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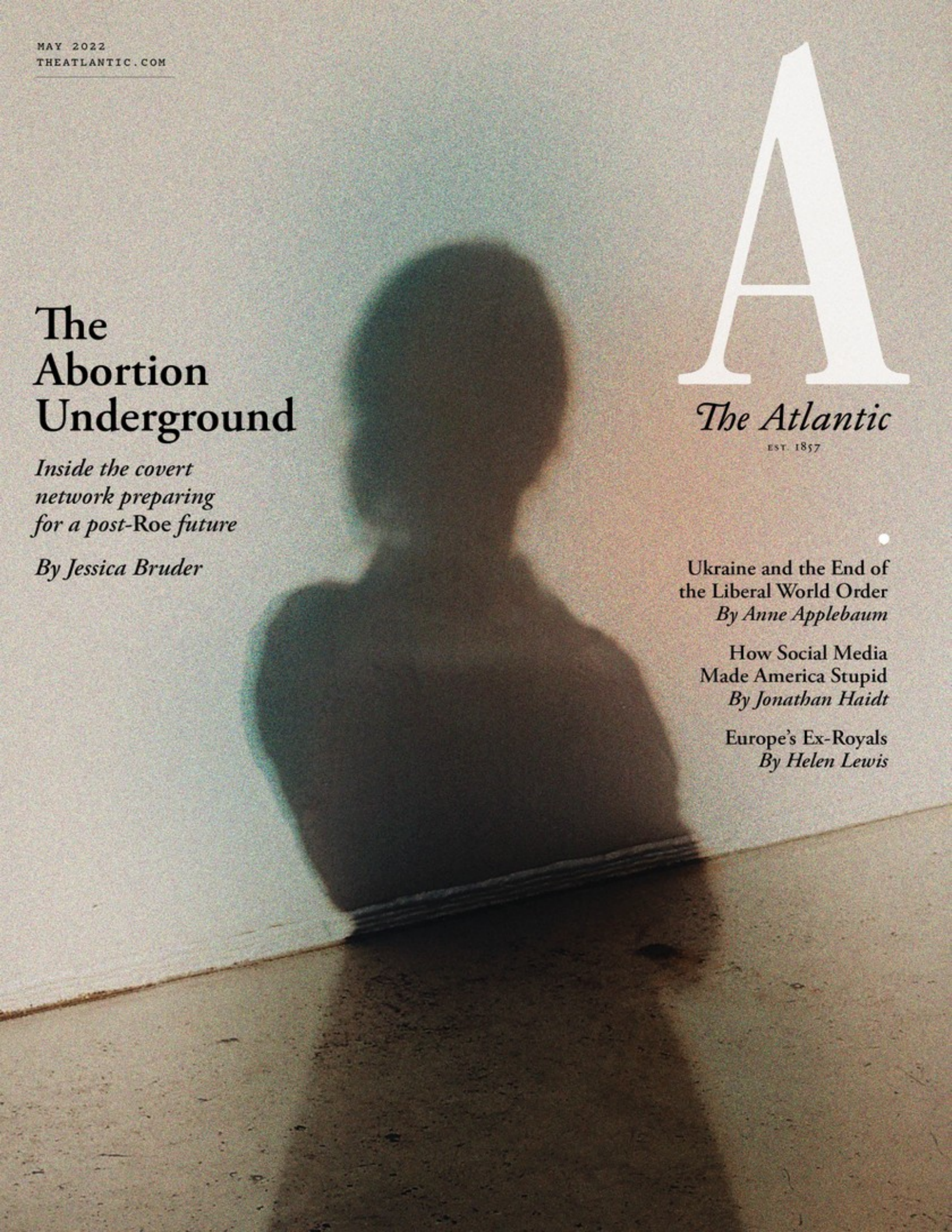
The Abortion Underground

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

By Jessica Bruder



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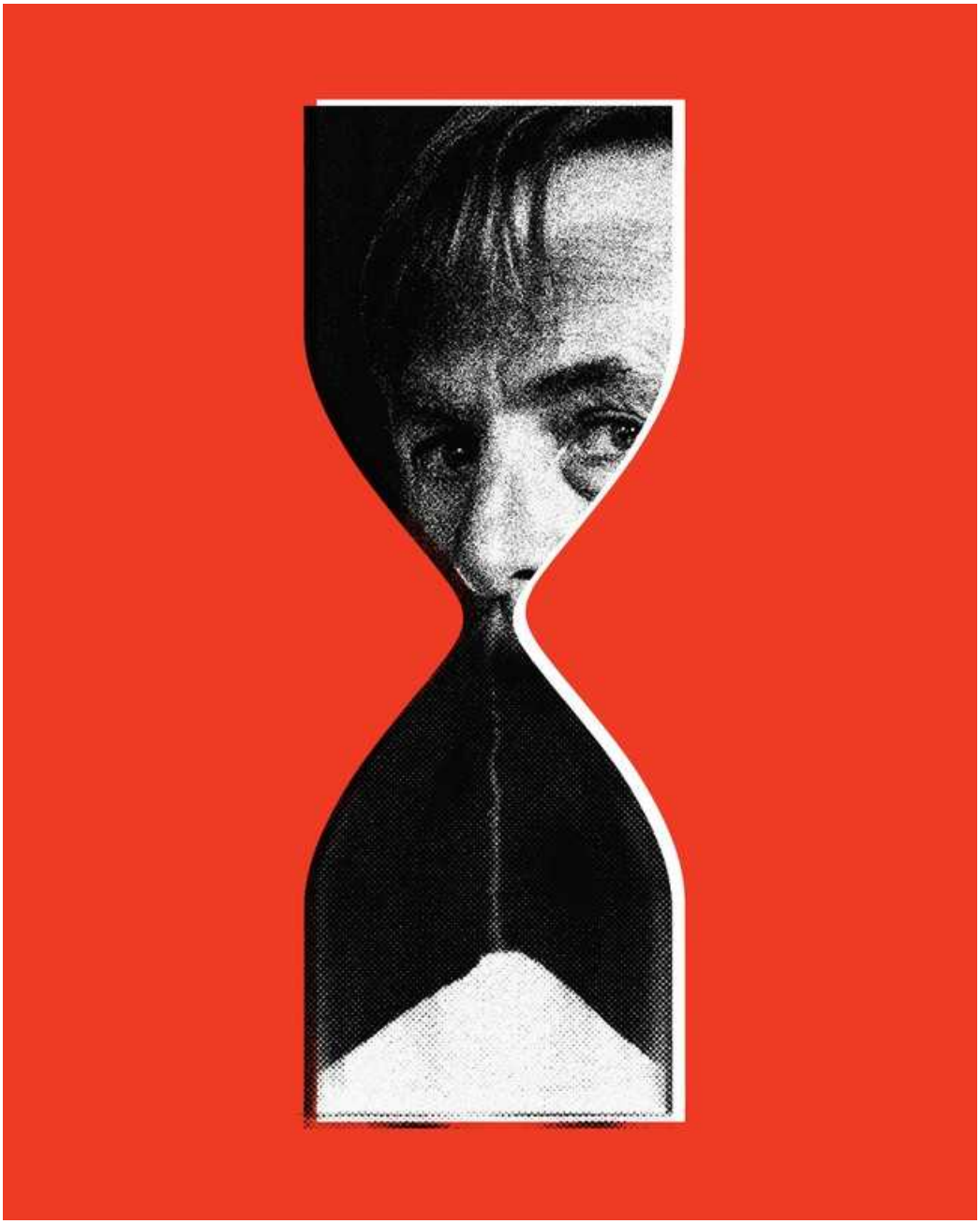
- **Have We Lost Patience for Prestige TV?**
  Better Call Saul is dazzling, and frustrating. -- Spencer Kornhaber



Have We Lost Patience for Prestige TV?

'Better Call Saul' Dared to Bore Us

By Spencer Kornhaber

People who respect the integrity of television as an art form tend to be horrified by the Netflix feature that lets viewers speed up what they're watching. Yet I recently found myself unable to resist the "1.5x" button as I caught up with one of the most acclaimed shows on TV. AMC's *Better Call Saul*, the *Breaking Bad* spin-off that debuted to record cable viewership in 2015 and will begin airing its sixth and final season this spring, can be magnificent. It can also be tedious. Frequent-depictions-of-tooth-brushing tedious. Multiseason-subplot-about-retirement-home-billing tedious. Slow-and-repetitive-commentary-on-the-human-condition tedious. I-stopped-watching-after-three-years tedious.

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

Or even very slow, *Better Call Saul* suggested. Two years after *Breaking Bad*'s five-season run ended, the show's creator, Vince Gilligan, and one of its writers, Peter Gould, launched their new series with a lengthy black-and-white sequence showing a man working at a Cinnabon. That man, fans recognized, was a meeker and wearier incarnation of Saul Goodman, Walter

White's sleazy lawyer, played by the comedian Bob Odenkirk. On *Breaking Bad*, Saul had been a world-wise jester, all quips and garish suits. But *Better Call Saul*, it quickly became clear, would not play up the comedy inherent in a billboard-advertised defender of drug dealers and drunk drivers. Nor would it be a reimagined courts-and-cops procedural. It would instead focus on the years before *Breaking Bad* and on the man who grew into the Saul Goodman persona: Jimmy McGill, a screwup and small-time con artist who just wanted to have a legitimate legal career.

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

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

2017 interview that he wanted to make "room for slower-paced stories," which he saw "as an antidote to everything else."

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

By Season 4, the actual experience of watching the show had come to feel like a chore I no longer needed to perform. The descent into Sauldom was inching along, and lengthy scenes were devoted to Jimmy (his law license temporarily suspended) working at a cellphone store with no customers to serve. After multiple seasons inspired by the rhythms of regular life, Gould and Gilligan had made their position clear: Jimmy might cut corners for a head rush, but this show simply wouldn't. I did not stop appreciating that project so much as forget to keep tuning in to it. The broader television ecosystem was supplying plenty of high-minded distraction, and in a variety of more vibrant flavors.

S*aul*'s debut year turned out to mark the moment when the so-called Golden Age of Television, with its hour-long weekly minimovies, tipped into "peak TV," as on-demand streaming services supplied a glut of content. Much of that content has been worthy of the "prestige" label, but not because it builds on *Mad Men*'s and *Breaking Bad* 's quietest moments by solemnly meditating on ordinary reality. Instead, the best of recent TV has often spiced up real-world settings with wild concepts (*Russian Doll*, which brought a psychedelic twist to an existential crisis), powerful topicality (*Succession*, a dramedy about the rich and pathetic), and zingy comedy (*Fleabag*, a character study of a woman who suspects, like Jimmy, that she

is a loser). The aura of significance that surrounded Walter White's saga came from years of careful, unhurried attention to a supposed everyman—a paradigm that *Saul* doubled down on. Meanwhile, miniseries and varied episode lengths began to show a fresher way forward, and more diverse casting broadened and challenged the everyman conceit.

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

At long last, *Better Call Saul* had ratcheted up the pace, the suspense, the stakes! As Season 4 ended, Jimmy adopted the name—and criminal-friendly branding—of Saul Goodman. Gun battles, life-endangering treachery, and duffel bags of cash—the pulp grist that had always been on the show's periphery—were now central. Gilligan and Gould still indulged in their cinematic reveries (a leisurely sequence zoomed in on ants swarming an ice-cream cone, to take one example), but the series was no longer fetishizing the grind of dealing with one small crisis after another between moments of serenity—which is to say, it was no longer focused on the familiar daily feeling of being alive. It was instead imagining how it feels to consciously make the leap into another universe, one of constant danger and excitement.

Would this jolt of adrenaline have been just a cheap high had *Saul* not delayed it for so long? I'm not yet ready to forgive the show's dullest detours. But the excellence of Season 5 did benefit from years' worth of slowly accreted details coming together. Certainly, the gradual lead-up to Jimmy's fall had set the conditions for an inner storm—greed and exhilaration mingling with guilt and fear—that roiled throughout the season. After one particularly traumatic ordeal for the characters, Mike

gives a spiel about life's road being determined by small, irreversible choices. The *oh shit* wince that Jimmy gives in response is all too believable: Viewers knew, deep in their cortex, that he had long failed to reckon with the larger course he'd been charting from one petty scrape to the next.

Saul 's story was always fated to get wild toward the end, and indeed, the creators of the final season have "turned the volume up on all of it," Rhea Seehorn, the actor who plays Kim, recently told *The New York Times Magazine*. "Whatever direction someone was already going in, they made it more extreme." That amplification sounds tantalizing, even if it may refute some of the ideals the series once seemed to stand for. Very few of the streaming era's breakout shows have shared *Saul* 's earlier, low-level languor—or they have done so only within the helpful confines of the miniseries format, or with the benefit of some sort of fantastical hook (see HBO's postapocalyptic tone poem, *Station Eleven*). Perhaps not coincidentally, nothing commands—nothing really can command—the same combination of acclaim and viewership that the Golden Age standouts did. What *Saul* does now share with its contemporaries and predecessors—what makes it, at last, a great show—is an energetic embrace of TV's promise: the room to experiment with the medium's episodic format, to play with pace and create immersive, sustained, addictive stories. Future viewers of this dazzling and frustrating series shouldn't think twice about speeding up when they feel the urge.*This article appears in the May 2022 print edition with the headline "*Better Call Saul *Dared to Bore Us."*

Departments

- **The Commons: The Satisfaction Trap**
  Readers respond to our March 2022 cover story and more. --

What Billie Eilish Knows About Satisfaction

The Atlantic May 2022 Issue: The Commons

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

Martha Lemmond
Williamstown, N.J.

Arthur C. Brooks's "The Satisfaction Trap" contains much wisdom. Contrary to what we often tell ourselves, possessing more things will not bring satisfaction. Brooks draws upon insights from Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Buddha to make his point, but his claim that they "were saying the same thing" misses the mark. Buddhism teaches that detachment is the goal. Desire is the problem. Thomism, however, teaches that humans were created to desire God. When our desire is disordered, we seek satisfaction in other things instead. As it turns out, Saint Thomas and the Buddha have very different answers to the question "Why should I stop desiring more possessions?"

Stewart Clem
St. Louis, Mo.

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

Ella Riley-Adams
Brooklyn, N.Y.

While Arthur C. Brooks is very likely correct that the good feeling from (at long last) having a letter published in *The Atlantic* is likely fleeting, composing them gives me satisfaction. Coming full circle with the rock-and-roll theme, Sheryl Crow chimes in with Thomas Aquinas, the Buddha, and Mick Jagger by observing that "it's not having what you want. / It's wanting what you've got." Professor Brooks provides an excellent road map to guide us out of the maze of dissatisfaction.

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

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

Gellman quotes Steve Bannon making clear both how central and how serious this idea is to the antidemocratic movement. Bannon says: "The state legislatures are the center of gravity … People are going back to the original interpretation of the Constitution." Unfortunately, many citizens can likely be convinced that he's right. It will be incumbent on media institutions like this magazine to lay out the stakes clearly: Either we as a country believe in democracy, or we believe in several archaic institutions and the legitimacy of ideas that have only ever been used for ill ends.

Benjamin Olneck-Brown
Washington, D.C.

In her cover story this month, Jessica Bruder reports on the clandestine network preparing for a post-*Roe* America ("The Abortion Underground"). Such networks existed before the 1973 Supreme Court decision, and never entirely disappeared. For many Americans, "*Roe* already feels meaningless," Bruder writes. "Nearly 90 percent of U.S. counties lack a clinic that offers abortions." The cover shows an unseen woman's silhouette, evoking a future in which women who seek to end pregnancies must do so in the shadows.

Oliver Munday, *Design Director*

For her feature "The Shadow Royals," the staff writer Helen Lewis traveled to Tirana, Albania, to meet Prince Leka II, heir to the country's defunct throne. When Mussolini invaded Albania, in 1939, Leka's grandfather King Zog fled with his family, and was later barred from returning by Enver

Hoxha's Communist regime. (Leka was 20 when his family returned to Albania, in 2002.)

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

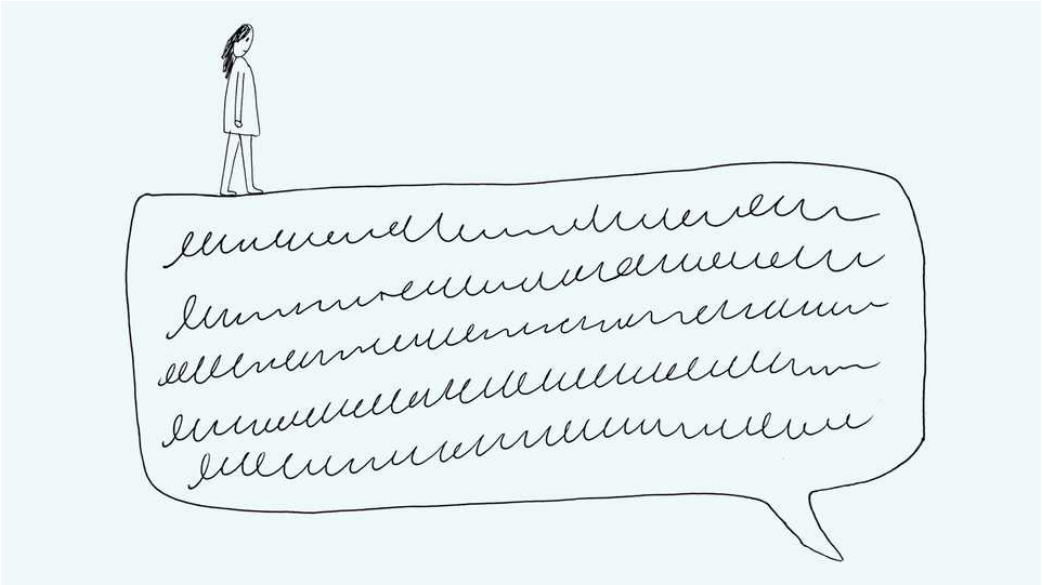
Cameron's resulting *Atlantic* dispatch is one-third geopolitical analysis and two-thirds travelogue. Hoping to disguise himself as a tourist, Cameron arrives in Tirana without a notebook or any ability to speak the language, and swiftly offends officials by sending a telegram to a London newspaper describing the country as "isolated." The article reveals as much about Cameron as it does about the place he's visiting. He complains about the "totally undrinkable wine" and the "indescribably terrible" food, and about having nothing to read (his books were confiscated upon arrival by Communist officials). Albania, he concludes, is "a tough place in which to feel at home."

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

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

Poetry

- **Oral History**
  -- Elisa Gabbert



Oral History

Elisa Gabbert: ‘Oral History’

By Elisa Gabbert

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I experience boredom as a kind of luxurious misery.

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

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

This poem is from Elisa Gabbert’s forthcoming collection, Normal Distance*, which will be published this fall. It appears in the May 2022 print edition.*
