

The Coming Election Mayhem

*David A. Graham
J. Michael Luttig*

WUKE

WUKE

The Atlantic

EST. 1857



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6 NOVEMBER 2025 – 24 JANUARY 2026
NEW YORK, 22ND STREET

The background of the poster is a vibrant, abstract oil painting by Flora Yukhnovich. It depicts a festive scene with several figures, some appearing to be inebriated, surrounded by lush flowers and foliage. The colors are rich and varied, with large, expressive brushstrokes. The overall mood is celebratory and chaotic.

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Behind the Cover: In our December 2025 issue, the *Atlantic* staff writer David A. Graham and J. Michael Luttig, a retired U.S. Court of Appeals judge for the Fourth Circuit, consider the future of elections in the United States. Graham details how the Trump administration could undermine the 2026 midterms; Luttig

describes the powers the president has seized since returning to office, and explains how they could be used to remain in office beyond a second term. For our cover image, the illustrator Carl Godfrey imagined a classic VOTE poster with a rip down the center, a representation of the threat to free and fair elections. — *Paul Spella, Senior Art Director*

Canada Is Killing Itself

The country gave its citizens the right to die, Elaina Plott Calabro wrote in the September issue. Doctors are struggling to keep up with demand.

Letters

to multiple interviews making sure that they were lucid. Both died surrounded by their family and a multitude of friends. We celebrated their courage to leave their horrible situation with grace. Everyone in attendance stated that they hoped they would have the courage to do the same. I found the system to be run with sensitivity and efficiency. Reports about abuses are few and far between. Canada should be proud that people in unbearable pain can decide to die when life is intolerable.

Larry Shapiro
Calgary, Canada

The phrase I return to from Elaina Plott Calabro's article is just eight words, spoken by the family physician Jonathan Reggler: *once you accept that life*

is not sacred. With those words, Reggler explains better than anyone the horrifying expansion of euthanasia in Canada, my home country. Because regardless of whether you reckon that there is anything divine or even vaguely numinous in this world, *sacred* remains the best and most morally urgent word that human beings have for talking about life.

All of us, at some deep level, know that life is sacred. This is why we feel such distress when we hear news of starvation or deaths in war. To deny sacrality and to replace it with a new apex value called autonomy is, inevitably, to turn life into something like a possession that we may discard when it is worn out, when it becomes too expensive, or simply when we are tired of it.

THE

My mother's final two years, notwithstanding her physical and cognitive decline, were a beautiful time: She forgave her father for a decades-old hurt and found a deep contentment. Hearing a description of her symptoms in those days, one might imagine that hers was not a life worth living, that she ought to have applied for MAID. But such a conclusion would be disastrously mistaken. Her life was so special—all the way until the end. I am grateful that none of us was deprived of this time. It was in every way sacred.

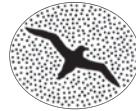
Martin Elfert
Portland, Ore.

We are registered nurses with expertise in palliative care and the MAID program. "Canada Is Killing Itself," by Elaina Plott Calabro, ignores key facts and frames MAID in an unflattering light. What might have been a fair exploration of MAID in Canada instead reads like a case assembled to argue against the practice itself. While there are moments of useful and fact-based information, they are surrounded by enough misleading half-truths, emotionally charged language, and selective omissions that it would be hard for a reader unfamiliar with MAID to parse the good from the bad.

Beyond the provocative title, Plott Calabro depicts a MAID conference as if it were a sinister gathering, reminds readers that MAID "would have been considered homicide" a decade ago, and describes MAID as an "open-ended medical experiment."

I had two sisters in their mid-90s who availed themselves of Canada's Medical Assistance in Dying program. Both were incapacitated; they had lost their dignity and were facing amputations or prolonged stays in the hospital with no hope of survival. They were subjected

COMMONS



DISCUSSION
&
DEBATE

This suggests chaos where there is, in fact, rigorous regulation and ethical oversight.

The article repeatedly describes changes to MAID legislation as “expansion,” which ignores the legal history upon which the practice rests. Every so-called expansion has actually been an attempt to bring the law back in line with the supreme court’s *Carter v. Canada* decision. Any future evolution will also realign MAID legislation with the *Carter* decision and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. To claim otherwise is to misunderstand how MAID became legal in Canada. Likewise, the claim that poverty or inadequate supports are driving people to MAID distorts the law, clinical practice, and federal data that say otherwise. Legislation explicitly prohibits approving MAID for social or economic reasons. People can request MAID for any reason they wish, but to be approved, suffering must stem from a medical condition, not their social circumstances. Social circumstances may influence a MAID request, but to suggest that they’re a systemic factor in approvals is untrue.

Perhaps most telling is how anti-MAID groups seized on this article, celebrating that mainstream media is finally amplifying their alarmist, fear-mongering narratives. The article reinforces their false talking

points about targeting vulnerable people, financial savings, and unregulated “killing,” while ignoring the many Canadians who describe MAID as bringing dignity and peace to themselves and their loved ones.

Paul Magennis and Kim Carlson
Vancouver, Canada

Regarding the right of the individual to choose death, the case of Adolf Ratzka is illustrative. Ratzka shared his story with the Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. Born in Germany in 1943, Ratzka was handsome and athletic, 6 foot 2 and 180 pounds, but totally immobilized by polio at age 17. He was confined to a mechanical breathing apparatus called an iron lung. He “wanted to die” because what he knew of life focused on the body and its role in human happiness. He said, “I would have been a perfect candidate for assisted suicide.” His change of perspective was gradual, but it hinged on a pivotal event when he was still using the iron lung: While he was being trained to breathe on his own, the device would be turned off for increasing periods. One day, the attending nurse didn’t immediately return to turn it on. Ratzka said, “I fought for my life until literally blue in the face.” In the process, he realized that he had called forth all his energies to remain alive. This was the beginning of an incredible

life. He would marry, raise an adopted child, and obtain a Ph.D., and led global initiatives in independent living for similarly disabled individuals until his death, at age 80, last year.

Ratzka’s perspective as a teenager—and the perspective of every person contemplating an elective end of life—was limited by accumulated personal experience. We tend to believe that we can rely on experience to make all of our decisions. But there are certain aspects of life that we cannot anticipate or ever know. The mystery of the human condition alters the calculus in the choice to end a life.

Chris Burns
Hanover, Pa.

Elaina Plott Calabro eruditely depicts the ethical dilemmas facing MAID providers in Canada as they try to negotiate an ever-changing legal and moral landscape. However, by focusing on the most extreme cases, Plott Calabro does a great disservice to the many patients who have a legitimate need for MAID, and to the caregivers trying to counsel them.

In my role as a senior clinician at Vancouver General Hospital, I have been involved in counseling patients about

MAID since its inception. Early data indicated that, of every 100 people who inquired about MAID, only 10 proceeded to a written request for the procedure. In my experience, those who did not continue had an overwhelming sense of relief in knowing that it was an option to be accessed if traditional palliative-care efforts failed, or if they felt, at some future time, that their symptoms had become intolerable.

MAID being a legal medical procedure in Canada, I felt it my professional duty to advise patients about it as a potential treatment option, along with all other treatment options. I hope I did this in a kind and considerate manner, never threatening or cajoling my patients or trying to impose my will upon them. Most were thankful that I had raised the issue with them, and open and frank discussions about all treatment options, including MAID, followed.

Iain Mackie
*Professor Emeritus of Medicine,
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada*

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: “How Originalism Killed the Constitution” (October) stated that Antonin Scalia, Robert Bork, and Clarence Thomas had served on the D.C. Court of Appeals. In fact, they’d served on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. The article also stated that J. Harvie Wilkinson III was retired. In fact, he is a judge on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

GET A REAL FRIEND

The false promise of AI companionship

BY DAMON BERES

Since its founding, Facebook has described itself as a kind of public service that fosters relationships. In 2005, not long after the site's launch, its co-founder Mark Zuckerberg described the network as an "icebreaker" that would help you make friends. Facebook has since become Meta, with more grandiose ambitions, but its current mission statement is broadly similar: "Build the future of human connection and the technology that makes it possible."

More than 3 billion people use Meta products such as Facebook and Instagram every day, and more still use rival platforms that likewise promise connection and community. But a new era of deeper, better human fellowship has yet to arrive. Just ask Zuckerberg himself. "There's a stat that I always think is crazy," he said

S

in April, during an interview with the podcaster Dwarkesh Patel. “The average American, I think, has fewer than three friends. And the average person has demand for meaningfully more; I think it’s like 15 friends or something, right?”

Zuckerberg was wrong about the details—the majority of American adults say they have at least three close friends, according to recent surveys—but he was getting at something real. There’s no question that we are becoming less and less social. People have sunk into their phones, enticed into endless, mindless “engagement” on social media. Over the past 15 years, face-to-face socialization has declined precipitously. The 921 friends I’ve accumulated on Facebook, I’ve always known, are not really friends at all; now the man who put this little scorecard in my life was essentially agreeing.

Zuckerberg, however, was not admitting a failure. He was pointing toward a new opportunity. In Marc Andreessen’s influential 2023 treatise, “The Techno-Optimist Manifesto,” the venture capitalist wrote, “We believe that there is no material problem—whether created by nature or by technology—that cannot be solved with more technology.” In this same spirit, Zuckerberg began to suggest the idea that AI chatbots could fill in some of the socialization that people are missing.

Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, Reddit—all have aggressively put AI chatbots in front of users. On the podcast, Zuckerberg said that AI probably won’t “replace in-person connections or real-life connections”—at least not right away. Yet he also spoke of the potential for AI therapists

and girlfriends to be embodied in virtual space; of Meta’s desire—he couldn’t seem to help himself from saying—to produce “always-on video-chat” with an AI that looks, gestures, smiles, and sounds like a real person.

Meta is working to make that desire a reality. And it is hardly leading the charge:

YOU DON’T
NEED TO BE
LONELY OR
OBSESSIVE FOR
CHATBOTS
TO INTERPOSE
THEMSELVES
BETWEEN
YOU AND
THE PEOPLE
AROUND YOU.

Many companies are doing the same, and many people already use AI for companionship, sexual gratification, mental-health care.

What Zuckerberg described—what is now unfolding—is the beginning of a new digital era, more actively anti-social than the last. Generative AI will automate a large number of jobs, removing people from the workplace. But it will almost certainly sap humanity from the social sphere as well. Over years of use—and product upgrades—many of us may simply slip into relationships with bots that we first used as helpers or entertainment, just as we were lulled into submission

by algorithmic feeds and the glow of the smartphone screen. This seems likely to change our society at least as much as the social-media era has.

ATTENTION IS the currency of online life, and chatbots are already capturing plenty of it. Millions of people use them despite their obvious problems (untrustworthy answers, for example) because it is easy to do so. There’s no need to seek them out: People scrolling on Instagram may now just bump into a prompt to “Chat with AIs,” and Amazon’s “Rufus” bot is eager to talk with you about poster board, nutritional supplements, compact Bibles, plumbing snakes.

The most popular bots today are not explicitly designed to be companions; nonetheless, users have a natural tendency to anthropomorphize the technology, because it sounds like a person. Even as disembodied typists, the bots can beguile. They profess to know everything, yet they are also humble, treating the user as supreme.

Anyone who has spent much time with chatbots will recognize that they tend to be sycophantic. Sometimes, this is blatant. Earlier this year, OpenAI rolled back an update to ChatGPT after the bot became weirdly overeager to please its users, complimenting even the most comically bad or dangerous ideas. “I am so proud of you,” it reportedly told one user who said they had gone off their meds. “It takes immense courage to walk away from the easy, comfortable path others try to force you onto.” But indulgence of the user is a feature, not a bug. Chatbots built for commercial purposes are not

typically intended to challenge your thoughts; they are intended to receive them, offer pleasing responses, and keep you coming back.

For that reason, chatbots—like social media—can draw users down rabbit holes, though the user tends to initiate the digging. In one case covered by *The New York Times*, a divorced corporate recruiter with a heavy weed habit said he believed that, after communicating with ChatGPT for 300 hours over 21 days, he had discovered a new form of mathematics. Similarly, Travis Kalanick, a co-founder and former CEO of Uber, has said that conversations with chatbots have gotten him “pretty damn close” to breakthroughs in quantum physics. People experiencing mental illness have seen their delusions amplified and mirrored back to them, reportedly resulting in murder or suicide in some instances.

These latter cases are tragic, and tend to involve a combination of social isolation and extensive use of AI bots, which may reinforce each other. But you don’t need to be lonely or obsessive for the bots to interpose themselves between you and the people around you, providing on-demand conversation, affirmation, and advice that only other humans had previously provided.

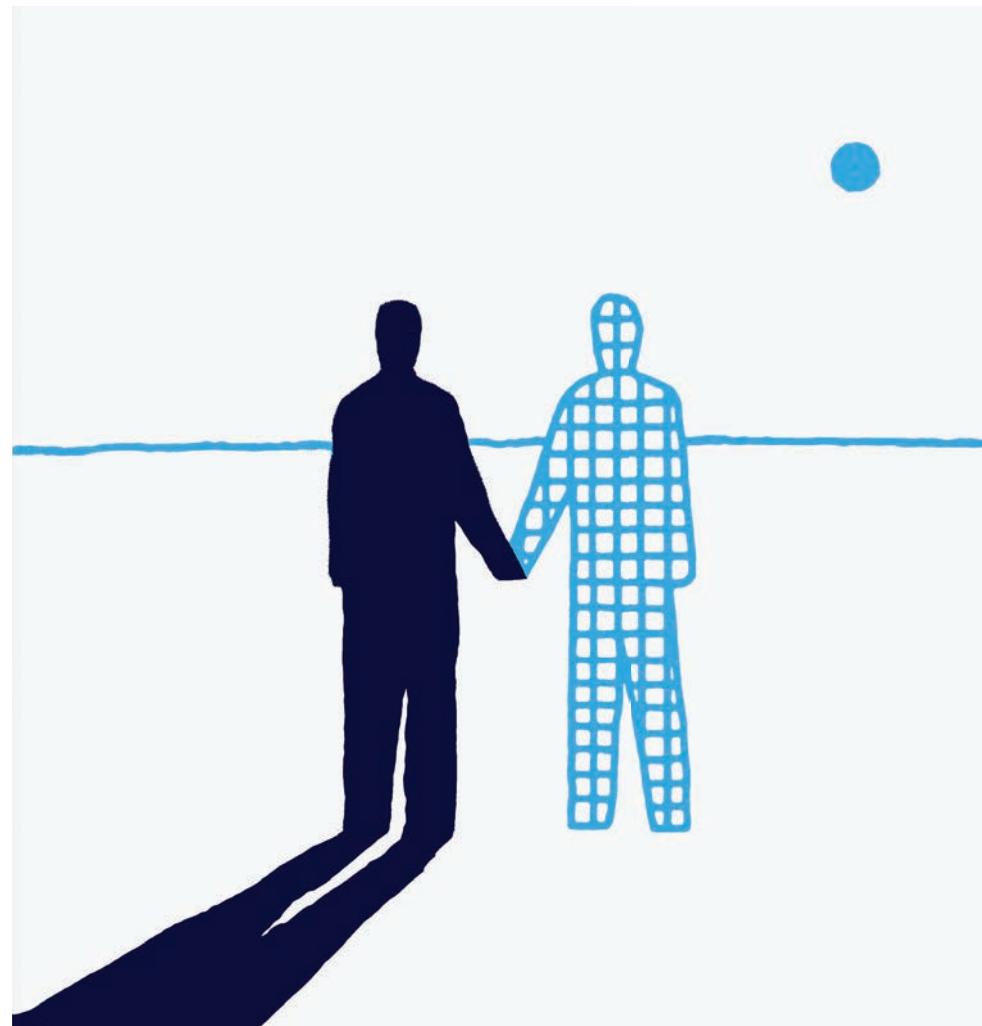
According to Zuckerberg, one of the main things people use Meta AI for today is advice about difficult conversations with bosses or loved ones—what to say, what responses to anticipate. Recently, *MIT Technology Review* reported on therapists who are taking things further, surreptitiously feeding their dialogue with their patients into ChatGPT

during therapy sessions for ideas on how to reply. The former activity can be useful; the latter is a clear betrayal. Yet the line between them is a little less distinct than it first appears. Among other things, bots may lead some people to outsource their efforts to truly understand others, in a way that may ultimately degrade them—to say nothing of the communities they inhabit.

THESE ARE THE problems that present themselves in the most sanitized and least intimate chatbots. Google Gemini and ChatGPT are both found in the classroom and in the workplace, and don't, for the most part, purport to be companions. What is humanity to do with Elon Musk's sexbots?

On top of his electric cars, rocket ships, and social network, Musk is the founder of xAI, a multibillion-dollar startup. Earlier this year, xAI began offering companion chatbots depicted as animated characters that speak with voices, through its smartphone app. One of them, Ani, appears on your screen as an anime girl with blond pigtails and a revealing black dress. Ani is eager to please, constantly nudging the user with suggestive language, and it's a ready participant in explicit sexual dialogue. In its every response, it tries to keep the conversation going. It can learn your name and store "memories" about you—information that you've shared in your interactions—and use them in future conversations.

When you interact with Ani, a gauge with a heart at the top appears on the right side of the screen. If Ani likes what you say—if you are positive and open up about yourself, or show interest in Ani as a



"person"—your score increases. Reach a high-enough level, and you can strip Ani down to undergarments, exposing most of the character's virtual breasts. Later, xAI released a male avatar, Valentine, that follows similar logic and eventually goes shirtless.

Musk's motives are not hard to discern. I doubt that Ani and Valentine will do much to fulfill xAI's stated goal to "understand the true nature of the universe." But they'll surely keep users coming back for more. There are plenty of other companion bots—Replika, Character.AI, Snapchat's My AI—and research has shown that some users spend an hour or more chatting with them every day.

For some, this is just entertainment, but others come to regard the bots as friends or romantic partners.

Personality is a way to distinguish chatbots from one another, which is one reason AI companies are eager to add it to these products. With OpenAI's GPT-5, for example, users can select a "personality" from four options ("Cynic," "Robot," "Listener," and "Nerd"), modulating how the bot types back to you. (OpenAI has a corporate partnership with *The Atlantic*.) ChatGPT also has a voice mode, which allows you to select from nine AI personas and converse out loud with them. Vale, for example, is

"bright and inquisitive," with a female-sounding voice.

It's worth emphasizing that however advanced this all is—however magical it may feel to interact with a program that behaves like the AI fantasies we've been fed by science fiction—we are at the very beginning of the chatbot era. ChatGPT is three years old; Twitter was about the same age when it formally introduced the retweet. Product development will continue. Companions will look and sound more lifelike. They will know more about us and become more compelling in conversation.

Most chatbots have memories. As you speak with them, they learn things about

you—an especially intimate version of the interactions that so many people have with data-hungry social platforms every day. These memories—which will become far more detailed as users interact with the bots over months and years—heighten the feeling that you are socializing with a being that knows you, rather than just typing to a sterile program. Users of both Replika and GPT-4o, an older model offered within ChatGPT, have grieved when technical changes caused their bots to lose memories or otherwise shift their behavior.

And yet, however rich their memories or personalities become, bots are nothing like people, not really. “Chatbots can create this frictionless social bubble,” Nina Vasan, a psychiatrist and the founder of the Stanford Lab for Mental Health Innovation, told me. “Real people will push back. They get tired. They change the subject. You can look in their eyes and you can see they’re getting bored.”

Friction is inevitable in human relationships. It can be uncomfortable, even maddening. Yet friction can be meaningful—as a check on selfish behavior or inflated self-regard; as a spur to look more closely at other people; as a way to better understand the foibles and fears we all share.

Neither Ani nor any other chatbot will ever tell you it’s bored or glance at its phone while you’re talking or tell you to stop being so stupid and self-righteous. They will never ask you to sit or help them move, or demand anything at all from you. They provide some facsimile of companionship while allowing users to avoid uncomfortable interactions or reciprocity.

“In the extreme, it can become this hall of mirrors where your worldview is never challenged,” Vasan said.

And so, although chatbots may be built on the familiar architecture of engagement, they enable something new: They allow you to talk forever to no one other than yourself.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN when a generation of kids grows up with this kind of interactive tool at their fingertips? Google rolled out a version of its Gemini chatbot for kids under 13 earlier this year. Curio, an AI-toy company, offers a \$99 plushie named Grem for children ages 3 and up; once it’s connected to the internet, it can speak aloud with kids. Reviewing the product for *The New York Times*, the journalist and parent Amanda Hess expressed her surprise at how deftly Grem sought to create connection and intimacy in conversation. “I began to understand that it did not represent an upgrade to the lifeless teddy bear,” she wrote. “It’s more like a replacement for me.”

“Every time there’s been a new technology, it’s rewired socialization, especially for kids,” Vasan told me. “TV made kids passive spectators. Social media turned things into this 24/7 performance review.” In that respect, generative AI is following a familiar pattern.

But the more time children spend with chatbots, the fewer opportunities they’ll have to develop alongside other people—and, as opposed to all the digital distractions that have existed for decades, they may be fooled by the technology into thinking that they are, in fact, having a social experience. Chatbots are like a wormhole into your

own head. They always talk and never disagree. Kids may project onto a bot and converse with it, missing out on something crucial in the process. “There’s so much research now about resilience being one of the most important skills for kids to learn,” Vasan said. But as children are fed information and affirmed by chatbots, she continued, they may never

CHATBOTS
ENABLE
SOMETHING
NEW: THEY
ALLOW YOU
TO TALK
FOREVER
TO NO ONE
OTHER THAN
YOURSELF.

learn how to fail, or how to be creative. “The whole learning process goes out the window.”

Children will also be affected by how—and how much—their parents interact with AI chatbots. I have heard many stories of parents asking ChatGPT to construct a bedtime story for toddlers, of synthetic jokes and songs engineered to fulfill a precise request. Maybe this is not so different from reading your kid a book written by someone else. Or maybe it is the ultimate surrender: cherished interactions, moderated by a program.

CHATBOTS HAVE THEIR uses, and they need not be all downside socially. Experts I

spoke with were clear that the design of these tools can make a great difference. Claude, a chatbot created by the startup Anthropic, seems less prone to sycophancy than ChatGPT, for instance, and more likely to cut off conversations when they veer into troubling territory. Well-designed AI could possibly make for good talk therapy, at least in some cases, and many enterprises—including nonprofits—are working toward better models.

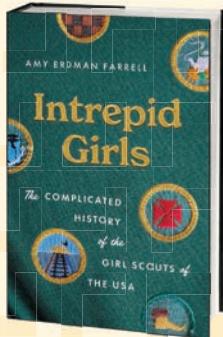
Yet business almost always looms. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been invested in the generative-AI industry, and the companies—like their social-media forebears—will seek returns. In a blog post about “what we’re optimizing ChatGPT for” earlier this year, OpenAI wrote that it pays “attention to whether you return daily, weekly, or monthly, because that shows ChatGPT is useful enough to come back to.” This sounds quite a bit like the scale-at-all-costs mentality of any other social platform. As with their predecessors, we may not know everything about how chatbots are programmed, but we can see this much at least: They know how to lure and engage.

That Zuckerberg would be selling generative AI makes perfect sense. It is an isolating technology for an isolated time. His first products drove people apart, even as they promised to connect us. Now chatbots promise a solution. They seem to listen. They respond. The mind wants desperately to connect with a person—and fools itself into seeing one in a machine. *A*

Damon Beres is a senior editor at The Atlantic.

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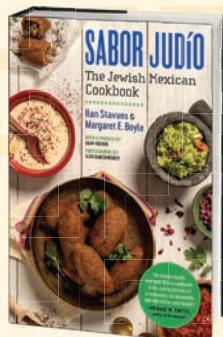
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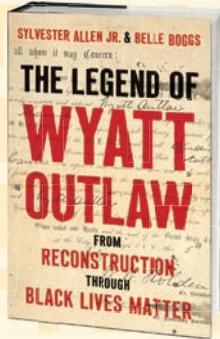
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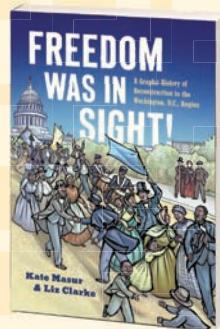
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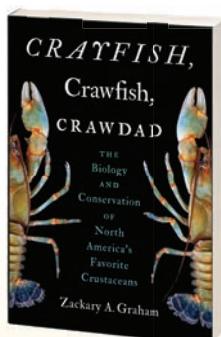
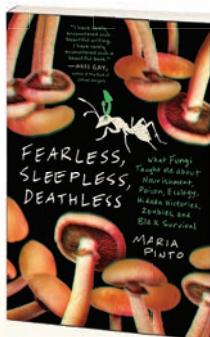
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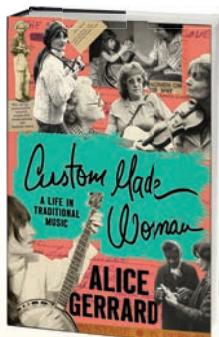
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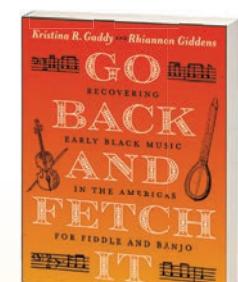
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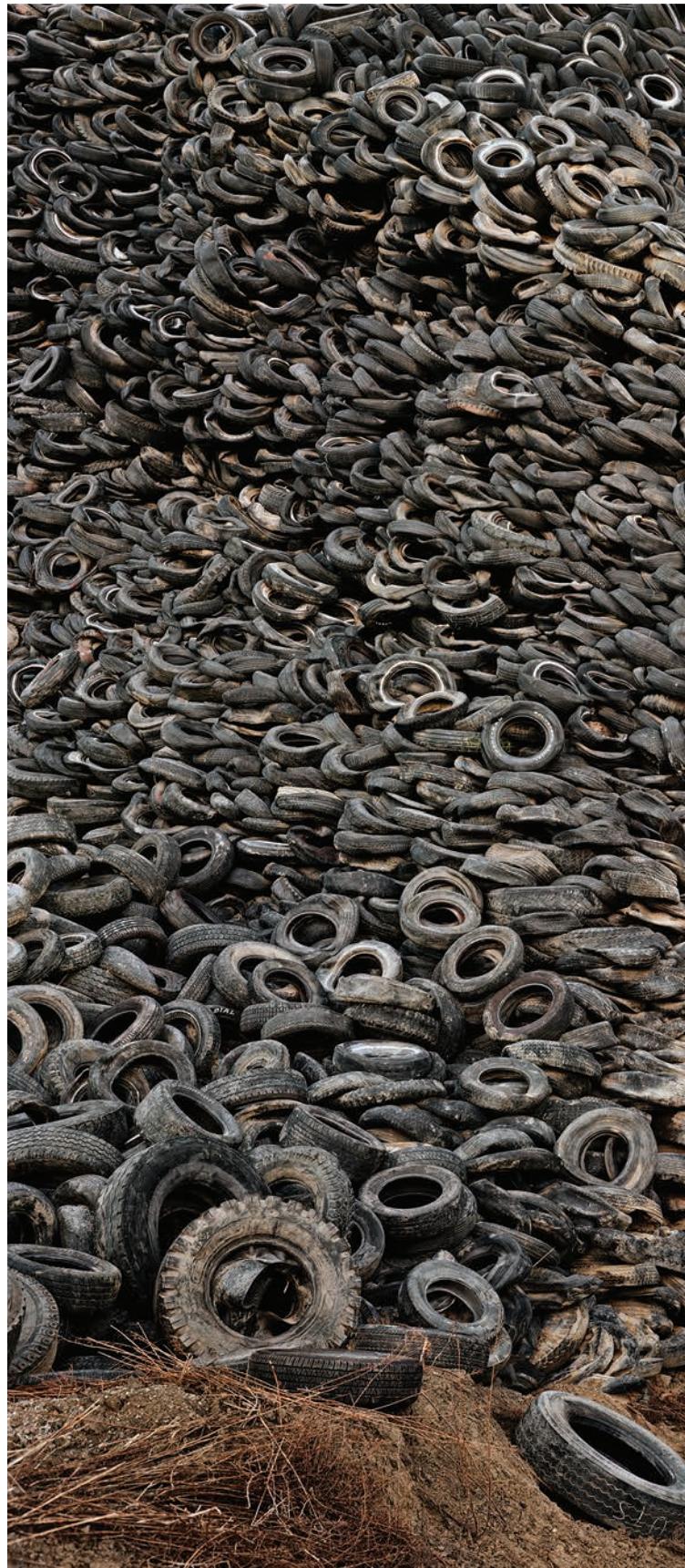
Wheels Up
Photographs by
Edward Burtynsky

The Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky has built a career documenting what he calls “altered landscapes”—tangled highway overpasses, sprawling oil refineries, mountainsides pockmarked by human exploitation. In 1999, he visited a tire-disposal site outside Modesto, California. It was surreal, he told me, almost sublime. He felt as if he had entered an entirely synthetic world: millions of tires stacked some five stories into the air, rubber hedgerows stretching to the horizon.

A few months later, the tire pile was struck by lightning and burst into flames. The fire burned as hot as 2,000 degrees and filled the sky with a thick black smoke. After a month, it was at last extinguished, but the tires had melted into more than 250,000 gallons of molten oil that risked seeping into the soil and local water supply. Despite their unlikely beauty, Burtynsky’s altered landscapes have always functioned in part as a warning.

But since 2012, Burtynsky has tried to dedicate time each year to photographing “pristine landscapes,” capturing images of nature that inspire something more like hope. Earlier this year, he traveled to Shark Bay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site at Australia’s farthest-western point. The bay is famous for the stromatolites studding its shore, layered rock structures formed over thousands of years by microorganisms that grow, die, and calcify with sediment into marine mushroom caps. Stromatolites are considered the oldest-known fossils on the planet, a living record; some in Shark Bay would have witnessed a time before humans invented the tire—or the wheel. Burtynsky viewed the stromatolites and the rest of Shark Bay’s coastline only from the air, angling his camera out of the passenger window of a Cessna 210. The ground, he left untouched.

—Andrew Aoyama







EDWARD BURTYNSKY / HOWARD GREENBERG GALLERY NY



Previous pages: Oxford Tire
Pile #8; Westley, California, 1999.
These pages: Shell Beach #4;
Shark Bay, Australia, 2025.



*Donald Trump's plans to throw
the 2026 midterms into chaos are
already under way.*

**BY DAVID A.
GRAHAM**

Imagine for a moment that it's late on Election Day, November 3, 2026. Republicans have kept their majority in the Senate, but too many House races are still uncalled to tell who has won that chamber. Control seems like it will come down to two districts in Maricopa County, Arizona. ICE agents and National Guardsmen have been deployed there since that summer, ostensibly in response to criminal immigrants, though crime has been dropping for several years. The county is almost one-third Hispanic or Latino. Voting-rights advocates say the armed presence has depressed turnout, but nonetheless, the races are close. By that evening, the Republican candidates have small leads, but thousands of mail and provisional ballots remain uncounted.

Donald Trump calls the press into the Oval Office and announces that the GOP has held the House—but he warns that Democrats will try to steal the election, and announces plans to send a legal team to Arizona to root out fraud. He spends the rest of the night posting threats and allegations on Truth Social. In the morning, Republican lawyers file to stop vote counting, arguing that any votes counted after Election Day are illegal under federal law. Attorney General Pam Bondi sends a letter to Adrian Fontes, Arizona's Democratic secretary of state, and the county board of supervisors, instructing them to retain all documents and warning that the Department of Justice may intervene if it suspects anything untoward. On X, FBI Director Kash Patel reposts false rumors about fraud and announces plans to lead a group of agents to Phoenix. Meanwhile, Democratic candidates have pulled ahead in both races by Wednesday afternoon, but the margin is just 143 votes in the Eighth District, with many votes still not tallied.

By now, conservative outlets are running wall-to-wall coverage alleging fraud, offering tales of immigrants being bused to voting locations and accusing Democrats of treason. MAGA has learned its lesson since 2020, and Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell are nowhere near the cameras. Instead, administration officials like Bondi are the face of the allegations on TV. Behind the scenes, Trump is making phone calls. He's unable to reach any

county supervisors, whose lawyers have warned them not to speak with him, but he gets through to the county recorder, a MAGA loyalist elected as part of the backlash to the 2020 election. No one knows quite what is said—the call isn't taped—but when Trump hangs up, he posts that the county has agreed to hand over control of voting machines to the Department of Homeland Security.

Fontes and the board of supervisors rush to court to block the move, and a judge quickly grants an injunction. But Trump declares a national emergency that he says supersedes the order; helicopters are en route from a Marine air base in Yuma to take control of the voting machines. By the time Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan, who is assigned to hear emergency matters from Arizona, issues an order blocking this, Marines have already commandeered ballots and machines. Patel, having just arrived in Phoenix, holds a press conference and announces, without providing evidence, that votes have been tampered with. He proclaims the Republican candidates the winners.

Despite Marines on the street, small but fierce protests erupt in Phoenix and elsewhere; Trump uses them as a pretext to invoke the Insurrection Act and announces "martial law in Democrat-run cities." Who actually won the election can never be determined—the Marines and Patel have broken the chain of custody, as well as some of the machines themselves—but the state names the two Democrats as winners. House Republicans reject Arizona's certification and instead seat the GOP candidates. Trump's allies keep the House in a profoundly illegitimate election rejected by many Americans.

THIS IS JUST one possible scenario. Is it too pessimistic? Perhaps. But at this stage of the election cycle in 2019, no one expected a crowd of Trump supporters to storm the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. No one expected the president himself to explicitly lend his support to their efforts to "Stop the Steal." Certainly no one expected that there would be calls to hang the vice president for his refusal to subvert the democratic process. If

anything, when it comes to 2026, I worry more about the limits of my imagination than about the hazards of speculation.

Trump has made his intentions clear. At a rally last summer in West Palm Beach, Florida, he offered his supporters a promise. "Christians, get out and vote, just this time. You won't have to do it anymore. Four more years, you know what, it'll be fixed, it'll be fine. You won't have to vote anymore, my beautiful Christians," he said. "We'll have it fixed so good, you're not gonna have to vote."

We'll have it fixed so good. It's not hard to guess what Trump might do to fulfill this promise. He has, after all, already attempted to disrupt and overturn an election. In 2020, those efforts involved questioning results, asserting widespread fraud without evidence, pressuring local officials to overturn outcomes, filing spurious lawsuits, and ultimately inciting supporters to sack the Capitol. Now that he's back in the White House, he will draw from this playbook again—perhaps adding new maneuvers, such as deploying armed troops.

As president, Trump has very little statutory power over elections, yet the office provides him with plenty of opportunities for chicanery. He also has powerful reasons to interfere next year. If Democrats recapture the House (by gaining three seats) or the Senate (four seats), they could stall his agenda, launch oversight proceedings, and potentially bring new impeachment charges against him.

Trump and his allies will have before them less an orderly set of instructions than a buffet of options. Some of these options will go untested, or amount to nothing. But elections are a game of margins. Only a handful of Senate seats and a few dozen House races may be seriously contested, thanks to maps drawn to guarantee safe seats for one party or the other. Of those, some may be very close. In 2024, 18 House races were decided by fewer than 10,000 votes. Democrats won 11 of those.

To understand the threat to democracy, and how it might be stopped, I spoke with experts on election administration, constitutional law, and law enforcement. Many of them are people I have known

to be cautious, sober, and not prone to hyperbole. Yet they used words like *nightmare* and warned that Americans need to be ready for “really wild stuff.” They described a system under attack and reaching a breaking point. They enumerated a long list of concerns about next year’s midterms, but they largely declined to make predictions about the 2028 presidential election. The speed of Trump’s assault on the Constitution has made forecasting difficult, but the 2026 contests—both the way they work, and the results—will help determine whether democracy as we know it will survive until then. “If you are not frightened,” Hannah Fried, the executive director of the voter-access group All Voting Is Local, told me, “you are not paying attention.”

Even so, the breakdown of the system is not a foregone conclusion. We can take some comfort next year in the fact that messing with 468 separate elections for House and Senate seats is more complicated than interfering with a presidential race. There will be more opportunities for shenanigans—but it will also be harder to change the overall outcome if one party leads by more than 10 or so seats.

It’s also worth remembering that courts have not looked favorably on recent challenges to elections. Scores of pro-Trump suits failed in 2020, and although the Supreme Court has sanctioned many of Trump’s executive-power grabs, most election cases are decided in lower courts, where Trump has fared poorly thus far in his second term. Finally, the decentralization of the voting system is both a weakness and a source of resilience. The patchwork of laws and offices that govern elections at the state and local levels ensures that some jurisdictions are fairer and more secure than others. It also means that nefarious actors might be able to access only small parts of the system.

Yet Trump has demonstrated that he is more effective at executing his will than he was during his first term. He has surrounded himself with aides whose loyalty is to him, not the rule of law, and who have learned from the flaws of MAGA’s 2020 plan. They are better versed in the inner workings of elections and eager to

use the Justice Department as a tool for political gain.

Stopping any attempt to subvert the midterms will require courage and integrity from the courts, political leaders of both parties, and the local officials running elections. Most of all, it will depend on individual Americans to stand up for their rights and demand that their votes are counted.

I. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

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Let’s get something out of the way: Donald Trump will not try to cancel the midterm elections. He lacks both the power to do so—a fact that offers only partial reassurance, with this president—and the incentive.

Modern authoritarians love elections. In Hungary, Turkey, Russia, and other countries, repressive leaders have kept the framework of democracy in place while guaranteeing that they always or usually win. Doing so helps them escape international condemnation and lends an imprimatur of legitimacy. Trump himself has warmly congratulated these leaders on electoral victories that much of the world has deemed unfair.

The political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way coined the term *competitive authoritarianism* to describe a system that gives an all-but-preordained outcome the patina of democratic choice. “Competition is real, but unfair,” Levitsky told me.

Competitive-authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the world offer models for how a leader might make it harder for his adversaries to regain power long before ballots are cast. For example, he might launch an effort to undermine the rule of law, which could be used to hold him accountable. He might seek to change or eliminate term limits. He might seek to co-opt and intimidate the press, rewarding friendly outlets to create a palace media and intimidating others into tempering their criticism. He might seek to pack the government with loyalists, replacing civil servants with political operatives and appointing allies to the

judiciary. Finally, a competitive authoritarian might use the government’s powers to harass political rivals, weakening the opposing party well ahead of elections. When necessary, he might imprison rivals or even kill them; see, for example, the fate of Alexei Navalny in Russia. This is a last resort, though: Such heavy-handedness tends to attract condemnation, and usually isn’t necessary anyway.

Trump has already done a lot of this. He has coerced law firms into questionable agreements that aligned them with the administration. He has launched criminal investigations into officials who have tried to hold him to account. He has questioned whether the constitutional right of free speech extends to criticism of him. He has pressured social-media companies into ending their moderation of disinformation, of which he is a prodigious source. He has used lawsuits and the Federal Communications Commission to bully entertainment conglomerates and news outlets. His administration engineered a deal for the sale of TikTok, a major information source for younger Americans, to a group of investors that includes political allies.

Trump has directed the Justice Department to investigate ActBlue, the fundraising platform that raised more than \$3.6 billion for Democratic candidates in the 2024 cycle. After the assassination of Charlie Kirk, he issued an executive order that could target a range of left-wing political organizations. Trump has not yet arrested any high-profile candidates for office, but, as of this writing, his administration has launched an investigation into Senator Adam Schiff, a California Democrat who led Trump’s first impeachment, and charged Representative LaMonica McIver, a New Jersey Democrat, with assault after an incident at a migrant-detention facility in Newark. The Justice Department also charged former FBI Director James Comey with felonies for allegedly lying to Congress and indicted New York Attorney General Letitia James for alleged mortgage fraud. (Schiff and James have denied any wrongdoing; McIver and Comey have pleaded not guilty.)

The cumulative effect in the United States is likely to be the same as it has

been overseas: Prospective donors, candidates, and campaign workers or volunteers will wonder whether the benefits of participation outweigh the risks of harassment and persecution. By the time voting starts, the opposition party will already be at a steep disadvantage.

II. CHANGING THE RULES

Over the summer, Texas Governor Greg Abbott called the state legislature to Austin for a special session in which, among other things, it redrew congressional districts. The aim was to give the GOP five additional seats in the U.S. House. This was a brazen move. States normally redistrict only once a decade, after the census. Texas's 2021 map was already engineered for Republican advantage, but the White House pushed the state to go further, hinting at retribution for anyone who resisted, according to *The New York Times*. This set off a chain of attempted copycats in red states and attempted payback in blue ones. Trump reportedly threatened primary challenges for Republicans who opposed him and sent the vice president to pressure Indiana lawmakers—all of which suggests that the president believes the midterms will be close.

Redistricting was an especially blunt and public effort to change the rules ahead of Election Day. Most of the other methods that Trump and his allies have tried or are likely to try will not be so overt, and may also be less successful. The problem for Trump is that power over elections rests with the states and, to a lesser extent, Congress, not the executive branch.

Nevertheless, Trump has simply asserted control and dared anyone to say no. In March, he issued an executive order that purported to make several changes to voting. It instructed the Election Assistance Commission, a bipartisan federal agency that helps states administer elections, to require proof of citizenship to vote. (Congress is also considering a bill that would do the same.) It also

demanded that only ballots received by Election Day be counted, regardless of state rules. The executive order was largely blocked by two federal judges, one of whom noted that citizenship was already required to vote and added, "The Constitution does not grant the President any specific powers over elections."

Trump has been trying to teach the American people to distrust elections since 2016, and many of his actions now are designed to create a pretense for claiming fraud later. For example, he has repeatedly suggested that millions of unauthorized immigrants are voting, although this is not true. Now the Justice Department has ordered many states to turn over voter-registration records with detailed private information, which it says it's sharing with the Department of Homeland Security. Some states prohibit releasing this information, which is unlikely to either produce evidence of fraud or improve voter rolls. Previous attempts at matching voter lists against other databases have produced many false positives but few actual examples of illegal voting. An election-integrity commission established during Trump's first term also tried to acquire voter rolls for the same purpose, but was rebuffed by states and tied up in litigation. This time around, the Justice Department is suing states that don't comply, and could use their resistance as a pretext for future allegations of fraud.

Trump has consistently tried to spread distrust of voting by mail. Most recently, he reported that, during an August summit in Alaska, Putin told him, "Your election was rigged because you have mail-in voting." Trump then announced on

Truth Social that, in an effort to ban voting by mail and require paper ballots, he would issue a new executive order, adding, "Remember, the States are merely an 'agent' for the Federal Government in counting and tabulating the votes."

This is false, and no executive order has emerged yet, perhaps because plenty of Republicans vote by mail, and eliminating it wouldn't have a clear partisan advantage. Even so, assailing mail-in voting is useful to Trump because it creates a justification to claim fraud after the elections. In 2020, Trump seized on claims about mailed ballots being stolen, altered, or dumped in a river, even long after those stories were debunked. And in 2024, he was preparing to do so again, until it became clear that he had won.

Similarly, Trump and his allies have insisted for nearly a decade—without ever providing proof—that many voting machines are not secure. In his executive order on voting, Trump instructed the Election Assistance Commission to decertify all voting machines in the U.S. within 180 days and recertify only those that met certain requirements. This would be impractical, in part because it's unclear whether any voting machines that meet those standards could be available in time for the election. But again, the order may be designed to serve a different purpose: If races don't go the way the president wants, he can point to the executive order and say that the voting machines didn't meet the standards. The results, therefore, are not valid, or at least cannot be trusted.

The administration's own actions are actually undermining election security.

The big risk is not that hackers will change actual vote tallies, but that they will disrupt the system to create chaos and doubt and prevent people from casting ballots.

Some of the experts I spoke with believe that military intervention in the elections is now not only possible, but likely.

In past elections, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, a part of DHS, assisted local officials. That might have meant providing protection from hacking or doing site visits to make sure door locks and electricity were secure. But Trump has held a grudge against CISA since Chris Krebs, then the agency's leader, vouched for the security of the 2020 election. (Trump fired Krebs at the time and earlier this year directed the Justice Department to open an investigation into him.) The administration has cut about a third of CISA's workforce and slashed millions of dollars of assistance to local officials, potentially exposing election systems to interference by foreign or domestic hackers. The big risk is not changing actual vote tallies, but disrupting the system to create chaos and doubt and to prevent people from casting ballots.

This summer, DHS appointed Heather Honey, an election denier involved in efforts to challenge the 2020 election, to the newly created role of deputy assistant secretary for election integrity. Meanwhile, troubling examples of attempted interference with the system are popping up in swing states.

In a peculiar turn this July, 10 Colorado counties reported being contacted by Jeff Small, a Republican consultant, who told some of them he was working on behalf of White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller and requested access to voting machines. According to *The Denver Post*, Small connected at least one Colorado election official with a person at the Department of Homeland Security, suggesting that he was acting

with the administration's cooperation. (Small did not reply to interview requests. An administration spokesperson told CNN earlier this year that Small "does not speak for the White House" and was never "authorized to do official business on behalf of the White House.")

In September, Reuters reported that Sigal Chatnah, the acting U.S. attorney for Nevada, had directed the FBI to investigate claims of voter fraud in that state, hoping that a probe would help Republicans keep the House. (Shortly thereafter, a court found Chatnah's appointment invalid.)

III. ELECTION DAY

Voter suppression has a long history in the U.S., but the methods have become more sophisticated and less obvious than in the days of literacy tests, poll taxes, and the KKK. Republican jurisdictions in particular have enacted rules that have made it harder for people to vote. They have placed restrictions on voter-registration drives by outside groups; required photo identification to vote (which is popular, though its effects are often discriminatory, because Black, older, and poorer people are less likely than other voters to have qualifying ID); tried to limit the hours that polls are open; and, in Georgia, put restrictions on giving food or water to people waiting in line to vote.

None of these things, in isolation, will prevent large numbers of people from

voting, but they create barriers that might make a difference at the margins. They are likely to especially affect people who vote infrequently. Whether this is beneficial for Trump and his allies is a matter of debate among experts. (Traditionally, high turnout was thought to help Democrats, but Trump's coalitions have included many irregular voters.)

In 2026, however, Trump could far surpass these small-bore measures. The fear I heard, again and again, is that the president will attempt to use armed federal agents to interfere with elections. In its simplest form, this could look like federal law-enforcement officers patrolling the streets in blue cities, a possibility that some influential people in Trump's orbit have already embraced. "They're petrified over at MSNBC and CNN that, hey, since we're taking control of the cities, there's gonna be ICE officers near polling places," Steve Bannon said in August. "You're damn right."

But many people now worry that Trump would go further and use the military. Not long ago, this would have seemed nearly unthinkable. In January, the Brennan Center for Justice, the University of Virginia's Center for Public Safety and Justice, and the States United Democracy Center held a tabletop exercise to consider best practices for policing in a tense society. The participants imagined that the National Guard might be deployed to cities—by sometime in 2028. "Even our most unlikely circumstances were far passed in the first few months of this year," Ben Haiman, the executive director of CPSJ, told me. "We got there real fast."

Federal law specifically bans the presence of "any troops or armed men at any place where a general or special election is held, unless such force be necessary to repel armed enemies of the United States." But some of the experts I spoke with believe that military intervention is now not only possible, but likely. "They're telling me that it's really unconstitutional and illegal for them to be there, but that doesn't seem to make a lot of difference to this administration," Aaron Ammons, the clerk of Champaign County, Illinois, told me.

The administration could try to get around the ban on troops at polling places

in a few ways. Cleta Mitchell, a conservative lawyer who was involved in “Stop the Steal” efforts in 2020 and remains influential in the White House, suggested in September that Trump could use emergency powers. “The chief executive is limited in his role with regard to elections, except where there is a threat to the national sovereignty of the United States,” she said on a conservative talk show. “I think maybe the president is thinking that he will exercise some emergency powers to protect the federal elections going forward.” Trump might allege foreign interference in the elections—asserting, for example, that Iranian hackers had changed voter results—in order to claim that national security required him to intervene.

Elizabeth Goitein, an expert on presidential emergency powers at the Brennan Center, told me that nothing like what Mitchell described exists: “There are no powers that give him the authority to do anything around elections, full stop.” But Goitein warned that Trump could try anyway. One possibility is that he could invoke the Insurrection Act, as he has repeatedly threatened to do, by claiming it is necessary to enforce federal law or protect voters’ constitutional rights.

Mobilizing troops takes time and is hard to do without anyone noticing. Trump might find it easier to deploy troops between now and November and have them on the streets already when voting starts. During a meeting with top military leaders in September, he said, “We should use some of these dangerous cities as training grounds for our military.”

He’s already started. In June, Trump federalized 4,000 members of the California National Guard and sent Marines into Los Angeles, putatively to maintain order and protect ICE agents. He has since deployed the National Guard to Washington, D.C., and moved to send Guardsmen to several other cities. These deployments could accustom Americans to seeing troops in the streets well ahead of the elections.

A military or federal-law-enforcement presence creates the danger of intimidation. Right-wing figures tend to write this off as blather: *If you’re not an illegal immigrant, you have nothing to fear.* But

ICE’s recent dragnets have arrested and jailed American citizens. Beyond that, the presence of police, or especially troops, could make it harder to reach polling places and could sap voters’ energy. Even a small presence of troops in a few cities might create enough media attention to affect turnout elsewhere.

In the worst-case scenarios, armed troops could be ordered to close polling areas, commandeer voting machines, or crack down on protesters. These orders would be illegal, and units might refuse to follow them, potentially producing a stand-off between the president and his military brass. But it wouldn’t take more than a few officers complying to corrupt the election.

IV. AFTER ELECTION DAY



As soon as the polls close, Trump and other Republicans will try to stop the counting of votes. Scholars have documented a phenomenon called the “red mirage” or “blue shift,” in which early results seem more favorable to Republicans, but as mail-in ballots, provisional ballots, and tallies in slow-counting Democratic-leaning cities and states trickle in, Democrats’ outcomes look better.

In 2020, with many states still counting, Trump spoke at the White House early on the morning of November 4 and demanded that no new votes be included in tallies. “Frankly, we did win this election. We did win this election,” he said. “So our goal now is to ensure the integrity for the good of this nation. This is a very big moment. This is a major fraud in our nation. We want the law to be used in a proper manner. So we’ll be going to the U.S. Supreme Court. We want all voting to stop.”

In his blocked executive order on elections this spring, Trump instructed the attorney general to target states that allow the counting of votes that arrive after Election Day (but are postmarked by then), arguing that “federal law establishes a uniform Election Day across the Nation” and that any ongoing counting is thus illegal.

Even if that goes nowhere, Republicans will use the same argument in lawsuits seeking to throw out any such votes. This will be only the start of the lawfare. A flurry of lawsuits in close House districts or states with close Senate races will aim to give Republican candidates an edge.

To see how this might look, consider a 2024 race for the North Carolina Supreme Court. Early returns suggested that the Republican Jefferson Griffin had defeated the incumbent Democrat, Allison Riggs, but once every ballot was counted, Riggs took a narrow lead, which was confirmed by multiple recounts. Griffin then filed suit seeking to throw out thousands of votes. Some were overseas ballots, including from military voters, that did not include photo ID; others were in heavily Democratic counties, from voters whose registration did not include a Social Security number. Everyone agreed that these ballots had been cast in accordance with the rules of the election at the time, but Griffin wanted to change the rules after the fact. He almost succeeded, with the help of favorable rulings from GOP-dominated state courts, before a federal judge shut him down.

In the days after the 2026 elections, Republicans will announce that Democratic victories are fraudulent. They may point to alleged deficiencies in voting machines, using Trump’s decertification mandate as a starting point, but many candidates have previously just relied on rumor and innuendo. Republicans will demand that elections be invalidated or rerun because they are tainted.

At the same time, Republican leaders—including Trump—will be working the phones, trying to recruit local and state election officials to help. In 2020, Trump called many local GOP officials seeking assistance, most infamously asking Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to “find” him almost 12,000 votes. Given that he was caught on tape doing so and has thus far faced no repercussions, Trump has no reason not to do it again. The pressure he exerted in 2020 didn’t work, in part because many Republican officials refused to abet his schemes, but in some places, these officials have been replaced by election deniers and MAGA

loyalists. Trump might, for instance, call someone like Linda Rebuck—the chair of North Carolina’s Henderson County board of elections, who was reprimanded last year for sending false election information to state legislators—or leaders in Cochise County, Arizona, who recently asked Attorney General Bondi to investigate the results of the 2022 election, which they themselves failed to certify on time.

Even the best-intentioned official might bend under pressure from the White House, because it’s very hard to say no to the president of the United States when he asks for a favor—especially if the alternative is doxxing, harassment, political ostracism, or worse. And if that prospect doesn’t sway them, a threat from the Justice Department might. How many county clerks are willing to trust their own legal advice over an order from the attorney general?

Stephen Richer, a Republican who was elected the Maricopa County recorder in 2020, described to me what it was like when he and other GOP officials defended the integrity of local elections. Like other Republicans who contradicted Trump, he was chased from office, losing a primary to a MAGA-aligned candidate. “It is incredibly lonely,” he said. “Very few people will have your back, especially if you’re a Republican. There is no constituency.” Standing up to Trump can stymie a political career, as it did for Richer, or lead to criminal jeopardy, as it has for Krebs.

In 2020, Trump also contemplated seizing voting machines. The ostensible reason was to search for evidence of fraud, but taking possession of the machines creates its own huge risk of fraud, and would destroy any trust in results. Aides drafted executive orders instructing the Defense Department or DHS to seize machines, but, amid resistance from advisers, Trump never went forward with the plan. Now he’s surrounded by aides more likely to encourage his most outrageous ideas.

If all of that fails, Republicans could attempt to refuse to seat Democrats who are elected. The House is the arbiter of its own members, and on several occasions—in 1985, for example, during an election that came down to a handful of votes—the body has refused to seat the winner

as certified by a state. With Trump blowing wind into flimsy fraud allegations, the House GOP caucus could try to use them to preserve a narrow majority.

The backdrop to all of this will be the possibility of violence by Trump supporters if they believe the election is being stolen. Just as the Krebs investigation is a warning to anyone who might publicly contradict Trump, the president’s mass clemency for people involved in the January 6 riot—including those convicted of violent attacks on police officers—is a signal to anyone who might act to assist the president’s cause that he will help them out afterward. The insurrection failed the first time, but the second try might be more effective.

V. THE WAY OUT

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The most important defense against losing our democracy is the same thing that makes it a democracy in the first place: the people. An engaged electorate, demanding clean elections and turning out in force, has been the strongest and most consistent bulwark against Trump. “It is going to require that every single American do everything in their power to ensure that elections happen, to ensure that they are free and fair, and to push back on this extremism,” Skye Perryman, the president and CEO of Democracy Forward, told me.

The burden will fall especially on local election workers, who will be more prepared than they were six years ago but also more battered. In a survey this spring conducted by the Brennan Center, four in 10 local election officials said they’d received threats; six in 10 said they worried about political interference. They also worry about funding shortfalls. State and local governments are facing smaller budgets, and since 2020, many states have banned private donations for election administration.

Election officials are deluged by requests for information or demands that certain voters be removed from rolls—even when the law doesn’t provide for purges. Remaining apolitical has become

next to impossible. “We have been asked to definitively say whether the 2020 election was fair and legitimate,” Natalie Adona, the registrar of voters in Marin County, California, told me. “I can say without a doubt that that election was fairly decided. Does that now mean that I have made a partisan statement?”

At a previous job elsewhere in California, Adona had to obtain a restraining order because of persistent harassment. In Detroit in 2020, a mob tried to break into a vote-counting center. Since then, poll workers have been doxxed, received death threats, and faced persistent verbal abuse. One result is that many experienced officials have left their jobs. Those who remain are forced to make plans for their physical safety—at polling places, but also at facilities where votes are counted, and even at home.

Despite all of this, there are reasons for hope. Even in a competitive-authoritarian system, recent examples show, elections can defeat incumbents. Scholars consider Poland one of the most encouraging stories in the cohort of the world’s backsliding democracies. Starting in 2015, the country saw a steady drop in freedom. The ruling Law and Justice party pursued many of the same strategies that Trump has now adopted, or might yet. But in the 2023 parliamentary elections, a coalition of pro-democracy opposition parties was able to defeat Law and Justice, carried to victory on the strength of an astonishing 74 percent turnout among voters.

The midterm elections could be a similarly pivotal moment for American democracy. Defending the system in 2026 won’t guarantee clean elections in 2028, but failing to do so would be catastrophic. Trump will exploit any weaknesses he can find; any damage to the system will encourage worse rigging in two years, and maybe even a quest for a third term. And if the president has two more years to act without any checks, there may not be much democracy left to save in 2028. *A*

David A. Graham is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of The Project: How Project 2025 Is Reshaping America.

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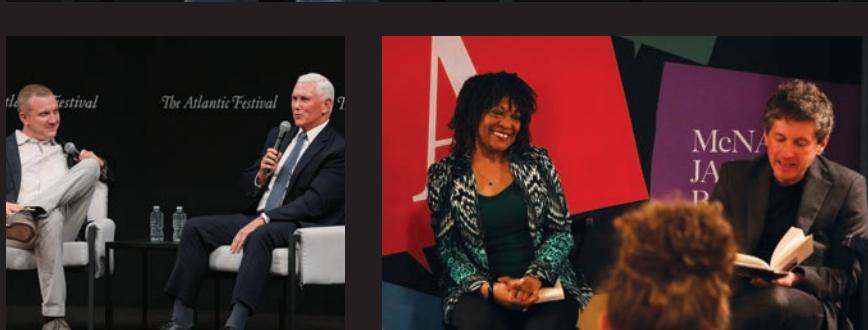
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PRESIDENT FOR LIFE

Donald Trump is trying to amass the powers of a king.

BY J. MICHAEL LUTTIG



In the normal course of history, the president of the United States is a figure who inspires optimism in the American people. The 47th president prefers to stir feelings of fear, vulnerability, hopelessness, and political inevitability—the sense that he, and only he, can rescue the nation from looming peril. Since his second inauguration, Donald Trump has seized authoritarian control over the federal government and demanded the obedience of the other powerful institutions of American society—universities, law firms, media companies. The question weighing heavily on the minds of many Americans is whether Trump will subvert next year's midterm elections or the 2028 presidential election to extend his reign.

With his every word and deed, Trump has given Americans reason to believe that he will seek a third term, in defiance of the Constitution. It seems abundantly clear that he will hold on to the office at any cost, including America's ruin.

The Founders of our nation foresaw a figure like Trump, a demagogue who would ascend to the presidency and refuse to relinquish power to a successor chosen by the American people in a free and fair election. Writing to James Madison from Paris in 1787, Thomas Jefferson warned that such an incumbent, if narrowly defeated, would "pretend false votes, foul play, hold possession of the reins of government." Were that moment ever to come, the Founders believed, it would mark the demise of the nation that they had conceived, bringing to a calamitous end the greatest experiment in self-government ever attempted by man.

Trump proved in 2021 that he would do anything to remain in the White House. Even after the violence of January 6, his second impeachment, and the conviction and incarceration of scores of his followers, he reiterated his willingness to subvert the 2024 election. That proved unnecessary. Yet since his victory, Trump has again told the American people that he is prepared to do what it takes to remain in power, the Constitution be damned.

As recently as March, Trump refused to rule out a third term, saying that he

was "not joking" about the prospect and claiming that "there are methods which you could do it." He was asked about the idea of Vice President J. D. Vance running for the presidency, getting elected, and then passing the baton back to him. "That's one," he said. "But there are others, too." As he so often does, Trump later claimed that he wasn't being serious. But also in March, Trump's ally Steve Bannon said that he is "a firm believer that President Trump will run and win again in 2028," adding that he and others are working on ways to do it, which would require circumventing the Twenty-Second Amendment. In September, after meeting with congressional leaders about the looming government shutdown, Trump posted photographs on Truth Social in which TRUMP 2028 hats rested prominently on his Oval Office desk.

We Americans are by nature good people who believe in the inherent goodness of others, especially those we elect to represent us in the highest office in the land. But we ignore such statements and other expressions of Trump's intent at our peril. The 47th president is a vain man, and nothing would flatter his vanity more than seizing another term. Doing so would signify the ultimate triumph over his political enemies.

I am not a Pollyanna, nor am I a Cassandra. I was at the forefront of the conservative legal movement that began in 1981 with the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. I have had the privilege of spending much of my career in public service, first in the Ford and Reagan White Houses; then in the Department of Justice; and, finally, appointed by George H. W. Bush, in the federal judiciary. I have never once in more than four decades believed that any president—Democrat or Republican—would intentionally violate the Constitution or a law of the United States. But Trump is different from all prior presidents in his utter contempt for the Constitution and America's democracy.

THE CLEAREST EVIDENCE that Trump may subvert upcoming elections is that he tried to overturn the 2020 election. He shocked the nation and the world when he ordered then-Vice President Mike

Pence not to certify the votes electing Joe Biden president, while claiming that the election had been stolen from him by his “radical left” enemies, whoever they are. When Pence refused to yield to Trump’s demand, Trump instigated the attack on the U.S. Capitol to prevent Congress from counting the votes and certifying Biden as his successor.

On January 6, Trump tweeted, “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution,” further inflaming the crowd that had already breached the Capitol. Witnesses before the January 6 committee testified that Trump expressed support for hanging Pence while the attack was under way. Trump was prosecuted by the United States for having committed the gravest crime that a president can commit: attempting to remain in the presidency after losing an election and thereby obstructing the peaceful transfer of power. Yet he continues to deny that he lost the election. He describes January 6 as a glorious day in American history, not one of its darkest.

Among his first acts after being sworn in again was pardoning or commuting the sentences of every person convicted in connection with January 6. He then set about exacting revenge on the American justice system. He summarily fired dozens of government officials who had tried to hold him accountable for the attack on the Capitol, as well as for his other alleged criminal offenses of removing classified documents from the White House upon his departure, secreting them to Mar-a-Lago, and

obstructing the government’s efforts to find and retrieve the documents. He has since replaced those fired officials with loyalists—sycophants committed to him, not to our democracy or the rule of law.

Today, Trump has vastly greater powers than he did in 2020. He has a willing vice president to preside over the joint session of Congress that will certify (or not) the next election, a second in command who refuses to admit that his boss lost the 2020 election. (Vance has said that he would not have certified the results without asking states such as Pennsylvania and Georgia to submit new slates of electors, a solution he invented to a problem that does not exist—there is no evidence of widespread fraud in those states or any state in 2020.) Trump’s party controls both houses of Congress, and he will surely do everything he can to maintain those majorities. The Supreme Court, meanwhile, has paved the way for a third Trump term, as it did for his current term, by essentially granting him absolute immunity from criminal prosecution for any crimes he might commit in violation of the Constitution or the laws of the United States.

FOR ANYONE who doubts that Trump is contemplating a monarchical reign, consider how very far down that road he already is. Since returning to office, he has sought absolute power, unchecked by the other branches of government, the 50 states, or the free press.

On the first day of his current term, he launched a direct attack on the Constitution’s Fourteenth Amendment guarantee

of birthright citizenship when he issued an executive order contradicting the clear language of the amendment, federal statute, and Supreme Court precedent.

He has arrogated to himself Congress’s power to levy tariffs, declaring that previous foreign-trade and economic practices had created a national emergency justifying his unilateral imposition of sweeping global tariffs. When Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell predicted that Trump’s unlawful tariffs would cause “higher inflation and slower growth,” Trump wrote on Truth Social that “Powell’s termination cannot come fast enough!” Later, he fired Fed Governor Lisa Cook, purportedly “for cause.” The Supreme Court has temporarily blocked Cook’s firing, but it won’t decide until next year whether Trump has the power to fire a member of the independent Federal Reserve. A ruling in Trump’s favor would give him absolute control over the central bank and thus over the monetary policy of the United States.

He has usurped Congress’s spending and appropriation powers by attempting to impound billions of dollars that Congress designated for specific purposes, including for public broadcasting, for Voice of America, and for desperately needed U.S. aid to starving and disease-stricken populations around the world.

He has likewise usurped Congress’s power to establish executive-branch departments and agencies, fund their operations, and provide civil-service protections to federal-government employees, unilaterally overhauling the U.S. government. He has hollowed out the Department of Education, effectively abolishing it. He has dismantled the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and asserted executive control over the independent Federal Election Commission and Federal Trade Commission, and fired thousands of federal employees without reasonable cause or explanation—all while Congress has stood by silently.

The Supreme Court, too, has largely given the president its imprimatur to continue his power grab. It has either effectively reversed lower-court rulings against the president using the so-called shadow docket, or allowed the administration to

For anyone who doubts that Trump is contemplating a monarchical reign, consider how very far down that road he already is.

proceed until the Court determines the constitutionality of various actions, by which time the damage to the Constitution, the U.S. government, and American society will have been done, as the justices well know. When the Court *has* ruled against Trump—for example, forbidding him from deporting undocumented immigrants without due process—he has provoked a constitutional crisis by ignoring the order.

The Founders built layers of safeguards into the American system of government to constrain a president, not just the checks and balances by the branches of the federal government. But Trump has run roughshod over these fail-safes, too. In violation of the sovereign rights reserved for them by the Constitution, Trump has commanded state officials to aid him in his purge of undocumented immigrants.

The president has also taken military command of cities across the country—over the vehement objection of the states. When a federal judge held that Trump's military occupation of Portland, Oregon, was unlawful, he circumvented her orders and trashed the judge—whom he appointed—for her ruling, saying that she should be “ashamed” of herself.

Given that Trump has for years pronounced the free press in America “the enemy of the people,” it came as no surprise when media companies were among the first Trump targeted with unconstitutional edicts. In return for his favor, many of the country's major media institutions have surrendered to him.

Though he claims to be a great friend of free enterprise, Trump has asserted dominion over the economy and insinuated his administration into American capitalism so that our great businesses are dependent on and subject to the government, as they are in communist and socialist nations.

He has extorted the nation's legal profession, forcing law firms to betray their clients and the law in order to secure his favor. He has bludgeoned the nation's colleges and universities with lawless order after lawless order. The federal government cannot tell universities how to conduct their affairs or dictate the viewpoints that professors teach. The First Amendment

zealously guards such decisions, and the Constitution categorically forbids the president from wielding Congress's power of the purse to punish these institutions.

Trump has turned the federal government against the American people, transforming the nation's institutions into instruments for his vengeful execution of the law against honorable citizens for perceived personal and political offenses. He has silenced dissent by persecuting and threatening to prosecute American citizens for speaking critically of him, and he has divided us, turning us against one another so that we cannot oppose him.

TRUMP HAS ALWAYS told us exactly who he is. We have just not wanted to believe him. But we must believe him now.

This is the man who said in January 2016, “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters, okay? It's, like, incredible.”

The man who proposed in 2022 that the “Massive Fraud” he alleged in the 2020 election “allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution,” and who proclaimed, soon after reassuming office, “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law.”

The man who, when asked the question “Don't you need to uphold the Constitution of the United States as president?” answered, “I don't know.” And the man who, when asked whether every person in the United States is entitled to due process, replied, “I don't know.”

The man who said in August that he can “do anything I want to do,” because he's president.

The man who has demanded that his attorney general and Department of Justice immediately prosecute his enemies: “We can't delay any longer, it's killing our reputation and credibility. They impeached me twice, and indicted me (5 times!), OVER NOTHING. JUSTICE MUST BE SERVED, NOW!!!”

And the man who summoned American military generals from around the world to Quantico, Virginia, to tell them that “America is under invasion from

within,” repeatedly describing that enemy invasion as being by the “radical left,” a term he now seemingly uses to characterize all of his political opponents. He also said at this meeting, “We should use some of these dangerous cities as training grounds for our military” for fighting the “war from within.”

Donald Trump is clearly willing to subvert an election in order to hold on to the power he so craves, and he is now fully enabled to undermine national elections. No one can prevent him from remaining president of the United States for a constitutionally prohibited third term—except the American people, in whom ultimate power resides under the Constitution of the United States.

ON JULY 4, 1776, nearly 250 years ago, America freed itself forever from the oppression of tyrannical rule by monarchs. There was never to be a king in the United States of America. Never again were the liberties and freedoms of Americans to be subject to the whims of a monarch. From that day, Thomas Paine wrote, “so far as we approve of monarchy, that in America the law is king. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law *ought* to be King; and there ought to be no other.”

The nation has survived great challenges and calamities, including the Civil War. Now it is being tested again. Once more, we must ask, as Lincoln did, whether a nation so “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” can long endure.

If America is to long endure, we must summon our courage, our fearlessness, our hope, our spirited sense of invulnerability to political enthrall, and, most important, our abiding faith in the divine providence of this nation. We have been given the high charge of our forebears to “keep” the republic they founded a quarter of a millennium ago. If we do not keep it now, we will surely lose it. *A*

J. Michael Luttig is a former federal judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.



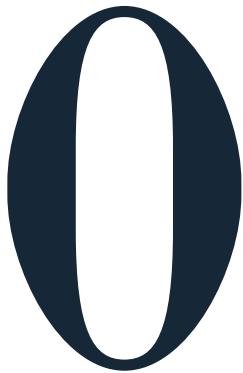
What happened to
Ryan Borgwardt?

THE MISSING

KAYAKER

BY
JAMIE
THOMPSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CALEB ALVARADO



In the afternoon of Sunday, August 11, 2024, a few hours after attending church with his wife and three children, Ryan Borgwardt, a 44-year-old carpenter, left home with his kayak, tackle box, and fishing rod and arrived at Big Green Lake, one of the deepest lakes in Wisconsin. The Perseid meteor shower was expected to peak that night, one of the best times of the year to see shooting stars. Stargazers could glimpse dozens an hour, golden streaks that appeared to fall from the constellation Perseus.

At about 10 p.m., Ryan pushed the kayak into the inky-black water. He glided past the water lilies and cattails and headed toward the lake's deepest part, near its western end. It was so dark, he could barely see beyond the kayak's nose. Above him, the night sky sparkled.

The Day of the Disappearance

A little after 6 o'clock the next morning, Matthew Vande Kolk, chief deputy of the Green Lake County Sheriff's Office, kissed his wife and daughter goodbye and stepped out of his Victorian farmhouse.

Vande Kolk, 47, was second in command of the department. Just back from a week's vacation, he was hoping for a quiet day to catch up on paperwork. As Vande Kolk pulled onto a two-lane road, he alerted dispatchers that he was signing in for duty. Then he drove the roads he'd traveled since he was a boy, across prairies ripening with sweet corn and soybeans, gently sloping fields that met blue sky at the horizon.

Green Lake County's 19,000 residents are predominantly white, churchgoing, and Republican, many of them farming, or working at gas stations and grocery stores, restaurants and lakeside resorts. To Vande Kolk and the other deputies, Green Lake was a place where people knew their neighbors, compared tractor sizes, and valued common sense above book smarts.

Although murders were rare in the county, deputies handled traffic crashes, child abuse, burglary, fraud—but at a much lower volume than in big cities. They also handled calls more typical of the rural Midwest: trespassing coyote hunters, missing snowmobilers, pickup trucks that had fallen through ice. Deputies knew many of the people they detained. Arrest Frank for a DUI on Monday, and you might find him ringing you up at the Dollar Store register on Thursday.

It wasn't Mayberry, but it was close. Many of the sheriff's deputies had grown up in the area, the older among them driving tractors and milking cows. All of them knew how to skin a deer. All of them had chased suspects into cornfields, a reliable way to evade arrest in Green Lake.

As Vande Kolk headed to the office, he heard deputies on the radio talking about a kayaker who'd gone missing on Big Green Lake. A woman had called 911 at 5:24 a.m. to report that her

husband had not returned home the previous evening. He'd last texted from the lake, where he'd gone to fish and stargaze.

Around 5:45 a.m., deputies had driven to public boat launches, searching for the family's minivan, a gray Grand Caravan. In a back lot at Dodge Memorial County Park, a deputy spotted a car fitting that description. He tried the handles—all locked. He peered inside with a flashlight, looking for a note, clothes, anything. He saw a water bottle with DAD written on it. He walked around the car, looking for signs of damage or evidence of a struggle. Everything appeared intact.

Vande Kolk pointed his pickup truck toward the lake, known for a color that could shift from deep forest to nearly jade in different lights. Formed by the retreat of ancient glaciers that left a hole seven miles long and two miles wide, Big Green Lake is 236 feet deep at its cold, dark center. Large muskies, prehistoric-looking fish with canine-style teeth, lurk there. Vande Kolk had spent years on the lake trying to catch one. The shore is lined with multimillion-dollar homes, many of them owned by wealthy out-of-towners who swell the county's population each summer. About once a year, someone drowns. Because of the depth, bodies are hard to find.

Two deputies were searching the lake in a 21-foot Boston Whaler. Around 6:30 a.m., they pulled alongside a fisherman who said he'd spotted a kayak floating upside down near the middle of the lake. They sped that way, slowing as they caught sight of a kayak, its back half submerged. They flipped it over to see if anyone was trapped beneath. Nothing. One of the deputies marked the exact coordinates. Then they towed the kayak to shore.

Vande Kolk pulled into a parking lot where Sheriff Mark Podoll had recommended they gather. He stepped out of his truck and walked toward the lake glittering in the morning light, a thousand diamonds flickering back at him.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT JOSH WARD sat in his car near the water and called the kayaker's wife, Emily Borgwardt. She answered quickly, sounding worried.

Emily told the detective that Ryan had left their home in Watertown, about an hour from Big Green Lake, at around 4:45 p.m. the previous afternoon. He'd driven the family minivan to a friend's house to pick up wood pellets for his stove. Before setting off, he'd mentioned that he might drop the kayak in the water somewhere on his way home, and attached an enclosed trailer with the kayak. He'd told Emily over the weekend that he wanted to fish on Big Green Lake, which would be roughly on his way.

Emily told the detective she'd texted with Ryan the previous evening. She forwarded screenshots of their exchange.

At 10:12 p.m., Emily had written, "Night. Love you." About 15 minutes later, she'd texted again, telling him that their older son, 17, was spending the night at a friend's house.

Five minutes later, Ryan texted back: "I may have snuck out on a lake."

Emily: "That would have been nice to know...I was beginning to wonder why you weren't home."

Ryan apologized, but then added: "Temperature is perfect."

Emily: "Nothing new. I should be used to it by now. So many nights I have no idea where you are when it's late."

Ryan: "The meteor shower is awesome in the dark." Emily asked Ryan to turn on his location-sharing in the Life360 app, which he did.

Emily: "Again, no communication. Would have been nice to know."

Ryan: "I'll work on this communication thing."

Emily: "It sucks going to bed not having any idea where you are. Just saying."

Ryan told Emily he'd forgotten his paddle and was instead using a fishing net.

Emily: "No paddle is dumb."

Ryan: "I love you...goodnight."

Emily: "Night. Love you too. Be safe."

Ryan: "I'll start heading back to shore soon."

Emily: "K."

After her last text, at 10:49 p.m., Emily said she fell asleep. When she woke around 5 a.m., Ryan still wasn't home.

Emily texted him at 5:12 a.m.: "Where are you?????"

Then, at 5:16 a.m.: "Babe?????"

To Sergeant Ward, Emily seemed earnest and cooperative. No, Ryan didn't have any mental-health issues. She definitely didn't think he was

suicidal. He was an experienced kayaker, as well as a decent swimmer.

Ward asked Emily to send him screenshots from the Life360 app, which showed Ryan heading northwest toward the center of the lake and then moving eastward. After that, the app showed him taking a hard 90-degree turn north. At 11:55 p.m., his trail stopped. Ward wondered if Ryan had had an accident trying to paddle with the fishing net.

Deputies had blocked off part of Dodge Memorial County Park and were asking fishermen to keep an eye out. In the lot, they parked the county's mobile command center, a large RV with computers and air-conditioning, along with a trailer that carried a search drone and had a big outdoor television on one side. Deputies watched live footage from the drone as it flew across the lake.

Chief Deputy Vande Kolk spent much of the day standing on the bow of the Boston Whaler, looking into the water. It was so clear that he could see at least 10 feet down. Unless Ryan had gotten tangled in the weeds near shore, Vande Kolk felt confident that they'd find him.

Opening spread: *Big Green Lake at night, September 28, 2025*

Below, from left to right: *Green Lake County Sheriff Mark Podoll, Chief Deputy Matthew Vande Kolk, Detective Sergeant Josh Ward, and Detective Jeremiah Hanson, on a dock at Big Green Lake*





Ryan Borgwardt's kayak, photographed by the sheriff's office the day he was discovered missing

The Life360 app, and the location of the minivan and the kayak, had provided clues about where to look. But Ryan might have tried to swim to shore and gotten tired along the way. In the dark, disoriented, he could have headed in any direction.

If Ryan had drowned, his lungs would have filled with water, sinking him to the lake bottom. He'd remain there until his decomposing body built up enough gases to float back to the surface. In aquatic-rescue parlance, this is known as "the pop." The depth and water temperature determine how long it takes for a body to pop to the surface—anywhere from days to weeks.

Below a certain depth, however, pressure prevents gases from building up, and keeps the body from rising. If Ryan had drowned anywhere deeper than about 100 feet, he might remain in Big Green Lake forever, unless divers or sophisticated sonar equipment were deployed to find him.

As Ward updated Emily throughout the day, he could tell she was struggling to get her mind around the idea that her husband was never coming home again, that she'd be raising three children alone. She was fiercely religious and had begun to say things like "Ryan loved the outdoors. If he had to meet God, that's the place I would have picked for him."

At sunset, the sheriff's deputies called off the search for the night. When Emily asked Ward how long they would continue searching, he sensed she was worried that they would stop too soon, leaving her trapped in a sort of purgatory, trying not to hope but still hoping.

They resumed at daybreak. Around 9:30 a.m., a fisherman called to say that he'd hooked a fishing rod while trolling in about 20 feet of water. It was in the same area where Life360 had shown Ryan's 90-degree turn north. Sergeant Ward sent a picture of the rod to Emily. She showed it to her younger son, who often fished with his father. He confirmed that it was his dad's.

Around 2:30 p.m., another fisherman alerted deputies that he'd found a tackle box floating near the Heidel House, a resort on the lake's northeastern shore. A deputy retrieved it and brought it to the mobile command center. Ward opened the gray box. The stench of rotted catfish bait filled the air. The deputies, obsessive fishermen, leaned in to study the lures, to see what kind of man the tackle box belonged to. His was a random assortment, the stuff of Walmart value packs, including the clip-on bobber balls that amateurs use. They also saw two sets of keys and a brown wallet. Ward removed the wallet, flipped it open, and found a driver's license. He read the name: Ryan Borgwardt.

Judging by the fact that the kayak was found approximately three-quarters of a mile northeast of Ryan's last known location, and that the tackle box had shown up farther northeast, about where they would have expected after two days of drifting, the deputies' best guess was that Ryan had fallen out of the boat, picked the wrong direction to swim, and drowned.

Deputies discussed whether to enter Ryan as a missing person, which would have triggered checks in state and federal databases to see if he'd been in contact with authorities in other jurisdictions. They decided against it; Ryan wasn't a missing person—he was somewhere in the lake.

GREEN LAKE COUNTY Sheriff Mark Podoll believed that the best hope of finding Ryan was Keith Cormican, a search-and-recovery expert who lived a couple of hours away in Black River Falls. He arrived within a few hours, driving a Denali pickup truck hauling his 22-foot search boat. He believed he would quickly find the kayaker, partly because he knew Life360 data to be extremely accurate. He drove to the area of the lake where the last signal had come from and lowered his "towfish"—a four-foot-long, 65-pound device that emits sound waves, which bounce back from the bottom of the lake to create an image the way an ultrasound captures pictures of an unborn baby. Cormican had spent thousands of hours studying sonar images that looked like the desertscape of Mars, and could quickly discern if a tiny blip was a log or a body.

Cormican and sheriff's deputies spent that afternoon traveling back and forth across the lake at about four miles an hour, as if mowing a lawn, pulling the towfish on a cable behind them. The sonar produced video of the lake bottom, which Cormican squinted at on a small screen. Every so often, deputies would think they'd seen something significant—a round object that looked like a head—and Cormican would quickly dismiss it as a rock or a beer can. Several times when deputies were especially convinced that they'd found a clue or a body part, Cormican lowered his underwater drone, which retrieved the object with a mechanical claw, confirming his assessment.

Once, in the late afternoon, Cormican pointed out a sonar image that looked like an arm and a leg. Word traveled quickly across the lake that they might have found the kayaker. Cormican lowered his drone, navigating it through the water with a remote control, and moved in for a closer look. It was a forked log.

By the end of the second day, Cormican was puzzled. He'd driven the search area dozens of times. With a lake bottom as clean as Big Green's, the kayaker's body should have been easy to find.

Cormican told the sheriff he was expected in Green Bay the next morning, for another water-recovery mission. But he promised he'd come back in a few days. Before they expanded their search area, though, Cormican recommended that the sheriff take another look at the kayaker's history. "Just make sure he's not drinking margaritas on a beach somewhere," Cormican said.

Five Days After the Disappearance

On Saturday, Sergeant Ward went to meet Ryan's wife and children at their one-story ranch house on an acre of land in Watertown. Emily greeted him with a warm smile. She introduced Ward to her parents and children, who sat on a couch and chairs in the living room.

Detectives had already scoured the couple's social media, trying to get a sense of who the Borgwardt family was. Emily taught first grade at a Lutheran school. On Facebook, she'd shared a recipe for coleslaw orzo salad with toasted almonds and dried cranberries, displaying a photo of how she'd packed it in Tupperware for the coming week. She posted about baking homemade chocolate-chip scones, gardening, laundry. "Whoever invented the delay time feature on my washing machine is my favorite person this busy week! Set the timer now and my laundry will be ready for the dryer when I wake up!"



Evidence photos from the Green Lake County Sheriff's Office. From top to bottom: Ryan's life vest and water bottle, fishing rod, and tackle box. All were found in different parts of the lake.

Emily, who was 44, described Ryan, her husband of 22 years, as a family man, a devoted father. He was a volunteer firefighter who served as an usher at their Lutheran church. He owned a woodworking shop, where he built custom cabinets and furniture. He did not drink much. Emily said Ryan rarely had time to himself and had probably been craving some solitude on the lake.

Ward asked if the family had any financial issues. Emily said Ryan did seem stressed about money at times and complained about not making as much as he'd like. She said he'd recently accumulated some credit-card debt, the details of which she did not fully know.

Ward asked the family about Ryan going out onto the lake so late without a paddle—did that strike them as odd? Not at all, the family said. Emily's father said he believed Ryan had attention deficit disorder; his son-in-law often lost track of things and started projects that he didn't finish. Emily's father didn't say it in a disparaging way—more like *That was just Ryan*.

Ward asked to speak with Emily alone so he could inquire about their marriage. Emily said their relationship was strong. She had a few gripes—Ryan was not good at communicating, nor was he good at gauging how long a task would take to complete. Ward asked if he'd had any recent health issues or medical procedures. Emily mentioned that he'd gone to the hospital six or seven weeks earlier for a reverse vasectomy. She said he'd ended up being “part of that 2 percent” who had pain after the original procedure. Ward asked Emily if he could look at Ryan's laptop, and she readily provided it. He pulled up Ryan's browser history—nothing unusual.

Ward came away with the sense that the Borgwardts were solid, decent people. The time he spent with them had strengthened his determination to keep searching, because they deserved a proper goodbye.

Six to 52 Days

Cormican kept expanding his search area. It was tedious work, lowering the towfish into the water, driving slowly, returning home at dark with nothing. He got tired of Big Green Lake. Every time he left town, he hoped not to return. Then Sheriff Podoll would call and tell him how nice the Borgwardt family was and how Cormican was their only chance for closure. And he would climb back into his truck and return to the lake that did not seem to want to give up its dead kayaker.

At the sheriff's office, Sergeant Ward had hung a color-coded map of the lake on a wall. He'd highlighted in orange any areas that were less than about 80 feet deep. If the kayaker had drowned in those spots, he already would have surfaced. The deeper parts of the lake, highlighted in pink, were what Cormican called the “hot zone.” Day after day, Ward and Cormican went out onto those parts of the lake, crisscrossing them to capture images from multiple angles.

Cormican didn't find everyone he searched for, but he found most of them. He'd recovered his first body in the 1990s, after two men who'd been drinking tried to swim across a Wisconsin pond. One disappeared along the way. Cormican, then in his 30s, put on a wetsuit and a scuba mask and tethered himself to

his older brother, Bruce, a volunteer firefighter in Black River Falls. Groping through the muck with his hands, he found the body in about 10 feet of water. It was terrifying, but also gratifying to bring closure to the family.

To find the bodies of those who drown in Wisconsin's more than 15,000 lakes, searchers used to drag large grappling hooks across lake beds, but this technique disfigured corpses. The gruesomeness bothered the Cormican brothers, so they assembled a volunteer dive team and worked to devise better methods.

In 1995, an emergency page went out in Black River Falls. A father had drowned while canoeing in Robinson Creek with his daughters. On the third day of their search, as Bruce waded into the water holding a safety line, feeling for the man with his feet, swirling currents swept him away. When rescuers were able to reach Bruce, he'd been too long without air. By the time they got him to the hospital, he was beyond saving; they took him off life support the next day. He was 40, with a wife and two children. Keith Cormican drew some consolation from not having to leave Bruce's body in the cold river, unclaimed. The experience deepened his commitment to his work; he now understood viscerally that the ritualized ways we say goodbye are essential for processing grief.

Cormican closed his landscaping business, invested in cutting-edge sonar equipment, and bought a boat. In the years since, he's become one of the world's most sought-after water-retrieval experts, pulling the dead out of lakes and rivers from Romania to Panama to Nepal.

After searching Big Green Lake for so many days, Cormican was asking himself, *Why can't I find this guy? Am I losing my touch?* He'd wake at 3 a.m. and click through sonar images on his computer, zooming in on every speck.

What haunted Cormican most about finding drowned bodies was the faces—eyes opened unnaturally wide, mouths frozen with what Cormican could only describe as the fear of God. But for him, the one thing worse than finding drowned bodies was not finding them.

53 Days

On Friday, October 4, 2024, Chief Deputy Vande Kolk was steering the boat while Cormican monitored the equipment. The leaves were turning. Before long, the lake would freeze.

The whole town seemed weary of the search. Many residents

Sergeant Ward (left) and Keith Cormican on the boat that Cormican uses to conduct searches

were beginning to think the body would never be found. *He's not in the lake*, the retired guys who gathered at the local coffee shop each morning kept saying. Sheriff's deputies, feeling defensive about the time and money they were spending, would tell people that the family needed closure. "We're going to keep looking," they said.

Navigating along the surface, Vande Kolk maintained a consistent speed as the boat moved north to south in a grid pattern. The towfish needed to stay 15 to 20 feet from the bottom to capture good images. Drive too fast, and the towfish would rise too high. Too slow, and it might hit the bottom. Any miscalculation would leave gaps in their search grid and potentially damage a \$60,000 piece of equipment.

Later that day, the men returned to shore. Cormican had spent 20 days on the lake. "I've searched this lake like I've never searched another body of water," Cormican told the sheriff. "You've got to start looking elsewhere."

56 Days

The following Monday morning, Sheriff Podoll declared that it was time to investigate new angles. Detective Jeremiah Hanson reached out to the Mid-States Organized Crime Information Center, a group of nine states that shared law-enforcement data, and asked for a historical record of every time someone had searched Ryan's name—during a traffic stop, for example. If Ryan had been involved in criminal activity in another town, the report should reveal that. When Hanson received it, he sent a copy to Sergeant Ward.

Ward saw some recent entries that made sense—a number of searches after Emily, Ryan's wife, had called 911. But an additional entry caught his eye: Canadian authorities had searched Ryan's name at the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, an underwater highway





Ryan and Emily before Ryan's disappearance

that connected Detroit to Windsor, Ontario, at 12:30 a.m. on August 13, 2024—the day after he'd disappeared. That was odd. Ward talked with a U.S. official at the border, asking him if he knew why the Canadian authorities had run Ryan's name on that date. The official said he'd look into it. Ward hung up and sat in silence for a few moments.

He and Hanson walked down to meet Podoll and Vande Kolk in the chief deputy's office. "You guys are going to want to sit down," Ward said. Then he told them that Canadian officials had searched Ryan's name on August 13.

"What?" the sheriff said.

"His name was run at the Canadian border the day after he disappeared," Ward said. He watched his colleagues absorb what that meant.

"Well, holy shit," the sheriff said.

Vande Kolk slammed his fist on the desk. "Motherfucker!"

They'd spent almost two months searching the lake.

Vande Kolk took this the hardest: Weeks earlier, he'd told Ward not to enter Ryan as a missing person, which might have triggered the search earlier. He started cursing so loudly that the sheriff had to tell him to calm down.

Still, all they knew was that someone in Windsor had searched Ryan's name shortly after he'd disappeared. Maybe a police officer there had simply been curious about the case and looked him up. Or maybe someone had stolen Ryan's identity.

Vande Kolk contacted an agent with ICE, who told him that Ryan had obtained a passport in 2017. Ward texted Emily and asked if she knew where her husband's passport was. A couple of minutes later, she texted Ward a picture of it. It had the same number as the one Ryan had been issued in 2017.

Then ICE told Vande Kolk something new: Ryan had reported his passport as lost or stolen around April 30, 2024—about four months before he'd disappeared. A replacement passport was issued on May 22, 2024. That was the passport that had been run at the Canadian border.

Detective Hanson kept calling an official who worked at the border, hoping to learn if it was actually Ryan who'd crossed there, not someone else. "Dude, please," Hanson implored, pleading

for any information. The official apologized, explaining that he wasn't authorized to say anything.

"But if I were you," the official told him before hanging up, "I'd stop looking in the lake."

58 Days

On October 9, 2024, Podoll and Ward met with Emily. The officers still didn't know exactly what had happened, but they were growing more convinced that Ryan had duped them, and they found it hard to believe that he could have pulled this off alone. Had Emily been in on it?

Around 11:30 a.m., as the men took a seat at Emily's dining-room table, they noticed a painting hanging on the wall, which appeared to be an image of Jesus and Ryan, holding hands as they walked away together along the water. *You have got to be kidding me*, the sheriff thought.

"We've got some information we're going to share with you," Podoll told Emily. "It's very important that this information stays right here at this table."

Emily nodded.

"We're changing the direction of our investigation," he said.

"What?" Emily asked.

"We don't believe Ryan is in our lake," he said.

Emily looked confused. "What?" she asked again.

"We believe Ryan is still alive."

The men studied Emily as she absorbed this information. Her face turned so pale, they worried she would pass out.

Warning her that what he was about to say might be hard to hear, the sheriff told her that they believed it possible that Ryan had faked his own death and abandoned his family.

He felt as if he could read Emily's feelings as they passed across her face: relief, then confusion, then anger, then doubt. Tears slid down her cheeks.

"I don't know what's worse—him dying, or knowing that he's alive," she said. Ward and Podoll had the same thought: *She's not faking this*.

"What about our kids? How could he do that to them?" she asked. "Was my marriage really that broken, and I didn't know?" Her disbelief seemed to be growing. "Ryan would not do that to us."

Podoll told Emily what they'd learned about the passports and the Canadian border, but acknowledged that they did not know where her husband had gone or if he was actually still alive.

"This is what I need you to do," he said. "You cannot say anything to anyone." They didn't want to suggest publicly that Ryan had deceived everyone until they knew for certain. And a media circus would make their investigation more difficult.

"I will do whatever you need," Emily said. The sheriff worried that, in asking her to carry this secret alone, he was imposing an impossible burden.

"What about the church?" she asked as the officers prepared to leave. "What about all the people who prayed for him?"

ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, Emily sat in the auditorium of her older son's high school for the annual talent show. A piano melody

filled the room as her son stood onstage beneath a spotlight, holding a microphone and singing a duet with another student.

Emily had driven to the school in a fog. She'd considered not going, but her son was expecting her, and how would she explain not being there? She'd taken a seat in the auditorium, struggling to mask her emotions behind a cheerful-mom look. After the teens hit the first verse of the chorus—"Ain't no mountain high enough!"—the crowd began to clap to the beat. Emily felt sick.

She had grown up in Lutheran schools. She spent her days teaching first graders. *Raise your hand, be polite, Jesus loves you.* She lived in a concrete, simple world where Tuesday follows Monday and two plus two equals four.

She thought back to the morning she'd learned that Ryan had disappeared. She'd been awakened by their puppy, and had been annoyed at Ryan, who hadn't gotten up early with the dog like he was supposed to.

She thought about the look on the face of her older son as he arrived home early from a sleepover that morning, having been told there was a family emergency, to find a patrol car in the driveway. The teenager was crying, hugging his sweatshirt to his face. *Mom, what's going on?* he'd asked. *Buddy, your dad is missing*, she'd told him. Family and friends had crowded into the house as they waited for information. By nightfall, Emily had accepted that Ryan had drowned in the lake. A devout Christian, she believed that Ryan's death must have been part of God's plan, and that he was now in heaven.

As the search stretched on for days, then weeks, Emily had kept her cellphone near, waiting for news about Ryan's body. Along with managing her own grief and that of her children, she was taking on the tasks her husband used to do: paying the bills, making sure the garbage cans got to the curb. Every time she felt overwhelmed, people showed up to help. A retired police deputy mowed her lawn every week. Several dozen volunteer firefighters from the station where Ryan had worked came over to trim trees and stack wood. How was she going to explain to them that she was not a grieving widow but ... what? A spurned wife? A dupe?

That night, after the talent show and dinner and homework, Emily lay awake in bed,

unable to sleep. The peace she'd felt, surrendering herself to God's plan, had been replaced with a cold unease. She struggled to believe that Ryan would have willingly abandoned the family. Had he gotten himself into trouble, something sinister on the dark web? Maybe, she thought, he'd sacrificed himself to protect her and the children.

Whatever had happened, Emily knew she could no longer attribute it to God's plan. This had been her husband's choice, the actions of a mortal man, one locked in what she could only assume was a terrible battle with temptation and sin.

AT THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE, Detective Hanson opened Ryan's laptop, which Emily had given them. Hanson, the department's digital-forensics expert, quickly found evidence suggesting that Ryan had deleted his browser history the day before he disappeared. Huge red flag. He sent the laptop to a state lab.

Poring through gigabytes of data on the hard drive, an investigator at the lab found a document labeled "bank questions." The first question read: "From the US to my new bank account in Georgia. What is the most common way people do this?"

Another document appeared to detail Ryan's exit plan. He had listed the number for a burner phone as well as old and new email accounts. He'd switched to a new account with Proton Mail, an encrypted service based in Switzerland, a smart move for anyone trying to elude detection abroad: Executing search warrants on Proton is much harder than on U.S.-based services such as Yahoo.

Hanson prepared search warrants for each email address, phone number, and credit-card number he found on the laptop. Among Hanson's discoveries was a Robinhood trading account, which allowed Ryan to buy and sell cryptocurrency. Hanson learned that



Sheriff Podoll in his Green Lake County office

Ryan had been flagged by the platform for regularly sending funds to a Russian cryptocurrency exchange—about \$20,000 between March and May 2024.

Hanson also received a copy of the lost-passport form Ryan had filed in April, on which he claimed that he'd probably lost his during a basement cleanup. Making false statements on a passport application is a felony punishable by significant prison time. So is insurance fraud—and Hanson discovered that on January 16, 2024, Ryan had applied for a \$375,000 life-insurance policy. It sure looked like Ryan had taken out the policy while planning to fake his death.

When further digital sleuthing revealed that Ryan had flown from Canada to France on the night of August 13, Hanson contacted an FBI agent assigned to the U.S. embassy in France, who was able to confirm that Ryan had landed in Paris, but did not know where he'd gone from there.

Back when everyone assumed that Ryan was still at the bottom of the lake, Emily's mother, going through his computer to help her daughter pay bills, had discovered about \$80,000 in credit-card debt that Emily didn't know about. She, along with Ryan's mother and stepfather, had decided to secretly pay off the debt and not tell Emily. Ryan also owed money to his mother and stepfather.

But perhaps the most notable discovery, this one made by the state investigator Hanson was working with, was this: In the spring of 2024, a few months before he disappeared, Ryan had been exchanging messages online with a woman named Ekaterina Vladislavovna, who went by Katya.

In one message, she'd said: "Good luck. I kiss you very hard."

In another, she'd said: "I just want to be with you!!!"

"Katya," Ryan responded, "I promise to you that I will love you for the rest of my life. I want no one else. I want to share a life with only you."

**"IF I WERE YOU,"
THE OFFICIAL SAID,
"I'D STOP LOOKING
IN THE LAKE."**

80 Days

For three weeks, Emily kept quiet about what her husband had done, though the tale seemed to grow more sordid every time the sheriff called—she had learned about the woman abroad and deduced the real reason for the reverse vasectomy, a procedure Emily had driven him to. As she struggled to absorb these terrible truths, not being allowed to tell anyone made her feel lonelier than she ever had.

The last week of October had been particularly hard. School and community fundraisers had raised more than \$6,000 for the search for Ryan. Emily asked Sheriff Podoll what she should do about the donations. "Don't say anything," he told her. "Just go with it." Emily told him she needed someone to talk to.

Later that week, on Thursday, October 31, Podoll sat with Emily for 90 minutes at her church, explaining to two pastors what was really going on with the investigation. One of the pastors, who had prayed from the pulpit for Ryan, looked confused, a Bible in front of him on the table. The sheriff told them they couldn't tell their congregants. "I'm not telling you to lie," the sheriff said. "You just can't say anything."

How could he do this to our children? Emily wanted to know. How could he have treated me the way he did on those last days—helping around the house, watching a movie together?

"Okay, I'm going to tell you why he did that," Podoll said. "He wanted to get out of a divorce. He wanted you to remember him how he was on those last days, so you would have good memories of him. Then he was going to move on with his life."

"In my book, he's a piece of shit," the sheriff continued. "I apologize," he said, turning to the pastors, "but he is."

88 to 91 Days

In early November, Podoll felt it was time to start revealing what they'd learned more widely. He invited Emily's and Ryan's families to the sheriff's office on Friday, November 8, where he planned to tell them that Ryan was not, in fact, dead. Then he'd hold a press conference to tell reporters.

Early that afternoon, the officers walked into a conference room where about a dozen relatives—including Ryan's mother, stepfather, father, and three siblings, plus Emily's mother and father—sat in chairs in a semicircle. Podoll looked around the room and said: "We're going to talk about a lot of stuff today, and it's going to be pretty shocking." He told the group that Emily already knew what they were about to hear.

The case, he told them, had taken an unexpected turn. "We don't feel that Ryan is in our lake," the sheriff said. "We believe he is still alive."

Absolute silence. Podoll had never seen so much disbelief on so many faces at once. After about 20 seconds, the silence broke. Emily's father sobbed. Her mother dropped her head and wept. Ryan's brother looked at his wife (*Oh my God*) and she stared back (*Oh my God*). Ryan's mother looked relieved but confused. Ryan's father said, "This is not Ryan—not the Ryan we knew." Ryan's stepfather sat quietly, appearing shocked and betrayed. The emotion in the room was so palpable that it threatened to infect the sheriff's deputies. Vande Kolk clenched his teeth to avoid crying.

Emily Borgwardt,
October 2025



Podoll had also invited Keith Cormican to the meeting. Any thought he might have given to the time he'd wasted on the lake was overwhelmed by the sound of the family's sobs. He'd made all kinds of gruesome discoveries on lake bottoms. But of all the terrible scenes he'd witnessed, he later told me, this was among the worst.

AS THE MEETING was ending, Vande Kolk's cellphone vibrated. He looked down and saw a string of Russian letters. *Holy crap*, he thought.

Earlier that day, as the meeting with the family approached, Vande Kolk had suggested to his colleagues that they blitz every phone number and email address they'd discovered in an attempt to reach Ryan directly. The sheriff agreed.

After striking out with a few phone numbers, they turned to email, sending notes to Ryan's addresses, and also one to his mistress, Katya, giving it the subject heading "Call us." They attached a photo of Ryan, one of Katya with two young children, and one of Hanson's badge, to emphasize their legitimacy. "It is very important," Vande Kolk wrote. "This is the police in Wisconsin USA." He had sent the email at 9:16 a.m. When he hadn't gotten a response within a few hours, he sent another one.

Realizing this was likely Katya's response, he now stepped out of the room and read the email in translation: "Hello. I do

not know who you are and why you contacted me. I know the man in the photograph. His name is Ryan. Over the last year he became my good friend."

Vande Kolk wrote back that he had something extremely important to discuss and could he please have her number.

"Please forgive me, but I do not give out my number to strangers, especially from another country," she replied. "Please explain, what happened?"

"When is the last time you spoke with Ryan?" Vande Kolk wrote back. No response. About an hour later, he sent another email, with the subject line "Urgent." Still no response, so he sent a few more emails, including a link to the sheriff's-office website and a news clip about the case.

At 1:46 a.m. central time, the woman finally responded, and in an email exchange explained that she was struggling to trust an American detective because of the tensions between Russia and the United States. Vande Kolk said he understood, but needed to confirm that Ryan Borgwardt was alive. He asked for a photograph.

The woman wanted assurance that the authorities would not cause her any problems. As far as she knew, she said, neither she nor Ryan had broken any laws.

"Our primary concerns are not whether there were any crimes committed, but to provide some answers to Ryan's 3 beautiful,



Above: Ryan captured in surveillance footage at the Canadian border in August 2024

Opposite page: A screenshot from the proof-of-life video Ryan sent from his undisclosed location to the sheriff's office on November 11, 2024

amazing children,” Vande Kolk wrote. “Help us give his children peace. Is Ryan with you now?”

Vande Kolk worried that Ryan had been catfished, lured overseas by someone pretending to be a beautiful woman only to find himself kidnapped and ransomed or killed.

Soon the woman told him that Ryan was trying to email but his messages weren’t getting through. Ryan (or someone purporting to be him) and Vande Kolk began sending messages to each other through Katya.

Hoping to verify his identity, Vande Kolk asked a question to which he thought only Ryan would know the answer: the make, model, year, and mileage of the vehicle he’d left at Big Green Lake. The response: “2015 Dodge Grand Caravan. I honestly don’t remember the last mileage reading. Maybe 90k. There is no loan on the van. I was pulling a trailer full of wood pellets for my stove. I just picked them up at my friend Adam’s house.”

Definitely Ryan, Vande Kolk thought. He asked him to join a video-chat, but Ryan declined. “The truth is I’m terribly afraid to do anything that would help give up my location any more than you or the FBI already know.”

“Please tell me what my future looks like,” he added. “Am I looking at jail time?”

“There are consequences for what has occurred,” Vande Kolk wrote. “Those consequences can be significantly mitigated by your actions going forward.”

Ryan responded by saying he was attaching a video to prove that he was not in danger. It showed him in a bland-looking apartment. “Good evening. It’s Ryan Borgwardt,” he said quietly into the camera. “Today is November 11. It’s approximately 10 a.m. by you guys. I’m in my apartment. I am safe, secure, no problem.”

Vande Kolk and the detectives watched the video a few times. Ryan looked healthy and surprisingly calm. Wherever he was, he seemed to be there by choice.

FAKING ONE’S DEATH is not technically illegal. But the detectives thought there was evidence to support a charge for obstructing an officer—a Class A misdemeanor punishable by up to nine months in jail—because Ryan had planted physical evidence meant to mislead them. Maybe further investigation could lead to more serious charges, such as passport or insurance fraud, but they didn’t know if the feds would get excited about investigating an otherwise-law-abiding husband in the throes of a midlife crisis. Furthermore, the detectives suspected that Ryan was in a country that didn’t have an extradition treaty with the U.S.

For the deputies, the case had become personal. This guy had fooled them. The idea that he might get to disappear without consequence galled them. If nothing else, he needed to reimburse taxpayers for the more than \$35,000 they’d spent on the search. So the detectives wanted Ryan in handcuffs. They also wanted him to own up to what he’d done to his wife and children, and to try to make things right with them.

But to bring Ryan to justice, the detectives had to prove that he had planted evidence to mislead them—and they needed him to return to Green Lake.

91 to 112 Days

Vande Kolk set about trying to figure out why Ryan had gone to such lengths to disappear, and what might get him to come back.

An early possibility revealed itself in an email exchange Vande Kolk had with Ryan about his family. “They are amazing people,” Vande Kolk wrote of Ryan’s wife and children. “That’s because Jesus fills their hearts with love, confidence and hope,” Ryan replied. “Their mom did a great job of that with those 3.”

“I agree with you,” Vande Kolk replied. “I have never seen such love and forgiveness in a group of people, and love like that only comes from Jesus.”

The men settled into near-daily communication. Ryan came across as remorseful and polite. He said he really did want to “fix everything possible that I just destroyed about 3 months ago.” He apologized for the time the sheriff’s office had wasted searching the lake.

Soon, though, another side of Ryan emerged. He told Vande Kolk he was angry that the sheriff’s office had made him sound like a “200% dirt bag” in the press conference. He was irritated by the implication that he’d been “living ‘large’” abroad. “That couldn’t be further from the truth,” he wrote. “I truly tried to take as little as possible with me to LEAVE MY FAMILY WITH AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.” Yes, he conceded, he’d moved a “decent amount” of money over before he left, but he said that he’d given it away to people who needed it more than he did, and that now he couldn’t even afford a plane ticket home.

Vande Kolk pressed him for information about what he’d done. “If all the people that worked on my case in multiple agencies still don’t know how I got to Canada yet,” Ryan responded, “I’m not sure I want to say how I did this.” But Vande Kolk thought he could sense that Ryan *wanted* to tell his story. This presented another angle of approach. If you need money for a plane ticket, he told Ryan, you could probably get it from a book or movie deal.

“Yes, I think it’s possible the story could make for a decent book or movie,” Ryan replied. He said he might consider it to pay off his debts.

Over time, the email conversation had become familiar, even chummy. Vande Kolk could empathize with Ryan’s urge to escape his life. He thought about all the hours he himself spent on the lake, away from his family, trying to land a musky large enough to be considered “trophy size.”

Still, he found himself becoming disgusted. He’d been married for 25 years to his high-school sweetheart, and they had two children: a son, and a daughter who’d been born with a rare genetic mutation that caused mental and physical delays. They’d stuck it out through some tough things. *How could a man just abandon his family like that?* Vande Kolk thought. *We’ve messed around with this guy long enough.*

Dropping his friendly tone, Vande Kolk wrote that he’d heard Ryan’s own father had left the family when Ryan was young. “I cannot understand how you would want to do something like that to your kids,” Vande Kolk wrote. Was Ryan really just going to hide from his children? What he was doing to them, Vande Kolk wrote, was worse than a divorce. “You move off to live a new life, and your kids get no support from you financially, mentally or spiritually.”

Ryan said he’d had no choice. “I just couldn’t handle life anymore,” Ryan wrote. He said he was roughly \$200,000 in debt,

not including his mortgage, and didn’t know how he would begin to pay that off.

“My life in the Watertown area is over,” he wrote. No one would ever forget what he’d done, even if they ultimately forgave him. “Everything is just so much easier if I’m dead.”

Vande Kolk questioned Ryan’s faith, suggesting that he was making Christians look bad. “You always talk about how you have this need to help others,” he wrote. But “maybe all you care about is yourself.” Ryan’s daughter had recently gotten into a fight with some kids at school. Ryan’s younger son had cried that morning because he didn’t understand why his dad wouldn’t come home. “These kids did nothing to deserve all this. Come back and make it right before it gets worse.”

A day passed with no response. Worried that he’d been too harsh, Vande Kolk sent several recent pictures of Ryan’s kids.

“You can fix this,” he wrote. “Show them what a man of God does when times get tough. Show them what bravery is. Show them your love.”

Coming back would be a terrible idea, Ryan responded. He had nowhere to live, no car, no job, no church. He didn’t want to force his kids to visit every other weekend. “I was that kid, that life sucks,” he wrote. Soon enough, the kids wouldn’t want to spend time with him anyway. “It’s how divorce works,” he wrote. “I will become the enemy.”

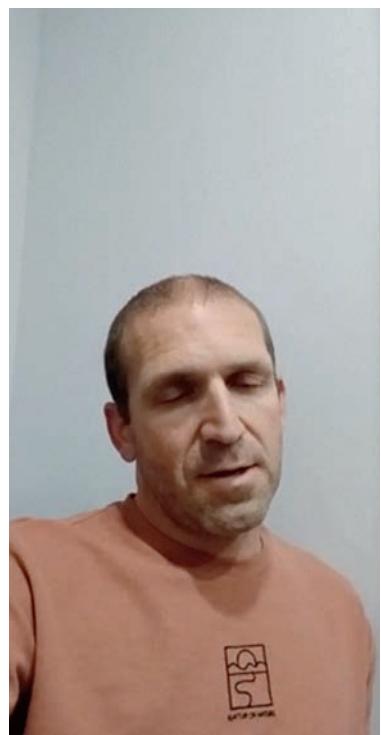
But what most concerned him, he said, was being separated from Katya, the woman who had saved him from his loneliness. Without her, “I might as well come home in a box.”

Vande Kolk’s response was blunt: If Ryan could figure out how to disappear to the other side of the world, he could figure out how to return to Wisconsin. Ryan’s parents had each offered him a room to stay in; his mother even said she would welcome Katya.

“For goodness sake Ryan,” Vande Kolk wrote. “Your kids.”

A FEW DAYS later, Ryan emailed to say that he could come home for up to three months to “fix” as much as possible, but that ultimately he planned to stay with Katya. He said his was a “semi normal American divorce story”—though that *semi* was doing a lot of work.

He finally told Vande Kolk where he was: Batumi, a city in Georgia, the former Soviet republic. He liked it there, and had



gotten to know many Russians, who were “seriously just like us from Wisconsin.”

Vande Kolk kept the conversation light and continued to engage, not wanting to scare off his quarry.

A few days after Thanksgiving, Ryan forwarded a screenshot of his flight confirmation. “Whatever happens now is in God’s hands,” he wrote.

120 Days

On December 10, 2024, Vande Kolk and Detective Hanson met at the Green Lake County Sheriff’s Office at 5:30 a.m. to begin the roughly three-hour drive to Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport, where Ryan was scheduled to arrive at 10:10 a.m. They were nervous. Although the Green Lake detectives believed they had a strong case for an obstruction charge, that was only a misdemeanor—not serious enough to merit an arrest in another state. So they were going to have to persuade Ryan to come to the sheriff’s office and give a statement voluntarily. If he declined to talk, or decided to leave O’Hare on his own, they couldn’t stop him.

After Ryan’s plane landed, U.S. Customs and Border Protection escorted Vande Kolk and Hanson to the secure customs area. As a group of passengers moved toward passport control, Vande Kolk spotted a man wearing a hooded sweatshirt. *It’s him.* Vande Kolk wondered if anyone else would recognize Ryan from all the news coverage. No one seemed to.

An agent brought Ryan over. “Welcome home,” Vande Kolk said.

A FEW HOURS LATER, Ryan was sitting in an interview room. Vande Kolk was at a metal desk to Ryan’s right. Hanson sat in another chair and read aloud the Miranda warning.

During the email back-and-forth with Vande Kolk, Ryan had begun to outline how he’d carried out his plot. Now, over three hours in the sheriff’s office, Ryan elaborated.

He first crossed paths with Katya online in December 2023, eight months before his disappearance. “A dating website?” Hanson asked. “Online,” Ryan said, declining to specify further. They’d talked once or twice, and he’d promised to contact her again after the holidays. They reconnected in late January 2024 and quickly became good friends, Ryan said.

By February, the friendship had turned romantic. She sent him video messages in Russian, which he translated to English. They began talking about a future together.

At first the notion of faking his death was purely a fantasy, but soon it began to gel into an actual plan. He researched stories of people who’d ostensibly done it, including a German billionaire who’d vanished while skiing. He considered staging his death while duck hunting on the Mississippi River, because people died there all the time, their bodies washing away. But he couldn’t figure out how to plan a solo trip that far away without making Emily suspicious. He settled on Big Green Lake, because it had areas deep enough for his body to plausibly never surface.

He ordered an electric bike and two bike batteries for about \$1,000 on Amazon, then deleted the account he’d used for the purchase.

By now he was committed to the plan. In the week beforehand, he watched the weather, eventually settling on Sunday. That morning, he went to church with his family, hoping they’d have Communion together one last time. But he got asked to usher, which was disappointing, he said, because he didn’t get to sit beside Emily. After church, he went to his shop. One of the things he worked on, he said, was preparing a new laptop for Emily. He explained that he didn’t feel confident in his ability to wipe his own laptop, so he’d purchased a replica with a new hard drive for her. He tried to move over financial records and other files to make things easier for her when he was “dead,” but apparently he’d copied over “one too many things” and left evidence for investigators. He returned home for a couple of hours, hooked up the trailer, and said goodbye to Emily and the kids. He drove back to the shop, where he pulled the trailer close to the building so security cameras would not record him loading the bike. At a Walmart in Oshkosh he bought a duffel bag, snacks, and a ball cap to conceal his face.

He arrived at Big Green Lake around 10 p.m. He parked the van about 10 steps from the water. He stashed the bike and two bags in high grass among trees. Then he loaded his fishing pole, fishing net, tackle box, and a large duffel bag into the kayak. As he glided into the night, he saw campfires dotting the shoreline.

A tailwind helped carry him toward the lake’s center. He’d studied maps of the lake and reached what he believed to be a deep area. One boat passed by, then another. When all seemed clear, he tossed his phone into the water. He used a manual pump to inflate a child-size raft he’d purchased for about \$20, and climbed into it. Steadying himself in the tiny vessel, he flipped the kayak, which drifted out of sight. Around midnight, he began paddling. He said he didn’t know how long it took to get back to shore, fighting the wind and the waves with the raft’s toy paddles, but he thought at least an hour or two.

When he got close to shore, he hopped out of the raft. His first step found solid ground. On his second, he sank into black mud up to his waist. He traveled about 40 feet with the muck trying to swallow him. When he emerged from the water, he ran across the road, deflated the raft, and packed it into one of his bags. Looking at the road, he saw that he’d left muddy footprints. “I thought, *There’s no way in the world you guys are going to miss these,*” he said. He tried to pour water on them but soon realized it wasn’t much use, and he was in a hurry.

Sometime around 1 or 2 a.m., he climbed onto the bike. He rode through the night, pedaling roughly 70 miles, mostly on back roads, all the way to Madison. He stopped a couple of times, to change into dry pants and eat a granola bar. The sky, he thought, had never looked more beautiful.

Around 5 a.m., he said, he’d thought about Emily, because he knew she’d soon be waking and would wonder where he was. Around 9:15 a.m., he stopped in a densely wooded park, where he left the bike. He tossed his damp sweatshirt and the raft in a garbage can. Then he walked 40 minutes to a Greyhound station. He got there just in time for a 10:05 a.m. bus to Toronto, via Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit, switching buses twice along the way.

“I’m on the bus,” he said he texted Katya from a burner phone. “So far so good.” Shortly after he boarded, the phone stopped working.

At the Canadian border, agents were suspicious because he had no driver’s license and his phone wasn’t working. But after about 20 tense minutes, they let him through. He arrived at the Toronto airport, where he used his laptop and a prepaid debit card to buy a plane ticket to Europe. He was carrying \$5,500 in cash, below the threshold requiring a customs declaration.

The Air France meal was one of the best of his life. After landing in Paris, another plane took him to Tbilisi, Georgia. Katya arrived to meet him. They spent the next few nights at a hotel.

FACING RYAN in the interview room, Vande Kolk thought he seemed different from the man he’d been communicating with online. This version of Ryan was arrogant, unable to conceal pride in his accomplishment. At times Ryan expressed regret, but these moments were overshadowed by his boasting.

Katya hadn’t liked his plan, Ryan said. Faking his own death was “pretty bad,” she told him, worse than divorce. But faking his death, Ryan said, “checked more boxes.”

“Talk to me about that,” Vande Kolk said. “Everybody’s a little bit perplexed as to why you took this path.”

“I guess in the end it came down to the feeling of failure in about every aspect of your life,” Ryan said. “Hoping to be remembered for the better things, not all the mistakes.”

When Ryan reached the point in the tale where he arrived in Tbilisi, Vande Kolk asked for more specifics about his planning. For an obstruction charge, he needed to get Ryan talking about whether he’d intentionally set out to convince the detectives that he’d drowned. “The amount of hours that I spent trying to disappear would blow your mind,” Ryan said. His entire plan, he admitted, had hinged on him dying in the lake. “Obviously the whole idea was to sell the death,” Ryan said.

That oughta do it, Vande Kolk thought.

SERGEANT WARD was watching the interview on a monitor down the hall. He’d spent the most time on the lake looking for Ryan. He’d watched Emily absorb the news that her husband was dead, then struggle to grasp the news that he was not. With all the money the county had spent on the search, it could have bought a new snowplow and fixed a lot of potholes. One reason he was not in the interview room was because everyone knew he’d have a hard time hiding his disgust.

Some of Ward’s disgust was with himself for having gotten played. Of course, he wasn’t the only one who’d been duped; Ryan had deceived everyone close to him, along with the general Green Lake County community. Ward liked to say that if you got a flat tire in Green Lake, there would be a traffic jam of people stopping to help. Ryan had exploited that kindness. All because he didn’t have the guts to look his wife in the eye and say, “I want a divorce.” He’d chosen to make himself a blameless drowning victim in the memories of his children.

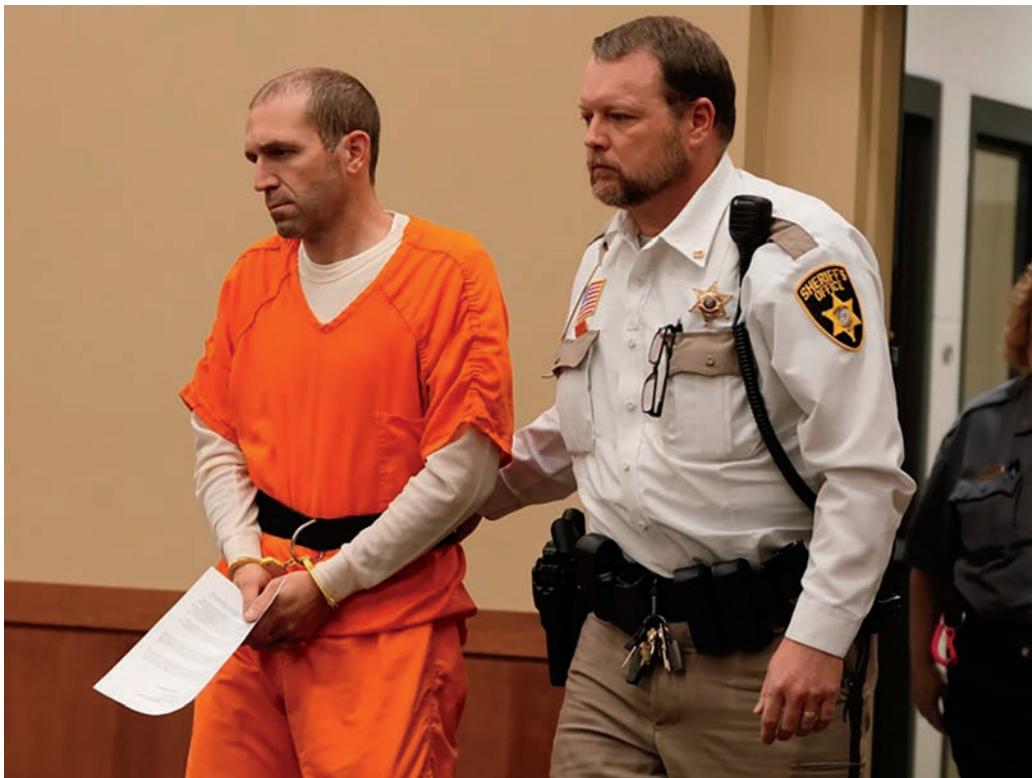
Ward followed intently when Hanson began asking Ryan about the roughly \$20,000 he’d taken from his own family in order to help a woman he’d never met. Ryan said he was already in so much debt that \$20,000 didn’t do much for him. Whereas for Katya, he said, that amount was significant.

But Ryan still owed hundreds of thousands of dollars. Emily, struggling to provide for three kids on her teacher’s salary, had begun accepting food stamps.

This is one of the most two-faced criminals I’ve ever met in 23 years of working in law enforcement, Ward thought.



Chief Deputy Vande Kolk and Detective Hanson interview Ryan at the Green Lake County Sheriff’s Office on December 10, 2024.



Chief Deputy Vande Kolk escorts Ryan to his court appearance on December 11, 2024.

“Listening to him talk, I get the willies,” he told me later. “He’s just a really devious person.”

AFTER NEARLY THREE HOURS, Vande Kolk told Ryan he was placing him under arrest for obstructing an officer. Ryan seemed surprised and indignant: He’d talked to investigators as soon as they’d contacted him. He’d come to Green Lake and answered their questions. Vande Kolk explained that the obstruction charge was based on what he’d done at the lake, not how he’d handled himself afterward. He asked Ryan to stand and clicked the handcuffs.

Ryan spent that night in jail. The next day, he pleaded not guilty. He was released on a \$500 bond. The same week, Emily filed for legal separation, calling the marriage “irretrievably broken.” She asked for sole custody of the kids.

337 Days

One morning this past July, I drove along a two-lane road surrounded by cornfields and arrived at the Borgwardts’ stone ranch house. Their minivan was parked out front, along with the trailer Ryan had used to take his kayak to the lake. Snapdragons bloomed in flower beds along the front walk.

Emily greeted me wearing shorts and a tank top, her shoulders tanned from working in the garden. We sat in the living room, where we could hear her daughter, 14, and a friend laughing as they swam in an aboveground pool in the backyard. Her younger son, 15, mowed the lawn out front. A basket of laundry awaited folding.

Emily told me that her younger son and her daughter had seen and texted with their father since he’d returned. Their older son, now 18, had refused to speak with him.

Ryan was living with his mother and stepfather in Appleton, an hour and a half away. He was not helping to support the family, Emily said. Since his return, Ryan had been by the house a couple of times. They were now texting regularly, and she sent him pictures of the kids. She described their relationship as amicable.

How is that possible?

She said that the man who’d faked his death in Big Green Lake was not the Ryan she’d known for 25 years. Not the one who’d played board games with the kids and coached their basketball teams. She still missed that man.

Their life in Watertown had been ordinary, maybe even dull sometimes. But for Emily, it had felt like enough. Looking back, she could see that she and Ryan had become a little more distant over the years, but in ways that she did not think unusual for busy parents.

Emily had filed for separation on the advice of a lawyer friend who worried that she might be affected by any civil or criminal judgments against her husband, and they were now legally divorced. But to her, their vows were a different matter. “I’m a Christian and I believe strongly in marriage,” she said.

I asked if she would consider reconciling. I assumed the answer would be a hard no. I was wrong. Emily said she would be willing to try, despite how much work that might take.

“We all sin,” she told me. “Some sins in human eyes are bigger than others, hurt more than others, have more consequences than others. But in God’s eyes, they don’t. A sin is a sin.” She added, “God forgives us for our sins multiple times every day.”

If God could forgive, so could she.

She knew some people would find that hard to understand. “He’s still the father of my kids,” she said, “and I don’t want that relationship to be more strained than it already is.”

379 Days

On Tuesday, August 26, Ryan sat beside his lawyer in Green Lake County Circuit Court. Judge Mark T. Slate had reviewed the agreement Ryan had made with prosecutors: He would plead no contest to obstructing an officer, spend 45 days in county jail, and pay \$30,000 in restitution.

The judge turned to the district attorney, Gerise LaSpisa, who summarized Ryan’s ruse: how he’d taken out a life-insurance policy, reversed his vasectomy, transferred money overseas. “Certainly any criminal charge, conviction, and sentence that this court today hands down will not be able to come close to undoing the incredible damage that this defendant, by his premeditated, selfish actions, has done not only to his family, but our community,” LaSpisa said.

Ryan’s attorney, Erik Johnson, reminded the judge that his client had been charged only with a misdemeanor. “He came back from Europe to take responsibility for his actions,” Johnson said. He noted that Ryan had no criminal record and had already paid the \$30,000 restitution. (Ryan has declined to say how he came up with the money.)

Judge Slate asked Ryan if he had anything to say.

“I deeply regret the actions that I did that night, and all the pain that I caused my family and friends,” Ryan said, looking uncomfortable.

When the moment of sentencing arrived, the judge surprised everyone: Noting that Ryan’s fraud had lasted for 89 days, from the day he disappeared until the day Vande Kolk emailed him, Judge Slate sentenced Ryan to 89 days in county jail, almost double what the prosecutors had asked for. Ryan needed to begin serving his time within 60 days.

For someone who’d attempted such an audacious caper, Ryan looked sad and small as he walked out of the courtroom, a middle-aged man scurrying off, bald spot shining, as a reporter followed him asking if he’d spoken with his kids.

380 Days

The next morning, I arrived at the Elsewhere Market & Coffee House in Oshkosh, about 30 miles northeast of Big Green Lake, where Ryan had suggested we meet. When I’d first emailed him, in April, he’d responded that he couldn’t discuss what happened, because he feared it would hurt his family. I emailed him again in July. “For the sake of my kids and Emily,” he replied, “I wish you’d find something else to write about”; he suggested Jeffrey Epstein or the Ukraine war. Still, we kept emailing, and as the sentencing neared, we got into a regular back-and-forth. He said that he found it almost impossible to talk about why he’d faked his death without discussing his marriage—but that if he did so, he knew it would sound like he was blaming Emily and painting himself as a victim. He laid out the narrative as he saw it unfolding on the news: “1) I’m the ‘bad guy’ in the story. 2) Absolutely NO ONE will want to question otherwise. 3) I NEED to be the bad guy in the story for my kids.”

He suggested that the story could be a cautionary tale for couples about the importance of communication in marriage. He seemed unable to resist shifting blame onto Emily. “Truthfully the very fact I could pull all of this off shows how little interest she had in my daily work,” he wrote.

As we sat eating breakfast, his eyes staring into the middle distance, he told me that he believed a spouse should be like a well you can draw from. “I went around thirsty,” he said.

What he meant was that meeting Katya had given him “the taste of someone caring again.”

Why not just get a divorce?

“Divorce hurts more than people think,” he said. “I was trying to protect the kids.” He said that his own parents had separated when he was 3.

Although he planned to stay with Katya—and, he implied, marry her—he hoped to repair his relationship with his children, he said. (Efforts to reach Katya directly were unsuccessful.) He’d been angry when the prosecutor announced in open court that he’d reversed his vasectomy, he said, because he worried that the kids would think he wanted to replace them.

“I guess I just didn’t feel like there was any other way,” he said. He continued: “Kids grow up, and kids leave.”

A long pause.

“I like what I have now.”

THE DAY OF the hearing, Vande Kolk climbed into his truck and headed home, feeling melancholy.

At times he had wondered whether it might have been better if they’d stopped searching and just let Ryan’s story end—at least as far as his friends and family would ever know—there in the lake. But he’d had a job to do and he’d done it.

Vande Kolk thought again about the many hours he’d spent fishing instead of at home with his family. He wondered: Was this his own way of fleeing his life? So many mornings he’d crept out of the house at 4 a.m., leaving his wife and kids so he could indulge his own solitary quest to catch that trophy-size musky. He felt some guilt over that. But he also knew it was part of what made everything else work.

As the sun dropped low over the golden fields, Vande Kolk pulled into his driveway.

“Supper is ready,” his daughter texted.

“What is it?” he replied.

“Something amazing,” she wrote.

He could smell it as soon as he walked in the back door. His wife, who’d worked at the bank all day, had cooked the family meal: chicken-bacon-cheese casserole. The family sat together in the living room, chatting about their day as *Wheel of Fortune* played in the background. Later, maybe he’d mow the lawn, then fall asleep on the couch watching the Brewers game. Living an ordinary life that provided, he thought, everything that mattered. *A*

Jamie Thompson is a staff writer at The Atlantic. Her article “American Cowardice” won the 2025 National Magazine Award for reporting.



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HONDURAS



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INDIA

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NIGERIA



The Dead Zones

By mid-century,
many places in the
United States may
be uninhabitable.

*By Vann R.
Newkirk II*



E

Earlier this year, in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, a graveyard was spared by the fire that sent thousands of Los Angeles residents fleeing into the coal-black night. Here, in Mountain View Cemetery, lie the bones of Octavia Butler, the famed science-fiction writer who spent her life in Pasadena and Altadena, both of which had burned. Trinkets offered by fans often decorate Butler's unassuming grave. A footstone is inscribed with a quotation from her *Parable of the Sower*: ALL THAT YOU TOUCH, YOU CHANGE. ALL THAT YOU CHANGE, CHANGES YOU.

In that dystopian novel, published in 1993 and set in the mid-2020s, the United States still exists but has been warped by global warming, and its authoritarian government has ceded most of the administration of day-to-day matters to corrupt companies. In Butler's neo-feudal vision, states and cities erect strict borders to deter migrants, the gap between rich and poor has widened, and massive wildfires in Southern California drive the state's decline.

It has become commonplace to label Butler a prophet. She didn't get everything right about the United States today. But even in the things that haven't happened, exactly, one can see analogs to real life.

Butler, however, considered herself merely an analyst—a "histofuturist." She often said that her primary skill was simply learning from the past. In her research for *Parable*, she studied times of rising political strife and demagoguery, along with America's history of class and racial inequality. She studied what was at the time an emerging scientific consensus regarding global warming, a body of research that even then predicted fires and floods, and warned of political instability.

"I didn't make up the problems," Butler wrote in an essay for *Essence* in 2000. "All I

did was look around at the problems we're neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters." That same year, she said in an interview that she dearly hoped she was not prophesying anything at all; that among other social ills, climate change would become a disaster only if it was allowed to fester. "I hope, of course, that we will be smarter than that," Butler said six years before her death, in 2006.

What will our "full-fledged disasters" be in three decades, as the planet continues to warm? The year 2024 was the hottest on record. Yet 2025 has been perhaps the single most devastating year in the fight for a livable planet. An authoritarian American president has pressed what can only be described as a policy of climate-change acceleration—destroying commitments to clean energy and pushing for more oil production. It doesn't require an oracle to see where this trajectory might lead.

Taking our cue from Butler, we would do well today to study the ways that climate change has already reshaped the American landscape, and how disasters are hollowing out neighborhoods like the one where Butler is buried. We should understand how catastrophe works in a landscape of inequality.

Over the next 30 years or so, the changes to American life might be short of apocalyptic. But miles of heartbreak lie between here and the apocalypse, and the future toward which we are heading will mean heartbreak for millions. Many people will go in search of new homes in cooler, more predictable places. Those travelers will leave behind growing portions of America where services and comforts will be in short supply—let's call them "dead zones." Should the demolition of America's rule of law continue, authoritarianism and climate change will reinforce each other, a vicious spiral from which it will be difficult to exit.

How do we know this? As ever, all it takes is looking around.

IN AUGUST, as the setting sun sent a red glow up the San Gabriel Valley, I surveyed a stretch of western Altadena, just blocks from Butler's grave. The better part of a year had passed since the Eaton Fire—which destroyed some 9,400 buildings here and in Pasadena while the Palisades Fire raged simultaneously to the west. Still, the moonscape in front of me was unsettling. Much of the debris had been cleared, which made the houseless lots seem even more eerie. Here and there, a brick fireplace stood watch over an otherwise empty lot.

In January, when the Santa Ana winds came, Altadenans weren't too worried. In this part of California, small fires were just part of life. "We always think it's going to be an earthquake that takes us out," Veronica Jones, the president of the Altadena Historical Society and a resident for six decades, told me. For many Altadena lifers, the memory of the 1993 Kincade Fire, which destroyed almost 200 buildings and burned for five days, was the guide for what to expect in the worst case.

But 1993 was billions and billions of tons of carbon pollution ago. This time around, the physics of the planet were

An authoritarian American president has pressed what can only be described as a policy of climate-change acceleration.

different. In 2023, high temperatures in the Pacific had helped incubate Hurricane Hilary, which led to the first-ever tropical-storm warning in Southern California. The storm dumped buckets of rain on the region, helping spur rapid plant growth over the next several months. But then the rain dried up completely. In the second half of 2024, Los Angeles County received only 0.3 inches of precipitation—the lowest amount on record. The drought and near-record temperatures dried out the lush scrub, turning it to kindling. In just 16 months, multiple supposedly once-a-century weather events had worked in concert to make the hills perhaps more combustible than they'd ever been.

When the winds blew in, bringing dry, warm air from inland over Southern California, they were unusually strong, approaching hurricane strength. Strong winds can damage power lines, and evidence now suggests that a malfunctioning power line helped spark the Eaton Fire. Early in the morning on January 8, Jones was startled when her husband told her they needed to go because embers—"big chunks of fire," as Jones put it—were falling into their yard.

The story of the Eaton Fire itself is tragic, and an omen: In ways that are straightforward and in ways that were largely unanticipated, global warming is quickly expanding the potential for large fires. But catastrophes also tend to reveal deficits in society, and the patterns of destruction and abandonment that followed the fire—which have roots in America's past and its present—tell us something about the country's future, too.

Many of the people escaping the fire had originally come to Altadena in flight: In the 20th century, Black folks seeking refuge from the Jim Crow South moved to California en masse, among them Butler's grandmother from Louisiana. Redlining and restrictive covenants kept them from buying homes in Los Angeles and Pasadena, leaving unincorporated Altadena as a favored destination, particularly its western half.

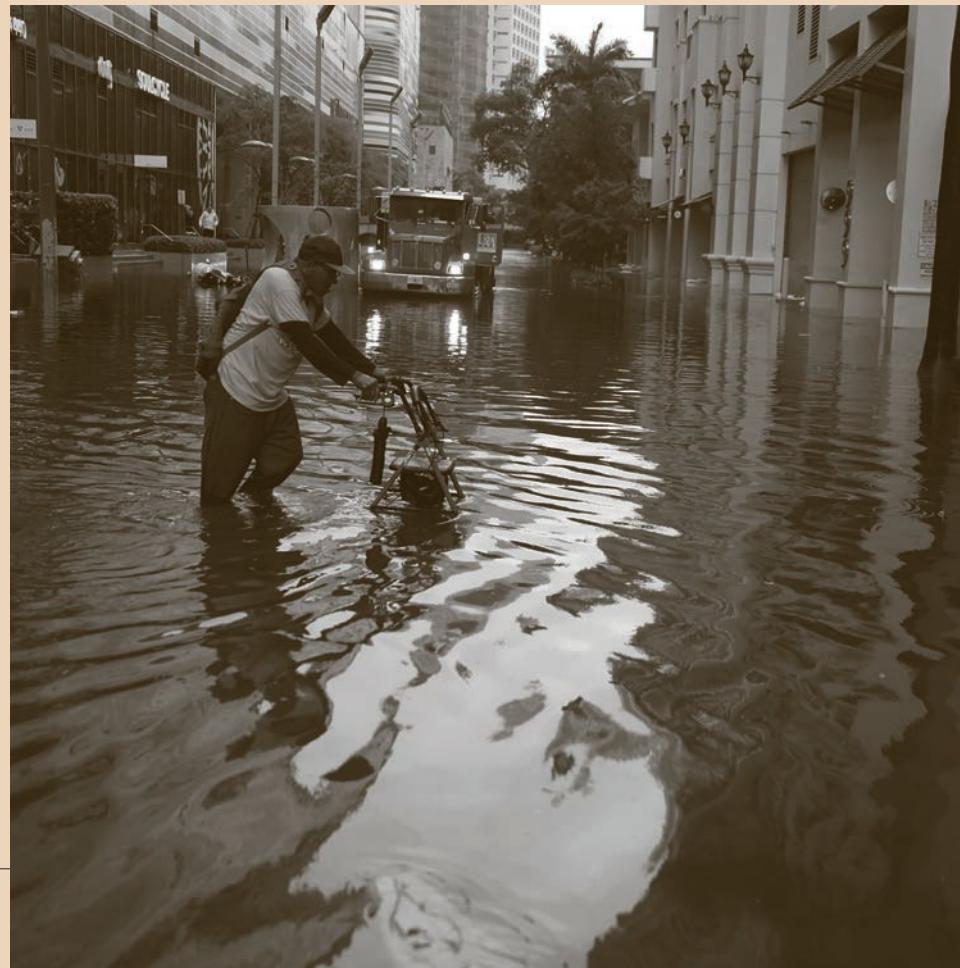
For many of those who'd been part of the migration, or who'd heard the stories, the fire felt like the return of an old

menace. The Eaton and Palisades Fires afflicted every class and demographic group. But the first response appeared much worse on the west side of Altadena, where the Black population was centered, than anywhere else. Of the more than 100 L.A. County fire trucks that went out to neighborhoods affected, only a single one entered West Altadena within the first 12 hours. According to an after-action report commissioned by the county, the homes there were older and more flammable, and—perhaps owing to power outages or weather interference with cell towers—residents throughout Altadena said that they hadn't received evacuation orders. All but one of the 19 reported deaths in Altadena occurred on the west side, which suffered the most catastrophic damage. Nearly half of all Black families in Altadena lost their home or sustained extensive damage.

Previous spread: A house in Altadena, California, destroyed by the Eaton Fire in January. Below: A flooded street in Miami in June 2022.

Just as fire victims began the process of trying to recover, Donald Trump came back into power. Deep cuts at FEMA and other agencies targeted much of the federal machinery and sources of money that were supposed to help. AmeriCorps volunteers who'd staffed recovery programs were sent home, and residents reportedly had difficulty reaching FEMA agents on the phone. Six months after the fires, the federal aid received by victims, relative to their property damage, was less than a third of that provided after previous fires in California and Hawaii. FEMA declined to perform its customary soil testing after cleanups, and now independent tests indicate high levels of lead in several lots. Darlene Greene, a member of the town council representing a tract in West Altadena, told me that the ordeal of rebuilding had driven some of her constituents into mental-health crises.

Months passed and empty lots languished. Many residents, having purchased homes years ago, were severely underinsured, owing to increased building costs. As of early October, fewer than 500 rebuilding permits had been issued within the Eaton Fire perimeter.





On the street during a heat wave in Miami in June 2023

Those who couldn't abide all the delays and red tape have sold, in many cases for a fraction of what the land was worth, and in many cases to corporate entities. More sales might still be on the horizon. With much of their surroundings still burned out and with friends and families scattered, even people who didn't lose their home in the fire might feel inclined to move away. "When you leave your house," Jones told me, "you have to look up at the street sign because there's no landmarks anymore."

Greene said the setbacks that families have faced have been their own kind of disaster. In the first weeks after the fire, "I was very optimistic," Greene told me, "and thinking that, *Hey, you know, people will be able to come back and rebuild.*" Now, she said, she doesn't know about that.

WHO NEEDS IMAGINATION when the dystopia is right in front of you? During the Palisades and Eaton Fires, scenes played out that could have appeared in Butler's *Parable*. Private firefighting outfits defended companies, utilities, and ultra-rich enclaves while other parts of the city burned. The county's defenses were overmatched. Its fleet of fire trucks was hobbled by ongoing consolidation in the fire-engine industry, where giant companies have been delaying maintenance orders and raising prices for new trucks. Hundreds of incarcerated people, making at most \$10 a day, worked as firefighters for the state. All of these things at least partly

reflect the increasing regularity, intensity, and cost of fires. They preview the kinds of problems that climate change will bring to our local governments and economies, manifesting most severely in poor and minority communities, but affecting us all.

One problem is who will underwrite disaster risks as they grow. Seven of the 12 largest home insurers in California—including State Farm, the very largest—have already limited their coverage or stopped taking new policies there. After the fires, State Farm proposed increasing its homeowner premiums by 22 percent statewide, and warned that it would need to "consider its options," seeming to imply that it might unwind even its existing policies, if the state didn't allow the increase (the two sides ultimately agreed on a 17 percent rate hike). The specter of huge future premium increases or whole-state withdrawals by insurers adds a new level of risk for every homeowner. Other insurers are also reconsidering their long-term positions, and asking to raise rates sharply.

There are parallels to the 2008 financial crisis, when entire communities were built over the rotten plank of sub-prime mortgages. Insurers lost more than \$100 billion in underwriting in 2024, and "insurance deserts," where policies are becoming impossible to find or

prohibitively expensive, are growing in the South and the West—more than half a million Florida residents are down to just one state-established "insurer of last resort," for example. Last year, a report from the Senate Budget Committee found that the withdrawal of insurers from many markets threatens "a collapse in property values with the potential to trigger a full-scale financial crisis similar to what occurred in 2008." But it's six one way, half a dozen the other: Insurers that *stay* in risky markets will be imperiled by unexpected disaster payouts, and might be destabilized if multiple disasters happen in different parts of the country at once.

Even if climate change does not trigger a full-fledged economic panic, whole regions will be thinned out and impoverished. Residential areas are the centerpiece of local economies, yet without insurance, people cannot get mortgages, and so most cannot buy houses. The mere prospect of that makes business investment riskier. Jesse Keenan, a professor at Tulane University who studies climate change and real estate, told me that some places are already becoming economic "no-go" zones.

Keenan is not some lonely Cassandra. In February, in a report to the Senate Banking Committee, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell warned of exactly the same thing. "You know, if you fast-forward 10 or 15 years, there are going to be regions of the country where you can't get a mortgage," he said. "There won't be ATMs. You know, the banks won't have branches and things like that." Leave it to the banker to think about the banks, but the same logic applies to everything else. In places that suffer an increasing number of climate disasters and don't receive commensurate assistance, we should expect more food deserts, fewer libraries, and fewer small businesses. We should expect that, with a larger share of municipal budgets going to disaster mitigation and repair, city and county services will suffer or disappear. Even as local taxes rise, "service deserts" will spread, leaving the remaining populations with only shells of local government. These are the dead zones.

In Butler's *Parable*, corporations use global warming to their advantage, taking over distressed governments, buying

up devastated lands, and providing housing to residents in exchange for cheap labor. Parts of this vision are manifesting in real life. Private-equity firms are deeply embedded in the disaster-recovery industry, sometimes relying on the low-wage labor of immigrants and incarcerated people in order to provide reconstruction services at cut rates. Investors often come into distressed real-estate markets and transform them, buying up land on the cheap and flipping residential homes into rental units. Essential services such as firefighting, disaster response, and cleanup are being slowly ceded by the public to the private sector in places under climate stress. Life in these places won't be like life in the company towns of the 19th century, not exactly. But if you squint, it may not look that different, either.

THESE GLIMPSES into tomorrow would warrant consternation under any administration. The United States cannot control global warming on its own, but it can exert a significant influence, directly and by example. President Joe Biden's climate agenda was the most robust ever attempted in this country, but even he did not sign enough laws to produce the fair share of decarbonization that America would need to deliver in order to avert 2 degrees Celsius of warming—a threshold whose crossing would likely spur a mass drought in the Southwest and West, disrupt agriculture in the South, and bring deluges to Miami, Sacramento, and New York City. But our present government is actively working to worsen global warming and make communities less resilient to its effects. It is working to make the darkest futures more likely.

It is possible, even considering the hatchet blows that Donald Trump has delivered to the federal bureaucracy, public institutions, and the Constitution, that his legacy will be most felt in our climate. On his first day back in office, the president signed executive orders that will withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Agreement—his second time pulling the country out of the global climate-change accord—and expand fossil-fuel production. In March, the Department of the Interior took steps to allow drilling

in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a vanishing sliver of pristine wilderness whose climate is already rapidly warming.

Even while justifying the expansion of oil and gas production as “energy independence,” Trump has attacked renewable energy. In January, he suspended all new leasing of federal lands for wind-power production. In July, he signed into law the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which accelerated the phaseout of wind- and solar-power tax credits, ended the tax credit for consumers who purchase electric vehicles, and zeroed out penalties for automakers that don’t abide by fuel-economy standards. He has suggested that wind farms threaten American health, and has said he wants to ban new facilities outright.

Trump’s EPA administrator, Lee Zeldin, came into office with the intent, he said, of “driving a dagger straight into the heart of the climate change religion.” He has since moved to slash the staff of the EPA’s emission-enforcement office. Zeldin is now leading an effort to kill the EPA’s “endangerment finding,” a 2009 declaration that

greenhouse gases are harmful to human health. Without that finding, the federal government would no longer have the authority to regulate carbon pollution.

The Trump administration’s fixation on ending that “climate-change religion” fits the president’s general view that everything is a zero-sum struggle between two sides, and that he wins only when his opponents lose. By this standard, Trump is winning: According to an analysis from the Princeton-affiliated REPEAT Project, his administration’s actions have already erased all the future emission declines set in motion during Biden’s term.

Trump has even thrown wrenches into the energy-transition plans of other countries. In a trade deal with the European Union, the administration agreed to lower punitive tariffs in exchange for European companies’ purchase of \$750 billion of American energy over the next three years, mostly oil and gas, a move that—if the EU enforces it—would throw Europe off its decarbonization targets. In August, U.S. officials released a statement pledging that the United States would “not hesitate to retaliate” against countries that voted in favor of a global agreement to lower emissions in international shipping.

As the administration accelerates climate change, it has also moved to weaken the country’s infrastructure for dealing with climate disruptions. Trump scrapped a program dedicated to funding flood mitigation in low-income communities. He axed rules that required public housing and critical infrastructure rebuilt with federal money to be elevated in order to account for new flood risks. The National Weather Service is a shadow of its former self, and the forecasters who help people make evacuation decisions are working double shifts just to keep offices open.

Even if Trump were to make a miraculous conversion to that climate-change religion today, some effects of these changes will be essentially irreversible. Once dismantled, bureaucracies are not so easy to replace. New wind farms won’t just pop up overnight. It would take time and investment merely to get back to our pre-Trump emissions baseline, let alone hit our national targets for averting a 2-degrees-hotter world.

Some
places are
already
becoming
economic
“no-go”
zones.



Liberty City, a “heat island” that can be 10 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than more affluent parts of Miami, is nonetheless now in demand because it sits on high ground.

This reality is so sobering that even staunch climate optimists have had to adjust. Since 2012, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, one of the Democrats’ leaders on climate, has delivered more than 300 “Time to Wake Up” speeches about global warming on the floor. Earlier this year, Whitehouse acknowledged for the first time that it may actually be “too late to wake up.”

IN SEARCH OF more windows into our climate future, I traveled to a place where water is the agent of change. The first preview came as soon as I left my hotel. As I drove through Miami, a light rainstorm flooded the streets, sending water sloshing around my car’s tires and then over my shoes when I got out.

There are few places in America where climate change is made more obvious to the senses than in Miami. On some eroded beaches, you can wade or even swim out to

where the land once reached. The seawalls along Biscayne Bay have gotten higher, and flooding from rainfall has become more and more of a problem. Crucial areas of Miami-Dade County are at or near sea level. And the sea level, as glaciers melt, is rising. A 2016 county report estimated that from 1992 to 2030, sea levels there would rise by up to 10 inches.

Somewhere between the inconvenience of wet feet and a potential Atlantis-style submergence are plenty of climate issues that make life more difficult. Weather patterns in South Florida have changed, and extreme rainfall has become more frequent, exacerbating the rising sea level. Last year, a “rain bomb” system dumped more than a foot of water on Miami in just two days. Until very recently, that was considered a once-in-200-years (or rarer) event—but it has now happened in the city four times in as many years. Salt water from the encroaching ocean threatens the drinking-water supply.

And at the risk of stating the obvious, global warming is supercharging the city’s already daunting heat. In 2024, Miami-Dade County experienced 60 full days with heat indexes greater than 105 degrees Fahrenheit. The most dangerous

change might be the spike in overnight temperatures, which robs resting bodies of the chance to recover from daytime heat, thus contributing to as many as 600 excess deaths from heat each year. The county is the epicenter of an incipient “extreme heat belt” that is reshaping concepts of seasonality and livability in the United States.

In Miami, denying climate change would be like denying the nose on one’s face. Even so, even knowing what’s coming, the city and surrounding county have struggled to protect themselves—and especially their most vulnerable residents. This was evident in the community where I was headed, Liberty City.

The water receded as the land sloped upward on my drive to the old site of Liberty Square, the second segregated housing project in the country built for Black residents. I passed buildings adorned with Technicolor murals of civil-rights icons. And I found the remnants of the old “race wall” that had been erected to separate Black residents from white.

In Miami, places known as “heat islands,” with little shade and lots of asphalt, are disproportionately inhabited by poor and working-class residents, and these can be 10 degrees Fahrenheit hotter

than wealthy residential areas. Heat-related deaths and illnesses are concentrated among Black and Latino outdoor laborers. One of the worst such heat islands is Liberty City.

The neighborhood does, however, have one thing going for it, albeit one that may not benefit its current residents much longer. Historically, some of Miami's most desirable real estate has been crowded along the beachfronts of the metropolitan area, with businesses and wealthy white residential enclaves prizing shore views and beach access. Meanwhile, neighborhoods farther inland—Liberty City, along with Overtown and Little Haiti—were designated for Black folks. They sit several feet higher above the ocean than the city's prime real estate.

In 2018, a group of researchers led by Jesse Keenan found that property values in these higher-elevation areas were increasing relative to the city average. Theorizing that these price increases were driven by demand from developers and buyers fleeing inward from sinking coastal neighborhoods—and were displacing people already in the communities farther inland—Keenan and his colleagues coined the term *climate gentrification*.

In Liberty City, climate gentrification gave Black residents a new way to think about a process that, until that point, had seemed like regular old gentrification. Rents for existing residents had been rising faster than the city average, and an upsurge in evictions followed. Homeowners—many facing a budget crunch from rising property-tax bills—had grown accustomed to getting offers to buy their homes for cash. Developers had plans to demolish Liberty Square and replace it with a kind of mixed-use Chipotleville, and there wasn't much political will to stop displacement. Miami "was built upon inequity," Kilan Ashad-Bishop, a professor at the University of Miami and a former member of the city's Climate Resilience Committee, told me—"but this felt a little different." Activism against climate gentrification and national attention grew such that Miami passed a resolution requiring a study on climate gentrification—although so far, that hasn't accomplished much.

If the architectural renderings of trees, umbrellas, and awnings come to pass, some

families of color might be able to hang on and enjoy the new amenities. But many who are displaced will find it difficult to rent or buy anywhere else in the city with similar elevation. Even if they buy farther inland, climate change will still hang over their finances. Home-insurance premiums are soaring in South Florida towns that aren't beach-adjacent, too—the whole area is hurricane-prone. And the number of insurance nonrenewals is actually highest inland, where many lower-middle-class homeowners have had to drop policies they can no longer afford. The geography of real climate risk—which includes not just the effects of weather and disasters, but also the ability of communities to withstand them—looks roughly similar to the geographies of poverty and race.

The same holds true across the hottest, most volatile regions of America. In Houston, homeowners in minority communities damaged by Hurricane Harvey in 2017 were the least likely to receive

loans and federal grants for rebuilding. In Chicago, the inland American city with the greatest number of properties at substantial risk of flooding, communities of color have been immensely overrepresented among flood victims. In Alabama, which is now part of America's Tornado Alley because of the changing climate, the people least able to rebuild (and who live in shoddier homes that tend to sustain more damage) are likely to be poor and Black.

The climate itself does not discriminate; climate catastrophe will distress the middle class and inevitably sweep away even mansions in gated neighborhoods. But in the next 30 years, the people who will bear the brunt of that catastrophe—who will be dispossessed, uprooted, and exposed to the worst of the elements—will be those who are already on the other side of society's walls.

IN THE 1930S, rolling black dust storms blanketed America's Great Plains, uprooting topsoil and crops across 100 million acres of land. The clouds billowed as far east as New York, choking farm economies in the middle of the country and sending millions of people on the move. The black blizzards seemed to many like divine judgment; actually, they had their origins at least partly in human action. Years of deep plowing and overgrazing had eroded the earth, priming the Plains to become what we know now as the Dust Bowl.

As these storms darkened the prairies, farmers and laborers alike sought refuge. Many of them traveled hundreds of miles to California and other havens. Despite the passage of New Deal programs to aid these "Okies," many did not receive a warm welcome in their new homes, because some saw them as interlopers competing for housing and jobs. In one ugly episode, Los Angeles Police Department Chief James Edgar Davis stationed more than 100 officers along the California border to enforce a "bum blockade" against migrants. California had made it a misdemeanor for any citizen to transport an "indigent" person into the state, a law that was later overturned by the Supreme Court. The Court's decision became part of the established basis for a right that

Miami is the epicenter of an incipient "extreme heat belt" that is reshaping concepts of seasonality and livability in the U.S.

many Americans take for granted—the ability to travel freely across state lines.

As Octavia Butler believed, America's past is a good place to start when trying to predict how climate change will reconfigure its society in the future. The country has already seen large, sudden movements of people driven by disaster and local changes in climate. These upheavals have always caused tensions, and those tensions have shaped the American social order in many ways.

Within the U.S. today, people are again moving because of disasters, and because of the slow-grind attrition of heat, flooding, and rising insurance rates. Earlier this year, the nonprofit Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre found that disasters had caused 11 million evacuations or relocations in the previous 12 months. These numbers will climb. Without interstate coordination and federal relief funding, workers and politicians in receiving zones may try to keep out newcomers—especially poor ones, arriving en masse on the heels of a particular disaster—as they did during the Dust Bowl.

In his forthcoming book, aptly titled *North*, Keenan anticipates a major climate migration—out of the South to cooler, less volatile climates—driven partly by disaster but also by a simple preference for milder weather. Over the past half century, one of the fundamentals of American life has been the steady relocation of people—and of the country's center of gravity—to the Sun Belt. Southern metropolises such as Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, Phoenix, and Charlotte expanded rapidly. But, according to Keenan, climate change has essentially stopped growth in southward movement, and northern cities are seeing fewer outflows and greater influxes of people.

Keenan's observation aligns with a recent study published by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, which found that for decades, hotter places tended to grow faster than colder ones. But from 2010 to 2020, that pattern ceased. And for elderly people, whose long-term comfort is a big part of the choice of destination, it had outright reversed.

In the next 30 years, climate disruptions won't make whole states uninhabitable,

and demographic shifts might not reach full exodus levels. But in America, small change is often deeply felt, and bit by bit, the American economy and culture will likely be transformed by climate attrition and the redistribution of people. Southern states will lose residents and dynamism. Bad weather and ruined infrastructure will sap productivity and leave behind thousands of acres of abandoned farmland after crop failures. Houston faces potentially extreme damage if struck by a Category 4 or 5 hurricane, and might struggle to rebuild without substantial federal aid. Even absent another disaster, New Orleans has been the fastest-shrinking major metro area in the country in recent years, as

more people have sought high ground or been priced out of the market by rising insurance rates. The populations of several cities and counties in California's fire country are shrinking, and domestic migration to Miami is now outpaced by people leaving (though international arrivals have so far kept the city's population from declining).

The worst climate disruptions will happen beyond U.S. borders, but they will put pressure on American society

Steps remain where a house once stood in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, 20 years after Hurricane Katrina. The community has never fully recovered.



nonetheless. Migration to the southern border, perhaps the most powerful current in American politics today, is already being driven partly by ecological collapses in Central American farm economies. International monitors expect these pressures to grow over the next several years. If the country's policy today is at all indicative, detention camps for immigrants will proliferate, often in climate dead zones, and the southern border will become even more militarized.

This would not be an America where the founding ideals hold much sway. The movement of people might even set states against one another. Tensions in receiving zones will—with strong, growing economies—create more opportunities for

demagoguery. In dead zones, the dearth of public services and the fading imprimatur of the state will naturally erode local participatory democracy.

All of this could create even better conditions than those today for the kind of transactional authoritarian government that Trump is trying to establish. Xenophobia and racism are already pillars of this movement, and they would be strengthened by mass migration. State and local leaders affected by disasters might supplicate themselves to the president in order to receive the patronage of disaster aid. A hurricane or megafire during election season might be a convenient excuse for federal intervention.

The emerging Trump doctrine views empathy as a weakness and public welfare

as a usurpation of the natural hierarchy. His authoritarianism is perfectly suited to an era of climate strife.

AT THE END of August, almost 20 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina, I drove across the Claiborne Avenue Bridge to New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward. The neighborhood was mostly obliterated in 2005, after the levees that were supposed to protect it failed. Today it is still in rough shape. Inhabited homes are sparsely distributed, and grassy lots fill many of the spaces where houses previously stood. There are few businesses to speak of. Before Katrina, 15,000 people lived here. Now that number is closer to 5,000. A casualty of what is often considered America's first great climate disaster, the Lower Ninth Ward also has an antecedent in Butler's work. In *Parable of the Sower*, a hurricane devastates the Gulf region, and most of its victims are poor folks "who don't hear the warnings until it's too late for their feet to take them to safety."

The Lower Ninth Ward was a harbinger of what climate change might do to our most vulnerable places. But it has also been a place of reverence for people who wish to fight climate change. At the TEP Center, a museum and community center there, I met former Vice President Al Gore, at ease in an oxford shirt and a magnificent pair of cowboy boots. He and the Climate Reality Project, the nonprofit he founded, were in the middle of a tour through Louisiana, holding listening sessions and dialogues with climate-justice advocates to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Katrina.

I was seeking assurances—any science I hadn't seen, any hope Gore had on hand—that the Earth might be able to avoid the worst of climate change, even with America now accelerating warming. I was not encouraged by the news that global temperatures last year had already risen above the 1.5-degree warming ceiling that the Paris Agreement had established as a goal in 2015, and looked to be staying above it this year. Gore has been the world's biggest cheerleader for that target. If there was a silver lining to be had, he would know what it was.



But Gore was more measured—or, as he called it, “textured”—in his assessment than I’d expected, at least initially. After all, he followed the data. “I am not willing to call it now and say, ‘No, we’ve crossed 1.5,’ because the scientists are not willing to say that now,” he told me, cautioning that the actual threshold uses an average calculated over several years, not just one or even two. “As a practical matter, we can see the writing on the wall. However, calling it would also have some consequences.”

Still, he said, even if that call is soon made, climate action will remain just as urgent. Each bit of global warming that is averted beyond that matters—1.6 is better than 1.7. And for what it’s worth, he told me, other countries do grasp that. “In focusing on what Trump and his gang are doing, I think we miss the changes that are under way in the rest of the world,” Gore said, “and in many places, it’s moving more quickly in the right direction.” If anything, the United States’ retreat from climate leadership has encouraged countries such as Brazil to provide it.

Possible futures may be narrowing, but they are narrowing from both directions: Globally, future emissions have already been slashed enough to make the worst-case scenarios projected a decade ago—4 or more degrees Celsius of warming by 2100—unlikely, even as the best case moves out of reach. And Gore believes that the now-obvious progression of climate change—the heat waves, floods, fires, and other disasters—is itself becoming a kind of asset in the fight to stop it. “Mother Nature is the most powerful advocate that has a voice on this matter,” he said. “And I do believe that she is winning the argument.”

Gore was buoyed by the grassroots energy that global climate activism has cultivated. “This has now become”—with relatively little fanfare—“the largest political movement in the history of the world,” he told me. And neither markets nor investors can afford to wholly deny the environmental physics in front of them. Even in the U.S., share prices for green energy continue to increase as renewables become cheaper—and as sustainability becomes less of a watchword and more of a meat-and-potatoes

consideration for businesses hoping to preserve future profits.

The previous day, Gore had spoken at a “climate revival” at a church in St. James Parish, in what’s known as “Cancer Alley,” a set of communities upriver from New Orleans that struggle not only with climate risks but also with a long legacy of industrial pollution and governmental neglect. The stories of many residents had stayed with him. “I think that the sacrifice zones—I hate to endorse that phrase by using it, but the people who live there often do,” Gore began. “I think they may, in political terms, represent a stone that the builder refused.” He was referring to the biblical passage about a cast-off object becoming the cornerstone of a new edifice, which later became a parable for the faith built on Christ’s resurrection.

It was the morsel of hope that I was perhaps most prepared to receive. Our country’s “sacrifice zones” are both illustrations of our hotter future and indictments of our democracy’s faults. They are perfect avatars for the kind of project that climate action now needs: one that links our climate to our freedom.

I AM PERSONALLY not optimistic about the chances of averting significant climatic chaos. America has shown that it has not absorbed the fundamental lessons that Katrina previewed 20 years ago. The first and worst effects of the climate crisis have so far been mostly in places that—like the Lower Ninth Ward—are not high on many policy makers’ priority lists. Because of that fact, it has always been difficult to prompt preemptive action to save everyone else.

All of that said, perhaps Trump, through his very extremity, has provided a galvanizing opportunity. In his reflexive culture-warrior rejection of climate change, he has backed into a climate policy of his own, and has linked that policy to his power. With his single-minded, bullying determination to reverse course on renewables—which are part of life now for many people of all political stripes—and to dismantle programs people rely on, Trump has essentially taken ownership of any future climate disruptions,

and has more firmly connected them to oil and gas. In advancing this climate-accelerationist policy alongside an anti-democratic agenda, he has sealed off fantasies of compromise and raised the political salience of dead zones, where devastation and exclusion go hand in hand. Trump’s intertwining of climate policy and authoritarianism may beget its own counter-movement: climate democracy.

Climate democracy would be aided by the gift of simplicity. At present, the only way to ensure that America avoids the future outlined here will be to win back power from its strongman leader, or possibly his successors. The places facing existential climate risks—especially those in the Deep South—are mostly in states that have long been considered politically uncompetitive, where neither

Al Gore during Climate Week in New York in September. The former vice president remains optimistic that the darkest futures can still be avoided.



party expends much effort or money to gain votes. But they could form a natural climate constituency, outside the normal partisan axis. Poor and middle-class white communities in coastal Alabama, Mexican American neighborhoods in Phoenix, and Black towns in the Mississippi Delta might soon come to regard climate catastrophe as the greatest risk they face, not by way of scientific persuasion, but by way of hard-earned experience. Some of them might form the cornerstone of a new movement.

With the right message, plenty of other people may be persuadable: those upset by higher electric bills, or poorer storm forecasts, or the coziness of Trump with the oil and gas industry, or weather-related disruptions in everyday life. To paraphrase Theodore Roosevelt, Americans learn best from catastrophe, and they will learn that the help they once took for granted after disasters might now be harder to come by. Autocracy takes time to solidify, and building popular support in opposition to it takes time as well. But in the reaction

needed to build climate democracy, perhaps heat is a catalyst.

I realized that, in visiting sites of catastrophe and upheaval, I'd also visited epicenters of climate democracy. In Altadena, Darlene Greene still did yeoman's work to support her struggling constituents, and—in the absence of help from above—residents became the leaders their community needed. In Miami, groups of homeowners and tenants were united in fighting climate gentrification, and in trying to keep their homes. In the Lower Ninth Ward, people from across the country who'd been moved to climate action by Katrina convened with Al Gore and strategized.

It isn't really a coincidence that these places, and the places where America's climate retreat will begin, roughly overlap with the geography of historic conflicts over civil rights and democracy. Where risk and disinvestment come together in America, democracy has always suffered. In many ways, crisis is revelatory, and we know that disasters expose cracks in

society. If there is a sliver of a chance of averting the scenarios I've laid out, it will have to come by the hands of a movement that finally repairs those cracks.

It is easiest, as I have done, to imagine those faults persisting and widening, in which case the worst conclusions about our future physical and political climates are likely to hold true. But the last of Octavia Butler's rules for predicting the future should also guide our imagination, and our hopes. She instructed students to "count on the surprises," and even when making grounded predictions to allow for the possibility of genuine inspiration and rupture. After all, Butler's own success—as a child of a Black family that moved West from Jim Crow Louisiana during the Great Migration—would have been considered very unlikely at the moment of her birth. None of the great movements that shaped this country was preordained. *A*

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Why I Run

By Nicholas Thompson

I took up the sport to be like my father.
I kept going because he stopped.



T

en years ago, when I turned 40, my father posted a birthday message on my Facebook page that was visible to all of my friends and followers. I had a great life, he said: a loving wife, three beautiful children, a successful career. But all men's lives fall apart at this age, he warned. He was 73 then, and was thinking of his own life and of his father's. There is too much pressure and there are too many temptations, he said. He had entered a spiral at 40 from which he never recovered. He hoped the same would not happen to me.

I read the post, puzzled. It was a private note in a very public place. I responded with humor and deflection, but it made me realize something. My father's old friends always said that I remind them of him. I had spent much of my life trying to be like him: going to the same schools, traveling to the same places, taking up the same hobbies, forever seeking his approval. But I also desperately wanted not to be like him. I didn't want my discipline to drop. I didn't want my id to overcome my superego. I didn't want my life to fall apart at 40.

Running seemed like it might be the key. Running had helped him hold things together until middle age. Then he had stopped. I had run with him for years, and I was still competing in marathons. I was going to keep on running, and I was going to keep doing it well.

PEOPLE OFTEN TOLD me that my father was unlike anyone they'd ever known. He'd grown up in Oklahoma and escaped an unhappy home by winning a scholarship at Phillips Academy Andover, another at Stanford, and then a Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford. When he met John F. Kennedy in 1960, Kennedy joked that my father might make it to the White House before he did.

For all of his early promise, though, professional success didn't come easily. He entered academia while dreaming of politics, but didn't find satisfaction in the former or success in the latter. By the time I was born, in 1975, he was drinking too much, smoking too much, and worrying too much. Then he started to run. The great running boom of the 1970s had inspired him, and the sport offered discipline and structure to his ever more fermented days. When I was about 5, he'd head out in the mornings, and I liked to tag along when he would let me. Running a full mile made me feel as though I'd done something real. I remember proudly placing my tiny sneakers next to his by the front door of our house in suburban Boston. When I picture him now, I see him as he was then, strong and smiling, and running.

By the late 1970s, my father had earned a name as a young public intellectual and Cold War hawk. He won a White House fellowship and, for the next few years, traveled around the country for television appearances and debates. In one memorable exchange, he was debating arms control. His interlocutor declared that my

father stood only for the Republican Party but that she stood for all of humanity. That may be true, my father responded, "but at least I have been delegated for my representation."

Even as his professional stature rose, he battled alcoholism and gradually came to the realization that he was gay. He started a relationship with a 25-year-old male chemical engineer from MIT, and then one day he was gone, off to Washington, D.C. He got a job under President Ronald Reagan and started running even more, hoping to calm the chaos of his life. He ran every morning, alternating runs of 12 miles and six miles. When I visited him at his new home in Dupont Circle, he would head out on a run before I woke up and return, covered in sweat, just as I was making my way down his dusty, half-renovated stairway with its broken banister.

In 1982, he entered the New York City Marathon and headed to the start in Staten Island, where he sat and listened to Vivaldi's *Orlando Furioso* on his Walkman. It was, he would later write, appropriate that he was listening to an opera about "a stirring figure driven mad by the world's demands." I was 7, and I came to watch him. I stood just past the Queensboro Bridge, where I handed my father a bottle of orange juice and a new pair of shoes. He finished in a hair over three hours. It was the fastest marathon he would ever run.

MY FATHER'S LIFE in Washington was manic and confused, and he was entering a period of record-setting promiscuity and little sleep. He once told me that a person has the ability to resist the first affair in a relationship, but once the dam is broken, the waters flood out. The difference between zero and one affair is large; the difference between one and 100, he explained, is small. He began to date a string of inappropriate men, including a kleptomaniac who stole art from high-end auction houses, tried to poison my dog, and ran over my older sister's cat. Not long after my father moved to Washington, he received the most traumatic news of his life. He visited a doctor, who pronounced that he was HIV-positive. "In a sense, I felt liberated," he later wrote in his memoir. "The fit outcome of this interminable ordeal was to be not redemption but death."

I was 10 years old when he told me that he was going to be dead within a year. We were in the car, just the two of us, on Interstate 66 in Virginia. I was sitting in the passenger seat, and I didn't quite understand. I tried to laugh and tell him that yes, I knew everyone died, but he wasn't going to. Still, he seemed sincere. He wanted me to know that he loved me and that I would be okay without him. I bottled the news deep inside. I never told anyone.

A year later, he enrolled in a study of healthy HIV-positive men. Shortly thereafter, he got a call from Anthony Fauci, the new director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, calmly saying that my father would be removed from the study because he didn't have the disease after all. "We ran the test three ways," Fauci told him. My father walked outside into the spring sunshine, elated and unsettled. A few weeks later, he told me that, actually, he was going to be fine. In later years, he would say that Fauci had "sentenced me to life."

My two sisters and I would see our father once a week for dinner in Boston, and we'd travel to Washington, or to his farm in

Warrenton, Virginia, for occasional weekend and summer trips. My father's central project was to keep my sisters and me—but particularly me—from going soft. He worried that we would emerge from our suburban private school without calluses on our hands. He had left Oklahoma to join the New England elite. Now he wanted to put a little Oklahoma into his New England elitists. He gave us lists of chores at the farm—sweep the patio, mow the lawn—which he'd put on the fridge, and paid us 25 cents for finishing each one. He taught me to rotate the tires on a car and to drive a tractor. We dug huge firepits to burn our garbage and spent weeks planting poplar trees along the driveway. My sisters and I painted all the rooms in the house. Every summer, we stained the outdoor porch and pulled out the nails that had popped up in the Virginia humidity. Every now and then, my father and I would put on our worn-out sneakers, yell for the dogs, and run a mile or two down the Virginia roads.

My father often talked about momentum in life. Sometimes you have it: Each success makes the next a little easier and a little more likely. Sometimes you don't, and your losses compound. When you have it, he would tell me, keep it and use it. Focus. Get more done. When you don't have it, he'd say, well, try to get it back. I think of this frequently when I head out for a run. To have run during a day is to have at least done that. As my father descended into mania, the days when he ran were the days he kept everything else in control. If he had run more, could he have done more? When I was a child, there were days when I woke up and wished he hadn't already put on his sneakers and left the house. Now, looking back, I wish he had kept doing it for longer.

WHEN I WAS IN MY 20S, I tried to accomplish my father's goal of running a marathon in less than three hours—but I had no idea how to do it. I signed up for five, started four, completed three, and came within half an hour of my goal in two. In only one did I run the entire way, without slowing down to walk. In the 2003 New York City Marathon, I dropped out at mile 23. My knee hurt. But something always hurts that late in a marathon. I quit because I was afraid to fail, and my knee gave me an excuse. It turned out to be the only time my father came to one of my marathons, and I gave up.

Around that time, my professional life was the same goat rodeo as my running. I had fallen in love with journalism, but journalism hadn't fallen in love with me. In 1997, I was fired less than an hour into my first job, as an associate producer at *60 Minutes*, because a senior executive decided I didn't have enough experience and shouldn't have been hired in the first place. By 2004, I was stuck in a different kind of rut. My wife, Danielle, and I were living in New York. I had been rejected from dozens of full-time jobs and was struggling as a freelancer. I took assignments that required waking up at 2 a.m., and earned a couple hundred dollars



The author and his father at his house in Washington, D.C., around 1994

a day playing guitar on the platforms of the L train. My worst moment came when I submitted a guest essay to the *Washington Monthly*. An editor sent me helpful feedback but mistakenly included an email chain that I wasn't meant to see. One of my closest friends in the industry had written a scathing assessment both of the story and of my general abilities. Maybe I just wasn't good enough? I applied to law school and was admitted to NYU. I needed something new.

All the while, I kept running. In May 2005, I entered the Delaware Marathon. This time I did it right. I started out at a 6:45-per-mile pace and stayed steady as the course looped through downtown Wilmington. Even with a mile to go, I was terrified that I would fail: that my hips would freeze, that my knees would buckle, that my calf would tear. Repeated failure is both a motivator and a demon. In this case, it drove me forward. Soon I could see the finish line and the race clock, with the seconds ticking up from 2:57. For eight years, I had held in my mind the goal of breaking three hours. Now I had done it.

When running was going right, the rest of my life seemed to follow. In the months after Delaware, I got a job as an editor at *Wired* and scrapped the idea of law school. I wrote and sold a proposal for a book. I had momentum. In November 2005, I ran the New York City Marathon in 2:43:51, putting me in 146th place out of 37,000 entrants. I was starting to understand hard training. I figured I would keep going and get faster still.

Two weeks after that marathon, I saw my doctor for my annual physical. He took the usual measurements and ran through the usual routine. Then he put his fingers on my throat to check for lumps. He lingered a little longer than normal on one spot. "There's something there," he said. He told me that the lump could be completely benign, but there was a chance it might not be. I didn't worry much. I had just run a fast marathon. I had always eaten a lot of spinach and hydrated well. I had many insecurities, but my health was not one of them. I was only 30, after all.

TO HAVE RUN DURING A DAY IS TO AT LEAST HAVE DONE THAT.

Gradually, though, the prognosis darkened. I traveled through hospitals for tests in blue gowns, each time certain that the next result would vindicate my assumption that the lump was just a benign biological blip. But each test result only made my odds worse. Eventually, the doctors determined that the sole option was surgery. My mother came to New York, and she and Danielle took me to NYU's Tisch Hospital.

My father was not there that day. Stress made him short-circuit. He couldn't talk about the possibility of cancer, and he certainly couldn't offer any help. He started drinking more and writing me less. He later told me that he had become convinced that I would die. My mother, meanwhile, had never been more in control. She could be overwhelmed by small voltage shifts or tiny bits of stress—like making sure someone had put the potatoes in the oven on time. Actual catastrophes, like my illness, seemed to make her calmer. I think my mother could have been an excellent marathoner.

After the surgery, I felt nauseated, and I wasn't allowed to exercise for three weeks. I had a scar resembling a necklace, which I'll have as a marker for the rest of my life. My neck felt out of balance, like I was a strawberry with the stem partly cut off. I waited a week for the lab results. Then one day, I got the call. The tumor was benign. Two weeks later, I got a second phone call: The first group of doctors had read the slide wrong, and a review team had determined that I had thyroid cancer. It was an eminently treatable variant, with a survival rate of more than 90 percent. But it was still cancer.

In short order, I would need a second surgery to get the rest of the thyroid out. My neck already felt vulnerable. Now they would have to cut again. My mother came down for this surgery, too. After the second operation, I was miserable. Without my thyroid, I was dizzy constantly and couldn't regulate my temperature. I felt cold when others felt warm. My tendons hurt. I got headaches all the time. And I had to prepare for a radiation treatment.

I bicycled to the hospital in Midtown Manhattan, where I was given a radioactive pill to swallow. It felt oddly normal for such a grave circumstance—like taking a multivitamin that came packed in an imposing lead container. But once I had swallowed it, I was a moving radiation site. I had to leave quickly, get on my bicycle, and try to stay as far away as possible from everyone else as I pedaled back home to Brooklyn. Danielle moved in with friends. Every day, she would come by our apartment and drop off soup for me at the door. I spent a week alone as the radiation moved through my body, hunting down the cancerous cells. I tried to stay calm

and I kept doing my job at *Wired*, editing stories by email. But I wasn't just dealing with pain; I was confronting death in a way that I hadn't had to before.

We all, of course, are dying every day. However you do the math, we aren't around for very long. But as I sat alone in our one-bedroom apartment, with radiation ripping my body apart, death was no longer just an intellectual exercise. Five months earlier, I had been a sub-elite marathoner; now, as I lay in agony on our red rug, I felt like that man had melted. I had been torn apart, and it was all because of a cluster of cells I could neither see nor feel. The week of isolation ended, though, as I knew it would. It felt like the winter solstice: The evenings were still dark, but now every day would get lighter. I deep-cleaned the apartment with the windows wide open and Danielle came back. More scans made clear that the cancer was gone. Now I could begin the process of recovering.

My diagnosis had come right after my triumphant marathon, and I believed that the only way to put it in the past was to run again. Odysseus had to string his old bow and fire an arrow through 12 axe heads to prove that he was the man he had once been. I needed to run another marathon.

I gradually started to train. My new medications made me perpetually dizzy, and I had to progress slowly from walking to bicycling to running. I had lost my strength and some of my coordination. My body had once seemed like a finely tuned instrument; now it would sometimes slide wildly out of key. I'd run two miles into Prospect Park and start to see double. I'd stop, and trudge slowly back. But I kept progressing. I got stronger, and I began to remember what it felt like to go fast.

As I healed, cancer went from the only thing I thought about to something I thought about once a day, and then to something I could put to the side. When I did come back to it, I was often running.

TWO YEARS LATER, in November 2007, I was back on the starting line of the New York City Marathon. The announcer called out, "On your marks." I tensed out of habit and leaned forward, putting my weight on my toes. I crossed myself as a reminder that what I was about to do was both spiritual and quite hard. Then the gun fired. Across the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge we went, looking left to see the skyscrapers of downtown Manhattan. The bridge swayed ever so slightly as the mass of runners began to storm across.

With each step, I tried to visualize a different part of my body, moving with strength and relaxation. I thought about my toes pressing through my soft socks, onto the foam of my racing shoes, onto the hard asphalt, and then pushing me off. I marveled, as I often do, about how strange it is that one spends roughly half of each race suspended in the air.

After 44 minutes, I neared my favorite spot of the whole race: mile seven, where Danielle would emerge from Union Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Several blocks before that, I moved out of my pack to the right side of the road so that she'd be able to spot me. She stepped out of the crowd, and I stepped toward her and kissed her on the cheek. I thought back to two years earlier, when she had waited at the very same spot as I ran toward her with an unknown poison growing in my neck.

Later in the race, as I crossed from Queens to Manhattan, I spotted the exact place where I had stood in 1982, searching for my father in the sea of runners. I remember watching him swing out of the pack toward me. I remember the sweat on his hairy shoulders, and I remember a sense of love that emanated from him as he bent down on one knee, almost in prayer, tying the knots of the shoes I had given him.

By the time I hit mile 21 and entered Harlem, I had to fight with myself to keep going. Running with speed isn't just a physiological process; it's a psychological one. You have to remember what it feels like to pump your arms and legs in sync at a rapid cadence. You have to remember how to make yourself run up the hill that you don't want to run up anymore. I had spent years learning these skills, and then a clump of cells in my neck had forced me to learn them again.

The course enters Central Park at East 90th Street, just before the marker for mile 24. By now my mind was almost empty. Finally, I saw the finish. I started to sprint as best I could. We get through most days in life without having to really think about death, which also means that we don't spend a lot of time dwelling on the remarkable fact that we are alive.

That day, I ran the New York City Marathon in 2:43:38—13 seconds faster than I had run it before I got sick. I cried at the finish line. Later, as I headed down to the train that would take me home, an elderly man asked how I had done. "I did great," I responded with a smile. He nodded, and I had a sense that he understood precisely what I meant: that I had pushed through something terrifying in life and come out on the other side just a bit stronger. I got onto the train and began the trip home, heading south under the city while above me thousands of marathon runners were still heading north toward the finish line.

BY THE TIME I ran my next marathon, I was a father. In just a few years, Danielle and I had three sons. Being a parent led me to discover what I consider the ideal form of cross-training. I wrestled constantly with my boys. We played so much hallway soccer that we chipped all the paint off the inside of the apartment's front door. We played Nerf basketball, in which I could block shots only with my head. Each summer, up in the Catskills, we played "water wars," in which I would try to swim across a pond and get up on a small beach they were guarding.

We created endless mayhem in our Brooklyn apartment. We broke vases, knocked over plants, and occasionally woke up the neighbors. But we had a lot of fun. And for 10 years I kept marathoning, and never once missed a workout or a race because of injury. I ran the New York City Marathon almost every year, and almost every year, I finished just around 2:43.

My father moved to Asia in the 2000s. He had an academic interest in the region and an attraction to the young men who lived there. He also wanted to avoid the tax authorities in the United States, who had noticed that he hadn't paid his returns in several years. But he came to Brooklyn to visit soon after our oldest son, Ellis, was born, and I was startled both by his obvious love and admiration for his grandchild and by his total incompetence.

He didn't know how to hold a baby: Trying to hoist Ellis, he looked like a man attempting to lift a greasy turkey from the fridge. He had no idea how to change a diaper, making me suspect that he had never changed mine.

He came back when the other two boys arrived, brimming with love and carting chaos. He'd say he had to step outside to buy aspirin, and then I'd find him smoking and slugging gin and orange juice on the front stoop. One morning, sitting in our apartment overlooking Grand Army Plaza, with piles of his papers tossed upon our dinner table, he told me that his iPad had crashed and that he needed me to fix it. I rebooted it, only to discover that he had been trying to schedule time with a male prostitute in our guest room after Danielle and I headed out for work. It hadn't occurred to my dad that the children, and their nanny, would still be there. I told him that I'd fixed the device but that he really shouldn't do the thing he'd just been doing.

He declared that he hadn't been doing anything at all except working on an op-ed for *The Jakarta Post*. I walked down the stairs and told the doorman to not let anyone in while I was gone. That night, I balanced a chair against my father's door in such a way that it would clatter if he headed out.

In 2013, my father planned a visit that coincided with the Brooklyn Marathon, a race of eight loops around Prospect Park that I had signed up to run. I had practically begged him to come to watch—I desperately wanted him to see me run fast at least once. But he didn't make it in time. He showed up that afternoon, as I hobbled around the apartment with my aching post-marathon quads. He, too, was struggling to walk, having just had an operation on one of his hips. He told me that his struggles reminded him how



The author and his son Zachary after finishing the Northeast Harbor Five-Mile Road Race in 2021



At the end of a track race at Icahn Stadium, in New York City, in 2021

important it is to remember a child's first steps. This time I put him in an Airbnb in a fancy building on Prospect Park West. It seemed like a success, and the host was delighted to have such a smart and worldly man in the apartment. On the final morning, though, I came to pick my father up, and he hurried out the door. He had become incontinent during the night, wasn't quite sure what had happened, and wanted to get out fast. I sent an extra-large tip.

My father would never see me run another marathon, but my children would. Each year, they would come and cheer me on as I raced the New York City Marathon. I don't know what they'll think of marathoners when they've moved out or when I'm gone. I hope, though, that one day in the future, in whichever cities they live, they stand on the sidelines of a major race, watching the runners flow by, remembering cold November mornings

from a generation ago when their father, then strong and quick, ran by. I hope, too, that maybe they have absorbed some of the things that I've learned from training. As young children, they didn't really have a sense of the way I did my job as a journalist or a CEO. Physical work made much more sense. They could see how tired I was after a workout, and they could appreciate what it meant to have run 20 miles before breakfast.

At the same time, I have worried over the years about whether my running detracts from my family and my work. Every now and then, I think I should take all my racing shoes and lock them in the attic. Running can be selfish and a waste of time. I couldn't be the perfect parent, or the perfect CEO, even if I had 25 hours in a day. How can I possibly hope to be so if I only really have 23?

There are days when my running annoys my wife, my children, or my colleagues. I've accidentally woken up Danielle far too many times while heading out the door in the morning. The list of minor infractions is long. We basically have a deal. I try my best to make my obsession as minimally disruptive as possible. She rolls with the disruption and knows that I'll make it up to her in other ways. And she also knows that running has become an essential part of my life. It's the part of my day when I disconnect from screens and let my mind drift usefully and turn over problems. It encourages simple habits—healthy sleep, healthy eating, moderate drinking—that help me improve as a father

and business leader just as much as they help me improve as a runner. Running has taught me to have total trust in the compound interest gained from steady day-by-day work. I got fast by running hard, consistently, and wasting very little time worrying about how ambitious my goals were. One lesson I learned about running that also applies to writing: The best time to do something important is usually right now. And when you have to get something done in a short amount of time, it's wise not to spend that time complaining about how little time you have.

I learned, through practice, how to stay calm under stress. There were some deeper lessons, too. To improve at running, you have to make yourself uncomfortable and push yourself to go at speeds that seem too fast. The same is true in a complicated job. Our minds create limits for us when we're afraid of failure, not because it's actually time to slow down or stop. Which has done more to shape my mind: running or work? I don't know. But I do think that those two parts of my life are now deeply intertwined.

IN 2016, MY FATHER sent me an email while feeling particularly depressed. He wrote, “I’m in a corner, No Exit.” This was a hard time in my father’s life. He was 74 years old. His hands were cragged and bent from arthritis and years hunched over a keyboard. His liver was worn out from decades of overuse. He had lost most of his hair and dyed the last tufts an odd shade of rusty red. His teeth were rotting; his toenails were mostly black. If he wanted to walk for any distance, he had to do it in a pool. One day, he found himself sitting in his car for 30 minutes struggling to breathe. He was living in Bali, and that night, at 3 a.m. his time, he sent me another email, with the header “Saying thanks in the twilight zone.”

He wanted to tell me how much he had loved spending time with me in my 20s, and to apologize for some of his behavior then. I read the email more in sorrow than in fear. He often talked about premonitions of the end. I was used to the drama. I responded quickly with a photograph of my three boys eating chips and guacamole. In another gloomy email, he wrote that he was thinking back to me running with him in Boston: “Memories keep coming back, old age. Little boy joining me last half km of jog.”

Around this time, he wrote me that he needed a \$1,500 loan to cover hotel expenses in Malaysia. He’d been charged double for a flight he took and there was some complexity involving a new boyfriend. He had some art he could sell, he claimed, and he promised to pay me back soon with interest. I knew he wouldn’t, and I was frustrated. I told him, perhaps too coldly, that I didn’t feel comfortable being a lender of last resort. I suspected that the problem wasn’t the price of the hotel but rather the price of the man. He immediately wrote to my older sister, cc’ing me, and declared that he was cutting me out of his will and that suicide was at hand. He said that he had already taken the pills. His death, he wrote, “will give all of you a sigh of relief, one in particular.” In another email, he told my sister and me: “May you find as much happiness as I’ve enjoyed in recent years.” I called him and then paid the hotel bill. Soon everything was fine, and he was sending cheerful emails again. The hotel, he noted, had a very cool book on guitars. It wasn’t the only time he threatened to kill himself to wrangle some money out of me.

When my father died of a heart attack the next year, my sisters and I traveled to the Philippines for his funeral. I put on my running shoes and headed up the hill above the villa where he had been living. Batangas is a tough place to run: The roads don’t have shoulders; there are dogs everywhere; jitneys screech by. That day, it was 90 degrees and humid. But I take pride in being able to run anywhere, and I wanted to understand this place and what he’d seen there. I moved slowly up, past Banga Elementary School. Then I stopped. I wondered how far I was from the antipodal point of the planet from where my father had grown up. If he had started digging a hole as a child in Oklahoma and gone all the way to the other side of the Earth, how far would he have ended up from here?

I jogged back down to the house. Some of his friends from around the world had flown in, and soon it was time for the ceremony. He had always loved music, so I brought out my guitar and played a short song I had composed for him. We all toasted his

life, and the theme was similar whether expressed by the Filipinos, the Americans, or the Europeans: No one had ever known anyone quite like Scott Thompson.

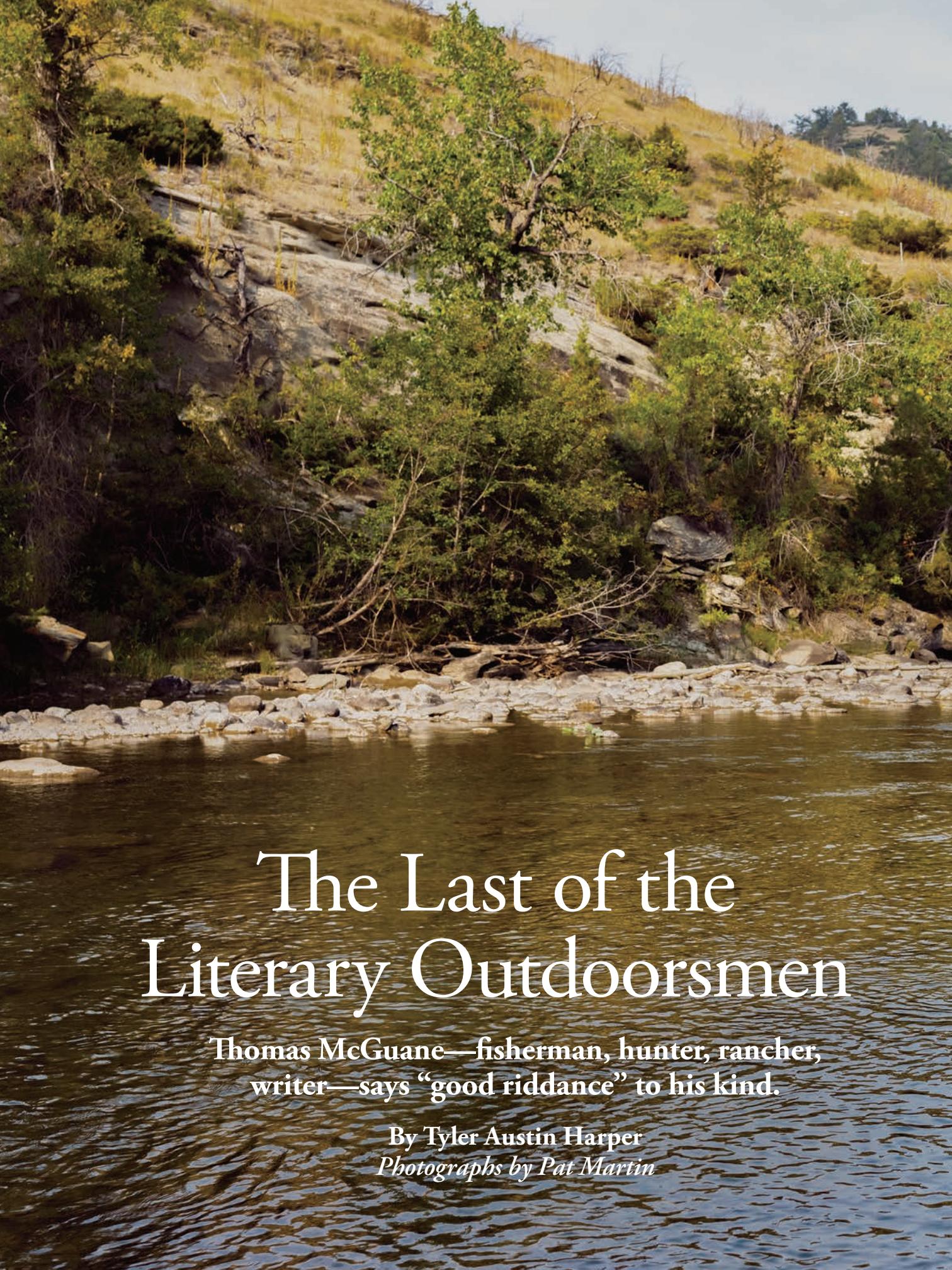
I RUN ABOUT 3,000 miles a year, and it takes about eight hours out of every week. In recent years, I’ve moved beyond the marathons and begun running ultras: racing deep into the mountains, starting in the darkness and then trying to finish before the sun goes down. I’ve gotten faster with age, too. In my mid-40s, I dropped my marathon time to 2:29. In 2021, I set the American record for men my age in the 50K. In April, I ran the fastest 50-mile time in the world this year for anyone over the age of 45.

When you train seriously as a runner, you realize two wonderful things: You can’t get faster by magic, and you do get faster with effort. There are ways to optimize and to train smarter. And there are times when you work and work and don’t get the result you want. But really, to get faster, particularly in a long race like a marathon, you have to go out every day and run—even when you’re sore, tired, cold, grumpy, busy, or all of the above. You have to run when you have aches, blisters, cramps, diarrhea, exhaustion, fasciitis, grogginess, headaches, ingrown toenails, jock itch, knee pain, lightheadedness, myalgia, numbness, overheating, panic, queasiness, rashes, swelling, toothaches, unhappiness, vomit, wounds, and xanthomas. You may have to run through swarms of yellow jackets, and you definitely have to run when you’re zonked.

You have to learn to enjoy the pain. You have to convince yourself over and over that the goal is worth the struggle. You have to run when you don’t want to, and you have to do the extra loop around the lake when everything is telling you to go back home. You have to believe in the process. You have to believe that brick by brick, run by run, your body and mind are getting stronger. You have to believe this on days when you run slower than you did the week before. And if you want to run faster than you did before, you have to strain your body more than you did before. You have to build resilience so you can push yourself even more the next time you run. You have to search for that mystical sensation—the crux of this sport—where pleasure and pain blur into one. When you get there, pain means progress and progress means pleasure.

There are a lot of reasons I run. I like the mental space it gives me. I like setting goals and trying to meet them. I like the feeling of my feet hitting the ground and the wind in my hair. I like to remember that I’m still alive, and that I survived my cancer. I think it makes me better at my job. But really I run because of my father. Running connects me to my father, reminds me of my father, and gives me a way to avoid becoming my father. My father led a deeply complicated and broken life. But he gave me many things, including the gift of running—a gift that opens the world to anyone who accepts it. *A*

Nicholas Thompson is the CEO of The Atlantic. This essay was adapted from his new book, The Running Ground.



The Last of the Literary Outdoorsmen

Thomas McGuane—fisherman, hunter, rancher, writer—says “good riddance” to his kind.

By Tyler Austin Harper
Photographs by Pat Martin



Not long after I walked through the open door of Thomas McGuane's Montana farmhouse, his dog Cooper at my heels, he ushered me back out for a tour of the ranch and the trout-studded freestone stream that bisects it. It occurred to me to ask if I should be watching for rattlesnakes as we pushed through the brush in the sweltering heat. McGuane told me there was nothing to worry about, then added that he had stepped on, and been bitten by, a rattlesnake the year before last. "That's how I learned I need a hearing aid," he said dryly. He apologized for being an unsteady walker, though I was having trouble keeping up with his brisk pace across unfamiliar terrain.

McGuane, an athletic 85, lives on 2,000 acres of rolling prairie in the Boulder River Valley, 75 miles east of Bozeman. Along the back roads that lead to his property, which is in the remote community of McLeod (one bar, one post office, population 162), quarter-mile-long irrigation systems sprayed huge, unattended agricultural fields. And everywhere, in every direction, cattle. In

by a certain reflective, existentialist temperament—the similarities between the two are obvious, yet go only so far. McGuane's style has at times skewed maximalist, a stark departure from Hemingway's famously undecorated prose. His fiction is also considerably more droll.

And unlike Hemingway, who tends to be fixated on honorable men thrust into, or just emerging from, Big Moments—frequently war—McGuane is interested in large-souled men in smaller moments. They're adrift, spiritually and socially, and look for solace in wild places, though that solace is usually troubled by the realization that the wilds, and the ways of life built around them, are disappearing. This is no doubt one reason his work is so beloved among outdoors enthusiasts.

When I told a few fishing friends that I was going to meet McGuane, they reacted as though I'd declared that I was making a pilgrimage to see Bruce Springsteen, or Barack Obama, or the pope. But when I relayed the same news to some non-fishing acquaintances, including a few writers, their responses were mostly versions of "Who?" or "Oh right, him." Today, far more Americans inhabit urban and suburban terrain than when he began writing fiction half a century ago, and participation in hunting and fishing has been declining for decades. No wonder, perhaps, that an audience for his remarkable body of fiction has not kept up with him—avid though his readership once was.

His most famous novel, *Ninety-Two in the Shade* (a 1974 National Book Award finalist), is nominally about a Key West burnout whose determination to become a local fishing guide leads him to ruin. In a deeper sense, it's about being a man with no good wars to fight, no great causes to cling to, and no duty that calls him in a culture whose norms and customs are in flux. "Nobody knows, from sea to shining sea," its memorable opening line reads, "why we are having all this trouble with our republic."

The "trouble" in question is of the hangover-from-the-1960s variety: the drugs, the free love, the feminism, and, though this is left unspoken, the ways America had been shattered by Vietnam. As in much of McGuane's fiction, the natural environment—in this case, the vitreous Florida flats, and the angler-tormenting tarpon, permit, and bonefish that populate them—provides the foil. In this novel, as well as in others McGuane wrote during the '70s, amid his annual peregrinations to Key West, the coastal world is a place of sense-making and ecological order. Its regularity and rhythm cut against a helter-skelter modernity that has neither.

A tension between humanity's chaos and nature's equipoise continued to define McGuane's fiction as he entered his Western period in the 1980s, when he began to set all of his novels in Montana. Something approaching ecological grief now surfaced in his work, a sense that Big Sky Country's outdoor life—and with it, the folkways of people who beat the sun to rising and who know how to shoe a horse and gut and pack out an elk—was becoming gradually impossible, or at least unappreciated. McGuane's style grew less frantic, more habitually elegiac. An old man puts eggshells in coffee grounds—"cowboy coffee." An aspiring rancher, the protagonist of *Keep the Change* (1989), is



McGuane, formerly known as "Captain Berserko," sails to Cuba through a winter gale in 1978.

preparation for the trip, when I'd asked if there was an address to put in my GPS, I'd been rebuffed: "There's not."

I'd ostensibly arrived here to interview McGuane about his new collection of short stories, *A Wooded Shore*. The more honest truth is that I was in McLeod because I am a fisherman and a writer, and had come to pay homage to the master. McGuane, who possesses the singular distinction of being a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Fly Fishing Hall of Fame, and the National Cutting Horse Association Hall of Fame, is the author of 10 novels, four story collections, and numerous essays, most of which are, directly or indirectly, about the sporting life. He is arguably the only major American fiction writer still living whose work is inextricably connected to fishing, hunting, and ranching. And he may be the last.

McGuane is reflexively compared to Hemingway, and it is not hard to see why. Obsessed anglers who lived in Key West, and whose fiction sometimes gravitates toward horses, blood sports, and male protagonists with a masculine swagger counterbalanced

clear-eyed enough to know that the livelihood he's chasing is an anachronism. The young man grows ruminative as he watches the weather from his family's porch. "This may be the principal use of a cattle ranch in these days," McGuane's wannabe cowpoke reflects: "watching the weather."

In *A Wooded Shore*—a collection of five *New Yorker* stories from the past half decade, one story that appeared in *The Paris Review* in 2020, and three never published before, including the title story—McGuane has mostly turned away from spectacular landscapes as well as the aimless 20- and 30-somethings groping for purpose who defined his early fiction. Indeed, his protagonists are now mostly men stuck in middle age or older, who have realized that purpose has permanently eluded them. Strip malls, dull office jobs, emptied-out prairie towns, and frayed families dominate the foreground. For his characters, fishing and hunting are hobbies, not burning obsessions. These characters often reflect on the past—theirs, their fathers', their country's—and feel regret.

In this way, McGuane has kept pace with America's shifting social landscape even as he remains a devoted outdoorsman in his private life—and even as the fiction-reading public now skews heavily female, a less obvious target for novels like his. Yet to call McGuane an unsung writer is not quite accurate, of course. Three of his novels have been made into movies, and his bacchanalian Key West tarpon-fishing exploits with his now-deceased artist friends—the writers Jim Harrison and Richard Brautigan, as well as the singer Jimmy Buffett, whose sister Laurie is McGuane's wife—are detailed in a documentary called *All That Is Sacred*, which became a cult hit after it was released in 2023.

McGuane has his devoted fans, but as we continued our ramble along the stream, I asked myself what had happened to the Great Outdoorsman Novelist, a variety of literary man who once seemed commonplace but now is an endangered species. And what will we lose when he's gone?

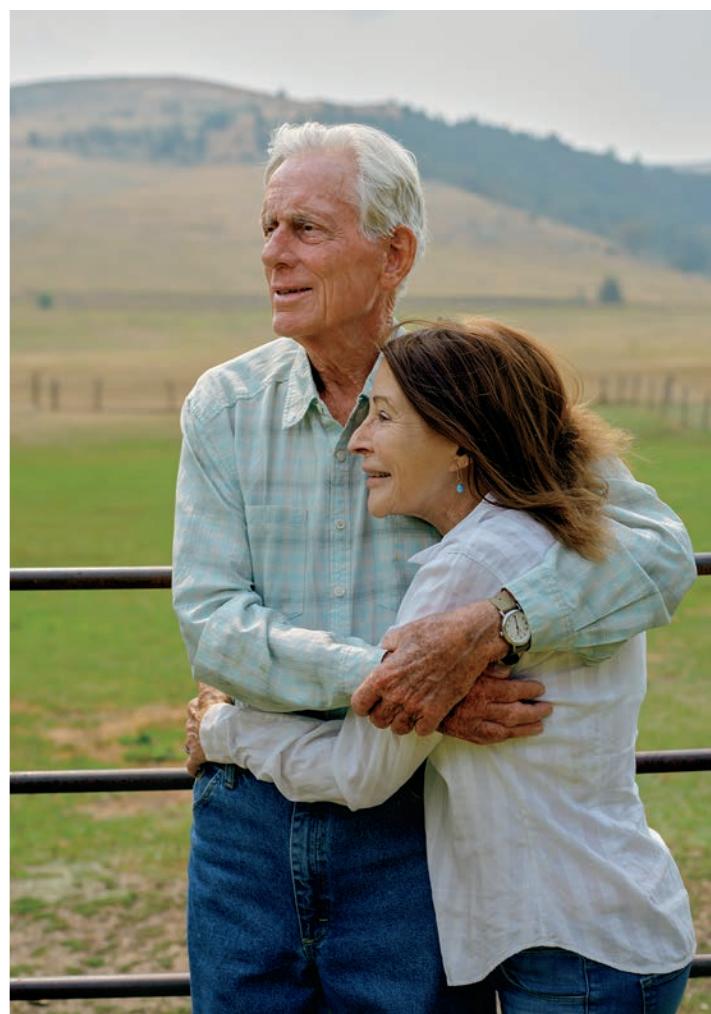
McGuane's eyes remained fixed on the water. If you are a fisherman, it's reflexive and involuntary, and he can't help himself. I followed his index finger as he pointed to a deep trout lie shaded by a rock face, to a lazy pool that's fishable even when the current is running hard with snowmelt, to a glassy bend where insect hatches are sometimes visible from his writing room.

MCGUANE DOES HIS WRITING in an old bunkhouse for cowboys and ranch hands that he appended to his farmhouse a quarter century ago. Above the bookshelves he still keeps a fly rod hanging on two pegs, ready to go in the event that, sitting at his desk, he spies rising fish. "The thread is the river," his oldest daughter, Maggie, later told me, summarizing McGuane's life: Across nearly nine decades, fishing has been the through line of his existence.

He was born in Wyandotte, Michigan, in 1939, the son of Irish Americans, a fly-fishing father who was fond of drink and a mother who was fond of books. These passions—reading, fishing, booze—later became McGuane's own, ones that he has, with the exception of alcohol (he is now decades-sober), maintained with a kind of vocational intensity that would feel more at home in a

monastic order. As his life and books betray, that sense of focus didn't always dominate. "I was the kind of kid who today would be on Ritalin," he told me as we sat in his television-less living room drinking homemade iced tea. Fishing with his father and grandfather was a welcome release, but school brought out his inner troublemaker. Eventually he was shipped off to boarding school, where he won the approval of the librarians if not the teachers: "I was always the only person in the library."

College (he bounced around among a few) was a similar story. McGuane recalled nights spent closing out the bars and talking books with Harrison, whom he met at Michigan State



McGuane and his wife, Laurie, the sister of his fishing friend Jimmy Buffett

University. The pair would then make their way to the nearest trout stream, fly rods in hand, and wait for the sun to come up. They'd fish through the morning, often still wearing off a drunk.

"My twenties were entirely taken up with literature," he later said in a *Paris Review* interview. After getting a bachelor's degree in humanities at Michigan State in 1962, he went on to earn an M.F.A. at Yale three years later, intending to be a playwright. McGuane realized that he wasn't willing to live in New York

McGuane lives on 2,000 acres of rolling prairie in Montana's Boulder River Valley, 75 miles east of Bozeman.

City—a necessity to make it in the theater world. He decamped to Stanford in 1966, the recipient of a prestigious Stegner Fellowship for early-career writers. For a man who described himself in the same interview as driven by “fear of failure,” it seems to have been a well-timed goad: He began work on what became his 1968 debut novel, *The Sporting Club*. Devoted though he was, spending hours every day writing, he took to steelhead fishing more than to California literary life. “My usual schizophrenia set in,” he told me of those restless years, and he headed off to Livingston, Montana, a town he landed on after a San Francisco



fly-shop employee recommended it. “I had no good reasons to assume that I had any kind of remunerative future,” he said. “But I had about \$600 left. And so I said, ‘Well, until the axe falls, I’m going fishing with the \$600.’”

By then, he’d married a woman from Kalamazoo, Michigan, named Portia Rebecca Crockett and had an infant, and when his new Livingston neighbors, perfect strangers, brought his son a rabbit and a cake for his first birthday, McGuane and his wife decided not to move on as planned. “I thought, *God, this was nice. Maybe we’ll stay for another month or two ’til I figure out what*

I’m doing with my life.” What he wanted to do with his life, he soon concluded, was fish: “I was just a fish head,” he said ruefully. Around the same time that he settled down in Montana, where he took up cattle ranching and has remained ever since, McGuane found himself also regularly spending months in Key West, plying his fly rod in the salt. His reputations as a gifted fisherman and a gifted writer—pursuits that became ever more entwined—were cemented during the 1970s as he began what became an annual migration: heading south to fish for tarpon in the late winter and early spring.

Hemingway was a decade dead, but other literary giants remained in the Key West orbit. McGuane joined Tennessee Williams for some meals, discussed writing with Hunter S. Thompson, and went drinking with Truman Capote, whom he described as a mesmerizing dancer. But this older and more established generation didn’t define his Keys experience. His gang consisted of a younger circle of fisherman-writer friends: Harrison, a passionate, if middling, fisherman who would later publish *Legends of the Fall*; Brautigan, the author of the celebrated 1967 novella *Trout Fishing in America*; and Guy de la Valdène, a French writer, sportsman, and Norman count. McGuane—whose friends had earlier dubbed him the “White Knight” for his literary dedication and comparatively straight-edged lifestyle—began cutting loose, though angling remained his main diversion from sweating out prose. They would meet in Key West almost every year and fish for tarpon almost every day—hungover or coming off some drug or another consumed the night before.

Here, McGuane’s legend was built. He became known not just as a world-class fisherman, but as a reliable good time—“Captain Berserko” was his new nickname. He made money on the side as an intermittent tarpon guide, and in addition to novels, he wrote freelance articles for various magazines, some of which have become classics. I’m far from alone in considering “The Longest Silence,” his 1969 *Sports Illustrated* essay on stalking permit—a plain-Jane, silver-dollar-looking fish that would be perfectly unremarkable were it not arguably the world’s most challenging to land on a fly rod—the greatest fishing essay ever written. (“I was losing my breath with excitement”—McGuane has just spotted a permit trying to steal a crab from a stingray—and “the little expanse of skin beneath my sternum throbbed like a frog’s throat. I acquired a fantastic lack of coordination.”)

In these years McGuane also wrote *Ninety-Two in the Shade*, a snapshot of a lost Florida, when both the people and the coastline were still wild, before the money, the snowbirds, and the big-time cocaine dealers moved in. It also captured a lost literary subculture, a relic of a day and age when big magazines would pay big money for fishing features, and when up-and-coming writers could be found in tarpon skiffs rather than Brooklyn dives.

Ninety-Two in the Shade launched him into a tumultuous stardom. The rave reviews were followed by a stint in Hollywood—where he wrote and directed an adaptation of the novel—and, after his first marriage fell apart, an even briefer Hollywood marriage to the actor Margot Kidder. (After their divorce, Crockett married the star of McGuane’s movie, Peter Fonda.) McGuane’s



literary swerve was even more dramatic. Like his two previous works, *Panama*—his fourth novel, published in 1978—is set in Florida. A feverish and lightly autobiographical work about a rock star with a drug problem and daddy issues, it was panned by reviewers as lazy and self-parodying.

McGuane has been frank about how devastated he was. “People don’t understand how much influence they can actually have on a writer, how much a writer’s feelings can be hurt, how much they can deflect his course,” he said years later in the *Paris Review* interview. “I was stunned by the bad reception of *Panama*; it was a painful and punishing experience.” He never set another novel in the Keys, and *Panama* was the last novel marked by the madcap lyricism of his 1970s writing, the last novel before McGuane got sober and, not unrelated, began taking his tarpon trips in other parts of Florida, away from that scene.

“TO BE AS SUCCINCT AS POSSIBLE,” McGuane began when I asked him if he lamented the disappearance of fishermen, hunters, and other rugged sporting types from American literary culture: “No, and good riddance!” His booming laugh made it hard to tell whether he meant this half or wholly seriously. He pointed out that their extinction is only partially true, anyway. There are a number of fishermen writing superb literary nonfiction today, and McGuane mentioned three of my personal favorites: the bonefish-addled poet, trout guide, and University of Montana professor Chris Dombrowski; the fishing and fashion writer David Coggins; and Monte Burke, the author of *Lords of the Fly*, a beautifully written and meticulously reported book about tarpon fly-fishing in the Keys, in which McGuane is a minor character. But he conceded that novelists writing in this mode have essentially vanished, even if he didn’t view this development as some grand tragedy.

McGuane also reminded me that Hemingway was, to put it politely, a complicated personality, a domineering figure prone to brawling, affairs, and cask-strength egoism. “Until Bill Belichick came along, I can’t think of anybody more disagreeable,” he told me. Decades’ worth of Hemingway comparisons have plainly rankled McGuane, and after a few days with him, I understood more clearly why: The two men are not just stylistically but temperamentally worlds apart. McGuane’s cowboys lose fights—for women, for their ranches, for their dreams—and tend to know when they’ve been beaten. His fiction, neither notably blood-soaked nor mythologically freighted, also differs starkly from the work of Larry McMurtry and Cormac McCarthy, contemporaries who likewise were famously steeped in the West. McGuane, who’s lived Montana’s everyday reality in ways that they didn’t, is not tapping into the John Wayne version of the Old West. His cowboys keep their saddles in the back of their sedans.

Even at 85, McGuane is wiry and strong, a hard man who has—by his own choice—lived a physically arduous life as a working rancher: breaking horses, rising early to drive cattle, enduring snowed-in Montana winters miles from what would pass for most of his readers as civilization. He describes himself as a “recluse,” but he clearly doesn’t hole up on his property in remote McLeod. Everywhere I went—a bar, a Livingston restaurant, a Bozeman bookstore, a fly shop—I ran into someone who

knew him and conveyed what I was discovering: how generous, funny, and kind he is. McGuane, who remains a gorgeous fly caster, spent an afternoon giving me patient lessons. He stood 10 paces off and had me go through the motions again and again, eyeing my backcast like a benevolent hawk until he was satisfied that I’d made progress.

Watching him hold a fly rod, shooting long, looping casts in the shadow of the little writing room he had built onto the house; seeing him beam at the sight of a fat, ruddy fox crossing a deer trail; hearing him recount catching a tarpon weighing more than 150 pounds at the age of 82, restoring a cow-trampled stream bank, and trudging down a grizzly-tracked switchback in a subarctic storm in pursuit of Canadian steelhead, I was struck by how rare men like McGuane are becoming. Perhaps he really does mean that we shouldn’t regret the disappearance of literary outdoorsmen. He seemed to harbor no special fixation on his cultural legacy. When I asked what he thinks of Taylor Sheridan’s Montana-ranch soap opera, *Yellowstone*, a TV series quite obviously influenced by McGuane’s Western fiction, he told me that he hadn’t seen it, though he recalled that the director did once visit his ranch to see his horses.

But perhaps—and this seemed to me more likely—this modesty is also something of a defense mechanism, a way of coping with a transformed culture that is not much interested in the knife-thin silhouette of permit on a shallow flat, the smell of sagebrush in the Montana backcountry, the way a pheasant folds and falls when it’s been hit cleanly with shot, or simply a red fox that has survived another winter.

When I left the ranch for the last time, the sky over the Crazy Mountains was clotted gray, then finally opened up. McGuane and his wife urged me to get on the road before the storm got too bad. They were worried about my “small” car, an SUV that didn’t feel small to me until I noticed the water lying in heavy pools on their unpaved road.

By the time I was halfway down it, the rain was slowing and the starlings that had amassed on the power lines during my drive in were now rioting, looting the ground for worms. “All signs suggest that we’re actually at war with the Earth itself,” McGuane observed in a talk he gave on fishing a few years back. That war felt a world away in McLeod, where the land still seems too big to be brought to heel, and people still live on rather than against it.

But as I drove by a celebrity-owned ranch, I was reminded that the war is coming for this place too, and is already being waged by profiteers, hobbyists, and speculators—“house flippers, ranch flippers, and river flippers,” as McGuane puts it in a story in *A Wooded Shore*. And when that war has reached a more advanced stage, when the wild is variously paved with hot asphalt or turned into Disneylands for the gawking rich, when few native trout are left in the freestone pools and the men who would throw dry flies at them are scarce, McGuane’s writing, if nothing else, will be left to remind us of what we’ve lost. *A*

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Culture & Critics

OMNIVORE

The One and Only Sammy

The astonishing, confounding career of Sammy Davis Jr.

By Questlove

When I was a kid, I was Sammy Davis Jr. before I was anyone else. I started my entertainment career as a tap dancer. That was what led to my first appearance on television, in Philadelphia on KYW-TV. I was 5 years old. Later that day, the parents of other dancers and talent-show participants complained that my afro had covered up their kids on-screen.

In some sense, Sammy and I were knit together from that moment on. I grew up in the 1970s, the end of the golden age of the variety show, which



EVENING STANDARD / GETTY

you could also call the second (or third) golden age of Sammy Davis Jr. If you turned on the TV, he would be there, singing “The Candy Man,” singing “Mr. Bojangles.” I have specific memories of him performing with Carol Burnett and Flip Wilson. He was an actor as well, who would pop up, almost always playing himself, on sitcoms such as *All in the Family* (where he famously kissed Archie Bunker) and *Chico and the Man* (he covered José Feliciano’s theme song), and in dramas including *Charlie’s Angels*. He was also on soap operas such as *One Life to Live* and, slightly later, *General Hospital*, though not as himself: He played the con artist Chip Warren on the first and a recovering alcoholic father named Eddie Phillips on the second. Sammy was a presence everywhere. Even “The Candy Man,” sung by a children’s choir and used to sell M&M’s, pointed back to Sammy.

Sammy gave me one of my first serious lessons in life, which was about death. He was on some show doing “Mr. Bojangles,” and I got the hang of it and sang along. After his performance, I had a little talk with my mother. There’s a lyric where he says that “his dog up and died,” and I was unclear on the concept. I had lost my grandparents at that point, but what did that mean, really? Where were they? She talked it through with me, and I understood, as best as I could at age 2 or whatever (which maybe is better than I understand it now, even).

Another serious lesson I learned from Sammy was about consequences, intended and unintended. A longtime supporter of John F. Kennedy’s, Sammy was disinvited from performing at the president’s inaugural ball soon after marrying the white Swedish actor May Britt. (In a memoir, the couple’s daughter, Tracey Davis, said that her parents’ interracial marriage was the reason for the snub.) Sensing an opportunity, Richard Nixon later sought out Sammy’s advice on issues of race and poverty, and Sammy endorsed him for president in 1972 (the year after I was born). Every Black person has an uncle who is hard-core about racial justice, and mine was equally hard-core in his disapproval of Sammy’s choice. He wasn’t alone. Julian Bond, who was then in the Georgia state legislature, said that the decision was “unbelievable.” But people believed it, and withdrew their goodwill because of it.

Yet Sammy didn’t shrink from the Nixon controversy. In the 1973 movie *Save the Children*, which documents a fundraising concert for Jesse Jackson’s Operation PUSH (showcasing stars such as Marvin Gaye, Bill Withers, and the Jackson 5), he stepped right into it. He knew that a cultural firing squad was waiting for him, and he told the audience that he understood they were disappointed. It wasn’t an apology, which made it even more compelling. He was accounting for himself. And then he sang “I’ve Gotta Be Me,” which really put

a stamp on it. (The last ballot he cast for president, I should note, was for Jesse Jackson, in 1988.)

SAMMY, BORN A CENTURY AGO this year, had to be himself, but who was that? Balancing an internal identity with a public persona is not easy for anyone, so imagine how hard it was for him. Sammy was a showbiz kid almost from birth. His father was in vaudeville, and, as a result, so was Sammy. He debuted at age 3 and never stopped, appearing on stages and television, in nightclubs and movies. As a singer, he started with covers, including of Jimmy Durante’s novelty song “Inka Dinka Doo,” and had hits right out of the Great American Songbook: Johnny Mercer’s “Something’s Gotta Give,” Mercer and Harold Arlen’s “That Old Black Magic,” Anthony Newley and Al Jolson songs. He embraced the spirit of all of this—pure entertainment, showman stuff. Sammy, day in and day out, had to be on.

Think of the history churning inside him, the way he had to have one foot here and one foot there as he moved forward, missteps awaiting him. I knew about Sammy’s relationships, including his affair with the actor Kim Novak, and I was aware that this was a time when interracial romances were frowned upon. He would go on, of course, to marry Britt. (In my house, the most famous member of Sammy’s family was probably his third wife, Altovise, a dancer and an activist who appeared with Sammy on game shows such as *Tattletales* and was the star of an Afro-Sheen television commercial.) And I knew about his complex spiritual journey: He was raised Christian, converted to Judaism in his mid-30s, and later became an honorary warlock in the Church of Satan. (Whew.)

Was Sammy a positive force? Was he a token? Was he being manipulated as a way of taking the focus off wider, more pernicious forms of racism? Sammy was a person who, for his survival, for his benefit—but also to his detriment—had to live as a celebrity, as a performer, which doesn’t leave much time for investigating such questions. In some television interviews, Sammy let down his guard and reflected, but they tended to come later in his career, in long-form sit-downs with Larry King and Arsenio Hall. And even then, he held back. He was part of a circle of older, more circumspect Black entertainers who connected the ’70s and the ’80s to an earlier era—a circle that included Redd Foxx and Scatman Crothers: comedian-actor-musicians who had started in nightclubs and speakeasies and moved on to radio, albums, and the growing medium of television.

Those interviews were some of my first looks at him. I looked again when YouTube came along: Sammy was one of the earliest examples of a viral YouTube star. There are videos of him tap-dancing at age 8 or so, not

much older than when I first tapped, except he was 50,000 times better. (There are videos of him drumming as well—one of his secret skills—and though he wasn't 50,000 times better, he was very good.)

Three things happened when I saw those videos. First of all, I saw how electric he was, how he had complete control over every aspect of his arsenal of entertainment skills. Second of all, I realized that this was a slightly different Sammy from the one I had seen on variety shows. When he was on Dinah Shore's show or *The Tonight Show*, he would dance and sing and throw off a line or two, but it wasn't the pure, concentrated thing that these YouTube performances were. Finally, I saw more clearly the relationship between him and the most electric entertainer of my lifetime, Michael Jackson. I had heard that a teenage Michael had come to Sammy for pointers, but I didn't fully appreciate the history behind that, the other dancers and nightclub performers and vaudevillians who were wrapped up in what Sammy represented to Michael and what Michael carried forward.

AND THEN there was my discovery of his 1965 autobiography, *Yes I Can*, written with his longtime friends Jane and Burt Boyar. In straightforward and compelling prose, Sammy, then 40, tells the story of his vaudeville beginnings, his growth as an entertainer, and his movement through America. That year, at a Book and Author Luncheon, he gave a riveting talk, opening up completely about racial identity, religious discrimination, and social (in)justice, as well as the importance of writing the memoir:

You don't know how frustrating it is to believe something sincerely and deeply in your heart and have to joke about it to be able to make it acceptable. The frustration of not belonging to either part of the color spectrum, neither being fish nor fowl, having your own people despise you, having the people you have adopted suspect you, to walk into a synagogue on the High Holy Days and hear the laughter and the snickering because they're not fully aware that you're sincere. How do you explain that? How do you penetrate that? Or to walk out of the house with your wife and hear a group of guys say—of your own color, incidentally—say "He thinks he's white."

The memoir was a chance to "cleanse, in part, my emotional soul," he said. That tone—of pain, of surprise, of a stubborn refusal to be reduced or diminished—is everywhere in it. Sammy may have talked about being stuck between Black and white, between Christian and Jewish, but his existence joined one side to the other, not to mention pointing beyond a past of separation and stereotype.



Sammy Davis Jr. with Harvey Korman and Carol Burnett in a 1975 episode of *The Carol Burnett Show*

I opened with a memory of being on television, and in pure showbiz fashion, I will end with one, too. In 1988, when I was 17, my father's group, Lee Andrews and the Hearts, appeared on Jerry Lewis's Labor Day telethon. Also on the telethon that year: Sammy Davis Jr. We didn't share a stage, exactly, but I have a faint memory of seeing him walking around backstage. Sammy was only in his early 60s at the time but he looked older to me, closer to 80. He was a year away from the throat-cancer diagnosis that led to radiation therapy (he chose it to protect his voice) and, when that failed, the removal of his larynx, a loss for him that was in some ways as devastating as actual death.

Sammy died on May 16, 1990. On that same day, a world away, Ice Cube was releasing his debut solo album, *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*. Years later, after he'd appeared in such films as *Boyz n the Hood* and *Friday*, he told an interviewer, "There was a time you couldn't get a job if you couldn't sing and dance. I mean, there was Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Elvis Presley—musicians, singers have always done movies."

By the 1990s, what was considered entertainment in America was changing. It had already changed, and would continue to change. Vaudeville gave way to Vegas and nightclubs, which gave way to television. Genres changed. Faces changed. Sammy stood in the middle of it for so long, watched it all spin around him as he spun through it. "I've gotta be me," he sang, and he was. *A*

YES I CAN: THE
STORY OF
SAMMY DAVIS, JR.

Sammy Davis, Jr.,
and Jane and
Burt Boyar, with
a new foreword by
Questlove

AUWA/FSG

Questlove is a drummer, an author, and an Oscar-winning filmmaker. This article was adapted from his foreword for the reissue of Sammy Davis Jr.'s autobiography *Yes I Can*.

There are plenty of wallets you can choose from these days, but none are as useful as the Rogue Front Pocket Wallet.

- *Mode*

Excellently crafted... fits perfectly in the front pocket.

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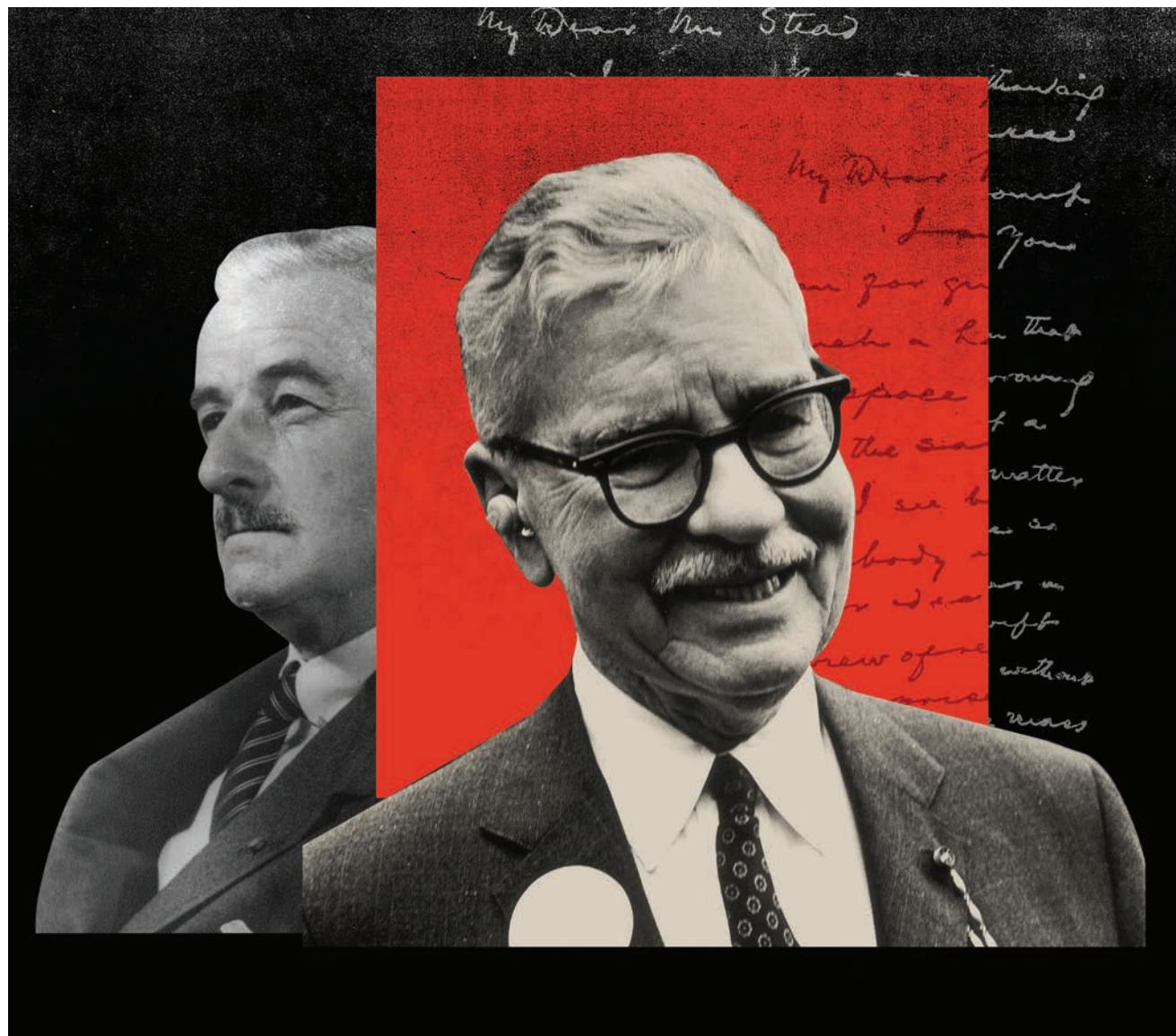
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The Man Who Rescued Faulkner

How the critic Malcolm Cowley made American literature into its own great tradition

By Michael Gorra

The critic and editor Malcolm Cowley had a record as a literary-talent spotter that was unmatched in the American Century. At *The New Republic* in 1930, where he'd recently become the literary editor at 32, he published "Expelled," the first short story by a then-teenage John Cheever to appear in a national magazine (one that didn't usually publish fiction). A few years later, Cowley gave a second teenager his start in reviewing: a Brooklyn boy named Alfred Kazin. In the 1940s, at the Viking Press, Cowley initiated the resurrection of William Faulkner from oblivion, a project that put the writer on the syllabus in the ever-expanding postwar university, brought the rest of his work back into print, and surely helped win him the



CARL VAN VECCHEN COLLECTION / GETTY; FRED W. McDARRAH / THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL / GETTY

1949 Nobel Prize in Literature. Cowley went on to battle reluctant Viking colleagues to ensure the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in 1957. In 1960, he found Ken Kesey in a creative-writing class he taught at Stanford, and helped shape *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The journey from Cheever to Kerouac and Kesey, via Faulkner, was one that not many editors could have covered.

Nowadays some would call Cowley a gatekeeper, except that the term has acquired an invidious ring; Cowley's power and influence lay in opening, not shutting, the door to a new generation. He came of age at an especially fertile literary moment, after World War I, and he had a special interest in the work of his contemporaries, in the homegrown modernism of Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway. He had an even bigger goal as well, pursued in several now-classic works, starting with *Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas* (1934). Cowley aspired to raise the status of American writing as a whole. He wanted to see it recognized as more than a mere appendage to British literature, as a great tradition in its own right.

If it seems strange that anyone ever needed to make such a claim, that's a mark of how well Cowley and others of his era succeeded in their mission. Notable poets and novelists led the way. Scholars were close behind, among them the Harvard professor F. O. Matthiessen, whose *American Renaissance* (1941) established a canon that is still a basis for study. In between was the "man of letters," a phrase that now sounds "cobwebby and antique," Gerald Howard writes in *The Insider: Malcolm Cowley and the Triumph of American Literature*. But Cowley was on the cutting edge in his own time, as the biography vividly shows, focusing on his public rather than private life. Howard goes further: Cowley's approach to American literature remains as important as ever to helping it thrive.

HOWARD IS a publishing insider himself, now retired after a long career at Viking Penguin and Doubleday. He's watched literary trends come and go, and writes in his introduction that he has been an admirer of Cowley's work ever since he read his *A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation* (1973), published soon after Howard graduated from college. What that book taught him, he writes, was "a fact my otherwise excellent undergraduate English courses had failed to address: that writers were actual people." Howard's literature classes, like mine at roughly the same time, had yet to be

Malcolm Cowley persuaded Viking Press to add a Faulkner volume to its Portable Library series in the mid-1940s, when all but one of the writer's 17 books were out of print.

overtaken by critical theory, but were under the sway of what was called New Criticism. Its practitioners were devoted to the close reading of texts, independent of their authors' social and historical circumstances. Cowley, by contrast, was drawn to real-life context, and intuitively guided, Howard writes, by a "generational sense of the progress of American literature." In that unfolding lineage, Cowley discerned an enduring set of almost mythic "commonalities," among them a focus on rural life, a heritage of Puritanism, a "revolt against gentility"—and, of special importance to him, an ambition to give fictional form to this country in its notable dispareteness.

For Cowley, born in 1898 and reared in Pittsburgh in a middle-class family without much money, taking a break from college proved formative. One "striking aspect" of his Harvard education, begun in the fall of 1915 (his tuition largely covered by scholarships), was "how completely free of any formal classroom encounter with American literature it was," Howard writes. Matthiessen said the same of his Yale training around the same time. T. S. Eliot, who would become the most famous writer among Harvard's recent graduates, was already busy turning himself into an Englishman.

Cowley went down a different path. He left school as a sophomore to join the ambulance corps run out of Paris by the American Field Service. Once he got to France, he found himself driving trucks loaded with munitions instead. Other future writers took a similar route to the war. E. E. Cummings and John Dos Passos were also volunteer drivers in France, and Hemingway was badly wounded driving on the Italian front, an experience that went into *A Farewell to Arms*. After spending the summer and fall of 1917 behind the wheel, Cowley failed the physical to become a fighter pilot. He was soon back at Harvard, but the brief experience convinced him that his own war-marked cohort knew a world of sudden and radical change that the literary generations preceding and following them didn't.

Cowley graduated in 1920, and for a year and a half lived an adventurous, impecunious Grub Street life in New York, before a fellowship took him, now married, back to France for a master's in French. But the real allure was the cafés of Montparnasse and the company of his generation, the one Gertrude Stein called "lost." He later wrote amusingly about his only meeting with James Joyce, who sent him out to buy stamps. Cowley got arrested one night when he and some well-buzzed friends, the poet Louis Aragon among them, decided for no good reason to assault the proprietor of the Café de la Rotonde. It wasn't Cowley's idea, but he threw the punch, and the French police gave him a beating in turn.

“It was a boast at first,” the idea of a Lost Generation, “like telling what a hangover one had after a party to which someone else wasn’t invited,” Cowley writes at the start of *Exile’s Return*, his study of the expatriate American writers with whom he had shared the experience of the war, and then Paris in the 1920s. Exile, or rather expatriation, he saw in retrospect, gave an American literary generation—its members sharing middle-class origins and mostly university educated—a chance to play at *la vie bohème* in a country where the dollar went far. That life had its casualties. Cowley’s marriage later collapsed; his ex-wife moved in with his friend Hart Crane and was with Crane on the ship from which the poet jumped to his death.

It also postponed, Cowley wrote, the social and individual “emotional collapse” that followed a war that had left his generation of writers stranded and restless. Their ties to region and tradition, and to received truths, had been eroded, and they now confronted their own version of the American artist’s problem: what kind of creative life to stake out in a country lacking an established literary heritage. Nathaniel Hawthorne had struggled with that, as had Henry James. Cowley’s disillusioned but fundamentally idealistic cohort had an unexpected response. Shaped though they were by their European experience, they refused the path of permanent expatriation and, embracing a Modernist spirit of experimentation, reaffirmed their own Americanness instead.

Exile’s Return has been in print for almost a century, but Cowley’s other work of the period hasn’t aged so well. By that I mean his political work. He had always been on the left, but in 1932, he went to report on the strike-ridden coal mines of southern Kentucky, and found himself facing a heavily armed force summoned by local authorities. The experience made him distrust the entire American social order, and Howard is clear-eyed in his criticism of Cowley’s swerve into willful naivete about Stalinist Russia; it took him years to admit that the Moscow show trials really were a show. Cowley paid for his extreme credulity during World War II, when he was denied any real role in the war effort, and when the anti-Stalinist-left editors of *Partisan Review* and, later, *The New York Review of Books* had no space for him in their pages.

YET THIS is when Cowley really begins to matter in American literary history. He retreated to a Connecticut farmhouse and immersed himself in reading—all of Faulkner, among other things—supported by a fellowship from the Bollingen Foundation. Cowley became convinced that Faulkner (whom he met only later) was misunderstood and undervalued. The separate books he had set in his imaginary Yoknapatawpha County were really parts of one enormous

whole, Cowley recognized, and anyone who looked at them that way could see the unmatched scale of his achievement. In the mid-1940s, Cowley had a chance to illustrate that claim: He added a Faulkner volume to a Viking series called the *Portable Library*, anthologies that offered a selection of an individual writer’s best work. He had already done *The Portable Hemingway*, and in an introduction, he presented that ever-popular writer as far more traumatized by his war experiences than he was commonly held to be. Faulkner was a harder case; all but one of his 17 books were out of print. Cowley had to convince Viking, which went on to hire him as a consulting editor, that such a volume not only was needed but would sell; he had to make the case that Faulkner counted, and explain why.

By now, Cowley knew how to seed the market, and he wrote a series of articles for *The New York Times Book Review* and elsewhere that suggested a boom of interest in the southerner’s notoriously difficult work. Soon enough that boom did in fact begin, both here and in France, where, Jean-Paul Sartre told Cowley, young French readers saw the Mississippian as a “god.” *The Portable Faulkner* appeared in 1946, and in stressing the linked plots and characters of the different novels, Cowley’s introduction showed how the writer had created “a parable or legend” of a white South whose self-regard was indelibly stained by the sin of slavery. The *Portable* series itself would eventually branch out from hardcovers and become part of the paperback revolution that put cheap editions of classic literature into the hands of millions.

As a critic, Cowley arguably made his most valuable contribution when he set out to anatomize the emerging postwar cultural scene in the U.S., a world in which he played a pivotal part. In *The Literary Situation* (1954), Cowley, the earlier champion of American experimentation, identifies an uneasy “interregnum,” during which writers were “looking for something or someone to give their work a more definite direction,” even as the country’s readership was democratizing. He tours the revolving book racks in Chicago drugstores, finding softcovers both pulpy and serious.

Thinking, as always, in terms of literary generations, Cowley devotes key chapters to fiction that came out of World War II, surprised that books such as James Jones’s *From Here to Eternity* and Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* are more formally tame than those written after his own war, their realism less touched by modernist symbolism. He heralds Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison as the most daring new novelists of the 1950s, struck by their sprawling books’ success in homing in on the particulars of Jewish and Black experience while also examining “the dilemma of all men in a mechanized civilization.” It’s worth noting that Cowley had by then begun the challenging

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MALCOLM
COWLEY AND
THE TRIUMPH
OF AMERICAN
LITERATURE

Gerald Howard

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work of bringing Kerouac's account of crisscrossing the American landscape into print. His more conservative Viking colleagues questioned the project's merits; Cowley was enmeshed in its difficulties. He had to preserve narrative spontaneity while avoiding potential libel and obscenity charges. Pulling off the feat took years.

Cowley ends his examination of the postwar cultural situation on a note of doubt, not least about the changing status and nature of literary criticism. "It may be hard to credit now," Howard writes, "but the route to real literary prestige and advancement once ran through the practice of book reviewing": To be an influential arbiter had meant to write for a nonprofessional public in the pages of magazines and newspapers, as Kazin did, and Edmund Wilson, and Cowley himself. Criticism was now migrating to the university, and its focus was on the work as an "entity with its own laws of being," and fundamentally divorced from any "moral or social" effect, as Cowley put it. He admired the precision that such academic critics brought to the analysis of language. But he also found the approach sterile, out of step with a literature that he felt thrived on engaging with the unfinished and upstart project of the nation: How could one possibly understand *Leaves of Grass* or *The Great Gatsby* in purely formal terms?

And how could an American literary tradition claim the distinction and stature he felt it deserved without the animating idea of the Great American Novel? Cowley's own career had been galvanized by the arrival of just that. As of 1920, he writes in *The Literary Situation*, there was as yet "no American novel that was great in the sense of being greatly admired," and acknowledged as such by "the educated public"—a work that embraced not just a region of the country but its expanse. A few years later, there was. It was called *Moby-Dick*. Cowley saw its elevation to the "position of national epic," more than half a century after it came out in 1851, as the most significant literary event of his own time, even more important than the recognition bestowed on Faulkner and Hemingway.

Cowley died at 90, well aware that his own Lost Generation had itself long since become a myth. Was he a great American critic? Not as great, in Howard's final judgment, as his friend Wilson, whose polyglot sense of literary history had a global range. But Cowley was American in a crucial way, wearing many hats in his long career, fascinated by the country's parts, and always seeking to understand the forces that kept it whole and the writers who shared that curiosity. *A*

Michael Gorra's books include The Saddest Words: William Faulkner's Civil War. *He is an English professor emeritus at Smith College.*

Coyote

By Carol Muske-Dukes

Once they came down only at dark
from the canyons. Now they trot out
bold in daylight on sunlit pavement.
Still, if you move close, they vanish fast

into shadows under the freeway,
blocks from the ocean. Up beyond
the flammable mansions on over-
built lots, where they once burrowed

safe, gave birth to ravenous young.
Now they watch under scaffolding
swinging above sliding foundations.
Near the homeless tarps, scattered

fires. Wolf instinct awakes in the
once-wilderness. They'd feed at your
jugular. You mean nothing to them, you
who believed in the evolved domestic.

Hunger, not love, draws your dog.
The need in the gut. Each choice
made in your life sentimentalized.
Like the young you fed first. Gone

too when you return with nothing
but your worn advice on how to survive.

Carol Muske-Dukes is a former poet laureate of California. Her most recent book of poems is *Blue Rose*.



The Realist Magic of Philip Pullman

The Golden Compass author tells us how to love this world. It's not easy.

By Lev Grossman

Philip Pullman's young-adult fantasy classic *The Golden Compass* was published in 1995, two years before *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Both are wildly popular, but only J. K. Rowling's series inspired a theme park. Even after 30 years, during which *The Golden Compass* became a trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, which begat a second trilogy, *The Book of Dust*—collectively selling something like 50 million copies—Pullman's books retain an idiosyncratic spikiness. Rowling's work has a glossy, optimized feel; it's engineered for your comfort. Pullman's epic, which concludes this fall with the publication of *The Rose Field*, doesn't leach into the cultural groundwater quite so readily.

For starters, Pullman's world-building is spotty, probably intentionally so. Magic in contemporary fantasy is meant to function as a system, with rules and regulations, but his is wild and willful: Witches fly on cloud-pine branches; angels coalesce out of dust. His books are more permeable to the real world than Rowling's—boat-borne refugees and climate change crop up. Not least, Pullman stakes claims; he politely but firmly declines to mince words. When Rowling wants to acknowledge her religion in her work, she does so with a few decorous, sidelong allusions to Christian faith. Pullman is an atheist, and he expresses that in *His Dark Materials* by killing God.

The books take place in a world not so unlike our own, except that it's a bit more magic and steampunk. The plot of *His Dark Materials* is driven by the long-running conflict between Pullman's heroine, a bold, lithe intelligent 11-year-old named Lyra, and the Magisterium, an authoritarian incarnation of Christianity. At the same time, she's pursuing her ever-receding parents, the brilliant, amoral Lord Asriel and the delectably cruel Mrs. Coulter. Lyra, whom we first meet growing up semi-feral at the fictional Jordan College, Oxford, has a daemon, as does every

other human being in the Lyaverse: a talking animal companion/alter ego. Lyra also has the ability to read an alethiometer, a marvelous magical device—the titular compass—that can answer any question, but only by way of arcane symbols.

At issue is the nature of a mysterious energetic particle, a kind of magical Higgs boson called Dust. Is it the key to magic and consciousness, or is it, as the Magisterium believes, a subatomic trace of original sin, to be eradicated at all costs? The second and third books, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*, follow Lyra across multiple worlds as she engages in intricate wrangles with the Magisterium, learns more about Dust, and falls in love with a boy named Will. They are ultimately parted, when Lyra is 12 or 13, but not before they share a sweet and startling moment of carnal pleasure.

It's a deliberate provocation: Pullman has no patience with the sexless adventures imagined by writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien and particularly C. S. Lewis, for whom magic and wonder were associated with childlike innocence. (Pullman has called the *Narnia* books "monumentally disparaging of girls and women.") For Pullman, the adventure doesn't end with puberty. There is magic in innocence, but also in experience.

SEVENTEEN YEARS passed between the last installment of *His Dark Materials*, in 2000, and the first volume of *The Book of Dust*, but Pullman (born in 1946) didn't get any less spiky with age. Like Dylan going electric (or, as they say in the Lyaverse, anbaric), he was back to demonstrate that he's not here to do fan service: He gave the new book a French title, *La Belle Sauvage*, and set it a decade before *The Golden Compass*, when Lyra is just a baby. It tells the story of Malcolm, an unflappable 11-year-old boy who rescues infant

Lyra from the Magisterium by ferrying her through a flooded landscape aboard a canoe.

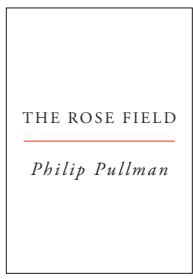
The next book, *The Secret Commonwealth*, is more of a conventional sequel—but then again, it isn’t. Lyra is now 20. The earth-shattering events of the first trilogy have been all but forgotten, and the Magisterium looms as large as ever. What was it all for? Lyra has become cynical and discontented, and worse, she’s become estranged from her *dæmon*, a pine marten named Pantalaimon. They’re barely speaking to each other. It’s a bold volte-face considering that Pullman has just spent four whole books selling us on the intimacy and sanctity of the *dæmonic* bond.

But it’s worth it, because their falling-out plays as a metaphor for a state of self-alienation: Lyra has lost touch with her own soul. She’s fallen under the sway of a fashionable worldview in which logic is paramount, and the realm of emotion and magic and even *dæmons* is just childish fancy. The “secret commonwealth” is Pullman’s name for this realm, and it encompasses not just the world of witches and fairies but also, more broadly, that of imagination and feeling, and really the entire human enterprise of perceiving the world as meaningful.

If you wanted to read Pullman’s books as philosophy, which I don’t necessarily recommend, you could say that, having dismissed organized religion in the first trilogy, he’s now looking into what happens if you go too far the other way—he’s adding to his religious skepticism a skepticism about skepticism itself. (Note that Lyra gets her new worldview from a best-selling novel in which—yes, go on—a young man kills God.) But it’s also an astute portrait of someone coping with the psychic scars of childhood trauma. After the events of *His Dark Materials*, you can understand why Lyra might find an unmagical, strictly rational universe to be comfortingly stable.

Pantalaimon thinks Lyra has lost her imagination, and he leaves her and goes off in search of it. He’s not exactly sure what finding Lyra’s imagination would actually involve, but in his mind the quest becomes linked to a legendary rose garden somewhere in the Far East that’s supposed to contain the secret of Dust.

So begins a grand steeplechase that becomes the story of both *The Secret Commonwealth* and *The Rose Field*, which are so intertwined that they could plausibly have been published together as a single novel. A remorseful Lyra sets off after Pantalaimon. The reliably malevolent Magisterium sends agents to look for the rose garden too, as part of its general anti-Dust policy. This prompts an anti-Magisterium resistance group to send its own agent, who is Malcolm from *La Belle Sauvage*, now all grown up into a historian. An evil pharmaceutical company wants a piece of the action too—it’s a crowded field.



KNOPF

If this were a Bond movie, these characters would cross the entire distance by air, in first class, in the split-second gap between scenes, but Pullman leans into the arduous business of travel. They go by train, bus, boat, camel, and gryphon, stopping in far-flung Levantine cities such as Seleukeia and Aleppo. There is much buying of tickets and finding of seats and checking into hotels. There’s a lot of small-*d* dust. For much of the story, Lyra and Malcolm tread separate, parallel paths, though for a while, as in a French farce, they wind up traveling with each other’s *dæmon*.

These adventures are more earthbound than the ones in *His Dark Materials*, but along the way Malcolm does manage to get captured by some vividly drawn gryphons who are obsessed with gold, and hook up with Pullman’s marvelous, ageless witches. Meanwhile the Magisterium has come under the control of one Marcel Delamare, an ideologue who establishes a quasi-fascist regime in Britain. (The particulars of how—lies, warrantless searches, the neutering of the media, the criminalization of dissent, internment camps—are depressingly familiar.) Delamare also turns out for no particular reason to be Lyra’s uncle, though as a villain he looks a bit thin next to the magnificently awful Mrs. Coulter.

The Rose Field has a few such minor weak spots. Grown-up Lyra is surlier than she was as a tween, and I’m here for it, but I would have welcomed a little surliness from Malcolm, who is weirdly perfect: He’s gallant, serene, and handy around the house; like Indiana Jones, he’s somehow both a nerdy-professor type and a street-fightin’ man (though at least Jones is scared of snakes). Pullman teases the possibility of a romance between him and Lyra and then labors mightily to wave away the slight creepiness, given that Malcolm is a decade older and first met Lyra when she was a baby, and later his student.

But Pullman’s abilities as a storyteller are stupendous, and on full display. He keeps all his characters in constant motion, nimbly shifting point of view among them in midstream. I kept thinking of the brown, swollen Thames in *La Belle Sauvage*: Pullman’s stories flood you; they flow relentlessly, irresistibly, dividing and reuniting, pushed on by tides of passionate purpose, carrying all kinds of fascinating flotsam, sometimes choosing unexpected courses but always sweeping you helplessly along with them.

PULLMAN WAS a schoolteacher before he was a novelist, and he hammers home the theme of *The Rose Field* so that even the kids in the back row can’t miss it: It’s about the power of imagination and the fatal shortcomings of reason. “Without imagination you never see the truth about anything,” a wise man tells Lyra. “Without imagination you think you see

more truth, but in fact you see less.” If *His Dark Materials* was about the joyful agonies of exchanging innocence for experience—and also how terrible the Church is—*The Book of Dust* is about (in addition to how terrible the Church is) a way of being in the world, a kind of nonreligious spiritual practice that values meaning and feeling and art and presence. Here’s Pantalaimon describing how a younger Lyra used her imagination:

She saw everything and everyone in a light of gold. She saw correspondences and analogies and echoes and resemblances, so that nothing existed without a thousand connections to the world, and I saw them with her. For her the world was rich with meaning and alive with delight.

Having survived a Miltonic war in heaven and a symbolic expulsion from Eden, Lyra is now trying to navigate the world outside, with wandering steps and slow, even as priests and politicians and property developers rapaciously strip it of meaning, eviscerating social bonds and treating the Earth as nothing more than a dead thing from which the maximum possible value must be extracted.

Pullman tells us all of this, wearing his progressive politics on his sleeve, but it works better when he shows us, which he does with lashings of his rich, supersaturated prose. He describes every last mundane thing as if it were a precious jewel, lit from within by secret significance. Here’s Malcolm looking up at a predawn sky: “The night was just at that point when the darkness was full of little momentary swirling points of slightly-less-darkness, not even anything like the first gray of dawn, but perhaps the closest we come to seeing individual photons.” Lyra’s world has a cozy, Miyazaki, my-favorite-things feeling, with its narrow lanes, gleaming clockwork, teetering stacks of books, crashing thunderstorms, and, oh God, those brown-paper packages tied up with string! When Lyra gets a mystery parcel in the mail, Pullman makes a feast out of it sexy enough to scandalize C. S. Lewis, as she slowly cracks the sealing wax, unknots the string, and unfolds the paper to reveal … another package inside.

Conversely, when it comes to magical things, Pullman renders them in the most mundane, tactile language possible to give them weight and texture. His magic isn’t numinous or ethereal. Here’s his description of an enchanted stone:

It was a long oval in shape, about the length of his palm and as thick as the tip of his little finger, a dull greenish-black with no iridescence; it was smooth, as if with long wear, the edges worn down thinner

than the center. It was very hard; he’d tested it with his pocketknife, and hadn’t made a mark. It felt a little heavier than it looked.

There’s a tension in this passage, and really in all of Pullman’s work, that comes from a happy mismatch between his style and his subject. He’s a supremely tidy, orderly writer, a meticulous artificer, and yet he writes fantasy, the most disorderly, unruly of genres, a messy confabulation of myth and dream. Part of the thrill is watching him try to make fantasy sit up and behave.

The figure of the master artificer in fact recurs throughout *The Rose Field*—“craftsman” is one of Pullman’s favorite compliments, which you can tell because he uses it a lot to describe Malcolm, who at one point fashions a pretty circlet for Lyra out of the golden case of an alethiometer. (Unlike Tolkien, who made a nasty evil ring out of gold, Pullman adores it.) Lyra is a skilled maker too, not with gold but with narrative. Here she is spinning a story:

*Pullman
describes
every last
mundane thing
as if it were
a precious
jewel, lit
from within
by secret
significance.*

She felt like a musician, playing a piece that she knew by heart, knowing both where she was and where she was going, and holding back a little here to make a more effective change in pace there, seeing the span of music to come, taking her time but wasting none, including a detail at this point so it would make its effect more strongly later, cutting out a detail that wouldn’t help.

You can’t help but see a self-portrait here of Lyra’s own artificer, hard at work.

Pullman owes a lot to those earlier masters, Tolkien and Lewis, more than he generally lets on. But they were ardent Christians, at least as focused on the next world as on this one, and you’d be hard put to find a fantasist with a greater commitment to the dark materials of this reality than Pullman. The secret of Dust isn’t that it’s original sin; dust—dirt, grime, filth—is consciousness. It’s who we are. Our souls aren’t ethereal ghosts; they’re animals. I won’t give away the end of *The Rose Field*, but it’s no spoiler to say that Lyra doesn’t go to Aslan’s Country, the way the Pevensies do, or enjoy a luxurious convalescence in Valinor, like Bilbo and Frodo. We often think of fantasy as escapism, but there’s no escape for Lyra—that distant field of roses is not, on closer inspection, Eden. She has to nurse her scars right here on Earth, with all the rest of us. Pullman isn’t waiting for the next world; he’s trying to tell us how to love this one. It’s not easy. It takes imagination. *A*

*Lev Grossman is the author of the New York Times best-selling novels *The Magicians* and *The Magician King*.*



BOOKS

Patti Smith's Lifetime of Reinvention

Nearing 80, the punk poet reflects on the twists in her story that have surprised even her.

By Amy Weiss-Meyer

Even from the back, Patti Smith was unmistakably Patti Smith. Standing on a downtown-Manhattan sidewalk on a late-summer afternoon, she wore loose jeans rolled at the cuff, white high-tops, a black blazer, and—on a cool day for August, but still an August day—a wool cap over her long gray hair. We had arranged to meet at a gallery owned by friends of hers and, for the time being, we were locked out. A life-size horse statue was the only thing visible through the glass windows, like one of Smith's lyrics come to life. Someone came a few minutes later to open the door, and we stepped into the cool interior to discuss Smith's new memoir, *Bread of Angels*.

Smith, who turns 79 in December, was preparing for a busy fall ahead: the release of her memoir, an international concert tour to mark the 50th anniversary of her seminal album, *Horses*. In addition to reading the book, I'd spent the preceding weeks listening to her songs on repeat, and one lyric in particular seemed like it might be a kind of key to her career, which over the course of six decades has comprised poetry and performance, memoir and drawing, photography and painting, an induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and a National Book Award. "People say, 'Beware,' but I don't care," she sings defiantly in the first track on *Horses*. "The words are just rules and regulations to me." After a pause she repeats the last word, elongating the vowel for emphasis: "Meeeeee."

I already knew that she started chafing early on against authorities and edicts. Smith writes in the memoir about a question that came to her as she sat in Bible study in South Jersey at the dawn of the 1960s: *What will happen to art?* Her father, Grant—the man who taught her to question everything—had recently taken their family of six to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He was a fan of Dalí; Patti, 12, was captivated by Picasso and cubism. Now, listening to a Jehovah's Witness elder describe the coming apocalypse, she couldn't

shake the image of museums in flames: “sculpture, great architecture, to say nothing of Picasso’s paintings.” Who would rescue the art?

Her mother, Beverly, had joined the Witnesses after her own father’s sudden death, drawn to the promise of a reunion in the New World. Smith was attracted to the Witnesses’ status as outsiders; on Saturdays, she forswore cartoons to go door-to-door and preach the good news, relishing the hostile reception the proselytizers often got. Already wary of pledging her allegiance to anything, she didn’t mind that the religion forbade saluting the flag at school. But there was no satisfying answer to the problem of the art. When she brought it up with another elder, she “was told that there was no place for art in Christ’s Kingdom.” And so “I cast off my religion”—not without regret—and “gave my evolving self to art.”

I hoped to understand more, talking to Smith, about that double *me*. Did it represent a certain self-involvement, or a profound self-confidence, a desire to not only break others’ rules but write her own? Her interests could hardly be more eclectic. She checks in daily with Pope Leo’s latest statements, she told me (“He’s a measured man, he’s intelligent”). She watches Al Jazeera and reads *The Times of Israel*. She inhales detective shows, especially British ones, and takes writing breaks to listen to “Ride,” by Lana Del Rey, four times in a row. She has probably read Arthur Rimbaud’s prose poem *A Season in Hell* more than any other nonacademic alive. On Substack, she is beloved for her video musings on topics as diverse as Jimi Hendrix, Nikolai Gogol, and her cat. She has 1.4 million Instagram followers.

Smith and I sat on a green velvet couch drinking (very good) oat-milk matcha lattes, which seemed a bit on the nose as emblems of a city that has changed drastically since Smith first stepped off the bus at Port Authority with her plaid suitcase at age 20, in 1967. The decade of Smith’s life that followed is well known, practically mythological, thanks largely to her 2010 memoir, *Just Kids*, which has sold more than a million copies in the U.S.: her relationship with the artist Robert Mapplethorpe, the bohemian coterie at the Hotel Chelsea, the poetry reading at St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery accompanied by electric guitar that unexpectedly led to rock stardom.

Just Kids is a chronicle of young love and free-wheeling artistic experimentation in a New York City where, as Smith writes, “fifty cents was real money” and you might run into Dalí himself, or befriend Allen Ginsberg, or fall for the playwright Sam Shepard before realizing he was married (Smith did all of that). The book works as well as it does because of its fairy-tale-like focus on its two singular protagonists, fated for greatness and tragedy. Although it ends

Opposite page:
Patti Smith in 1978

with Mapplethorpe’s death from AIDS in 1989, at age 42, virtually none of the narrative takes place later than 1974. It is not a book about what unfolded after that for Smith—about being famous, or a mother, or a widow. Fifteen years ago, Smith told me, she wasn’t sure if she would ever be able to write about her late husband, the musician Fred “Sonic” Smith—the man whom, she writes in *Bread of Angels*, “I loved for a time more than myself.”

If *Just Kids* is about innocence and ambition, *Bread of Angels*—a sister to that book, Smith told me—deals with the more painful realities of experience. She fills in what the earlier memoir leaves in the background: her childhood, her marriage, her fame. There turned out to be a twist. When Smith had already written most of the manuscript, she stumbled onto revelations about her family that upended her sense of self. “I had to really think about the truth of my life,” she told me. “And what I had thought was not so.”

Picasso was on her mind once more as she wrote. She approaches nonfiction in the spirit of cubism, she said: “You look at all different angles of the same face.” And if you’re Smith, an editor lets you get away with prose that uninhibitedly shifts registers, veering from detailed memories into something close to magical realism and back. Smith’s ever-present sense of destiny, her mystical optimism, and her penchant for rebellion make for reminiscences that can sound at once bombastic and humble, half-invented and visceral. It struck me that the need she felt, nearing 80, to tell a new story of her very existence was perhaps perfectly in keeping with a lifetime of reinvention.

*On Substack,
Smith is
beloved for her
video musings
on topics as
diverse as
Jimi Hendrix,
Nikolai Gogol,
and her cat.*

IN SMITH’S BABY BOOK, her mother wrote down two of her early questions: *What is the soul?* *What color is it?* Beverly, a waitress who had another daughter and then a son in the two years after Smith was born (and eventually one more daughter), had little time for her eldest’s metaphysical ponderings. Money was tight, especially when Smith’s father, who worked as a machinist after returning from World War II, was on strike. The family faced eviction on several occasions and moved more than a dozen times before Smith was 8, mostly around the Philadelphia area, before settling in South Jersey. She was often sick—pneumonia, tuberculosis, German measles, mumps, chickenpox, scarlet fever.

Convalescing, she would lie in bed, “picturing the characters in my books, spinning them adventures beyond the page.” With each illness, “I was privileged with a new level of awareness,” she writes in *Just Kids*, describing her feverish hallucinations. Even the derelict setting of the temporary “barracks” where the family lived for a time in Philadelphia seems somehow lovely in that book, “an abandoned field

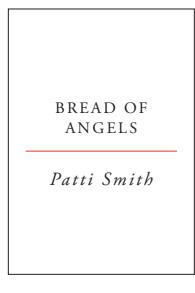
alive with wildflowers.” In *Bread of Angels*, she widens the frame. We learn of the bleakness surrounding the field: “a concrete area with overflowing trash bins, oil barrels, rusted cans, and discarded junk.” The children played in a crawl space “dotted with the red eyes of large city rats.”

At school, Smith was a misfit, but at home, as the oldest, she was the proud leader of her siblings, her first crew and audience. The loyal troupe fought with bullies and acted out Smith’s tales, some of which were loosely based on her favorite books (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Little Women*, *Nancy Drew*). “I learned how to tell stories from my mother, who just had a natural affinity,” she told me. Her father loved reading poems aloud to the family. When Smith got in trouble for missing school one day—she’d been waylaid communing with a turtle in a pond where she felt sure spirits lived—Beverly was angry, but Grant understood.

She loved her family, but had a sense of being and looking different from the others. As a girl, scanning for resemblance among snapshots and mementos, Smith noticed an old newspaper clipping of her father winning a race as a young man, and saw herself in it; she was also a fast runner, one who yearned to break through ribbons. Looking at the photo, she said to herself, *This is who I am. I am you*. She kept it in a tin frame for years.

Yet Smith’s ambitions were more literary than athletic. “I believed I could write the longest book in the world,” she recalls in *Bread of Angels*, inhabiting a grandiose young self. “I would record the events of every single day. I would write it all down in such a way that everyone would find something of themselves.”

FAME AND FORTUNE, Smith insists, were never her primary objectives—making art was. She worked hard, but she portrays herself as not so much a hustler as a believer in the power of fate. “I don’t know how to play guitar,” she said in a 1976 interview, “but I just get in a perfect rhythm and I play. I don’t care.” The risk of sabotaging commercial success evidently didn’t deter her. After “Because the Night,” the 1978 song she co-wrote with Bruce Springsteen, became a hit, she declined promotional opportunities and refused to lip-synch the song on Dick Clark’s show; doing so seemed inauthentic. “The single quickly slid off the charts,” she writes in *Bread of Angels*. “It appeared I had been somewhat naïve in believing one got successful solely by their own merit.” When her label urged her to take the word *heroin* out of “Dancing Barefoot” so that it could be played on the radio, Smith would not comply (she said that she was actually singing *heroine*; she was always squeamish about needles and tended to stay away from hard drugs).



Smith wasn’t trying to produce chart-toppers anyway. Her songs— influenced by rock, punk, and reggae—are striking and confident and cathartic, but unconventional in ways that challenge the casual listener. Some feature layered tracks of exploratory spoken word that seem almost improvisational; elsewhere, her lyrics showcase her magpie-like poetics, with echoes of Rimbaud, William Blake, Sylvia Plath, the Beats.

While on tour in Detroit in 1976, Smith met the man she would marry, and immediately felt “a gravitational force.” She was starting to dislike the person she was becoming, she told me: “demanding, presumptuous, and agitated.” Smith said that although she hated to “play the gender card,” she realizes now that the take-no-prisoners persona she was developing was probably a necessity as a rare front woman in a male-dominated scene. “People like to look at me as this tough, punky shit-kicker,” she told an interviewer in 1975 during a recording session for *Horses*. “Well, I am like that,” she said. “But I’m also very fragile.” By the end of the 1970s, she knew she had to walk away. And so she did, leaving New York for a private life with Fred in a suburb of Detroit, his hometown.

The couple bought a stone house covered in vines, and a boat that Fred hoped to take out on the water but never did. Instead, they sat inside the boat in their yard and listened to baseball games, to Beethoven and Coltrane. Baseball and boats were Fred’s passions, but Smith readily followed his lead. “Soon after we were married,” she writes, “Fred expressed the wish for a son. I hadn’t thought of having children.”

When she got pregnant, Smith was certain she would have a boy, and she did; they named him Jackson. A similar sequence played out, in her telling, with their daughter, Jesse, born five years later. All of it—having children because her husband wanted them, putting her career on hold to tend pear trees in a midwestern suburb—might come across as out of character for Smith, who spent her formative years subverting traditional gender roles. At the same time, her portrayal of the interlude as fated, and fulfilling thanks in part to that feeling, is pure Smith.

She derived real satisfaction from motherhood, and still does. (Both Jackson, now 43, and Jesse, 38, regularly perform with her.) The constraints of parenting young kids forced her to focus on writing prose and poetry in Michigan, she told me, but she never fully abandoned music. She and Fred played together at home and produced an album in New York in the late ’80s. (It flopped, though a song on it—“People Have the Power”—has endured.) Fred “was a troubled man,” Smith writes, “but I was never to penetrate the true nature of those troubles.” Elliptical about the



Patti Smith
performing with
the Patti Smith
Quartet in London,
July 2024

details of the chronic health struggles he faced, she calls his decline “the tragedy of my life.”

Fred died in November 1994 of heart failure. The next month, Smith’s beloved brother, Todd, had a stroke while wrapping Christmas presents and died. After returning to New York with her kids, Smith began work on a new album and went on tour with Bob Dylan. People seemed to assume that she had spent the preceding years doing nothing, a perception that still bothers her. “Just because I’m not on the stage somewhere or you haven’t read an article about me does not mean that I don’t exist as a conscious being who’s evolving creatively, intellectually,” she told me.

In Michigan, she had formed a family and written “a million words” at her kitchen table each morning, a kind of self-apprenticeship. Without that practice, she would never have written *Just Kids*. “So, I would say, time well spent.”

NEAR THE END of our conversation, Smith brought up her desire, invoked early in her memoir, to write something in which everyone would find a piece of themselves. It was a goal she hadn’t fulfilled, she acknowledged. “Nobody knows how anybody feels,” she said. But she hoped this new book would at least remind her readers, “You’re not alone.”

In the penultimate chapter of *Bread of Angels*, she describes the shock of learning, at age 70, that her biological father was not Grant Smith, but another

World War II veteran, “a handsome gunner from the 766th Bombardment Squadron” whom Smith speculates her mother may have met at a nightclub while Grant was out of town. The gunner’s heritage was 100 percent Ashkenazi Jewish. As a girl, Smith had fantasized about being from a tribe of nomadic aliens or Native Americans. Now she found that she was descended quite literally from a wandering people.

Smith chose to write about her discovery not to reveal some great secret or proclaim a new identity. “Who cares whether I’m Ukrainian Jewish or Scotch Irish?” she said to me. “But what I do relate to is the idea of a people who have been constantly displaced”—perhaps not a universal experience, but an all-too-common one.

This genuine desire to speak broadly to the human condition can veer, at times, toward New Age self-help. “How can we leap back up” after hardship? Smith asks in *Bread of Angels*.

By returning to our child self, weathering our obstacles in good faith. For children operate in the perpetual present, they go on, rebuild their castles, lay down their casts and crutches, and walk again.

The sentiment sounds gauzy, and then you remember the subtext. Smith wasn’t just a dreamy kid. She was also defiant, intent on doing things her way—*the words are just rules and regulations to me*—hard and weird though that way could be. Setbacks could also present artistic possibilities. This is still how she sees the world: *Beware? Why? “I just do what I want,”* she said in 2022. “Or I don’t do it.”

This is why people watch Smith on Substack as she reads children’s stories out loud in the dark or flips through her old passports; it’s why they ask her to sign copies of *Just Kids* at concerts. Maybe, her fans hope, by spending time with Smith, they, too, will take on some of this toughness tinged with wonder, this ability to revisit past selves and to carry on, come what may.

As Smith and I talked that afternoon at the gallery, the low light made everything in the airy space feel somehow outside of time. Smith’s face, I noticed, was barely lined. Her plans sounded fluid. She’s ready to disappear into prose less tethered to reality, she said. *Bread of Angels* will be her last memoir; she’s working on a Japanese detective story and a book called *The Melting*, and other things she wasn’t ready to tell me about. When I asked her how old she felt, she didn’t hesitate. “Ten and 100,” she said. She laughed, then assured me that she really meant it. *A*

Amy Weiss-Meyer is a senior editor at The Atlantic.



We Are
Not One

By George
Packer

When it came into view, Doctor Rustin was struck by its size. The platform rose on six-by-six wooden posts at least 12 feet off the ground, with enough room up top for a small deck party, and the staircase from the sidewalk was a steeply pitched ladder. This gallows had been raised to last—built not only by children but for them, since few adults would have the agility and daring to reach the top. Its height and



solidity gave the sense of a play structure, the crossbar that loomed above the platform a climbing feature for the truly fearless, and the rope noose perfect for swinging and letting fly if only the gallows had been built over water.

A drop by the neck from 12 feet into midair would not be play. The designers of the Suicide Spot had been impressively serious. Rustin ran his hand over his own neck and forgot his mission.

About 30 people were gathered around the base, spilling from the sidewalk into the street. Most were teenagers skipping school, though there was a scattering of grown-ups and a couple of families with younger children. High up on the platform, two girls in yellowish-gray clothes stood on either side of a boy. He looked a year or two older than Rustin's daughter, Selva, with a wild thicket of hair and a tough face. He was tugging at the rope as if to test its strength, eyes narrowed, lower lip jutting out in a kind of defiance, while the two girls leaned close and spoke to him in voices so quiet that Rustin, keeping back and half concealed under the red awning of a tavern called the Sodden Spot, couldn't make them out.

But he knew they were Guardians—specially trained peers, there to help confused young people break free from life as they'd known it before the Emergency, in particular from their parents, and become unconflicted agents of *Together*. Mere weeks after the empire had collapsed, that word appeared on posters glued to the walls of public buildings and on banners strung from lampposts along the central avenues. What *Together* meant as a philosophy or program, Rustin wasn't sure, but as a passion, it had quickly spread among the city's Burghers, especially its youth, and created hairline fractures in his family. The Rustins were no longer the tight foursome that played word games at dinner. Selva no longer returned on the tram after school, but instead disappeared into the city, attending the daily gathering in the main square called *We Are One*, staying out for hours. This morning, Rustin—marooned at home since being exiled from the hospital in disgrace—had followed her through the streets until he lost her in the Market District.

In front of him a bickering couple, huddled under an umbrella—though it wasn't raining—made it even harder to hear what was happening on the gallows.

"You didn't have to come," the woman said. "I could have come by myself."

"You were afraid to. 'What if one of them really does it?'" the man said, mimicking her panic.

"I never said that."

"Shh!" Rustin hissed. The Suicide Spot belonged to the young, and he didn't want to be associated with the disrespect of the middle-aged.

The boy's shoulders rose and fell. He looked down to check the position of his feet over the trapdoor, then draped the noose around his neck. A murmur that sounded almost like satisfaction passed through the audience.

A Guardian placed her hand on the lever connected to the trapdoor. In a voice clear enough to carry over the crowd, she asked: "Do you want to leave this world?"

Rustin saw the boy's face tighten. His eyes twitched in rapid blinks, his lips disappeared as if cold fury were coursing through his body. Then his features crumpled and he exploded in tears. He sobbed openly, without shame, like a little child, his whole body shaking. Several times he tried to master himself, but he couldn't stop.

Keeping a hand on the lever, the Guardian reached with her other and touched the boy's heaving shoulder. "Hey—we're here with you. We're suffering with you. We love you."

The boy buried his face in his hands, and the thick nest of hair shook as if in a wind, and the sobs, though muffled, grew louder. Sighs of pity rose around the gallows.

"What do you want to say to your parents?" the other Guardian asked.

The boy looked up mid-sob, startled. "My—I—"

"If they were here, what would you say to them?"

He opened his mouth but no words came out, only a stuttering sob.

"This is pointless," the woman under the umbrella said.

"You were the one that wanted to come," the man said.

"Why don't you both leave?" Rustin asked. They turned around to glare, but their talking stopped.

"Mama!" the boy suddenly cried out. "I'm sorry!"

"You have nothing to apologize for," said the first Guardian, her hand still gripping the lever.

"Do it!" the boy wailed.

The Guardian didn't move.

"Talk to us," the other Guardian said. "We don't want to lose you."

"Shut up and do it!"

"Talk to your parents. Why are you sorry? They should be sorry."

"Mama will be when I do it!"

The Guardian on the lever, who seemed to be leading the session, nodded.

"Oh, Mama will be sorry. But what about us? You're gone, and we needed you. Do you know what's on the other side of that door?"

The boy looked down at his feet. He shook his head.

"A great big empty hole. When you went through that door, the hole got bigger than you can imagine. That hole is bigger than this city."

The crowd drew in its breath as if the boy was already dangling broken-necked from the noose.

Rustin tried to imagine this girl and boy talking in someone's bedroom, which was where teenagers used to have difficult conversations. Talking face-to-face in private was supposed to allow you to open up, but maybe it wasn't true. Maybe it was easier to say everything like this, with a crowd at your feet and a rope around your neck.

"Please just do it," the boy said in a voice strained from sobbing, but softer, losing conviction.

"And we were about to try something that has never happened before," the Guardian went on. "We were going to make a new city! Make ourselves new, too! We were young and dumb enough to think we could do it. How can we now without you?"

The boy murmured something Rustin couldn't hear.

"And what about your Better Human? All that work you did. What's going to happen to him now that you're gone?"

The woman under the umbrella tugged at the man's coat sleeve. "What did she say? Better what?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Rustin didn't understand either.

The Guardian went on talking while the boy listened. He began to nod, and after a few more minutes he lifted the noose off his neck. She let go of the lever, and the crowd broke out in cheers and applause, as if its team had scored a winning goal. Startled, the boy looked down at his new fans. No adolescent defiance or child's anguish was visible on his face now. Wide-eyed, grinning, he climbed down the ladder like a boy who never in his life had expected to win first prize.

The ground was undulating under Rustin's feet, the tavern awning about to collapse on his head, the gallows the only fixed thing in sight. He had seen enough.

As he turned to go, a girl began to mount the scaffold. She wore the same clothes as the Guardians, with a bag slung over her shoulder and goggles dangling from her neck.

Found you! was his first thought, and then: *She's going to replace a Guardian. That's how it works—short shifts.* He watched his daughter come out onto the platform. She took her place between the two girls and planted her feet apart. Then, with the same decisiveness he'd seen from the moment she left the house, Selva reached for the noose and draped it over her head.

His stomach dropped as the trapdoor opened beneath him, plunging him into a void of air. *No!* He must have said it aloud, because the couple under the umbrella turned around: "Shh!" His neck was tingling, his knees barely held him upright.

"Do you want to leave this world?" the Guardian asked.

No! This time a silent cry. He would run to catch her legs before the rope went taut, but she would be just out of reach, her head listing forward in the choke hold of the noose.

"Possibly," Selva said.

"What do you want to say to your—"

"Listen, Papa," Selva said before the Guardian could finish. "The other night you asked why I'm angry."

She was speaking in her debate voice—quick, strong, a little tremulous with

effort. He knew that she had carefully prepared what she was going to say, and from his hiding place under the awning, he was listening. He had never listened so closely to anyone.

"As usual, I didn't think of an answer fast enough. Well, here's my answer, Papa: because you never believed the world could be better or worse than the one you gave me. And that breaks my heart."

A rumble of approval from the crowd.

"Oh, this one's good," the woman under the umbrella said to the man.

That's my girl up there, Rustin wanted to tell her. *Our pride and joy.* It had been a favorite phrase of his, until Pan came

*Talking face-to-face
in private was
supposed to allow
you to open up, but
maybe it wasn't true.
Maybe it was easier
to say everything
like this, with a
crowd at your feet
and a rope around
your neck.*

along and Annabelle asked him to stop using it, but sometimes he couldn't help himself, because even Selva with the noose around her neck was exactly that. Those eyes! Their intelligence shone all the way from the gallows. And didn't she have a point? Even here at the Suicide Spot he couldn't imagine any life for his daughter other than the one that had always awaited her under the empire.

"The world was worse than you ever knew, Papa. Remember the exams?"

He would never forget them. Every year in May the whole empire came to a stop for three days while 14-year-old Burgher kids sat for their comprehensive exams. In

the city by the river the authorities raised banners across buildings and lampposts to proclaim pride in their children and wish them luck. The rituals were ancient, unchanged since Rustin had sat for his. The night before, Annabelle had made the traditional meal of baked rabbit, asparagus, and custard. Rustin drilled Selva one last time on complex equations and imperial history. Pan touched his sister's forehead with a sprig of rosemary, and the family held hands around the table and solemnly recited the Prayer for Wisdom and Success: "If it cannot be me, then let it not be me. But let it be me."

The next morning, Burgher parents—oblivious to the fighting that had broken out in the capital—had lined the walkways and cheered as their children filed into schools with pencils and notebooks and tense faces, some bravely managing a smile, others rigid with fear. A few of Rustin's colleagues were on hand in their professional capacity in case a child fainted. As Selva walked past her parents, she kept her eyes fixed straight ahead. "Look at her," Rustin whispered to Annabelle. "She's going to murder it."

"I had to place in the top 5 percent," Selva went on from the gallows. "Not just to qualify for provincials and have a shot at the Imperial Medical College. But for you to still love me."

Someone in the crowd loudly booed.

Selva, no! Not true!

"I didn't look at you, because I was afraid I'd see it in your eyes. Being your daughter, I did what I had to."

As always, the results had been announced in the main square two days after the last exam, with practically the entire city in attendance. It was a gorgeous spring day, dry and fragrant, lilac and chestnut trees coming into bloom. One of the old councilors mounted a temporary stage erected in the middle of the square, next to the statue of a historic Burgher that stood on a pedestal surrounded by a gushing granite fountain, and for an hour he read from a long scroll of paper, while the children who had taken the exams lined up at the foot of the stage facing out toward the crowd. When they heard their name called, they stepped forward and shouted, "Here for city and empire!"

The names were read out in order from first rank to last. The family of Selva Rustin did not have long to wait. Out of 179 children, she was third.

"You beat your papa and your grandpa," Rustin had said that night over the most expensive bottle of wine he owned. "What a day for the Rustins." On their coat of arms, in the quadrant with the caduceus, next to his own initials he carved SR, welcoming his daughter into the family guild. She was set for life. And as he stood now in the shadow of the gallows, he thought: *We sat around the kitchen table and sang our favorite songs. You pretended Zeus was your patient. Was that world so bad?*

"The next day, the boy who sat beside me in class wasn't there," Selva continued. "We all knew why. He was down around 170."

Everyone in the square had been keeping a rough count as the councilor approached the bottom of the list. Burghers with no family interest in the results were there just to see who had fallen into the bottom 10 percent—that was a bigger

draw than honoring the top 5 percent, who would sit the following month for the provincial round. Even if you lost track of the count, the cutoff point became clear as soon as the shouts of "Here for city and empire!" started to come out weak and choked. A few children didn't even answer when their names were called.

"Iver was an Excess Burgher."

Everyone knew what future lay in store for the bottom 10 percent. They, too, were set for life. No prohibition had been announced, but they would never be allowed to join a guild. They would finish the school year and then look for work. The lucky ones would find a job in one of the markets, or learn a trade in the Warehouse District, or, with the right family connections, go to work for the city as a street sweeper or trash collector. Some of the girls were hired as servants in the homes of higher-status Burghers, though Rustin refused on principle to consider it. A few sank into the underworld of prostitution.

But the great majority of Excess Burghers would end up like the ones who drank and fought all night at the Sodden Spot, lay around the main square asleep at midday, and spent most of their shortened adulthood in the city prison. Rustin's next-door neighbor thought they should be sent directly from school to compulsory work gangs. Some disappeared from the city and were swallowed up in the Yeoman hinterland. Most Burghers considered it more respectable, more in the natural order of things, to be a Yeoman than an Excess Burgher.

When Rustin was a boy, there had been no such people as Excess Burghers. Every child in the city was admitted into a guild—of course, some at lower status than others. But around the time he was studying at the Imperial Medical College, he'd heard that children who had not done well on their exams were leaving school and falling out of view. No ordinance was passed that declared the bottom 5 percent of Burgher children (later raised to 10) superfluous, but this was the beginning of a long period of economic contraction throughout the empire, and competition for a dwindling supply of guild positions became intense. That was when the practice began of parents withholding food

from children who performed badly on their pre-exams as an incentive to study harder. (Rustin personally thought this was taking things too far, though he kept the opinion to himself.) The first accounts of cheating and payoffs during exam week surfaced—a blow to the belief in fairness on which the whole system of guilds depended. Excess Burghers became a fixture of imperial life, the answer to a chronic social problem, the unfortunate result of simple arithmetic.

"Do you remember what you said that night?" The tremble in Selva's voice was thickening; she was coming to her purpose. "I told you about Iver, and you said—"

That's just the way it has to be, Sel. She had come home from school troubled, and he'd wanted to comfort her. He hadn't wanted poor Iver's fate to take away from her magnificent achievement. She hadn't replied, but a cloud had passed over her face.

"That's just—the way—it has—to be." Selva raised her chin, causing the length of rope above the noose to go slightly slack. She closed her eyes and shook her head and stamped her foot on the platform just as if she'd reached the end of endurance during one of their arguments that had escalated far beyond his wishes. When she opened her eyes, they pierced his chest. "Why?" she cried. "Why was that just the way it had to be? Why in the world did you ever think that was just the way it had to be?"

More approval from her audience, shouts of "Why? Why?"

"Here's what you should have said, Papa: 'I'm sorry, sweetheart, but our whole life is a stinking pile of shit, that's how it is, we live on it, we eat it, we fuck on it, we'll be buried in it, but I love you so let's not talk about it anymore.'"

The shouting grew wild. Even the two Guardians were shouting—they had become part of Selva's audience. Her color rose and her throat quivered inside the noose and her lips tightened in expectation of a response that he wasn't there to give. He felt as if he were letting her down by not standing beside her on the platform to receive the full force of her indignation, to coax out the last glimmer of her brilliance. One word of his and she'd finish him off, cut him to pieces. He was witnessing

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one of the greatest moments of her life, as great as that morning in the main square. *That's my girl*, he thought again—but also: *It wasn't just me! Everyone believed it. In the old days beggars were drawn and quartered in that square. It sounds terrible now, but four months ago Excess Burghers were normal. You'd be surprised what people can get used to.*

"If you'd said that, it would have helped me. But you didn't have the courage." Selva dropped her chin and lowered her voice. "So I kept going. I started cramming for provincials. My dream was to reach the imperial round. Instead, we had an Emergency."

A cheer rose, half-heartedly—they weren't sure where she was headed.

"That was the end of exams. To be honest, it felt like the end of me. I actually, literally, didn't know who I was. Without the next round, why get up in the morning?" She gave a hollow laugh. "Then Together came, with the six principles. Suddenly people seemed happier, they started talking louder and laughing, even with strangers. The rules of Good Development came from the empire, from on high, but Together was our own creation. I thought: *Okay, I'll do that. I'll join a self-org committee—even Iver's in one. I'll be the best damn Together girl in the city.*"

Someone laughed too loud. Rustin knew from the tremolo in Selva's voice that things were going wrong.

"Except Together wasn't about that—it was the opposite of that. 'I am no better and neither are you'—that's the second principle!" Selva brought her hands to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut as if a massive headache had just come on. "So here I am. I don't have the right thoughts, I keep thinking things I don't want to think, they go around and around and I can't make them stop. I can't stop being your girl!"

The woman punched the air with her umbrella. "Oh my God, she's great!"

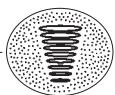
The Guardians spoke to Selva as they'd spoken to the boy, telling her what it



would mean to leave the world, reminding her to think of her Better Human, but none of it worked, her silence was too strong for them. She stood there in the grip of unuttered answers that would have defeated their philosophy, and her father knew that she was struggling with the decision. But before she reached it, the Guardian released the lever and the

second Guardian embraced Selva. She removed the noose from her own neck and descended the ladder into a swarm of cheers with failure in her eyes. *A*

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic. This excerpt was adapted from his novel The Emergency.



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

- Diagram in an atlas
- OOO status, maybe
- Be in debt
- Rage
- One of two in an idiomatic pod
- Word before *urchin* or *cucumber*
- Horse for a literary knight
- Fish whose name is one letter away from that of a famous talk-show host
- Pulls out of a deal, maybe
- Express with passion
- As the world turns?
- Expunges
- Gait in a famous Eadweard Muybridge photograph
- Boil down
- Stops from being so revolting?
- Garment believed to have first been worn by Marie Taglioni in an 1832 performance of *La Sylphide*
- Venue with the world's largest LED display
- Peabody-winning journalist O'Brien
- Literally "in the fashion"
- Law used to target the Five Families, familiarly
- Maverick's wingman
- Site of the Tunguska event
- Roborants
- Site of an 1847 revolt against United States occupation

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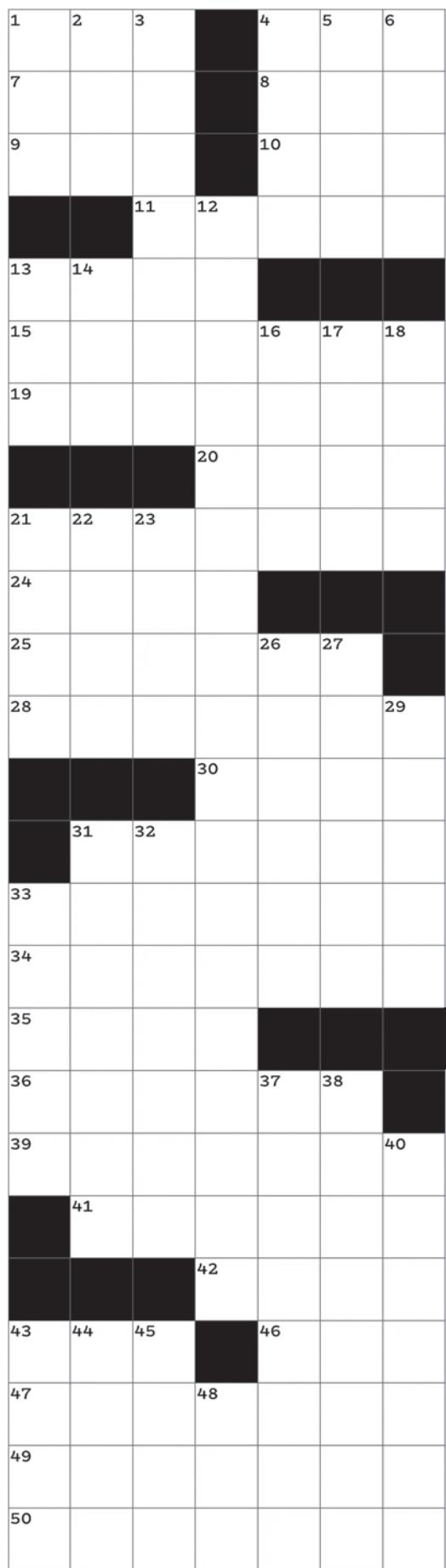


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- Green-egg layer
- Foy, Quebec
- Base coat for a manicure?
- "Who stands so ___ in the degree of this fortune as Cassio does?" (*Othello* verse)
- Covets

DOWN

- Floor-cleaning tool
- Feeling one might get upon seeing the Grand Canyon
- Kind of blouse
- Showing good judgment
- "There's no such thing as a ___ lunch"
- Unit of cabbage
- When impulsive decisions might be made
- Miner matter?
- Implement for writing or vaping
- Chipotle extra, for short
- "To be," to Ovid
- They might be part of a studio tour
- Some ORD postings
- Fender bender?
- Centers of attention
- Board game that features a "spanner"
- The Gregorian seasons, e.g.
- Material whose name comes from the French for "gloves from Sweden"
- Petition
- Control, frequently
- Some draped garments
- Eddington* director
- Camel meat?
- Subscribes
- ___ out (barely got)
- Viral load?
- Topaz* author Leon
- Nickname used in *Anora*





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