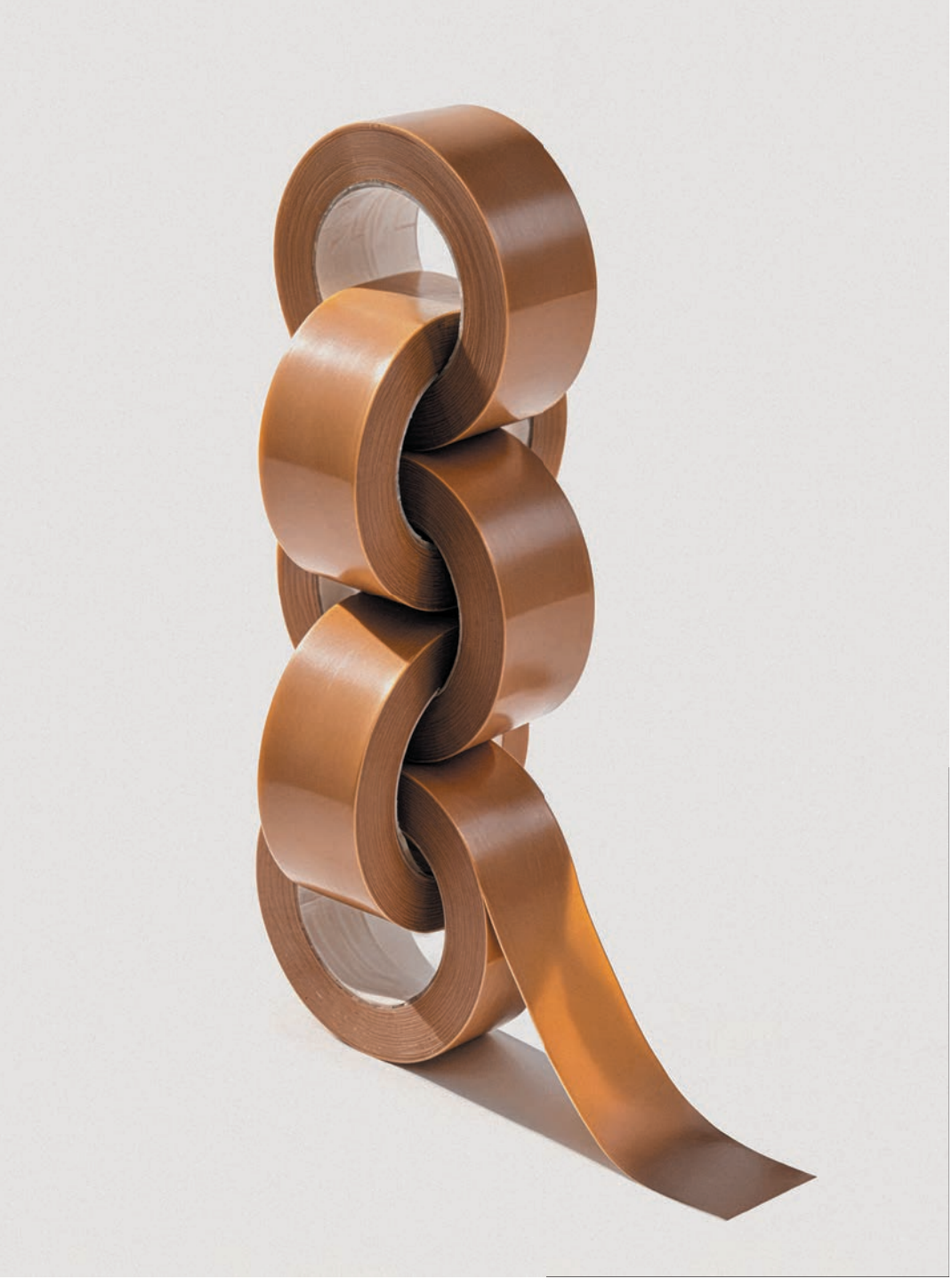
In 1947, when Jacobs and her husband, Robert, moved to their new home in Manhattan's West Village, the area was still filled with immigrants and their children, with people constantly moving in and moving out. Before the Jacobses arrived at 555 Hudson Street, the building had been rented by an immigrant named Rudolph Hechler, who lived with his family above the store they operated. A large sign read FOUNTAIN SERVICE—SODA—CANDY, and a cheerful awning added cigars and toys to the list of promised delights. Hechler had come to the U.S. from Austrian Galicia when he was 13, and spent much of his life working in the garment industry, chasing the American dream. He moved between apartments and neighborhoods until he had finally saved enough to move his family from the Bronx to the West Village and open his own shop.

Bob and Jane were different. They were young, urban professionals, Bob an architect and Jane a writer for a State Department magazine. And they came to stay. With dual incomes and

no kids, they were able to put down $7,000 in cash to purchase a house, placing them among the scarcely 1 percent of families in all of Greenwich Village who owned their home.

Instead of finding a new tenant for the storefront, the Jacobses ripped it out, transforming their building into a single-family home. They cleared the bricks from the lot behind the house, turning it into a fenced-in garden. On the first floor, they installed a modern kitchen, dining room, and living room, with French doors opening onto the backyard. "The front of No. 555," a preservation report later noted, "was rebuilt in 1950 at considerable expense, using metal sash and two-colored brick to complete the horizontality of the wide windows. It retains no vestige of its original appearance." (The new facade, the report concluded, had been "badly remodeled," and was "completely out of character" with the neighborhood.)

That Jacobs would later celebrate the importance of mixed-use spaces to urban vitality, drawing a vivid portrait of the remaining shops on her street, presents no small irony. But in doing as she pleased with the property she had purchased, she was only upholding a long American tradition. The larger irony involves what Jacobs did next. Although she is widely remembered as a keen-eyed advocate for lively and livable cities, her primary legacy was to stultify them—ensuring that no one else could freely make changes as she had and, most important, ruling out the replacement of existing buildings with larger structures that could make room for upward strivers.



Jacobs arrived in the West Village just as many Americans were abandoning dense, urban neighborhoods for the attractions of suburbia. For decades, city officials and reformers had worried about the spread of urban blight. They looked at the crowding, chaos, and confusion of immigrant neighborhoods like the West Village with horror. They wanted to sweep away neighborhoods that grew and decayed organically and replace them with carefully planned blocks. Urban planners sought to provide families with affordable homes, consolidate the jumble of corner stores into supermarkets, and keep offices at a distance. Everything would be rational, everything modern. They wanted to take the rich stew of urban life and separate out its components like a toddler's dinner—the peas to one quadrant, the carrots to another, the chicken to a third—safely removed from direct contact.

JAVIER JAÉN

In 1916, the year Jacobs was born, New York City began an ambitious effort to achieve this sort of separation: enacting the first comprehensive zoning code in the United States. By the time Jacobs moved there almost two decades later, the once-radical scheme of zoning, with sections of the city separated out for different uses, seemed less a startling change than a natural feature of the city's environment. Urban planners had hailed it as a cure for poverty and blight; it was supposed to ensure a better future for the city. But zoning failed to produce these benefits, instead limiting the ability of New York and like-minded cities to adapt to evolving needs. Officials soon embraced a more radical scheme of urban renewal: bulldozing old, dense neighborhoods in the name of slum clearance. And Jacobs, whatever her other sins, had the courage to stand up and demand that it stop.

From her renovated home on Hudson Street, Jacobs fell in love with the city as it was—not the city as urban planners dreamed it might be. She saw shopkeepers greeting customers and schoolchildren buying candy. She watched her neighbor wheeling his handcart, making laundry deliveries to customers, in what she later described as an "intricate sidewalk ballet." She realized that many of the things professional planners hated about cities were precisely what most benefited their residents.

And so Jacobs sat down before her Remington and pounded out *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Her book, published in 1961, took aim at urban renewal and all that it destroyed in the name of progress. When, that same year, Jacobs learned that the city intended to designate her own neighborhood for renewal, she rallied a small group of residents to its defense. They wrote letters and showed up at hearings and plastered the neighborhood with flyers, creating the illusion of mass opposition. And it worked. Jacobs and her collaborators were among the first residents of a city neighborhood to successfully block an urban-renewal scheme. Jacobs's book—its brilliantly observed account of urban life, its adages and conjectures—paired with her success as an activist to catapult her to fame. She became the apostle of urbanism, and eager disciples sought her out to learn how they might defend their own neighborhood.

But in halting the ravages of clearance, Jacobs advanced a different problem: stasis. For centuries, the built form of the West Village had continually evolved. Old buildings were torn down and larger structures were erected in their place. The three-story houses to one side of Jacobs's, at 553 and 551 Hudson, which had once held small businesses of their own, had been bought by a developer in 1900 and replaced with a six-story apartment building. Zoning had already begun to put some limits on this evolution but had not stopped it.

Jacobs's activism blocked efforts to add any more buildings like the one next to her house. Other three-story houses could no longer be consolidated and built up into six-story apartment blocks; the existing six-story walk-ups couldn't be turned into 12-story elevator buildings. Such development would change the physical appearance of the neighborhood, and also risk displacing current residents or small businesses—eventualities to which Jacobs was fundamentally hostile. Before, the neighborhood had always grown to accommodate demand, to make room for new arrivals. Now it froze.

At an intellectual level, Jacobs understood that simply preserving historic buildings cannot preserve a neighborhood's character; she warned that zoning should not seek "to freeze conditions and uses as they stand. That would be death." A neighborhood is defined by its residents and their interactions, as Jacobs herself so eloquently argued, and it continually evolves. It bears the same relation to its buildings as does a lobster to its shell, periodically molting and then constructing a new, larger shell to accommodate its growth. But Jacobs, charmed by this particular lobster she'd discovered, ended up insisting that it keep its current shell forever.

To stave off change, Jacobs and her allies asserted a proprietary right to control their neighborhood. It belonged, they argued, to those who were already there, and it should be up to them to decide who would get to join them. Over the decades that followed, that idea would take hold throughout the United States. A nation that had grown diverse and prosperous by allowing people to choose their communities would instead empower communities to choose their people.

JACOBS'S BOOK MARKED a shift in American attitudes. Where civic boosters once sketched fantastical visions of future development, competing to lure migrants their way, by the 1960s they had begun to hunker down and focus on preserving what they had against the threat of what the architectural critic Lewis Mumford called the "disease of growth." State legislatures had authorized local governments to regulate land use at the beginning of the 20th century, but now activists pressed for even more local control—for what the writer Calvin Trillin has called "neighborhoodism." They were justifiably concerned that unrestrained growth was degrading the environment, displacing residents, and leveling historic structures. More than that, they were revolting against the power of Big Government and Big Business, and trying to restore a focus on the public interest. They demanded that permitting processes consider more fully the consequences of growth, mandating an increasing number of reviews, hearings, and reports.

But in practice, the new processes turned out to be profoundly antidemocratic, allowing affluent communities to exclude new residents. More permitting requirements meant more opportunities for legal action. Even individual opponents of new projects had only to win their lawsuits, or at least spend long enough losing them, to deter development.

The preservation of the West Village itself, long celebrated as a triumph of local democracy, was in fact an early case study in this new form of vetocracy. What saved it from being bulldozed like other working-class areas in Manhattan was not the vitality of its streetfronts. Instead, it was saved because the displacement of working-class immigrants by college-educated professionals was already further along than the urban planners had appreciated when they'd designated it a slum. The night after the first public meeting of the Committee to Save the West Village in 1961, the activists reconvened in the apartment of a recent arrival who conducted market research for a living. He showed them how to survey residents to compile a demographic profile of the area. Jane's husband, Bob, the architect, began looking at the condition of the existing buildings. Carey Vennema, who'd graduated from NYU

Law School a few years before, began researching tax records. A sound engineer compared recordings he took in the West Village with those in affluent neighborhoods. This small group of professionals leveraged their training and expertise to mount a challenge to the planning process—a form of bureaucratic warfare unavailable to the great majority of Americans.

Their success in limiting new housing in the West Village hasn't just kept the neighborhood from expanding; it's helped empty it out. The neighborhood that Jacobs fought to preserve in the 1960s was already shrinking. Jacobs celebrated the fact that her neighborhood's population, which peaked at 6,500 in 1910, had dropped to just 2,500 by 1950. This represented, she argued, "unslumming"—what today we would call gentrification. As households more than doubled the space they occupied, amid rising standards of living, the neighborhood would have needed to replace its existing townhouses with apartment buildings that were at least twice as tall, just to maintain its population. Instead, the neighborhood kept its townhouses and lost most of its population. Despite her strident insistence that not a sparrow be displaced from the Village of the '60s, Jacobs cast the displacement of a dynamic working-class community of immigrant renters in the 1950s by a stable, gentrified population of professional-class homeowners as a triumph. "The key link in a perpetual slum is that too many people move out of it too fast—and in the meantime dream of getting out," she wrote. Jacobs prized stability over mobility, preferring public order over the messiness of dynamism.

> Mobility is what made this country prosperous and pluralistic. Now progressives are destroying the very force that produced the values they claim to cherish.

Yet in one respect, preservation proved more lethal to the texture of the community than redevelopment. Jacobs bought her home for $7,000 in 1947, rehabilitated it, and sold it 24 years later for $45,000. "Whenever I'm here," Jacobs told *The New Yorker* in 2004, "I go back to look at our house, 555 Hudson Street, and I know that I could never afford it now." Five years after that interview, it sold again, for $3.3 million; today, the city assesses it at $6.6 million. If you could scrape together the down payment at that price, your monthly mortgage payment would be—even adjusted for inflation—about 90 times what the Hechlers paid each month to live in the same building.

JANE JACOBS, of course, is not the only suspect in the death of American mobility; there are many others. People have always been most mobile while they're relatively young, and the country is aging; the median American was just 16 years old in 1800 and 28 in 1970, but is nearly 39 today. The rise in two-career households might have made relocation more difficult. The prevalence of joint custody makes it harder for members of divorced couples to move. More Americans own their home, and renters have always been more mobile. Some Americans, perhaps, have simply grown more successful at locating jobs and communities that meet their needs, reducing their impulse to move someplace else. Some are relying on remote work to stay where they are.

But none of these answers can possibly explain the broad, persistent decline in geographic mobility. The country may be older, but the drop in mobility has been particularly steep among younger Americans. Two-earner households may be less mobile, but their mobility has declined in tandem with that of other groups. Mobility is down not just among homeowners but also among renters, and its decline predates the rise of remote work. And there is little to suggest that staying put over the past half a century has left Americans more satisfied with their lives.

Jacobs's activism capped a century of dramatic legal change that eroded the freedom to move. Zoning may have been adopted, eventually, by well-meaning urban planners, but the process began in 1885 in Modesto, California, where bigoted local officials were looking for a tool to push out Chinese residents. The federal courts would not allow them to segregate their city by race, but they hit on a workaround, confining laundries—whose proprietors were overwhelmingly Chinese and generally lived in their shops—to the city's Chinatown. Over the ensuing decades, other cities embraced the approach, discovering that segregating land by its uses and the size of the buildings it could hold was a potent means of segregating populations by race, ethnicity, and income. New York, for example, first adopted zoning in part to push Jewish garment workers down fashionable Fifth Avenue and back into the Lower East Side. As zoning proliferated, it was put to a wide variety of uses, some laudable and others execrable. The housing programs of the New Deal then spread the system nationally, by limiting federal loans only to those jurisdictions that had put in place tight zoning rules and racially restrictive covenants.

But zoning alone was not enough to halt American mobility, even if it did serve to widen inequalities. Zoning had introduced a new legal reality: Putting up any housing now required government approval. It was progressives like Jacobs who then exploited this reality, creating a new set of legal tools, beginning around 1970, for anyone with sufficient time, money, and patience to challenge government decisions in court, handing neighbors an effective veto over housing approval.

Not every place in America is having its growth choked off by zoning, or by the weaponization of environmental reviews or

historic-preservation laws. The opposition to mobility appears concentrated in progressive jurisdictions; one study of California found that when the share of liberal votes in a city increased by 10 points, the housing permits it issued declined by 30 percent. The trouble is that in the contemporary United States, the greatest economic opportunities are heavily concentrated in blue jurisdictions, which have made their housing prohibitively expensive. So instead of moving toward opportunity, for the first time in our history, Americans are moving away from it—migrating toward the red states that still allow housing to be built, where they can still afford to live.

It is hard to overstate how much is lost when people can no longer choose to move toward opportunity. Social-science research suggests that the single most important decision you can make about your children's future is not what you name them, or how you educate them, or what extracurriculars you enroll them in—it's where you raise them. But if Americans cannot afford to move to the places with growing industries and high-paying jobs, or if they can't switch to a neighborhood with safer streets and better schools, and instead remain stuck where they are, then their children will see their own prospects decline.

Not far from where I live, in Washington, D.C., two lawn signs sit side by side on a neatly manicured lawn. One proclaims NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE FROM, WE'RE GLAD YOU'RE OUR NEIGHBOR, in Spanish, English, and Arabic. The other reads SAY NO, urging residents to oppose the construction of an apartment building that would house the new neighbors the other sign purports to welcome. Whatever its theoretical aspirations, in practice, progressivism has produced a potent strain of NIMBYism, a defense of communities in their current form against those who might wish to join them. Mobility is what made this country prosperous and pluralistic, diverse and dynamic. Now progressives are destroying the very force that produced the values they claim to cherish.

III. Building a Way Out

In December, the Census Bureau reported that the United States had set a dismal new record: The percentage of Americans who had moved in the previous year was at an all-time low. That same month, the economist Jed Kolko calculated that geographic inequality—the gap in average incomes between the richer and poorer parts of the country—had reached an all-time high. The loss of American mobility is a genuine national crisis. If it is less visible than the opioid epidemic or mounting political extremism, it is no less urgent. In fact, the despair it fosters is fueling these and other crises, as Americans lose the chance to build the best possible lives for themselves and their children.

Even partial analyses of immobility's costs yield staggering results. Consider, for instance, just the economic growth that has been lost by preventing people from moving to where they would be most productive. The economists Chang-Tai Hsieh and Enrico Moretti recently imagined a world of perfect mobility, in which the three most productive U.S. metropolitan areas—New York, San Francisco, and San Jose—had constructed enough homes since 1964 to accommodate everyone who stood to gain by moving there. That alone, they calculated, would have boosted GDP by about $2 trillion by 2009, or enough to put an extra $8,775 into the pocket of every American worker each year. It's a rough estimate, but it gives a sense of the scale of the distortions we have introduced, and the price we are each paying for them.

But the social costs are arguably even greater than the economic ones. Among academics, the claim that housing regulations have widened inequality is neither novel nor controversial. The economists Peter Ganong and Daniel Shoag offer an illustration: If a lawyer moved from the Deep South to New York City, he would see his net income go up by about 39 percent, after adjusting for housing costs—the same as it would have done back in 1960. If a janitor made the same move in 1960, he'd have done even better, gaining 70 percent more income. But by 2017, his gains in pay would have been outstripped by housing costs, leaving him 7 percent worse off. Working-class Americans once had the most to gain by moving. Today, the gains are largely available only to the affluent.

Many of the country's more dynamic cities, along with the suburbs around them, have continued to wall themselves off in recent years, using any means available. In Manhattan, for instance, 27 percent of all lots are now in historic districts or are otherwise landmarked, predominantly in the borough's most affluent areas. And once a neighborhood in these areas is designated historic, new construction within it drops dramatically below the city's already grossly inadequate rate. In D.C., where nearly 19 percent of buildings are similarly protected, residents of the well-off Cleveland Park neighborhood once stopped the construction of an apartment building by getting the old Park and Shop on which it was going to be built designated as historic; it was one of the first examples of strip-mall architecture in the country, the research of one enterprising resident revealed.

The good news is that addressing this crisis of mobility doesn't depend on your moving anywhere, if you'd rather stay where you are. It doesn't depend on your surrendering your single-family home, if you're lucky enough to have one. You can keep your lawn, your driveway, your garden. Solving crises often requires great sacrifice. But the simplest solution to this one promises to leave everyone better off. All you have to do is make room for some new neighbors—maybe even new friends—to join you, by allowing other people to build new housing on their own property. Americans are generally skeptical of the hassles of development and tend to focus on the downsides of change in their neighborhood. But if you ask them about the benefits—whether they'd allow construction in their neighborhood if it meant letting people live closer to jobs and schools and family members—they suddenly become overwhelmingly supportive of the idea.

If we want a nation that offers its people upward mobility, entrepreneurial innovation, increasing equality, vibrant community, democratic participation, and pluralistic diversity, then we need to build it. I mean that quite literally. We need to build it. And that will require progressives, who constitute overwhelming political majorities in almost all of America's most prosperous and

productive areas, to embrace the strain of their political tradition that emphasizes inclusion and equality.

There are at least some signs that this message is taking root. California has enacted a series of legislative reforms aimed at paring back local zoning regulations. Cities across the country are banning zoning that restricts neighborhoods to single-family homes. Where older environmental activists rallied to block any new construction, a new generation of environmentalists sees building new housing near public transit as an essential tool in the fight against climate change. And national politicians have started to talk about our affordable-housing crisis.

These changes are encouraging, but insufficient. And sometimes the solutions on offer solve the wrong problem: Building subsidized housing in a place where land is cheap because jobs are scarce will help with affordability, but only worsen immobility.

Any serious effort to restore mobility should follow three simple principles. The first is consistency. Rules that apply uniformly across a city will tend to produce neighborhoods with diverse populations and uses, while providing equitable protections to residents. Rules that are tailored to the desires of specific neighborhoods will tend, over time, to concentrate less desirable land uses and more affordable housing in poorer areas. Just as the federal government once used its power as a housing lender to force local jurisdictions to adopt zoning laws, it could now do the same to reform those laws, encouraging states to limit the discretion of local authorities.

The second principle is tolerance. Organic growth is messy and unpredictable. Giving Americans the freedom to live where they want requires tolerating the choices made by others, even if we think the buildings they erect are tasteless, or the apartments too small, or the duplexes out of place. Tastes evolve, as do neighborhoods. The places that thrive over the long term are those that empower people to make their own decisions, and to build and adapt structures to suit their needs.

The third principle is abundance. The best way to solve a supply crunch is to add supply—lots of it, and in places that are attractive and growing, so that housing becomes a springboard, launching people forward rather than holding them back.

How much housing do we need? For 50 years, we've been falling behind demand. The Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation estimates that it would take another 3.7 million units just to adequately house our current population, with the shortfall concentrated among starter homes. Treat that as the lower bound. The trouble is, most *existing* units are located where regulation is loose and land is cheap, not in the places richest in opportunity; a considerable amount of the nation's housing is in the wrong place. Another recent estimate that tries to account for that, by the economists Kevin Corinth and Hugo Dante, puts the tally above 20 million. And even that might be too low.

Here's another way to think about what we really need: As things stand, roughly 20 percent of American workers relocate from one metropolitan area to another over the course of a decade. If all the moves that would happen anyway in the next 10 years brought people to the most prosperous regions, where productivity is highest—places like New York and the Bay Area, but also Austin and northwestern Arkansas—we'd have to add some 30 million new units, or 3 million a year. That's, perhaps, an upper bound. It's an ambitious target, but at roughly double our current pace, it's also an attainable one.

These three principles—consistency, tolerance, and abundance—can help restore American mobility. Federal guidelines can make the environment more amenable, but the solutions by and large cannot come from central planning; states and cities and towns will need to reform their rules and processes to allow the housing supply to grow where people want to build. The goal of policy makers, in any case, shouldn't be to move Americans to any particular place, or to any particular style of living. They should instead aim to make it easier for Americans to move wherever they would like—to make it equally easy to build wherever Americans' hopes and desires alight.

Giving Americans the freedom to live where they want requires tolerating the choices made by others, even if we think the buildings they erect are tasteless. Tastes evolve, as do neighborhoods.

That would return agency to people, allowing them to pursue opportunity wherever they might find it and to choose the housing that works best for them. For some, that might mean reviving faded towns; for others, it might mean planting new ones. Whatever level of education they have attained, whatever city or region they happen to have been born in, whatever occupation they pursue, individuals—janitors and attorneys alike—should be able to make their own choices.

The genius of the American system was never that its leaders knew what was coming next, but rather that they allowed individual people to decide things for themselves, so that they might collectively make the future. *A*

Yoni Appelbaum is a deputy executive editor at The Atlantic. *This article is adapted from his new book,* Stuck: How the Privileged and the Propertied Broke the Engine of American Opportunity.

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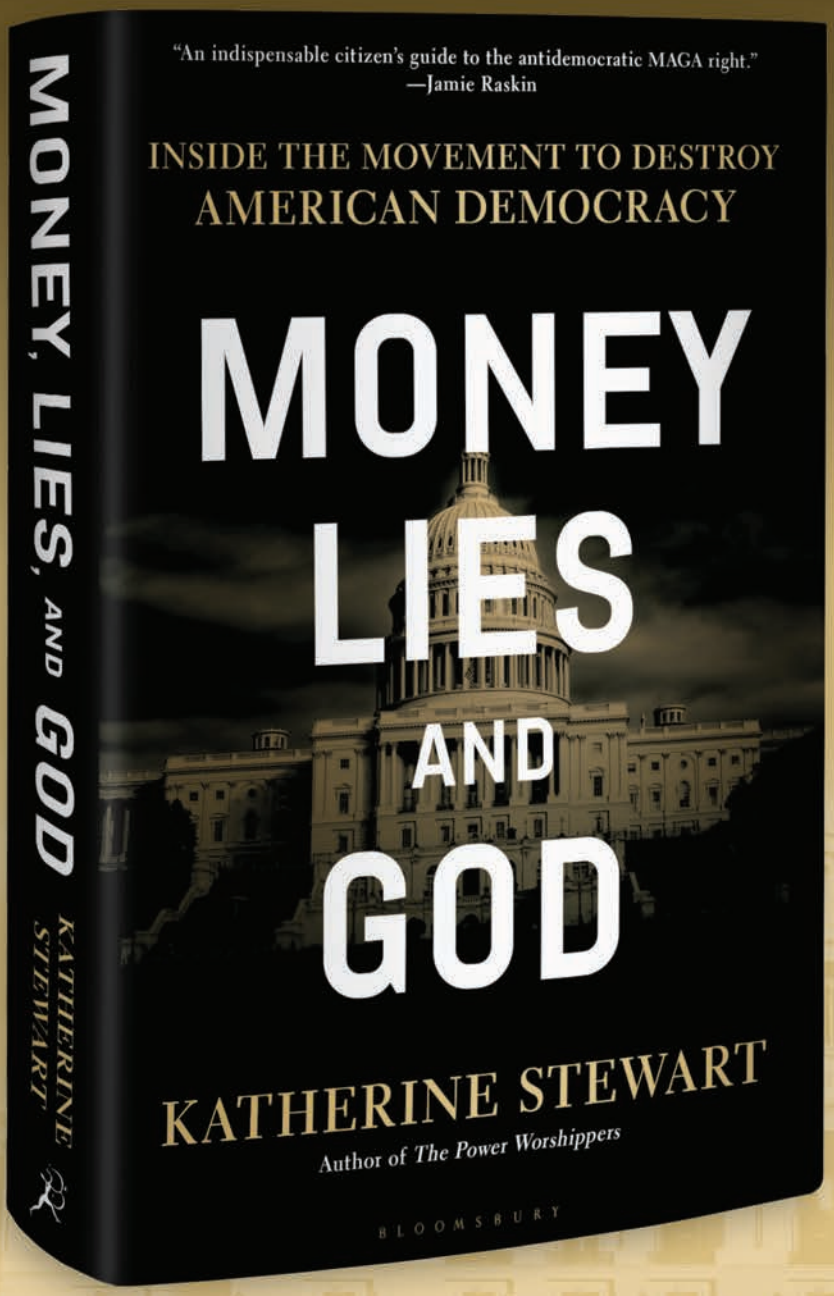

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BLOOMSBURY

Who's Your Mommy?

I knew that becoming a parent would change me. I just didn't know how.

By Olga Khazan

Illustrations by Kimberly Elliott

In the spring of 2022,

I was 36 years old and jumping up and down in my bathroom, trying to figure out my future. I had ordered a fertility test online that said it would provide fast results with just a few drops of blood. The videos on the company's website featured a smiling blond woman jumping—to stimulate blood flow, naturally—and then effortlessly dribbling blood from her fingertips all over a little strip of test paper. All I had to do was be like her. Joyful. Sanguineous. Fertile.

For years, my husband, Rich, and I had gingerly walked the prime meridian between wanting and not wanting kids, usually leaning toward the "no" side. Having a baby had seemed unaffordable and impossible. On days when I finished work at 8 p.m., the thought of procreating made me laugh, then shudder.

Recently, though, I'd begun to reconsider. I was in the midst of an admittedly strange-sounding project: I was spending a year trying to change my personality. According to a scientific personality test I'd taken, I scored sky-high on neuroticism, a trait associated with anxiety and depression, and low on agreeableness and extroversion. I lived in a constant, clenched state of dread, and it was poisoning my life. My therapist had stopped laughing at my jokes.

But I had read some scientific research suggesting that you can change your personality by behaving like the kind of person you wish you were. Several studies show that people who want to be, say, less isolated or less anxious can make a habit of socializing, meditating, or journaling. Eventually these habits will come naturally, knitting together to form new traits.

I knew that becoming a parent had the potential to change me in even more profound ways. But I had no idea how. My own mother once said to me, "I can't picture you as a mother." The truth was, neither could I.

I wasn't sure I could get pregnant, even if I wanted to. My age put me in a category that was, in a less delicate time, called "geriatric" for pregnancy, and one doctor told me my eggs were probably of "poor quality." The fertility test I'd ordered was meant to determine if those eggs were serviceable. In the bathroom, I unwrapped the glossy white box. The instructions said the test would take 20 minutes and require a pack of lancets. I grabbed one and stabbed it into my geriatric forefinger. Two hours, five lancets, and a graveyard of gauze and alcohol wipes later, I still hadn't squeezed a single droplet out of my finger. Was I not jumping high enough? Was I already failing as a mother?

I was worried I wouldn't be able to have a baby. I was also scared to death of having one.

ARGUABLY, MANY THINGS are wrong with me. I was raised by Russian immigrants who constantly worried that the "dark day" was upon us, so hopeful thoughts about the future of humanity don't come naturally. I'm not a person who is affected by cuteness. I've never liked holding—or even really looking at—other people's babies. I don't like animals. I couldn't imagine cooing and smiling at a baby as much as science says you're supposed to for their brain development.

My neuroticism made it especially hard to decide if I wanted kids, because no process is more rife with uncertainty than parenting, and nothing scares anxious people more than uncertainty. I worried that Rich and I would fight more, and that our relationship would suffer. I worried about sleep deprivation. I felt torn between my lifelong conviction that people shouldn't create problems for themselves and my (apparent) desire to do just that.

I would wake up in the middle of the night and Google things like *percent miscarriage pregnant while 36?*; *anxiety pregnancy miscarriage causes*; *Diet Coke fetal defects*; *pregnancy brain stops working hands stop working*. These searches surfaced horrific anecdotes, but never any conclusive answers about what I should do. One time, I Googled *reasons to have kids* and found an article that labeled all the reasons I had come up with—like being cared for in old age and having someone who loves me—with the heading "Not-So-Good Reasons to Have Children."

But then I would remember the times we visited Rich's mom, who had dementia, in her nursing home. Her face lit up at the sight of him. "My son, my son, my only son," she'd say, grabbing his arm. He was the only person she still recognized. The visits were a reminder that the people who matter most at the end are your children. The readers of your blog posts won't make the trip.

Heather Rackin, a sociologist at Louisiana State University, found in a study that the death of a mother or sibling increased the likelihood that a woman would give birth within two years. The proximity of death is, perhaps, a wake-up call. Who will remember us? The study was based on Rackin's personal experience: When her father died in 2017, she decided not to wait any longer to have kids. His death got her thinking, she told me, about what was important in life: the experience of being loved and the chance to provide that love for someone else. Her first child was born in 2019.

There are many reasons to postpone or avoid having children—the cost, the responsibility, the existence of and use case for the NoseFrida. But in addition to the practical challenges, a narrative has taken hold: Everything changes when you become a mother.

Once they reach their 30s, many people have carefully cultivated friend groups and sourdough starters and five-year plans. They "really have a good sense of who they are, and then having a baby totally disrupts everything that they thought they knew about themselves," says Lauren Ratliff, a perinatal therapist in Illinois. Of course, this is where I differ from the rest of my cohort. By the time I was ready to have a baby, I'd already been trying to disrupt everything about myself.

For my personality-change project, I had experimented with science-backed strategies to turn down my neuroticism and amp up my extroversion and agreeableness. I had spent hundreds of hours trying out different iterations of mindfulness, culminating in a day-long meditation retreat that almost killed me with boredom but somehow alleviated my depression. Among other agreeableness-boosting activities, I traveled to London for a "conversation workshop," where I learned techniques that can make even British people show an emotion. And to become more extroverted, I went out as much as humanly possible. I played table tennis. I did improv, and survived.

For the most part, my efforts worked: I no longer thought of talking with people as a waste of time. I became less afraid of uncertainty and disappointment. I made one very good new friend. I drank less.

Being pregnant means having your brain replaced with an anxiety T-shirt cannon. I didn't feel glowy or goddessy; I felt crazy.

I had been changing, but it was a type of change that I directly determined. I could go to happy hour, or not. I could meditate, or stop. I was aware that parenthood would transform me further, but what I found unsettling was that I couldn't know exactly how. Bizarrely, for the biggest disruption of your life, study after study shows there's no "typical" way that becoming a parent changes your personality. Some studies have found tiny average decreases in extroversion or openness among new parents—but even those findings aren't consistent.

Despite my progress, I was still too neurotic to feel comfortable surrendering control and letting biology mold me into someone I couldn't predict and might not recognize.

AFTER DOCTORS PRONOUNCED me insufficiently fertile, Rich and I decided to just stop being careful one month and see what happened. We figured we would at least have some fun before we embarked on our arduous "fertility journey."

A short time later, on a choppy boat tour in Europe, I couldn't stop leaning over the edge of the catamaran and hurling.

"Do you think you might be pregnant?" Rich whispered as the boat crew force-fed me pita bread.

"Don't be insane," I said. Everyone knows that 37-year-olds—especially infertile ones—don't get pregnant on their first try.

A week after that, I found out that I had indeed gotten pregnant on my first try.

Being pregnant means having your brain replaced with an anxiety T-shirt cannon. I didn't feel glowy or goddessy; I felt crazy. None of my friends has kids, and many of them reacted to my news like I'd gotten a face tattoo. One sent me a TikTok of everything that can supposedly go wrong in pregnancy, including the possibility that vomit will come out of your eyes. (It won't.) I spent more and more time by myself, obsessing over which swaddles were best. (We didn't end up using any.)

Thanks to a king tide of hormones, irritability spikes during the first and last trimesters of pregnancy. People say your baby will remember the sounds they hear in the womb, but I fear mine detected little in there other than me screaming at his father. Every few weeks, something would set me off, at a deafening volume. If they'd overheard me, those couples therapists who say contempt is the most glaring sign of a failed relationship would probably have advised us to start divvying up our furniture.

Sometimes when I was yelling, being so mean felt amazing—as though I'd finally engulfed Rich in my distress. *Obviously you need a travel stroller* and *a regular stroller!* I always apologized, and Rich always accepted my apology. But one time he said, "You know

that with a kid, that's not really something you can take back, right?" Sometimes, late at night, after yet another argument, I would rotate my spheroid belly toward Rich and ask, "What if I turn out to be a bad mother?"

The rest of the pregnancy was horrible. I didn't think it was possible to feel so tired and still be technically alive. At my baby shower, when some friends asked me how I was feeling, I quoted the Russian dissident Boris Nadezhdin responding to a question about whether he feared imprisonment or death: "The tastiest and the sweetest years of my life are already in the past." (This is the closest Russians get to excited.)

Three weeks before my due date, after a routine ultrasound, my high-risk ob-gyn walked briskly into the room. She looked around for something to sit on and, finding nothing, plopped down on top of a closed trash can. She told me that something was wrong with my placenta, and that the baby was in danger. And that I should now walk over to the delivery wing of the hospital.

In the antechamber of the operating room, I hyperventilated in my paper gown and tapped out emails to all my sources and bosses: *I'm having an emergency C-section today, so I won't be available for the next few months.* My last day of caring whether people were mad at me.

Afterward, while the medical residents were rearranging my innards, I thought I heard one of them ask me something.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what's going on down there at all," I said across the blue curtain.

"That's … probably for the best," the resident said.

Life events like parenthood seem to change everyone differently, and how you'll change is, in part, up to you.

HE CAME OUT with white hair, a perfectly round face, and a grumpy expression, like the leader of a former Yugoslav republic. I called him "Slobodan" a couple of times, until Rich told me to stop.

Because he was early, we panic-picked a name from our shortlist—Evan. The same day he was born, doctors whisked him away to the NICU; I saw him only a few times before we were all sent home days later. My discharge paperwork said, "Mom is breastfeeding four or five times a day," which was funny because at that point I had not done it successfully even once. It was also funny because I—quite possibly the least qualified person for the job—was apparently "Mom."

Once home, we entered the period we now refer to as "Cute Abu Ghraib." Sleep deprivation addled me to the point that, on a call with the pediatrician, I forgot the baby's name. When Evan was two weeks old, I bit into a piece of chicken and tasted something bloody and sharp. I had ground my teeth so hard during his NICU stay that I'd loosened a crown.

We agonized over whether the gyrations of the SNOO Smart Sleeper Bassinet would rattle his brain too much, then grew too exhausted to care. I became the CEO of Baby Inc., and Rich was employee No. 1; we communicated only about ointments and ounces. I finally had the big boobs of my dreams, but the only man who saw them was two feet tall and couldn't read.

But then something interrupted the misery. One night, I was holding Evan while he was sleeping. I had read that singing to your baby was beneficial, so I decided to serenade him with one of the few songs I know by heart: "Forever and Ever, Amen," by Randy Travis. Except I couldn't seem to get through the fourth line: "This love that I feel for you always will be." I, a bad bitch who has never cried at a wedding, kept choking up.

Rich asked me if I was okay.

"Whatever!" I said, tears rolling down my cheeks. "Shut up!"

I thought motherhood would be a forced march through inert babyhood and feral toddler years before we finally reached the golden time of my imagination: having a talking, precocious elementary schooler. But there I was, flooded with adoration for someone who barely registered my presence. I'd hated being pregnant, so I thought I would hate having a baby, too. But I loved him. I loved this.

Recall the research showing there's no one way that parenthood tends to change people's personalities. Anecdotally, researchers told me that they do notice certain patterns among new parents. Most moms worry about their kid, more or less constantly, from the minute they find out they're pregnant. "Signing up to be a parent is signing up to have a lifetime of some degree of depression and anxiety," Ratliff, the therapist, told me.

KIMBERLY ELLIOTT

New parents' satisfaction with their romantic relationship goes down, especially for mothers, and especially in the first year. "Guilt is another universal," says Aurélie Athan, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University's Teachers College, who researches the transition known as "matrescence." The creeping sense that you should be with your kid while you're working and working while you're with your kid apparently never goes away.

She told me that mothers become more attuned and prosocial—more caring and empathetic toward others. Athan said this is why so many mothers cry when their babies cry and have a hard time watching gory movies. "Moms get a really bad taste in their mouth with violent television or looking at images of war," she said.

That's where she lost me. My son had colic; for the first four months, he screamed like the possessed unless he was within the jiggly confines of his SNOO. The doula we hired referred to him, alternately, as "Mr. Cheeks," "Mr. Crab," and, sarcastically, "Mr. Wonderful." If I had cried every time he cried, I wouldn't have had time to do anything else.

Eventually, Rich and I grew desensitized, or felt like we had to match his chaotic energy with equally intense stimuli. One night, after Evan wailed in our ears for two hours, we shuffled downstairs and collapsed onto the couch. There was only one thing we could think to watch that would serve as a comedown from what had just happened: *Saving Private Ryan*.

"Did you remember to sterilize the pump parts?" I asked Rich as the entrails of American soldiers spilled out over the beaches of Normandy.

"The sterilizer thing broke, so I had to reset it," he said as a man stumbled around with his arm blown off.

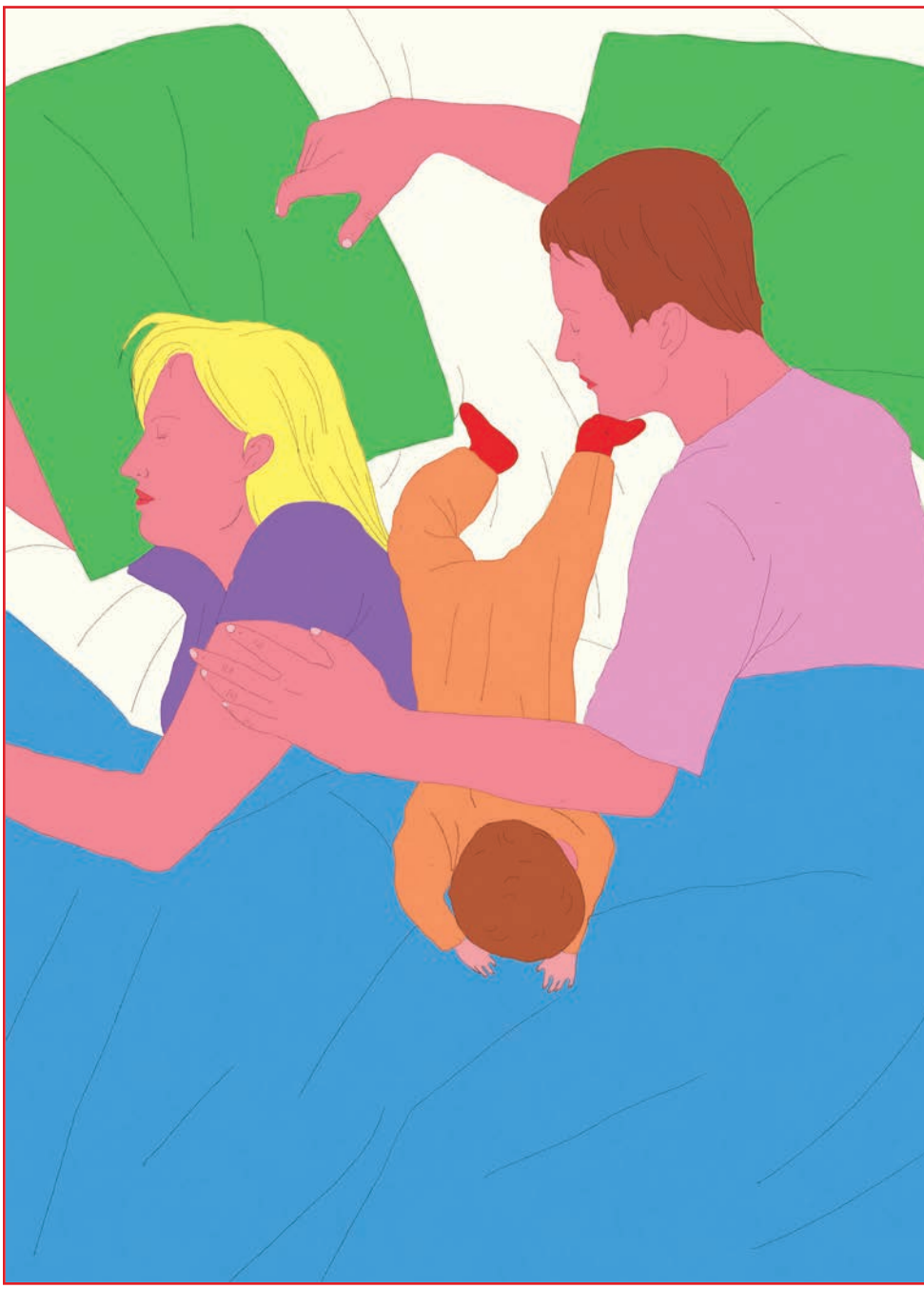
Even within these supposedly universal rules of parenthood, that is, there's a lot of variability. That's because life events

like parenthood seem to change everyone differently, and how you'll change is, in part, up to you. For a recent study, Ted Schwaba, a psychologist at Michigan State University, and his co-authors asked thousands of Dutch people about a life event in the past 10 years, such as a divorce or a new job, that they felt had changed who they were as a person. About 7 percent of the participants identified parenthood as the event that changed them, and on average, they felt that it had made them slightly more agreeable and conscientious.

But the big takeaway for Schwaba, from looking at all the data for all the different types of life events, was that there really was no pattern. Some people became more extroverted when they got a new job. Some became less so. Some people actually became less neurotic—that is, less depressed and anxious—after, say, a cancer diagnosis.

To Schwaba, this research suggests that it's how you experience an event such as parenthood, more than the event itself, that determines how you'll change. "The same event, like getting divorced, might be someone's worst thing that's ever happened to them, and for someone else, it might be the best thing that's ever happened to them," he told me.

Or your personality might change not immediately after an event like childbirth, but through a long process that the event sets in motion. It's not the cry you hear in the delivery room that changes you; it's the many years of researching child care and soothing boo-boos that gradually turn you into someone new. To change, you have to take steps every day to do so. Having a baby won't make you a better person. Behaving like a better person for your baby will.



Of all the things I wanted motherhood to change about me, neuroticism was high on the list. Before I had Evan, I felt like I was personally responsible for making life unfold perfectly, and whenever I "failed" to do so, I had a meltdown. One day a few years ago, I got a bad haircut, got stuck in traffic, and had professional photos taken that looked terrible. My response to this—what my new-parent eyes now see as an 8-out-of-10 day—was to chug half a bottle of wine and scream to my husband through sobs, "I hate everyone and everything!"

KIMBERLY ELLIOTT

But now so much goes wrong every single day that there's no time to get upset about any one thing. I recently took a flight with Evan by myself, an exercise that really underscores the first Noble Truth of Buddhism (life is suffering). As I hauled the car seat, the stroller, the baby, the diaper bag, and the trendy, impractical tote from my childless years to the TSA line, an airline attendant took one look at me and said, "I know; it is too much."

In the middle of the flight, I noticed that the two bottles of formula Evan nervously drank during takeoff had caught up with him, and that he was now soaked with pee. I grabbed him under the armpits and scooted across the seats to change him in the airplane's postage-stamp-size bathroom. With one hand, I held him, crying, on the changing table, and with the other, I dug a clean onesie out of the bottom of the diaper bag. I fastened a million tiny onesie buttons. Then I saw that I had misaligned them and fastened them again. Next it was my turn. I couldn't leave him on the changing table, or put him on the disgusting floor. I yanked my leggings down and held him at arm's length as I peed.

By the end of that ordeal, I felt accomplished and capable. I didn't feel like sobbing; I felt like high-fiving myself. I've let go in other ways, too. I show up at important meetings without makeup on. I say weird stuff to strangers and don't analyze it obsessively later. Evan has forced me to step outside myself, to break from the relentless self-focus that has contributed to both my success and my unhappiness.

My remaining neuroses are laser-directed on his well-being. I had initially planned not to breastfeed, but once I started, I got so into it that when a doctor suggested that Evan would spit up less if I cut food allergens from my diet, I stopped eating virtually anything but oats and spinach for months. When I was pregnant, we'd signed the unborn Evan up for day care, but as the end of my maternity leave loomed, I embarked on a frantic search for a nanny so he could stay close to me while I worked from home. I had always mentally mocked parents who checked to be sure their babies were still breathing at night, then found myself standing in front of his crib at 3 a.m., feeling for puffs of air from two tiny nostrils.

I yell at Rich less than I used to, because not only is he employee No. 1 of Baby Inc., but he's the only employee, and frankly there are no other applicants for the job. In fact, the whole experience has made me kinder and more tender, like the Grinch, post–heart enlargement. I'm less worried about wasting time, because all time with a baby is essentially wasted—the most important nothing you'll ever do in your life. I even love Evan's wet, violent "kisses," which leave his baby-teeth imprints on our jaws. When my friend Anton visited recently, he watched me make horsey noises for Evan for what probably felt like hours. "I can't believe you love an infant!" he said.

Having a baby won't make you a better person. Behaving like a better person for your baby will.

During my interview with Ratliff, I told her that Evan had lately been losing interest in breastfeeding. I had awaited this day through months of bleeding nipples and frustration, but now that it was here, it was making me a bit sad. "Your baby's moving to the next stage," she affirmed, "and this one is not going to come back again." I started tearing up—both at the memory of those bleary, milk-soaked months together and at the realization that he wouldn't even be a baby for much longer.

During my personality-change experiment, my meditation teacher had tried to hammer home the idea that "this too shall pass" is both uplifting and sad: Nothing bad lasts forever, but neither does anything good. Before I had Evan, I was focused on impermanence's upsides: This uncomfortable improv show will end; this awful pregnancy will too. But now I'm more keenly aware of its downsides. The sleepless nights will end, but so too will the times Evan squeals at a game of peekaboo, or spends an entire swim class gazing up at me in awe. Every day brings a sigh of relief and a pang of nostalgia. Having someone who loves you, I've decided, is a good reason to have kids. *A*

Olga Khazan is a staff writer at The Atlantic. *This essay was adapted from her forthcoming book,* Me, but Better: The Science and Promise of Personality Change.

BEHOLD MY SUIT!

A LIFETIME OF FASHION MISERY COMES TO AN END.

By Gary Shteyngart

THE DREAM

A fine suit made just for me. From the best fabrics. By the best tailor. Paired with the best bespoke shoes.

A suit that would make me feel at ease, while declaring to others, "Here is a man who feels at ease." A suit that would be appreciated by the world's most heartless maître d'. A suit that would see me through the immigration checkpoints of difficult countries. A suit that would convince readers that the man in the author photo has a sense of taste beyond the Brooklyn consensus of plaid shirt and pouf of graying hair.

The suit would serve as the perfect carapace for a personality overly dependent on anxious humor and jaundiced wit, a personality that I have been trying to develop since I saw my lightly mustached *punim* in the mirror as a pubescent boy and thought, *How will I ever find love?* The suit would transcend my physicality and bond with my personality directly. It would accompany me through the world's great salons, the occasional MSNBC appearance, and, most important, the well-compensated talks at far-flung universities. The suit would be nothing less than an extension of myself; it would be a valet preceding me into the room, announcing with a light continental accent, "Mr. Gary and his suit are here now." Finding this perfect suit, made by the most advanced tailor out of superlative fabric, would do nothing less than transform me.

THE BODY

Before there is a suit, there is a body, and the body is terrible.

First there is my shortness (5 foot 5 and a half, with that "half" doing a lot of work). Being short is fine, but those missing inches are wedded to a narrow-shouldered body of zero distinction. Although I am of Russian and Jewish extraction, the continent whose clothing stores make me feel most at ease is Asia. (I once bought an off-the-rack jacket in Bangkok after the clerk examined me for all of three seconds.) However, this is not exactly an Asian body either, especially when I contrast myself with the natural slimness of most of my Asian friends. Just before my bar mitzvah, I got a set of perfect B-cup knockers and had to squeeze into a "husky" suit to perform the ritual yodeling at the synagogue. But that's not all. Some hideously mismanaged childhood vaccination in Leningrad created a thick keloid scar running the length of my right shoulder. The shame of having this strange pink welt define one side of me led to a slumped posture favoring my left shoulder. When I finally found people to have sex with me—I had to attend Oberlin to complete the task—my expression upon disrobing resembled that of a dog looking up at his mistress after a bowel movement of hazmat proportions.

Top: *The author, about 6 years old, in Leningrad, dressed as a sailor and forced to play balalaika under a hanging carpet.* Bottom: *About a year later, in Rome, his parents buy him a normal Western sweater.*

BEFORE THE SUIT

The clothes before the suit were as bad as the body.

I was born in the Soviet Union in 1972 and was quickly dressed in a sailor's outfit with white tights and sexy little shorts, then given a balalaika to play with for the camera. The fact that Russia now fields one of the world's most homicidal armies can partially be explained by photos such as this. On other occasions I was forced to wear very tight jogging pants with a cartoon bunny on them, or a thick-striped shirt dripping with medals from battles I had never seen. These outfits did make me feel like I belonged to something—in this case, a failing dictatorship. I left the U.S.S.R. before I could join the Young Pioneers, which would have entailed wearing a red tie at a tender age, while prancing about and shouting exuberant slogans such as "I am always ready!"

What I wasn't ready for, however, was immigration to Queens. I arrived in New York in 1979 with the immigrant's proverbial single shirt, although my parents had managed to snag a cute Italian V-neck sweater during the few months we spent in Rome on our way to America, a sweater that would serve me for the next half decade (as mentioned, I did not grow much). The Hebrew day school to which I was sentenced for eight years began a clothing drive for me, and I was rewarded with pounds of old Batman and Robin T-shirts, which made me look like a Soviet-refugee poster child. It's worth noting that, growing up, I never thought, *They hate me for my clothes or my poverty or my lack of English skills*. This realization would come later, in hindsight. For the longest time, I thought that I was hated for the essential state of being myself; the clothes were more a symptom than a cause. My school may have been Jewish, but I somehow found myself in the throes of Calvinist predestination. For as long as I was myself, I deserved these clothes. Around this time, the idea of becoming an entirely different person took root—*How will I ever find love? This is how*—an idea that would be expanded for four decades, until it finally led me to The Suit.

PAGE 52: AN RONG XU FOR *THE ATLANTIC*. THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF GARY SHTEYNGART.

GROWING UP TASTELESS

High school found me trying to blend in with a suburban outlay of clothes that my now middle-class family could finally afford. These were surfer T-shirts from Ocean Pacific and other brands that suburbanites who survived the 1980s might remember: Generra, Aéropostale, Unionbay. Unfortunately, I did not go to high school in Benetton Bay, Long Island, but in Manhattan, where these shirts were immediately a joke. (This would become a pattern. By the time I figure something out fashion-wise, I'm already two steps behind.) At a high-school job, my boss bought me a set of colorful *Miami Vice*–style shirts and jackets. These proved ridiculous at Oberlin, where dressing in janitor uniforms from thrift shops was considered the height of style. (Ironically, I had worked as a janitor during the summer, at the same nuclear laboratory that employed my father.)

After college, I fell in with a crowd of artsy, ketamine-addicted hipsters, and together we managed to gentrify several Brooklyn neighborhoods during the late '90s. One of my friends, who was especially fashion-conscious, began to dress me at the high-priced secondhand emporium Screaming Mimis. The clothes she told me to buy were very itchy, mostly Orlon and Dacron items from '70s brands such as Triumph of California, but these tight uniforms, like their Soviet predecessors, made me feel like I was playing a part in a grander opera, while also serving as a form of punishment. On nervous dates, I would sometimes have to run to the bathroom to try to angle my acrylic armpits under the dryer.

Because I was a writer who worked in bed, I mostly did not need a suit, although when I got married, in 2012, I went down to Paul Smith to get a herringbone number that I thought was just fine, if not terribly exciting. I bought a J.Crew tuxedo for black-tie benefits. Once, I did a reading sponsored by Prada and was given a nice gray jacket, pants, and a pair of blue suede shoes as compensation. Come to think of it, there was also a scarf. As a final note, I will say that I am incredibly cheap and that

> I was born in the Soviet Union in 1972 and was quickly dressed in a sailor's outfit with white tights and sexy little shorts.

shopping for clothes has always raised my blood pressure. Leaving Screaming Mimis after spending more than $500 would always end in me getting terribly drunk to punish myself for the money I had blown on such a frivolous pursuit.

THE DREAM BEGINS

When I reached the age of 50, mildly prosperous and with a small family, I met a man named Mark Cho. We discovered each other because of a mutual love of wristwatches (a costly middle-aged hobby I had recently acquired), and because I knew about his classic-menswear store, the Armoury, with locations in New York and Hong Kong. The Armoury has been called "a clubhouse for menswear nerds"; if you're looking for, say, a cashmere waistcoat in "brown sugar," you have found your home. I had even given one of the characters in my latest novel, a dandy from a prominent Korean chaebol family, an article of clothing from that store to wear.

We met for dinner at Union Square Cafe, and I liked him (and his clothes) immediately. Mark was almost always dressed in a jacket and tie, and would often sport a vest along with spectacles made of some improbable metal. What I loved about him was how comfortable he appeared in his medley of classical attire, and how, despite the fact that all of his garments had been chosen with precision, he gave the impression that he had spent very little time and thought on which breathable fabrics to settle over his trim body. He looked like he was, to use my initial formulation, at ease.

Later, I would learn that this whole look could be summarized by the Italian word *sprezzatura*, or "studied carelessness," and later still I learned of something that the Japanese had discovered and refined: "Ivy style," which is basically

PETER FISHER FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

The author's chest is expertly measured by the master tailor Yuhei Yamamoto at the Upper East Side location of the Armoury.

studied carelessness goes to Dartmouth. For the time being, I knew that I liked what I saw, that my inner lonely immigrant—the one who is always trying to find a uniform that will help me fit in—was intrigued. Mark once gave me an Armoury safari jacket, the very same one worn by the character in my novel, and its light, unflappable linen proved perfect for my summer readings around Germany and Switzerland that year. Everywhere from starchy Zurich to drunken Cologne to cool-as-fuck Berlin, the jacket would pop out of a suitcase and unwrinkle itself in seconds, yet it was also stylish and seemingly impervious to the odors of my non-Teutonic body. It was, to use Hemingway-esque prose, damn well perfect, and I immediately knew I wanted more.

I had lived in Italy in my 30s and met many aristocrats there. Those bastards had *sprezzatura* to burn, but when I asked them the make of their suits and jackets, they would smile and tell me it was the work of a single tailor down in Naples or up in Milan. *Ah*, I would say to myself, *so that's how it is*. Given my outlook on life, owning a bespoke suit was not an outcome I was predestined for. The Prada jacket I had been given, which fit me well enough, was the most that my Calvinist God would ever grant me.

But over more martinis and *onglets au poivre* with Mark, I began to understand the parameters of a fine bespoke suit and its accessories: bespoke shirts and bespoke shoes. I also began to timidly ask questions of a financial nature and learned that the price of owning such a wardrobe approached and then exceeded $10,000. I did not want to pay this kind of entry fee. Given my own family's experience in fleeing a declining superpower, I try to have money saved with which to escape across the border. Unlike watches, a suit could not be resold in Montreal or Melbourne.

Testing crease-resistant fabric at Vitale Barberis Canonico, the oldest fabric mill in Italy

A brief but generative conversation with my editors at this magazine soon paved the way for my dream to become possible. At a particularly unsober dinner with a visiting Japanese watchmaker, I whispered to Mark the extent of my desires. Yes, it would take a lot of work, a lot of research, and possibly travel to two other continents. But it could be done. At the right expense, with the most elegant and sturdy of Italian-milled fabrics, and with the greatest of Japanese tailors, a superior suit could be made for anyone, even for me.

> The suit would be nothing less than an extension of myself; it would be a valet preceding me into the room, announcing with a light continental accent, "Mr. Gary and his suit are here now."

SOME THOUGHTS ON MALE FASHION

In religious school, I studied the Torah and the Talmud, which were okay but failed to leave a deep impression. At Oberlin, I read Gramsci's notebooks from prison; those were fine, but a little too carceral for my airy disposition. Mark sat me down with the foundational texts more relevant to my lived experience, as they say. Or at least the experience I hoped to live. The canonical texts of male fashion, and I urge them upon any aspiring dandy, are *Dressing the Man*, by Alan Flusser, and *True Style*, by G. Bruce Boyer (that name alone deserves a cummerbund). I would also slip in an interesting national study, *Ametora: How Japan Saved American Style*, by the well-dressed intellectual W. David Marx, whom I would meet in Tokyo soon enough. Like the diligent student I had rarely been before, I took copious notes: *American look*, *dart*, *London shrunk*, *natural shoulder*, *weft*, *warp*. I have worn clothes all my life but never known a single thing about them. It was like not knowing the difference between freshly caught tilefish and farm-bred tilapia; each fills your stomach, but only one tastes good.

Formal male fashion traces back to two personalities: Beau Brummell, the sharp-witted proto-dandy of the early 19th century without whom the modern suit would be unthinkable (and who reportedly spent five hours a day getting dressed), and Edward VIII, the Nazi admirer and short-term king better known as the Duke of Windsor. These two insufferable assholes are mostly responsible for how men dress today. "With Brummell," Flusser notes, "male style became a matter of impeccable fit and cut, exquisite detail, and immaculate cleanliness." Before Brummell, the aristocracy dressed in rich, smelly materials; after, styles were adapted from military uniforms—think of the broad shoulders of a British pinstripe suit, for example. The duke took Brummell's simplicity and "ran to Baroque elaboration," Boyer wrote. "District checks, windowpane plaids, bold stripes, and tartans were his true métier."

In the battle between the 19th-century dandy's stark simplicity and the duke's playful elaborations, I find myself choosing the former. My personality is colorful enough without tartans; let the suit merely contain it. Whatever the duke's "district check" is, I will leave it uncashed.

BEA DE GIACOMO FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

YAMAMOTO-SAN ARRIVES

On May 24 of the fateful year 2024, a plane from Tokyo landed in New York City, carrying one of the most meticulously attired men in existence. His name is Yuhei Yamamoto, and he is the preeminent representative of Ivy style, that mode of dress that Americans appreciate yet only the Japanese fully understand.

The British suit, in all its City of London severity, morphed into different shapes around the world. The Italians made particularly interesting work of it. The Milanese suit was the most British-like, but as you traveled farther down the boot to Florence, Rome, and Naples, the tailors became more freehanded; the colors and fit became jauntier and more Mediterranean, more appreciative of bodies defined by crooked lines and curves and exploded by carbohydrates. Meanwhile, in America, as always, we went to work. The suit became a uniform that stressed the commonality and goodness of Protestant labor and church attendance without any further embellishments. It came to be known as the "sack suit." In the 1950s, Brooks Brothers furthered this concept with an almost subversively casual look: a jacket with natural-width shoulders that hung straight from the body, and plain-front trousers. This, along with other American touches, such as denim, became the basis for Ivy-style clothes that the Japanese of the '60s made into a national obsession, and that culminated in a wholly different approach to workwear, office wear, and leisure wear. Today, you can't go into a Uniqlo without seeing the aftereffects of Japanese experimentation with and perfection of our "Work hard, pray hard" wardrobe ethos.

The author is confronted with endless amounts of wool at Vitale Barberis Canonico.

BEA DE GIACOMO FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

I met Yamamoto-san at the Upper East Side branch of Mark Cho's Armoury empire. The moment I first saw him, I was scared. No one could be this well-dressed. No one could be so secure in a tan three-piece seersucker suit that didn't so much hang from his broad shoulders as hover around them in expectation. No one's brown silk tie could so well match his brown polka-dot pocket square and the thick wedge of only slightly graying hair floating above his perfectly chiseled face. This man was going to make a suit for me? I was not worthy.

Yamamoto-san examined me briefly and said, "Sack suit."

The diagnosis stung at first. I was already aware of the provenance of the sack suit, which had clothed men up and down the very avenue (Madison) right outside Mark's store for almost a century. Was I not more than an Excel jockey or a finance bro whose oppressive job had him ready to be put into a sack? Were my curves, at least the double trouble posed by my tatas (true, they had shrunk and mellowed with age), not worthy of something with a little bit more Florentine flair, if not full-on Neapolitan decadence?

"Sack suit," Yamamoto-san repeated. He then explained through a translator that I was, in his eyes, "full of character." I had heard this sentiment before, and not always in the form of a compliment, but wanted elaboration. "You're a character," he said. "You're an authentic New Yorker. You transcend fashionable suits. As an authentic New Yorker, you need a sack suit."

He and Mark began to talk about the master plan for my body. Yamamoto-san would make a drape-cut suit that would emphasize my slimness, and "flatter" my chest. The pants would accentuate my legs while making me look taller than 5 foot 5 (and a half).

"You can hide a multitude of sins with a good suit," Mark said. The Calvinist inside me blanched.

For the first time in my life, I felt non-physician, nonlover hands all over me—measuring, prodding, taking stock. The thousands of dollars being spent on this project were not just creating a garment; they were affording me a new level of care and involvement. It was the sartorial version of having a concierge doctor. "At the fitting stage," Mark said, "you'll feel like a woman getting haute couture. Why should women have all the fun?"

Yes, I thought. *Why should they?* We retired to the Armoury's garden to smoke half a dozen short Davidoff cigars and discuss matters some more. "Clothing is a visual language," Mark said. "What we have to divine is: What is a Gary Shteyngart suit?"

I puffed on my cigar, feeling seen. "Your head has to sit in a certain way on your frame," Mark said. I pictured my head above the suit, like the dot at the top of an inverted exclamation point. The suit, according to Mark, would focus attention on my head, which was definitely where I wanted the attention to fall. After mastering English in Hebrew day school and social democracy at Oberlin, I had always made the right sounds with my head. ("I want to make a suit that accentuates my client's character," Yamamoto-san had told me. "I don't want a suit that speaks more than the character.")

Above: *At the Ascot Chang factory, in Hong Kong, sewers and cutters produce about 45 meticulously made shirts a day.*
Below: *The author touring the factory. The Chang family has been making shirts in Hong Kong since 1953.*

"The best body type for a suit," Mark went on, "is one that is slightly unathletic and also stoops slightly so that it hangs better." *That's me!* I thought, shocked that what I'd considered a debility had turned out to be a strength. "Yamamoto-san will make a softer, rounder, more natural shoulder," Mark continued. "He will cut closer to the hips. You don't want a pumpkin shape."

"Most certainly not," I said.

Back inside, Yamamoto-san had set the music system to his beloved Chuck Berry and had spread out ancient *Esquire* and *GQ* magazines. "I will make you a suit from the golden age of American style," the tailor was saying. "I will make your legs even more beautiful." We were looking at intimidating books of fabric swatches. I had signaled that I wanted the suit to be ready for nights of leisure as well as labor; drunken dinners at Frenchette as well as university readings and television appearances. This led us to the darker side of the color spectrum, until we settled on midnight blue. "Six-ply is more durable, and it travels well," Mark was saying. "There's more return. See how it bounces back more quickly? Fewer wrinkles."

That all sounded great, but I was both intrigued and confused. What the hell is "six-ply"? How is yarn even made? Mark invited me to attend a fabric fair in Milan in July, then to journey to the nearby fabric mill, where the materials for my suit would be prepared. Next, we would fly to Hong Kong to have the appropriate shirts made by the fine shirtmaker Ascot Chang, and on to Tokyo for a second fitting with Yamamoto-san, as well as a fitting for a pair of shoes at the atelier of the master shoemaker Yohei Fukuda.

"Sure," I said.

Somewhere in the heavens, my Calvinist God was preparing his lightning bolts.

THE ANTICIPATION GROWS

There are many days between May and July. How many exactly I cannot tell you, as I am not a mathematician, but definitely too many when you're waiting for a series of garments to change your life.

In the meantime, Mark threw a black-tie party to celebrate 10 years of the Armoury in New York, and I put on my J.Crew tuxedo, hoping no one would sneer at its humble pedigree. The party was sponsored by Campari, and I was soon coasting on boulevardiers and chatting with a gaggle of short menswear nerds and the attractive women who loved them. As with most

LEUNG MAN HEI FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

The author snuggling with some alarmingly soft wool at the Vitale Barberis Canonico mill

Midtown parties, the mix had its share of financiers, but also included war-crimes prosecutors and museum executives. "Are you in fashion?" I overheard one attendee asking another. "No, I'm a Marxist." (And, I later found out, an architect.)

Alex Seo, a Korean American man dressed stunningly in a white double-breasted, peak-lapel tuxedo jacket, told me that when his grandfather, an academic, had landed in the Midwest from Korea many years ago without a proper outfit, the man who'd sponsored him had said, "Every professor should have a tweed jacket," and then handed him his own. The story reminded me of the clothing drive that was started for me at my yeshiva, although this tale had a kinder, more midwestern ending (Alex's father and his Armoury suit were also at the party). Looking around the room and talking to people, I realized just how many of us were either immigrants or the children of immigrants. The need for a fine suit became obvious. It was the final certificate of naturalization.

MILAN AND BEYOND

I tried to take my mind off my desperate need for bespoke clothing. A conference brought me to Tbilisi, Georgia, and then I tooled around Istanbul, Rome, and Lucca for a bit. Finally, the fabric fair arrived, and, accompanied by my old friend, the stylish Tuscan resident, art historian, and translator Shilpa Prasad, I traveled to Milan, where Mark was waiting for us.

"We're starting way upstream," Mark told me, meaning that we were going deep into the nitty-gritty of how a suit is made. Amid the city's heartless July humidity, he took us to a neoclassical palazzo, where Dormeuil, a family-run French maker of high-end fabrics, presented us with endless espresso and samples. I wasn't here to shop, just to learn what was possible.

What followed was an impressive display of discernment. Mark and his colleague Jan would feel the square of a fabric swatch, then scrunch it up and watch as it regained its composure. "Fabric drives our collection," Mark said. "For Hong Kong, this is good winter fabric," he said of one sample. Because Hong Kong represents a large portion of his business, he is very attuned to that part of his clientele. "This one's too hairy," he said of another. "Hong Kong people don't like things that are hairy." *Most people don't*, I thought, sadly.

Shilpa was amazed by how Mark and Jan knew which samples they would buy from just a cursory feel. "It's like muscle memory," Jan told her.

"We'll take four meters," Mark told the fabric salesman, and the barcode adjoining one swatch was zapped. The price for this particular fabric, which would become a three-piece suit for another client, was about 68 euros a meter. Shilpa lovingly stroked cloth flecked with gold that clocked in at 380 euros a meter, and visualized the shawl that could be made from it.

Mark explained that some fabrics are better for business suits, others for leisure suits. As an example of the former, he showed me the kind of slightly shiny wool-and-mohair blend that could have been worn by members of the Rat Pack. The fabric for my suit should bridge the gap, Mark said. It should be both beautiful and travel-resistant. "More texture, less sheen."

The Milano Unica fair took place in a typical soulless convention center on the city's edge. The booths where the vendors had set up shop were grouped by the type of goods they were hawking: Shirt Avenue, for example. The sellers we

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visited each gave us a fine cup of espresso and sometimes even a little chocolate, so that by the time I left the fair, I was orbiting Neptune.

We stopped by the esteemed Somerset cloth maker Fox Brothers, which produced the fabric that once draped Winston Churchill and Cary Grant. They favor undyed sheep's wool and are known for their wool flannel, the kind that was used to make Fred Astaire's trousers. The clothes made from their fabrics, one trench coat in particular, were gorgeous, but I would have needed to buy a Land Rover to complete the look.

Next we headed down the "street" to the booth for Vitale Barberis Canonico, the mill tasked with producing the fabric for my suit. After we had another coffee, the attractive representatives of the brand presented us with bolts of cloth to feel. "This reminds me of going to sari shops in Bombay," Shilpa said as we felt our way through the sensuous wares, gasping in delight. I was reminded of Mark's quip: "Why should women have all the fun?"

A sample of the fabric that would be used for my suit was finally presented to me—the 21 Micron. I was told that the mill's 21 Micron is made from the wool of Argentinian and Uruguayan sheep that live high in the mountains. Regular, less important sheep are subjected to the cruelty of mulesing, where strips of wool-bearing skin are removed from around their ass, to prevent the parasitic infection of fly larvae. My sheep were not subjected to such horrors. "They are happy sheep," one dapper representative told me with a wolfish smile.

Despite its South American origins, the fabric had a heavy British solidity. I crumpled it up in my fist as I had seen Mark and Jan do, and when I let go, the fabric opened like a flower. "21 Micron is the more exclusive fabric," the mill's representative told me. "It is breathable, high-twisted yarn; it will not wrinkle." Unlike most suits, mine would be made of six-ply yarn. The fabric's weight, exclusivity, sturdiness, and expense came from the fact that there was simply more of it.

"Six-ply is for the brave," the dapper man assured me, a sentence I did not understand, but cherished nonetheless.

"Your suit will be business luxury," Mark told me. "You can wear it into the ground."

I stared into the fabric, which looked as inky blue as the eternity I hope to fall into after I expire, many fathoms deeper than the Baltic Sea by which I was born. *Soon*, I thought, *this magical fabric will cover me from my ankles to my neck. And then, maybe, I will be another person.*

The next day, Mark and I traveled west of Milan, past rice fields and solar-power farms and shirtless men yawning on balconies, to a village in the Biella region of Piedmont, where Vitale Barberis Canonico is based. The mill's waiting room was filled with volumes that had titles such as *I Am Dandy*, and the magazines *Monsieur* and *The One: Yacht & Design*. Yachtless and without a French appellation, I wondered what the hell I was doing there. The executive offices surrounded a lovely Japanese garden, and as we began our tour, the members of a visiting group of fabric buyers from Taiwan, China, and Japan shyly snuck photos of Mark.

First mentioned in documents in 1663, Vitale Barberis Canonico is truly canonical, the oldest fabric mill in Italy. Our tour guides explained that the water in the Biella region has a very low concentration

The author visiting Ascot Chang in Hong Kong to select fabric and be fitted for four bespoke shirts

LEUNG MAN HEI FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

of minerals, making it soft, unlike the harsh water in other parts of Europe. This adds an extra softness to the fabric, much as pizza crust in Naples would be unimaginable without the city's *acqua*. I touched a clump of Australian wool, and noted how superior my South American sheep was to its antipodean cousin. The seven steps for making wool fabric were explained: washing, gilling (aligning the wool fibers and removing short strands), spinning, dyeing, warping, weaving, and finishing. Giant machines are dedicated to these tasks, and they run all day, mostly without human intervention. The weaving, in which the weft, the horizontal structure, is inserted into the fabric's vertical structure, the warp, is conducted in the world's quietest weaving room. Touching the yarn as it was being spun by a machine was like strumming a gently weeping guitar. I was told that my six-ply yarn was the strongest that Vitale Barberis Canonico produced, and that it had been worsted to eliminate some of its hairiness (Hong Kong readers, rejoice). Finally, this exemplary fabric had been put into a massive machine called the Dolphin 1200, which finishes the fabric and prevents it from shrinking.

In the mill's archives, we examined order books dating back to 1846, as well as a photo of King Charles III and his fun-loving wife, the Queen Consort, who both appear to be fans of the brand. I saw an advertisement for my fabric, which featured a drawing of sheep standing on a road, next to a man leaning against a sports car. A sign behind him pointed to the *RUTA DEL FIN DEL MUNDO*, "the route to the end of the world." The tagline read: "21 Micron is the final destination of a long journey in search of a family of cloths of the highest quality that guarantee unparalleled strength and crease resistance."

Is this it? I thought. *Has my long sartorial journey finally come to an end?*

Touching the yarn as it was being spun was like strumming a gently weeping guitar.

MOM POSTURE

But my journey had only begun.

On the way to Asia, I watched one of Wim Wenders's latest films, *Perfect Days*, and was struck with the teariness that often hits at 30,000 feet. The film follows an older toilet cleaner in Tokyo, exulting in the care with which he performs his task, the way he makes his work anything but menial. The toilet cleaner's devotion reminded me of something Mark had said about how a true craftsman focuses on just one item, asking himself constantly, *Is this as good as it can be?*

In Hong Kong, Mark brought his obsession with individual crafts to a 100-year-old building off Queen's Road Central, known as the Pedder Building. On the fifth floor, a 6,000-square-foot space called the Pedder Arcade has a distinctly Wong Kar-wai feel, punctuated by broad arches and spinning overhead fans. The Armoury may be the Pedder Arcade's flagship store, but it is just one part of a lifestyle hub for the intelligent moneyed class, where you can buy a signed first-edition set of John le Carré's *Karla Trilogy* for about $7,000. Mark himself works out of a space called "The Study," where people feel free to drop in and smoke a cigar—some of the world's best cigars are sold out of an anteroom, with the more intense aged Cuban variants smelling, according to Mark, "as good as God's armpit."

Mark is Malaysian Chinese by heritage, but grew up in London, Hong Kong, and Los Angeles and speaks perfect American English, though he will occasionally break a word like *forgotten* into two, adding to his charm. He got his bachelor's degree in economics from Brown and started out in finance. We are similar in that neither of our fathers was perfectly happy with the career we ultimately chose: wordsmithing and clothes selling. In Milan, I had asked Mark how he'd resolved things with his father. "He died," Mark said.

In the island's oppressive heat, Mark and I strolled over to a neighboring mall, where Ascot Chang, the renowned maker of shirts and suits, has one of its stores. Justin Chang, the grandson of the founder—the family has been making shirts in Hong Kong since 1953—greeted us and pulled out rolls of fabric (the store has more than 7,000 variations).

I was to have four shirts made to complement my suit. Justin and Mark talked over each other as I pawed at the crisp fabrics.

We chose four fabrics for the different shirts: a spread-collar dress shirt made in a fine cotton piqué, a traditional white oxford button-down, a vintage-1970s cotton shirt with blue stripes, and my favorite, a chambray shirt with a button-down collar whose uneven yarn gave it a cool and casual look. I reveled in the by-now familiar, almost therapeutic feel of several men pressing measuring tape against my shoulders, chest, and arms. Because I am a watch aficionado, Mark requested that the diameter of the left cuff be slightly larger to expose my timepieces. The formal shirt must not have a pocket, he said, but the easygoing chambray could have a pocket with a button on it. "What does this button convey?" I asked Mark, trying to master all the rules.

"It conveys, *I have a button on my shirt*."

One of the shirts had to be rushed for my second fitting with Yamamoto-san in Tokyo in a mere two days. Back at the Pedder Arcade, as I tried on a pair of artisanal-denim jeans, Mark told me that this was a particularly difficult task for Ascot Chang, because of my body's many quirks. "There's a large drop to your right shoulder," Mark said. "It makes it difficult to dial in."

I also apparently have something called "rounded shoulders," which results from a forward head position and a forward pelvic tilt. When I looked up my diagnosis online, I discovered that it is also called "mom posture," a malady that usually afflicts mothers, who have to bend down to take care of their children. I wanted to congratulate myself on my devotion as a parent, but realized that my mom posture must result from a lifetime of slouching my shoulders to hide my breasts and, possibly, from constantly nursing my other child, my phone, while walking.

As I modeled the artisanal denim, Mark and I discovered something else: I have no ass. This is why all my pants fall off me.

"No," I said, immediately predicting what Mark would prescribe. "I can't. It's too *Wall Street*, the movie."

"Suspenders," he said.

The next day, we left the fancy Central district and crossed the bay for the industrial hum of Kowloon East, to see the shirt that was being rushed for our Tokyo departure. In the warm, bright light of the factory, a host of workers was making my chambray shirt. I smiled sheepishly at the men and women toiling overtime to create the special differing armholes that would compensate for my dropped shoulder. Thirty-eight workers at the Ascot Chang factory produce about 45 shirts a day. The cloth cutters are mostly men; the sewers, who do the more complex engineering, such as the cuffs and collars, are mostly women.

The next morning, the chambray shirt was ready. I tried on my first-ever bespoke garment with trepidation. In the wooden glow of the Ascot Chang shop, I witnessed my first transformation. This was not the suit, but it was the pre-suit, an exquisite blue thing with gleaming charcoal mother-of-pearl buttons and, as I was told by Mark, "quite a strong collar for someone your size."

But for the first time in my life, the fit was right. The fit was good. The fit was perfect. Through the industry of a thoughtful team of cutters and sewers on the edge of Asia, I had finally reached a détente with my body. I looked at myself in the mirror and there I was: a well-dressed middle-aged man.

YAMAMOTO-SAN RETURNS

Armed with one Ascot Chang shirt, with three more on the way, we left Hong Kong for Tokyo for the final steps of the bespoke journey—the second fitting with Yamamoto-san and a shoe fitting with Yohei Fukuda, "arguably the best shoe money can buy," according to Mark.

Tokyo is the city for craftspeople, and I was happy to watch Mark buzz around like a hummingbird, searching for perfect accoutrements for his clients. We visited the Ginza branch of Atelier Jean Rousseau, where men in white lab coats perfected a watch strap for a customer's Patek Philippe Ellipse. "Do you have a real rose-gold stitch?" Mark asked. "I know they cost a lot of money."

We cabbed across Ginza to Ortus, a maker of elite bags from materials including hippo, elephant, and seal, where Mark had commissioned a briefcase for an underemployed man of means that contained nothing but a Monopoly set (the Hong Kong–tram edition, naturally, the pieces made in silver). "Does he go around Hong Kong playing Monopoly with his friends?" I asked.

"Well, he's hoping this will make him some friends," Mark said.

That evening I had dinner with W. David Marx, the author of the aforementioned *Ametora*. David is a 6-foot-4 southern WASP-Catholic-Jew hybrid, who also counts Yamamoto-san as a tailor. "It makes you look like an adult," he told me of the suit I would soon wear. "Which is not what people want to look like anymore."

The next morning, I climbed the steps to the second floor of Yamamoto-san's atelier, Tailor Caid, in the hip Shibuya section of Tokyo. WELCOME TO CAID MODERN TAILORING proclaimed a sign next to a silhouette of a man in a fedora toting a briefcase down an imaginary

The author with Mark Cho, the owner of the Armoury (left)*, and Yamamoto-san* (middle)*, enjoying a drink at Martiny's bar, in New York City*

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Madison Avenue. WE ARE NOT FASHION SNOBS, the sign continued, BUT WE KNOW A FEW SIMPLE RULES.

Inside, Yamamoto-san was resplendent in another seersucker suit, this one light blue, a dark-blue pocket square providing contrast. A record player was spinning not just Ella Fitzgerald, but a rare Japanese edition of her work titled *Ella and Nice Guys*. A Harvard pennant hung in the bathroom. There were old, yellowing copies of the Japanese magazines that had made Ivy style synonymous with Japan, with titles such as *Popeye* and *Hot-Dog Press* and headlines including "We Are Real IVY Leaguers." And, finally, I was confronted with the work in progress, draped over a wooden hanger: my midnight-blue suit held together with white basting thread.

I relieved myself beneath the Harvard pennant and, with shaking hands, put on the suit. At this stage in the bespoke process, the basting thread disfigured the jacket, dividing it into quadrants, and the buttons were nothing but stickers. But I could begin to imagine the wonder that the suit would become. The heavy six-ply fabric felt primordially satisfying, like a light suit of armor, but one that managed to cling to my body with near perfection. This second fitting would remove the *near*.

"There is an extended shoulder, but no pad," Yamamoto-san explained through a translator, negating the horrors of the shoulder-pad-stricken '80s, but also managing to support my dropped right shoulder. "There is an empty space in the chest," Yamamoto-san pointed out. Because I stoop so profoundly, he had used the draping technique to, in Mark's words, "give your chest a little more volume." The jacket cleverly made my chimichangas all but invisible, while ironically providing them with new space to roam.

"Damn, this is dramatic," the usually unflappable Mark said.

"The way you wear this," Yamamoto-san said, "it looks like '50s France, or Alain Delon in the '60s."

We talked about areas that needed improvement. I lifted my arms and turned around. "What do we do with Gary's behind?" Mark asked as the two men searched for my ass. "Apparently you lost some butt since the first fitting."

"He should wear his pants as snug as possible," Yamamoto-san said. The dreaded word *suspenders* came up again. "When the pants are above the belly button, everything is in line."

"He could do some squats," Mark said, an opinion I would not dignify with a response.

We chose a beautiful turquoise lining to contrast with the outer sobriety of the suit, and also navy buttons made out of nuts. "Into each life, some rain must fall," Ella crooned on the record player, but I was hardly listening to her.

To celebrate the suit, we retired to the tailor's favorite bar, Le Zinc, a few minutes' walk from his atelier. Yamamoto-san is the type of Japanese man who surrounds himself with so much perfection that it would be interesting to take him someplace awful, like Hudson Yards or Westfield Garden State Plaza. Le Zinc felt like it had floated in from a former America, too spare and beautiful to provoke nostalgia, only awe. My martini was so excellent, I struggled not to cry. "There's a sentiment in Japan," my tailor said. "We don't want to come to a bar without being

Top: *The atelier of the shoemaker Yohei Fukuda, in Tokyo.* Bottom: *Mark educates the author on how to tie an Old Bertie knot during his final fitting at the Armoury.*

AN RONG XU FOR *THE ATLANTIC*; DINA LITOVSKY FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

The author stroking the iridescent lining of his suit during his final fitting

well-dressed. There is a sentimentalization of Western culture."

"A Western culture that barely exists," I said.

A few martinis and highballs into our celebration, Yamamoto-san began to talk at length. He'd idolized America since he was a child. He listened to jazz in elementary school and saw the men wearing suits, and he couldn't wait to wear a suit as well. He fell in love with the show *Bewitched*, in which an ad executive named Darrin (originally played by Dick York) was married to a witch named Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery)—but more important for Yamamoto-san, Darrin worked on Madison Avenue and wore fabulous suits.

I have to pause this story for a minute. Back in Queens, when I was wearing my Robin the Boy Wonder T-shirts and watching television on my grandmother's failing 1960s Zenith set, *Bewitched* had managed to bewitch me as well. My nearly pubescent eyes lightly male-gazed Samantha, but I was equally in love with Darrin and his stark but perfect suits and ties. Though separated by a continent and an ocean, the young Yamamoto-san and I had entertained the same ideas of male fashion.

"A lot of young people today are anti-aging," he continued. "They want their clothes to show their youth. I like the idea of aging, the kind of aging you see in vintage furniture or a vintage watch. Aging is beautiful. When I see a 70-year-old man in Manhattan picking up after a dog while wearing a suit, I applaud."

We continued our discussion over bottles of Barolo at his favorite restaurant, which featured Lucchese cuisine. I had been to the actual Lucca just a month earlier, but the Japanese version of the food, like my Ivy-style suit in progress, seemed to both canonize and elevate its inspiration. If this part reads like a love letter to Japan and its pasta makers and toilet cleaners, I assure you it is.

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The fit was perfect.
Through the industry
of a thoughtful team
of cutters and sewers
on the edge of Asia,
I had finally reached a
détente with my body.

According to ancient Japanese custom, a night of karaoke followed, about which I recall only singing Suzanne Vega's child-abuse classic "Luka," to which my audience nodded politely. In the middle of the night, I tripped over the complicated stairs of my hotel suite and almost broke my nose. But I felt fine.

THE FINAL TOUCH

The next day would see the last piece of my wardrobe fall into place. The back-order list for Yohei Fukuda's shoes is so long, the atelier has stopped accepting bespoke-shoe orders from new clients. For the time being, it is near-impossible to get his shoes, so please allow me to enjoy mine by myself. Fukuda-san and his assistants make only eight pairs a month, and each takes 130 to 140 hours of work. The soles are stitched by hand, which makes them a lot more flexible. Much like Yamamoto-san, who interned with a Boston tailor, Fukuda-san attended two years of "shoe college" in Northamptonshire, England, and then worked his way up from repairing soles to creating leather masterpieces in his atelier, by Tokyo's Olympic stadium.

Fukuda-san is perfectly bald, with a luxuriant mustache. His work has been described as "kind of British," which means he references and perfects traditional British shoes with the same brio as my tailor's approach to Ivy style. The British did fine; Yohei Fukuda does better.

Mark has this theory that bespoke oxfords are not really worth the money, because many fine examples can be found off the rack. But he believes in bespoke loafers. So now is the time to confess another of my body's deficiencies: One of my legs happens to be longer than the other. Since I was a child, I've had to wear inserts in my shoes to account for this discrepancy, and so an easygoing loafer, the pride of America's aristocratic New England class, is sadly not for me.

We surveyed the gleaming shoes arrayed along the length of Fukuda-san's atelier, like icons in a church. "Derby shoes," Mark suggested. I looked over a couple. They were not quite as formal as oxfords, nor as floppy as loafers. Unlike

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oxfords, they had an open-laced construction that would comfort my calloused piggies during my daily six-mile walks around the countryside.

My final row of samples to examine was rolled out, a collection of hides that would allow us to choose a color. "For derbies, the best place to start is the darkest brown," Mark suggested. I remembered Boyer writing in *True Style* about how the Italians had taught the world not to be afraid of mixing brown shoes with blue suits.

"Coffee," Fukuda-san suggested, as we flipped through the hides.

"Maroon," Mark offered.

"Brown pepper!" I said, as I ran my hands across a suede that seemed spicier, more intense, more brown than the others. Fukuda-san measured and traced every part of my foot, as we discussed adding a big rubber heel for better traction, and a steel toe. As with Yamamoto-san's suit, my comfort and pleasure would be the biggest factors here; there would be no room for ostentation. *No one must know that these shoes cost $3,000*, I thought. *No one*.

My derbies would be lined with forest green to remind me of the forests behind my dacha. "Would you like your shoes monogrammed?" Fukuda-san asked. I was tempted to allow this to happen, but my Oberlin education still had some sway. My shoes remain anonymous.

YAMAMOTO-SAN 3: THE TRANSFORMATION

Just over two months later, Yamamoto-san arrived back in New York with my suit. My shoes had emigrated through different channels.

It was November 7, two days after an important American election. I was trying to practice self-care. I couldn't make my adopted country fall out of love with fascism, but at least I could enjoy my new shoes. Also, I suspected that our new leader would cut my taxes as he had in the past, shuffling money from his supporters into my piggy bank. As an immigrant who had moved from one failed superpower to another, I had learned to take my pleasures wherever I could.

On the night of my suit's unveiling, Mark threw yet another party at the Armoury's Upper East Side location. The evening was warm, almost summery. Before I was ready to put on my suit, Yamamoto-san showed me how to steam-iron it with his beloved Panasonic travel iron. The Yohei Fukuda shoes were presented to me in a beautiful blond-wood box. "There's no nail in that box," one of the Armoury's salesmen said. "Like a Jewish coffin."

But as I put on the suit, I felt less Jewish than distinctly Christian, Episcopalian if not Calvinist; in any case, born again. I walked out of the changing room and looked into a mirror. I was contained by midnight blue, my shoulders weighed down with six-ply pleasure, each of my feet covered by what felt like the product of a heavily personalized cow.

"*Yokatta!*" Yamamoto-san cried—roughly, "Thank goodness!"

"*Yokatta*," Mark said, smiling.

While I stood there yammering my gratitude, I noticed that despite the tailor's best efforts, my pants were still

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The author strolling through New York with his newfound self-esteem

sliding off the ghost of my ass. "I also have no tuchus," the Armoury salesman who'd likened my shoebox to a Jewish coffin explained. "There's no shelf on our bodies."

To compensate, I was strapped into a pair of suspenders, and Mark lovingly tied a polka-dot tie around my neck in an Old Bertie knot. Even though I was at least a decade older than he was, I had started to think of Mark as my parent. He demonstrated how using a Bertie knot instead of the usual four-in-hand would benefit a shorter man like me by ending my tie at the waist, not the groin, where our returning president likes his. He thrust his index finger below the knot of my tie and explained that he was making a dimple.

"Braces and polka dots, matching, wow!" Yamamoto-san said in English. He motioned to my nearly transparent Selima Optique frames. "And with glasses color, very nice!"

We'd had many discussions about whether my pants would come with buttons instead of a zipper, to avoid the dreaded "pants tent." But after I had demonstrated to him my love of martinis and the many bathroom visits they inspire, Yamamoto-san had relented with a zipper.

I left the fitting room and walked out into the crucible of menswear society. Although my suit felt Episcopalian, men gathered around me as if I were a bar mitzvah at the bimah. They touched the fabric; they touched my shoulders; they touched my arms and my collar. They followed me out into the Armoury's well-lit backyard.

"It looks like it was painted on you," one man said.

"The back is so clean."

"Your shoulders slope, and this just hugs them."

"The neck hugs the collar with no wrinkle."

"The stitching adds texture and visual interest."

"The weight helps it hang, the drape."

"That's a good lapel length."

"You're shaming us all tonight."

I opened up my suit, shyly and then proudly, to let folks touch the iridescent lining within. Is this what it was like to be loved in this country? Yamamoto-san took me aside and told me that I must wear my suit all the time, and wear it casually, not just for special occasions. The suit was a part of me now. "What we have to divine is: What is a Gary Shteyngart suit?" Mark had once asked. Well, now we had divined it.

"If this becomes just for special occasions, I haven't done my job," Yamamoto-san said.

I promised him that I would never abandon the suit. Every week, I would find a use for it.

And I have kept my promise. I wear my suit regularly and with joy. I can do the Bertie knot in my sleep now. The different Ascot Chang shirts combine with either the polka-dot tie or its less formal counterpart, a silk foulard tie, to create different personalities. "You look like a crooner from the '50s," my wife, Esther, said of one combination. "You look like an English deacon," she said of another.

"Bitch! You're ready for anything now!" Shilpa wrote from Tuscany.

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The suit was a part of me now. "What we have to divine is: What is a Gary Shteyngart suit?" Mark had once asked. Well, now we have divined it.

"I feel like you're walking differently than you usually do," my friend Sarah remarked. "You're strutting a little."

Only my 11-year-old son, Johnny, was unimpressed. "I wear a less comfortable version of that every single day," he told me, pulling at the collar of his school uniform.

I began to wear my suit to all my meals and to take it into consideration when I ordered. *What would my suit like to eat?* I would ask. The suit wanted shrimp cocktail. Even after the noon hour, the suit wanted steak and eggs with Tabasco sauce and a Bloody Mary. I traveled with my suit to give a reading at the University of Pennsylvania. The suit was a perfect companion. It sprang out of my suitcase like a golden retriever, with not even the afterthought of a crease on it.

My head floating above the perfect triangle effectuated by my lapels, I gave one of the best readings of my life. Why shouldn't I? I had always been content with my mind, but now I loved my body. It was no longer an object of discomfort and derision. I loved the small flickering muscles beneath my chest. I loved the roundness of my posture, my settled state. Like a character out of a James Salter novel, I loved my physique, my physicality. And I loved myself.

We did a photo shoot at Martiny's, a Japanese-style cocktail bar on 17th Street. Yamamoto-san insisted that he would help supervise. He parted the tie for me as I lay on a couch to make me look more at ease, more Ivy style. He made sure that only half of the watch I had chosen for the shoot, a gilt-dial 1963 Rolex Explorer, would flash from beneath my cuff.

Afterward, Mark and I were walking through Tribeca past an immensely popular French bistro. It was the weekend, a prime dining hour; the place looked packed.

"Let's get a table," Mark said.

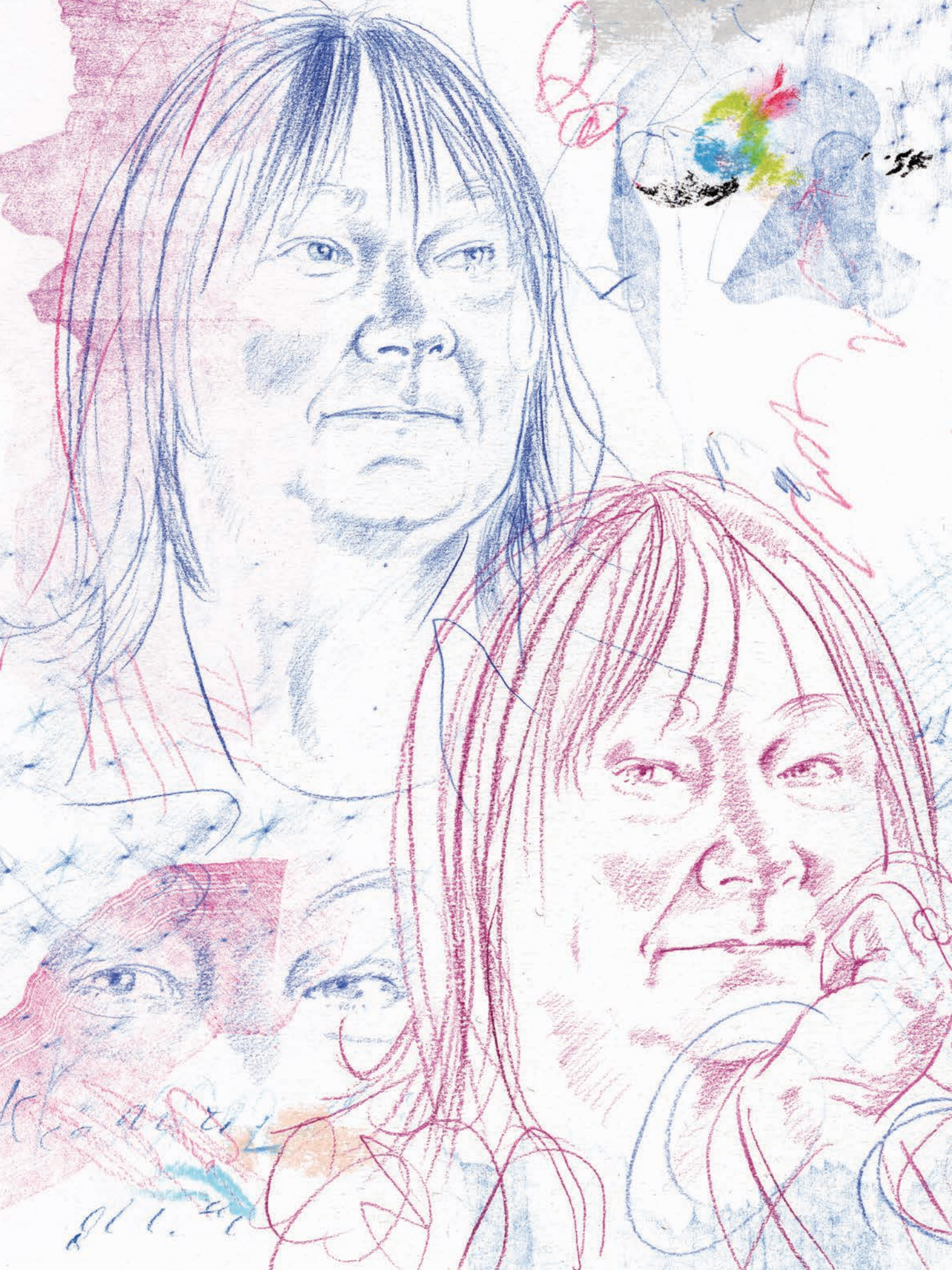
"Are you kidding?" I said. I mentioned several other restaurants down the street that might prove a better bet.

"Just go in and try," Mark said. "I have to make a phone call."

I approached the beautiful maître d' alone, but instead of the usual sniveling noises I make in these situations, the excuses for not making a reservation, my understanding that I might have to wait for an hour or more for a table to open up, I stated forthrightly that my friend and I were in need of immediate sustenance.

A microsecond passed among myself, the maître d', and my suit. A brief nod was issued. "Would you like the dining room or the bar?" she asked. *A*

Gary Shteyngart's new novel, Vera, or Faith, *will be out in July.*



The Experimentalist

Ali Smith's novels scramble plotlines, upend characters, and flout chronology—while telling propulsively readable stories.

By Adam Begley

Illustrations by Jan Robert Dünnweller

On a late summer's day in Cambridge, England, the writer Ali Smith sat with me on a wooden bench in a patch of garden across from the brick rowhouse where she works. Her new novel, *Gliff*, was due out before long; she described it as a "dystopian pony book," clearly pleased to have invented a new genre. She flashed impatience when I suggested that she frequently expresses political views both in her fiction and outside it. After a tart "Do I?" she continued, "I think I'm always in the realm of fiction." A pause before she allowed, "Well, I'm a citizen." At that moment, I knocked over the water glass I'd carelessly balanced on one arm of the bench. It shattered, and Smith said merrily, "See what happens when you talk politics?" I apologized, and she told me, "If you want to break another one, I'll break one with you."

Funny, cheerfully provocative, at once friendly and sharp-elbowed: That's Smith in person, and also in her copious fictional output (13 novels and six story collections over the past 30 years). Her books are challenging—experimental and unabashedly literary—yet welcoming to all, eminently readable even when they're disorienting; they engage the reader, demanding collaboration. (Her fifth novel, published in 2011, has a fill-in-the-blank title: *There but for the*.) Most writers with a foot in the avant-garde achieve cult status at best; Smith collects awed reviews at home and abroad, wins prizes and honors, and sells lots and lots of books to avid fans.

She breaks rules with gleeful abandon, mocking convention, asking her publisher to do things that the industry instinctively abhors. After *Gliff* will come *Glyph*—a pair of homophone titles guaranteed to trip up booksellers and buyers for years to come. (Smith adores wordplay, the quirks of language: puns, rhymes, bizarre etymologies, neologisms, contronyms—words that have developed contradictory meanings.) According to her publisher, the two books will "belong together." Could she tell me more about *Glyph*? "Absolutely not"—she hadn't yet started writing. I backed off, reminded of a line from *Artful* (2012), a novel first delivered as a series of Oxford lectures, much of it literally ghostwritten (that is, written by a ghost): "Sequence will always be most of the word consequence."

I've been thinking about Smith for more than 20 years. In 2006, just after her third novel, *The Accidental*, was named Whitbread Novel of the Year and shortlisted for the Booker Prize, I reviewed it, and did a little research. I found a short essay by her fellow novelist Jeanette Winterson in which Smith asks, rhetorically, "Do you come to art to be comforted, or do you come to art to be re-skinned?" This is what Smith does: First, she confuses you—Who's talking? When did this happen? Where am I?—then she hooks you with a flash of storytelling genius or a dazzling formal innovation. You read on, and the world seems strange to you, and you seem strange to yourself. The flimsy illusions offered up by conventional literature seem hollow (life *is* stranger than fiction), as do the certainties you live by (are you yourself truly a coherent character?). You have been reskinned.

THE HOOK sometimes looks like a gimmick. It's not. At Smith's behest, her obliging publisher hurried each of the four books of the *Seasonal Quartet* (2016 to 2020) onto bookstore shelves only about six weeks after she'd delivered each manuscript—an unthinkably quick turnaround. Smith's ambition, from the time she conceived the project in the 1990s, had been to graft the rush of current events onto the everlasting cycle of the seasons. Soon after she finally sat down to write the first book at the end of 2015 came the United Kingdom's Brexit crisis. Galvanized by the shock result of the referendum, she told herself as she began to write, "This book has to meet the contemporary head-on, or there's no point to this sequence of books." Hence the superfast schedule: *Autumn* appeared just four months after the vote.

Although the press labeled it "the first Brexit novel," the word *Brexit* is never uttered in the book. A seemingly random yet oddly menacing chain-link fence, topped with barbed wire and security cameras, is erected near an ordinary English village. A woman battles bureaucracy to renew her passport at the local post office; the petty hurdles are dismaying, ominous, comical. Spanish tourists visiting England are heckled at a train station: "This isn't Europe … Go back to Europe." Appalled, a sympathetic witness realizes that "what was happening in that one passing incident was a fraction of something volcanic"—a compact summary of Smith's narrative strategy.

At the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2018, Nicola Sturgeon, then first minister of Scotland, interviewed Smith onstage—since when does a nation's leader host an experimental novelist at a literary festival?—and read aloud a passage from *Autumn* that for her perfectly captured the post-referendum mood:

PAGE 68: LORENTZ GULLACHSEN / CONTOUR BY GETTY; LEONARDO CENDAMO / GETTY

> All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU?* All across the country, people looked up Google: *move to Scotland*.

The echo of Dickens (the first line of *Autumn* is "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times") carries on and on: 46 consecutive sentences begin with "All across the country."

Every volume of the *Seasonal Quartet* was a best seller in the U.K.; the most conspicuously topical of the four, *Spring* (2019), tackled the "migrant crisis" and reached the top of the *Sunday Times* best-seller list. Migration has been one of Smith's abiding concerns. "We're ignoring it," she said in an interview more than a dozen years ago. "As our countries and our world become smaller … we're bordered, everything is about the stranger." She eventually went to see for herself what detainees in the U.K. are put through and was shocked to find "a razor-wire fence so high and encircling such a tiny yard space that it would pass as a literal example of surreality." In *Spring*, a brutal Immigration Removal Centre is described in distressing detail—but Smith also imagines a kind of underground railroad for migrants anxious to avoid the authorities.

Bad guys versus good guys? Part of Smith's appeal is that she shows us warmhearted progressive ideals in action, a spirit of inclusion feeding hope and healing hurt. As one character in *Spring* puts it, "What looks fixed and pinned and closed in a life can change and open." But nothing in Smith's fiction is that simple. In *Winter*, two sisters are mourning the death of their mother. One says, "It takes a death sometimes to make us all live a bit more." The other thinks, "Platitude, cliché." If your sympathy is divided, that's because with Smith, every either/or is complicated by a both/and. A maxim from *The Accidental*: "The word *and* is a little bullet of oxygen."

The stories she tells spill out of stories that spill out of other stories. She's an inveterate flouter of chronology—a timeline for almost any of her books, including the quartet, would look like a manic Etch A Sketch scribble: Rather than plot or the forward sweep of the clock's hands, it is Smith's voice, her many voices, that propels the reader. As though on a whim, she'll take an unexpected detour into art history or natural history or literary criticism. Finger-on-the-pulse backdrops are balanced by cultural or historical or scientific deep dives. Against the grim tidings of the day, news of pain inflicted by strangers on strangers, she pits, in *Spring*, the oddly charming tale of Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke spending several weeks in 1922 in the same small Swiss town—and never meeting. A hack screenwriter wants to rework that non-anecdote into an erotic TV costume drama, the two writers screwing in a swinging cable car high above a picturesque snowy valley. Appalled, the director he hopes to hire flees and ends up in the Scottish Highlands, where he crosses paths with the network of people dedicated to helping migrants.

> *"I grew up on the margins," she said. "I inherited all the value of the margins."*

Like every Smith novel, *Spring* is about human connection, how hard it is—how damned important it is—to acknowledge humanity in the other and embrace it. Yet Smith has talked about how she loves the spirit of alienation in Mansfield's writing: "Distance, foreignness, knowing you're out of place or in limbo … and however much you feel at home, you're fooling yourself, and however strange you feel in the world … it's natural, it's the most natural thing." Sometimes there simply is no connection. Force it, and you get schlock.

WHEN I INTERVIEWED Smith for *The Paris Review* in 2017, a few years after the Scottish-independence referendum, she told me, "I like edges but not borders." Born in Inverness in 1962 and raised by an Irish mother and an English father, she calls herself "Scottish by formation" (quoting another of her heroes, the Scottish-born Muriel Spark). "I grew up on the margins," she said. "I inherited all the value of the margins." Her working-class parents brought her up in council housing. She was much younger than her four siblings, and looking back, she recognized that she'd had "a remarkably lucky childhood, cosseted and bullied both in that lovely family way, with nobody following me, no rivalries." Her parents had both won scholarships, but had been obliged to leave school to go to work. They were adamant that their children would be educated. All five graduated from university.

"I was a proficient, happy, versatile child," Smith told me. She went to Roman Catholic primary school, then a state-run high school. She read all the time. "I thought of myself as a poet through my teens," she confessed to another interviewer. "I was pretty dreadful." At the University of Aberdeen, she studied English literature and language, graduating with highest honors. She then spent five years studying for a Ph.D. at Newnham College, Cambridge. Alongside her studies, she wrote plays; Sarah Wood, who became her life partner, directed five of them. The doctorate, meanwhile, never materialized. Her examiners requested changes to her dissertation on three Modernist masters (James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams); she refused. She was nevertheless offered two teaching jobs, and accepted the one at the University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow.

That stint lasted 18 months, cut short by a debilitating bout of chronic fatigue syndrome. At the time, the illness felt "like I'd been hit from the back with a baseball bat—after which I … went into a kind of physical breakdown." Smith returned to Cambridge to recover, but the symptoms lingered, resurfacing intermittently. Though she found it painful to write longhand, she scratched out her first collection, *Free Love and Other Stories* (1995), which scooped up a couple of prizes. She persuaded her publisher, Virago, to take a chance on her debut novel, *Like* (1997), and from then on, she was a writer only.

Her second novel, *Hotel World* (2001), was shortlisted for both the Booker and Orange Prizes, success of the kind that heralds a major career. In *The Guardian*, the novelist Giles Foden wrote, "I have never seen the tenets of recent literary theory (the impossibility of the coherent subject, or substantive character, for instance) so cleverly insinuated into a novel." It begins with the voice of a ghost. A teenage chambermaid working at a fancy hotel in a dour northern city has fallen down a dumbwaiter shaft to her death. Her ghost, itching to feel again ("What I want more than anything in the world is to have a stone in my shoe"), would like to know how long it took her to fall:

> (and this time I'd throw myself willingly down it wooo-
>
> hooooo and this time I'd count as I went, one elephant two eleph-ahh) if I could feel it again, how I hit it, the basement, from four floors up, from toe to head, dead. Dead leg. Dead arm. Dead hand. Dead eye. Dead I, four floors between me and the world, that's all it took to take me, that's the measure of it, the length and death of it, the short goodb—.

A classic, manically ludic Smith passage, grim and comical, pushing at the edge of too much, yet as easy to swallow as a spoonful of honey.

Having given voice to the dead, Smith takes it away; the ghost girl is losing her ability to speak, losing language. Her last message to the living:

> Remember you must live.
> Remember you most love.
> Remainder you mist leaf.

When I asked Smith about the legion of ghosts in her fiction, she shrugged and said, "I just don't think death makes that much difference." Sounding like Gertrude Stein, she elaborated: "We carry with us all the people who have made us and the people we make and the lives we make, and the world we make continues on from what we make of it."

THE REALM OF FICTION where Smith says she "always" dwells is mostly populated by family and friends, the people we're most comfortable with, who also drive us crazy. Often the setting is the home we long for and can't wait to escape. The premise of *The Accidental*—borrowed from Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1968 film, *Teorema*—is the reskinning of an unhappy bourgeois family: mother, son, daughter, and stepfather. In musical notation, an "accidental" changes the pitch. In the novel, the accidental—the catalyst—is a mysterious character who rings the doorbell and announces, "Sorry I'm late. I'm Amber. Car broke down." Though she's very much flesh and blood (her flesh is desired by every family member, young, old, male, female), this uninvited guest might as well be a ghost, an inexplicable apparition with uncanny powers. The daughter thinks of Amber as "the kind of superheroine that can draw things to her and repel them away from her at the same time."

The reader watches as the family's world disintegrates, and the idea, I believe, is that the reader molts in sympathy. The daughter, in her old skin, needs everything to be mediated, filtered, distanced. A bright, lonely 12-year-old, she's obsessed with her video camera (and has a verbal tic, using *i.e.* ad nauseam). Amber drops the girl's camera from a pedestrian bridge onto a busy highway below—deliberately. Amber does everything deliberately. In her new skin, the younger girl accepts that "her responsibility" is about "actually seeing, being there." That may sound like a New Age mantra, but the transformation, slight and subtle, is also plausible and moving. The parents fare less well; the fractured family will never be whole again. (Smith doesn't do happy endings.)

In my mind, the 12-year-old from *The Accidental* reappears, four years older and much sadder (her mother has died), in my favorite Smith book, *How to be both* (2014), a novel in two parts published in vice-versa editions: with the same cover, but with the order of the parts reversed—in effect, different novels packaged identically and released simultaneously. This older girl, George, is also bright and lonely, and she's pedantically fixated on correct grammar—"a finite set of rules," she insists. George, too, will be reskinned. Among other things, she slowly discovers her erotic love for another girl. Her evolution is watched over by the ghost of an actual Italian quattrocento painter from Ferrara, Francesco del Cossa.

One part of *How to be both* is narrated by the bewildered painter, who can't comprehend 21st-century England and decides he's in an afterlife "purgatorium," condemned to traipse after George, whom he mistakes at first for a boy. The other part is told from George's perspective, close third-person. She remains unaware of the ghostly observer who's following her around.

When I asked Smith about the legion of ghosts in her fiction, she shrugged and said, "I just don't think death makes that much difference."

Which part you read first depends on which edition you happen to have bought, and to discover which sequence works best, you'll have to reread. Should the tale of a 600-year-old artist, with its technical asides on the art of the fresco, come before the tale of modern-day teenage angst? Do the parts of the puzzle fit either way?

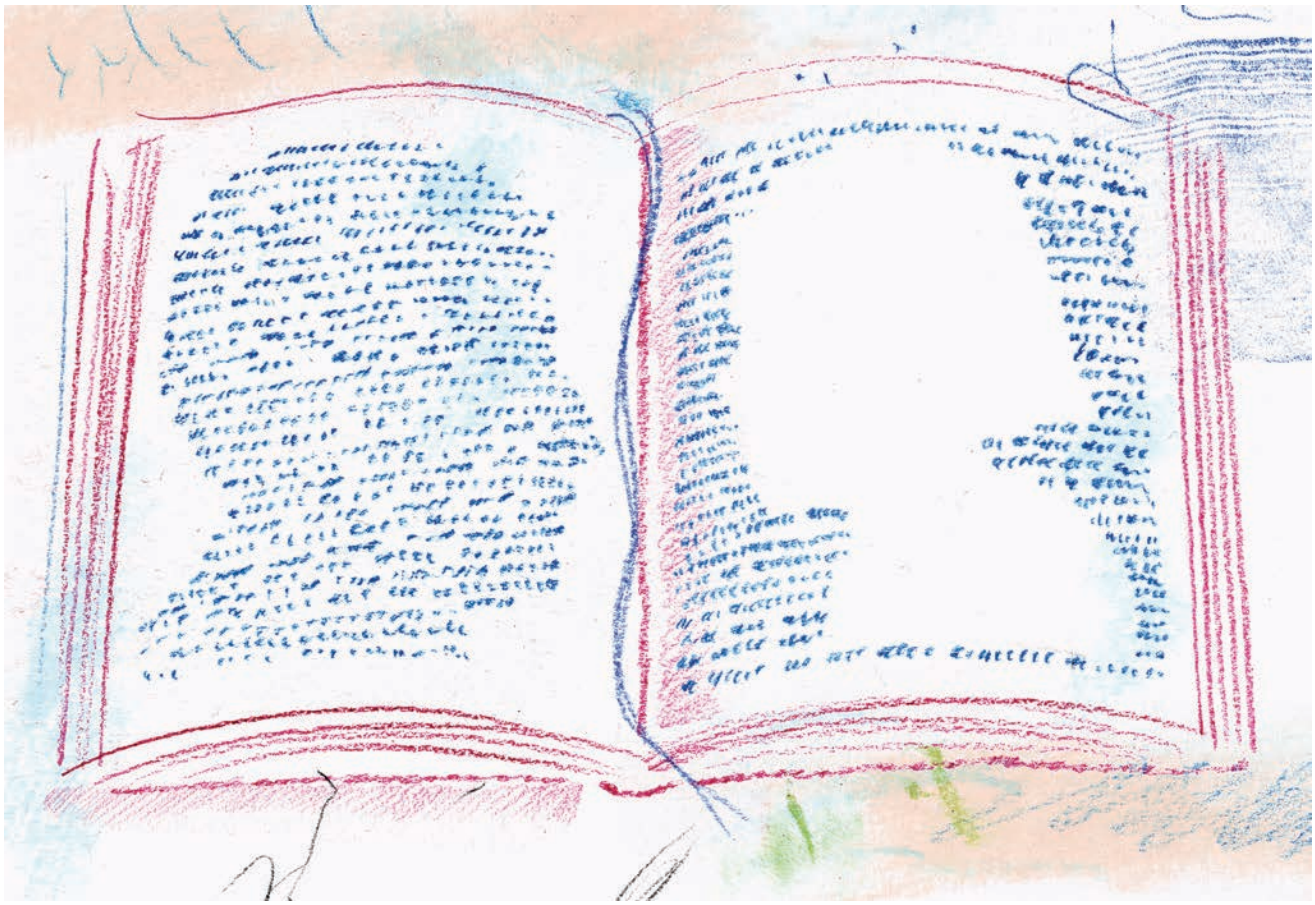
The painter's confusion about George's gender is an ironic echo (or foreshadowing) of the backstory Smith has invented for him: He was born a girl but disguised himself as a boy to become a painter. ("Nobody will take you for such a training wearing the clothes of a woman," warned his father, a brickmaker.) The adventures of this talented cross-dresser make a mockery of binary ideas about gender. What the painter learned centuries ago in Ferrara, what George learns in 21st-century London, is that no finite set of rules applies.

BACK ON the sunny Cambridge bench, Smith told me about the origins of *Gliff*, which is full of characteristic quirks and revisits her abiding concerns—gender, boundaries, the importance of unmediated engagement with the world. But it's darker fiction, with some acutely painful passages. It began as a short story written "very fast" in August 2023, a commission for an anthology: "I was supposed to write something that was tangentially Kafkaesque," she explained, after which she turned to work on a new novel. But she was ambushed by a "horrendous" bout of insomnia, "three months of almost no sleep," and realized that she was writing the wrong book, and that the short story "was not going away, was waiting, rather like characters do, at the back of your head."

Where did the title come from? "I was playing about online one day thinking, *Is this a nonsense word or not?* And I looked up the word that sounded like *glyph* but was spelled differently, and found out it wasn't a made-up word—it was actually a northern word, a Scottish word." It has many meanings, among them a glimpse, a sudden fright, or a brief moment. It's also the name of the horse in this dystopian pony book, but we'll get to that.

A glyph is a mark—as Smith said, "The smallest unit of meaning," a scratch on a cave wall, an ornamental carving on a primitive tool. In the *Paris Review* interview, when I asked about the building blocks of her prose, Smith explained that "the rhythmical unit of the syllable is at the back of all of it—the word, the phrase, the sentence, the syntax, the paragraph, and the way the heart moves when you read it." Now she's taken the next step, training her attention on the gesture that precedes even the syllable. In *Gliff*, she shows us prehistoric cave art and the head of a horse carved many thousands of years ago onto a rib bone.

She also steps for the first time into the near future: A brutal totalitarian state has been rounding up, interning, and reeducating people whom the regime deems "unverifiable." The climate is as much Orwell as Kafka: 24/7 surveillance, grotesque euphemisms, justified paranoia. Britain's not quite there yet—but, Smith insisted, "could be." She added, sitting up taller, "If we just raise our heads



JAN ROBERT DÜNNWELLER

from thinking it's not happening, we'd see that most of the book is happening right now somewhere."

The authorities have started drawing red lines around the unwanted unverifiables—literally. They have a comically low-tech machine called a "supera bounder" that applies paint around houses, around vehicles. Demarcated houses are demolished, vehicles towed away: rapacious capitalism combining punishment and profit.

Two siblings, a young teenager and a younger sister, more or less abandoned in an empty house, find themselves on the wrong side of the red line. The older sibling—our narrator, Bri, cautious and protective—worries about the meager supply of canned food, and tries hard to lift the spirits of the younger one, who finds seven horses in a nearby field, one of which, a gray gelding, she adopts (or is adopted by). She gives him his name.

Gliff the horse is the moral center of *Gliff* the novel, and also the occasion of some arresting descriptions:

> The grey horse's bones were close to its skin all over it and it seemed huge even though it was quite a small horse, the smallest one in this field. It moved with laidback strength and with a real weightiness though it wasn't weighty at all, it was as spare as a bare tree …
>
> The eye was shocking.
>
> It was really beautiful.
>
> You could see light in its dark, and it also had in it, both at once, two things I had never seen together in one place, gentleness, and—what?

Five years later, in a moment of crisis, Bri realizes that the missing word is "equanimity."

When Smith was a child in Inverness, about 4 or 5 years old, she discovered a stable behind an ice rink. "Between the age of 7 and 11," she said, "I went every Saturday in the summer and hung out. We did do a little grooming—very small ponies in my case. What I know about horses all comes from that place at the back of the ice rink, where 12 or 13 horses lived in the field." She paused. "You know, being on the back of a horse teaches you everything about everything."

The writing about Gliff the horse does more than bring the living creature into focus. "His mouth was decisive without force, a soft lipped line. It made him look resigned, noncommittal, but also poised, as if waiting." That "soft lipped line" is the antithesis of the supera bounder's garish, excluding red. Yet Smith is in the business of complicating binaries as well as erasing boundaries; she won't tolerate a simple dichotomy.

Which brings us back to the two siblings. The younger one is Rose, wild, fiercely loyal, fiercely stubborn. Bri, kind and caring and, like so many of Smith's characters, obsessed with words and their meaning, is also Briar or Brice. ("Why did I myself really like having more than one name, as if I had more than one self?") When asked, bluntly but without malice, "Are you a boy or a girl?," the answer is, "Yes I am."

Flash-forward five years and—a spoiler follows—Bri now serves the state. Reeducated? Lured by the promise of elevated status? Tortured? It's not clear what has happened, but Bri is complicit in the horrors of the regime, and this lover of words has been silenced: "That's as much of that story as I care to tell. One line about it is more than enough." The unspoken, the unspeakable, is more frightening than anything else in the novel.

"Fiction's only agenda is to be fiction," she replied, "but lies have an agenda."

FOUR CATS patrol the alley next to where Smith and her partner live and work. The cats came and went, occasionally pausing near our bench to lick a paw and ignore us ostentatiously. I wondered which ones were hers, and she said, approvingly, "They kind of live everywhere."

I asked again about politics, suggesting mildly that sometimes she deploys her dazzling skills in the service of ideology. In *Winter*, she quotes Keats: "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us." Does she agree? "Fiction's only agenda is to be fiction," she replied, "but lies have an agenda." Her soft, lilting voice was buttressed by quiet conviction: "All you do is tell the story. What you do is write and write, and you tell the story that arrives—and it really is like being on the back of a horse." But what about the wild complexity of her narratives, the abrupt swerves and unannounced excursions? As though to allow for nuance, she said, "Of course it will be political when it's written, because everything is. But I believe deep in my own bones that story is about something that cancels division between us." She added, "We cross those lines every time we listen to someone or are heard by someone."

Some early reviewers of *Gliff* have complained that it feels too "on the nose." The book's horrors—climate catastrophe, internment camps, genocidal wars, high-tech surveillance—are too familiar to serve as prophecy. Is it fair to complain that the future is almost already upon us? Who needs prophecy when dystopia is now? The novel thrums with Smith's urgent need to tell a story about where our divided present could lead us. "We cannot look away at the moment," she said to me. "We must not look away from the darkness. And if I didn't look at the dark, what kind of a writer would I be?" *A*

Adam Begley is the author of several biographies, including Updike. *He's working on a book about Harvard College.*

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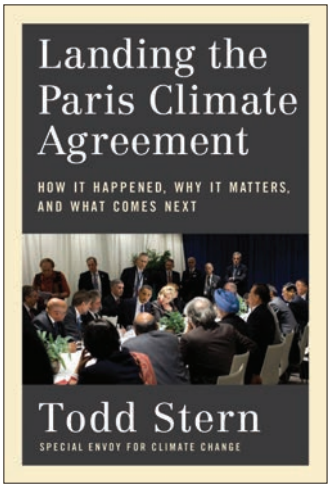

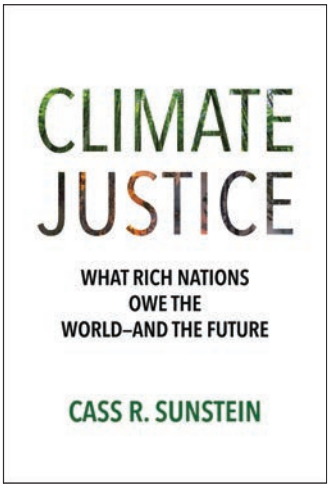

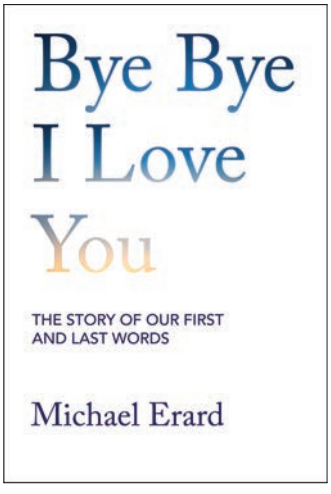

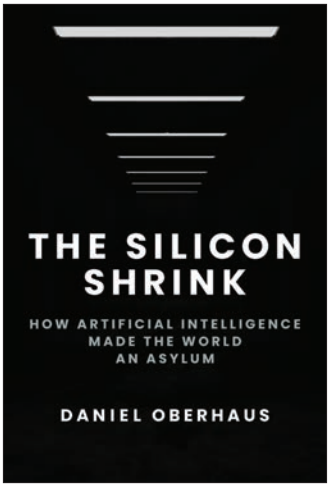

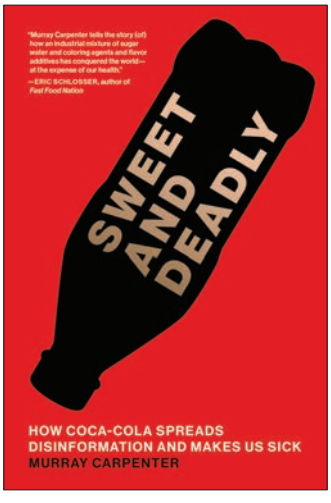

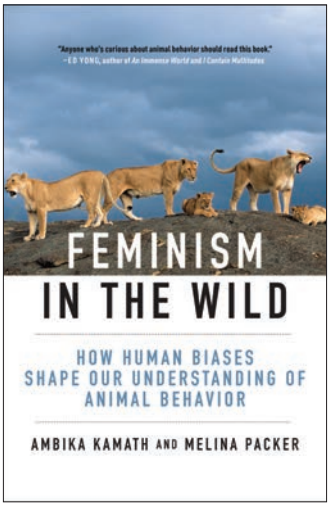

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Bridget Jones Never Gets Old

How the beloved British diarist outlasted her critics

By Sophie Gilbert

Bridget Jones, as a character, has always hovered uncomfortably between the hard light of reality and the rosy glow of romance. When she first appeared, in newspaper columns written by the British journalist Helen Fielding during the mid-1990s, the 30-something Bridget was claimed as a totem of womanhood at the time: a calorie-counting, self-improvement-obsessed, chain-smoking, wine-guzzling singleton (a neologism Fielding immortalized); an earnest vassal of *Cosmo* culture and the embodiment of fearmongering *Newsweek* coverage about the plight of unmarried career girls. With Bridget, Fielding "articulated the traumas of a generation," the writer Alain de Botton observed.

But when Bridget's diary entries were published in book form, in 1996, her true narrative arc was revealed. It didn't chart a postmodern Gen X nightmare. It was lovingly cribbed from *Pride and Prejudice*. The most notorious single woman of an era, as her fans learned in the book and its 1999 sequel, and from the movies they inspired in 2001 and 2004, would be largely protected by the tired old trappings of the marriage plot: She would bag her Mr. Darcy and live happily ever after—with a few detours—in his dreamy detached house in Holland Park.

Her trajectory over the next decade-plus (in another round of newspaper columns; another book; and a third movie, *Bridget Jones's Baby*, in 2016, not based on a book) certainly had its requisite stumbles. But the character was steadied throughout by the Texan actor Renée Zellweger as the very English Bridget, an unpredictably brilliant piece of casting that just works.

On paper, Bridget can be compellingly hard to pin down, inconstant and ironic, messily self-aware, undeniably human. Early on, she cops to highly compromised feminist principles: She will not "sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend." On-screen, though, Zellweger makes her all heart, guileless as a toddler, impossibly hopeful and lovably absurd. Whatever cards she's dealt—not least professional humiliation and an accidental pregnancy (paternity unclear, thanks to separate one-night stands and a box of expired eco-friendly condoms)—she muddles through with gusto. We know that Bridget will get her happy ending; this is just about the last romantic-comedy franchise standing. But Zellweger makes us also deeply want her to win, formulaic predictability be damned.

How will the last cockeyed optimist in popular culture deal with the desolation of a husband's death?

Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy, an adaptation of the slapdash third novel that starts streaming on Peacock on February 13, keeps the trope-laden structure, but finds surprising depth in a devastating plot twist. Bridget, now in her 50s, is single once again: Her beloved husband, Mark Darcy (played in grand metafictional form by an actor who played the other Mr. Darcy, Colin Firth), has died while on a humanitarian mission in Sudan, leaving Bridget to raise their two children alone. The book uses Mark's death mostly as a narrative device to launch Bridget, with her typically obsessive energy, into cougardom: She starts dating a hunky man in his late 20s named—inanely—Roxster, which exposes Bridget to a whole new range of body-image issues, and exposes Roxster to her children's head lice.

The movie, though, is more interested in documenting Bridget's loss, and in the process, it presents a more honest and moving version of her than we've seen before. How will the last cockeyed optimist in popular culture deal with such desolation? Widowhood is no laughing matter, parenting alone even less so—though we have to laugh at Bridget burying her face in the fridge to curse, and being surprised by her son's uptight science teacher while buying an astonishing variety of contraceptives. Pathos underpins the plot. "Do you miss Dada sometimes?" Mabel, Bridget's daughter, asks her in the movie. "I miss him all of the times," Bridget replies.

Grief is a tough sell for a rom-com, which is maybe why the movie has marketed itself as something more timely, once again positioning Bridget as representative of her moment. Cinema lately has been consumed with what viewers call the "age-gap romance," or, less decorously, the "MILF setup." In 2024's *The Idea of You*, Anne Hathaway plays a divorcée not unlike Bridget in her ditziness, who careens her way into a love affair with a handsome British boy-bander. In two separate movie projects within the space of a year, *A Family Affair* and *Babygirl*, Nicole Kidman parses the power differentials at play when older women find fulfillment with younger men.

Bridget's adventures with the age gap are characteristically sweet and laced with goofiness: When she meets Roxster, she's shinnying up a tree that both of her children have managed to get stuck in. When he

Left: Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger) with Mark Darcy (Colin Firth) in *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004). *Right:* With Roxster (Leo Woodall) in *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2025).

later messages her on Tinder, it's via an account that her friends have set up: "Tragic Widow Seeks Sexual Awakening." Mortification, for Bridget, is only ever a degree or two removed from triumph.

Yet *Mad About the Boy*, for all its familiar, delightful notes, is also wincingly astute regarding modern-day dynamics, good and bad, for women of Bridget's age. When her friends encourage her to pursue Roxster, the idea is plausible not just because Zellweger is still luminously endearing in midlife, but because the world really has changed: Women can date men a decade or more younger without inciting mass hysteria. But they've remained undesirable in other ways: Bridget works as a producer for a daytime TV show where formerly hard-hitting female news reporters now gush their way through cooking segments and softball interviews. For female journalists over a certain age, "HDTV was an extinction-level event," Bridget's friend Talitha mutters.

The tension between sharp contemporary verisimilitude and age-old romantic archetype helps explain why Bridget potters on while so many other '90s heroines have fallen by the wayside. (Remember Ally McBeal? She of the miniskirts and the catfights and the ludicrous workplace dilemmas?) The book version of Bridget has come in for derision as an embarrassing relic of postfeminism, screwing up even the most basic personal and professional tasks, and fixated on her thigh circumference and her office crushes. In 2023, a *New York Times* retrospective finally declared her "nuttiness and self-loathing" to be well past its expiration date for modern readers. Yet her movie comebacks continue to be irresistible, in part because no one is more aware of her failings than Bridget herself.

Crucially, she never lets her self-critique shake a confidence lodged someplace inside her (even if she's not quite sure where). The academic Kelly A. Marsh has argued that despite her ongoing preoccupation with becoming better, Bridget at her core represents, through all her phases, the victory of self-acceptance. She flourishes not just because of the love stories that the novels' framing forces on her, but thanks to the faithful love of her friends and her own stouthearted spirit.

There's something poignant, too, about seeing Zellweger in the role, despite all the indignities the actor has suffered along the way—the 2000 cover shoot for *Harper's Bazaar*, rudely shelved because Zellweger had gained weight for the role and was deemed too fat for a fashion magazine; the tabloid coverage declaring her "scary skinny" when she then duly dieted; the discourse about her changing face, so rabid and intrusive that she had to strike it down in a personal essay for *HuffPost*. At 55, Zellweger is in what Germaine Greer once cited as a decade of new "invisibility" for women—a phenomenon that Bridget herself analyzes in her diary. And yet here they both are: undaunted, blond, adorable, enduring, changing the world by refusing to shrink away from it. That, as Bridget might say, is v.v. good to see. *A*

Sophie Gilbert is a staff writer at The Atlantic. *She won the 2024 National Magazine Award for Reviews and Criticism and was a finalist for the 2022 Pulitzer Prize in Criticism.*

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When Robert Frost Was Bad

Before he became America's most famous poet, he wrote some real howlers.

By James Parker

Bad poems never die, never really go away: The vigor of their badness preserves them. Up they float into bad-poem limbo, where their bad lines, loose and weedlike, drift and coil and tangle with one another eternally. Robert Frost, who turned 20 in 1894, uncertain of his gift, bouncing among stray gigs (actor's manager, repairer of lights at a wool mill) in Lawrence, Massachusetts, had written a poem called "My Butterfly." It begins like this: "Thine emulous fond flowers are dead too, / And the daft sun-assaulter, he / That frighted thee so oft …" It is what it is, a bad poem. A random-feeling extrusion of lyrical matter, like something that might come out of the tube when you pull the lever marked POETRY.

Nevertheless, for this poem, and for the first time in his career, Frost got paid—$15,

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ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA MORRISON

by the editor of a New York weekly called *The Independent*. "On reading 'My Butterfly,'" Adam Plunkett writes in his new *Love and Need: The Life of Robert Frost's Poetry*, "the poetry editor called the rest of the staff over to listen because she had just discovered a poet." A woman whose literary perspicacity exceeded my own, clearly. I would have left him to molder in the slush pile.

Plunkett, whose book offers close readings of the poems as well as the life, quite likes "My Butterfly." For him, it "reads like a spell that conjures the experience of grace." Frost himself thought enough of the poem to include it, 19 years later, in his first collection, *A Boy's Will*—where it acts as a kind of remedial concentrate, strengthening the poems around it with homeopathic doses of its own badness. "To the Thawing Wind," for example, opens with three lines of sub-Shelleyan puff: "Come with rain, O loud Southwester! / Bring the singer, bring the nester; / Give the buried flower a dream …" (Flowers again.) But the fourth line—"Make the settled snow-bank steam"—that's Frost. You can see the steam rising, hear it hiss across those sibilants. And the next line is better still, blunter, Frostier, more concrete even as it hums with the voltage of symbol: "Find the brown beneath the white." The growth beneath the crust of death.

Through his poetry, with his poetry, Frost thought about symbols a lot. Were things as they merely appeared, or were they representative of something else, some higher or lower order of being? Was the world made of matter saturated in spirit, or the other way around, or neither? "God's own descent / Into flesh was meant / As a demonstration / That the supreme merit / Lay in risking spirit / In substantiation," he declared in 1962's "Kitty Hawk," writing in the philosophical doggerel of his late manner.

Many of his poems turn on the problem of having a mind—of simply being conscious, observant, in our weird human way, while existence churns through us and beyond us. Of coming upon an abandoned woodpile in the middle of winter, a thing of utter dereliction, and being unable not to invest it with some kind of personality, watching it "warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay."

Shortly after writing "My Butterfly," Frost had a bit of a blowout with his girlfriend. He'd just dropped out of Dartmouth; she wasn't ready to drop out of St. Lawrence. Did she even want to marry him? Plunkett suggests that he'd been "generally making a pain of himself in the role of jealous lover." Badly upset, and in a state of screw-it-all young-man desperation, Frost packed his bag, left Lawrence ("without even a note to his mother," tuts Jay Parini in his *Robert Frost: A Life*, from 1999), and headed for the Great Dismal Swamp—which sounds allegorical but is a real location, a forbidding stretch of wetland on the Virginia–North Carolina border.

Frost seems to have never been to the Great Dismal Swamp, to have had no connection to it at all. I'm speculating, but surely his only possible reason for going there was literary: the Bunyanesque name of the place ("Being the creature of literature I am," as he would later write in "New Hampshire"). He was on his own Pilgrim's Progress, his own symbolic quest, and he wanted to pass through his own Slough of Despond.

By train and by ship, he got himself in there—into the doom-bogs, into the fen of misery, and he did some lonely wandering. Then he came back out. He took a steamer, hooked up with a party of drunken duck hunters, hopped a freight train, got robbed by the brakeman, stayed in a hobos' camp, made it to Baltimore, wired home for cash. It's a great burlesque episode. Someone should write a little book, *Frost in the Swamp*. Plunkett rather rattles through it; Parini takes it slower, noting that a chunk of Frost's poetic psyche was forged on this trip, down there in the great dismalia, among the mulchy ground and the dark trees: "If Frost can be said to have an archetypal poem, it is one in which the poet sets off, forlorn or despairing, into the wilderness, where he will either lose his soul or find that gnostic spark of revelation."

LOVE AND NEED: THE LIFE OF ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

Adam Plunkett

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

"THE ROAD NOT TAKEN," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"—these aren't really poems anymore. Decades of mass exposure have done something to them, inverted their aura. Now they're more like … recipes. Or in-flight safety announcements.

Not really Frost's fault, of course. But then again, he did love being famous. He embraced being famous. After so many years of hidden toil, scratching out a living through his 20s and 30s as a teacher and poultry farmer in Derry, New Hampshire, he adored—who wouldn't?—his huge, unpoetic popularity when it finally arrived. And it wasn't just the general reader, the middlebrow poetry lover—he had the respect of the bigwigs, too. Four Pulitzer Prizes (1924, 1931, 1937, and 1943), a pileup of other honors and sinecures. To John F. Kennedy he was Mr. Rabbit Frawst; the president-elect invited him to read at his inauguration, where Frost fumbled over his prepared text before reciting "The Gift Outright" from memory: "The land was ours before we were the land's …"

The interesting comparison, fame-wise, is with Dylan Thomas, who in early-'50s America went off like a rocket while Frost was steadily expanding his audience. But Thomas was fragile and buzzing and not long for this world; Frost was solidifying. He would become an institution.

And yet I found it strangely easy to avoid him. To go right around him. For a long time there was a

perfectly Frost-shaped hole in my understanding of American poetry. And it wasn't a problem, because there's something hermetic about his legacy: Frost sits alone, sealed, seeming to touch or connect with none of the poets around him. He did live, to a greater degree than most poets, in his own atmosphere, but it's more than that. "What does it mean?" is always the wrong question in poetry. A poem is what it does, the effect it has, not what it narrowly and explicably means. And yet with Frost somehow—equivocal, enigmatic, withholding, hide-and-seek Frost, the Frost of "Mowing" and "Birches" and "Mending Wall," rustic-inscrutable (or affecting to be), full of dark hints, so plainspoken and so tricky—this is the question you keep helplessly asking: What's he on about here?

Take, for instance, the famous penultimate line of 1913's "Mowing": "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." It's pregnant-feeling, aphoristic, winking away with compressed significance. But I don't know what it means. Do you? Frost, the old gnome, once told an audience, "There's one of the keys to all my life [and] thinking in one line." Plunkett is all in; he calls this line "a creed," adding that it "set a standard for the rest of Frost's poetry." But his explanations of it don't really help me: "The creed declares that the richest aesthetic experience of imagination, the sweetest dream, is to be had by using the power of imagination to contemplate the world at hand." Or again:

> Of the creed's manifold meaning, the double meaning most fundamental is of realist and idealist visions of knowledge, the *fact* as the sweetest dream that labor knows or the fact as the sweetest *dream* that labor knows, as if the facts of the world, like dreams, were knowable through imagination.

Perhaps I'm being obtuse. Or perhaps the necessity of any explanation at all has already short-circuited my intellect.

SO I GO BACK to the great poems, the undeniable, straightforwardly mysterious, no-explaining-required, knock-you-on-your-ass poems. The glittering miniatures ("Fire and Ice," "Dust of Snow"), the mighty midrangers ("An Old Man's Winter Night"), the great statements ("Desert Places"), and the shaggier, madder excursions into monologue and dialogue, his special brand of agitated farmhouse talk: "A Servant to Servants," "The Witch of Coös." ("Mother can make a common table rear / And kick with two legs like an army mule.")

Between *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* a year later, something happened: The Muses tapped him, lightning struck, poetry broke upon him in a big way. What had happened, actually, was that he had crossed the Atlantic—upped sticks, with his family, in 1912, and decamped to England for three years. A solid career move. In prewar London he met Yeats and Pound, and the extraordinary poet-critic T. E. Hulme. He hung around with lesser Georgians like Wilfrid Gibson and Lascelles Abercrombie. He bonded profoundly with Edward Thomas. He had arrived, in other words, at just the moment when—and just the place where—poetry's ancien régime was about to be dynamited by modernism.

In his creaky, earthy style, Frost was ushering in something just as shock-of-the-new as anything the modernists would produce.

The change was under way in his own poetry. In his creaky, earthy Robert Frost style, he was ushering in something just as shock-of-the-new as anything the modernists would produce. The drunkard on the bed in "A Hundred Collars": "Naked above the waist, / He sat there creased and shining in the light, / Fumbling the buttons in a well-starched shirt." It has the too-real physical exactitude of the later war poets, of Wilfred Owen or Robert Graves—but the war hadn't happened yet. The working title for *North of Boston* was *Farm Servants and Other People*, and in its spooked, unreliable rural scenes, Frost had only one true peer at the time, the English poet Charlotte Mew. Her "The Farmer's Bride" was published in *The Nation* in 1912: "When us was wed she turned afraid / Of love and me and all things human; / Like the shut of a winter's day. / Her smile went out."

North of Boston was Frost coming into his birthright as a poet. No more strained lyricisms, fewer flowers. "I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight": Now that—from "After Apple-Picking"—that's a creed, that's a motto for a poet. The confessional throb of the line seems to place it right between Wordsworth's "I cannot paint what then I was" and Robert Lowell's "My mind's not right." Listen, indeed, to the 1951 recording of Frost reading "After Apple-Picking" and you'll realize how close you are in this 1914 poem to Lowell's "Skunk Hour" 44 years later, how you're shivering on the same visionary frequency and hearing the same chanted, haunted cadence. Both poems take place in the hallucination chamber of a New England autumn. Frost's narrator is being dragged into a death-doze by the scent of freshly picked apples, caught between his body and his dreaming mind, his instep still sore from all the hours spent up a ladder even as he goes into a trance: "Magnified apples appear and disappear"—the plumpness in that double-*p* sound, hypnotically renewed—"Stem end and blossom end, / And every fleck of russet showing clear." It's like a YouTube ad for apples, endlessly rolling, evilly glistening apples, a sumptuous close-up for which the technology did not yet exist.

FROST WAS a complicated fellow, not always using his powers for good. By the end of *Love and Need*, you're glad to escape his company. He certainly had

his trials—the death of his wife, the suicide of his son—but somehow more depressing is Plunkett's portrait of the strange and stifling coterie around him in the latter years, the grand-old-man years, when he was playing one would-be biographer against another and maintaining a kind of zombie love triangle with his manager-secretary and her unfortunate husband, all while reaping large amounts of the especially bland worldly acclaim you get when you're already acclaimed.

The work, all the way through, was crazily uneven. *A Witness Tree* (for which, naturally, he won another Pulitzer, in 1943) contains the sonnet "The Silken Tent," which Plunkett regards as a masterpiece and I regard as a card-carrying bad poem. From the first line, "She is as in a field a silken tent," that slithery is/as/in—we feel the ickiness of the whole creepily extended woman-as-tent conceit. But turn a few pages and you find "The Most of It," which begins like this:

> He thought he kept the universe alone;
> For all the voice in answer he could wake
> Was but the mocking echo of his own
> From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.

Here we are: modernity. The current condition. This is the trapped subject, the voice crying out in the wilderness, seeking a response from the Everything but getting only the scornful bounce-back of itself.

But then we shift. The cliff across the lake, it turns out, is not a metaphor, or not just a metaphor. It's an actual (if phantasmagoric) place. It's like the Great Dismal Swamp: It exists and it super-exists. And now something, or some thing—an "embodiment" (brilliant, terrifying word)—noisily enters the water on the far side of the lake. Splash, and here it comes, paddling toward us—the universe's reply. And the embodiment, the apprehended sound, that report of something unseen and solid crashing into the lake, now takes a form: "As a great buck it powerfully appeared, / Pushing the crumpled water up ahead."

So Frostian: right between reality ("crumpled") and otherness. The word *antlers* is not in the poem, but somehow you see them, the great rearing trees of bone. This buck is a monster—wordless energy, wordless strength—and with its snorting and triumphantly chaotic arrival on the shore, it brings the Message, which is no Message, from the far side. The meaning is there is no meaning. It "landed pouring like a waterfall, / And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread, / And forced the underbrush—and that was all." *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Reflections

By Czesław Miłosz

Translated by David Frick and Robert Hass

An ant trampled, and above it clouds.
A trampled ant and above it a column of azure sky.
And in the distance, marking its blue steps,
The Vistula or the Dnieper on its bed of granite.

This is the image reflected in the water:

A city ruined, and above it clouds.
A ruined city and above it a column of azure sky.
And in the distance, stepping over blue thresholds,
The remains of History or the Spring of myth.

A dead field mouse, and beetle gravediggers.
On the footpath, running, a seven-year-old joy.
In the garden a rainbow-colored ball and laughing faces
And the yellow luster of May or April.

This is the image reflected in the water:

A defeated tribe, armored gravediggers.
Along the road, running, a millennial joy,
A field of cornflowers blooming after the fire,
And the silence is blue, everyday, normal.
This is the image reflected in the water.
— Warsaw, 1942–Washington, D.C., 1948

Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980. This poem, translated into English for the first time, appears in a new volume of his work, Poet in the New World.

David Frick is the author of Kith, Kin, and Neighbors. *Robert Hass is the author of seven books of poetry and co-translated several volumes of poetry with Miłosz.*

BOOKS

The Warrior's Anti-War Novel

In All Quiet on the Western Front, *Erich Maria Remarque invented modern war writing.*

By George Packer

Every war begins in blind folly and ends in unimagined suffering. This is true of all wars but especially of the First World War. Its catalysts were so trivial and its consequences so apocalyptic that they belong in a Swiftian satire of human stupidity: the shooting of a bewhiskered potentate, followed by a botched game of diplomatic chicken, armies mobilized across Europe and cheered on by delirious publics, a whole generation sent to die by the millions in industrial warfare—all for a few miles of mud and barbed wire. Between the assassination in Sarajevo, the mass slaughter in the trenches, and the stagnant front lines lie disproportions so immense that cause and effect lose all relation. The conflict is a sustained demonstration of war's essential inanity. "Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected," the critic Paul Fussell wrote in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. By this standard, World War I was the most ironic war in history.

ILLUSTRATION BY TREVOR SHIN

What did the soldiers of the Great War think they were going off to defend? King, kaiser, czar, empire, democracy, European civilization, national honor—the reasons, in hindsight, make no sense. By 1917, the meaninglessness of the sacrifice had become clear enough to the combatants, if not to civilians back home: French and Russian troops mutinied, tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides deserted, the British poet and captain Siegfried Sassoon made a public anti-war declaration, and English war poetry turned brutal and bitter. Yet most soldiers, including Sassoon, fought on, under intolerable conditions—rain-soaked and hungry; facing machine-gun fire, shelling, and chlorine gas; surrounded by the half-buried corpses of their comrades and enemies—until the last minute of the last hour before the armistice on November 11, 1918, when, to quote John Kerry, an unknown soldier became "the last man to die for a mistake."

In some ways, the enormous casualty figures are less staggering than the survivors' endurance. After all, the living soldiers had to withstand the example of the dead. Near the end of Erich Maria Remarque's classic novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the soldier-narrator, Paul Bäumer, says, "Isn't it remarkable that … regiment after regiment heads into the increasingly hopeless fight, and one attack after another is launched, even as the line recedes and crumbles?" Why did they keep fighting?

Remarque—born Erich Paul Remark in 1898—was a lower-middle-class Prussian, conscripted into the Imperial German Army at age 18, and wounded in action in Flanders after a few weeks at the front in the summer of 1917. That was the end of his combat experience, but the emotions and images of the war haunted him for the next decade. *Im Westen nichts Neues* was a sensation in Germany in early 1929, and was translated into English later that year. Soon it was available in dozens of languages, and to date it has sold more than 20 million copies—the best-selling German novel ever.

A few months ahead of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, which appeared in September 1929, *All Quiet on the Western Front* invented a genre: the warrior's anti-war testament. Even those who haven't read the novel are likely to recognize its English title as a sort of requiem for the dead—not ironic like the original German ("Nothing New in the West"), but as sad as the playing of "Taps." So much that's become familiar about this genre can be found in Remarque's book: the journey of the protagonist from youthful idealism through hard experience to bitter realism; the worm's-eye view of the common soldier, with his narrow focus on danger, physical discomfort, and food, and his hatred of authority; the sense of immediacy, anxiety, and inescapability that comes with episodic, present-tense narration; the unflinching details; the band of brothers that slowly diminishes as they're killed one by one.

The narrative is fragmentary, nonlinear, and as static, in a way, as trench warfare.

A version of these literary features can be found in earlier writers—Homer, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Stephen Crane. But Remarque gave war writing its modern voice, understated and terrifying, harsh and tender, a voice that says: *This is what it's like. You may not want to hear, but I have to tell you.* A passage such as this one in Remarque's novel—where the first-person narrator is trapped in a watery shell hole with the corpse of an enemy soldier he's stabbed to death—couldn't have existed in earlier fiction about war, but it's become almost standard ever since, without losing its power:

> The sun is shining at a slant. I'm numb with exhaustion and hunger. Yesterday is like a fog to me, I have no hope of getting out of here. So I doze off and don't even notice when evening comes. Dusk is falling. It seems to me it's coming quickly now. Just one more hour. Three more hours, if it were summer. Just one more hour.

These sentences come from a new translation by Kurt Beals, which renders Remarque's German in a colloquial register—sometimes caustic, sometimes lyrical—that is itself a product of the Great War. As he explains in his introduction, the original English version of 1929, by an Australian veteran of the war named A. W. Wheen, "is frequently stilted and labored," as if its prose belongs to an earlier period and wasn't forged in the fire of the story it tells. In this passage from Wheen, the soldiers have just been inspected by Kaiser Wilhelm II:

> Tjaden is quite fascinated. His otherwise prosy fancy is blowing bubbles. "But look," he announces, "I simply can't believe that an emperor has to go to the latrine the same as I have."

Here is Beals's translation:

> Tjaden is completely fascinated. His mind isn't usually so lively, but now it's bubbling over. "Look here," he announces, "I just can't fathom that a kaiser has to go to the latrine just like I do."

He gives us a version that can stand as Remarque's contemporary.

THE HUGE POPULARITY of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a tribute to its universal accessibility. The novel's force is undiminished by either its familiarity or its historical distance; the story it tells is at once time-bound and timeless. It doesn't require any interpretive feats—it simply demands that the reader not look away. The narrative is fragmentary, nonlinear, and as static, in a way, as trench warfare. Young Paul Bäumer and his classmates in a provincial

German town are exhorted by their schoolmaster to go defend the fatherland. Half a dozen enlist in the same regiment, are trained by an abusive corporal named Himmelstoss (a mailman in civilian life), and soon find themselves under fire somewhere on the Western Front. They learn the specific noise and lethality of each type of artillery, how to find cover in the open, where to forage for piglets and turnips. When one of them dies of his wounds, the others compete for his excellent boots. By the end, only Paul is left.

At one point, Paul and his old schoolmates discuss the reasons for the war. Who started it? Did the kaiser want it? Don't both sides think they're right? Who stands to gain? Not the common people, only politicians and generals. "It's more like a kind of fever," one of them says. "Nobody really wants it, but all of a sudden it's there." Finally they agree to drop the subject. From their point of view, the biggest questions about the war are unanswerable and change nothing. All they know is that they have to keep fighting to stay alive.

This is true for soldiers in any war, including "good" ones. In his essay "Looking Back on the Spanish War," George Orwell, who fought in Spain against fascism, wrote: "A soldier anywhere near the front line is usually too hungry, or frightened, or cold, or, above all, too tired to bother about the political origins of the war … A louse is a louse and a bomb is a bomb, even though the cause you are fighting for happens to be just." Accounts from eastern Ukraine suggest that even soldiers who go off to fight with high morale to defend their country and freedom are eventually overcome by disillusionment not unlike that of Paul and his comrades.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they banned *All Quiet on the Western Front* and later revoked Remarque's citizenship, accusing him of being at least French and maybe Jewish. They had their reasons: The great success of an anti-war novel threatened German nationalism and militarism. Hitler, himself a veteran of the Great War, hated any view of it as pointless slaughter. And yet *All Quiet on the Western Front* has no clear politics; its pacifism, too, is never stated, only implied. "This book is intended neither as an indictment nor as a confession," Remarque declares in an epigraph, but as "an account of a generation of people who were destroyed by the war—even if they escaped its shells." The novel presents the Great War as a crime perpetrated by the old against the young, the powerful against the ordinary, and civilians against soldiers.

This last conflict is the one that matters most—more than that between opposing combatants or political outlooks. Before *All Quiet on the Western Front*, alienation from the home front was rarely a concern of war literature, but it's become a central theme, as indicated by the title of the Iraq veteran Phil Klay's collection of short stories, *Redeployment*. In Remarque's novel, the horror of the trenches is so radically separate from the rest of life that Paul finds being at home intolerable. When he returns on leave, he can't bear his mother's sorrowful love, his sister's forced good cheer, his father's fatuous pride, or the bullying of a rear-echelon major whom he encounters by accident. The attitude of civilians amounts to "Thank you for your service" and "On to Paris." Paul's only pleasure is seeing his jingoistic schoolmaster, now called up in the reserves, humiliated by one of his former students in the same pointless marching exercises that Paul once suffered through in the name of defending the fatherland.

Paul is like a ghost revisiting his past. But as he moves through the world of his childhood, the identity that's allowed him to survive the trenches—"indifferent, and often hopeless"—is undone by the feeling that surges back, by the pain of wanting his mother's comfort. He can't be both a son and a soldier, and he chooses the second. "I never should have gone on leave," he thinks, and when it ends, he returns to the war with a kind of relief.

This sequence plays a key role near the end of the 1930 American film adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Its 13 minutes are the movie's quietest and saddest, but the subplot never appears in the 2022 German production, which won several Academy Awards. The omission is strange, rendering a relentlessly, grotesquely violent film less wrenching. In our time, with military service in most democracies, including America, limited to a small professional army, the chasm between civilian at home and combatant at war has never been greater. One result is that a filmmaker seeking to represent the horror of war as intensely and immediately as Remarque did is likely to make the mistake of showing little other than blood and mud. But Paul's return home is pivotal to the novel, because in Remarque's telling, war's ultimate crime is to make soldiers fit for nothing else. The survivors, winners and losers alike, will come back "tired, broken, burned out, rootless, and hopeless"; incapable of understanding or being understood by the previous generation and the generation to come; doomed to live in their own tortured memories; "superfluous to ourselves."

Here is a partial answer to why the soldiers of the Great War kept fighting long after it was hopeless. They fought to avoid punishment, they fought for their brother soldiers, they fought out of lingering patriotism, and they went on fighting because they saw no way back. *A*

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Erich Maria Remarque, translated by Kurt Beals

LIVERIGHT

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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"I Am Still Mad to Write"

How a tragic accident helped Hanif Kureishi find his rebellious voice again

By Hillary Kelly

"That's what's great about being a writer," Hanif Kureishi told an interviewer a decade ago. "Every 10 years you become somebody else." He was 59 then, looking back on his younger days; in his 30s, he'd made his mark on a newly multicultural literary scene in London with the Oscar-nominated screenplay for *My Beautiful Laundrette*, followed by the prizewinning debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The son of an English mother and a Pakistani father, he was a bad boy in the spotlight, intimate with working-class locals and worldly elites, unabashed about smoking weed and sleeping around, and funny. He invoked P. G. Wodehouse and Philip Roth, and struck a chord with upstart young readers and writers (among them Zadie Smith). His boldly nonconformist voice was his own.

Then, at the age of 68, in December 2022, he became somebody unimaginably different after he keeled over onto a hard floor in Rome and came to consciousness a paraplegic. Trapped in a paralyzed body in a hospital bed, he tweeted two weeks later, via his son: "An insect, a hero, a ghost or Frankenstein's monster. Out of these mixings will come magnificent horrors and amazements. Every day when I dictate these thoughts, I open what is left of my broken body in order to try and reach you, to stop myself from dying inside." And suddenly, Kureishi was back in the spotlight. People around the world were listening. He kept dictating.

When I went to visit him in London two years later, this past December, he was in his power chair, in the ground-floor living room of his colorful, cluttered house in Shepherd's Bush. His hospital bed is in one corner, with stacks of books he cannot reach packing the shelves above it; his partner, Isabella d'Amico, and his 24-hour health aide, Kamila, sleep in bedrooms upstairs, next to his large, now-unused study. He had been sick with diverticulitis and had smoked half a joint and drunk half a beer, he told me, on the fateful day when he fainted and "fell literally flat on my face. Bang. Without putting my arms out or anything. I fell flat on my fucking face and broke my neck." While we talked, his right hand, in splints to keep it from clawing up, fluttered in front of him, almost as if it were strumming a guitar—ironic, because Kureishi used to passably play the blues. His mobility is limited to controlling his chair, leaning forward, and wiggling his hips. Drugs, now a cocktail of pharmaceuticals, are very much back in his life: He's taking 12 or so a day; he isn't really sure. "It's to make me shit. It's to stop my bladder doing this. It's for this, that, the other. God knows."

He went cold turkey on virtually everything else, compelled by another need. Right away, he was "mad to fucking write," he told me. "And I still am mad to write. It's holding me together." At first, the fragmented, dispatch-like nature of Twitter gave his individual utterances a suspenseful intensity: "Sitting here again in this dreary room for another week, like a Beckettian chattering mouth, all I can do is speak, but I can also listen," he tweeted a few days into his new life. And then, "I wouldn't advice [*sic*] having an accident like mine, but I would say that lying completely inert and silent in a drab room, without much distraction, is certainly good for creativity."

Two weeks after the accident, Carlo, one of his three sons, revived the dormant Substack, The Kureishi Chronicles, that his father had once launched. The dictations began to coalesce into essays that combined tales of his former, able-bodied life with unvarnished assessments of his medical and mental conditions. "Experiencing the press coverage you might receive had you died," in his words, spurred him on, and in July, just after he moved from an Italian rehab facility to London's Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, his agent agreed that the entries would work

as a book. *Shattered*, a bare, tumultuous memoir of the first year of Kureishi's new life, published in the United Kingdom in October 2024, is now out in the United States. It's simultaneously the story of his mind's entrapment in his body and his attempt to outrun that restriction with radical transparency.

Back in the 2014 interview, he'd spoken of forging "a new kind of English realism" as his career took off. After reading *Shattered*, I wondered if the multigenre experimenter had, quite literally, stumbled into a new kind of illness realism.

NOBODY IS EQUIPPED for the kind of calamity that struck Kureishi. But the body, with all its spewing, writhing, lusting, hunger, and degradation, had long been his obsession. His fiction had traced his own arc from young renegade to disgruntled middle-aged father to ailing older man. Pain and pleasure were his recurring catharsis points. He wanted to explore whether, and how, the body could really satisfy the curiosities of the mind.

My Beautiful Laundrette is bookended by two beatings similar to ones inflicted on an adolescent Kureishi by punks who regularly chased him home from school. Pain conveys its bearer, whether it's the Pakistani British Omar or his former skinhead lover, Johnny, to a new level of self-realization. *The Buddha of Suburbia*—with more plotlines pulled from Kureishi's young life—follows teenage Karim on lust- and creativity-fueled escapades that end with the kind of sex that includes a leather hood, ropes, and a candle inside an orifice. "What do you do?" he asks the woman involved in this act. "Pain as play," she responds. "A deep human love of pain. There is desire for pain, yes?" In the wincingly autobiographical novel *Intimacy* (1998), a married man who leaves his wife for another woman has aging very much on the brain.

But *The Body* (2002) most uncannily foreshadowed Kureishi's current situation. The novel is narrated by a writer in his mid-60s whose medical ailments have left him broken—"I don't go to parties," he moans, "because I don't like to stand up." But a secretive new surgery transplants his brain into a young, fit body for six months, which he uses to screw women across Europe, take ecstasy, and contemplate how experiencing a body's failure elevates your appreciation of just how good you can feel. "After the purifications and substitutions of culture," he thinks, "I believed I was returning to something neglected: fundamental physical pleasure, the ecstasy of the body, of my skin, of movement, and of accelerated, spontaneous affection for others in the same state."

Anointed with unexpected establishment credentials (Queen Elizabeth II named him a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2008), Kureishi was mellowing in the 2010s. As he put it to me, "I was bored with my own imagination and … I was happy having a good life. I was living part of the time in Italy, part of the time here; the kids were grown up. So I thought, *Fuck it. Why should I spend all day working?* So I was taking it easy and I had—I didn't have much of a desire to write anymore. Not with the enthusiasm I had when I was younger. Then I had the accident."

Writing fiction no longer merely strikes him as boring. To "make up shit" has become impossible. "It just seems frivolous to do that," he told me. Some other writers, I pushed him, might retreat to the relief of fantasy in his situation. Not Kureishi. "I'm not writing fiction," he said. "I'm not writing some stupid story, made-up story. I'm writing it directly about what happened to me." Forget easing into his late phase as a writer. Kureishi has been ambushed by the physical infirmities of age in a rare way. He has always drawn on his own experience, but by choice. A vulnerable, relief-seeking self-exposure is now a necessity, a compulsion—a mode of connection, even as his world has shrunk. It has also offered a way to again rebel against the dominant modes of storytelling. He has one story, and it's his own, and the only way he wants to tell it is to spit it out raw.

SHATTERED:
A MEMOIR

Hanif Kureishi

ECCO

IN 1926, after a bout with a devastating flu and a series of earlier nervous breakdowns, Virginia Woolf published an essay on why we don't—but perhaps ought to—treat illness as a subject as valuable and enlightening as "love, battle, and jealousy." "On Being Ill" considers illness as a foreign land, a place where "the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea." Properly rendering the miasma of sickness and the "daily drama of the body," argues Woolf—who endured her share of forced confinements in bed—is so difficult that the challenge is rarely undertaken. The ill usually write after they've recovered, when the palpable sensations of debilitation are gone, and "our intelligence domineers over our senses."

Nearly a century later, fiction about illness is still relatively uncommon. Even the best of the genre, such as Helen Garner's *The Spare Room* and Elizabeth Strout's *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, are told from a caretaker's perspective or maintain a veil of silence over the specifics of the chemical and mechanical horrors that a body can endure. Excessive depictions of pain, as in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, can curdle understanding into a kind of grimy sympathy or, worse, distaste. The illness memoir, however, is a well-trodden contemporary genre. First-person tales about cancer, freak accidents, chronic disease, and mental breakdowns regularly make their way onto best-seller

lists (or into remainder bins). They typically take one of two approaches: Either the writer finds redemptive lessons in the path toward death or disability, as Paul Kalanithi did in his posthumous megahit, *When Breath Becomes Air*, or, as in Meghan O'Rourke's *The Invisible Kingdom: Reimagining Chronic Illness*, a previously unexamined world of disease is made manifest while the writer explores what we know, and don't know, about its properties. The hope in both types of books is to impose sense—for the writer and the reader—on the mysterious.

The illness narrative usually benefits from months or years of deliberation: It's a reckoning with how injury or sickness edges into a life and then cracks it wide open. As Kureishi tilted his chair forward and backward, he blithely told me that he hadn't had a chance to read Woolf or any other books in the illness canon (he can't hold a novel and doesn't want to be read to), and that in *Shattered*, "there isn't much reflection." His writing method during the post-accident year he chronicles hardly changed, even when, halfway through, he knew that a book would emerge. Once he was home and stabilized, the suspense petered out, but his from-the-trenches method continued. For a few hours each day, he sat with his son, recording a routine newly cluttered by physiotherapy bills and National Health Service red tape. What winnowing they did was minimal. *Shattered* is akin to a war diary, prizing immediacy above all else.

Kureishi never planned to produce a stylized memoir. He simply documented the uncertainty and emotional convulsions of the moment. At night, when visitors left his hospital room, he was alone, awake, and imprisoned in his body. "I would write the whole scheme of the piece in my head," he told me. "One sentence, one paragraph, one paragraph, one paragraph, and kind of hold it there. I could see it visually like a picture." He'd keep it in his mind until morning, and then dictate in a rush. In an early entry, he notes that he hopes to one day "be able to go back to using my own precious and beloved instruments," meaning pen and paper, then swerves. "Excuse me, I'm being injected in my belly with something called Heparina, a blood thinner," he says, then gets right back to praising longhand.

The book's tone leaps and crashes with Kureishi's post-accident moods. A model of bountiful gratitude, he praises the Italian doctors and nurses who feed him and move him, who "wash your genitals and your arse, often while singing jolly Italian songs." When someone comes to measure him for a wheelchair, he writes, "I've had enough of this shit." He turns on himself frequently, worrying that he is "both a helpless baby and terrible tyrant." Memoirs are designed for revelation, but Kureishi, a connoisseur of shock, invades his own privacy more than most. Nothing is off-limits, including the butt plug he wears in hydrotherapy: His rectum cannot be trusted to control itself. He can't resist stories, such as one about a threesome he had years ago in Amsterdam, that remind him and us of his wild old days and magnify the contrast with his current straits. How many (sometimes tedious) details we might really want to hear doesn't concern him. *Shattered* practices what Woolf calls "a childish outspokenness in illness"; she goes on to note how "things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals." Kureishi's mode is impromptu exposé: He has no distance from himself or his condition, and refuses to add any.

Kureishi's mode is impromptu exposé: He has no distance from himself or his condition, and refuses to add any.

For readers, this lack of filter makes *Shattered* bluntly intimate, demanding in its sharing. For Kureishi, it reflects the urgent purpose of his confessional writing, which is partly financial. "It costs me a thousand pounds a week just to have physio and to go swimming and all that shit," he told me. Friends donate to a fund, but he'd like to contribute to it himself, with a book that really sells. The urgency is also partly—probably mostly—existential. If Kureishi can't be out in the world, he needs his voice to be.

Kureishi's emotions, as you'd expect, surface readily. He cried a few times while we talked, once when I asked him about the knife attack that maimed his friend Salman Rushdie. The two men suffered nearly fatal injuries within months of each other: Rushdie was stabbed onstage at a literary festival in August 2022 and has lost sight in one eye and the use of one hand. They emailed each other daily during Kureishi's months in the hospital. Rushdie has written his own memoir, *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*, in which he carefully and solemnly recounts the way the attack punctured and then reinflated his sense of self. *Knife* favors a narrative of growth; it aims for closure. *Shattered* rejects both, never leaving the insistent and unceremonious present tense.

Just as Kureishi hasn't read the illness canon, he hasn't read his own memoir. "People tell me it holds together," he said. He doesn't seem to need or want proof of that; he knows it's fragmented. He's interested in his daily creations as evidence of what feels like newly unfettered access to his mind—of his power to delve into its recesses and skim its surfaces, mobile as he can be nowhere else. That drive shows no signs of ebbing as he now works on a sequel and a movie, his son at his side. "I've never felt such a strong desire to be a writer," he said. "It's a relief that to be a writer for me is to be a human being, to be sentient." *A*

Hillary Kelly is a literary critic and an essayist.

The Moron Factory

By George Saunders

April 20:

Sometimes feel life stinks, everything bad/getting worse, everyone doomed. Then day like today occurs, reminding one that yes, although life stinks, does not always stink to same extent, i.e., variation can occur in extent to which life, from day to day, may stink.

Today strange.

Strange day at work.

Sally Gear = extremely tall co-worker with perpetual explosion of unbrushed

SOURCE IMAGE: PAUL DENZER

BEN DENZER; SOURCE IMAGE: PAUL DENZER

gray hair. Nice lady. Many kids: three from previous marriage, four adopted. Plus, usually, one or two foster kids. Also 12 cats, nine dogs, five rescued ferrets, all living on run-down farm outside of town. Is always explaining: reason she looks so bad/ragged = totally swamped with kids/adopted kids/foster kids/pets/farm. Her husband, Sid, also tall, w/ same gray hair-explosion. When together, always laughing, leaning into each other, looking unkempt, happy, bellowing out story re latest wacky thing done by kid, foster kid, ferret, and/or donkey they keep tied to tree. When Sid comes to office to pick Sally up, will say, "So this is how they do it in the big city!" or "Say, this is one heckuva fancy orifice!" (Which is odd: Sid not country, Sid = Wesleyan grad, grew up in Philadelphia, family owned famous shoe store.)

This week, one of their foster kids selling candy bars for Swim Team. Sally has put box of candy bars in Break Area, with sign: DON'T BE ALL WET! BUY A CANDY BAR FROM TERRENCE.

Liv VanUster annoyed by presence of candy bars, emails Sally: this = place of business. How would Sally like it if she, Liv, brought in ton of magazines, encouraged all to buy magazines, for her Women's Personal History Group? Sally says sure, no problem, she can just scoot candy bars over. What magazines do they have anyway? Any about ferrets/foster kids/growing organic vegetables in limited space?

Liv emails back: no, Sally missing point. Sally being rude, making it impossible for people to decline to buy crappo candy bars, i.e., Sally letting her weird life choices overflow into Break Area.

Liv = tough = big complainer. Complains if someone tracks in snow: slip-and-trip hazard. Once complained janitor had given her "predatory glance," demanded that Ed Finer (our boss) reprimand janitor. Turned out, janitor legally blind. Was not giving predatory glance, was trying to ascertain if thing on Liv's lapel = spider.

Liv apologized to janitor, rushed back to Finer, said that although, yes, she is, of course, #1 advocate for visually impaired, on other hand, why pay blind janitor full salary, since blind janitor likely incapable of getting anything truly clean?

Sally hurt by Liv's email. Replies to entire office. Says her life choices not "weird." Swim Team "weird"? Having husband "weird"? Having kids "weird"? Having certain modicum of warmth/affection in life "weird"?

This raises ante: Liv single, never married, no kids, no current boyfriend.

Office tense all morning.

Just before lunch, Liv sends Sally email of apology, also to entire office:

Sally, I was out of line. It was rude of me to characterize your life as "weird." Many apologies. Your life actually strikes me as admirable: the kids, the pets, the ferrets. Wow. You do so much for others. Sometimes my own unhappiness will drive me to become overinvolved in things that might easily be overlooked. Please trust that I am working on this. I sincerely apologize.

What harsh things did we say to Sally over years? What nice things? What jokes did we make behind back of Sally?

Everyone impressed. This gracious, this surprising, should end whole thing.

But no.

Within minutes, Sally replies:

Nice try, Liv. That is so typical! You get your dig in, then retreat to higher ground? "Your life actually strikes me as admirable." Ha! I bet. My hubby may be bony and countrified but at least I've GOT one. You have the nerve to call my life weird? Then real quick apologize, as if you are all holy? Everyone knows you color your hair! I am sick and tired of your fakeness. You jabbed me and now have got me going. Not going to fly, sister. You wear makeup like clown makeup. Stay out of my way or I don't know what might happen.

This crazy. This not like Sally. Sally kind. Sally sweet. Often so happy in morning, will do jig in Break Room. Will sometimes, for no reason, make brownies at home, bring brownie to desk of each person in office, with person's initials, in M&Ms, on brownie.

Apparently, Liv has hit nerve.

Finer calls Sally in. Tells Sally enough = enough: Liv has apologized, is time for Sally to accept Liv's apology, put this behind us.

Sally storms out, sends email in which she says she knows everyone against her, everyone siding with "sneak-thief," just because "sneak-thief" = wealthier, younger, more attractive.

This dubious. Liv possibly wealthier. But younger? No. Sally younger. Liv more attractive? Debatable, Kate G. says, in Break Area. Sally has weird gray hair-explosion, true, but, Kate points out, Liv has prominent jaw + is strangely wide at hip.

Finer goes to Sally's office to talk her down. Sally gone (!). All her stuff gone. Pics of her ferrets gone, special clogging shoes + apron gone, box of Swim Team candy, formerly in Break Area, gone.

On Post-it note on Sally's desk: I QUIT!!!

Rest of morning, Liv roams around office like martyred queen, saying she did her best, does not know how else she might have handled, feels she bent over backwards to pull thing out of fire, etc.

All confident Sally will be back. Sally/Sid not rich. Kids + foster kids + animals not cheap. Plus, Sid has bad knees, extreme asthma, cannot work outside of home/farm, i.e., no way Sid + Sally can make it without Sally's paycheck.

Have lunch in Finer's office, with Finer. Jill (my wife, my person, we have been through wars together) texts: *How are things @ Moron Factory?*

(As joke, between selves, we sometimes call my workplace "Moron Factory." Re my workplace, Jill pities me. Comes to office Christmas party, is bored/annoyed

whole time, rolling eyes if anyone talks shop. Her attitude: Sweetie, these people, my God, you are true champ, how do you even bear? Is true: our office odd. No one stable. Everyone nuts in his/her own way. Usually, at work, I keep to self. Don't socialize. Just do my work, head straight home.)

Just then, Paige (receptionist) calls, says Sid calling, for Finer.

Finer raises eyebrows at me, puts Sid on speaker:

Sid: Ed, are you sitting down?

Finer is. Is sitting. Ergo, can honestly say yes, he is sitting.

Sid, on speaker: Sally's gone.

Finer: Where'd she go?

Sid: She's dead.

Finer freezes. Was about to pick up pen, tap lamp with pen in way he does when bored. But now: no. Hand frozen over pen in shape of hand about to pick up pen, he widens eyes at me, as in: This really happening?

Sid: Her poor old heart finally gave out. Because of you people. That gal was such a softie. But you people harried her and condescended to her and insulted her and never gave her the time of day.

Finer protests: We did, we did give Sally time of day. We liked Sally, loved Sally. Hopes Sid will recall last August, pool party at Finer's house, when all sang "Happy Birthday" to Sally as Sally stood blushing at shallow end of pool holding overflowing plate of nachos.

Sid breaks down. Seems to drop phone. Can hear him sobbing. Dog barks, truck goes past, donkey brays from out in yard, presumably tied to tree.

Finer calls office-wide meeting to announce Sally = dead.

Weeping breaks out. Oh, Sally, we feel, you were always just *there*, passing out your brownies, giving each of us a cheerful word, bringing our copies to us if we had left them on the Minolta, coming in dressed as witch on Halloween when no one else even wearing costume, taking trouble, whenever someone dropped by your office, to quickly don long, warty nose, then cackle.

All examining own consciences. What harsh things did we say to Sally over years? What nice things? What jokes did we make behind back of Sally? Well, we feel, cannot just go around all day, assuring every person he or she = valued. Even cavemen, in ancient, simpler times, could not merely sit around in cave admiring/praising one another, but had to hunt, fight, compete with members of own group for status.

All feel a bit sick.

I go down, sit a moment in Sally's empty office. Look at own hands. These hands someday dead, bluish, crossed on chest? Cross hands on chest. Think: Sally dead. Just this morning, was right here, alive. Now, no. Just then, someone passes in hallway. Yikes, I think, did he/she see me sitting in chair of recently dead lady, crossing hands over chest like corpse in coffin? Spring to feet. Step briskly into hall. Moving steadily away down hall: Maxine. Maxine turns, gives me wave + sad smile, quality of which indicates she did not, thank God, see me imitating posture of Sally dead in coffin.

Dodged bullet there.

Life not easy. Life = tightrope. Most days, we stroll along rope, all fine, gazing off at distant hills, making future plans. But down below: those who have fallen. For them, all not fine. No future plans. Glad that not me, we may think. But ultimately, we too will fall. All must. Trouble will find us, shake tightrope, down we too will fall.

Today, Sally has fallen, Sid has fallen.

We, as office, have fallen.

How might we, as office, begin to make amends?

Raise money for charity of Sid's choice? Foster care? American Heart Association? Donkeys who are sick? Donate money directly to Sid, who, no doubt, will need?

Go to see Finer. He is in there with someone, door closed.

Must wait.

Out little window overlooking Parking: our Taurus. Baby rattle on dash. Not our baby's rattle. We have no baby. Chose not to. Also, could not, as it turned out. Actually, was other way around: wanted, found out could not have, decided did not want. This was years ago. Big drama at time. All fine now. Tershers, friends of ours, came to town last month, left behind rattle of their baby (Marco). Tershers live across state. Could mail rattle. But postage = double price of rattle. Could just throw rattle away. Is cheap rattle. But throwing away rattle sans Tershers' permission seems weird. But also seems weird to call Tershers, say, Hey, okay to toss your rattle? Tershers may feel: Oh, gosh, right, sad: sight of our rattle must remind them they have no baby. But no. Does not. Or, rather, maybe does, slightly, i.e., every time I get in car, see rattle, I think: Still fine we have no baby? Then assure self: yes, yes, of course, still fine, that ship sailed long ago, are at peace with, we two have great life full of laughs + tenderness.

Door flies open, Liv bolts out.

Inside, Finer has head down on desk.

Says Liv just told him most horrible story: When teen, Liv got in huge fight with dad. That night, dad cut off own leg with chain saw in woods, bled out while attempting to crawl back to house. Dad had owned chain saw for years, never used, did not know how to use, but that night, upset with certain things Liv said during fight re his failings (too passive + wishy-washy), made big manly point of storming decisively out of house into woods, taking chain saw, with which he had zero experience, accidentally applied chain saw to large boulder that he, in dark, believed to be stump. Crawling back to house, bleeding out, wrote note on back of shopping list, only too bad: big storm swept in, rain fell all night, so, by time they found dad dead in morning, his note = too smudged to read.

Today, Liv having flashback: feels she once again caused tragic event via reckless speech, i.e., picked fight with Sally, sent Sally over edge, gave Sally heart attack, i.e., "killed" Sally.

I suggest we go find Liv, comfort Liv. Finer: Yes, yes, of course, how stupid and thoughtless am I?

However, Liv not in her office. Nowhere to be found. Paige (receptionist) says Liv raced past in huff, appearing "muy weirded-out," briefly paused at door, as if could not recall how to open. Paige rose, opened door, Liv thanked Paige, albeit calling her "Piper."

Leaving work not like Liv. At all. Liv super-responsible. When having appendix out, Liv constantly texting Finer from

hospital bed, reminding Finer they had agreed that new coffee maker in Break Room must meet or exceed quality of current coffee maker. Immediately post-surgery, Liv dictated text to nurse, specifying acceptable models, suggesting Finer poll office on desired color.

Finer = former military. Saw some things over there. Way we know this is: he never talks about. If someone asks if he saw some things, he will say: No, had quiet tour, mostly did ordering for cafeteria. Then his face will change in way that makes anyone seeing it doubt what Finer has just said re not having seen some things.

At moment, Finer = mess.

Asks me to send flowers to Sid. On day of service, you mean? I say. Finer says yes, day of service, right, for sure. But also today. We're sending flowers twice. At least. Two separate sets of flowers. He feels so bad. This happened in office of which he was in charge? What does this say about his leadership style? Not sure he will ever live down, ever feel better about. Wants Sid to know we are thinking of him. Not enough flowers in world, he feels, to make this thing up to Sid.

I mention my idea of starting fund for Sid. Finer feels this may be one too many. Does not want to concede liability for Sally's death. Oh God, he says, listen to me, Mr. Corporate, evading responsibility already. No, yes, that great idea, he says, let's do fund. Also, let's get Sid on horn immediately, give direct, heartfelt apology, accept all blame, see if there is anything at all, even smallest thing, we can do for Sid, poor Sid, after which we'll send first set of flowers, get started on details of fund.

Call Sid.

Guess who answers?

Sally (!).

Finer: You're not dead?

Sally: Not that I know of.

Long pause.

Sally (yelling): Sid, you jamoke! You didn't! Why would you? I told you no! What a dumb idea, Butch!

Sid takes phone, apologizes. Says if we are wondering who Butch is, is him. Sally sometimes will call him Butch. Is pet name. As for death business? Sorry, sorry, bad call. That on him. Loves Sally so much, was going just nutty watching her mope all heartbroken around house feeling undervalued. He did not, perhaps, it would now appear, think thing all the way through. Double-dang-it. Is deeply sorry for any confusion he may have caused, promises he will never do again.

Sally, in background: You won't do it *again*, Butch? You think? Are you out of your gourd? Damn straight, dingbat!

Sally grabs phone, says she is coming in, will be right down.

Fifteen minutes later, all dressed up, in suit, hair combed for once, she arrives, goes around from office to office, apologizing on Sid's behalf.

At kitchen table: Liv, slumping, looking like she is in hell of own making, several bottles of pills spread out before her on table, rifle (!) in lap.

Is strange. No one mad. Sally so dignified. Because all believed her dead, she is now like celeb. Many pull her aside to tell her how dear she is to them, how often, over the years, they have found selves wondering, "What would Sally do?," how sad it has been today to walk past her office, not be greeted by crumpled-up paper ball rolling into hall which would, when unwrapped, be found to say, "Come on in, you!" or "Work SUX!"

Finer glowingly watching Sally accepting hug after hug. Asks me to call Liv at home, tell her good news, i.e., Sally = not dead after all.

I dial, put phone on speaker.

No answer. Message new. Old message: professional, crisp. Included numbered lists of categories into which caller should place his or her call. New message: "You've reached Liv. Who is not available. Ever again. Where I go now, I should have gone long ago."

Yikes, we feel. All have heard rumor re Liv's recent breakup with nutty spa-supply salesman, Wayne: she did not, in fact, go to Italy to learn to make pasta in authentic way but, rather, in bathroom at Denny's on Clover, lit several candles, which she had snuck into bathroom in tote, then took many pills, nearly died, was given CPR by special-needs bus girl, recuperated for month at sister's tiny apartment in Blanket Farm Estates, out near airport.

We leave message. Leave two messages, three. Just keep calling.

Soon voicemail full.

Finer and I fly off through town in my Taurus. Finer gives me glance, as in: Why rattle on dash of guy with no baby? Tosses rattle into glove box, slams glove box closed.

Everywhere people moving around, happy to be alive. On Tooley Bridge, under fat white clouds, two friends throw arms around each other, each holding cup of coffee far out from body so as not to spill on other while hugging. In front of hospital, old man talking to equally old woman makes motion of throwing football, does victory shimmy, she shakes head as in: That, my friend = one bad shimmy.

Finer says, tensely, that, at end of day, Liv savvy, Liv smart, Liv too egotistical to kill self.

Me: Hope so.

Him: Oh God. If she does? If she has? Already? That's the end of me. I mean it. I had a thing happen. When I was serving. Did I ever tell you?

Me: No.

Him: Later.

We arrive at Liv's.

Through front window: lit candles everywhere (on coffee table, atop microwave, all the way up staircase). At kitchen table: Liv, slumping, looking like she is in hell of own making, several bottles of pills spread out before her on table, rifle (!) in lap.

What to do? Am afraid to knock on window. May push Liv over edge (?). On other hand, if do not knock, Liv may take pills or suddenly shoot self before we have chance to convey happy news re Sally (i.e., Sally = not dead).

Tense moment. Wish I was anywhere else. But Finer bold, Finer hero: knocks sharply on window, shouts: Liv, open up! Liv doesn't budge. Finer punches out window (!), reaches in, opens window, climbs through. Liv sits frozen, watching him come, as if she wishes to be saved but cannot possibly imagine what might do trick.

Finer: Sally's alive, Sid's a big a-hole. You did no harm: everything's fine, all is well.

Liv stands slowly, sets rifle on table gently, as if afraid it may go off on own.

Finer's arm, shoulder bleeding from broken window. Liv holds up finger, as in: wait. Walks off, comes back with first-aid kit, has Finer remove shirt, sits on chair before him, tends to his wounds, picking out shards, putting bloody shards on table, applying salve.

We drive back to office, Finer in back, Liv in front w/ me, looking out window. All three silent whole time.

Odd: everyone gone from streets. Town like empty stage. Purple clouds rolling in. Papers racing along sidewalks in wind, as if rushing home to common apartment complex where all loose pieces of paper required to live.

At office, Sally is in Bullpen, telling funny story re their donkey in lively way to small group of rapt admirers.

Turns, sees Liv.

Am watching Liv's face. Anger flares up, replaced by look of: No, no, anger must find no home in me, am done with that, it has cost me too much these many years.

Sally gestures to Liv: Come, come here, please forgive. Liv hesitates, does awkward stumble toward her, drops head onto Sally's shoulder.

Just then, Sid hobbles in. Has been waiting out in car, per Sally's orders, he says, for nearly two hours, reading newspaper as instructed, but is tired; is so hot in car, is sweating like pig, has read entire paper three times, knows all news by heart, time to go home.

Sid looks even more agitated + flinchy than usual, as if, in addition to expecting to be referred to as hick for his country ways, is also expecting to be called liar, be banned forever from premises. At sight of Sid, all anger flees room. Office, at the moment, if I may say it this way = swollen with mercy.

Colleagues = non-good dancers. All trying, at least. One will catch eye of other, as in: Can you believe we are doing? + Don't laugh at me, I won't laugh at you.

Sid, sensing he has been forgiven by group, lopes across Bullpen in ungainly way, on wobbly long legs, seizes Sally's hand + Liv's hand, shakes resulting hand-cluster overhead, as in: Winners, still champions!

What does it even mean? Are not winners, are not champs of anything. If anything, are champs of being difficult, goofballs, needy, problematic.

I sneak away, call Jill.

How to tell her all that has occurred?

Decide to wait. Will tell all tonight, at length.

For now, just want to hear her voice.

Jill: What is up with you? You sound high.

Is true, yes, am high, a bit.

Tell her I will give her full scoop later.

Jill (dryly): Can't wait.

Finer orders pizza, Kate G. puts on music, Paige (receptionist) throws open windows to let crazy pre-rain breeze blow through.

In Bullpen, improbably, colleagues begin dancing. Strange to see colleagues dancing in Bullpen space where we normally spread out in-progress reports, store broken printers, leave our bikes, if have biked to work. Colleagues = non-good dancers. All trying, at least. One will catch eye of other, as in: Can you believe we are doing? + Don't laugh at me, I won't laugh at you.

Pizza guy bursts in, chin on top box of stack, as if chin's job is to hold big stack steady. So young. Mere child. Red cheeks, yellow pants, purple hair. Shoots room baffled look, as in: What gives? Why you oldsters dancing in socks to quaint old-time music? Why so happy? Do you not know you are wasting lives in dull corporate space? Unlike me, who will soon take world by storm?

Feel like saying: Yes, guilty, are happy. Today, lost none of our number. All still here. Will not be here forever. But all here now.

Finer calls out from Bullpen: T! T!

(I am Thomas. Hence = "T.")

Finer: Dance with us, brother!

What is there to do but join? *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

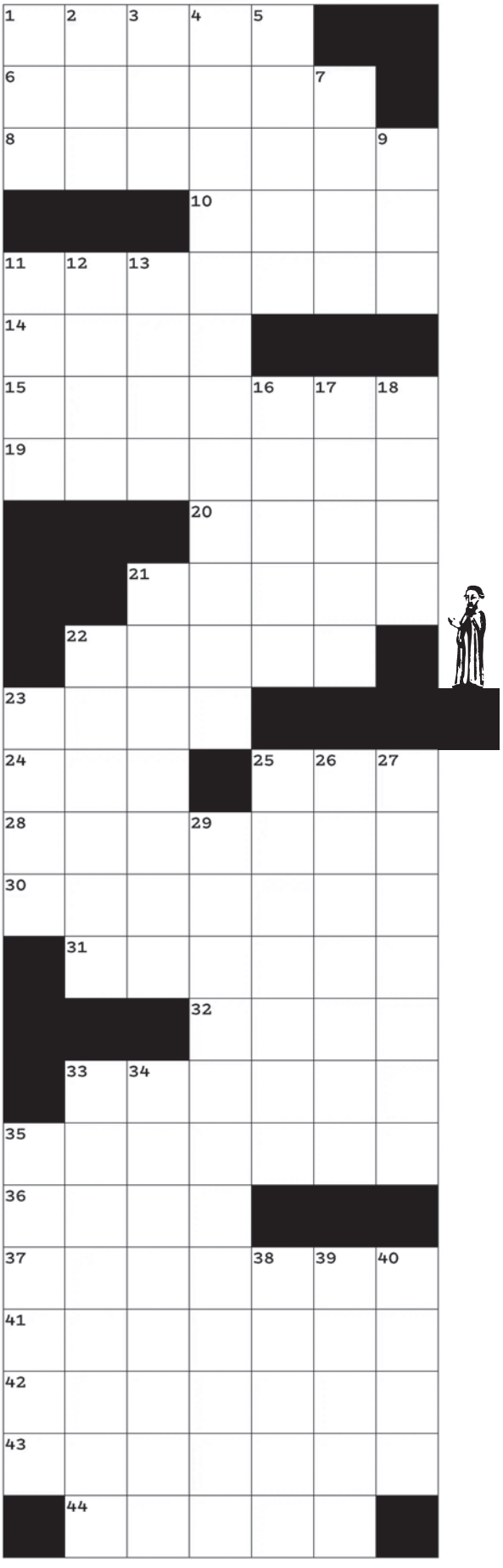
1 Jewish religious leader
6 "Rock ___ the Clock" (1954 Bill Haley & His Comets hit)
8 Fledgling tech company, maybe
10 "99 Luftballons" singer
11 Allowed
14 "*Mi ___ es su ___*"
15 "Not really an expert or anything, but that doesn't stop me!"
19 Break before classes
20 Attorney general before Garland
21 Ear coverings?
22 Mints named for their seal of approval from *Good Housekeeping*
23 Delivered
24 Company that named its rugby-union team Big Blue
25 *Photo* finish?
28 Definitely not sudden
30 "Let me give it a spin?"
31 Abrasive presence in a kitchen, perhaps
32 *A Kid Named* ___ (breakthrough 2008 mixtape)
33 It's always positive
35 Royal who negotiated the Treaty of Picquigny, ending the Hundred Years' War
36 Broadcaster founded by a former New England Whalers employee
37 Repressed
41 Finds a way
42 How many rants are written
43 Term whose etymology, Thoreau believed, came from *sainte-terre*
44 Worthless stuff

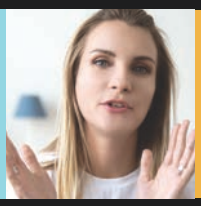
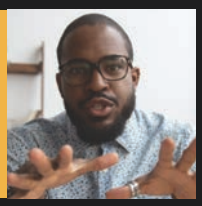
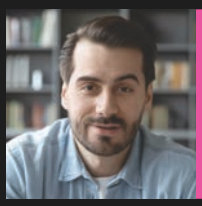
DOWN

1 College employees who might receive free room and board
2 The *A* of MoMA
3 ___ constrictor (nonvenomous snake)
4 With 29-Down, refrain from a 1976 hit by the Trammps
5 What a spy might gather, for short
7 Science-fiction franchise set partially on a desert planet
9 Embellish, as a résumé
11 Source of a vaper's vapor, for short
12 Zilch
13 Lickety-split
16 Beauty's fairy-tale counterpart
17 Some little songbirds
18 Flubs
21 Dweller in a 14-Across, perhaps
22 Some strikers?
23 *The* ___ (2010s dramedy about a woman with melanoma)
25 Yields
26 Catch-22, e.g.
27 Close-up-magic pioneer Tony
29 See 4-Down
33 Something you might do on Craigslist
34 Instapoetry pioneer
35 "Do You Hear the People Sing?" musical, for short
38 Stops on the way to the bar?
39 Components of some polytopes
40 Action figure?

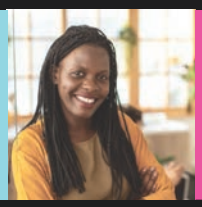
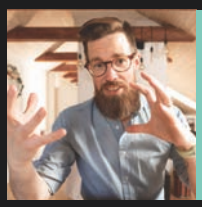
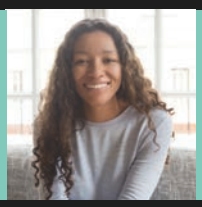
FOR HINTS AND SOLUTIONS, VISIT:

TheAtlantic.com/inferno



DROP THE F*BOMB

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